

Chapter 1: Nearly There

The campfire was nearly extinguished until Crow added spare wood. The flame sparkled and so the light pushed back against the night. Crow withdrew his hand from the flame with a sigh. He ran his hand through his hair. His gray eyes peered into the outer edges of the light and then turned back. His back was hunched over the flame, as he attempted to grasp as much warmth as possible. The autumn wind chilled his bones. He didn't despise nights like these, but rather their frequency.

Crow stared at the mountains nearby. Their jagged heads threatened to puncture the sky. Crow had come to familiarize himself with many landscapes since he began wandering the continent of Vetus. From sleepy villages to bustling cities. He had even encountered ruins of the old world. Not many were left since most were salvaged to set the bedrock for new civilizations, but occasionally Crow would chance upon an old convenience store or forgotten school. The silence and emptiness of those buildings made him shudder.

Another wind came and Crow drew his black cloak tighter across his shoulders. He rummaged through the pockets of his cloak and produced a leather-bound journal. The papers within were coarse and yellow. He flipped to the latest page and withheld the bleeding ink. His eyes glazed over the written reminder. First, he would scale the mountains. Then he would continue north until he arrived at the old station that still stood, and the town would not be far from there. He thumbed the page and made the ink smear.

In two weeks, he would reside in a small town. That's what he wanted. A quiet life. The man imagined what his life would be. He would be a helper, a polite decoration to a sleepy town. He could imagine the voices of the townsfolk: "Oh, there's Crow. Maybe he can help us with

hunting. Do you think he knows anything about carpentry? What about farming?” A simple life was all that he wanted.

Crow laid down on the ground and closed his eyes. He held the journal close to his chest. His mind wandered beyond the possibility of an end to this lifestyle. Crow rekindled the flame once more throughout the night and allowed himself a few hours of sleep. In between bouts of jolting awake, he watched the red sparks of the flame sail across the sky and join the stars. Crow snapped his fingers. An orb of fire popped and levitated atop his hand. Crow waved his hand and the fire disappeared. He yawned and went back to sleep. He needed ample sleep for the rest of the journey. He was able to grab another hour until dawn arrived. The fire was gone when Crow awoke. He wiped the sleep from his eyes and looked up at the mountains and prepared himself for the hardest part of his journey. The next two weeks would be grueling.

While the rest of the continent was still in autumn, the northern mountains were convinced it was winter. Crow kept his hood upon his head. His boots kicked the pebbles and lame grass underneath the layer of snow. The imprints that his boots left on the canvas of snow were erased with wind. His cloak was pelted by pellets of ice. The howling wind threw his hood back. Crow grinded his teeth before he threw his hood back on. He blew hot air into his gloves. He was a single black dot that made its way through white. Flutters of ice scraped against his lips and chin. Crow raised his arms to cover his face. Half of his cloak was now white from a thin coating of snow and ice.

Crow dug his right hand into his cloak and withdrew the crude journal. Crow flipped through the pages to ensure that he was on track. Crow found the latest page. He trailed an index

finger down the page. He closed the journal and pushed it back into the depths of his cloak's right pocket.

He kept his eyes uphill. The sun peeked through the cliff behind Crow. It was a faint white marble behind the ice fog. Crow took a moment to look at the long path behind him and the path that awaited him. Crow was in the middle of a frozen cradle. Behind Crow, was a steep mountain that was garnished by trees with white leaves. In front of him lied an easier climb. This last climb would signify that his journey would soon come to an end. He just needed to leave the valley. Crow attempted to continue, but he was stopped.

The sensation started at the back of his skull. It would then trail down his spine and end at the fingertips of his left hand. He examined the rolling hills of snow. He found a single imperfection in the land before him. A blemish on the flat ground. Crow deviated from his set path. He walked towards a deformed mound of snow. Crow looked towards the sun. The rays of light still couldn't peek through the natural curtain. Crow went on a single knee and gently shook the lump.

The body wasn't old. Crow determined that it must have been two days old. It was a man. His drool had crystallized into icicles around the corners of his mouth. His eyes were silent and glassy. His skin ashen white. His ears were covered by brown woolen earmuffs that matched with the rest of his clothing both in color and material. His finger snapped off with frostbite. Crow looked at his own gloved left hand. He saw his white bandages peeking out from under his gloves.

"I wonder what the Nixians do when they have to bury the dead, so forgive me for not knowing your customs." Crow turned the body to face the sky. Crow closed the corpse's frozen

eyelids. He took both of the corpse's hands and placed them on top of each other. At the very least, this created a simulacrum of being buried. "I'll end up just like you.... If I don't get some shelter," Crow tapped his chin. "I wonder if that station is even still standing. It could have easily been torn apart for building material."

Crow meant to walk away from the dead body, but his foot caught itself on a long strip of metal. Crow tumbled headfirst into the snow. He frowned and spat the snow out his mouth. He stood up. He inspected the offender. Crow's foot connected with the second metal strip. Two parallel metal lines. The corpse that Crow attempted to bury was right in between both. He couldn't be determined whether these train tracks hadn't been used for a decade or a millennium. Crow's eyes followed uphill and nodded to the corpse.

"Thanks." Crow followed the tracks.

It was an hour before Crow reached a silhouette of shelter. Nightfall had made the snowstorm even more belligerent. Darkness and diamond dust obscured most of one's vision. The train station had a sign covered in snow, but Crow didn't bother to uncover the name. The words would more than likely be faded from centuries of abandonment. Beyond the sign was the stone and wooden structure with the moon not far above it.

The station was small. It would house no more than thirty people with the platform included. The stone platform where commuters would wait for their train was cracked and weathered. The painted wood was eaten away. The wooden doors were still attached, but their long brass handles were replaced with holes to look inside. The wooden doors had small windows. They were foggy. Crow placed his face close to the window. He peered into the station. The fog seeping into the waiting room hid the floor. Small benches made for commuters

were knocked over and ripped apart. The ticket booths were empty, but a single ticket was still there, waiting for someone.

Crow wiped away the flecks of snow from his hair when he entered. The waiting was cold, but it still would serve to defend against the elements. Crow adjusted his gloves and broke apart some of the boards from the dilapidated benches and stacked them in a neat pile. He took a small matchbox from his cloak. It could have been the last matchbox ever created. The date was faded, but Crow took solace in little uncertain dribbles of imagination. Crow opened the matchbox only to find that all the remaining matches were charred creators of campfires. No dice. Crow closed the box and tossed it behind him.

“It was worth a try.” Crow shrugged. He held his hand outward. He paused for a moment. He imagined the same lit campfire from last night. He snapped his fingers. There was a crackle and a controlled fire appeared. He felt a dull warmth in his thumb and fingers, but they cooled back down after a few minutes. The set of boards crackled while Crow took off his cloak. He defrosted his outer clothing and then wrapped his cloak around himself like a blanket. He yawned and laid down on the hard floor. Crow stared at one of the multiple windows within the waiting room. He watched as the snowflakes fell and stuck to the glass. The wind had turned from a howl to a whisper. Even with the fire and cloak, Crow shivered. He shut his eyes and tried to rest.

Crow wasn't certain of the time when he heard someone making tracks. He didn't carry a watch like most people. He wasn't fond of clocks in general. He stood up and patted warmth into his body. The blizzard had died down and the snow fell at a gentler pace. Crow wiped the fog from a window and looked outside. With squinted eyes, he found a faint figure in the distance.

He put his hand to his chin and thought back to the frostbitten merchant. A traveler who died alone a journey through this harsh land. Crow pushed the door open and navigated towards the figure. He chose to forgo his hood, so the snowflakes landed atop his black hair. The figure's form became more apparent as both drew closer to each other.

Crow blinked. Her hair was as white as snow. So long that it flowed down to the middle of her back. It was the color of her hair that made him consider the flaws in his vision. Her head was down in contemplation. Her eyes were darkened. The snow fell atop the shoulders of her coat. She looked up. It was clear that she saw Crow. Crow considered turning back around but realized that he would appear even more strange if he just walked away.

"Hello?" Crow asked.

"Hello." The woman responded. A snowflake fell on Crow's nose. He shivered. It appeared that she was real.

"Um..." Crow said. Crow didn't know what next to say to a random stranger in the middle of a snow-covered land. The woman parted her lips. Crow saw the faint splotch on her bottom lip. It was most likely a scar. She reminded Crow of someone, but he couldn't exactly remember who.

"May I have your name?" The woman asked.

"Crow. Crow Pendragon," Crow said.

The woman smiled, "You may call me Elizabeth." Elizabeth turned back to the moon. "Well, Sir Pendragon, may I inquire why you are here? I can tell that you are not from these lands. You are not properly dressed for this weather."

“I was looking for a town and I took shelter in the station for the night. Why are you here? Are you travelling as well?” Crow asked. Elizabeth turned to Crow, then her face contorted. She ran forwards and pushed Crow behind her. A sharp noise sliced through the sounds of harsh winter. A sword was in Elizabeth’s hand.

“I was hunting an ogre,” Elizabeth said.

“An ogre? Here?” Crow asked. Then he saw it. A hobbling lump in the fog. The gray ogre took a step forward. His skin was gray and leathery. The bottom half of its face was swallowing the top half. His chest was wide and flat. His entire left arm was a massive pillar of flesh. His right arm was a thin emaciated arm. One of his legs was shorter than the other and this caused his hobble. His body was decorated with chains that wrapped around his chest to form an X. The chains held a wooden cross close to the ogre’s back. The chains were strained and sunk into the ogre’s fat.

Crow watched as Elizabeth ran straight towards the ogre. Her hair fluttered. It took a moment for the ogre to react. His mind was slow to process Elizabeth. Then with a short grunt, the ogre bounded towards her. The ogre could no longer speak, but merely grunt and whimper. His thinner arm flapped like a tattered flag as he ran. He made to grab the woman with his better arm, but she ducked under and sliced his wrist.

The ogre stomped his feet on the ground and slapped his wrist to stop the bleeding. Unfortunately, the ogre’s thin arm was so small that it couldn’t halt the flow of blood. The ogre gave a war cry in another attempt to attack. Elizabeth was able to slip past the brunt of the attack, but the ogre made another swipe and caught her head. The commitment to the attack caused the ogre to trip and fall down the hill. Elizabeth was sent rolling the opposite direction. She nursed

her head with one hand and raised her sword with the other. The ogre pushed himself off the ground and sucked in air with his mangled face.

Then a yellow flash burned the ogre's back. The ogre shouted and took off the large wooden cross on his back and cradled it close to his chest. A chunk of the ogre's skin was left dangling and signed.

Crow clasped his hands together and shot the ogre with another bolt of lightning. This second shot of lightning tore apart more skin off the ogre's back.

The ogre growled and used the cross as a weapon to swing in a wide arc. Crow was able to raise his arm to defend himself. The attack didn't have much force, but Crow didn't have the strength nor the footing to handle it and was knocked down. Crow groaned when he fell to the ground. He heard the stomping ogre approach him. Crow looked up at his sickly face and the beady white eyes. The ogre places the cross on the ground beside him and raised his good fist. Crow closed his eyes. He was certain that this would be his death and he had no qualms about. It made sense that this would be the way he would die.

Elizabeth ran up the ogre's back. With the moon behind her, she drove the sword right through the ogre's body. The ogre screamed, but Elizabeth held on and dragged the sword across the entirety of the ogre's back. She took a moment to dig her heel and yanked the sword out of the twisted muscle. She then jumped off the ogre's back. The ogre's knees buckled, and he fell to the ground. He reached for the wooden cross, but his hands only grabbed chunks of snow and dirt. The ogre spluttered out a last groan and died. Crow witnessed all of this.

Elizabeth allowed herself to finally tremble. Her sword was slick with gray blood. she turned her head to the cross.

A skeleton was nailed to the cross with a garland of flowers. More dried-up flowers were stuffed into the skeleton's ribcage. A dead rose was its heart. Poppies for its lungs. Daisies for its liver.

"I am sorry." Elizabeth said. The ogre was already motionless and still. She then snapped her head to look for Crow.

The sky spun. Crow's foggy breath was short, and particles of snow were thrown into his face. He had one hand in the shape of a claw over his chest. The sky was then blocked by Elizabeth's face. She was looking down on him. He saw her red lips move, yet he couldn't hear her faded voice because the winds were far too loud for him to hear anything. Crow settled for staring into her blue eyes.

"Just leave me." Crow said.

Chapter 2: The Town of Jotun

Crow felt the nearby graveyard before he opened his eyes. With sleep came a lack of control and his “talents” were left unrestricted like dreams spun by the unconscious. When he opened his eyes, they were presented with a controlled flame in a hearth. A metal pot was hung atop of the hearth and its warm smell was wafted over to his nose. Crow licked his lips. He would appreciate a good meal, but he believed that it was not for him. The orange glow painted his blanché face and casted a thin shadow on the walls behind him. Crow sat up. The blue, woolen blankets draped around his body slid off. He stretched his arms above his head and yawned. The cracking of his bones echoed in the cottage. The floors consisted of wooden slats. Furthest from the bed was a small milky white door with a brass handle. Crow still wore all of his clothes, except for his boots. They were placed next to the hearth. Crow rose from his bed and peaked into the pot. A stew of carrots, onions, and a couple of celery stalks were kept warm.

There were no pieces of furniture or baubles. It was just a lone bed and hearth. At first, Crow believed that there was nothing left in the room, but then he noticed a large canvas that was hung on the west wall. He struggled to see exactly what it was and drew closer to see it more clearly. It was a detailed map of the country, or the country that once was. The Kingdom of Nix no longer had a ruler nor structure, and this map was merely a remnant from ten years prior. The map was fractured into thirteen providence of varying size. Each one with its own name and history. The southernmost province of the kingdom had the least labels, but one of them caught Crow’s attention. It was the town of Jotun.

“This must be it,” Crow said. He chuckled and with a tired smile continued. “I actually made it, but how exactly did I get here?” The door opened. Crow jumped back and pushed his left hand behind his back. In the doorway stood Elizabeth and behind was a landscape of snow. The cold crept into the room and Crow shivered.

“Sorry about the cold.” Elizabeth said. She walked inside and closed the door behind her. “Pendragon was it?”

“Yeah, Pendragon as in Arthurian legend.” Crow said and relaxed his left hand back to his side.

“Arthurian legend? I am not familiar with such a legend.” Elizabeth rummaged through her satchel while she asked the question. Only one of her hands was occupied with the task. The other balanced a white mug.

“King Arthur. It was a story from the old world.”

“I was never a scholar, but nevertheless it is nice to meet you, Sir Pendragon.” The woman carved a smile with her thin red lips. She pushed her hair to the side. Crow could now see both of her eyes. “It is a pleasure to meet you.” Elizabeth went back to her satchel. “Give me a moment, as you can tell, this satchel does not belong to me.” Crow’s eyes flickered to her side; a navy-blue scabbard hung around her waist. Its silver locket had a speck of rust.

“Yes...um-thank you. Just Crow is fine. I don’t like formalities.” Crow said. Then he noticed steam rising from Elizabeth’s white mug.

“Take this for now while I get a bowl and spoon. You must be famished.” Elizabeth said. She offered the mug to Crow. “I didn’t know if you preferred tea or coffee, so I decided with the middle ground.”

“This isn’t necessary. I assume that I have already been a bother for you. Carrying me back to town probably wasn’t easy.” Crow said.

“I insist that you take it.” She pushed the mug into Crow’s hand. With her second hand free, she withdrew two bowls and spoons. Elizabeth set both of the sets near the hearth and stirred the pot with the ladle. She peeked into the broth to find that it was nearly finished. “You don’t feel any pain, right? One of my companions inspected you and told me that there were no signs of major injuries, but eyes don’t account for much.” Elizabeth filled it. “However, she did say that you were not well fed in the slightest.”

“I feel okay.” Crow said. She filled the two bowls and sat down on the floor with her legs crossed. She laid one of the bowls for Crow and started to eat from the second. The warmth from the mug transferred to Crow’s fingers. He raised the mug to his lips. The liquid was a light brown. Crow took a tentative sip, and his tongue went into shock. “W-What is this? Why is it so sweet?”

“It’s chocolate.” Elizabeth said. “You know what chocolate is right?”

“Yeah, of course. I know chocolate.” Crow said. How long has it been since he had some?

“Is this second bowl for me?” Crow asked. Elizabeth looked behind her then back to Crow. She waited. “Sorry. That was a stupid question.”

“Please, enjoy your meal.” Elizabeth said. She handed Crow the stew with a sweet smile. Crow accepted it and tried to emulate with his own smile, but he dropped it once he thought how odd it must look. “It is the least I can do for the wanderer that assisted me with the ogre.”

“I hardly think that I turned the tide of that fight. You seemed to have a grasp of things. I just made a small lightshow.”

“A lightshow? Your magic stripped his back of flesh! I have never seen a mage that can cast lightning spells.” A certain sparkle was in Elizabeth’s eyes when she spoke. Crow tried to take another sip of the hot chocolate, but then he realized that he finished the entire thing. “This drink was excellent. Was chocolate the only ingredient?”

“Thank you. No, it was a blend of fine Nixian peppermint and chocolate, or at least as fine as you can get these days. It’s a common recipe, but there is a bit of room for experimentation within each family. Mine was a bit more traditional with its creation.” Elizabeth went towards the bed.

“Oh. Let me fix it. I was the one that slept in it.” Crow said.

“Continue eating, please.” Elizabeth said without turning around. She fixed the bed.

“Consider it and the meal, payment for helping me with the ogre. He had killed a few of us during the night. I was ensuring that he would no longer harm us or impede our progress down the mountain.” Elizabeth said.

“Is Jotun normally attacked by ogres?”

“No. I assume that he was wandering for a while and appeared near our vicinity.” Elizabeth said. She walked over the map on the wall. “Excuse me, I forgot to pack this.”

Elizabeth took the edges of the map off the wall and rolled it up. She took out a string from her satchel and tied it. “May I ask why Jotun was your destination? You are aware that there is not much left in these lands.”

“Well, I heard that it was one of the few Nixian towns that was still standing. I planned to live here. Of course, I don’t aim to mingle too much. Just have a place to live,” Crow said.

“Si-Crow, I believe it would be wise to make other plans.” There were three repeated smacks against the door. Elizabeth stood up and opened the door. Crow once again caught a glimpse of the outside. The skies were a clear gray. The snowstorm had passed. It was still too cold for Crow’s liking, but he was hoping that he would get accustomed to it. Crow discovered that the cottage was located up a hill slightly away from the main street. More rising mountains were directed north. The people of Jotun scurried around carrying supplies and working. Farmers lead their cold-hardened cattle with crooks. Crow then saw a girl of no more than eleven in the middle of winding up a snowball. The girl attempted to stop her throw, but it sailed out of her hands. Elizabeth caught a snowball with her hand and crushed it. She focused on the girl and her other two friends that were in the middle of making their own snowball. They stared at Elizabeth with paralyzed fear.

“Run along.” Elizabeth waved. “You should not be far from your parents during this time. Besides, it is too cold to make a snowball. They are as hard as ice and could hurt someone.” The kids nodded, and they shuffled away from the cottage. Elizabeth turned her head back to Crow. “Apologies.” Crow didn’t acknowledge Elizabeth at first because of the rarity behind her. A snapped off specimen of timber with strips of steel dangling from the top like loose antlers. It was an electric pole. No matter how many centuries had passed, even thirteen

sets of centuries had passed, there were still remnants. Very much like the station from the night before. Visages of what once was and what the current generation was struggling to re-achieve.

Crow knew that the current state of the world wasn't disastrous, but it wasn't thriving like the old world.

"Is it not sad? The sight of it conjures far too many possibilities." Elizabeth said. She had followed Crow's eyes. She held her hand on the door while more cold air seeped in. "I often feel that much of our world's misery could be attributed to the large mystery that caused..." Elizabeth waved her over the electric pole. "All of that."

"It must've been hard for the first three thousand. To be the ones to pick up the broken pieces and make sense of them." Crow said.

"You knew about that old-world legend. Do you ever think about what happened? What caused The Entropy?"

".... I don't know." Crow answered. It didn't take a scholar to craft an answer, each person born would have their own theory on the mystery. It was difficult because the sketches of the past were like the electrical lines or train stations, they only mentioned what the people of the old world had. Not even memoirs of the first three thousand survivors would have a direct answer. With the unknown came legends and theories. Some said that The Entropy was caused by the wrath of a higher power. Some said it was human stupidity. Some more modern scholars believed that The Entropy was caused by nuclear warfare. Crow disagreed with this theory and he wasn't the only one. Nuclear radiation doesn't make ogre out of humans, nuclear radiation doesn't smash continents together into one and drown the remaining pieces. Nuclear radiation

doesn't let people make lightning bolts and let young boys talk with the dead. "I don't know."

Crow repeated.

"I suppose it was foolish to expect that you would have an answer." Elizabeth continued to stare out the door, but then she turned to Crow. "Ah. There is someone that I would like you to meet."

Crow looked back to the door and found a woman entering the room. Elizabeth closed the door behind her. She was Elizabeth's senior by thirty and her hair was a deep brown curtain that stopped right above her shoulders.

"How is our stranger, Elizabeth?" A cigarette was lit between the older woman's teeth. She took a small puff and leaned in closer to Crow. The woman examined his face for a second before snapping back to a rigid posture. In turn, Crow could see a faint scar that was near beneath her eyelid and ran down her cheek.

"He is doing well. Crow, this is Lady Brynhildr. She assisted me in making sure that you acquired adequate attention."

"Thank you, Lady Brynhildr." Crow complimented. Brynhildr dropped her cigarette on the floor and extinguished it with the heel of her boot.

"No need for formalities. Elizabeth only introduces me like that because of habit. You can call me Bryn. I am glad to see you are doing well. Elizabeth and your unconscious body were freezing by the time she carried you here. We were worried that you got frostbite."

"I have already mentioned that he was underdressed for *our* autumns. A cloak may serve you well down south, but our autumns and winters can be brutal." Elizabeth said.

“You should have seen her. I am surprised her panicked voice didn’t alert the whole damn town. I opened my door to find her covered in snow and you in her arms. You are surprising light for your height.” Brynhildr said. Crow rubbed his temple and imagined the entire scene. Why would risk it on a man that she didn’t know? He could have been a scoundrel, a murderer, a man worth less than the ogre that she slayed.

“Brynhildr, Crow explained that he was in search of Jotun. He wanted to make a new life,” Elizabeth said.

“Why? You could have gone to Arcadia to find a decent home,” Brynhildr said. Crow scratched his neck.

“I heard that the outskirts of Nix were a quiet place.” Crow said. “Places like Arcadia are too crowded.”

“You seem too young to want a quiet life. The people here are now in the process of leaving this town for good. They are seeking warmer lands down south. Food has been harder and harder with many nearby trade routes no longer being managed. I am sorry that you made the trek all the way here for nothing.” Crow shook his head.

“No worries. This is not the first time.” Crow said. “While I am here, can I get some supplies for the trip back?”

“There is no need for you to leave, yet.” Elizabeth said. “Right, Bryn? He doesn’t need to be in a rush. He was injured, after all.”

“I rather leave sooner than later.” Crow said.

“Just stay put for now, Crow.” Brynhidlr said. “The situation is delicate. The people of this town are worried about the journey south. Tension is in the air, but I don’t want to throw you back out with nothing.

“Thank you for your consideration,” Crow said.

“Elizabeth?” Brynhidlr asked.

“Yes?” Elizabeth asked.

“A word, outside?” Brynhidlr turned to Crow. “Sorry.”

“I understand.” Crow said.

Brynhidlr and Elizabeth walked outside of the cottage for a moment. Crow sat back down on the bed. He crossed his arms together and considered the journey back. He was hoping to have some respite from the wandering, but it seems that more nights by the campfire awaited him. It also meant another journey back down the mountain. Where would he go? Arcadia was a risk. Elizabeth opened the door.

“Brynhidlr will attempt to get you something for the journey back. Neither of us, in good conscience, could let you leave empty-handed.” Elizabeth said.

“Thank you. We just met and you guys are helping me out. I will say, while the journey is grueling, the landscape can be beautiful.” Crow said. Elizabeth nodded.

“Not many foreigners can look past the coldness and appreciate the charm of our land.”

“I have been meaning to study more about the history of Nix. It is an intriguing country.” Crow said.

“We do have some expandable time. What do you want to know about us?” Elizabeth asked.

“I know some of the basics. It was the first nation that was built after The Entropy. It held a monarchist system of government. Across the continent, it was known for its tailors.” Crow hesitated. “The government officially fell ten years ago due to a civil war.”

Elizabeth bit her bottom lip. “The fall of the kingdom is largely connected to the actions of our last ruling king. He angered many and appeased few. His foreign policy also left him with no influence across the land.”

“Was he an Isolationist?” Crow asked.

“Yes. He wanted Nix to stand on its own with no assistance or relationship with any other nation. I am certain that he had good intentions.” Elizabeth said.

“A bad decision considering the history of Nix. The kingdom had weight due to its history...Sorry. It’s not right for me to enter the politics of a country that’s not mine.”

“No, you bring a common point. Not that it matters anymore. After the people of Jotun leave there will be nothing but abandoned houses and castles.”

“These ten years must have been difficult for everyone.” Crow said.

“Jotun is an example of a small town that attempted to stay together after the fall, but these lands are not very sustainable without a proper government. That is the reason for their departure.” Elizabeth said.

“You speak of them, as if you’re not from Jotun. Where are you from?”

“I am Nixian, but I have only been in Jotun for a few months. I came here with Brynhildr.”

“I am sorry.” Crow said. He chastised himself. He lacked far too much tact for social conversation.

“For what?” Elizabeth asked.

“For all of these questions. It's been ten years, but it can't be easy to talk about this. Let's change the topic to something more light-hearted.”

“That would be agreeable, but what should we talk about?” Elizabeth asked. Crow put his hand to his chin.

“What about that hot chocolate that you made me? How did you make it?”

“I am surprised you're interested. The first step was to find some peppermint....”

Chapter 3: Introductions

Brynhildr waited at the small wooden table with her arms crossed. A single rectangular table sat in the middle of the room with six chairs of the same cedar wood accompanying it. There were no windows, so most of the light came from a muddy light bulb. It was in a state of flickering attributed to the old method of creating electricity. The method consisted of using wooden windmills. The main problem with this method was that the icy winds periodically froze and slowed down the windmills. This demanded a weekly chipping away at the icicles and ice that obstructed the blades. Another pain that would be averted with a trip down south.

Brynhildr thought back to Crow. His cloak, black hair, and pale skin. She reminded him of a vampire and a polite one at that. Of course, she hadn't met many vampires. It wouldn't surprise her that they were a polite bunch. The single door to the room opened. An older man with trimmed gray hair sat down in front of her.

"Good morning, Kay. How's the effort going?" Brynhildr asked.

"All the supplies for the journey have been accounted for. All that's left is deciding our destination and charting a route. We have a general idea, but it is difficult to pinpoint an exact location. I pray for a safe journey." Kay said.

"Never knew you believed in a higher power." Brynhildr said. Kay shrugged his shoulders

"I have once before. I might as well try it again, but we are here to talk about the newcomer. Brought here by Elizabeth."

“She killed the ogre. An ogre that no one wanted to step up and take down. The least we can do is help a wanderer that helped her out.”

“The people are thankful, but this stranger coming to town is bound to alert some.” The lights in the room flickered off for ten seconds before flashing back on. “It doesn’t help that people are on edge with the whole journey. I forgot to ask his name.”

“Crow Pendragon. Odd last name, but he is polite. The easiest method would be to give him some food and send him on his way.” Brynhildr said.

“I have a feeling that you will recommend something different,” Kay said.

“Elizabeth said that she saw him harness lightning. He is a mage.”

“Really? Not uncommon, sure, but we haven’t an orthodox mage in Nix ever since Kingfisher held the crown. What do you suggest?” Kay asked.

“He braved two weeks of journey through the fields of snow just to get here. He is a traveler, so he must have more insight on the continent’s affairs. Kay, we have to admit that we don’t know what’s going out there. He would be an incredible help to us.”

“Did he ask to join us on our journey?”

“Well, no, but I intend to convince him if necessary.”

Kay closed his eyes and rubbed his left cheek. “This is asking a lot. Are you doing this just because he helped Elizabeth and your duty demands to repay him, or because he can provide practical benefits?”

“Both.” Brynhildr answered. Kay looked at the six-pointed snowflake patch on Brynhildr’s shoulder.

“I trust your judgment, but it will be an impossible feat unless we get Madeline and Baxter on board. Baxter is from Jotun and Madeline was a commoner. They barely trust me because I served. The three of us will judge his character and make a decision on whether or not he can stay with us, but I can’t promise anything.”

“Then let’s call for a meeting.”

“So, what path did you take? I expect that it wasn’t easy. Did you take the ice bridge?” Elizabeth asked. Crow shook his head.

“No. I took a path that was recommended to me by an old merchant. I wasn’t certain if the ice bridge would be maintained. I took a route that was more roundabout, but I was able to avoid relying on any man-made pathways. I wouldn’t recommend that path for a large group, especially one carrying supplies.” Elizabeth frowned. “Sorry.”

“No worries.” There was a knock on the cabin door. There was a pause and Brynhildr entered the cabin.

“Hey.” Crow said.

“What did they say?” Elizabeth asked. “Don’t tell me that they said no. I’ll demand it myself.”

“Relax girly, only Kay was able to meet with me.” Brynhildr turned to Crow. “Have you decided where to travel next.”

“Not exactly, but if you would all feel better if I left sooner then- “

“How about you help us make the trek down the mountain?” Brynhildr asked.

“What? You want my help to make the journey? This is sudden.”

“It is sudden, but I believe that you can help us. You are a traveler. Plus having a mage is always useful. I don’t want to force you into this.” Crow put his hand to his chin. He did come to Jotun in order to find a place to settle. If Crow feared that he would be discovered, he could leave once they reach their destination. Crow nodded.

“Alright. I’ll help.” Crow said.

“Good. Follow me.” Brynhildr led Elizabeth and Crow out of the cabin and into the streets of Jotun. The icy winds smacked Crow the instant that he left the cabin. Crow made to put on his hood, but then he witnessed a shop owner close his door shut when he passed by. Crow decided not to put on his hood.

“Are you cold?” Elizabeth asked.

“I can manage.” Crow said.

“The meeting is inside here.” Brynhildr opened the wooden door to the stone building in front of Crow. Depiction of knights during battle were etched into the stone along the edges of the building. The capstone of this artistry was a weathered stone knight on the roof. This knight

was clad in full armor and a long cape. A sword was planted in front of the knight and he kept both hands atop the hilt. The knight's finer details were scrubbed out by the elements.

"I heard from the older locals that this monument was once the topic of tourism. They stopped caring for it, after the isolationist policies were enacted." Elizabeth said.

"It is still impressive. Who is it meant to represent?" Crow asked.

"We don't want to keep them waiting." Brynhildr said.

"Right. Sorry." Elizabeth said. There was a faint echo in the building. The windows were long and splattered large rays of light throughout the short halls. Brynhildr walked in front of Crow and Elizabeth. She stopped next to a brown door. The three entered the same room in which Brynhildr and Kay held their private conference.

"So, these are the two heroes that got rid of the ogre." Kay raised his hands. He was seated at the table. Behind Kay, there was a young man, no more than eighteen, that gave a short wave. The two people next to Kay were unamused by the statement. "Crow, was it? Thank you for assisting Elizabeth in that endeavor."

"I was happy to assist." Crow said.

"Please sit down. We have some things that need to be discussed." Kay waved a hand over the seats. Crow and Elizabeth sat down opposite to the three people. Brynhildr decided to stand behind Elizabeth.

"My name is Kay, to my left is Baxter and to my right is Madeline. Behind me is my son, Tristan." Kay introduced himself. He adjusted his unbuttoned navy-blue coat. His face was a canvas of wrinkles and short, white locks. Crow noticed wisdom in his eyes, especially when it

seemed like Kay was examining him. Tristan waved at Crow. Tristan looked much like his father, except for features like the eyebrows and chin that most certainly came from the mother. “Except for my son, who serves as a peacekeeper, we are the temporary leaders of this migration. I am sure that you know about our migration.”

“Yes. I would also like to apologize for coming at an inopportune time. I wasn’t aware of your current plight and it was careless of me to not properly acquire information about your situation.” Crow said.

“His politeness gives em the air of the royal dogs.” Baxter said. Madeline rolled her eyes.

“Relax, Baxter. Men can be polite without being nobility.” Madeline said. Crow looked back and forth between the two of them. Crow thought they looked normal enough. Baxter pushed up the sleeves of the shirt that was too tight for his build. His round face and flat nose were lit by the single lightbulb in the room.

“Crow wasn’t part of the nobility or the royal guard. I or Elizabeth would certainly have known him. Even Madeline would recognize his name.” Brynhildr said. Nobility? Crow thought. Was Elizabeth a noble? She had the air of a refined person, but nobility? Crow focused back on the conversation. “He is a complete outsider. Whether that is better than a noble is up to you.”

“Either way, we have yet to determine his character or motives.” Madeline said. She folded her faded hands neatly on the table. “How far have you traveled, Crow?”

“Enough.” Crow said.

“What exactly is enough? Where was your birthplace? We require this information if we are to trust you.”

“I was born and raised within the Magnus Empire. I have been travelling specifically westward for five years. My earlier years were spent travelling within Magnus itself. My goal of approaching Jotun was a relatively new goal. A few months ago, I was in a tavern with a merchant who spoke of Jotun being economically active.”

“Can we stop asking him questions?” Elizabeth asked. “He could have left me alone to deal with the ogre, yet he did not. Is that not enough evidence of his character?”

“Your Majesty, please.” Kay started.

“She isn’t our majesty anymore, Kay.” Madeline said. Your Majesty!? Was Elizabeth a queen? Was he having a normal conversation with a queen? Crow thought back to his etiquette. He didn’t even properly address her by any title! No one else seemed to jump at the notion, so Crow had to just internally process the information. He then heard Kay speak.

“I have one final reservation about this matter.” Kay said. He turned to Crow. “This is not a wealthy town; we cannot provide you with adequate monetary payment. What do you seek to gain?”

“Well,” Crow scratched his chin, but no desire came. There was some internal panic when Crow realized that they were waiting for a proper answer. What did he want? No desires came, so Crow came up with a quick answer. “I wish to return the favor for Elizabeth saving me. I’ll start there.” Crow bowed his head slightly.

“You came here randomly searching for a home and you don’t want money for giving us some help.” Baxter said. “Who are you?”

“Stop badgering him.” Elizabeth said. Baxter rubbed his palm across his face.

“I don’t see why you are so apt to defend this boy. You just met him.” Baxter said. “Here is an honest question for you. What help can you provide us?”

“My journal.” Crow said. He reached into his cloak and took out the faded book. “I made note of places that I have been too in my travels. Pieces of land that are no longer contested that you may settle in.”

“Do you know anything about the Grasslands of Rhei?” Kay asked. “That was one of the locations that we considered.”

“That place is free.” Crow said. “No nation has sent out settlers to that area.”

“Are you sure?” Baxter asked.

“Yes.”

“Then we should go to the Grasslands. We can’t afford to wait around any longer. Kay, we need to find a proper place to live.” Madeline maintained.

“That we do.” Baxter said. “Yet I need not remind you lot that a few minutes of conversation does not mean we know his life’s story.”

“I got an idea.” Tristan spoke up. Everyone turned to face him. He hesitated to continue until Kay nodded to his son.

“Baxter can keep an eye on Crow, and he’ll make sure that his intentions are true. Being a mage, he can also be on the front line of the caravan and use his magic to avert any threats.”

Tristan said.

“I am fine with that.” Crow said.

“Baxter?” Kay asked.

“I will watch over em.” Baxter said.

“Then we have a deal.” Kay said. He shook hands with Crow.

“We’ll have to let everyone know about our destination and of our magical guest.”

Madeline said. “Let’s iron out the finer details now, so we can be concise when we inform everyone.” Everyone agreed and so the conversation to begin the month-long migration to the Grasslands of Rhei began.

Chapter 4: An Old Night

Crow wiped his window with the sleeve from his new black cloak. The view of his window was obscured by branches of a yew tree, yet beyond the branches he could see the top of mountains and foggy valleys. The wind pushed one of the branches to tap on the window. Crow tapped back to amuse himself but grew bored. He swiveled around to face his new room. Everything was new. From his clothes, his room, to the land around him. There was a draft in the room, but it was still comfy enough. The bed consisted of a mattress with blankets and a pillow. There was a shelf of books besides his desk. Farthest from the desk and shelf was the door. There were no other decorations or furnishing to the room and Crow liked the simplicity of it.

The handle on the door rattled. Crow turned his back to the door and looked out the window. The hall beyond the door was cavernous, but Crow could hear the faint ticking of clocks. Crow shivered when he heard the creak of the door open. A single follower stood in the shadow. He blended into the emptiness of the hall.

Crow surrendered and turned around. The follower stood in the doorframe motionless. His face was obscured by a mask made of leather. In one hand, he held a wax candle that was halfway melted by a purple flame. In the other, a skull.

“Master Pendragon,” The follower said. “The Grand Priestess has ordered me to give this to you. Master Thane and Lady Winnie have also received a similar specimen. Your first test shall be to hold communication with this skull.” The follower’s word was constantly interrupted by his raspy breathing. The follower kneeled before Crow. Crow then discovered why the follower was wearing the mask. He saw pieces of rotting flesh peeking out from the follower’s

scalp. The follower presented the skull to Crow. Crow took it. “We expect great things from the three of you.” The follower stopped kneeling and walked into the hallway. With his newly freed hand, the follower snapped his finger and the door closed.

Crow let out the air that he was holding and examined the skull. His gray eyes traced the features of his new company. The skull was a faded yellow. A permanent layer of dust had stuck to every crevice. A jagged crack ran down the skull’s frontal lobe. It had a missing jaw and several missing teeth. Crow placed the skull on his desk and rubbed his chin.

“Uh...Hi?” Crow said. The skull just stayed silent. “Of course, that wouldn’t work. Come on focus!” Crow closed his eyes. He could feel his skin unraveling. He could feel his organs vibrating, the very sensation made him sick. Feel the expansion of his lungs when he breathed. He could hear the blood flowing through his body. He could hear the beat of his young heart. Crow clasped his hands together. “Being that now proceeds in oblivion. Heed my call. A fledgling, I may be, but worth in both aether and mind. Regale me your tale.”

“Hello lad.” Crow heard the simple response. The voice rippled across his skin. It was barely noticeable. Crow concentrated. Pain flashed in the front of his skull. Crow tried to relax and keep a steady breath, but his body became cold.

“What is your name, wise gracious spirit?”

“I am neither wise nor gracious, young necromancer. I am dead. You are the one that called me here, so introduce yourself first.” The skull’s voice was low and gentle. Strangely enough, Crow felt a warmth from this dead man’s voice. It was not a ghostly wail from the great beyond, but it was simply a voice like any other. However, the pain in running along his spine and head ensured that the conversation would not be seamless.

“Crow Pendragon.” Crow introduced himself to the talking skull. This scenario was certainly strange, yet it was to be expected. His mother emphasized what he and his siblings were meant to do. Talking with the dead was only the first step.

“Well nice to meet you, Crow. Name’s Mordecai. I never had the pleasure of speaking with a necromancer before. I wouldn’t have expected to speak with one so young.” Mordecai asked. “How old are you exactly.”

“Thirteen.” Crow responded. The conversation was even stranger to Crow. Mordecai was conversing with him like it was a regular chat. Crow turned behind him. He made sure the door was closed and turned back to the skull. “Are you really okay with talking to a necromancer?” Crow asked.

“What were you expecting? For me to wail about how the great beyond a horrible place is?”

“The dead can’t speak of the afterlife. I know that. I just wasn’t expecting you to easily fall into conversation with me. Shouldn’t you be scared? Scared of me?”

“Why would I be scared of a child?” Mordecai asked.

“Well...” Crow couldn’t think of a response. He was just a child. A child who was thrown into this with a modicum of training and assurance that this needed to be done. That there was a purpose for the long sleepless night and treks down to the catacombs with only a hazy torch leading the way. No matter how much he hated.

“Well?” Mordecai asked. “Are you going to ask me any questions? This must be your training, right?” Crow was still dazed that this dead man was so easily going along with this situation.

“Are you a necromancer?” Crow asked. It was the only question that popped in his mind. The nonchalant conversation must have been due to his previous life.

“Not quite right, but I was a wizard before I died!” Mordecai said. Excitement laced his voice at the recollection of his chosen craft. “I was head of the department of Phenology in Mount Greenhill. Phenology was a broad form of magic. It normally had to do with using weather and the elements.” Crow had heard of Mount Greenhill in one of the history texts that he was forced to read. It was college for mages that had disbanded long ago.

“So, you're like a mage? Did you know any spells?” Crow asked.

“Mage? No, I was a wizard. Do you not know the difference?”

“Um no.” Crow said. With every word, Crow created a large gulf between him and Mordecai. Crow didn't know anything about wizards or mages.

“There is no need to be ashamed of what you do not know if you are willing to learn. A mage can apply to anyone that is knowledgeable of magic. A wizard or a witch holds an official position or title, mostly used in an academic setting, but governmental positions also work. You would be considered a mage.”

“Really?” Crow asked. “I thought necromancers were not considered mages due to their very goal and concept.” Crow heard Mordecai sigh. To think that even in death, they could make vocal gestures.

“I never heard of a necromancer that I would consider a good man.” Mordecai said.

Crow always assumed that necromancers were an ostracized group among other practitioners of magic. “But I have known men and women whose talent caused more destruction than some necromancers. I have seen colleagues taken by greed, scorn, shame, and resentment. I watched some set the breathable air ablaze. I have witnessed hurricanes and earthquakes rattle the innocent. If you think that a necromancer can be more evil than other mages, then you truly are a naïve boy.” Crow had forgotten the pain that came with speaking the dead. He was entranced by the solemn voice of Mordecai. Just by his voice alone could Crow see the destruction caused by magic.

“I see.” Crow said. He clasped his hands together. “Is magic something that should be expunged from this world?”

“Are you insane? That is not the solution!” Crow was thrown back from Mordecai screaming his mind. “The proper way is to teach them the right path from the start. To teach them that our gift is one that must always be reined in and used to protect and provide.” Crow continued to be amazed by the passion that an animate skull could provide. Crow also realized what he needed to do.

“I understand if you say no. Can you teach me to become a mage?” He asked.

“You already are a mage, necromancer.” Mordecai said. “Necromancy is magic like any other.”

“No, it's not. It is evil. I have seen it. Can you teach me real magic?” Crow asked.

Mordecai did not answer for some time. Crow believed that he overstepped his boundaries. That he asked too much from Mordecai.

“I’ll teach another form of magic, but you must learn to accept necromancy.

Understood?”

“Yes.” Crow lied. He was ready to throw it away. To rebel.

“It will be grueling to learn. Learning the craft is not easy for any subsection. Both body and mind must be trained. You must learn the way of the world if you are to be successful.

Understood?”

“Yes.” Crow said. He heard Mordecai laugh.

“Not scared are you, lad? Very well. You’ll be a mage of renown when I am done with you.” Mordecai said. Crow smiled. The path towards becoming a mage began on that rainy day.

Crow’s mouth was dry when he woke up. He took off the glove from his left hand and saw that the bandages were beginning to stain. Crow scanned the dark empty cottage and peeked through the single window. He snatched the fresh bandages that he acquired earlier in the day from Elizabeth. She wondered what they were for, but Crow assured her that it was just for precaution. He gave the room one more thorough examination. Crow peeled the bandages from his left hand like it was dead skin. He was never accustomed to seeing what was before him.

His left hand was rotten. No fingernails remained on his fingers. His thumb was the worst. There wasn’t any skin. It was just a bone. A large purple vein was etched across the dried webbing of his hand. Several small punctures leaked out little droplets of blood. It reminded Crow of a beehive. Crow applied a set of new bandages. He ensured the bandages were tight.

Satisfied with his work, he put on his gloves. Crow sunk his head back on the pillow. He squeezed his eyes shut. He was comfortable and warm. Very warm indeed.

Crow opened his eyes and clicked his tongue. Wolves howled, as Crow exited his temporary cottage. The rest of the town was asleep. Crow wandered around the empty town with his hands in his pockets. A thought passed his mind that this walk was not the best decision. He was still a stranger. He stopped, but then realized that it would seem even more bizarre to leave his cottage, walk down the street for a moment, and then go back inside. He continued his walk towards the outskirts. Crow allowed his mind to wander. It wandered to Mordecai, to Winnie, to Thane, to Morrigan. Then he remembered who Elizabeth reminded him of. Elizabeth reminded Crow of Felicity. Perhaps it was their warmth, but Elizabeth did appear to be more hardened.

But then it wandered to tomorrow. For the first time in many years, Crow would partake in assisting a community rather than wandering into a town and leaving before next sunrise. Crow thought of Elizabeth's kindness. The way she defended him in the conversation with Kay and the others. Why was she being so nice to him and Why did Kay agree to bring him on board? There was also the revelation that Elizabeth was the set to become the Queen of Nix. Crow discovered that he woke up later than his usual bout of insomnia when he saw edges of sunlight peeking across the snowy horizons. Crow stood alone in the outskirts of Jotun. He took a deep breath of the cold air and relaxed. Crow decided to sit down and watch the sunrise.

“Thane, Winnie, Morrigan.... I wish you could all see this. Morrigan would probably complain that it is too cold.” Crow smiled, but then dropped it. “The hospitality that they gave me.... Why did they do it? Who am I to judge? I don’t even understand my own actions sometimes. It was a bad idea to come here, but they are desperate. I can’t abandon them with

good conscience. Besides, it is not like I know what I am doing.” Crow savored the silence and sight before him. A cold wind kicked up the snow around him. Crow wiped the snow from his face. Day arrived and Crow stood up. “I’ll do my best to help these people and then leave. I don’t want to cause them any hardship.” Crow walked into Jotun and ready to start the day and the journey.

Chapter 5: A Small Reveal

Crow covered his yawn with his hand and groggily looked around. The main street of Jotun was littered with rows of wagons. The wagons were carried by stout horses of different colored manes. Riders wore navy blue fleeces and woolen caps. The wagons near the very back were filled by anxious families with warm coats and scarves. The rest of the wagons had a mixture of supplies, personal property, and tools.

Crow saw Brynhildr pulling a horse by the reigns. This horse was vastly different in color from the others. It was a gray stallion. That trotted firmly across the snow.

“Now, now. You had enough rest. You don’t have room to complain, old girl. Take this.” Brynhildr fed her horse a dark orange carrot. The horse plucked it from Brynhildr’s hand and munched on it.

“What’s her name?” Crow asked.

“Kara.” Brynhildr said. She stroked Kara’s mane. “Hopefully she can take a couple more journeys without too much trouble, but she’s getting up there in age. Heh, kind of like me.”

“Kara’s a good name.” Crow shifted his weight. “Elizabeth is the Nixian queen. Did I offend her in any way? Maybe with the way I addressed her?”

“What?” Brynhildr asked. “When we left the castle together, I urged her to not tout the information of her heritage. It could have led to some complication back then. That was nearly ten years ago, but she still follows those principles. You did not offend her.” Brynhildr said.

“Oh.” Crow said. He now felt even more stupid that he was worrying so much about it. There was a sharp whistle in the air. Baxter sauntered towards Crow and Brynhildr.

“This will be a walk longer than the depths of Ithir.” Baxter said. Crow turned to Brynhildr.

“It’s a large crater in the northernmost part of Nix.” Brynhildr said.

“Thank you.” Crow said.

“Crow you’ll be sitting up in the front wagon. I’ll be in the one behind. These spots are in stone. We’ll change ‘em if need be. Aye?” Baxter said.

“Aye, sir.” Crow said.

“Leave the sirs for the ones that want it. Don’t shirk on yer responsibilities and this trip will be a hell of a lot easier.” Crow raised an eyebrow. It appeared that Nixians used the term hell. Well, at very least Baxter appeared to. The line of wagons lurched forwards and the first few steps down the mountains began. “Other than that. Let’s try and make this journey a safe one, eh?”

“Yes. We’ll make sure that no danger befalls the citizens of Jotun.” Brynhildr mounted her horse. The entire of Jotun uprooted themselves and trotted south in search of a new home. In time, Elizabeth joined the frontlines. She walked over to Crow’s wagon with a coat and a book in her arms. The coat was a well-made thing with fur on the inside and was made with Nixian autumns in mind. Its color was navy blue.

“Since you are helping us, I decided to give this to you. Consider both a gift.” Elizabeth handed him the book and the coat. Crow put on the coat beneath his cloak and felt the quality. The title of the book was *The First King*.

“Thank you, your majesty.” Crow said.

“Ugh.” Brynhildr made a noise. “I told she doesn’t care about that kind of thing. Stop being so stiff.”

“Let’s just worry about the journey for now.” Elizabeth said. The company followed a trail south of Jotun. South of their home. Crow attempted to retrace his steps from when he made the journey himself, but the route deviated slightly at first and then gradually became larger. The caravan moved slowly, but steadily. Crow passed the time by reading the book. He sat at the front of the first wagon and read while a driver of the wagon continued forwards. The occasional inclined caused a bump but wasn’t major. The book was an exquisite piece. A book that had a smooth leather binding. A title was drawn on the front in white letters. *The First King*. Brynhildr trotted beside him on Kara and Elizabeth followed close behind.

The First King was a historical book whose creation was odd. It states that it was a reprint of a previous book of the same name. This older book was a transcription of an oral account by a man named Taliesin and had a scribe by the name of Jonathan Gwil. Crow wondered why Taliesin couldn’t write it himself nor why his last name wasn’t mentioned. This caused him to wonder the validity of the book, but he felt that it was too soon to question it. It was a gift after all, and he didn’t want to seem rude. Crow turned through the pages. The book’s topic was mainly about the inception of Nix and its first king, Alexander Fraser. Crow found fitting that the first pages depicted the migration that Alexander led with his twelve knights, a side note was

written that one of these knights would become his future queen. The book was incredibly specific. It threw out numbers like 3,029 migration and 72 days to reach the land that became the capital of Nivalis. This made Crow wonder even more about the inception of this text. Crow closed the book.

“You must be able to recite this entire chronology from memory considering your upbringing, right?” Crow closed the book.

“Is that a text on King Fraser?” Brynhildr asked. Crow nodded. Brynhildr smiled. “It is an inspiring tale, especially now. I would say that all people of Nix would have one version or another in their minds. Of course, all versions had one common trait. Alexander Fraser was a great king. Elizabeth had a tutor back in the castle. It would be expected that she can recite the whole thing, but then again, she was a handful during her childhood.”

“I was not a handful. That was a narrative built by my tutors.” Elizabeth scoffed. Crow smiled while imaging a young Elizabeth being a petulant child.

“You must’ve had to study the entire history of Nix intensely.” Crow said. “A nation’s history is important for any leader whether it be a monarchy or not.” Elizabeth drooped her shoulders.

“I spent hours in the libraries studying such meticulous details. I found it all dull and boring. I don’t know how anyone can spend so much time in the library.” Elizabeth said.

“Be careful what you say, Elizabeth. Many scholars would have plotted murders to have access to such historical texts. There were even several books that pertain to life before The

Entropy. One alone would be worth a fortune.” Brynhildr said. “Then again, those books were either fictional pieces or extraordinarily vague.”

“I know. I know. I just wish I wasn’t forced to read for such long hours.”

“I remember one day you snuck into my room to avoid a historical lesson. You even went to such lengths as to hide under my bed. Do you remember that day? You were quite spoiled.”

“What’s spoiled about not wanting to spend hours in a stuffy library?” Elizabeth said. Elizabeth looked towards Crow for validation. Crow just shrugged and flipped through a couple more pages.

“What I find most interesting about Alexander was his ability to convince people to follow his lead. His influence was so great that he was able to create a group of knights that were loyal to him alone.”

“Those knights were also responsible for creating many of the historic institutions. The royal guard, the military, a medical center, and even a college of architecture.” Crow looked over the pages and found that Brynhildr’s claims were also present within, yet there was something missing.

“What’s this?” Crow asked.

“What’s wrong?” Elizabeth asked. Crow scratched his head and looked up.

“Two of the twelve knights. Sarah Rockwell and the other, a nameless mage. A book of such details, yet there are not any specifics given about them. One isn’t even named.”

“Sarah Rockwell disappeared one day. There are some stories, but not much else.”

Elizabeth said. “Even among royalty, none know the truth about her. The nameless mage is an even greater mystery. He had no name, but legend says that he wore solid black armor.”

“A mage that wears armor?” Crow asked. “Never heard of that before.”

“Hmm?” Brynhildr squinted her eyes. She signaled a stop. Upon close expectation she saw the faint outline of a grand bridge. The bridge was as blue as the sky. “Elizabeth, Crow, let’s go and see exactly how severe the damage is.” Elizabeth, Crow, and Brynhildr continued forwards while the entire caravan was set to a stop. The bridge was a magnificent structure of immense height. It connected two large cliffs that were about twenty-five miles apart. The bridge was great not because of its length, but rather its height. One could not see the ground of the chasm that the bridge crossed over. The columns that held the bridge up were still standing and would very well stand for an eternity, if there were no unnatural forces. They were not white, but a sharp silver. The main platform itself however was starting to crack and break away. The largest gap was at the beginning of the bridge. It was this gap that caught Brynhildr’s attention.

“I can’t believe that the bridge is actually made of ice.” Crow said. This wasn’t the first time that he witnessed a large structure, but those were made of stone and marble.

“It is not natural ice.” Elizabeth said. “It would melt if it was natural ice. It may not seem like it now, but our summers can get temperate.” Crow brought his hand to chin.

“Is it slippery?” Crow asked. Elizabeth and Brynhildr laughed.

“No, but that would be entertaining to see.” Brynhildr said.

“What should we do?” Elizabeth asked. “Finding a new route could take the rest of the day. This bridge was meant to cut down on the travel time and ensure that we don’t have to navigate through treacherous cliffs.”

“We also don’t know how the weather will fare in the following days.” Crow said. “Taking an uncommon route mixed with a snowstorm could at best delay us for weeks. We don’t have supplies to deal with that.” Baxter jogged up to three.

“What happened?” Baxter asked. Brynhildr tilted her head towards the gap. “Shite. You think we can talk with some of the old merchants to see if they know alternate routes.”

“Wait.” Crow said. He held up *The First King*. “In this book, it is stated that some members of the royal guard were trained to harness an incredible form of ice magic. The bridge could be made from the same ice.” Crow looked at Brynhildr. Brynhildr rubbed her neck.

“It has been a while since I did such a thing.”

“You want to use magic to repair the bridge?” Baxter asked. “Isn’t yer magic dangerous?”

“Magic was apparently used to make it in the first place.” Crow said. “If you feel like you can’t, then we can think of something else.”

“It can be done.” Brynhildr said. “Just give me a moment.” Crow witnessed as Brynhildr closed her eyes. She interlocked both of fingers together. It seemed that everyone had physical ticks when casting magic. They watched as a new sheet of ice was formed over the impurities of the bridge. A wave of cold made Crow shiver. He stepped forwards to examine the sheet of ice. It emanated cold. Crow knocked on the ice and then slammed his heel down on it. It

did not break. Elizabeth and Baxter mimicked Crow's action. After a bit of stomping, they were satisfied.

"That's pretty cool." Crow said.

"Well, looks like you saved us some time." Baxter said. "But let's take it slow across this bridge. We don't need to take any risk."

"Indeed." Brynhildr said. Crow waited for anyone to acknowledge his pun, but no one did. Baxter whistled and the caravan prepared to move again. Before Brynhildr remounted Kara, she tapped Elizabeth on her shoulder. "Want to try your hand at riding, Kara for a bit? It's been a while."

"I suppose it has been some time." Elizabeth placed her hand on Kara's head. "What do you say, old girl? Care to carry for a bit." Kara neighed in response to Elizabeth's touch. Elizabeth saddled up. She took a moment to get her bearings and after a bit gave the signal to trot forwards. Kara listened to her dutifully. Brynhildr sat next to Crow in the front wagon.

"Elizabeth was never a rider when she was younger." Brynhildr said. "She didn't dislike it, but I rarely saw her visit the royal stables."

"She seems adept to me." Crow said.

"I took it upon myself to teach her some things when we left the castle. You never know what skills you need; you know?"

The rest of the day was lost in uneventful travelling and soon enough the pale sun had surrendered to the moon. Kay and Baxter agreed to end the travelling for the night and ordered the stop of all wagons. They stopped in the middle of a patch of flat land that stretched across

several miles. Herds of Nixians huddled together around several campfires or within their cabins. Their bodies were choked with thick blankets, fleeces, and coats. Shifts were created to keep watch during the night. Those watching over the encampment would keep an eye out for danger and ensure that the accompanying cattle did not wander off. Crow pulled out his personal journal and took some notes on the day. Then a sheep waddled next to him and laid down. Nixian sheep had especially dense woolen coats, as such it had no problem with the cold. The sheep collapsed next to Crow and fell asleep. Crow blinked and turned back to his journal.

“Excuse me,” Crow looked up. Elizabeth stood in front of him. “May I sit down next to you?”

“Yes,” Crow said. Elizabeth sat next to him and flicked the hair away from her eyes.

“I wanted to thank you for what happened near the beginning of the day.” Elizabeth looked towards Brynhildr. Brynhildr was brushing Kara’s mane. “The people of Nix admired the royal guard. Everything about them was honored, but now the only stories foretold are the ones that include the unsavory kind. Brynhildr, like myself, has faced her share of unwanted attention.” Crow instinctively rubbed his left hand and didn’t say a word. “I have been meaning to ask, Sir Pe-Apologies, Crow. How old are you?” Crow and Elizabeth exchanged ages. They were both twenty-four years old. Elizabeth's birthday was in January, while Crow’s was in October. On the topic of birthdays, Crow revealed that he shared his birthday with his twin brother, Thane.

Elizabeth placed her hands to her sides. She tilted her head and looked towards the sky. “A twin brother.” Elizabeth said. “How was it like having a sibling?”

“They were quiet, especially around the time that I left.”

“They?”

“I had a younger sister, as well. Her name was Winnie. I haven’t spoken with either of them in years. They might be completely different than how I remember them.” Crow said. Crow thought back to the day he left. That day where every moment was spent running. “Vetus is a continent with subsections upon subsections of culture. Beyond nations there are standalones villages, clans, city-states. It is hard to keep contact when you start travelling.”

“The world is large.” Elizabeth said.

“Indeed.” Crow nodded.

“Ah, before I forgot. What province of the Magnus Empire are you from?” Elizabeth asked.

“Telos.”

“I believe I have seen that name on a map once. What are they known for?”

“Agriculture is most of its export. Quarter of the population live high upon mountains. No one knows what they do, except that they followed a particular religion.” Crow said. “The land consists of plains and mountains. The mountains are often wracked with thunderstorms during spring.” Elizabeth tilted her head and eyed Crow. She looked at his pale complexion, his thin hands, and his lanky frame.

“Forgive me, but you don’t seem much like a farmer.” Elizabeth said with a smirk.

“Were you one of those that lived atop the mountains? Nix is a secular region, but I wouldn’t judge you for believing in a higher power.”

“I left before I could do any of the major family work. I was focused on different types of schooling. I never joined them. Understood?” Crow's voice was harsher than he meant to project. Crow chastised himself for it. It wasn't her fault that she didn't know. There is no reason he should be snapping at her. “Sorry.”

“No worries.” Elizabeth said. “I believed that you were part of them and hoped to learn more about a religious organization, but it appears you have bad blood with them.”

“That would be an understatement. Besides, I should be asking you the questions. You are a literal queen. Your story must be leagues more interesting than mine.”

“Well, I was a princess. By the time I could be considered a queen, the monarchy was already disestablished. I was fourteen myself, when I left the castle.”

“How was it living in a castle? Must have been a grand lifestyle. I can picture millions of servants running around and minding your every need.” Elizabeth looked at the wagon filled with Nixian forced out of their homes and on this perilous journey.

“I would say that I missed key features that any child should have, but these issues must have paled in comparison to those of commo-I mean modest class.” Elizabeth said.

“What do you mean?”

“Commone-Those who were not directly tied to government in any way were not allowed inside, and my parents discouraged me from playing with any of the noble children. I believe it was so that I wasn't lured into some dreadful plot.”

“I imagine that your parents must have had tremendous responsibilities.” Crow said.

“Yes. My parents were hardly there. Tutors and maids were the normal sight for me. You were right, however. Servants were not far behind me. Many of my desires were fulfilled.” Elizabeth said. “I still feel guilty about it. It was only years later that I would discover that my countrymen were missing necessities.”

“Listen if you don’t want to talk about your past that’s alright. You saw firsthand the topics that I don’t want to discuss.”

“No. I don’t shy away from what happened to me. It molded me into who I am. I shouldn’t avoid it no matter how painful it is.” Elizabeth said. She wore a smile and straightened herself in a show of confidence.

“I envy your resolve.” Crow said. “I don’t think that I would ever be able to see the positives in a situation like that.”

“We will all experience pain. What matters is how we respond to it. You cannot run away from it. That would be cowardice.”

“How do you do it?” Crow asked. He wanted to know. He wanted to discover how she could bear the pain of losing her father and mother. How she could still carry on with such resolve after so much time. Elizabeth took a deep breath.

“I will not deny the rage that I bore. I can still hear the oath of vengeance I took with my fourteen-year-old mind, but oaths mean very little when one is just a child. In time, I came to realize that these people.” Elizabeth motioned towards the rest of the migrants. “They were not the ones that stormed the gates and took lives. There would be no point in harboring a grudge.

Besides, the revolutionaries that overtook the castle wanted a peaceful end.” Elizabeth shook her head while she spoke.

“Hmm.” Crow didn’t understand. He did not understand her strength. He understood her forgiveness, but not her grace. He was truthful when he spoke of envying her strength. The visage of the Grand Priestess still instilled fear and rage within him and it has been ten years since. Elizabeth turned to the sky. It was a waning moon tonight. “Perhaps it is time that we try to rest for the night.”

“Yes. It is getting late.” Crow said. “Goodnight.”

“Sleep well.” Elizabeth said. Crow watched Elizabeth walk away.

“Is it truly cowardice?” Crow threw himself into his bedroll. He waited for sleep to take him, but his mind turned to Elizabeth's words. “What is truly cowardice?”

Chapter 6: The Boy That Was Struck by Lightning

Crow finished the rabbit's stew. He wiped his mouth with a napkin and neatly folded his hands over his lap. A servant came by to care for his ivory bowl. The servant had a blanche, empty face that made Crow flinch whenever he approached. The servant grasped the bowl with his cold hands and disappeared. Crow stopped himself from shivering. He would face something worse if she caught him shivering.

Four sat at the long dining table. Large windows showed a sea of foggy mountains and the rainfall. The rain smacked against the glass window and almost tuned out the sound of a clock ticking. Everyone eating at the table was silent. Thunder struck a mountaintop. Crow's eyes flickered from windowpane to windowpane. He watched for lightning strikes. Across from Crow sat his sister, Winnie. Her hair was tied neatly with a black ribbon. Her stew was nowhere near done. A servant came by and took away a knife that was accidentally placed when the table was originally set. Crow saw the fear in Winnie's eyes when the servant drew near her. Crow's twin brother, Thane, sat right next to him. The only difference was shorter hair and a sleepier face. Crow ventured a glance at the two of them. They only played with their food and didn't return any acknowledgement. Crow went back to staring at the windows. Telos was facing its worst storm yet and the conditions were perfect. Crow cracked his fingers, pulled at his collar, and sighed. He moved his hands to rub his cheek, but instead he laid them back on the table.

"Do you have somewhere to be?" The voice broke the silent dinner. Crow swallowed. He turned his head to the far reaching left of the table. The shade at the end of the table stared at

him with dark brown eyes. “Or do you simply do not want to enjoy a meal with your family?”
Beads of sweat started to form around Crow’s forehead.

“I just wanted to...” Crow trailed off.

“What? Speak clearly. I didn’t teach you to mutter.”

“I wanted to go to the cemetery.” Winnie dropped her spoon on the floor. Thane choked on the stew. A servant in the shadows scooped up Winnie’s utensil and replaced it with a new one.

“At this time? By yourself?” She asked. Crow nodded. “Now that is the dedication that I have come to expect from all of you! Winnie, Thane. You must take your older brother, as the true example of greatness. Not the riff raff of the other children. Your brother, here, is a necromancer. Looks like all that time in the box gave you some sense.” Crow swallowed a lump in his throat. “Crow, you are excused from the dinner table.” Crow couldn’t look her in the eyes. He couldn’t believe the lie worked. Was he good at lying or was this a lucky chance? It didn’t matter.

Crow rushed out of the dining hall. He ran towards the main entrance of the manor and pulled on the brass knob quickly. His feet ran faster than his heart would have liked. The manor and the ugly yew tree next to the manor quickly became two faint figures in the horizon. Crow was laid bare before the storm. His clothing and hair drenched after running for a few minutes. Crow wiped the rain from eyes and kept his eyes upwards. Crow reached a gravel path. He arrived. Four boulders sat at the top of the hill. Crow swung his arms over the first one in his view and climbed atop it.

Crow admired his surroundings: the thunderstorms, the mountains, and the little villa down below in the valley. He could faintly see a farmer's field. The darkened gray sky. Crow smiled and for a moment felt at the center of the world. Then he remembered Mordecai's secret lessons.

A mage can't know every spell in creation. There are many spells out there. Not including the spells that you make yourself.... Once you get good enough that is. You need to hone your skills on a single type of spell first. A single moment. A single sensation. One that can become a part of you. After you master one, you can pick up more here and there, but you need to have the one. Me? Well, the sea always had a special place in my heart. I was raised in a port town, long 'go. I still remember the scent of the sea.

Crow saw a lightning strike shatter the ground of a nearby pass. He saw the earth itself tremble and wobble from strike. The stray pieces of rock and mud that kicked up into a cloud of dust.

That's what you want to learn? Well, you may need to find some batteries to get accustomed to getting shock. Hah! It also wouldn't hurt to pay attention to the weather. Crow could still hear the dead wizard's wheezy laugh. The hoarse laugh that was surprisingly comforting. Crow ripped off his gloves and threw them aside.

Be careful. If you aren't ready, you might end up killing yourself. Crow smiled and raised his right hand to the sky.

Crow couldn't see from the flash of light, but he could smell his own searing flesh. The sound of thunder came second. He felt the plasma rip right through his cloak. His skin red from the blistering heat. His teeth chattered. The liquid in his eyes sizzled. He smelled burned flesh.

Crow fell on the gravel path on his chest. He scraped his cheek on an especially sharp rock on the ground. Black smoke rose from his body. Rain fell on his numb back. His fingers were and ears were bleeding. Crow loss and regained consciousness multiple times. He realized that the blast of lightning threw him off the boulder.

Crow focused on breathing. His whole body was convulsing. Crow lapped up some of the rain that fell around his lips. He tasted iron. "Come on." Crow choked out. "You can handle a single lightning strike." He forced his body to still. Then he sat up and waited for the world to stop spinning. When his vision was fixed, he looked at his golden hands. Yellow electricity danced around his fingertips. The small bolts leaped from fingertip to fingertips. Pure electricity in the palm of his hands. Crow laughed and then a sudden pain flared in his chest. He coughed up blood. Crow closed his eyes and concentrated once again.

He saw the shape and the raw power of the lightning that struck his frail body. He imaged the wild atoms, he imagined the soothing patter of rain on his window, he saw the rainfall nurture the plants and forest, and he remembered each streak of light that he studied from afar. The ability to nurture. The ability to destroy. Crow snapped his fingers, and a ball of golden lightning appeared in his hand. Crow laughed and coughed a bit more blood. A trail of blood trickled down from the palm of his hand. Large cracks formed around his arms and chest. His body was layered in a mixture of rain, blood, and sweat.

Back at the manor, Thane and Winnie saw strange lightning strikes. They swore to Crow that it came from their mountain, but Crow would wave off their claims with a smile.

Chapter 7: Smile

Crow opened his eyes. He groaned and rolled to the side. The night was still fresh. Sentries were still dutifully watching over the rest of the sleeping camp. Sleep was being an evasive mistress once again. After five minutes, he surrendered and rose from the bedroll. He peered into the surrounding darkness and spotted a small mound. Crow made his way towards the mound. A few of the sentries waved at Crow. The sentries were surprised he was awake but didn't make a fuss. Crow reached the top of the mound and adjusted his gloves.

"Might as well kill some time." Crow clasped his hands. He watched yellow static hop and glide across his hands. He saw a single tree in the distance. He closed one eye and shifted his weight to the left. Crow drew a yellow line in the air. The line solidified. Crow spun the lightning bolt between his fingers and threw it at the tree with his back turned. Of course, he missed. Crow made another attempt for fun. He threw the lightning bolt while doing a pose that he surely thought was cool in his mind. He missed. "This is what I get for trying to be fancy." Crow snapped his fingers. A small searing wound was left in the center of the trunk.

"What are you doing?" Elizabeth asked. Crow jumped backwards. Elizabeth peaked over his shoulder over to the tree. Crow wondered how long she was standing behind him. She squinted her eyes at the tree. "Are you practicing magic?"

"Yeah." Crow said. He pointed at the tree. "I wasn't trying anything complex, just a smaller scale spell. I made certain that the tree wouldn't catch aflame. I just wanted a target to practice my aim."

“Magic seems to be such a useful skill. Brynhildr saved us time on the bridge, and you used your magic to combat the Ogre from a safe distance. I wonder why there are not more mages around.” Elizabeth said. “How did you come to learn it.”

“I owe everything I know to a man named Mordecai. Magic takes dedication like any skill. People can get discouraged and some may even hurt themselves or others if they are not careful, but Mordecai always helped even when he didn’t need to.” Crow said. “Was magic really that uncommon in Nix?”

“No. Not at all. We even had a court witch by the name of Tabitha. I am just surprised that not everyone chooses to learn at least some.” Elizabeth put her hand to her chin and smiled. “Speaking of which, do you mind teaching me some?”

“Are you sure?” Crow asked. Elizabeth nodded. Her azure eyes egged Crow on. “Alright.” Crow cleared his throat. “I assume I can go over the basics.” Crow walked over to Elizabeth and snapped his fingers. He created a small flame in his hands. He held it in front of Elizabeth, so that both of their faces were lit up. The flame was then joined by several droplets of water. The droplets and fire did not combine but rotated around each other in a whirlwind. Then a few sparks of lightning floated above the ball of water and fire. The sparks were like clouds hovering over the earth. “This is a representation of the ether or aether. Whichever one you prefer. It is within every living thing, from plants, to humans, to gargoyles.”

“So, it is made of water, fire, and lightning?” Elizabeth asked. Crow shook his head.

“This is just a model. Picture it as just pure energy and matter. Magic is all about transferring and transforming. The fire before you is not fire that I created, but rather an alternate form that came from my aether. There are three parts to the aether. The fire is what we call mana.

Like all things, across cultures and countries they may be named differently. It is someone's endurance. The water is what we would call the anima or animus. It connects to our mental capacity and allows us to mentally form spells. Spells would be just explosives without it. Brynhidr was able to form a sheet of ice over the bridge because of the anima. The last part, the lightning, is the aura. A part of the aether that protects us from external dangers. You can strengthen the aura through repeated non-fatal trauma."

"I understand the aura, it has saved me on a few occasions. Mana seems simple enough, but what about the anima? What do you mean by mental connection?"

"When we create spells, we have to decide how powerful they will be and what form they will manifest in. This comes from a balance that most form. Logos and Pathos. Mages must have both physical knowledge of the element they are casting and an emotional connection. The weaker the emotional connection, the strength of the spells will suffer. Take the water droplets that I created. These droplets are the only thing that I can do with water. I don't really have any memories of water. At most, Telos had riverbanks. The only water in my mind is rain. Of course, they may be someone out there that could create a tidal wave. That does not mean that I can never make spells having to do with water in the future. It just means that it will take longer to hone such a skill."

"Brynhidr!" Elizabeth said. "I know how the royal guard fostered both her physical knowledge and emotional connection. I remember she once told me that one of the training regiments was to run around during a blizzard in their underwear! That must have served for an emotional connection." Elizabeth's face was glowing under the night sky. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

“These gloves are not ordinary.” Crow took off only his right-hand glove and showed it to Elizabeth. “They may look normal, but they were created specifically to help me cast spells. They are called invokers, but that’s a more intermediate lesson. How about I reveal something that pertains to you.

“What do you mean about me?” Crow reached out and tousled some of Elizabeth’s white hair.

“Have you ever wondered why you have snow white hair?”

“You can explain the color of my hair with magic?”

“The reason you have white hair is because of a phenomenon called aethereal metamorphism. When someone’s own aether gets incredibly accustomed to an element or spell, their physical body can permanently alter. Your white hair must come from this very phenomenon. It may not have been you, but someone in your family must have been afflicted by it. Then many years later, they passed it on to you.”

. “The first king was the one that created the bedrock of ice magic. How did you create an emotional connection with lightning? You seem to make those spells with ease.” Elizabeth said.

“I got struck by lightning.” Crow said.

“.... Pardon me?”

“It seemed like the best course of action at the time.” Crow said. Elizabeth laughed. Crow unknowingly smiled hearing her laugh. He wanted to hear it more often.

“I can’t picture that. You being struck by lightning is a funny thought. Flying off into the distance by the impact. Your eyes wild and your hair even wilder.” Elizabeth covered her laugh with her hand. “If you weren’t able to form spells like those bolts, I would have decided you were insane.” Then Elizabeth's smile faded, and she reached for her sword. “Speak your name.” Elizabeth said.

“Sorry for my intrusion.” Tristan said. He raised his hand above his head. Elizabeth relaxed. “The two of you were together, so it was a little awkward for me. I also haven’t really had a proper chance to introduce myself to Crow.”

“Tristan. Standing in the dark like that makes you suspicious.” Elizabeth said. “Don’t do it, again. Especially with how tense, the situation can be.”

“Ah...sorry.” Tristan said.

“Why did you come here?” Crow asked. Crow caught a glimpse of Tristan here and there, but never really spoke with him.

“To be honest, other than introducing myself. I had another reason for approaching the two of you. Some of the other sentries had mentioned sightings of a nearby pack of wolves.”

“Wolves. What type of wolves?” Elizabeth asked. “Dorian wolves are very territorial. Chariot wolves won’t necessarily attack us, but they may ravage some of our food.”

“We are uncertain. We could very well be dealing with Dorian wolves. My plan was to investigate the woods. We don’t want to be caught off-guard by them, especially if the leader of their pack is prowling around.”

“You want our help?” Crow asked.

“Yes. We leave for a bit, find our quarry and beat away some Dorian wolves. I don’t intend to kill any of them unprovoked. These are their lands after all.”

“I am for it. What do you think, Crow?” Elizabeth asked. Crow looked at Tristan. He still couldn’t comprehend how much he looked like his father. Kay was a good man from what Crow saw and heard. He hoped that his son was much of the same.

“I see no harm in it.”

“Excellent! Let’s go!” The three of them made their way towards a nearby forest devoid of leaves. Crow looked back at the camp. His eyes hesitated to leave the red glow of the campfire. The night didn’t faze him, but he felt an odd presence. Crow tightened his glove on his left hand. He also had to find some time to change the bandages away from everyone else. It was a reminder that he couldn’t get too comfortable with these people.

“Crow? Something amiss?” Elizabeth asked.

“Nothing, just an odd feeling.” Crow, Elizabeth, and Tristan made their way deeper into the forest. Crow felt his way through the forest. His hands groped for trees. His ears went red from the cold. He was tempted to light their way with magic, but it could attract unwanted attention. Crow and Elizabeth followed behind Tristan. Tristan raised his hand. Elizabeth and Crow stopped behind him. Tristan pointed forwards with two fingers. There they found a wolf pup in a clear opening in the forest. The mother of the wolf nudged it along. The mother turned to three of them. Her green eyes stayed on them until she surmounted no threat. She snapped once and took off with her child.

“They were too small to be Dorian wolves.” Elizabeth said.

“She would have also attacked us if she was.” Tristan said. “Let’s continue for a bit.” The party of three continued onwards through the dark forest. Elizabeth pulled Crow close to her.

“Careful.” She pointed at the branches above them. Icicles lined the tree branches. “Be mindful. You could get injured.”

“Right.” Crow said.

“So, Pendragon was your name?” Tristan said.

“Just Crow is fine.”

“What’s your story?” Tristan asked.

“Not much to tell. A traveler in search of a place to live.” Crow said. Tristan stopped in front of Crow and placed an arm on his shoulder.

“There is no need to be stiff, friend.” Tristan smiled. “I find it great that we are getting new faces around here.”

“I appreciate it.” Crow said.

“Speaking of a story, why were the two of you so far away from camp?”

“He was teaching me about magic.” Elizabeth said. Tristan turned to Crow.

“Really? Can you teach me?”

“I don’t promise anything, but-” Crow stopped. “What is that?” A creature walked around the forest. Its appearance was like that of a human woman. The creature created a trail of

icicles with every step. The creature stared at the three with empty eyes. Crow readied himself. Then the creature lost interest and continued along their path. “Was that an ice elemental?”

“Is that the academic name for it? We usually just call them winter passengers. They are harmless. Some swear that they can speak like a human, but I have never seen it myself.”

Tristan responded.

“That is most likely because elementals are hypothesized to be humans before The Entropy, but the same can be said for many other creatures. I thi-” Crow yawned. “I think it’s best to head back.” When Crow finished speaking a sharp shrill scream came from the camp. Tristan was the first to start running.

“There must be something happening at camp.” Elizabeth said. The three raced their way back to camp. Hunters ran around the perimeter of the camp. Baxter spotted the three returning. He drew his bow and loaded an arrow. His eyes directed behind them. Crow’s right prepared a spell. Elizabeth and Tristan drew their swords. A small pack of nine wolves growled behind them. Their white pelts served as near perfect camouflage.

Baxter’s hand snapped and fired. An arrow caught one of the wolves in the eye. Crow wove two bolts of lightning and electrocuted two wolves. Tristan was able to bat two wolves away from him. The two wolves stared at him. One leaped at Tristan. The second skirted behind him and targeted Crow. Its yellow fangs caught themselves on Crow’s left hand. Crow feigned pain and tried to shake off the wolf. Elizabeth cleaved through the two wolves in front of her and ran to Crow’s side. She stamped her boot on the wolf’s back and drove her sword its head. Tristan finished off the wolf that Baxter blinded.

“Some may still linger. Keep yer eyes open.” Baxter took out the arrow of the wolf.

“Though, I do wonder why the three of you vanished from the camp.”

“We were searching for these very wolves.” Tristan said. There was another scream.

“Fine. Go ensure the safety of everyone.” The four of them dispersed into the large camp. The sun was now fully aflame. The sunlight made the snow blinding.

“Is everyone okay?” Crow asked.

“We are missing someone. My husband.” A woman said. Crow went to his side.

“When did you last see him?”

“We got separated near the south outskirts when we heard the first scream.” The woman pointed.

“Stay here, I’ll find him.” Crow was winded from the running but pushed on. Crow did find the woman’s husband. He sensed his body before he found it. This wolf was taller than a man and Crow found the beast with an arm in its mouth. The wolf swallowed and bared its teeth. Its jaw nearly formed an equator around the entire wolf’s head. It snapped open like a door to reveal an esophagus. Its tongue was a yellow belt. This wolf did not come to be this size due to evolution. A mad creation of the Entropy. This was a brutal creature that was never meant to be. Crow extended his left hand.

“You must be in pain.” Crow said. “Your flesh is barely being held together. Your physiology meant to be impossible.” The wolf’s hind legs straighten. It was ready to pounce. The wolf howled with its jaw fully agape and its tongue flailing. Crow covered his ears. Even its howl was sickly. The wolf jumped. Crow responded in turn by blowing off both its hind legs

with lightning and stepping to the side as the wolf's momentum took care of the rest. The wolf choked up a whimper and skidded along the snow for several feet. Its hind legs detached three feet away from the rest of its body. Crow used three more bolts of lightning. The wolf gasped its final breath with Crow standing atop. Its murky yellow eyes looking upon Crow's blank expression. Crow sighed and looked over to the remains of the dead husband.

It didn't take long for the deformed creature to die of blood loss. Crow sat next to its body. He wanted to ensure that it was dead. His body was still, but he shivered when he heard the scream of a woman newly made widow.

Brynhildr brushed off the snow from her jacket and sat on the flat boulder. She laid her sword at her side. A tool that looked as it was made of opaque ice. She kept her palm on the hilt of the blade. The body of twenty wolves laid at her feet. A clean cut was left on each of their bodies.

"Of course, wolves had to just attack us." Brynhildr groaned.

"What a tasteful display." A voice spoke. Brynhildr craned her head sideways. A woman wearing all black garb contrasted against the snow. A large black hat was perched upon her head and hid her eyes. She sauntered over to Brynhildr and turned to look at the corpses of wolves. Brynhildr squinted at the woman. She rubbed her eyes to ensure that she was truly witnessing what was before her.

"Tabitha? Tabitha?" Brynhildr sheathed her sword and grabbed the woman by her shoulders. "How are you alive?" Brynhildr asked. The question lingered for a moment. The

woman's attention was only on the wolves. She pushed Brynhildr's hands away and grabbed the brim of her hat. She threw off the hat and winked her green eyes. Brynhildr scowled. Tabitha's eyes were always brown in her memories. "Is your name Tabitha?"

"To down all of these wolves must be exhausting." The woman said. It looked like her lips formed an estranged smile. Her porcelain teeth were radiant. "My name *is* Tabitha. Let's not linger on the past. Things can get awfully complicated."

"Was it a ploy? A trick with magic? Your death. Believe it or not, I mourned your passing. I considered you a good friend."

"I appreciate the sentiment." Tabitha said. Tabitha took one of Brynhildr's hands. "Tell me, Lady Brynhildr," Tabitha placed her hand on her chin. Brynhildr stared at Tabitha's face. She was trying to find a blemish. A stray mark that signified that this wasn't the same woman. "What if I was to reveal a secret to you. It pertains to a certain outsider."

"You mean Crow?" Brynhildr asked. Brynhildr withdrew her hand from Tabitha.

"Yes. Are you aware that he is a necromancer? A necromancer that is spending an awfully long time with Elizabeth." Tabitha said. "As the captain of the royal guard, is it not your duty to intervene?"

Brynhildr sat back down on the boulder. Brynhildr reached into her pocket and pulled out a bag of Tobacco and paper. Brynhildr rolled a cigarette for herself. Tabitha waited for Brynhildr to finish the entire process. Her lips were pursed in impatience.

"You used to call me Bryn and *never* called me lady. Like I said, I considered you a good friend." Brynhildr took a puff and stared at Tabitha's face. There was no recognition from both

parties. Her very form seemed distant. “My Elizabeth has taken a shine to him and I am certain that he won’t hurt her. He is at war with himself above all. I can see it.” Tabitha waited for Brynhildr to finish. Brynhildr blew another puff of smoke. “My question is simple. Who benefits from revealing this information to me?”

“A Captain of the Royal Guard is meant to protect the royalty. It is in the name. You may heed my words as you like. I am merely presenting information for your benefit. What I say is true. Crow Pendragon is a necromancer,” Tabitha said. “I have no more time to speak. Maybe we shall meet again or maybe not.” Tabitha turned on her heel and walked away. Brynhildr would stay on the boulder until the cigarette had receded to mere ash.

Chapter 8: Uncontested Lands

Crow learned that his name was Vincent, and the widow was named Charlotte.

Crow and Elizabeth patrolled the outskirts of the camp. Their eyes surveyed the land for any threats. They passed the time by asking questions. The back and forth was nice. Crow learned that Elizabeth despised fish, knew the piano, and once got in trouble for scaling the castle walls. She mimicked the sound of one of the maids that saw the princess scraping hands and knees against the walls. Elizabeth learned about Crow's sweet tooth that wasn't often satiated and his interest in poetry.

Yet Crow couldn't forget about Vincent. He was unnerved about the ordeal. It wasn't the man's death itself, but what Crow came to learn about his reaction. He heard the widow's wail of agony. The way she pounded the snow and drew her fingers back over her heart. Crow questioned his own reaction. His monotone stillness. He wondered if he was too far gone. If he lost his humanness over the years. Perhaps he should have felt anything other than dull ambivalence. It scared him.

Then he saw Elizabeth. Elizabeth carried the same stillness that Crow did. Her face was just as empty as his. Crow believed that they would react the same, yet Elizabeth walked over to Charlotte as soon as she broke down. Elizabeth placed her arm around Charlotte and pulled her close. Charlotte accepted the embrace with her closed eyes. She grieved with someone at her side. The tact that Elizabeth displayed in that moment showed off her compassion and strength all at once. Meanwhile Crow stood like a silent statue and did nothing while a widow saw the actualization of her husband's death.

“Are you okay?” Elizabeth asked. Crow awakened to the present.

“Huh?” Crow asked.

“Are you okay?” Elizabeth asked again.

“Yeah. I am fine.” Crow said. “What were we talking about?”

“The journey. We still have a way to go, but we are around halfway down. What are you planning to do? Once we get to our destination.”

“Most likely leave once everyone gets settled.” Crow said.

“Why?” Elizabeth asked. “You can stay with us. People are warming up to you.” Crow went to respond, but a third voice interrupted him.

“You two!” A man called out. He was clad in white uniform with a brown scarf. He approached them casually, yet Crow prepared himself. He knew what the man was wearing.

“Who are you?” Elizabeth stepped forwards.

“My name is Christopher Finn.” Christopher flashed a medal on his warm uniform.

“I have never seen that medal in my life.” Elizabeth squinted at it. Crow saw the picture recognized the white and golden cross. “What does it mean?” Elizabeth asked.

“He’s a pathfinder. That’s the term for it, correct?” Crow said.

“At least one man recognizes me. Do you hail from the provinces?”

“Telos.” Crow said curtly. He never met a pathfinder so far away from the border.

“Ah. They provide the land with rich vegetables and fruit. They are essential to us.”

After Christopher made this comment, he formed some extra distance between him and Crow.

Crow turned to Elizabeth. “A pathfinder is a branch of the Magnus Empire’s military that searches for the uninhabited to occupy. Though I am uncertain as to why they would wander so far out.”

“Our population is in a constant state of growth. Snow or not, the empire considers all their options in search of proper living space for its populace.” Christopher adjusted his coat.

“Are the two of you alone?”

“We are part of a group of migrants that are headed south for new land.”

“Hm.” Christopher rubbed his cheek. He avoided eye contact with Crow and turned to Elizabeth. “I’ll assume that you are a local. Have you seen the castle of Nix?”

“Why do you have interest in that?” Elizabeth asked.

“Our emperor has an architectural interest in it. He wanted to study it. Once we get a foothold in Nix, he was considering making it the capital of a new province.”

“Excuse me?” Elizabeth asked. Crow sensed a fury behind Elizabeth’s words.

“These lands are brutal, Pathfinder. Wolves attack at random. Just the other day, we lost a loving husband to one. Most of the land cannot sustain crops for a long amount of time. It would do best for the Emperor to reconsider other options.” Crow said.

“I suppose, but I am only a lowly pathfinder. I hold no influence on what land I chart. They just point and I go,” Christopher said with a shrug. “You two wouldn’t happen to have a spare map back in your camp, right? It would surely speed up my progress.”

“No.” Elizabeth said.

“You don’t have spare maps?”

“We have a good memory.”

“Well then,” Christopher said. He shuffled uncomfortably. “I suppose, I’ll just go. I still have much to chart today. Thank you for help.” The inflection of the word help was obvious to all. Elizabeth stood her ground until Christopher was out of sight. The two of them walked back to camp.

“The capital of a new providence! What?” Elizabeth said. “And did you notice the way he treated you after you said that you were from Telos. What an arrogant-” Elizabeth sighed and closed her mouth. It appeared those etiquette lessons still influenced her to this day.

“Ten years is a long time.” Crow said. “You should be surprised that it hasn’t happened sooner.”

“That still gives him no right to look down upon us. Did he not consider how some must feel to have our land stripped of its importance?” Elizabeth shook her head. “I am sorry. It is just incredibly infuriating.”

“How about we take a breather. We patrolled for long enough.” Crow said.

“I’ll report to Kay and mention Christopher.” Elizabeth looked at Crow. “Shall we talk again sometime later?” That question had started to become more common between the two of them.

“Yeah,” Crow said. Elizabeth smiled and parted with Crow. Crow realized that he had time to kill. He took out his journal from his coat pocket and started to flip through the pages.

Crow didn’t notice Brynhildr watching him from a distance. He moved slowly towards the outskirts of the camp. Excluding the attack by the wolves, the migration was going well. Moral was temporarily wounded by the death of Vincent, but the people pushed on. It was already too late to turn back now. Crow found a shy stump to sit on. He took a pen and started to scribble on the thing.

“Crow.” Brynhildr said. Crow looked up and found Brynhildr off to the side. He acknowledged her with a nod but waited for her to speak first. He wondered what she needed. Brynhildr held her scabbard in her hands rather than keeping it attached to her waist. “Is it true? Are you a necromancer?” Crow’s eyes widened. An uncomfortable heat spread throughout his body.

“It was naïve to think that I can keep it for so long.” Crow put away his journal. He intertwined his fingers over his lap. “You have all treated me with kindness.” Brynhildr appeared in front of him. He felt the cold blade against his neck.

“This blade is an Oathkeeper. Wielded by royal guardians and monarchs alike. Forged from winter’s guile and gnashing ice.” Brynhildr said. “In my hands, it strikes true. It shields the crown and its people. Tell me, Crow. What shall you say?”

“I am sorry.” He whispered. “I once defended myself when someone threatened me just like this. I still regret that to this day, so I won’t do it this time. Do it.” Brynhildr shook her head. The winds heighten with his words. “I have run from enough towns. I should have allowed this to happen long ago.” Crow closed his eyes. He no longer felt the blade on his neck.

“You haven’t done anything to Elizabeth, to me, or to the people of Jotun. And I don’t believe that you ever hurt someone who didn’t attack you first. You keep things like that, and my blade won’t come near you.” Brynhildr said. Crow opened his eyes. “To be honest. I never had intentions of killing you.”

“How did you find out?” Crow asked.

“.... An old friend told me. It is not very important.” Brynhildr paused for a moment. Crow waited. What was she going to say? “Crow, you are aware that I was captain of the royal guard.”

“Yes.” Crow responded.

“That was not my only duty. The other position that I held is something that still requires me.”

“What position was it?” Crow asked.

“There is no benefit in telling you. Besides, if I fulfill my role, you or Elizabeth won’t ever need to know of it.”

“Elizabeth, doesn’t know either?”

“She doesn’t. All I want you to know is that I may be leaving once things have settled.” Brynhildr said. “I just wanted to be aware of this.”

“Okay. Can I ask a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why haven’t you taught Elizabeth ice magic.” Crow said.

“Elizabeth is the Queen of Nix. The kingdom has always prided itself on the fact that the monarchy had a distinct form of ice magic. A form of ice magic that is under lock and key. Few were privy to that information. I have witnessed it, but I am no magical instructor.”

“Who would have taught Elizabeth if everything went well?”

“A court magician. She went by the name of Tabitha.” Brynhildr scratched her head.
“She may be alive, but I wouldn’t count on her cooperation.”

“You say those words with some venom. Was the court magician during Elizabeth’s time poor or traitorous?”

“No, she was actually very kind and intellectually sound. Honest, she was a good woman.” Brynhildr eyed Crow. “You wouldn’t be able to tell whether someone is dead or not, would you?”

“You mean a dead servant like a thrall? The dead have naturally purple eyes. They can theoretically hide it with magic, but I haven’t seen it myself,” Crow said. “A necromancer could also tell by touch or an extremely skilled one would be able to sense it by merely focusing,”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. Tabitha never got the chance to teach it.”

“Then the practice is gone?” Crow asked.

“No there is a tome-”

“Grimoire. Book regaling spells are grimoires. Tomes are more general or for magical theory,” Crow said. “Excuse my interruption.”

“Ok. There’s a *grimoire* that contains the practice in the castle’s library. It’s a month's journey from Jotun on horse.” Brynhildr said. “Going on that journey would be daunting.”

“I understand. Copying another mage’s spells verbatim is harder than weaving your own. Spells require specific knowledge of the material and specific emotional concepts that are individualistic in nature. It requires a perfect exegesis.”

“I told her not to worry about such things. She acts interested in magic, but she always pulls back right before actually practicing it. Learning a different type of magic would be admitting that she is truly no longer the Queen of Nix. Monarchies have tons of symbolic gestures.”

“She will struggle if magic is ever required from her.” Crow said.

“Then guide her.”

“Elizabeth can use a court magician.”

“I am not accomplished for such a position.” Crow said. “Besides, I am a random stranger. Why trust me?”

“Because you are growing fond of her; I can see it. You must also see that she is growing fond of *you*. Just consider my words at the very least.” Brynhildr turned away from Crow. She meant to leave, but Crow saw that she meant to say one more thing. “Crow?”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know your life story, but you seem like a good man.” Brynhidlr said her piece and left. Crow sat back on the stump and went back to his journal unable to write out anything down.

Chapter 9: Taming Dragons

Elizabeth was the first to notice it. It swirled across the sky in a circle. Crow couldn't see it clearly with his eyes, all he knew was that it was a winged creature.

"Bryn!" Elizabeth cupped her mouth and shouted. "It's Taliesin!" Crow turned his eyes back to the sky and saw the creature diving towards the ground. A deep roar accompanied the fall to the ground. Elizabeth grabbed on to Crow's wrist and pulled him along. The caravan lurched to a stop. Baxter turned to Kay. Kay shrugged and decided it was time to call a break anyway. Brynhildr and Elizabeth with Crow being dragged along were headed towards the landing zone.

"Should I go get my bow?" Baxter asked. Kay shook his head and turned to Madeline.

"Pass the word that we are going to rest for half an hour. Man may no longer recognize the crown, but a pact made with nature still holds. Let them handle it." Kay said. Baxter widened his eyes and then smirked.

"What is so funny?" Kay asked.

"They are dragging *Pendragon* to meet a dragon." Baxter responded. "I've got to tell the wife about this one." Baxter went giddily over to retell this revelation. Madeline rolled her eyes.

"That is pretty funny." Kay said.

Crow met many creatures during his travels, but never any dragons. Dragons were a rare breed. Crow knew from Mordecai's retelling of legends that Dragons were another fictional

concept prior to The Entropy. The notion intrigued him, but there was great difficulty about asking a creature about their own existence. Crow could hardly explain his own.

All thoughts faded once the dragon landed on the ground. The length of the dragon was that of seven men and as wide as ten. Its scales were the color of aquamarine. Its surprisingly small eyes were spheres of gray with black pupils. These same eyes looked over to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth stepped forwards and got within touching distance of the dragon. Brynhildr nodded at Crow. He stared at her with wide eyes. What did the nod mean? Was everything okay? Did he have to do something? The dragon voice was just as deep as its roar, but it was melodious like a bard.

“Years since our last meeting.” The dragon bowed its head to her. Elizabeth reached out an open palm and rubbed the dragon head. Crow thought it looked like she was petting a dog.

“Years, indeed. How do you fare, Taliesin?”

“My wings have been stout, my breath still carries the piercing glare of winter, and my eyes are sharp as steel. These words, I speak truth, but I must admit that your presence has graced me with life. I still feel grief that I could not carry you on my back when your enemies amass upon your gates.” Taliesin said.

“Do not worry about that Taliesin. It's been ten years.” Elizabeth said.

“I welcome you, Lady Brynhildr.” Taliesin moved his sharp head over to witness Brynhildr.

“Hello, Taliesin. The winters have not served your scales well. They used to be brighter.”

“Same voice. Same words. Same Brynhildr. Not an inch of tact, but strength to spare, yet I can see the years have made ravines upon your skin.”

“We all grow old.” Brynhildr said. Then Taliesin turned his gray eyes towards Crow. Crow’s body warmed up. He sweat a little. This was a meeting of old friends and he was intruding.

“I have never met such a man with a black hood and gray eyes. My lady, is he one of yours?” Taliesin said.

“Yes. Listen to this, Taliesin, his name is Crow Pendragon.”

“Like King Arthur?” Crow blinked. The only person that recognized his name was not the queen, not the royal protector, not the very people that were ruled by a monarchy, but a dragon. Vetus was indeed a strange place. Taliesin made a smile that showed his teeth. His teeth were serrated pyramids that could assuredly chew through bone and metal alike. “What do you do, Pendragon?”

“Just Crow is fine. No need to be so formal. I am helpin-”

“Why not bear the name of gracious legend! Let it be your sail that embody the gales of heroism, let it be your blade of reason that strikes down the rotten fools that wish to drag your name through thick mud, let it be your Master of Revels that dances away the concept of being lost and forgotten to dreary history, let it.....” Crow couldn’t keep up with Taliesin’s speech. “...So, can I call you Pendragon.”

“Sure.”

“Can I call you brother?”

“What?” Crow asked.

“We are both dragons.” Taliesin said. The dragon took a few steps forwards and looked down on Crow. Taliesin then nudged him with his snout.

“You mentioned the legend of King Arthur. You must know that King Arthur was not a dragon.” Crow said.

“My lady, has this man been shielding you from the stormy winds of the world? Has his black cloak preserved your mind’s eye? Has-”

“Yes, Taliesin. He has been helping me out.” Elizabeth said.

“Good. Then he is my brother.” Taliesin said. “What joyous occasion. It is not often that I can experience a brother.”

“I don-” Crow opened his mouth. Crow was cut off by Taliesin’s laughter.

“It was merely a jape, a jest! The perplexion upon your features were a sight to behold. It has been a long time since I was able to freely approach those of man.”

“Taliesin, why have you come for us?” Elizabeth asked. Crow closed his mouth and scratched his temple. Perhaps it was best that he stayed quiet.

“You are leaving the mountains. I ask why? Fifty-six seasons,” Taliesin asked. “You have stood in the fields of snow, content with its frozen beauty. Why leave and lock the sector of your birth? Why throw away the ice tipped branches and the cold rivers where frost hardened fish call their fortuitous home?”

“My people seek richer lands, Taliesin. It is my duty to watch over them,” Elizabeth said.
“I am their Queen in nothing more than spirit, but I want to help them.”

“The same people that killed your mother and father?” Taliesin asked. Elizabeth released the tension in her back and threw her eyes towards the snow under her feet.

“It was not their fault.” Elizabeth said. Brynhildr stepped forwards.

“Taliesin, you haven’t been doing anything unsavory to the remaining Nixian, right?”
Brynhildr asked. Taliesin eyed Brynhildr. He raised his eyes to the winds and closed them for a moment.

“I could not. My anger, my rage, my sorrow, my very icebound blood could not draw breath nor claw to the people that I have sworn to guard, yet I will not deny my fiery thoughts. I wept for the king and queen. The king, once Prince Maxwell Kingfisher, grazed my wings and called me friend. The queen, once a blushing wife, read me poetry of gentle giants and sang for my undeserving scales.” Taliesin paused. He seemed to be recollecting something. A wistful look. Crow himself remembered that Mordecai once told him that dragons heard through their scales. “Yet, once I took flight upon one starless night and I saw clarity in my mind’s eye. The last moments that I witnessed their melted kindness, the hot-blooded eyes that nearly scarred my heart. They no longer saw me as a friend, but as a beast. I wondered upon that same starless night, how they treated their citizenry?”

“Enough, Taliesin.” Elizabeth said. “Let us move on.”

“Have my words harmed you?” Taliesin lowered his head closer to Elizabeth.

“No, you never will, but we must go, Taliesin. We do not have much time.” Elizabeth said.

“When shall we meet again, my lady? Shall we meet upon these white fields again?”

“Perhaps.” Elizabeth said. She stepped forwards and petted Taliesin’s nose. “I am not certain, but I have a feeling that it may be some time until then.”

“I shall ever count the day ‘till then, my lady.” Taliesin said.

“Come, Brynhildr. We need to ensure that everyone is ready to continue.” Brynhildr and Elizabeth walked away. Elizabeth gave one final wave before going back to the caravan. Crow and Taliesin were left alone.

“My words made her heart weep.” Taliesin said. “The sorrow of an orphaned child. Married to strength, plagued by fury, contracted to weakness.”

“Your words did not cause what happened to her. I am sure that she’ll bounce back. It is still a bad subject for her, but in the short time that I have known her, Elizabeth’s greatest ability has been her strength.” Crow said.

“Your words are kind, Pendragon. Tell me, who are you?”

“What?”

“You are neither knight nor Wizard. Black cloak, gray eyes. What are you in this half old, half new world?”

“I am just a guy that would rather not have titles.”

“May I chance a request?” Taliesin asked. “Will you care for her in my stead? She is strong, but the strength of one cannot stand alone against the bad fortune of this world.”

“Why not follow us?” Crow asked. “You can watch us over and help us if necessary.”

“The allegiance of man and dragon is called upon in cycles. I cannot be with them every waking moment. I have my own life to live. Besides, I need to protect these lands, for there may yet be Nixians that walk these white mountains in need of guidance.”

“Elizabeth has Brynhildr. I am sure their bond can stand the test of time.” Crow said.

“Her duty will compel her soon enough. She is not just a royal protector.” Taliesin said. Taliesin appeared to be aware of Brynhildr’s second role. “Can you be the man to do it?”

“I’ll see what I can do, but I won’t be making any oaths.” Crow said. Taliesin breathed through the large nostrils in his head. Crow saw and felt the warmth in the dragon’s breath.

“Taliesin before you go.”

“Yes?” Taliesin asked. Crow withdrew *The First King* from his cloak and waved it.

“You are mentioned in this book. Even referred to as a historian. Do you remember ever telling the history of Nix?”

“I do.” Taliesin lowered his head. “Men are not like my kin. Their capacity to fade into dust is as certain as the seeping water from melted snowflakes. I am a dragon that has witnessed much and has thus been called many times to share the tales of what I have seen.”

“I see. Maybe one day, when we are not in a rush, can you tell me some of your stories?” Crow asked.

“Of course! Care for yourself, Pendragon, so that one day we may sing songs of King and Queens.” With these parting words, Taliesin did not give time for Crow to respond, and the dragon took off, leaving behind a mess of snow that sprayed Crow’s cloak. It was dyed completely white. Crow patted away the snow from his cloak, as Taliesin flew north.

Chapter 10: The Grasslands of Rhei

Tristan's face brightened when he first caught the sight of the mossy rocks, so did many of the children. They pointed at the vibrant greenery covering the rock and spoke of how bright it looked. Grassy ground was a welcome change for all and signified progress. Nearly everyone took a moment to gander at the change in scenery. The grass of Nix during the spring and winter months was grayscale compared to the one before them. The caravan of wagons lurched towards a stop and the people took a moment to rest and breathe in the warmer air. Crow kept along the dirt path. He had *The First King* in his hands. He had already finished the book several times over, but he found himself reading the text repeatedly. There were always new details to be gleamed. Elizabeth approached Crow from the right. She pushed her long white hair away from her eyes.

"Kay will come to the frontlines soon. This might be our last temporary encampment." Crow went to respond, but Elizabeth fidgeted suddenly. She took off her blue coat and folded it over her shoulder. She flicked off sweat from her forehead. "It is quite warm." Elizabeth fanned herself.

"You are going to have to get acquainted with this new temperature. Besides, this is far from the sunny beaches of the Land of Tides. It must be only thirty degrees hotter than Jotun."

"It is still hot." Elizabeth said. Crow climbed upon a large boulder. He relaxed his muscles and looked upon the Grasslands of Rhei. A wide gravel path followed the curvature of the rolling hills and stopped abruptly once they reached a sea of ashy, gray fog. His eyes stopped on a large hill with a leafless yew tree. He grimaced and continued to scan the rest of the land.

To the south were the remnants of small houses. Near these houses were sparsely planted trees and a long river that cut a path westward. Some stretches of land were so unoccupied that they still had small pieces of electrical power lines from the old world. Crow's eyes glazed to the start of the river and found it. The river began at a small lake that would gradually widen into a large river that flowed for miles. Most interesting point of interest was the large castle that stood further east. Further south, the grasslands were stopped suddenly by the largest forest in Vetus, the Arbor Forest. Crow scanned the grasslands once more. His left hand pulsed. He could feel the community that was buried here.

He turned to the rest of the Nixians. "Take pride in your tenacity. You have reached your journey's end." Crow whispered. "They did it. They can start again." Crow saw the weary travelers rise their head from the promise of an end.

"Move 'long! Let's witness our new home." Baxter said. It was clear that he was inspired and excited. The company of Nixians made their way down the steep path. Soon enough, they found themselves at the river. Baxter had already ordered for a camp to be set up. The transition from camp to settlement would be ironed out later. The leaders of the migrants, and Crow, Elizabeth, and Brynhildr met at the outskirts of the new camp. Crow looked at the Arbor Forest. He studied its vast opening of thick trunks and spindly branches. Crow then turned to the castle. A large ghastly structure that was erected upon the top of one of the shorter mountains. It was a structure of rusty iron, stone bricks, and sharp spires. Large pane windows dotted the face of the castle. Crow eyed the stone bridge that led all the way to the entrance. Some architects would have called it a gothic beauty.

“The Castle of Rhei. The precursor to Arcadia.” Crow said. It was a piece of history, but one that was often forgotten. Crow admired the size of the castle. It was evident that the followers of Rhei were devout people. You could house all two thousand Nixians in the castle and perhaps a few hundred more. Crow saw the endless halls in his mind. The hidden room, perhaps a library laced with ancient text and literature. Crow could even imagine a ballroom in it. There would be spiders, dust, and even moss along the many halls and rooms of the castle. It likely hasn’t been maintained for decades perhaps even centuries. Unless some stray travelers decided to use it for shelter.

“The Castle of Nix was larger.” Elizabeth said. Crow nodded but continued to imagine the intricacies of the castle before him.

“Someone should go and investigate it.” Brynhildr said. “We could house our people in there until we can start building actual homes.”

“We need to make sure that the preparations are set here.” Kay said. He turned to Elizabeth and Crow. “Do the two of you mind making the short trip there? We understand if you wish to rest. We could all use a nice meal and sleep.”

“No, I’ll go.” Crow said. He was aware of the bags under his eyes and the soreness of his legs, but he needed to satiate his curiosity.

“I have no qualms about it.” Elizabeth said. The two of them started the few miles walk towards the castle.

“Careful.” Baxter called out before the two of them left. Crow gave a thumbs-up.

“What do you think is within the castle walls?” Elizabeth asked.

“I have no idea. That is what makes this exciting. People haven’t been in these lands for generations. We don’t even know what they could house in there. Unfortunately, there is also the possibility that there could be nothing left.” Crow said.

“During the time that we temporarily are housed in the castle, people might have to share close spaces...” Elizabeth said.

“No, I am certain that people won’t be too cramped. It is a large castle after all.” Elizabeth blinked. “What?”

“Nothing.” The two reached the entrance. It was a rusty iron gate with strange sigils etched into the metal. The weathered stone walls were weathered and discolored. Elizabeth reached for the gate. Crow stopped her hand.

“Those are runes.” Crow said. Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “A type of spell. They are like magic traps. I don’t know what they do, but it is best not to touch them.”

“Very well. How do you suppose we get inside?”

“Ello!” A booming voice hailed them. Elizabeth and Crow craned their necks upwards. Atop the outer walls they found a pudgy man with red hair. He wore a smile with a gold tooth and pointed at them. Crow hadn’t met someone with a golden tooth since his days in Magnus. “Travelers? Ay! Jim, we got travelers!”

“I’m sorry are you in control of this castle?” Elizabeth asked.

“Aye! This castle is under the control of Daniel Olympus. The name’s Crimson. Get it? It’s cause of my ‘air.” Crimson grabbed tufts of his red beard. “Come on inside!” Crimson

disappeared. The gate shuddered and rocketed upwards. Elizabeth peered through and found a muddy courtyard.

“We should let Kay know about this. Let’s talk with them and then report back. The castle is far away, so perhaps we can come to an agreement on land.” Elizabeth said. Elizabeth looked back to the courtyard. “Though I think that we should be on our guard.” Crow rubbed his left hand.

“We should see what these people are about.” Crow said. Crow and Elizabeth stepped through the entrance. Above their heads were several large gates held up by several rusty gears and pulleys. The ground of the courtyard was nothing like the bright green grass of the grassland. It was a layer of soft gray earth. Old tools were tossed around with no care for organization. Crow assumed they were all made of iron because some of them had begun to rust. Then Crow took a single step into the center of the courtyard. He stared into the gray mush beneath his feet. His grays appeared brighter. He grabbed roughly Elizabeth by the arm and pulled her back.

“What are you doing?” Elizabeth asked. An arrow landed in the spot where she was standing before. The iron gates shuddered once more and slammed shut behind them. Crimson sat on one of the walls with a cheap wooden bow in his arms. Several men and women appeared along the rest of the walls. Crow looked up at Crimson.

“How many people have you buried here?” Crow asked. Crimson tilted his head.

“The realization of our deeds won’t do you any good. You are already trapped.” Crimson showed his gold tooth once again. “Let’s make the Basilisk proud, boys!” The bandits climbed down from the wall like spiders. Crow and Elizabeth stood with their backs to the gate. Elizabeth unsheathed her sword. Crimson shot another arrow at her. Elizabeth swung and the arrow

exploded into several splinters of wood. Crimson took another arrow from his quiver. He took aim at Crow. A lightning bolt sent his right leg flying off in a bloody mist. Crimson screamed and lost his balance. His body tumbled down the castle wall to the muddy ground. His face gray from the dirt. Crow turned back to the bandits in front of them. Two aimed to meet with Crow. More lightning was conducted. Their bodies groaned and fell to the mushy courtyard ground. Elizabeth parried a few attacks by bandits with swords and axes. Her hands danced with her sword and three more bandits met their end. A bandit huffed and threw his axe. Elizabeth ducked underneath it. The axe flew into the stone wall behind her and fell apart into two parts, the handle and axe head.

“There are too many of them! We have no choice, but to try and lose them inside.”

Crow said. He formed a claw with right hand and dozed the floor with fire. The two ran inside the castle. They climbed the stairs, as Crow’s flames disappeared, and the mob followed them. The inside of the castle was a maze of long identical halls. Wine colored carpets, empty suits of armor, and yellow banners with black salamanders decorated were the only few decorations used. Crow and Elizabeth made several sharp turns. The battle cries of the bandits were unharmonious screams for blood. Elizabeth saw another axe pass her head. Elizabeth grabbed Crow’s hand and pulled him left. She found a wooden door to her left. She grabbed the brass knob and pushed Crow inside into the dark room. The mob made the same turn. They held their breaths as the mob’s screams grew closer and closer. The screams were adjacent to the door. The two readied themselves. Crow could only see the whites in Elizabeth’s eyes.

The screams passed and turned into echoes of ferocities from down the hall. Elizabeth released the air that she was holding in. Crow wheezed in the opposite corner. Elizabeth only saw his faint figure.

“Are you okay?”

“Not.... Not used to running.” Crow groaned. He tried to catch his breath and put his hand against the wall. His fingers grazed against a cool surface and the dark room lit up. The rows of light lit up one by one. The last row of light bulbs flickered weakly and were the only ones that didn’t turn on. Along with rows of lights there were also rows of shelves. These shelves were filled with weapons. Elizabeth and Crow examined the room for a moment.

“This must be an armory and where those bandits got their assortment of weapons. A few rooms like these and you can provide for a small army.” Crow said.

“We need to warn everyone about these ruffians.” Elizabeth.

“Our first plan would be to get out of here. The gate in the front is resistant to magic. One of the most aggravating sigils that I have seen.”

“What was that question that you asked the redhead?” Elizabeth asked. “You said ‘How many people are buried here?’ How did you know people were dead here?” Crow paused for a second.

“Crimson’s fingers.”

“Yes?”

“They were bloody. Slick with blood and mud.” Elizabeth considered the answer for a moment and nodded.

“Your perception saved us. Let’s leave this place quickly.” Elizabeth grasped the handle with a tight fist and looked at Crow for validation. He nodded and they opened the door to the hall. No one was waiting for them. The two of them softened their footsteps and peeked around corners. They attempted to retrace their steps but found themselves at a dead end. A glass pane window was to the left of them. The beautiful day taunted them. To their right was an open door. Inside was a small study. There were dusty bookshelves and a long wooden desk. "This castle truly is vast. It would benefit us to fully explore this place.” They turned around to amend their wrong turn and were faced with a screeching bald-headed man. The mob of bandits poured in from one of the many corners. Their eyes glazed with murder. Crow turned to the window. A long 300-foot drop awaited them.

“Elizabeth? Can you survive a long drop with your aura?”

“Are you mad?” Was her only response.

“I don’t know any suitable air magic either and the wooden door to that study would be easily broken down.” Crow thought aloud. The mob squeezed themselves into the hall and were approaching closer and closer. Crow rose his head. He pushed Elizabeth behind him. Crow clasped his open palms together. Yellow electricity once again danced around his hands. ".... I need you to stand at least five feet behind me. We’ll see if this kills me.” Crow ran towards the mob. His hand glowed brighter and brighter. Elizabeth shielded her eyes. The lightning started to go beyond his wrist and spread to his arms. Crow violently outstretched his arms. Wild lightning made the walls vibrate. The glass pane window shattered. Glass shards flew in every direction.

The members at the forefront of the mob quickly turned on their heels and tried to run away from the magical wall of lightning. The mob tripped and collapsed on itself. Their eyes were no longer bloodthirsty but scared. They scrambled to run, but the lightning entangled them. It bounced along the walls and formed a golden web. They died instantly from electrocution. Those at the front were left with burnt organs. The smell was atrocious. Elizabeth unshielded her eyes. She stared at the carnage and then turned to Crow. Crow tried to wipe away the beads of sweat on his forehead, a red streak painted his skin. He fell to his knees. Both of his arms were bleeding. The blood was warm against his skin. Elizabeth offered to carry him.

“Can you take my arm?” Crow raised his limp right arm towards Elizabeth. Elizabeth held it gently. Crow hissed. “The cracks are along my entire arm.”

“Sorry.” Elizabeth said.

“It is not your fault.” Elizabeth helped guide Crow through the castle. No longer being chased by a group of bandits allowed them to easily find the crank to open up the gate. Elizabeth saw her jacket was stained by red splotches.

“You mentioned cracks. What are they?”

“Have you ever heard of a man named Newton.” Crow grinned, but he saw that Elizabeth didn’t even crack a smirk. “When you perform a spell, your body gets hit by the same force. Very intense on your body, but your aura stops it from killing you. The only problem is that if your aura is not trained to take a spell, like the one I just casted, then cracks form. You can also get cracks from casting more spells than your aura can handle.” They reached the gate. “Good news is that my aura will now be stronger. After I take some time to recover, that is.” Elizabeth scowled at Crow.

“I am assuming that if you casted a spell that was way too mighty, you would destroy your body.”

“Yes.” Crow said. “You’re a fast study.”

“Don’t do that again.” Elizabeth said.

“Elizabeth, they had us trapped.”

“We could have taken all of them on without the need for a suicidal tactic. What if you got yourself killed?” Elizabeth asked.

“They all would have died either way.” Crow said.

“What does that mean?”

“They would all be dead, and you would have survived.” Elizabeth stopped. She inadvertently squeezed Crow’s arm. Crow grunted from the pain.

“Sorry. I just....” Elizabeth readjusted Crow’s arm. “The way you speak about yourself. The way you act. You have so little care for yourself. I have grown to know you during this month, at the very least the pieces that you care to share. Please, consider your action. I would not feel joy from surviving alone.” The two silently continued. Then something took a hold of Crow’s leg. Elizabeth already drew her sword, yet Crimson crawled towards them with half of a leg missing.

“You killed them all.... didn’t you?” Crimson praised. His voice was joined by a mixture of spit and blood. “You’re just like the boss.” Crimson wouldn’t let go of Crow’s foot. A content expression on his face. “What a way to go.” Crow was disturbed with how satisfied Crimson

looked from being defeated. “Not bad. Not bad at all.” A gentle wind passed. Crimson peered right into Crow’s eyes. “Don’t give me that look of pity. Dying in combat is the best way to appease my forefathers.” Crimson took his last breath and laid his face down on the muddy ground. Crow waved off his final words as the rambling of a dying man.

“Let’s go.” Elizabeth urged.

Tristan was the first to notice Elizabeth and Crow trudging back to camp. He helped Elizabeth carry Crow back to the center.

“What happened to the two of you?” Tristan asked

“There was a group of bandits in the castle.” Elizabeth said.

“Do we have to get ready for a fight?” Baxter said while drawing his bow.

“No. They are all dead.” Crow said. Streams of blood spilled down Crow’s arms. Crow finally got some strength in his legs and walked towards the wagon containing fresh bandages.

“Let me help you.” Elizabeth offered.

“No.” Crow said. Elizabeth winced. “I didn’t mean to be curt. I want to have some time with my thoughts.”

“I understand. Just remember what I said.” Elizabeth said.

Crow secluded himself in the forest. He sat on a stump and began the process to patch up the cracks. He shed his long cloak and his gloves. He balanced the roll of bandages on his lap and dipped a white cloth in a bucket of cool water. He wiped his arms clean and the red smudge on his forehead. The wounds were thin ravines on his skin. Once they were clean, Crow cut

several long strips with his knife. He wrapped the strips tightly over his right hand and both of his arms. No such wound appeared on his necrotic arm. Once Crow was satisfied with the end result, he reapplied his gloves and closed his eyes.

“That was quite a powerful spell.... well relatively powerful. In time, you could grow stronger.” A woman’s voice called out. Crow looked straight ahead. Then he turned left and then right. The forest was the only thing that surrounded him. “How’s your hand. The rotting one. It was curious to see you not put on a batch of fresh bandages.” Crow looked up to find a woman dressed completely in black sitting on a tree branch. She had the brim of her pointed hat over her eyes. She balanced a pinecone on her fingertip.

“Who are you?” Crow asked. The woman tipped her hat and gave a fish hook smile.

“My name is Tabitha.”

“What do you want?” Crow asked.

“Nothing in particular, just wanted to see if the little necromancer was okay.”

“Do you know who I am? Did Lucia send you?” Crow stood up from the stump. “I am not going back.”

“Grand priestess dearest didn’t send me. She is simply a thorn that pricks. Speaking of the grand priestess, I wonder what the Nixian would say if they found out. I wonder what they would do. I know that they have their own horror stories about necromancers. Every culture in the world does. Would they gather their torches?” Tabitha laughed. “Your face says it all. This isn’t your first song and dance after all.” Tabitha disappeared.

“Wait! Who are you? Come back!” Crow cried out. Crow rooted himself in the ground. His palms planted on the ground. He was kneeling. “Please. Don’t say anything to them.” Crow didn’t know why he was begging. It was inevitable that they would find out. Nevertheless, he desperately awaited Tabitha’s response, yet the forest was silent.

Chapter 11: Midnight Reflection

“Crow....” Crow adjusted his hood over his head. He saw Winnie with her own black cloak. Her knees against her chest. Her foggy breath came out slow and shaky. She looked up at him with sad grey eyes. “You're tired.” Crow smiled.

“The sorceress brought us here for the meeting that she'll have. You'll need to stay quiet.” Crow's sister wrapped her arms around herself.

“I hate this. I hate this cold weather.” She made a displeased hum. Crow turned to Thane. Crow saw that Thane looked lost. He found his brother's mind wandering far too much. Crow reached inside the emptiness of his cloak and found a red apple. He handed it Winnie. “Give it to Thane. He looks more out of it than me.” Winnie said. Crow turned to Thane and raised the apple in front of his face. Thane snatched it and took a bite.

“Crow.” Thane said. He swallowed a mouthful of apple. “Looks like you're up.”

“Crow!” Lucia said. Winnie gritted her teeth. Crow sped up to Lucia's side. He slipped on the slick ground but caught himself before he could fall into the mud. “This exchange will be very important. Do not dare to make a mockery of me or our people.”

“Understood.” Crow said. He would keep quiet. He still did not know why he was here, but it would be unwise to go against Lucia's wishes. The sky stretched out even further and the downpour came down harder. Crow pulled his cloak tighter around himself. Crow looked out towards the fields of farmland that dominated Telos. From this small piece of hill, he could see it all. The rows of small wooden houses. The families that would be asleep near a warm fireplace.

The children who were currently warm and fed. Crow's eyes flickered towards the red lights trudging uphill. He straightened his frail frame.

He could not see their faces. The red lights were just that, lights. Pale oak torches that were kept alive even through rainfall. The tall man who led the charge was hiding in his own hood. Crow nerves were heightened by the man's presence. It made him sweat. It was the same feeling whenever Lucia called for him. The way he could feel the pulse of his heartbeat in his ear. He thought that Lucia was the only one capable of showing him fear, but this tall man was something else. His cloak was brown. It was shabby and patched together with varying colors of cloth, yet one thing that Crow noticed was a set of golden strips that poked out through the visage of poverty. That might have been what alarmed Crow.

The rest of the group were identical. Their armor was as white as marble and lined with pieces of gold. Their hardy helmets hid their faces even more than the tall man's hood. Their bucklers were a rose red. Their bucklers had built-in scabbards where their swords were sheathed. There were exactly a dozen of them. The tall man made thirteen. Crow believed them to be soldiers. The squad member farthest in the back held a log brown object the shape of a log. Crow squinted to make out detail, but his eyes failed him. It wasn't easy to see with the rain and the night. Crow decided to keep his head down.

"I have your gift, Grand Priestess." The tall man spoke. "Know that this payment to you is one of great value to me. You have taken a piece of me with this payment. A piece that cannot be replaced."

"You say that this piece cannot be replaced?" Lucia asked. She chuckled and dragged a long finger across her cheek. "A man fights for the things that cannot be replaced. He does not

simply give in unless the alternative is greater. Do not tell me that this gift is irreplaceable because clearly it means nothing to you. Merely currency now.”

The tall man shivered. Crow’s feeling on the man lapsed in that moment. This stranger was unnerved by Lucia just as much as him.

“Take it! Take it!” The tall man signaled a man in the back to bring her forwards. Crow could now clearly see that it was a body wrapped up with a brown canvas. He saw auburn strands of hair peeking out from the canvas. He swallowed and held back his voice.

“I appreciate your payment. My children shall not bother you or yours. We shall keep to ourselves and keep our practices away from those farmers.” Lucia placed a hand atop her son’s head. Crow started. “I need you to carry her home.” The absurdity of request made Crow dizzy, but then he saw it. He saw a streak of lightning in the sky and the thunder rattled his heart.

“Maybe if you didn’t keep me malnourished, I could carry more than fifteen pounds.” A white handprint was left on his cheek for that.

“I want none of your backtalk. Get your brother and sister to carry it with you.” Lucia allowed the armored outsiders to drop the body on the ground. They had more words for Lucia and thus it took Crow’s strength to drag the wrapped-up body up the hill. Winnie and Thane joined to assist and together they were able to make some progress. Lucia talked with the tall man and his soldiers. Their conversation was lively, at least on the part of the man. Lucia maintained her silent smirk throughout the entire exchange.

Then Thane and Winnie gasped. Crow was picked up by the back of his neck. He saw his feet dangling above the mud as he was pulled upwards. The smell of rain and mud was drowned

out by smoky tobacco. A man had grabbed Crow by the neck. Crow's body was pushed roughly against a tree and he saw his face. A man whose face was worn by trouble and sorrow. His beard trimmed in the wrong places, stubble hanging about like shrubbery. His delirious eyes were what made Crow whack his sweating palms against his solid arm. The man was not fazed by Crow fighting back, but he did apply more pressure on Crow's neck. Crow tried to scream but couldn't. Winnie and Thane did the screaming.

Lucia turned away from the tall man and looked upon this stranger.

"I'll kill him." The stranger said. Crow noticed his wavering voice. The stranger could hardly speak without his voice breaking away.

"Why do you have your hands on my son?" Lucia asked.

"Give me back mine." The man said. The soldiers drew their weapons, but Lucia shook them off with her hand. "You think you got everyone wrapped around your finger, but not me. Not me. Those in the capital will turn a blind eye, but not me." The outsider squeezed tighter on Crow's neck.

"What's your name?" Lucia asked.

"Let him go!" Thane said. He looked ready to tackle the stranger.

"Silence, Thane." Lucia said. Thane swallowed and reverted to himself.

"It doesn't matter! You took my son. Give him back or I'll take yours." The outsider said. Crow started to cry.

"I asked for your name?" Lucia asked.

“Ro-Roger.” The stranger said.

“Roger. You’re a farmer.” Lucia said. “You lived down the mountain in that little red house.”

“You remember?”

“Of course.” Lucia took a step towards Roger. “You came to me. In search of help. You wanted me to relieve you from your son.”

“That’s not true!” Roger said. His grip was softening. “I ask for this.”

“You told me the humiliation and torment from having a lame son. A son that was slower than the rest.” Lucia said. Crow watched as she approached Roger.

“It’s not my fault.” Roger said. “You were the one that took him. I am here to get him back.”

“But it was you who wanted me to take him.” Lucia was nearly within striking distance of Roger. Crow no longer feared Roger, but what was going to happen to him. “You were the one ashamed of him. You were the one who called Peter useless.”

“Don’t say his name.” Roger said. He released his grip on Crow. Crow fell to the floor. He crawled away from Roger, yet Lucia was still approaching him. Roger fell to his knees. His back curved inwards and his palms on the soil.

“You were the one who wrapped him up and dropped him on this very road.”

“I-I loved my son. I did. I did!” Roger said. “I didn’t want him to become a thrall.”

“I see that.” Lucia said. She took a hold of Roger’s chin and pushed up his face to meet hers. He looked right into her eyes. Pools of gray. Her voice was gentle like raindrops. “You are a good father, Roger. And like all good fathers, you must bear the burden. You were the one that abandoned your son.” Lucia dropped Roger’s face. She walked away slowly, as the father grabbed tufts of his hair and screamed. Tears mixing with rainwaters fell down his face as the weight of filicide embodied his skin and bone. He breathed through his teeth in sharp breaths and cried. He tore upon his face with his dirt-lined nails. He had fully internalized Lucia’s words.

Crow watched this all. He expected a horrid spell only capable from a skilled necromancer. His childhood imagination saw an undead tearing the man apart. His mind pictured the entrails and the screams of man being eaten alive. Crow imagined death. He witnessed something worse. Crow turned away from the broken man and saw Lucia approaching him. She kneeled with a smile. She raised her arms and pulled Crow in a warm tender embrace. Crow’s hands were suspended in the air. He didn’t know how to react. She kissed the top of his head and leaned into Crow’s ear.

“I’ll never let anything hurt you.” She whispered. Crow reciprocated her hug. He accepted her warmth and her love. This startling participation in affection. He needed to take advantage of it.

The body donated to Lucia was carried upwards by the soldiers. Lucia intertwined her fingers with Crow. She called Winnie and Thane.

“Let’s go home.” Lucia said. The family of four started their ascent towards the mountain. Crow turned one back once to see Roger whimpering in the mud. Crow would never see Roger again and he would never discover what happened to him.

“You awake?” Baxter looked down at Crow and kicked him lightly with his hunting boots.

“My eyes are open, Baxter.” Crow said.

“Maybe you sleep with yer eyes open. I don’t know yer habits.” Baxter flashed a crystal bottle. “Want to share a drink?” Crow opened his mouth to reply. “Yer girl won’t be there, so don’t come expecting the queen.” Crow took a moment to think of a reply and shrugged.

“I wasn’t sleeping anyway.” Crow sat up. “Elizabeth is not my girl.” Baxter clicked his tongue.

“I would have thought the two of you were joined by the hip.” Baxter said. He led Crow to a small campfire. Three others sat around the campfire, Brynhildr, Madeline, and Kay. Their faces were painted with an orange glow and their eyes were wistful. Crow sat down with his legs crossed. Instead of words, the first sound between them was the pop of Baxter removing the cork from the crystal bottle with his teeth. The man passed around the bottle clockwise. Madeline took a sip, then Kay, Brynhildr refused and took out a silver flask from her breast pocket, then Crow was the last one offered. He eyed the bottle.

“Take a sip, it won’t kill you.” Baxter said. Crow took a sip. The drink tasted caustic, but it provided a sleepy warm that made Crow’s eyelids flutter for a moment. The sensation was common as Madeline yawned and Baxter stretched out his arms with a tired gaze.

“That was one of the last drinks that we brought with us.” Kay said. “But once we settle things, I am certain that there will be those wanting to produce more.”

“And bars too, so we can have ourselves a proper skald.” Baxter said. Madeline turned to Crow. Crow’s eyes wander about. Crow didn’t even understand why he agreed to Baxter’s invitation.

“The poor kid doesn’t know what a skald is.” Madeline said.

“It's when co-workers go to have a drink together.” Baxter said.

“That’s only half of it. You make it sound like a normal night out.” Brynhildr said. She took a swing from her flask and looked at Crow with her cerulean eyes. "A skald is the day when those of the same profession gather around and pass around alcohol. Each one must share a memory from their past that is dreadful. The whole point is that it was created to allow us to move on from it. It could only be done on calm nights like this.”

“It is almost morning.” Baxter said.

“That is why we only have time for one story. Who shall go?” Brynhildr asked. Kay lowered his head.

“I shall.” Kay said. Baxter offered Kay the bottle and the cork. Kay held the bottle by the neck and slapped the cork on it with an open palm. "Listen to my tale. Let us regale this tale with drink and accompaniment.”

“Hold!” This word burst forth as shields and swords clashed. Kay didn’t know who was giving the order, but he hoped that they knew what they were doing. For all he knew it could have come from a soldier on the other side. "Hold!” Snow and ash were falling on this day. The ash came from the nearby houses that were set aflame. He could hear the horns and drums

coming from the king's men. Even on this day they played with thunderous concentration. The melodies of the horns and drums were a tasteless tradition still beating to the tune of old certainties. Kay swiped his lance to abate those in front of him. He didn't have the heart to call his own countrymen enemies. Some of his fellows referred to them as traitors, but Kay knew that when alcohol made lips lost to passion, these same fellows would still call these traitors brothers, sisters, and cousins. The wave was defeated as quickly as it came. Kay saw that the current horde of opponents were defeated. Their bodies were piled on the bridge in heaps of tangled corpses.

"Clean up the mess. Prepare for the next group!" Orders were given. Again, Kay did not know who gave them. When "clean up the mess" was first uttered in the day, all the dead would be piled in rows. The dead were divided into the groups of those that fought for the crown and those that were considered insurrectionaries. At this point in the battle, the bodies were rolled to the sides.

"Captain?" A young soldier with a woolen cap looked at him with weak eyes. Blood formed splotches against his knitted scarf. His voice was hoarse. "What shall we do?"

"Whatever the commander orders." Kay didn't look the young soldiers in the eyes and looked out towards the rest of the city. He could see the red light of torches in the streets, and he saw more scuffles locked in crosswalks. Roofs and walls were being torn apart. Civilians were locked in ice and spears of ice impaled rows of bodies. Kay looked to his own home. It didn't look destroyed, but it was too far to make out clearly. Tristan was a smart boy; Kay didn't need to worry. After all this madness was over, he would see him.

"The commander is dead, Captain Alvis." The young soldiers adjusted his posture just like how he learned in military school.

“Then who gave the orders to pile up the bodies?”

“I don’t know.” The young soldier looked at the bridge. “Do you know if the King-”

“The King will not help us. He is determined to stand his ground even if icy death itself knocked upon these castle gates, yet he will not pick up a weapon himself.” Once this madness was over, Kay would go back to his house. That’s all Kay needed to do. This fight would soon be over. No, that was not true. Kay immediately shut down the idea. This was no longer a fight or a revolution. It was an explosive tempest of violence. People unaffiliated with the conflict either trying to escape or join on the frenzy. Kay felt a tinge of regret for insurrectionaries. They wanted to get rid of an archaic system, but losing their level headed leader ignited a spark of dissatisfaction and rage. This wasn’t going to end soon. An event such as this has been boiling for twenty years, maybe more.

“Someone to help with this body,” a young recruit said. Kay turned back to his house on the horizon. Every second, Tristan was alone out. He was alone.

“Captain? Are you okay?”

“I already gave twenty years. I am not going to give anymore.” Kay said. He dropped his lance and shield on the floor. He grabbed the young soldier by the shoulder. “I am going to get my son. I am not going to give you any more orders. There is an exit near the entrance of the castle that will take you to the chapel in the lower streets. Tell your brothers-in-arms and do with that what you will.” Kay released the boy and walked towards the exit. The young soldier was left with a slack jaw. Kay would never discover what happened to the rest of the defenders. He was certain that some may have survived, but others would not.

The entrance to this hidden path was behind a statue of a saint by the name of Aleta. This passageway would lead directly to the Chapel of Aleta hence the chosen statue even though the royal family was secular. Nix as a majority was secular along with the royal family, yet many religious sects that were created since its inception. Where there were people, there were gods as the old expression went. Folktales would also be sprung to take the place of religion for some. The chapel of Aleta was only allowed to be built so close to the castle on the stipulation that a secret passageway was built. The statue itself was played off as an acceptance of good will from the chapel of Aleta. It was simple to reveal the secret, all one had to do was press against the wall directly behind the statue for the wall to sink inwards.

Kay coughed from the dust that flew into his face when the cavernous opening was revealed. The hidden path to the chapel was a series of tight tunnels where shoulders brushed against the musty walls. It was impossible for most to turn around, so anyone that entered would have to reach the other end or be determined to walk backwards. Dust trailed in the air and the passageway was dimly lit with small slits of daylight that trailed along the roof of the tunnel. The path was an imperfect straight line that slightly bent left or right at times, but there wouldn't be any corners or decisions. Kay's shoulders squeezed against the walls, as he ran down the entrance with his arms down. His face repeatedly darkened and illuminated as he walked the passageway. He ducked under a white spider's cobweb and reached the end of the path. The path broadened, and Kay was met with a slab of wood. Kay pressed his hands against the slab of wood and applied some pressure. The slab wobbled. Then Kay noticed something about this secret passageway. It was quiet. Even with the small slits of light, his breath was the only thing that echoed. He took a moment to enjoy it, but only for a moment.

Kay kicked the slab of wood hard enough to leave a dent. It didn't matter, this path would at best be used for another day. Then it would only be a relic of the past just like those fallen skyscrapers. Kay stepped out of the passage and was struck with the sounds of conflict when his feet touched the chapel's floorboards. He heard screams, glass shattering, and rumbling of boots on stone. Then a man's corpse crashed through a stained-glass window that depicted Saint Aleta complete with a loom and white flower. Kay recoiled and hid behind a pillar until he heard the footfalls fade. Kay's eyes trailed to another portrait of Aleta. One where she held a large mirror and gently stared at her own reflection. "Please let him be safe." Kay prayed. It was the first time that he prayed, and it would be his last. He took off towards the exit of the chapel. He passed dark blue pews that were chipping away and gripped the doors to leave.

Then the sudden crash of an organ passed through the chapel. An explosion in the outside world joined the second the strike of the organ. A man dressed in an exquisite red coat sat on a long chair to conduct the organ. He flourished another note and grabbed his red hat. He stood up and stroked the white plume that was attached to his hat. He stared at the Aleta statue in the center and spoke without turning around.

"Where are you going?" the man in red asked. "To the hell outside?"

"I am heading to the Southwest Quarter," Kay answered. The man slid his hand across the brim of the red hat.

"Linden?"

"Rochester," Kay said. The man in red walked down the aisle, as the sound conflict continued.

“Well good luck to your endeavors.” The man in red sat back at the organ and began to play.

“I can get you out of here.” Kay offered. It appeared there was an inkling of a knight in him after all. “I can help you find your family at the very least.”

“No need.” The man in red played a somber note on the organ. Any song played on an organ felt somber to Kay. “My family would have never lived in this city.” The man in red pulled the red hat over his eyes, “Don’t stay for me.”

With the image of Tristan, Kay left the chapel.

“Have you ever wondered what he wanted?” Crow asked. Kay looked at the empty bottle of liquor and tossed it to Baxter.

“I always thought he was ill of the mind,” Kay shrugged. “His mind shattered from the chaos outside wouldn’t have surprised me.”

“It wasn’t just the capital that was hectic on that day,” Baxter said “You would have thought it the second coming of The Entropy. Millions of people headed East, North, South. The maddest ones headed West.”

“I was just concerned with keeping Elizabeth safe,” Brynhildr spoke. “I had half the mind to dunk her hair in black ink. I opted instead to snip it and hide it behind a hood.”

“There must be more, right Kay?” Madeline asked.

“Aye. A little more. I shall finish soon enough,” Kay looked out to the horizon and knew there only a couple hours to dawn. “I’ll finish quickly.”

“Tristan! Tristan?” Kay said. The streets were littered with ash. Thankfully the fighting was condensed to the center of the city. Most of the houses were already abandoned. Most had cut and run, as Kay would have put himself. Kay pushed back the gates to his house. The stone wall surrounding the property seemed untouched except for a clear layer of soot. The thyme growing in the front yard had withered away, but that wasn’t a recent development. The roof hadn’t collapsed, all four walls were still there, and the windows weren’t even shattered. When Kay went through his front door, he heard her voice.

A house in the outskirts will be good for us. We can be away from all that hustle and bustle near the castle. It’ll be better for Tristan.

Tristan was in the backyard motionless. His stumpy legs stuck on the wispy yard and his eyes glued to the purple leaves and ice tipped branches of the tree. He was wearing a puffy sweater over his awkward and growing frame.

“Tristan!” Kay grabbed Tristan into a hug. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” The ten-year-old turned back to the tree.

“Look at me! Are you hurt?”

“I am not hurt.” Tristan was still looking at the tree. His eyes glided towards a small indentation that was carved into the bark of the tree.

“Tristan,” Kay watched as Tristan looked up to him. He patted his wiry hair. “We need to leave. There are bad things happening in the city.”

“Are there bad people?” Tristan asked.

“Bad? It’s hard to explai-All you need to know is that we need to leave. Now come we need to pack quickly. Who knows what the city will be like in the night?” Kay attempted to run into the house, but Tristan pulled on his sleeve. “What is it?” Tristan pointed at the tree.

“What about Mom?” Tristan said. Kay looked from his son’s face to the knife wound that he made into the tree. He saw her black hair intertwined white flowers.

When I die, bury me under a tree. No tomb. Just under a tree. A normal burial.

“We’ll have to leave her behind.” Kay said. “I am sorry, Tristan.”

“Why?” Tristan asked.

“We just can’t take the whole damn tree with us!” Kay said. Tristan jumped back and started to cry. “Tristan, plea-”

“I don’t want to leave her!”

“Tristan...” Kay fell to his knees and leveled with his son. “We have to go. I know you want to stay, but we can’t.” Kay sighed. “Maybe in a few years, we can come back.”

“Really?” Tristan wiped his tears.

“Yeah. We can come back and show her how much you’ve grown. Now get inside and grab some clothes and something to carry it with.” Tristan nodded to his father and ran inside dutifully. Kay sighed and took a step towards the house before looking over his shoulder to the

tree. He saw this tree every morning through the window in the kitchen every morning and afternoon. Every morning and afternoon, he would stop and just stare at the tree. It may have been to take a snapshot of her resting place. To witness a sense of tranquility that caused all his grief. "We'll come back. I promise you. We'll come back."

Once Kay finished speaking, he stood from the fire and walked away to his sleeping bag. His tale had ended and soon the night would too. Baxter was the second to follow his footsteps. Madeline was the third. She complained about the fact that neither man had tried to extinguish the flame, so she did it instead. The warm orange glow that emanated throughout the entire memory was gone. Only a thin trail of smoke was left. Crow and Brynhildr were the last ones that were left. Crow was left in a state between the delirious and the lethargic. Everything but faces seemed to be hazy. Brynhildr took out a cigarette. She offered Crow one.

"No, thank you." Crow said.

"Are you feeling strange? Off?" Brynhildr asked.

"I don't think I can properly digest that story."

"Staring at nothing won't help you, neither will trying to stay awake. If you won't smoke or drink, then go get some sleep."

"Bryn?" Crow asked.

"Yeah?"

"Did you know your parents well?" Crow asked.

“Yes. I lived a normal childhood, except for the fact that they had me a bit late. I was thirty when they died at the age of sixty.” Brynhildr said. "I loved them like any child loves their parents.”

“Yeah...” Crow said. "Of course.”

Chapter 12: A Request

The Nixians stretched their legs and acquired their orders. The early morning was bright and promising. Crow found himself in the middle of another meeting between the leaders. His eyelids drooped and the dark circles had formed around his eyes. He greeted everyone with a simple 'good morning'. Some of the Nixian were especially chipper. Children frolicked around their new home. They merrily went on adventures around the river and the nearby mountains. They acclimated quickly to the change in scenery and weather. Some of the Nixians conversed vaguely about instruments and lightning campfires once more.

"Good land. This is good land. Here we will experience winters, springs, summers, and falls. We can hunt. Grow crops. Acquire lumber from the forest, water from the river." Baxter stated.

"I dare say that the greatest trial of this pilgrimage has been passed. We were not adventurers. Those who had taste of conflict in the past are now of older age. We are carpenters, builders, plumbers. Farmers. Now is the time to use those humble skills to rebuild our homes." Madeline said.

"I'll choose to ignore that part of your speech about older age, but nonetheless, I will not sit down and relax until everything is situated." Kay continued. "We still have plenty of work ahead of us. This shall be our new beginning. Now, Let get to-"

"What the hell is that!?" The leaders heard the commotion from a crowd behind them.

“It has wings!” A person said and pointed at the sky. Elizabeth turned to find a stone creature land right in front of the camp. Its harsh landing kicked up a small dust cloud and ruined a patch of grass. The stone beast was twice the size of the average man. One of its hands was clenched tightly. Baxter drew his bow; Elizabeth raised her sword. Crow was shocked into being awake from the excitement. He held Elizabeth and Baxter back.

“A gargoyle.” Crow said. Crow assumed that gargoyles were not present in Nix. The gargoyles turned his deep red eyes to Crow. The gargoyle adjusted its jaw. His stone chest was wider than two men standing next to each other.

“At least one man hasn’t raised his hand against me upon first contact.” The gargoyle voice was a slow and deep voice. “Name is Samuel. I am from a tribe of gargoyles within the forest. The Dame Tribe to be exact. We have noticed you all since you have arrived from the top of the Nixian Mountains.” Kay stepped beside Crow and bowed.

“It seems eyes have been on us ever since we came down. My name is Kay. We are from the Kingdom of Nix. We have made a long arduous journey to these lands in hopes of finding a new home.” Kay cleared his throat. “If these lands are yours, please excuse our intrusion.” Samuel shook his head. He pointed a thumb with a sharp, broad nail towards the woods.

“Our tribe lives within a small clearing in the forest. This is not our land. We only wished to extend an invitation to our new neighbors.”

“An invitation?” Kay asked. Samuel nodded.

“Yes. The elders of my tribe hope to become friends. We have never had humans in such proximity. We tried to contact those in the castle, but they were less than amicable.”

“Yeah. They weren’t the kindest.” Elizabeth said. “But you won’t have to worry about them anymore.”

Samuel opened his clenched fist and dropped a small, golden bell at Crow’s feet. “Enter the woods and ring the bell. We hope to see you.” Dust kicked up into air when Samuel flapped his great stone wings. The Nixians watched in awe, as the gargoyle rose to the air and took off towards the forest. Samuel came and went. Crow picked up the bell and shook it. The bell responded with a cheerful yelp. The Nixian started to murmur.

“A trap is what this is.” Baxter said. The pilgrims turned to him with wide eyes. Their murmurs became even louder. He forced his voice down and continued. “Apologies for that, but who are we to trust those stone monsters?”

“They can speak. They have a tribe. It is our responsibility to treat them with respect and humility. We can’t just call them monsters. They are our neighbors.” Elizabeth said. “It is too early to make enemies.”

“You want to treat those monsters like any old colony. Are you mad?”

“We will only lose from not helping them.”

“We could lose the people that we promised safety. We don’t know what those beasts eat. They could grind our bones and swallow our flesh!” Baxter said. Elizabeth balled her anger into a single fist.

“Gargoyles don’t require sustenance. They have no need to “grind our bones and swallow our flesh.” It is strange. They don’t need to breathe and don’t need to eat. Their physiology is

quite strange.” Crow repeated the word strange a few more times. It was apparent that he still wasn’t fully awake.

“Then how should we approach this, Crow?” Baxter asked.

“You want me to form a strategy to speak with them?” Crow asked.

“Yes. You seem to have some knowledge about them. I’ll admit that I know jack about them.”

“He was the first to identify Samuel, as one. While the rest of us were slack jawed.” Madeline said. “What should we do?” Crow rubbed his chin.

“I’ll go visit them. I have some knowledge on the practice of gargoyles. Some layer of caution must be had. They specified that they are from the Dame tribe. Not many gargoylian tribes are jotted down in scholarly text due to their scarcity. I’ll go alone.”

“You will not go alone.” Elizabeth said.

“A minute ago, you were stating how it would be useful to cooperate with them. Did I hear poorly?” Madeline asked. “You make it seem like poor Crow was going to get eviscerated by them.”

“Two is enough for it to truly be safe. It is a mere precaution. Nothing more.” Elizabeth assured.

“Very well, we’ll go together.” Crow said.

“Before this meeting ends, what should we do in the case that the gargoyles are nefarious?” Kay asked. Baxter opened his mouth, but Crow quickly cut him off.

“The gargoyles have a belief. This belief states that their creator, The Great Bell, created them for the purpose of war. They may reject this notion now, but if the Dame tribe maintained this way of thinking.... the best option would be to run.”

Chapter 13: Black Hood

Crow adjusted his gloves and faced the woods.

“Do you need new gloves?” Elizabeth asked. “You always seem to adjust them.”

“It is just a habit.” Crow said. The two of them could no longer hear the encampment. They were too far into the woods for that. Crow felt the wind pass through his hair. He turned to Elizabeth and wondered if she still felt that it was warm. In her palm was the brass bell. Elizabeth held it from the brown handle.

“This instrument certainly fits the winter season. We’ll need some bells for Jack Frost’s Week.” Elizabeth said. She raised the bell and shook it lightly. It made a sweet ring.

“Jack Frost’s Week? Is that some sort of Nixian holiday?”

“Yes. We need to teach you about our culture now that you are one of us. Maybe the archives within the castle have information about it.” Elizabeth said. Crow felt oddly nervous that she stated that he was one of them now. “I have never played a bell like this. Have you?”

“Not really.” Crow said.

“Hmmm. This won’t be a piano, but how hard can ringing a bell truly be?”

“We’ll see what happens.”

“Indeed. Come, let’s be off.” Elizabeth said. She and Crow trekked further into the woods. The wood’s vigor reflected the season. Orange and yellow leaves had already been buried into the dirt, yet there were some green survivors that clung to the branches. These

determined few would not live past the first snowfall. Overhead birds migrated south towards warmer lands. Crow continued to walk until he spotted something slithering in a nearby bush. A two-headed snake slithered away from the bush. Crow jumped backwards and bumped into Elizabeth. The snake paid him no mind and slithered away.

“Scared of snakes, are we?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes.” Crow wiped off the dirt from his cloak.

“We are all scared of something. I fear spiders myself. Too many legs.” Elizabeth said. “Look.” Elizabeth pointed. Crow turned to it. It was a sleeping owl. He wondered the importance of the creature until his mind snapped in realization.

“Ah, yes. Nix’s animal was the owl wasn’t it?” Crow asked. Elizabeth nodded.

“Very good. Soon enough people will think you were always a Nixian. It would make a good pet, but he looks so peaceful. I wouldn’t want to take him from his home.” Elizabeth said. They pushed themselves three more miles into the woods. “They didn’t specify how close we had to be, but maybe this is enough.” Elizabeth rang the bell. The bell gave a low jingle.

“I would jingle it a bit louder.” Crow said. “Make sure they hear us.”

Elizabeth nodded and rang the bell for a minute. They were simply making noise, but once they heard the flapping of wings, Elizabeth stopped playing it. Samuel landed in front of them.

“Greetings!” Samuel hailed. He stretched out his bulky arms. “We were considering the possibility that you would all be apprehensive.”

“Some back at camp are, but here we are.” Elizabeth said. “We aim to form a good relationship with our neighbors.” Samuel showed his fangs in a smile.

“Excellent. Follow me. I shall show the village.” Samuel pounded his fist into his chest. “Worry not, the trip will not be far.” Samuel, Elizabeth, and Crow traversed the woods. They passed dozens of oak trees before finally reaching a large green clearing filled with several tents. The tents were erected using rusty pipes. The material for the tents were made of a thick canvas. Bells were painted on to the tents. There were bells of green, white, and blue. Gargoyles went about their business, they tilled with steel tipped hoes, carried lumber and boulders on their shoulders. They considered Crow and Elizabeth for a moment before going about their responsibility. Samuel led them to the center of the village. Elizabeth looked at the crops that the gargoyles grew. Rows of maize, wheat, and pumpkin.

“Do gargoyles truly not eat?” Elizabeth asked.

“We don’t.” Samuel answered. “We maintain crops for the purpose of trade. Merchants sometimes pass through the forest on the way to Arcadia.”

“I understand.” Elizabeth said. The three of them stood before a slightly larger tent with golden bells painted on it.

“This is where the elder resides. You can tell by the golden bells painted on the tent. He rarely leaves the tent.” Samuel explained. He clapped his hands together. “Wait a moment.” Samuel peered through the entrance. A quiet voice was heard from within. Samuel nodded. “One may enter at a time.”

“One at a time? Can we not enter together?” Crow asked. Samuel shook his head.

“The elder only talks with one person at a time. He does not want conversation to be muddled by several guests all at once. We mean no disrespect, of course. Even members of the tribe abide these rules”

“I understand.” Elizabeth said. She turned to Crow. "Do you want to speak with him?"

“No, you go first. You are a better representative for the people of Nix.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Crow insisted with a nod.

“I will return.” Elizabeth disappeared into the tent. Crow waited outside and watched the community of gargoyle go about their daily lives. Elizabeth entered through the small slit in the tent. The tent was dark within. A single red flame lit in a small circle of gray stone. The canvas tent did well to block any other of light, but intimately trapped in the light from the fire. The elder gargoyle sat cross-legged behind the small flame. Shadows were drawn upon stone skin. The elder gargoyle signaled Elizabeth to sit. Elizabeth mimicked the elder’s way of sitting. She bowed her head and put on the same regal voice that was taught to her by her tutors.

“My name is Elizabeth Edda Kingfisher. I speak for the pilgrims of Nix.” Elizabeth said. She watched as the elder moved his stone body in preparation of speech. The snapping sound of rock rotating was hearable in the quiet tent.

“Welcome to our humble encampment, Elizabeth Edda Kingfisher. My name was once Treize. Most refer to me as the elder.” The elder said.

“It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“It is best that this conversation is held properly. The Dame tribe has met with many humans ever since the Chimes of War have awakened us. I wish to learn the intentions of the kind that is settling so close to us, yet I see in your eyes that you have not met creatures like us before. If I speak true allow me to explain my brethren, so no ignorance lies between us.”

“This is true. I have never seen gargoyles before. To my knowledge, there never has been gargoyles tribes in Nix.” Elizabeth said.

“We gargoyles are one of the many creatures that were birthed from the Great Bell. You humans call it The Entropy. Our features differ from humanity, but this goes beyond our stone skin and lack of reproduction. The Great Bell did not grant us magic. It granted us a different gift.” The elder pointed at his wise, red eyes. “Gargoyles are able to look directly into a living creature’s aether.”

“I am sorry, but I am not certain that I understand.” Elizabeth said. “What do you mean by look directly?” The shadows on the elder’s face shifted. He stared into Elizabeth’s eyes.

“Your aether is dim in terms of elements. A passing snowflake. Broken ice yet bearing ample strength. You are a daughter of winter.” The elder said.

“Incredible.” Elizabeth said. “You can surmount so much about a person from just their aether.”

“Nothing in this world acts independent. Interconnected like grass and rain, stone and salted sea. Now that you are aware of our facilities, we may continue to the main topic. Why have you come to the Grasslands of Rhei?”

“We are pilgrims. Migrants from the fallen kingdom of Nix. We sought new lands because it would be impossible to thrive in our old home. If we are to get technical, I am the Queen of Nix.” Elizabeth explained.

“Is your companion one of these migrants?” The elder asked.

“Crow was a traveler who met with us. We employed him to stay and assist us with the journey. He has been a great ally to us.”

“These lands are bountiful. I have no doubt that your people will be able to flourish, but let’s talk about the relations between yours and mine.”

“Yes, of course.” Elizabeth said.

Outside of the tent, Crow and Samuel conversed. Crow put his hand to his chin.

“I was of the understanding that all gargoyles believed themselves to be the same age. How could there be an elder?”

“The elder is burdened with memory.” Samuel responded.

“Memory?”

“Most Gargoyles forgot who they were. Our long lives come with limited memory. We essentially become new creatures every century. Bits and pieces sometimes come to us suddenly or through deep meditation, but I was not Samuel a hundred years ago.” Samuel looked towards the tent. “The elder is different. He remembers everything. He has only had but one name for his entire existence. He remembers the gargoyles that we once were and those that are just stone in the ground.”

“Sorry.” Crow said. “I didn’t mean to ask such a painful question.”

“We have come to terms with this fact.” Samuel said. “Ask more questions. it is not always where men are interested in our ways.”

“Are you sure?” Crow asked.

“Certainly.”

“Well, what do the bells signify? It is some sort of class system?” Crow inquired.

“Not particularly. Green is for tradable materials. Crops fall under this category among other goods. White is akin to human housing. We rest there. Yes, gargoyles sleep. Blue is for.... Well, we have forgotten what the blue tents were for and the elder refuses to explain to us its meaning. They have been empty for as long as we remember. We must have erected them as soon as we arrived from the Spires.”

“You passed through the Spires? Aren’t they filled with brigands and bandits?” Crow asked.

“Not three hundred years ago. The Field of Spires once belonged to a large group of gargoyles back when all gargoyles lived together. It was a city of them.”

“First-hand knowledge on how the word has changed.” Crow said. “If gargoyles existed prior to the Entropy we might not have been in this mess.”

“The world has not changed much, but then again our memories fade. Civilizations had either grown larger or fell. Life has not seemed to improve for humans. Never obtaining the same heights as before The Entropy. Any more questions?”

“Thank you for this opportunity, I always wondered the specifics of Ravana’s onslaught against the Silver Sands.” Crow discharged multiple questions about historical events of Vetus. Samuel could hardly answer any of them. The Dame tribe was never a tribe that interacted with the large countries or partook in politics. Crow didn’t find any answers that he was looking for but understood the Dame tribe position. Elizabeth poked her head out the tent.

“Tis done.” Elizabeth said. “Kay and the others will be glad to hear about our future relationship with the gargoyles.”

“Seems you have everything settled. Let’s return.” Crow said.

“The elder wishes to speak to you before we go.” Elizabeth said.

“Really? Did he mention why?”

“No, just that he wanted to speak with you.” Elizabeth held the tent open for Crow to enter. Crow rubbed the back of his head then shrugged.

“Well, I shouldn’t leave him waiting.” Crow stepped inside the tent.

“Sit. If it pleases you.” The elder gargoyle's voice was low. Crow felt comfort in it. He assumed that the elder only spoke when necessary. Opportunity where he could impart wisdom. Crow sat down cross-legged. His face was colored red by the flame. The elder looked beyond the flames and on to Crow. “Welcome, Black Hood. Has society accepted necromancers into their ranks?”

Crow parted his lips to speak, but he didn’t say anything. He lowered his head. Shadows casted over his eyes. “It must be a great disrespect to you and your people to have come here. I am-” The elder waved a stone palm.

“Breath child. Breath.” The elder said. Crow took a shallow breath. “As an elder, my people seek wisdom from me. You are not proud of who you are. Bad stone for anyone. I assume that the girl does not know, nor do any of her comrades.” Crow nodded his head. “The teeth of this lie will dig into your heart and leave nothing but an empty husk. You are aware of this, yes?”

“Yes.” Crow said.

“The Great Bell granted us the boon of being able to perceive the ether of all children. I can also see the scars of the aura.” Crow stayed quiet. His body tensed. “You only carry one hand in your ether.”

“.... Yes.”

“Listen. Do not speak but listen. You must say the truth of who you are or leave them behind. Ruin will come from speaking false words or the omission of truths. Your psyche will devour itself until you’re left wandering into a chasm.” The elder said. Crow stood up.

“I will take your words to heart. Thank you, elder. I am grateful for your wisdom.” Crow bowed. The voice of the elder called to him one last time before he left the tent.

“I hope you make the right choice. Make certain that you consider all avenues. Do not destroy yourself. It is not a folly to see the worth of oneself.” The elder closed his eyes and sat motionless in the room. The sun felt so much brighter than previously. Crow covered his eyes with his arm. It was like the sun was only pointed at him. Elizabeth tilted her head.

“Are you okay, you seem unusually pale?” She asked. Crow clutched his head.

“I didn’t get much sleep. Don’t worry about it.” Crow cleared his throat. “Let’s head back to the others and tell them what transpired.”

“Very well.” Elizabeth turned to Samuel. “We will send others when we have finished consulting among ourselves.”

“Of course.” Samuel responded. Elizabeth and Crow walked back towards the forest. Crow still nursed his head.

“When we get back you should head to a physician. I don’t want you falling apart on me.” Elizabeth.

“Yes. A physician would help and some rest, as well.” Crow said.

Chapter 14: A Gathering

The pilgrims of Jotun had started to leave their mark upon the Grasslands of Rhei. They toiled for the last few weeks of autumn and continued into winter. By December, they had started to form a hamlet. Not quite a city, but the seeds had been sown. Gargoyles assisted the Nixian in creating the bedrock for home. A home that still needed a name.

Crow watched the Gargoyles and the people of Jotun carry materials and form simple houses from lumber and stone. Brick was still not a material that they could easily access in their position. Glass was acquired mostly through the help of the gargoyles. The Dame tribe had a hand in leading a caravan of merchants to the hamlet.

Crow watched one of the men on an unsteady wooden ladder. He saw the ladder bend under his weight and foresaw what would happen. The man was so occupied hammering the nails into the framework that he did not notice that the ladder was on its last legs. There was a snap and the ladder split into separate pieces. Crow formed a simple wind spell to break the man's fall. He landed gently on the grass. The man laughed and thanked Crow.

"I can help with the building process. I only need a hammer." Crow said. The workers just chuckled.

"A mage like you won't get much work done. Besides you have done enough for us during the trip. You deserve rest." One builder said.

"It was a long journey for all of us."

“We have all talents, Sir Crow. Let’s play to them. Unless you have a spell that can make a house?”

“That I do not.” Crow returned to a Nixian text that he bought from one of the passing merchants. It was fortunate that one of the traveling merchants in the caravan was a proprietor of books. The workers decided to take a break and they sat along the ground. They wiped the sweat from their forehead. Their lunches consisted of sharp cheddar sandwiches with a thin layer of jam. One of the workers was a young housewife. Her main role among the workers was to fetch materials. She would pass glances at Crow and giggle from time to time. Crow noticed at last and raised his head away from his book.

“What’s the story? I know you have one to tell.” She asked.

“The story? Do you mean what I am reading? This is a historical tale. It is not fiction.” Crow said.

“I meant the story between you and Elizabeth.”

“I am not sure I follow.” Crow answered. A carpenter spoke up.

“When someone from Nix asks, ‘what’s *the* story’ they mean your romantic life, Mister Crow.” The carpenter spoke with a smile.

“Enough teasing our resident mage! Let’s get back to work, the lot of you.” The workers rose to their feet and continued their project. Crow closed his book. He stood up and watched the frameworks for new houses. Crow focused for a moment. He felt the old inhabitants of the land underneath his feet. It was nearly time to leave.

Elizabeth worked on a smaller house close to the river. She and Brynhildr prepped the site. They worked for an hour until sweat started to drip down their faces. Once the foundation was laid down accordingly, Elizabeth was the first to sit on the grassland. She took out a small canteen and gulped the remaining water down. The water ran out and Elizabeth groaned. She threw herself to the ground and sighed. Brynhildr plucked the canteen from her hands and refilled it in the river. She held the canteen above her face. Elizabeth reached for it. Brynhildr uncapped it and poured it over Elizabeth's head.

"Feeling better?" Brynhildr asked. Elizabeth frowned.

"How are you not sweating? The heat in this place is unbearable." Elizabeth said.

"You are too used to the snowy fields. When are you going to learn to take care of yourself?" Brynhildr said.

"I can take good enough care of myself." Elizabeth said. She shot up from the ground and crossed her arms.

"Are you certain? How long has it been since you properly brushed your hair or are you still trying to beat that habit that no one will come do it for you? I would think something like that would break after so long."

"....." Elizabeth looked away. Brynhildr sighed. She looked up at the sky. Her brow was furrowed in pensive thoughts.

"How long have I cared for you, my dear?" Elizabeth was taken aback from the shift to mild ribbing to reflective discourse.

“You became part of the royal guard long before I was born. Father mentioned that you became the captain, a year prior to my birth. It was the same year that you disappeared. Everyone was mystified from your sudden absence, but father told everyone that there was a special reason.” Elizabeth said. Brynhildr nodded.

“One day will come when I have to tell you about that year. I was revealed to truths beyond my comprehension that year.” Brynhildr said. She turned away from the sky and back to Elizabeth. She smiled and petted Elizabeth’s head. “I was there for your birth. I took an oath to protect you. An oath to protect is to be expected from a royal guardian. There was nothing special about such a declaration. I already received an Oathkeeper for the same declaration that I made to your mother and father, but for you, there was something different. I took an oath to become your guide and your companion. My greatest wish was for you to one day look upon me as a not an obligated knight, but a friend. Elizabeth, old age is rearing its ugly head for me. Not quite yet, mind you, but I can see it from the corner of my eye.... There is only one thing I wish to know. My queen, did I serve you well.” Brynhildr did not look away from Elizabeth while she waited for the response. Elizabeth grasped Brynhildr’s hands.

“Of course. You never faltered. You were always at my side, when I was princess and when I lost all of it. You guided me well not just these seven years, but my entire life. There is no better knight in the land of Nix.”

Brynhildr accepted Elizabeth’s words and turned away.

“Let’s get back to work. Don’t want to waste the entire day reflecting on the past.” Brynhildr said. She wiped her face with her arm. The two resumed their work. The day ended

with much progress being done to create the new settlement without a name, but it was clear that everyone had exhausted all their energy.

Crow shuffled back to the castle but stopped when no one was following the same path. The pilgrims lit multiple campfires and crowded around them. Some of the Nixian took out stringed instruments and set themselves around the campfire. Among the instruments was a fiddle, wooden guitar, and flute. The instruments were offered to a variety of people. Some of the braver or drunken souls took the challenge and started to play a fast and bright melody. The more skilled musicians set the pace. The less capable either surrendered their place or kept a simple backdrop to the main song. This meant that music meant to accompany the campfire fluctuated between skilled and terrible. Elizabeth approached Crow and motioned at the players.

“Sit with us. There will be time for sleep later in the night,” Elizabeth said.

“I was of the notion that we were all going to rest. Guess there is still energy left in everyone,” Crow said.

“Their excitement must come from giving the settlement a name. A gathering may even occur.”

“What was the chosen name?”

“New Nivalis. A name that seeks to bridge the gap between a new identity and our heritage.” Elizabeth scowled. “An identity that may not require the use of a monarchy, but nevertheless it is heartening to see the people take action.”

“I see. A future home built by the humble remnants of a fallen kingdom, yet they hold true to their heritage.” Crow admired. Elizabeth frowned at the campfires outside. The people

dancing along to the fiddle in the night sky. Their bodies lit orange by the dazzling flame almost like a pyre. The two of them were left farthest from the campfire. Crow noticed Elizabeth staring at her boots and kicking the dirt.

“The night is young and so are we, last time I checked.” Crow said. Crow walked in front of Elizabeth. Crow offered his hand. “Shall I have this dance?”

“You can dance?” Elizabeth asked.

“I know a few basics steps in a waltz, but this isn’t a ball. People are enjoying themselves. I think hardly anyone will judge.”

“Very well. I shall accept this dance, Sir-I mean Crow. Sorry my etiquette training came back again.”

Crow took Elizabeth’s hand and the two joined the rest of the people of New Nivalis. Elizabeth was far too stiff while she danced. She worried more about her keeping an upright posture. Crow led her around to the best of his ability but would almost trip several times on the uneven hills of the land. Nevertheless, they cheered and danced alongside with the rest of Nixian. The players were loud and fast.

Then the players halted. Crow watched the rest of the dance stop. He assumed that most people were going to sleep, but then he saw people interlocking their hands together. Baxter intertwined his fingers with a round dark-skinned woman. The two of them practically giggled at each other. Then Baxter took a hold of Crow’s right hand with a smile.

“Follow my lead, boy.” He spoke. The entire field of people unified by their fingertips. Elizabeth interlocked fingers with Crow’s left hand. She winked at him and squeezed his hand.

The musicians that remained were only the most experienced. They watched the crowd waiting for something. Crow saw Tristan across from him. The man nodded at him. The musician started a methodical tempo. A few notes were played, and the people joined in with voices. Their hands linked together and their bodies swaying back and forth. Their faces glowing from the orange flame in the center of their circle. The song that the people sang had no lyrics. It was more like a solemn hum that served as accompaniment for the instruments. The melancholic sound passed through the grasslands and the night sky like a bitter wind. The song was meant not just for the people, but for the land around them. A testament to their fears and anxiety. It was the last chant for a broken kingdom. Perhaps the song was different for each person, Crow was there humming along. He created his own meaning for the song. It was a song about parting.

Chapter 15: Royal Guard

The gathering had revitalized the new settlement. In a week, they slipped into their old roles along with the duty of helping with the building of homes. A semblance of normal life was clearly on the horizon. Elizabeth watched as the pilgrims of Nix, or rather the citizens of New Nivalis, and the gargoyles ran about with their supplies. Kay was busy having a conversation with Samuel, Baxter was setting up the foundation for a hunter's guild, and Madeline was assisting in the education and schooling of the young. Crow was nowhere to be seen. Off to the side was Brynhildr with Kara. Elizabeth noticed that Brynhildr was wearing the standard blue tunic of the royal guard. Elizabeth had once worn one provided by Brynhildr, the same one that she had reached her knees when she was a twelve-year-old girl. A rarity ever since they had arrived at Jotun. Brynhildr patted her satchel. She turned to Kara and stroked the horse. Elizabeth decided to approach her.

"It will be a journey. I know that I forced a lot of work upon you, but the world needs us to fulfill our duty. Even with our older age." Brynhildr said. Kara neighed. "Ah. Elizabeth, how's your day?"

"It has been a fine day. The Dame tribe are quite interesting. They are good allies to have. I see that you are wearing the tunic. Are you going hunting or....?" Elizabeth trailed off. Brynhildr rubbed the strap of the satchel cautiously.

"Elizabeth. I am leaving for a little while." Brynhildr said.

“I see. Our talk the week before left me wondering what was on your mind. I understand that, beyond a simple oath, there is no need for you to keep watch over me.” Elizabeth said.

“That will never be the case. This must do partly with my year of absence. It is something that I must do alone. This is my duty.”

“Are you sure, you don’t need help? People don’t really need me anymore. I can go with you.”

“That’s nonsense. The people of New Nivalis will need you when the time comes. I know it. Besides.” Brynhildr smirked. “You’ll miss Crow. He may not be your first love, but I can tell you’ll miss him deeply if you go on this journey with me.”

“You can still read my thoughts and beliefs with ease.” Elizabeth said. “What will I do without you?”

Brynhildr embraced Elizabeth and whispered.

“You’re a woman now. You don’t need anyone to coddle you anymore.”

Elizabeth walked down the great halls of the Nixian castle. Suits of armor were placed at every corner. Banners of brilliant silver, blue, and white expanded over the walls. They were as far reaching as the kingdom itself. Maids and the occasional guard would glance at the young princess, but not intercept her. They all saw the smooth brown comb in her hand. It was an expensive thing made of the smooth ash wood from the northern region of Glacies. The craftsmanship was exquisite. Upon the comb was a depiction of the land of falling snow. A single name was engraved on the comb in a black meticulous script. *Elizabeth Edda Kingfisher*.

It was no crown, no tiara, but nevertheless it was evidence of who she was. A gift that foreshadowed her ascension to the throne.

Elizabeth found the door that she was looking for and gave it three gentle raps, just like how she was taught by her tutors. There was no response. Elizabeth tried again. Three gentle taps. Still no response. Going against the rules of politeness, Elizabeth opened the door and entered the opulent chambers. A circular ornate rug sat in the center. An oval shaped mirror with a desk and an identical comb sat to her left. A large bed with large pillows and blankets was empty to her right. It was the room of the Queen of Nix, for the King and Queen slept in different beds. This was not because of tradition, but a new arrangement of the current monarchy. Straight ahead of the young princess was the entrance to the balcony. Elizabeth stepped timidly to the balcony. There she found the Queen of Nix, Josephine Sarah Kingfisher. Her raven hair flowed down to her back. Having the features of a southern noble of Nix, her eyebrows were thick, and her eyes were a misty blue. She balanced a cup of tea on her tea, saucer and all.

One could see the entire capital of the Nixian kingdom, Nivalis from the balcony. The great stone roads and the populated buildings. The great hills and mountaintops. The partially frozen rivers and domesticated wolves that roamed the fields of snow with their masters. The factor of nighttime only multiplied the spectacle. Dozens of light bulbs were lit up like fireflies and one could see them all from the balcony. Families eating food together at the dinner table. A common trope in ballads and songs. Nix was a nation sowed upon snow and ice, yet its capital was of light and warmth. Elizabeth looked away from the immense view before her and turned to her mother.

Elizabeth inhaled deeply. It was best for her to present her etiquette lessons. “Mother. I was wondering if you wanted to.... Um.... Well. If you are not busy. I wanted you to comb my hair.” Elizabeth said. Elizabeth could tell that her attempt was faulty. The single utterance of “um” would not go down well. Larina, her etiquette teacher, had always spent hours trying to work on both her stutter and use filler words. Here and now, those pervasive hours of teaching evaded her. Josephine eyed her child. It was not a hateful look. It was clear that the queen did not hate her child, but nevertheless she refused to acknowledge her. Elizabeth held out the comb. Josephine shook her head and turned back to the view of the horizon.

“Please?” The Queen of Nix glanced at her child once more. Elizabeth felt her body shatter when her mother waved her away without another word. Elizabeth lowered her head and stared at her shoes. She maintained her straight posture and walked out of the room. Elizabeth felt her throat clamp shut. A pool formed behind her eyes. She shook her head and did not cry. She started to think about horses and the bedtime stories that her father retold and the promise that she would ride upon Taliesin’s back. A future queen should not cry. Everyone reminded her of this fact. Queens did not cry. It was what her tutors had told her. Then Elizabeth crashed into a wall of armor and fell back.

“Princess Elizabeth! Are you hurt?” Elizabeth looked up and saw the greatest knight in all the realm. Brynhildr pulled the girl up slowly. “Why were you staring at the floor while you were walking?” Brynhildr asked with a gentle smile. “I have told you plenty of times that you can get h-” Elizabeth wrapped her thin arms around the knight. The princess started to weep. Brynhildr held the girl in her arms. Brynhildr looked behind and in front of her to ensure that no one else was there to witness this.

“Why doesn't she love me?” Elizabeth cried into her shoulder. Brynhildr held the girl tighter.

“There, there. The queen is just busy. You must understand, she carries the weight of the kingdom.”

“No, she isn't!” Elizabeth stamped her feet on the floor. “She doesn't love me. She didn't want me.” Brynhildr saw Elizabeth's comb on the floor. Brynhildr held the comb in her hand and looked upon the crying princess before her. Brynhildr knew that a future queen could not flourish under these conditions. A child needed compassion.

“Did you want her to comb your hair?” Brynhildr held the comb. Elizabeth nodded and sniffed. “Come.” Brynhildr held Elizabeth's hand. “I'll comb your hair. I bet on my title that the queen will comb your hair next time. She must have just had a long day. No one can avoid a bad mood here and there.”

“Go on this quest, but as your Queen, I command you to return.” Elizabeth showed a smile. Brynhildr bowed and formed a fist over her heart.

“I am sworn to you. It would be a dishonor to let you down. I'll come back and reveal everything. No more secrets.” Brynhildr hoisted herself on Kara. The stead horse neighed and the two of them took off. Elizabeth's last knight was gone. Disappeared into the green plains and she was left without her sworn guardian.

Chapter 16: God Save the Queen

Elizabeth was in a field of permafrost. The dreadful silence told her everything she did not want to hear. Her legs dangled from a promontory. A salted sea shattered against the rocky shore. The rush of water was inconsistent. It rose and fell and even stopped at her ankles. Elizabeth hovered over for a moment before stepping upon the water. It then froze over with each step. Her boots were soaked, yet she felt an uncomfortable warmth. She shivered. The ice guided her and guided her. Her footsteps ignited the world's sound. She was forming a path.

“Sleep in your safe bedroom. Your comb at your side, a bloodied blade frozen with strife.” The waves spoke.

“It was not my fault.” Elizabeth felt her lips move. She could hear her voice. She could tell she was speaking, but she knew she wasn't trying to.

“Tell us why we are meant to serve, to cry, to suffer, then to die for you.” The waves spoke.

Elizabeth cried when she entered the castle. The windows and walls of glass, the staircases and spires that spun towards the clouds. The edges pierced the blue above. The waves snapped at the bridge of ice, like a dog trying to nip her heels. The white and blue knights bore their swords with the common stance. Swords pointed towards the ground, metal balanced by their sharp tips, their helms bowed in contemplation. Their blue capes flapped in the wind. Their faces empty, just another soldier, just another knight. Elizabeth rose the stairs and entered the

mouth of the castle without thought. The gate shaped like dragon teeth. The brick, as pure as nothing.

“Banners of blue and white answer to no one. It does not bestow understanding to the arms that bear it.” The waves spoke.

“I did not weave this banner.” Elizabeth replied.

“Blood spilled for chivalry. What does that mean?” The waves spoke.

“It means justice.”

“Gorge yourself on Justice until you grow fat in dominance. A monarch cannot err.”

“That was not my intention. It was not my father’s intention.”

“Why shall then the fallible, a bud in the heart of every creature, be allowed free reign over eternity.” The waves spoke.

“Tradition. It has been this way for centuries. How can a child comprehend the suffering of her countrymen?” Elizabeth asked. The waves were silent. Elizabeth navigated the halls like it was real. A lump formed in her throat when she glanced upon the marble door. Her body was made small from it. Again, dragon teeth. The doors opened, as if she was expected. The light shot through the room like cannon fire. The two thrones of ice created all the symmetry that the room ever needed. The pillars across the gigantic room casted but mere shadows. Her steps echoed through the room. The throne was smaller than the doors that embraced her.

“Tenacity. Courage. Compassion.” The doors bellowed.

If the doors made Elizabeth feel small. The throne made her feel miniscule. Elizabeth felt something dig into her skull.

“A Crown of Ice, sharp like serrated glass.” Her father said.

Her blood was worth no more than dirt. She stood before her throne.

“The people can only swallow opium for so long.” The people spoke.

Elizabeth sat on the throne. The air was stiff. Her lips were as blue as ash. Ice slithered from her head to feet. Locked in ice, she became a statue and a distant memory.

Elizabeth woke in a room for the first time in a couple months. The dream consciously forgotten in an instant, subconsciously embedded like a piece of shrapnel. She had no time to wake up in a cold sweat because she died from being frozen. Her back popped when she stood up. She cracked her neck. She wanted to stay in bed but did not give in to her urges. She bathed herself in a makeshift tin bathtub with water from the river. Hygiene was an emphasized aspect of life since the rebuilding began after The Entropy. It was necessary to combat sickness. Even dental hygiene was emphasized with some blunders. At first, a paste was created from a mixture of pepper, poppy seeds, and salt. This paste was quickly abandoned due to it causing bleeding gums. Eventually a new concoction using flaxseed oil and peppermint as the primary base was used to create a product for one's teeth.

Elizabeth dressed herself with the overused, but clean attire through several yawns. She combed her hair with the ash comb from her childhood. Fortunately for New Nivalis, the gargoyles advertised their compatibility for trade. In two weeks, merchants were able to pass

through with goods. Basic goods, but goods, nonetheless. That is how she acquired a short mirror. Her cottage-like housing arrangements left her with little space. A fireplace, a bed, mirror, and that small rack where she hung the scabbard for her sword. After ensuring that she was presentable in front of the mirror she went to grab it. She pulled it from the rack and the leather snapped, and the entire thing fell to the floor. Elizabeth held the scabbard in her hands. The rusty locket was snapped. Her only option now was to carry the sheathed sword in her hands. She placed a fist over her lips and breathed deeply. The anger subsided. There was still some time before the meeting. She took her sheathed sword and left the small cottage.

At most the roads of New Nivalis were patches of gravel that were slapped together in a few days. Street names were considered, but actual roads would need to be at least started before that became a clear possibility. Elizabeth's booth smacked against the gravel beneath her feet. She nodded and smiled at any passerby that would greet her. One child stumbled into her only to respond with a meek sorry. The child would then continue to run down the road carelessly. Even now, the children were still enjoying running around in the new climate. Small family houses were given priority over shops, thus until everyone was out of the castle, shopkeepers responded by setting up large tents. The budding marketplace of New Nivalis began its humble beginnings.

Elizabeth maneuvered through the marketplace. She found that many of the shoppers were not using Nixian currency, but were bartering and trading goods. Elizabeth looked at her own pouch and wondered if would even be able to pay for the repair. After asking for direction, Elizabeth found a metalworker's shop. The metalworker did his work outside of the tent. He was a large man with small, delicate hands.. It was clear that he was concentrating because his eyes were crossed, and his tongue stuck out across the stubble on his upper lip. His dexterous hand

constricted against a copper ring. In one hand, he held the copper ring. In the second, tweezers squeezed a rectangular chunk of rubellite.

“Careful! Careful!” A man swished behind Elizabeth. “That ring has emotional value towards our customer.” The man was a strange one. The best description for his shirt would be frilly. A tailcoat was wrapped over it. A rose stuck out of his shirt. He looked ready for a ball. Elizabeth was about to speak another word, but a third man appeared.

“Remember, the customers expect us all to deliver. The third man was the most average looking of the three. His attire was like Elizabeth: brown pants, white shirt and jacket. His brown eyes looked down at the ring and slapped the metalworker on the back. The metalworker didn’t expect the slap on the back and dropped everything.

“What did I say about touching me during work!” The metalworker dove towards the ground.

“Search for that ring like your life depends on it! It was a ring that was passed down by the customer’s great-grandmother!” Elizabeth watched the three men pat the grass until they finally found both the ring and the rubellite. Elizabeth’s mouth was slightly parted, and she blinked several times. The three looked up to see her. They all spoke in the same order that they appeared.

“A customer.”

“The queen. Our queen is our customer.”

“Welcome!”

“Hello.” Elizabeth stepped forwards. She put her hand over heart and began, “My name is-”

“Elizabeth Edda Kingfisher, her most gracious Queen of Nix. There is no need to introduce yourself. My name is Theodore Roman, I am a tailor, the one that runs the tent behind you with my wife, Isabella.” The man with the flower said. Then the average man spoke up.

“This man loves to hear himself speak. You can call me Harry. This here is my husband, Oliver.”

“Thank you for the introduction. Oliver, at your service, my queen.”

“The queen is a busy woman. You came here for a reason. Let’s see what you got.” Harry motioned towards a table covered with Oliver’s tools.

“Go on. Show what you need repaired.” Oliver said. Elizabeth’s placed the sheath and locket. Oliver scratched his chin and picked up the stray pieces of the locket. “Yeah, the poor old things chipped and rusted. I don’t mean any disrespect, my queen, but did you maintain the material?” Elizabeth shook her head.

“The journey hardly gave me time to maintain the sword that was granted to me, let alone its accessories.” Elizabeth said.

“I see. There’s no harm in it. I can fix it in three days.” Oliver said while examining it.

“That works for me.”

“Then we have a deal.” Oliver asked.

“How much will it be?” Elizabeth asked.

“Free.” Oliver took the locket and inspected it further. “I’ll need to meld that together....”

“Free? Are you certain?”

“It is not a common task to work for the queen. I’ll do it for free.” Oliver offered his hand.

“Thank you.” Elizabeth shook hands with Oliver.

“My queen, if you ever require a tailor, then I offer my services. Isabella and I can create some exquisite clothing for you and yours.” Theodore bowed.

“And I am here to do your leatherwork. Belts, shoes, gloves, jackets, a weird shirt if you want it.” Harry maneuvered a smile.

“Thank you all for your help. I’ll take my leave; I’ll return in three days.” Elizabeth said.

“Of course.” Oliver said.

Elizabeth enjoyed the interaction with a select few of her people. She made her way towards the meeting tent. Tristan was by entrance. He waved at Elizabeth.

“Good morning. How did you sleep?”

“Adequate. Did I keep everyone waiting?”

“Nah. We weren’t supposed to start for another five minutes.” Tristan drew his thumb towards the tent. “Is Crow alright?”

“What do you mean?” Elizabeth asked. A frown started to creep on her face. She felt like something was wrong, but she chalked it up to looking too into it. Tristan shuffled his weight a bit.

“He seemed worried. Almost scared.” Tristan said.

“Did anyone threaten him?” Elizabeth’s voice rose a couple of octaves. She noticed this and repeated the phrase with a voice that was almost a whisper. Tristan shrugged.

“I don’t know. Everyone seemed to have warmed up to him. Baxter no longer gives him the dirty eye. I saw him having tea with Madeline once. Father talks quite positive about him. He calls him a ‘young but well-adjusted man.’ I haven’t heard any ill will on the street, either. Ah, I am rambling. We should probably head inside.”

“Yes, let’s.” Elizabeth said. Tristan held the entrance for Elizabeth and the two entered the large tent. The meeting room was still a meeting tent, but at least there was a table now. The table even had a map. Kay, Madeline, and Baxter all stood on the same side. They were opposite to Elizabeth. Tristan stood at the head of the table in between both sides. Crow was the last thing that Elizabeth noticed. He was sitting on a small chair away from the table entirely. His hands folded so over his lap. Crow looked up and noticed Elizabeth staring at him. He just waved at her. Elizabeth nodded and turned back to the table.

The map was of the entire continent of Vetus. A wet black circle was drawn on the grasslands. Someone who thought they were cute, painted four-leaf clovers (It was Tristan, Crow told him about an old belief that four-leaf clovers brought luck). Above stood the mountains of Nix. The mountains were covered in geometric snowflakes. The mountain range continued east and curved slightly downwards, but mostly acted as a straight line across the continent. Far east was the amorphous blob of a country, the Magnus Empire.

Maybe in a single year the blob would consume even more of the map. Elizabeth thought back to the man that she and Crow met. The pathfinder. Jim? Lin? It did not matter. Below the

mountain range that divides the northern part of Vetus was the country named the Silver Sands. A country depicted with books and stone columns. Elizabeth noticed that the mountain range that acted as a natural border between the Silver Sands and Magnus was held by Magnus. She then saw written in Crow's handwriting, *Telos*, written on top of the mountain range. To the right of the Telos, was a small plot of land called Aquilavania. Bats were seen flying from the small nation. Elizabeth rolled her eyes.

Below the grasslands was the Arbor forest. The gigantic forest was a patch of green fur smacked into the middle of the continent. Near the northeast quadrant of the forest was a picturesque tree trunk. This labeled the city-state of Arcadia. Then the forest stopped abruptly and a river that sliced through half of the bottom of the continent named Pascal River. To the left of the Pascal River, was the nation of Chalbis, whose borders, unbent like steel, had not changed in centuries. The port-city state named Atlus' edge sat to the right of the river. A single giant mountain was next right to the port country. Wooden ships were sailing freely from their home of Atlus's edge towards an archipelago of islands and one single large island.

The Land of Tides. A banknote was drawn upon the largest island, all the paper money in all Vetus was created there. A large sea creature was shown in the ocean between Atlus's edge and the Land of Tides. The last thing on the map that caught Elizabeth's eyes was a small city to the left of them. A city that was called The Spires. The old-world architecture known as 'Skyscrapers were drawn on it. Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. She had difficulty remembering the geography of her own homeland.

"That's quite a map." Elizabeth said. "Who drew the bats?" Tristan pointed at Baxter. "Really?" Elizabeth asked. Baxter shrugged.

“Just a bit of levity.” Baxter said. “The missus has been saying that I am too serious all the time.”

“Just because they are vampires doesn’t mean they can turn into bats. That’s an old myth.” Elizabeth said.

“I know that I was just making a small joke.” Baxter raised his hands. Kay cleared his throat.

“Let’s get on to the main topic of this meeting.” Kay placed his hands on the table. “Has anyone been to the marketplace along the edge of the settlement?” Kay asked. Elizabeth raised her hand. “Did you notice anything.”

“The people were bartering with goods and services rather than using our coin.” Elizabeth said.

“Correct. I advised them to do it.” Kay pointed on the banknote on the map. “Crow informed me that Vetus uses a universal currency that stems from the Land of Tides. With no solid government, Nixian currency is worthless.”

“Isn’t it made out of silver?” Baxter asked. “Maybe we can smelt it and reshape it into something valuable.”

“Nixian coins are not made of silver.” Elizabeth said. “They are made of an alloy. I don’t remember exactly what metals, but they aren’t exactly rare.”

“So what can we do?” Madeline asked. “If New Nivalis is to grow, it will need to partake in economic ventures with the rest of the continent.”

“Aren’t the gargoyles sending traders our way?” Tristan said. “Will we be able to trade with them without their currency.”

“That’s why we are bartering,” Crow said. “When the time comes, New Nivalis will have to sell its goods to traders in order to circulate the currency of Vetis within itself.”

“That won’t solve everything,” Madeline said. “People who don’t have goods to sell won’t have the ability to gain any form of the new currency.”

“That’s why we have to ensure that the community properly communicates and we have to keep a watchful eye.” Kay said. “We need to ensure that no one gets left behind in this transitional period.”

Elizabeth dangled her legs off the cliff. The meetings were exhausting. She tried to provide as much information as she could, but this was all difficult work. The transition to a new form of life was difficult, but it needed to be done.. There were also the agricultural concerns and the architectural planning. Elizabeth shook her head. She came here to relax not continue wasting away hours contemplating planning. The winds of the grasslands were starting to feel like home. They were starting to feel cold. Perhaps in a month, it would reach the snapping bark of Nixian wind, yet this nice breeze could surely do wonders. The sky was a gray that she was accustomed to. It was such a gloomy color, but it was the color of home. She sat in silent comfortability and nothing else. The cliff which she sat upon was the same one that welcomed the company of Nixians when they first approached the grasslands. Elizabeth saw how much the landscape can change on a journey. The green locks of the grasslands would transition into the rocky mountains and eventually the mountains would lead into fields of snow. The rest of the journey would be

strictly in Nixian territory. Elizabeth looked down to see the specks of people building a new life for themselves.

Elizabeth felt land on her face. She stretched her hand out and a snowflake landed in the palm of her hand. She looked towards the sky and saw that it was the start of mild snowfall. The whimper of a weaker winter. The snow wouldn't form inches and blankets over the ground like back home, but it was still beautiful to see. Elizabeth smiled. Maybe this was nature's answer to her uncertainty? Elizabeth thought back to her sleepy childhood days. The day without a mother. The days where time was measured in lavish gifts from nobles. Elizabeth watched the snowfall for a little while longer before heading back to her new home.

Chapter 17: The Choice of a Necromancer

“The gargoyles’ timber has greatly increased the speed of construction for the new houses. If we continue to focus on the production of homes, everyone will have a roof over their head.” Kay announced. He leaned back in his chair. He could feel the weight being removed little by little. At the start of the journey, he could hardly breathe, but things were looking up. “New Nivalis will soon be a bustling city just like the rest of them.”

“I also heard that they are beginning to construct a statue of Fraser.” Elizabeth said. Baxter nodded.

“We cannot deny our past. The last king was a bastard.” Baxter said. Elizabeth physically recoiled. “But he shouldn’t be the reason that we deny our heritage. Call it what you will. I still miss the fields of snow. They were bitter, but a little bitter here and there makes people strong. Besides, we have the Queen of *New Nivalis*, now. A fresh start for all.”

“I am still in the process of establishing the guards of the town. We have few actual capable people. Father’s a bit too old.” Tristan said.

“I would be careful of those words.” Kay said. “My hands can still wield a lance like any other.”

“Father has moved on to other work, was that better?” Tristan said. Kay looked satisfied with Tristan’s amendment. “Elizabeth.”

“Yes?”

“I was hoping that Crow could join the guard.” Tristan said.

“You want him to be a guard?” Elizabeth asked.

“Not exactly. He is the only one here that knows about magic, so if any crimes come up having to do with magic, he can provide insight.”

“I see.” Elizabeth put her hand to her chin. The castle would be the first place to check, but that wasn’t a certainty. Elizabeth realized that this would be the first time where she wouldn’t have a general place to check. For a while now, the two of them would naturally fall into long conversation over one thing or the other and there was always a promise to continue. That hasn’t come up for a week now.

“Judging from your face, you haven’t seen him in a while. I wonder what happened to him,” Tristan said.

“I believe someone made him feel insecure about being an outsider.” Elizabeth said.

“Humph. At least, I *tried* to be hospitable.” Madeline said. She glared at Baxter.

“He was suspicious at the time.” Baxter said. “I swear, I haven’t said anything. I considered him sound.”

“Is this meeting over?” Elizabeth asked. “I can search for him.”

“Go. We were finished either way.” Kay said. He ended the meeting. Elizabeth rose from her seat and left the small brown tent that was still used for the gathering of the four. It was a cloudy day, and a chilly wind came from the north. It was clear that winter would soon encompass New Nivalis. Elizabeth wondered how wintertime would function in the grasslands.

Elizabeth stood atop a hill. Her eyes searched for a black coat among the sea of her people. Most were occupied with the construction of new houses. Then a blonde man walked over to Elizabeth.

“Yo.” The man said and threw the three books into Elizabeth’s arms. “Give these to Crow when you see him. He already paid. I just needed to find them in one of the wagons.”

“Al-alright.” Elizabeth balanced the three books in her arms. “Shouldn’t you hand it to him yourself?” The blonde bookseller shrugged.

“I haven’t seen it. You’re the one he spends all his time with.” She turned and looked towards the castle. Elizabeth went to the entrance with the books still in hand. She went through the gates and found herself in the gray courtyard. Many have displayed their interest in revitalizing it, but housing took precedent. The bodies of the bandits were cleared out long before a majority stepped inside. They were carried out to some far-off corner and buried. Elizabeth entered the long halls. She wandered the halls of the secretive castle until she remembered the small study. It took some time to navigate her way there, but she eventually rediscovered it. The door was slightly ajar. Elizabeth gently pushed it opened and found a cozy study. A small wooden desk in one corner. A bookshelf, and a damning piece of evidence that the room was occupied, a makeshift bedroll. Elizabeth stacked the three books on the desk. On the desk was a roll of bandages. Elizabeth thought back to Crow’s wound. His left hand seemed to work fine, but there were certainly moments where it appeared to be agitated, but how severe was it? Elizabeth left the study and took a passing glance out one of the long windows. There she saw his figure atop one of the spires.

Elizabeth swiftly rose the flight of stairs. At the top, she found Crow with his hood on. He held his head down in contemplation. He looked down upon New Nivalis. Even after many conversations, Elizabeth was reminded that she didn't know everything about him.

"Crow?" Elizabeth asked. A gust of wind passed through both. "Are you alright? You have been reclusive for some time now. Did something happen? Did anyone say anything?"

Crow nodded.

"I shouldn't have worried you." Crow whispered.

"What?"

"Elizabeth.... You and the Nixian have shown me nothing but hospitality. Your kindness has graced me for long enough. It is time for me to leave." Crow said.

"Leave?" Elizabeth said.

"I will reveal something to you. I owe you the truth. Whatever your thoughts may be; I swear.... I swear... I won't hurt you." Crow spoke. The wind passed through them. Elizabeth walked closer.

"What do you aim to show me?" Crow pulled off the glove to his left hand and undid his bandage. He placed the pestilent hand for her to see. "W-what happened to your hand?" Elizabeth attempted to reach for it, but Crow recoiled.

"This a thrall's mark. There is a type of magic out there. A magic that deals entirely with death. To speak with the fallen, to bring back the dead back to life. Elizabeth, this form of magic is called necromancy and I am one its followers."

“Wizards and witches that raise the dead.” Elizabeth said. “Just like the folk tale.”

“This hand is evidence of necromancy. I know I should have told you sooner, but that won’t be a problem any longer.” Crow knelt in front of Elizabeth.

“With this confession, you willingly put yourself at the behest of my judgment?”

Elizabeth brushed her long white hair to the side. Allowing her a clear view of the necromancer before her. “Crow, what will you do if I tell you to leave?”

“A wanderer’s life. Jotun was my hope of living with other people. A chance, but I can’t live with you guys in good conscience.”

“What if I were to destroy you? To raise my sword?” Elizabeth asked.

“I would let you. Brynhildr was close, but she decided to give me mercy for some strange reason.” Crow said. “The world won’t lose anything if you choose to end me here.”

“What if I were to let you stay?”

“Why would you do that? Why wou-“Elizabeth unsheathed her sword. Crow saw his own reflection in the steel. After all these years. He closed his eyes and bowed his head. After all these years, he would finally be slayed. At the hands of someone that he respected no less. Elizabeth rose her sword. Then lowered it gently upon Crow’s left shoulder.

“It is my right.....” Elizabeth raises her sword once again and lowered it upon his right shoulder. “As Queen Elizabeth Edda Kingfisher of New Nivalis. To entrust this title, this duty, upon a brave soul of honorable mettle.” Elizabeth placed the tip of the sword on the ground and stood firm. “Crow Pendragon, will you be the first that the people of New Nivalis can call upon

in their time of need? Crow Pendragon, will you fight for the innocent? Would you provide succor to the unfortunate?" Crow looked into Elizabeth's eyes. His mouth agape.

"Why would you entrust this to me?" Crow asked.

"Because I found you to be worthy. It is not complex. I know you are a smart man, do not act slow."

"Are you certain about this? Elizabeth, you need to be certain about this." Crow said.

"My sword laid upon your shoulders is my answer. All you have to do is give me yours." Elizabeth said. There was some time in between the response. A few seconds to the world, but it felt longer for both.

"I will do my best. I accept this title. I hope to prove that I am capable of holding it."

"Place your fist in front of your face. Let the knuckle of your index finger touch your forehead." Crow followed Elizabeth's instructions. "Crow Pendragon, from this day henceforth... You are a knight. Perhaps first of many, or first of few. Nevertheless, you are a knight."

"What of the others. I don't think I can reveal myself to all of them. I am fearful of their reaction." Crow said. "I know it may end in the long run, but I don't think I have the courage for it."

"Worry not, my knight. I will look after you, as you look after me." Elizabeth kneeled and removed Crow's hood. "Give them time. Show them your true self. The self that I see and know. They will not easily banish a man of your nature."

“Is this the best course of action?” Crow asked.

“Shed away your doubt and stay with us, *Sir* Pendragon.” Elizabeth said with a smile. “I can call you that now that you have been knighted.” Crow rubbed his temple.

“Just Crow is fine.”

Chapter 18: A Castle, a Study, a Cathedral

Crow wandered the halls of the Castle of Rhei. The people of Nix soon learned that the massive structure was secretive. They still hadn't explored the whole structure, so Crow took it upon himself to occasionally stroll and discover the castle's secrets.

Crow's mind was foggy with Elizabeth's words. He found himself picking away at his left hand more often. His neuroticism seemed to be in full effect. It was getting irritated. Crow felt sudden shivers that began at the bottom of his spine. He turned around the corner and went up a flight of stone steps. An old red carpet was splayed over the center of the steps like a long tongue. His absent mind led him to miss a row of steps and trip over.

"Something always has to go wrong." Crow said. He massaged his temple and sat on the floor of the long hall. His eyes wandered and stopped on a particularly large set of doors. Most doors in the castles that he had seen up this point had been mundane wooden doors with bronze-colored handles. This door was made of what seemed to be marble. The doors were shaped like an arch and fifteen feet tall. The handles were stone circles to pull outwards. Crow approached the front of the door and traced his fingers over the few engravings. There were depictions of tree roots, a deer, a waterfall, and a book. The engravings were perfectly mirrored on both doors with the book in the very center. It was cut straight in the middle from the division of the two doors. Crow pulled on one of the stone handles. It took him a few minutes to get the door to open. A strange moss had grown underneath the doors that acted as an adhesive. Crow burned away the moss with a simple flame spell and then was able to open the two doors. The doors were light considering their material and size.

At first, Crow was blinded by the white heat from the sun. Rays of sunlight dripped into the large room through oval windows scraped along the far back of the wall. Crow shielded his eyes with arms and walked inside. A flurry of the dust drifted under the spotlight of the sun. Crow coughed. He waved a hand over his mouth and looked at the room while averting his eyes from the bright windows. There he saw rows and rows of bookshelves. Crow hummed with glee at the size of the library. A bottomless room of texts. Tables with pounds of dust separated the room into quarters. Crow navigated his way to the closest bookshelf and pulled a random book, *Structures of the Old World*. He thumbed the pages and saw paragraphs detailing old world structures. The chapter that he found himself reading was one about housing. Crow squeezed his left hand. He closed the book.

“Hello?” Crow asked. There was no response. Crow put the book back in its place. Crow looked down the slither of passageways between the bookshelves. He saw a blur pass one of the shelves. “Wait!” Crow ran through the cramped hallways. He saw a speck of movement and picked up his pace. He crashed into a random chair placed in the middle of a hallway. His brow was light up with pain, but he picked up the place. He nearly slipped when he climbed the steps towards the second floor of the library. He saw the blur once again. He passed a blackboard on wheels with faint pieces of chalk. “Who are you?” He asked. “I don’t mean you any harm, I just want to talk.” He heard no response and stopped running when reached the southernmost corner of the second floor.

Crow leaned against one of the shelves and caught his breath. He drew his hand over his beating heart.

“I really need to.... run more often.” Crow rubbed his brow and examined the corner. The entire shelf was composed of strange moss, except for one spot that was taken up by a single green book. Crow bent down and traced his finger along the binding. The book had small gray gaps. These gaps all connected to a small circular oval hole. Crow straightened himself and reached out for the book with his left hand. He used his index finger to pull the book off the shelf. A spear severed Crow’s left hand in half. Crow didn’t notice at first until he pulled the hand close to his face and saw that the pieces of muscle detached. “I need to buy new gloves, thank you for your random book.” The flesh of his left hand started to thread itself back together. Crow looked back at the green books and saw that his blood had filled in the book’s gap. The gaps now looked like veins. The oval in the center pooled with his blood. Crow heard the grinding of what seemed like cogs. Then the entire shelf sucked itself into the wall and revealed a hidden room.

The room was bright and white. A small man-made waterfall was in the very back of the room. This water flowed throughout the entire room and watered the brightly colored flowers that were packed into the outer edges of the floor. All the bright sunlight in the room came from a single paned window. The only thing that seemed off place in the room was a bronze ladder in the left most corner. The room was beautiful, but it wasn’t worth getting your hand cut in half. Crow looked back to his left hand. The thing was now fully repaired. It still looked horrid. He took off his right glove and fitted it on his left hand. It looked stupid, but no one would be frightened by it.

Then Crow looked up to see a woman who didn't cast a shadow. Her garb was entirely white. Braided blonde hair tickled her back. She turned to him with a small and saw that a silver cross hung from her neck. The woman examined her clothing.

"Those history books must do a terrible job if this is the clothes that you think I would wear." She spoke.

"Once history reaches a certain point it becomes pseudo-fiction. Historians believed you to be a religious figure." Crow said.

"I was only interested in studying silvamancy. Magic pertaining to Botany. Nixians think that any magic that doesn't have to do with ice is some religious movement."

"That real question I want to know is why were you trying to get my attention. I am not going to bring you back to life."

"Do you think I am stupid? I want an apology."

"What?"

"I was a damn good mage in my time, and you come at me with that. Maybe you should stop projecting your dreams into reality." The woman snapped. "By the way, these clothes are incredibly dull!" Crow blinked.

"I was just following the pictures that were presented in books."

"I bet." The woman said. She saw Crow's eyes wander back to the ladder. "That leads to a bell. We rang it around noon."

“Just to ensure there is no confusion, you are Rhei Ingelheim. The same woman that created this castle.”

“I didn’t create this castle. My people did.” Rhei said. She ran her hand through her locks and looked at Crow. “Now, what is a necromancer doing in this castle?”

“I am part of a group of migrants that made their way to the grasslands. Their back over there.” Crow threw his thumb behind his shoulder.

“You know that I can’t see the real world, only you.”

“Yeah. I haven’t talked with the dead in a while. Apologies.”

“Wait, you mentioned migrants? How are the descendants of my people? How does the country fare.” Rhei asked.

“There is no country, not anymore at least. After your death, the people that followed you moved to the Arbor Forest. They now have a country named Arcadia.” Crow said.

“Oh, I wouldn’t have expected that name...”

“Arcadia was going to be the name for your first child, right?”

“Yes. I always thought it was a beautiful name. I am glad to see that it lives on in some capacity. How’s Nix.”

“It fell. The king and queen lost their life. The royal princess, now technically queen, roams with us.”

“I knew they would fall. Their isolation was slowly killing them.” Rhei snapped.

“The isolationist laws came into effect just twenty-five years ago. How would you know that information?” Crow asked.

“Laws are not the only thing that define a nation. Isolationism has always been in our blood. They stuck up their noses at other people trying to settle in new lands. ‘Why would you leave the first nation?’ ‘What is the point of looking for uncivilized land.’ Their downfall was telegraphed even when I was a schoolgirl. You seem courteous like a Nixian noble, but less pompous. Where are you from?”

“Well, technically I was born within the Magnus empire.”

“*Empire*. Back in my day, it was just the Halidom of Magnus.”

“I would like to stay and chat, but do you have any other reason for talking with me. I rather not.... talk like this.”

“Because necromancy is evil, right? Some of my followers wanted to outlaw pyromancy because of forest fires.” Rhei said. “Are you aware that morality can be a subjective thing.”

“I appreciate your words, but necromancy is vile art. It is a perverse form of slavery.” Crow said.

“Whatever you say, necromancer. I need you to do a task for me,” Rhei said. She rubbed her hands together. She looked at Crow with a shine in her eyes. “It is a job that only a necromancer can accomplish. In my later years, prior to my sickness, I was studying a particular mystery.”

“I am not going to partake in anything that involves necromancy.” Crow answered.

“The Entropy. What caused it?” Rhei asked.

“We don’t have the answer, even after so many years we still don’t know. I can assure you that necromancy has nothing to do with The Entropy. It is vile but wouldn’t cause such an event.”

“Necromancy may not be the direct cause of it, but it may very well be the discipline to investigate it.” Rhei stood up and pointed at Crow. "Necromancers have the ability to talk to any historical figure. Granted of course, that another necromancer doesn’t claim that first. I am aware that necromancy is a first come, first serve discipline. Nevertheless, necromancy in a sense, the magic of history.”

“Thousands of scholars and historians can do a better job than me,” Crow said. "Sorry, but necromancers aren’t special. I can’t help you.” Rhei looked at Crow and smiled. It was the smile of the victor.

“Why can’t a necromancer revive someone that was born prior to The Entropy?”

“Crow? Are you here?” Elizabeth entered the library. She waved her hand over her face. “Dusty....Crow, are you here?” Elizabeth called out.

“.... That doesn’t make any.....No, the Knights Age was immediately after.....I don’t have all the answers.....Stop interrupting me! I am trying....” Elizabeth followed Crow’s voice to the second floor of the library. She found Crow. "I said stop interrupting.” He was talking to an empty chair.

“Crow?” Elizabeth asked.

“Elizabeth!” Crow said her name with a startle. A piece of chalk flew out of his hand and smacked against the board. Crow cleared his throat. “Hi.”

“What are you doing?” Elizabeth asked. Had he gone insane? Crow looked to her and back to the empty chair. Elizabeth had also noticed that he was wearing his right-handed glove on his left hand.

“I was studying the history of Vetus.”

“And why are you talking to a chair?” Did he really think that his answer explained everything? Crow sighed.

“She already knows.” Crow said. He was still talking to the chair. He walked over to Elizabeth. “You are going to see someone appear. Do not worry,” Crow offered his hand. “May I?” His eyes were so sincere that Elizabeth couldn’t help but humor him. She took his hand and then she saw a woman.

“Hello.” Rhei said.

“How?” Elizabeth asked.

“She’s dead.” Crow said.

“Necromancy?” Elizabeth asked.

“.... Yeah. This is Rhei. The same one that inspired the modern name for this grassland and this castle.”

“Why are you talking with her?”

“Crow is a necromancer. I wanted him to take over a specific field of research for me.”

Rhei said.

“I see.” Elizabeth said. Elizabeth’s skin felt strange almost like it was unraveling. She could feel the movement of her organs. The slight vibrations and the movement of her blood. She grew nauseous and clutched her head. Crow noticed and gently squeezed her hand. Rhei was gone. Crow then guided Elizabeth to an empty seat. Elizabeth sat down and Crow kneeled next to her still holding her hand.

“Necromancy is still magic; your body wouldn’t be able to handle an exposure for too long without training. I just wanted you to see that I am not crazy.” Crow said.

“Is she going to follow you around forever?” Elizabeth asked.

“No. Just when I wish to speak with her. My curiosity of this place must have subconsciously allowed me to manifest her.” Crow picked up the piece of chalk and sat on one of the many dusty tables. “It doesn’t help that I haven’t talked to the dead in a long while. We’ll pick this up later, Rhei.” Crow snapped his fingers. “She’s gone.”

“Why were you studying the history of Vetus? You seemed awfully heated.” Crow walked to the blackboard. A timeline was drawn up across the entire board. Titles and anecdotes scrawled along the side. The Age of Knights, The Age of One Nation, The Age of Migration, The Age of Magic, The Age of Rediscovery, and the final one, The Modern Age. Crow scratched his cheek.

“What caused The Entropy? What caused the billions of lives to be extinguished like that? These are questions that we have already asked ourselves. This entire continent has always

been wary of progress because we have no idea what caused The Entropy, but how could such a catastrophic event have so much mystery? Necromancer can speak with everyone that has died in the 1307 years after The Entropy, but not before. Why? I don't know."

"Well, are you approaching an answer?" Elizabeth asked. Elizabeth saw an expression that Crow had shown before. His eyebrows furrowed. How he placed his right hand over his chin and his left hand underneath his right elbow. It never worried her because it meant that he was in deep thought. In fact, she found it endearing. Then Crow brought his hands to legs.

"I am not even close," Crow said.

Chapter 19: Another Story

A man adorned in gold and jade was accompanied by two bodyguards wearing black armor. Their axes swung by their belts lazily. The bodyguards were stout and grizzled. The overweight man was wearing a gaudy cloth. Gold piercing followed the shape of his earlobe. The man looked from rooftop to rooftop. The man scowled at the large metal walls at the edge of the city and at the guards patrolling the walls. Miners who returned from their long shifts avoided the overweight man's presence. Their dirt and sweaty faces turned away. They were minding their own business. The gaudy man returned his eyes forward and continued down the street. Two more armored guards followed from behind. Great swords were strapped to their backs with a brown rope. A silhouette jumped and looked down on them from one of the many rooftops. The silhouette paused when he spotted the nouveau riche.

"We are almost there, Master Polonius." The left bodyguard whispered. Polonius wiped some sweat with his sleeve. He kept rubbing his hands together. He pulled his shawl over his lumpy head.

"Do I have to remind you that I am an advisor to the Kaiser?"

"No sir." His guard said.

"Good. Are the others in position?"

"Yes sir." The silhouette continued tracking them from behind. The figure had a single eye showing from his hood. Dozens of knives lined the insides of his coat. The silhouette dropped down into an alleyway. He took out two silver daggers from his pocket. He toyed with

the knives in his hands before turning the corner and slitting the throat of the two farthest bodyguards behind Polonius. The assassin pulled the two bodies into the alleyway. Then the assassin stalked behind Polonius.

A blade came down in front of the assassin and then a stone fist collided with his chest. A gargoyle and a man stood side by side wearing matching armor pieces. More bodyguards appeared from corners. Polonius snickered and ran into a red bricked apartment.

The assassin was surrounded. He pulled back his hood and jabbed forward. A small gust of wind blew the two men in front of him towards the road. The assassin threw a dagger directly at a man to his side. The bodyguard's aether blocked the attack.

"You won't get past me, Vakaris!" The bodyguard said. Vakaris did not respond. His opponent charged forward throwing all his weight into the attack. Vakaris sidestepped the attack. The pavement cracked due to the force of the hammer. Vakaris stabbed the man in the jaw. The bodyguard wouldn't relent. He took the dagger from his jaw and tried to punch Vakaris in the stomach. Vakaris caught the fist and threw the bodyguard as if the guard was an empty bag. More guards appeared. Vakaris focused. He threw his hands at his side and smirked. Three men went for an attack. Vakaris opened his pockets and suspended three knives in the air. Vakaris winked and the three knives each entered the necks of each bodyguard. They floundered like fish on the floor, as their blood spewed onto the ground. Vakaris saw more men coming, but he caught view of a tan man with a silver shoulder guard. He threw on his hood. One more bodyguard charged at him. Vakaris grabbed the hand that held the weapon and broke his wrist. Vakaris clicked his tongue at the man and struck him with his palm. The force from the wind in

Vakaris' palm ruptured the bodyguard's chest. Vakaris turned to a new set of guards running towards him.

"He better deal with them." Vakaris whispered. Vakaris shifted out of sight. A small puff of dust floated where he stood. He jumped from window to window until he reached the top of the apartment that his target had entered. Men screamed from the street below before a loud crash silenced them all. Vakaris grinned.

"Not early, but at least you made an entrance. Your head is mine, Polonius." Vakaris rolled into an opening on the roof of the apartment. The hallways did not have working lights. Vakaris stalked from corner to corner. He used the minimal light from windows to make out general shapes.

Polonius chatted with his two of his minions. Polonius felt a short breeze. His two guards dropped with a loud thud. Before Polonius could run, Vakaris grabbed him by the neck. Vakaris placed his silver dagger closer to Polonius' face.

The razor's edge was planted firmly on the Polonius' neck. Polonius held his breath. A deft hand took out a second blade. This blade was aimed at the man's stomach. Polonius jerked forwards. He elbowed Vakaris in the nose and started to run. Polonius looked desperately for more guards. He pulled open a random oak door and threw himself inside. He locked the door behind him. Inside the room, two guards sat on the table. Their heads were down. The room was only lit by a single candle in the center of the table. Drinks placed in front of them.

"You idiots. The two of you are supposed to protect me! You must earn your keep! Now is not the time to get drunk!" Polonius said. The guards did not respond. He ran to the table but slipped before he reached them. Polonius' back and hands were red and wet. A small draft

entered from an opening in the window. Polonius threw a bag of banknotes on to the table. "Take it."

"I don't want your dirty money." Vakaris sang. Polonius shuffled to the corner. He took a sword from his guards and started a rapid prayer. He heard a creak. His eyes darted back and forth between the window and the door. A

"If I am going to die. It will be of my own accord!" Polonius jumped out of the window, but a gale pushed him backwards. Glass shards dug into his eyes and body. Through his bloody vision, Polonius could only see a silhouette standing in the broken window frame. The figure twirled two knives. Vakaris flicked his wrist and the knives nailed Polonius's hands to the wall. Polonius tried to pull himself from the wall, but the knives were embedded deep into the wall.

"Die on your own terms, yeah? Please be considerate." Vakaris said. "I don't get paid if it is not my hand that ends you." He picked up the man by his neck. "Either way. This is all your fault. All the people that you have trampled upon. It is only natural that they would send someone after you." Vakaris ran his knife across Polonius's neck. Polonius convulsed for a few moments before ending it off with one a twist of his right leg. That was that. Vakaris wiped his dagger on Polonius's clothing. A man with a metal chest plate entered the room. A large sword was sheathed on his back. He stopped when he saw the three dead bodies. "You were late." Vakaris said.

"We got him, didn't we?" The armored man said.

"Yup." Vakaris went to the corner and looked inside the bags filled with bank notes. Vakaris pocketed a handful. He threw the rest out of the window. On that day, money rained from the sky and the people scrambled to gain wealth. Vakaris cupped his mouth and screamed

out the window. "The rat is dead. You can thank your heroes, Vakaris and Marcus. Mostly thank the Vakaris."

"Yeah. Of course. You did all the work." Marcus said. Marcus took his large sword and placed it on Polonius' neck. He took a second to measure the angle. He raised his dark arm. Polonius's lumpy head didn't roll much. Vakaris took the now empty bag of money and put Polonius' head in the bag. The two men walked out of the building. The civilians were still picking and fighting over the money.

"A month's rent!"

"The finest wining and dining tonight."

"I'll finally leave this shithole!"

Marcus and Vakaris pulled their hoods on. They disappeared into the crowd of looters. Marcus elbowed Vakaris, as the pools of civilians expanded. "We should go get some ribs."

"Ribs. Hmm. Not a bad idea actually." Vakaris swung the bag over his shoulder and walked down the street. Guards dressed in dark yellow armor arrived to subdue the mob. The two men went unnoticed.

Polonius' eyes were wide open as it was taken out of the bag. Another bag of money was opened on the opposite side of the table. Marcus and Vakaris counted slowly.

“Good job. We are one step closer to bringing down Fafnir. Soon our rebellion will have a proper leg to stand on.” This revolutionary’s name was Antonio. He was a tall man with a dark ponytail.

“Yeah. Sure. Go rebellion. Woo.” Vakaris said. He put one of the bank notes to the light. He tisked. “A few of these bills are fakes. Sell swords have sell in the name. We don’t do free or discount work. Nor are we one of your little revolutionaries.”

“Take some of his gold piercings. They will cover the cost. If you only gave us more time. The raid on the palace is due soon.” Antonio said.

“I don’t care that much.” Vakaris picked out the gold earrings.

“Give them a break. The guy was an asshole. He deserved his fate.” Marcus said. Vakaris looked at the group of revolutionaries. Their faces darkened by scars and trauma. Even after so many odds they were still fighting. Vakaris stopped himself from caring too deeply. It would hurt business.

“Don’t come asking us for more help if you can’t pay. We’ll let it slide this time.” Vakaris said.

“Thank you. Maybe one day, Chalbisi will be a nation that will be loved by all. We may yet-”

“We are not joining your cause, bye.” Vakaris shut the door behind them. Marcus shook his head and followed him. They left the area and went to a small restaurant. The food was stale, with most of the flavor coming from a thick red sauce. Marcus bit into his ribs like a bear. His large arms grasped a bottle of spice and dowsed the ribs to the point of saturation.

“This food is terrible.” Marcus said. He paused in between bites and pointed at Vakaris with a bone licked clean of all meat. “You should be nicer. We helped this place for the better. It's good that we after a target that actually deserved what was coming to him. Doesn't doing jobs killing random people make you feel empty. I know it does for me. We need to find more fulfilling work.” Marcus went back to his ribs.

“I don't like it, but what else can I use my talents for? Potato peeler? I am not joining Chalbis army to work. There is not a lot of opportunity for guys like us. Who else would want an excellent assassin and some brainless muscle?” Vakaris sighed. “Also, for your information just because there is a group that wants to revolt doesn't mean they are the good guys.”

“I'll ignore that you called me brainless. This city is a weird place. We may find something.... Or we could leave Chalbis?” Vakaris turned to Marcus.

“Is this about that new settlement? What was it? New Nivalis? What of them?”

“They need people to grow. We can probably find good paying work. A town like that wouldn't be filled with all these crude people. I heard they're decent.”

“You know, when I took a boat to Vetus. They all said, ‘Wait till you see the people, wait till you see the advancements of Chalbis. You'll love it.’ This place is a shithole. Most of us are rats looking for scrapes.” Vakaris said.

“So, New Nivalis it is?” Marcus asked.

“Fine. We'll visit this New Nivalis, but first I need to get something done before we go.” Vakaris called the bartender for a refill. Marcus went back to his ribs. He licked another bone clean.

“You’re paying for this right?” Marcus asked.

“Pay for your own damn food!” Vakaris said.

Chapter 20: Iugazwang

The pebble bounced on the outcrop once and passed through an opening in the steel mesh. This was then followed by the pebble falling into a bottomless chasm. Vakaris picked up another pebble and repeated the motion. With spring came small tufts of grass that peaked in between the crevices of the broken cliffs like stray hairs. The steel mesh was attacked by hints of moss along the absolute bottom portion of the metallic lines.

“You gonna keep throwing rocks or do something?” Marcus asked.

“Give me a minute, I am trying to see if I can hear it drop.” Vakaris didn’t throw a pebble, but a lumpy rock that was the size of his small palms. Marcus and Vakaris stood there for five minutes. Vakaris blew a short sigh and looked at the purple night sky that was tinged with rosy clouds.

“This sky is too nice for us.” Vakaris whispered.

“What was that?” Marcus asked.

“Nothing. Okay, here’s the plan. I am gonna climb the palace.” Vakaris raised his thumb and jerked it upwards. “The very top. No one’s gonna stop me.”

“Why don’t we just leave for New Nivalis?” Vakaris didn’t move his eyes away from the metal palace in front of him.

“I got Iugazwang.”

“What the hell is that?” Marcus dusted off the bits of rock salt from his tight green shirt.

“It is a want-no-a compulsion to climb high places. I want to climb that palace before I leave. I might be dead before I get another chance to come back here. Besides, you could have left without me.”

“I don’t abandon my friends. Let’s just get this done. Like any other job.” Marcus said. Vakaris smirked.

“Like any other job.” The two men jumped across pillars of broken mountain and perched themselves near the elongated entrance towards the palace of Chalbis. The entrance was a long rectangular opening in which the steel mesh that ran along the perimeter of the large chasm stopped and allowed a bridge made of limestone to pass through. A sewage system was built into the chasm. Grimy dark green liquid flowed like a waterfall out of large pipes straight into the chasm. The pipes were large enough for people to enter and navigate. The chasm was shaped like a lopsided donut, with the palace in being the very center. The limestone bridge connected the palace and the rest of the world with only a single straight line. The bridge was lined with dim flood lights that were crafted in the shape of normal street lamps. The steel mesh expanded along the side of the bridge to form a metallic fence. Guards in caps patrolled the bridge with rifled snapped to their shoulders. Their movements were as fluid as solid iron. Their eyes never glanced over the two shadows; one was larger than the other. Marcus had no discernable emotion and hung from the steel mesh. Vakaris couldn’t contain his pleasure. A sensation passed through his very veins when he felt the wind at his back and the notion that a single miscalculation or a slippery hand could lead to a fall towards the bottomless pit. It was electrifying.

In the end, the two of them reached the large mouth of the palace. The palace itself was composed of cubes snapped together with hundreds of curved windows of glass and steel frames. Shallow walkways also wrapped around the entire building. A construction that allowed for several shortcuts or the deployment of guards.

“Try not to slip and fall.” Vakaris said. He eyed a path upwards.

“Are we really doing this just so you can reach the top of the palace?” Marcus asked.

“Yep.” Vakaris and Marcus took a running start and pushed their arms to catch a rough edge. Vakaris turned to Marcus. “I am surprised the ledge didn’t snap under your weight.” Vakaris turned back to the bridge. “Alright, let’s hurry this up.” Marcus craned his head towards where Vakaris was looking. He didn’t see anything out of place, certainly not anything that would cause such a serious response from the man. Vakaris had already climbed three more stories when Marcus focused back on the climb.. “They’re really slow. That’s good, more time for us.” Vakaris said.

“What-” An explosion went off on the bridge. A soot and ash filled the air and a delirious breath washed over the entire entrance. Long red coats held on to red burlap sacks. The palace guards took out their rifles and fired upon the silhouettes. The silhouettes responded by throwing their burlaps sacks. Marcus didn’t understand why until one of the burlap sacks landed and exploded into a pool of fire. Confused orders manifested into war cry once the realization settled in that this indeed was a battle. Rifles spat out brass teeth. The first casualties were on the side of the silhouettes, some dropped their makeshift fireballs at their feet when bullets sunk into their eyes and heads.

Vakaris dug his arms and fingers into the palace walls. His hands scraped along shiny openings for his continued climb. The screams of battle intensified. One would see a million lights flicker on in the brick sea of apartments that surrounded the chasm. Horrid faces that peered into the forgotten quiet of the streets. Some of the revolutionaries were shot and carried themselves all the way into an alleyway before accepting death. Some died on the spot. One guard defending the castle was hit directly by a burlap sack. The fire started in his chest, then arms, then legs, then heads. Rather than rolling on the floor, his inflamed panic threw him over one of the short barriers and straight into the chasm. His flaming body was a small red glint that streaked down towards the chasm.

Vakaris made it to the very top of the palace with one final hop. He stood motionless with his eyes beyond the battle below, beyond the red bricked buildings, beyond the fields of damp mud and gravel roads. He closed his eyes. He could taste the salted sea and see fields of bamboo in his mind. He remembered the fluttering of a red sparrow during the golden days. He remembered his last morning. The morning he woke up to the smell of autumn air and sweet breakfast. The morning where he saw the slanted sunlight that made his wooden flooring glow. He kept a flute under his pillow not a dagger. He saw the glitter in his mother's eyes when he would play it. He ignored the screams of dead soldiers and grew a content smile. Marcus reached the top of the palace, a moment later.

"Alright, let's get going." Vakaris said. He swung his legs off the edge of the building and yawned.

"That's it? You came all this way just for that?" Marcus asked.

“Yeah. That was enough.” The two men made their way down quickly. No more blood was being spilled below, yet the screams did not waver. Orders were still being shouted to imprison the offenders. Vakaris and Marcus landed on a wide walkway that was built around the middle of the palace. The walkway connected to large sections of the palace and was open to the air. Withered daisies hung from the sides. If someone were to look from afar, they would not be able to tell the difference. Vakaris placed his palm on the edge of the walkway. He was poised to continue his descent.

“Thief!” A bullet accompanied the scream. Vakaris ducked and saw the bullet shatter against one of the palace's walls. Vakaris sighed.

“Let’s entertain them.” Vakaris said.

From both sides, soldiers in yellow armor aimed at Marcus and Vakaris. The yellow armor was odd. On their back were pistons and gears. Occasionally steam would rise from their shoulders or back. A young man in red armor stepped forwards. He glared at Vakaris with blue eyes. His general disposition annoyed Vakaris. “You are Vakaris.” He turned to Marcus. “And you are Marcus.” Marcus just crossed his arms and waited. “By orders of the Kaiser, surrender yourself to us.”

“Why?” Vakaris asked.

“For stealing the Gram.” The young man stepped forwards.

“Gram? Oh yeah. That fancy sword. It belonged to your pops, right? Poor little Siegfried lost daddy’s sword. We didn’t steal it.”

“Then why are you trespassing?” Siegfried took another step forward.

“You expect me to be scared of you? You just started growing chest hairs a year ago. I just wanted to catch the view.”

“Are you disrespecting a member of the Chalbian military?” Siegfried asked.

“Oh, sorry. I guess I wasn’t clear with my disrespect. If you don’t understand I was making fun of your age because you are younger than me.” Siegfried drew a sword. “Wait. Why are you worried about the Gram when you had a perfectly good sword on your person?”

“I will not hesitate to cut you down. Surrender now.”

“No.” Vakaris said. He waved his hand and knocked all the soldiers in the frontline off their feet. He took a running leap and leapt off the walkway. He made sure not to crush any of the withering daisies. Marcus jumped after Vakaris through stray gunfire. Marcus too was considerate of the floors. Vakaris put both hands behind his head, as he fell. Marcus caught up to him. “I should have enough mana for temporary suspension.”

“Should?” Marcus asked. He stared at Vakaris as they both fell into the emptiness below.

“Don’t look at me like that. You should know it was a joke.” Vakaris made a sudden motion with his hands and their momentum slowed gradually. They floated towards the large opening for sewage. The spell ceased before an inch before they were inside the tunnel. Vakaris caught himself on the ledge and was splashed with sewage water. Marcus did the same, but the metal bent under his hand. They scrambled to pull themselves up. After some effort they threw themselves inside the sewage tunnel. Vakaris sat on the floor of the tunnel and tried to flick the grimy water out his thin hair.

“Get up. We need to go.” Marcus said. He walked into the tunnel.

“How can you be so stoic when you just got sprayed with piss and shit?” Vakaris asked.

“Victorious breath.” Marcus said.

“Huh?” Vakaris asked. "I am supposed to know what that means?"

“Let’s get a move on.”

Chapter 21: New Companion

Crow rubbed his eyes, and looked out the window of his small study. The Grasslands of Rhei were blossoming with new flowers. It was still cold, at least from Crow's perspective. He thought back to the day that he and Elizabeth met, and he shivered. She mentioned that he had never seen a true Nixian winter. Crow turned back to his journal and finished the sentence that he was writing. He put the pen and journal in his cloak and looked at the stacks of books to his right, all of which were treatises on the history of the new world. To his left there was only one single book. It was a treatise on the history of magic. The door opened behind him and heard a sneeze.

"Sorry for the dust. It is hard to clean this room." Crow said. Elizabeth wiped her nose with a blue handkerchief.

"An old castle is bound to have dust, but I am certain that you have not cleaned. You are always busy jumping from grimoire to grimoire." Elizabeth said. She reached for a stray book and opened it. She thumbed through the pages. It was a book that attempted to categorize dragons into different families, genus, and species.

"Grimoires are spell books. I have not seen a single merchant sell one of those. Besides, am I to expect that the pampered princess knows how to clean." Crow said with a smile.

"I am not pampered!" Elizabeth closed her book. "Have you decided when to share the information with everyone else?" Crow shook his head.

"I want to know as much about Nix before I truly reveal everything to them."

“Understanding them in hopes that they will understand you?”

“That’s the plan.” Crow said.

“I still believe that you are overthinking this. You do not have to spend hours in this study.” Elizabeth waited for Crow to respond, but he didn’t and merely continued to read. “What have you learned about us?”

“I learned about the seamstress guild and how it led to Nix becoming popular for its fashion and clothing.”

Elizabeth recounted happier times with a smile. “The royal family especially valued all those that participated in the business of making clothes. We even gave medals to especially prolific tailors. Some of them still live with us, here in New Nivalis. Anything else?”

“Jack Frost Week seems interesting. Seven days. Each representing a different relationship.” Crow closed his book. “I was hoping that I could get more information on that.”

“Oh!” Elizabeth clapped her hands. A physical tick that Crow saw Elizabeth doing whenever she forgot something. He found it oddly lovable and didn’t know why. “We missed Jack Frost Week. Well, there's always next year.”

“Hello? Is anyone here? Crow? Elizabeth? Anyone?” A voice called out. Crow stood up from his desk and placed his gloves back on. He opened the door and peaked out from the door. Down the hall, he saw a short man with brown curly hair.

“Yes? May I help you?” Crow response. The man smiled sheepishly.

“This place sure is big! Spooky too! Uh, we need your help for something.”

“What might that be?” Elizabeth asked and stepped forwards.

“Well...There’s this woman. A young lass that stormed into my tavern and started to demand drinks.”

“A drunkard?” Elizabeth asked.

“She didn’t seem drunk.... yet. After she demanded drinks, she started to go around to each of my customer’s tables and offered to heal them with her magic.”

“She sounds disruptive, but not necessarily harmful. Healing magic is incredibly useful. It usually involves the element of earth or water. Wounds are then healed, but often some grotesque scars can be left behind if the wound is particularly large. It can also be used to revitalize the strength in people. There should be a book about it in the library.” Crow said.

“Her ‘healing magic’ involved fire.”

“Fire?” Crow asked. The barkeep nodded. "She was using flames to heal? Fire to heal wounds?"

“Yeah. She started juggling balls of fire and doing tricks. The people didn’t seem to mind the show, but she could burn my whole place down! I would be grateful if you could investigate her.” Crow put his hand to his chin.

“Pyromancy has many forms, but I have never read or seen it used for medicinal practice. We’ll check it out.” Crow said.

“Thank you, sir. We just built the tavern; I don’t want to lose it to some random mage.” Crow and Elizabeth were led by the barkeep towards the center of New Nivalis. Now that more

houses were built, people took the time to furnish their homes. A few children played outside. A girl in a brown cloak, no older than fourteen, passed by Crow. The two met matched eyes for a few seconds before the girl turned away quickly. While they walked, the barkeep described the pyromancer that had overtaken his bar. The name of the bar was Winchester. Crow and Elizabeth entered. There they witnessed a red headed woman with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a small flame in the other. Her eyes were as bright as the sun. She sang and danced while the fire started to revolve around her body. The other customers clapped and whistled at her. Some of the more exaggerated patrons threw flowers.

“Excuse me?” Crow approached the woman. She sprung towards Crow and grabbed him by his left hand. She pulled him close.

“You’re too skinny!” The woman said. She turned Crow’s head and examined his eyes. Crow pulled back.

“I am in good health. I do have poor posture, but I am in good health.” The woman relented her grip.

“What about you, whitette?”

“Whitette?” Elizabeth tilted her head.

“Yeah. You got white hair. There’s brunette. There’s blonde. I am redhead. You’re a whitette. Actually, how about I buy you a drink?” The woman smirked.

“No thank you.” Elizabeth said with a neutral expression.

The redhead turned back to Crow. "You seem malnourished. You are definitely missing some proper nutrition in your system. Extremely skinny and no color in those cheeks!"

“Can we have your name?” Elizabeth asked.

“The name’s Ardea. Now once I’ll finish this bottle, I can get to writing you a diet that will bring you to a recommended weight. Eggs and spinach will help.” Ardea took a swig of her bottle.

“Thank you for the suggestion, but that is not necessary. I heard that you were a healer. I know magic myself.” Crow said.

“Really! I haven’t met a mage in ages! Not since I stopped in Arcadia, but I mean that’s the place that you go when you want to see mages. No good bars, though.”

“I think you should slow down. And please extinguish your flames. You made the barkeep nervous.” Elizabeth said.

“Oh yeah. He left in such a hurry. I didn’t know what was wrong with him, he should’ve said something.” After a minute of explaining the situation to the barkeep. Ardea could stay in the bar, if she paid for her drinks and didn’t attempt any “magic shenanigans”. Crow and Elizabeth watched with agape mouths as Ardea downed a third pint.

“So, you are a physician?” Elizabeth asked. Ardea nodded.

“Something like that.” Ardea said. She wiggled her fingers. “I am on pilgrimage. Healing people with my flames whenever they need it. Sometimes for pay, though most unlucky bastards can’t even afford it. Vetus is in a tough spot right now. Tensions across the whole continent.” Ardea looked at her empty tankard. “Hey!” Ardea called a stray waitress. “Be a sweetheart and give me another refill.”

“A pilgrimage? To where?”

“It’s some random nonsense that all Lubrums go on a pilgrimage to learn more about the world or some shit.”

“Lubrums?” Elizabeth asked.

“Fire elementals.” Crow said.

“You don’t know them? They are like humans, but consistently on fire. They also have horns.”

“Why-”

“I was raised by a tribe of them when I was child.” Ardea cut Elizabeth off.

“I see.” Crow understood.

“How can you accept that so easily?” Elizabeth muttered. Elizabeth shook her head. “If you are willing to stay then we could always use another physician. Just try to warn people about your unorthodox healing practices.”

“Okay!” Ardea said.

“And try not to drink this place dry.”

“No.”

The adolescent with the brown cloak stared at the bar from a secluded alleyway in town. She felt a sudden sensation. She turned and saw a woman in full black garb. Her clothes were incredibly pristine. She placed her hand on her cheek.

“It seems you weren’t lying. What was your name again? Tabitha? What do I have to pay you for the information?” The girl asked. Tabitha smiled and tipped her large black hat.

“I have no need for money. The payment is the opportunity to witness what will come from the meeting of you two. It will certainly be entertaining. We shall be thrilled. We await the result of your meeting.”

“These are my personal matters. Mind your own business.”

“Such cruelty, but such is expected from your kind. The skin of a child is unbecoming your disposition. Please remember that I will be watching.... Whether you want me too or not.”

Tabitha disappeared into the darkness. The girl could still feel the witch grinning from far away.

She left the alleyway and quickly sought out an inn.

Chapter 22: A Set of New Faces

Crow groaned. He rubbed his face and grimaced when he felt another migraine coming.

“You seem tired, Crow. Perhaps you should get some rest.” Samuel said. He used a single arm to pull the wagon full of logs, stone, and old bricks along with a rope.

“I am fine. My head has been acting up recently.” Crow said.

“Are you coming down with a sickness? I can ask the elder for some herbs.”

“No worries. Is this the last wagon for today?”

“Yes. We should bring another batch in the next two weeks. Well not me.” Samuel stretched out his wings.

“Huh? What do you mean not you?” Crow asked.

“I will perform a short journey to listen to the Great Bell.” The gargoyle nodded eastward. “I will travel to a secluded place in hopes of hearing the transcendent sound of our birth.”

“Is this a common ritual among gargoyles?”

“Yes. All in hopes of discovering a solution to our lack of reproductive methods. It is how we discovered our original purpose.”

“Hmm. Best of luck on your journey.” Crow extended his hand for a shake. Samuel accepted it with a grin. “Before you go, can you tell the elder that we can push up the supplies to a monthly basis rather than biweekly? Less houses need to be built.”

“Are you certain?” Samuel asked.

“Yes. Kay held a meeting about it, yesterday. He’ll come visit the elder in a few days to iron out some new details for trade.” Crow said. Samuel nodded.

“Well then I bid you farewell.”

“Say hello to the rest of the tribe for me.”

“Of course.” The gargoyle flapped his wings and returned to the forest. Crow watched the workers take stock of the new items.

“Guess that means I am done for the day.” Crow said. He stretched out his arms over his head and yawned. Crow frowned. “Maybe Ardea was right.” Crow slumped his shoulder. On his way towards his room in the castle, he stopped by the market and bought an apple. It was when he neared the castle that he heard a faint sound. Two men came running from the forest. The faint sound became a rumble. A group of armored soldiers followed behind the two men with medallions hanging from their necks. All the soldiers wore faded yellow armor with moving piston and exposed gears. Steam rose from their backs. The leader of the charge was clad in crimson armor.

“You in black! A little help!” The shortest of the pair cried. His scarf flapped around as he ran away from those on horseback. His scarf covered the bottom half of his face. He turned quickly on his heel and made hands signs at one of his pursuers. A blast of wind knocked one of the yellow armored soldiers off their horse. The two men caught up to Crow and stood beside him. Their breaths racked with gasps. Crow stepped forwards and called to the soldiers on their steeds.

“What is going on?” Crow asked. The red soldier slowed down and took off his helmet. A young man was revealed with long blonde hair. His fine eyebrows knit in anger. He jumped off his horse and pointed at the two men beside Crow.

“Are you the leader of this settlement?” The blonde soldier demanded. Steam rose from his back again. The pistons on his armor were smaller than that of the men besides him.

“No, but-”

“These two ruffians come from Chalbis. A country that is several hundred miles away from these grasslands. We have had a long journey chasing them through the majority of the Arbor forest. I demand that you hand them over!”

“Well, they are not exactly in my custody. Sir?” Crow said.

“Siegfried Schulz, nephew of the Kaiser of Chalbis. These are my personal men.”
Siegfried and his companions gave a reserved bow with a fist over their hearts.

“I am not well versed in the politics of Chalbis. Is the Kaiser a high rank?” Crow asked.

“He is like the king.” Vakaris whispered.

“Ah. Why would you chase them for so long? What are their crimes? You came in garbs of warfare. Look around.” Crow gestured to New Nivalis. Several people were leaving their homes in order to view the commotion. “We are not exactly the most developed settlement. You are causing a disruption in a place where your reputation is unknown. What grave crimes did these men do?”

“They stole-”

“We didn’t steal it. Go tell your uncle that we didn’t steal it. It was one those revolutionaries.” Vakaris stamped on the ground.

“Then why were you at the Jade Palace on the same night that Gram was stolen. You also attempted to run from us.”

“You threatened to decapitate us! Of course, we would run away. All for a damn sword! We were gallivanting.” Vakaris responded. Siegfried unsheathed his long sword slowly. His lackeys followed through.

“You are outnumbered.” Siegfried’s dull blue eyes flicked over to Crow. “Do not consider helping these barbarians. I have no qualms razing this place down to enact proper justice.”

“Is this sword really this important?” Crow asked. Marcus just stood still with his arms crossed. His face was chiseled to a stoic expression. He was waiting for the fighting to actually begin before getting ready. Vakaris drew his knives.

“You intend to resist?” Siegfried asked.

“Yeah. That’s why I took out these knives. I know it’s hard for you, but please try to keep up, Siegfried.”

“Stop.” Crow ordered. He raised his hand to block Vakaris from moving forwards. Crow stepped forwards. “It is best that you leave, unless you have definitive evidence. They are no longer within the realm of Chalbis. We will handle their sentence. They have entered without permission.” Siegfried’s eye measured Crow. His lanky frame, his pale skin, his old cloak. Siegfried laughed.

“You want to defend these hooligans who you don’t even know?”

“I know that you drew your weapon first and have yet to give any piece of evidence that they are the thieves you are looking for. There doesn’t have to be a fight over an object.” Crow said.

“You deny my will?” Siegfried asked.

“I guess being the Kaiser’s nephew gets you everything that you want, right? This feeling must be new to you.” Marcus said.

“Oh, holiest of nephews, why don’t you challenge this guy over here to a duel.” Vakaris clasped Crow’s shoulder. “He wins, we walk. You win, we turn ourselves in. A classic Chalbian solution.” Vakaris said.

“I rather fight for myself.” Marcus said.

“Nah. Let him.” Vakaris winked at Crow. Crow rolled his eyes.

“Is this only way to settle this?” Crow asked. Siegfried and Vakaris nodded to each other. “Fine. Let us duel, I suppose. Though, let it be known that my intention is not to kill or maim.”

“I accept those terms.” Siegfried said. “I have no reason to hurt a man that I just met. Even if he is at odds.”

“Nice. I’ll count to three.” Vakaris pushed Crow forwards. “Now gentleman, I want a clean fight.” Crow and Siegfried faced each other. “Three.” Siegfried raised his sulfuric-yellow sword. “Two.....One!” Siegfried charged forwards with steel in hand. After a flash of yellow

light, Siegfried was found on the floor several feet away from three men. Crow cracked his fingers.

“I made the lightning bolt more blunt than sharp. You should have a bruise, but nothing else.” Crow said.

“A mage? Putrid filth!” Siegfried raised his sword. “You deny your pure state of humanity to perform those hellish practices!”

“Hah!” Vakaris cheered. “I knew you were a mage. You look the part and everything.”

Crow put his hands in his pockets. “Are we done, yet?”

“Your magic will be your downfall.” Siegfried and his fellows got upon their horses. Vakaris cupped his mouth.

“Go cry to your uncle about how you got your ass handed to you!” Vakaris screamed.

Siegfried pulled the reins of his horse and eyed Crow before leaving. The soldier of Chalbis rode back into the Woodlands. The gallop of their horses made a thunderous sound. Crow turned away once all seven of them were out of sight. Vakaris and Marcus turned on their heels and waltzed into New Nivalis. Crow stopped them.

“I don’t think so. We still need to talk.”

Marcus and Vakaris toasted their steel tankards and downed the golden-brown beer. They ordered a second round with toothy grins. Their faces flushed by the alcohol. Crow sat across from the two with a glass of water. His eyes focused on the entrance and his fingertips were near

his mouth. They were at the Winchester. Vakaris noticed Crow jotting something down in his journal.

“Fancy journal.” Vakaris said.

“Thank you.” Crow said. Crow finished his scrawl and pocketed his journal. “So, you know magic?” Crow asked.

“Who me?” Marcus asked.

“Both of you know magic?” Crow raised his eyebrow. Vakaris elbowed Marcus in the ribs.

“All this guy can do is punch people. I know wind magic.” Vakaris said while he dusted off his shoulder. “Impressed?”

“I was more interested in the way you wove the spell. You made a specific gesture with your hands. You must not be from around here.” Crow said. Vakaris nodded.

“I am from the Land of Tides. That’s just how we do it there. Hand gestures and Haikus.”

“It is incredible to see magical technique differing across different nations.” Crow said. “You must come from a wealthy family.”

“What gave you that impression?” Vakaris asked.

“I was under the impression that everyone that knew magic in the Land of Tides came from a wealthy family.” Vakaris stretched his arms and placed his feet on the table.

“I did find that strange that we used the same currency when I got here, but watch yourself friend, all of us are *not* born with silver spoons up our asses. The two of us are mercenaries.”

“People eat on this table.” Marcus said. He shoved Vakaris feet off the table. Vakaris almost fell to the floor.

“I gathered as much. Then how about a job offer?” Crow asked. The doors to the tavern opened. Tristan squinted into the room until he saw Crow. He walked towards the three gentlemen. Tristan gave Crow a warm handshake. Crow pointed at Tristan with his thumb. “This is Tristan.”

“Gentlemen.” Tristan gave a curt nod. “These two must be the reason that you sent for me. I heard that they caused quite a commotion earlier today.”

“Tristan is in search of capable people to act as guards to the town.” Crow said.

“Guard duty is far too disciplined for me.” Vakaris answered. “But thanks for the drink. Let’s go.” Vakaris stood up.

“Wait.” Tristan called out. “I don’t need you two to act like moppets. I just need capable people to watch over citizenry. You don’t even need to wear uniforms. It is only a temporary position.”

“What’s with the leniency?” Marcus asked.

“Woah! Leniency? Where did you learn such a complicated word like that? I am so proud of you.” Vakaris nudged Marcus. Marcus scoffed.

“New Nivalis is getting new visitors every day. People have grown very interested in our city-state. Many intend to form new lives here when we still have barely been able to set up proper crops and plumbing, and all the practical functions of any city. We can hardly keep up. We need people to watch over the streets, stop a scuffle here and there. If not, then crime will rise. While we were traveling most people behaved themselves, but not anymore. For now, we are willing to take anyone we can.” Tristan explained.

“Seems a fitting job for two mercenaries.” Crow said. He stood up from his chair. Vakaris and Marcus huddled together. They whispered a short exchange. Vakaris eyed Tristan.

“What’s the pay?” Vakaris asked.

“A hundred a week.” Tristan said. With one glance, the two mercenaries nodded to each other.

“Two-hundred.” Vakaris offered his hand.

“One-fifty.” Tristan said. Vakaris and Marcus exchanged glances.

“We can work with that.”

“The two of you are now guards of New Nivalis.”

“.... For now.” Vakaris reminded.

Chapter 23: Little Bird

Ardea was only in New Nivalis for a week and the woman had already earned the reputation of a great healer, and heavy drinker. The appreciation that Ardea built from her healing practices was shattered every time she went out for a drink.

“Hi!” Ardea hiccupped. “Crow!”

“Ardea this is getting tiresome. Soon enough they’re not going to let you come here again.” Crow said.

“Actually, while she causes a ruckus. She’s good business and very kind. I would take affectionate drunks over those who want to start a fight anyway.” A passing waitress commented.

“Thank y-ou Hi-lda. See Crow people li-ik-ke me.” Ardea giggled.

“Please stop encouraging her.” Crow looked at the bartender. “Did she pay for her drinks?”

“Yeah. She paid for everything, no worries there. Like I said, she’s not too bad.” Crow offered his hand to Ardea.

“Let’s get you home.” Crow said. Ardea held on to Crow by his shoulder. On the way back to Ardea’s room in the inn, she occasionally tripped over nothing and would have surely busted her chin if not for Crow desperately trying to keep her steady. Crow gazed at the sky and found himself shivering. The sky was just a black empty pool. He felt a tension in his skull and

heart. The migraines were getting worse. The air tasted bitter and sour. The nocturnal creatures of the night were oddly silent. He passed by houses and saw that everyone had already retreated to their beds. Crow realized that he wouldn't be able to afford sleep on this night. He wondered if Vakaris and Marcus were staying in the same inn. Then his mind drifted back to Elizabeth. Was she asleep? He shook his head and refocused on guiding Ardea. Crow left hand was pulsating and was growing warmer.

"We are almost to the inn. Come on." Crow encouraged. The two made it to the front door of the inn. "Here we are, Ardea. Make sure to get a good rest." Ardea didn't move and pointed down the road. A brown cloaked figure stood by the entrance to the inn. She was lit by one of the few electrical bulbs properly installed into the town. The bulbs were still being tested and it would be some time till it would become commonplace.

"She looks kinda mean. Don't worry if she tries anything. I'll protect you!" Ardea said. She positioned herself in front of Crow and then vomited. Crow pulled Ardea up and ensured that she entered through the front door. The innkeeper was a younger man with brown eyes. He welcomed the two. Ardea crawled to her room by herself and entered a deep sleep. Once Ardea was secured in her room, the innkeeper turned to Crow.

"The girl outside in the brown cloak wanted to meet you, Crow. I think she traveled all the way here to meet you. Is she a friend? Family?" The innkeeper inquired.

"Something like that." Crow stepped back out underneath the empty night. The two stared at each other down. Crow looked into her green eyes. Crow motioned towards the forest. She followed five steps behind him. They spoke no words between each other. Everything about her was silent. Even her steps. After a few minutes of walking, the two found themselves within

the sight of a large oak. It was an old tree with gnarled roots that had risen from the ground. Crow sat on one of these gnarled roots. He intertwined both his hands and placed his chin on them. There was another bout of silence. Crow waited for the girl in the brown cloak to speak first.

“Do you know my name?” She asked. The figure threw back her hood.

“Cora. That was the name that I gave you. The first name that came to my mind at least. They didn’t warn me.” Crow said. Pain seared itself into Crow’s skull. He cradled his head. “You’re the reason for my migraines. Your emotions are intense. It is supposed to be faint, but proximity must amplify it.”

“Why?” Cora asked.

“Why? You seek the reason I brought you back to life? I was forced into it by my lovely mother. I wish there was a better reason. You are my thrall because I was raised in a cult that believed that the only way to save this world was to bring the dead back to life.” Crow said. His throat was getting dry. “They believed that there would come a day where a necromancer would need to create an army of the dead.”

“Look at me.” Cora said. She raised her left hand and waved it over her eyes. They gradually faded from green to purple. Evidence that she was an undead creature. Crow would raise his head only to turn back to the dirt. He stamped his foot on the ground and kicked a pebble to the side. Cora clenched her left hand.

“Don’t look away from me!” A lightning bolt sailed towards Crow. He pushed it aside with a flick of his hand. He didn’t turn his eyes away from the dirt. Crow heard a nearby bush shake. Crow looked up.

“The spell that I created. It would have been perfect if that was the thing that killed me.” Crow said. “.... Yet, I deflected it. It was almost like an instinct. A feeling to find a reason to keep living. That same feeling brought you here. Perhaps there is still a scrap of dignity within me, and I don’t know why. Why does a part of me want to keep living?” Cora balled her small hands into fist. She screamed and bashed her fist into Crow’s chest. There was no magic, only her small fist. Crow accepted the blows and waited for her anger to subside.

“I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” Cora said. Her voice cracked and petered out with every shout. “How many years were taken away from me! Only for me to come back, as your slave!” Cora slowed her assault slowly until she stopped completely. Her long black hair stuck to her forehead. It covered her face like a black curtain. Cora raised her fist once more, but she faltered. He heard Cora whimper. She was crying. Crow thought of his options. Then he slowly embraced the young crying child. Crow felt odd doing it, yet when he cried as a child, he imagined being hugged.

“If even a useless man such as I can find a reason to keep going. Then maybe you can as well.” Crow whispered. “I know it's hard. Every day, I just want to run away, but maybe I can find something. I want to atone for what I have done.” Necromancer and thrall stood in absolute silence under the darkest night. Cora pushed herself away and wiped her tears.

“Is this settlement the reason that you keep going? The reason that you continue to live?” Cora asked.

“Yes. The people here have given me something that I never had before. For the first time, I break bread with people. Actual people. Not anxious followers of a cult, but real people. I still don’t know why they are nice to me.” Crow said. He heard a dry chuckle from Cora.

“Maybe that’s how people are supposed to be.” Cora said. “You and I wouldn’t understand. Even through it all, people still bear kindness.”

“Even through what?” Crow asked.

“It feels like this world has been standing in the same spot for years. I watched the people across this land struggle.... Never mind.” Cora turned to Crow. “I will stay in this town and gather my thoughts for now, but this doesn’t mean that I accept my existence as your thrall.”

“I will not ask of you anything that you don’t want to perform. The magic that binds us, is strong, but I won’t dare use it. You are your own being.” Crow said. “I would never dare.”

“We will talk again.” Cora said. His voice was still a horse. Cora placed her hood on. She waved her hand over her face. A glimmer turned her eyes green. “Goodnight.” Crow watched Cora go on the path to the New Nivalis. He peered into the forest. His heart was still tense. Crow now knew for certain that it was going to be a restless night. Crow left the forest.

Tabitha laughed by herself.

“I surely thought the rustling of the bush would turn their attention to me. It would have made this confrontation a little more interesting.” Tabitha shrugged. She walked to the gnarled roots and sat down with her legs crossed. “The girl didn’t have the stomach for spilling blood after all. All that rage and she couldn’t kill the harbinger of her pain. What a farce.” Tabitha’s smile was as white as the moon. “Restless necromancer. What shall I do with you?”

Chapter 24: When the Clock Stopped

Cora woke up with a groan. Her purple eyes glazed over the room. She looked for shapes in the dark. She pulled her knees close to her chest and sat in silence for some time. The sunlight glimpsed through the blinds of her inn room. There was also a candle placed on the nightstand in case someone required light. Cora grasped a small brown pouch. The pouch was lighter than she remembered. She peered through and only saw coins. Some money she gained from doing odd jobs in her travels. She wondered how many times Crow did the same thing. Cora tossed the pouch back to the nightstand.

“He was nothing like I expected.” Cora whispered to herself. She expected many things. A scythe. That was the classic one. All necromancers were set to have scythes. Rotting flesh. Her best-case scenario was that her necromancer would be touting around with a gaggle of undead. He would use his necrotic powers either to satiate his own hedonism or seek the secret to eternal life. Worst case was a full-blown lich king. A man that lost all sense of humanity and was nothing more than a pile of rotting flesh. A man that would get an ageless life with the caveat of incurable flesh and a weakness in the form of a black heart, yet Cora found none of this. Instead, she met face to face with a man haunted by sins that he did not wish to commit. A man that was clearly hanging on to life with a thin rope. There was a knock on the door. Cora jumped. She decided to ignore but couldn’t once it happened again. Cora dressed herself and put on her green eyes. She opened the door.

A flash of scarlet was the first thing that she saw. The bright color disorientated her before she saw the face of a woman. The same drunk that her necromancer carried home.

“What can I do for you?” Cora asked. Half of her face was hidden behind the door.

“Crow told me about you.” She said. Cora went to close the door. Ardea pushed her hand to block the door. “Wait! Wait! Wait! He just told me that he knows you from his childhood and that you weren’t used to being around others. He was pretty vague about it. He just told me to help you out.”

“Help me out with what exactly?” Cora asked. Why would Crow ask this woman to help her out?

“Anything. He believed that you needed someone at your side.” Ardea said.

“I bet you think that he must be very caring.”

“At least the very least he is trying. I don’t know why the two of you are like this, but he seems like he truly sympathizes with you.” Ardea said. “It’s not every day that you can catch up with someone that you used to know.”

“A master giving his thrall sympathy....” Cora said.

“I didn’t catch that. What did you say?” Ardea asked.

“Nothing—I won’t exactly be doing anything exciting.” Cora said. “I am not very interesting.”

“I love boring. Let’s get breakfast. A young girl like you should be treated.” Ardea cheered.

“I don’t have much money and I am not a child.” Cora muttered. “I’ll just have to hunt for my food.”

“Nah. Don’t worry about it. I’ll pay for it.” Ardea offered.

“I cannot let you do- “

“Come on! I’m hungry.” Ardea pulled Cora by the arm and ripped her outside.

“Wait, At least let me grab my cloak!” Ardea guided Cora throughout the gravel roads of New Nivalis.

“That’s the tailor’s shop. Apparently, Nixian tailors are among the best in all of Vetus, so maybe you can get yourself a new cloak. Elizabeth and I have been trying to convince Crow to do the same.”

“I don’t care.” Cora said. Ardea did not seem phased by Cora’s tone. Why was she being pulled around like a child? Crow was not helping her at all. Then Cora watched a pair of adolescent girls walk the opposite way of her. They waved at her. Cora waved back, but only once they left her view. Cora looked at her own hand. Surprised at her own response.

“Oh! How about we visit the bakery. You can get yourself something sweet or savory.” Ardea said. They got themselves seats outside of the bakery. Cora tried to maintain a low profile, but Ardea just radiated energy. Many people passing along stopped and spoke with the healer. Cora was there to witness much of Ardea’s advice to her patient. “I am not a physician; I am a healer. My job is to heal wounds in the moment, not operate or aid in long-term medical problems. So, take my advice with a grain of salt will you. But if you ever start bleeding come to me, first.” Ardea winked at Cora. Whenever the conversation shifted to Cora, Ardea was always there to divert the topic. The redhead seemed to have some tact after all. One thing that Cora did

notice was that there were many couples out and about, so early in the morning. Cora stopped people watching when the food came.

The food tasted well. Cora was served a common Nixian breakfast of eggs, sausage, baked beans. Ardea ordered the same meal, but with a side of cauliflower chess. Ardea tried to make conversation herself with Cora but eventually the healer focused solely on her meal. Ardea licked her fingers after the meal was done which Cora found appalling yet said nothing.

“So, what do you want to do now? Perhaps go out to the town.” Ardea said.

“I want to go back to the inn.” Cora said.

“Huh? But there is so much to do. Why stay in the inn? You really are like Crow.” Ardea said.

“I am not like Crow.” Cora said. “I appreciate the meal, but I truly need to gather my thoughts on something. Preferably alone.” Cora stood up. Ardea clasped her hands together.

“I understand. Let me walk you home at the very least.” The walk back was uneventful until Vakaris and Marcus were spotted along the path. Marcus eyed the street carefully, meanwhile Vakaris sauntered down the street with his arms raised and his hands behind his head. Vakaris smirked at them.

“This must be Cora and the lecherous Ardea.” Vakaris said. “Ladies.”

“You have no right to call me lecherous.” Ardea said. She smoothed her hair and stepped closer to Vakaris.

“It was a joke. Redheads can have such a fiery temper.”

“I’ll show real fire!”

“How did you know my name?” Cora asked. “Are you one of Crow’s friends?”

“Yup, but that’s not how I know.” Vakaris waved a leather journal. Ardea’s eyes widened. Cora had watched Crow write in that leather journal before. She pushed her hands forwards to grab it, but Vakaris raised the journal above her head. It was just out of reach for Ardea. Vakaris laughed until Ardea jabbed him in the stomach and snatched it.

“Crow got you out of that confrontation with that bastard from Chalbis and you steal from him?” Ardea asked. She held the journal close to her chest and shook her head.

“You can be far too emotional. I only peeked here and there. Half of it is just personal reminders, list of books to read, things to buy, and abstract poems for certain spells.”

“This book contains his personal thoughts and feelings.” Ardea said. “Things he doesn’t just belch out.” Cora eyed the book. If Crow’s internal thoughts from the night before were written there, then she was not in the best position. Marcus placed a hand on her shoulder. The large man towered over everyone, but her especially. For a moment, she knew what the outcome was going to be. Her secret as an abomination was out. He would surely capture and execute her. Thus, was the way. Then Marcus nodded. His face kept a stoic expression and he just nodded at her. Cora blinked.

“If they were truly personal, he wouldn’t have written them down. I had my suspicions when I met him. We are kindred spirits, he and I.” Vakaris made a claw over his hand and feigned some kind pain. Ardea rolled her eyes. “We have brands upon our flesh that define us. You know, we have a certain tale about a necromancer where I come from. The story of Chihiro,

a necromancer that is clad in white. Crow wears black, but still.” Ardea heard the word necromancer and popped open the book.

“A necromancer...” Ardea thumbed the book. "I mean, he dresses like one. Aren't they also known as black magicians?" Ardea shrugged, "I am gonna tell him that we know. Knowing you, you probably have plans to use this for a laugh.”

“You think so little of me,” Vakaris craned his head towards Cora. "Why are you sweating? Oh yeah, you're the thrall.”

“You should have started with that.” Marcus spoke. "The poor girl thought I was going to hurt her.”

“How about we tell Crow over a drink.” Ardea recommended. “Smooth him over with some alcohol and he won't get as mad with you.”

“It's far too early for a drink.” Vakaris said. "This is why I called you lecherous.”

“Then we'll do it later tonight.” Ardea turned to Cora. "You should come too. I'll speak to the guy who runs it. He'll let you in without much fuss.”

“Uh.” Cora could only mutter. The conversation turned back to a disagreement between Ardea and Vakaris, yet Cora was baffled. People found out she was a thrall, and nothing came of it. They just talked with her. No disgust or vilification. Was this the reason that Crow was still able to hold on to hope. The company was obnoxious, but Cora would take that over her past dealings. Cora looked at the Crow's journal. His fleeting thoughts condensed into ink and paper. Perhaps they were in a similar situation.

So, this is what happened to his journal. It was stolen. Crow walked into the bar and found his journal right in the middle of the table when he arrived. Ardea was on her third drink and Vakaris grinned at Crow. Crow sat to the right of Elizabeth. Crow didn't know how Cora was allowed in with her young appearance, but she was also present. She had a cup of water. Crow shook his head. There were more important things to worry about.

"So, you all know." Crow said. He tapped his fingers on the table. What did they think of him now? Crow turned to Elizabeth. He was eternally grateful for the understanding that she displayed towards him, but she was the most virtuous person that Crow had met. Vakaris on the other hand.

"It is not respectable to steal from a man that assisted you." Elizabeth scolded. "I was under the impression that you believed Crow to be one of your friends."

"I do consider him a friend. I was just curious. He is always writing in it. Don't lie to me Elizabeth. You wanted to see it too." Vakaris said. "I just had to know what little secrets he wrote in it."

"It doesn't matter whether he did or not. What do you think of me?" Crow asked.
"Genuinely, now that you essentially know my greatest secret."

"Truthfully?" Vakaris asked.

"Truthfully." Crow said.

"Brutally honest?"

"Brutally honest."

"I think you are a coward." Vakaris said. He rubbed his hands together. "You got all this power and you run away from it. I mean, I would use necromancy to set a couple things right back home. You could use that power to protect people, yet you're too wrapped inside your head. You are always going to have people like that farm girl."

"Farm girl?" Elizabeth wondered.

"When Crow was--"

"It's not important." Crow said.

"Come on. You gotta tell her about that small town you visited." Vakaris said.

"I want to hear it, too." Ardea said. "Even Marcus looks interested!"

"I am curious," Marcus said. "You are an interesting man, Crow."

"Come on be a storyteller." Vakaris said. Crow sighed. "It'll be nice to get something like this off your chest."

"Very well. I'll tell you all about it, but I won't go into every detail. I rather not spend time on this tale."

I was fifteen when this happened. It was only a year after I left home behind. I was still too scared to leave Telos, so I mostly stayed away from the mountains. It was.... Unnerving. I had to watch my back at all times. I wasn't able to sleep. Insomnia is a common side effect of necromancy, but the nightmares of a cult chasing me down did not help in the slightest.

Telos is a province within the Magnus Empire. It is mostly known for farming and cultivation. The necromantic cult is hidden to most of the world but is an unspoken truth among the normal people in the providence. The Emperor of Magnus, at least officially, outlawed and denounced them. It was for this reason that I kept my head down and never told a soul about who I was. How did no one talk about my black cloak? I was still growing at the time and it was too large for me. Thus, I made the excuse that I found it randomly upon my travels and wore it because it was all I had.

The town that was placed in the outskirts of Telos was larger than most towns. Since it was on the outskirts, it was closest to the city of Parthos. The little town was called Janus. It was apparently named after the man who decided to settle there, Maxwell Janus. The town had plenty of rustic charm. Even I, who would have preferred a large city, was swept up in the humility and the warmth of the people. I arrived with the notion of doing some odd jobs. I was to take the money and continue my wandering. The people welcomed the extra hand. My apprentice level magic interested them. They mostly got me to slay annoying beasts or light some fires around the town. Where did I sleep? Well....

The family was by the name of Morrison. The father was named Hector Morrison, and the mother was named Sandra Morrison. They had two children and a dog. The oldest was their son, Maxwell Morrison. They wanted to give recognition to Maxwell. The dog was named Chap, he was a loyal pet. Their second child was.... a daughter. Her name was Felicity. They were the kindest family that I had seen at that point. Janus was already filled with such an open and trusting presence, but the Morrison family we were something else. They treated me like I was

part of them. I lived with them. I ate with them. I worked with them. I was a random adolescent that they accepted into their home.

I continued to work with the town of Janus. People started to recognize me on the street. They tipped their straw hats, waved, and some would even embrace me. I found myself spending more time with Felicity. Hector had taken a liking to me. He found me responsible and mature for my age. You see, Felicity and I were close in age. She was only two years older than I.

She was a bundle of energy. She would always grab me along for an adventure in the woods. She couldn't stand still. She worked the fields and enjoyed it. I thought her charming and she was certainly beautiful. It was hard to deny it, but I knew that I couldn't stay long. When I first entered Janus, my intention was to stay for a month. I stayed for nearly a year. My thoughts drifted. I wondered to myself, should I stay here? Should I make a life here? Beyond my turmoil, I found myself spending more and more time with Felicity. We grew too close and that was my biggest regret.

"So, you got yourself a lover when you were younger." Vakaris interrupted. "I don't understand why you treated it like it was a massive misstep. We all fall into the trap of adolescent love. I certainly fell in love with the first girl I fancied."

"It was a mistake." Crow said. "One that shouldn't have happened."

"Vakaris, didn't you read the whole tale?" Marcus asked. "You should know why he feels it was a mistake."

"I'll be honest, I skimmed it." Vakaris said. "I saw that our mage had a young lover and wanted to hear everything from his own mouth."

"Crow, you don't have to share, if you don't want to." Elizabeth said.

"But I want to hear the end of it," Ardea said. "Oh well, I guess my curiosity doesn't have to be sated."

Crow sat in his chair and felt the hot hair against his face. This was a story that he had never told. A story that was meant to be only written across the pages of his journal. He was nervous yet enticed to reveal it all. To finally tell someone about that moment. "I already started to recount. I might as well finish this."

Felicity and I had our love affair for a few months. It was a small town. Everyone figured out about our relationship. Her father gave me a ring. A ring that belonged to his mother. I still don't know why he did it. It was idiotic. I was a stranger. Nothing good comes from mystery. I saw that everyone expected me and Felicity to marry. I considered the notion of marriage. I told myself that I loved Felicity. Now looking back, perhaps it was only lust, or perhaps it was that she was my first love. It didn't matter. What mattered was that I couldn't keep the lie. I told myself that if I was going to marry her, then I should tell her everything. I wanted the meeting to be at the lake, but she wanted us to go to the barn. It was more secluded, she said. Walls to hide the both of us.

So, I grabbed her by the wrist, and I looked into her golden-brown eyes. I took in all her beauty and charm. At the time, she had flowers, scorpion grasses, woven into her hair. I gathered

my courage and took a deep breath. I spoke as I speak now. "Felicity, my dear. I want you to know all of me. To know my past before we can form a future together. Felicity.... I was a necromancer."

Her eyes widened and her loving smile became twisted. She pulled her hands back, as if I burned her. She backed away from me quickly. She tripped and screamed at me. I stood there, unmoving and she just screamed at me.

I would rather her feel hatred. Hatred that I put on a façade and lied to her. I would rather her feel sadness or shock.

She did show any of these emotions. She picked a sharp pitchfork nearby. Her hands trembled. Her bright summer dress darkened by the lack of light. She called me a "Vile creature."

The only emotion that Felicity felt towards me was fear. Her fear dictated her next actions. She charged at me with the pitchfork. I begged her to take a moment and relax. I told her not to resort to violence. I tried to stop her. I really did! I tried to subdue her! The pitchfork nearly clipped my face. The three edges dug into a haystack. I begged her once more. Then she raised the pitchfork high above her. Her golden-brown eyes pooled with murderous intent. I cried out. I told her that I would leave, and she would never see me again. Her only desire at that moment was to destroy me. She wanted to kill *me*.

The warm light faded from her eyes. Replaced by a single aim to destroy me. The door to the barn opened and I saw Hector's face go from a dopey smile to absolute horror. It is one thing to see a man scared. It is another to be the reason why he was horrified. He expected to find his daughter and his new son-in-law. He was confused by his daughter's rabid screaming but was

still conscious enough to know that I was the source of it. The next hours were a blur, but the town chased me for miles. Torches and any spare items to be used as weapons.

I killed one of them. I still don't why I defended myself. I should have let him take my life, yet I fought back. I always chalked it up to instinct. Either way, I escaped. I bought a new pair of gloves. I decided my goal. To find a small town, one where I could stay an outsider. Live a useless life in which no one knew my name. My goal was to live between the realm of life and death. Just like the creations of a necromancer. The name of the man that I killed was John Brook. He and his family always treated me well. I wanted to visit his funeral, but my selfish will to live stopped me. One sight of me and everyone in town would have hanged me.

The table was silent, yet all the other patrons were enjoying their time in the bar. They drank and traded jokes. They had no idea what was occurring at their table. Vakaris sighed. Marcus just crossed his arms and closed his eyes taking the time to digest the tale. Ardea watched the black alcohol in her cup ripple. Cora rubbed her neck, as if she was massaging a lump. Elizabeth looked at her own hands. Even she was contemplative.

"So, now you know." Crow breathed out these words like he had holding him in his whole life. Marcus finished his meditation and was the first to speak.

"To lay your heart before us. How do you feel?" Marcus asked. Crow considered Marcus' question. Crow had to admit it. His heart felt lighter. The process of telling the story was unnerving, but now that it was over. He felt a sense of ease. The same ease that he felt when Elizabeth accepted him.

“It... It felt good. Like I just rid myself of all this pressure.” Crow said. “I suppose I’ll have to thank you for forcing me into this situation.”

“I know. I know. I am quite good at solving people’s problems.” Vakaris said.

“No one is free from regret.” Ardea said.

“Hey.” Vakaris said. Crow was startled by the honest face that Vakaris had formed. His smile was replaced by a thin line and his eyes lost their shine. “Take this from a man that killed for money. We all have our stories. Moments where we feel that the world is disgusted by our presence, but that is no reason to see yourself as less than. Trust me. Feeling remorse just means your better than the vile.”

“He’s right.” Ardea said. “I never killed for money, but not everyone appreciated my magic.” Ardea turned to Cora. “We’re not gonna look down upon either of you.”

“We accept the two of you.” Marcus said. “It would hardly be fair to judge when we have our own sins.”

“Well....” Crow said, “This night has certainly become something else. All because you wanted to read my journal.”

“Indeed.” Cora said. “But we thank you. I never thought that there would be someone who would know what I am and accepted me all the same.”

“Now that’s out of the way,” Ardea slammed her palm on the table. “Hilda! Be a dear and get a drink for all of us!” Ardea said. Hilda came swiftly and distributed a drink for all and refilled Cora’s glass of water. Ardea raised her glass. “A toast,” Ardea paused. “A toast to ourselves. That we are still standing here and that we found people much like our own.”

“A toast.” Everyone followed Ardea’s lead, and the rest of the night passed by them. They spent the time together swapping lighter stories. Crow retold the story of being struck by lightning.

“Crow, may I speak to you for a moment?” Cora asked.

“Of course,” Crow said.

“It feels nice that we have people like us. Well not entirely like us, but you understand what I am saying.”

“Yeah. I am sorry that I forced you to come with us.” Crow apologized. “I just thought it would be nice to have some cheer. I didn’t know how you would be after our talk and I was worried.”

“It’s fine. I have no intention of being your thrall, yet I plan to stay here for a little longer. These people have done you some good.” Cora said. She extended her hand. “Our introduction wasn’t the greatest, so how about a second attempt. My name is Cora.”

Crow shook Cora’s hand. “My name is Crow. It is a pleasure to meet you.” It was odd to have a second introduction, but their connection was odd to begin with.

“Let’s find a reason to live.” Cora said. She pulled her brown hood over her head. “Goodnight, Crow. Ardea, come on. I’ll guide you home as reimbursement for the breakfast.”

“Ok!” Ardea said and willingly was guided back home by Cora. “You, Pendragons sure are helpful.”

Crow stood outside the bar. He stared at all the stars in the sky. He wasn't sure how, but every night they seemed brighter than the last.

"Our companions have quite the characters," Elizabeth said.

"Yeah, but I can't deny that character is helping me in many ways," Crow said. "I would have held onto that tale for all my life if it wasn't for Vakaris' shenanigans." Crow chuckled. "It's really late."

"Yes, it is," Elizabeth said. "Would it be a bother if you walk with me?" Elizabeth asked.

"You're never a bother." Crow said. Both began their walk to Elizabeth's home. Crow imagined that it was difficult to adjust for Elizabeth, but she never complained about her living arrangement. Elizabeth was the first to speak during the walk. "That's why you played dumb, wasn't it? I tried to garner your attention and sometimes you would just respond too literally. I thought you were daft, this whole time, you were scared that you were going to hurt me."

"I didn't want to repeat what caused me to leave Janus in the first place. I didn't know how you would have reacted if you knew the truth." Crow said.

"I will never raise my hand against you. You know that. I am not Felicity. I do not fear you and I definitely do not wish to cause you any harm." Elizabeth said.

"It is more complicated than that." Crow said.

"Is this about reputation?" Elizabeth asked. "My father is considered the worst ruler in the entire history of Nix. My mother was a cold-hearted noble who never once glanced at the people's problem or mine for that matter. I tout about like I am still a queen, but I only have two things to my name, knowledge on proper dining room etiquette and how to swing around a

sword. What else could they say?" They reached the front of Elizabeth's door. Crow sighed and looked at the castle that he called home. "At the very least, can we have a proper conversation?" Elizabeth asked. She was right. Crow owed her that much.

"Let's talk inside." Crow said.

Crow had never been to Elizabeth's small cottage until that moment. It was almost empty. Elizabeth detached her sheath from her waist and hung it on a small peg right next to the door. There was a table and chair that stood in the center of the room. It reminded Crow of the cottage that he woke up in when he first arrived in Jotun. Elizabeth sighed and sat on her bed. Crow sat on the wooden chair, but then he noticed that Elizabeth patted the space next to her. Crow sat next to her on the bed.

"Alright." Elizabeth said after a bit of silence. "Let's talk. Why do you not wish to pursue a romantic relationship with me? I want you to be honest even if it's something as menial as my looks, I simply want the truth." It was not because of Elizabeth's appearance. In fact, that was one of the many reasons why it was so hard for Crow to say no. There was also her bravery and her general demeanor among other things.

Crow sighed before speaking, "I, well, you know my past."

"I do." Elizabeth said.

"Well, yes, but, well. I." Crow stopped talking and composed his thoughts. Now was not the time to form half sentences and incomplete thoughts. Elizabeth asked for an honest answer and Crow was determined to give her one. Crow took off his gloves and rubbed his hands together. "When I was child, my mother saw her children as followers of an orthodoxy. We were

her practitioners first and her children second.” Crow said. “But she knew the power of a mother. She knew very well that sporadic gestures of love could manipulate our minds. She asked us to listen, and we did because maybe this time, maybe this one time, she would once again treat us like we were her children. This is the reason that I don’t want to start this kind of relationship with you. Elizabeth, I don’t think I know how to love someone properly.” Crow turned to Elizabeth and saw her sympathy for him. He didn’t want it. He knew his place in this world and it was not to feel the joys of romance or camaraderie. Crow lowered his head and chuckled. “I said more about myself today than any other day in the past.” Crow saw Elizabeth think for a moment. It was only a decisive moment. She took Crow’s left-hand and placed it on her cheek. “You’re insane.” How could she be this bold!

“Your palm feels warm.” Elizabeth said. She shrugged and drew closer to Crow’s face. “Your face, your skin, your eyes.... They all look normal. Some might even say boring.” Elizabeth placed her hand on Crow’s cheek. “I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I am more stubborn than you.” Elizabeth smiled. “I won’t drag you into something that you don’t want. So, I will ask you one more time, will you stay with me tonight?” Crow didn’t know how he responded, but the ensuing night and morning supplied enough evidence that his answer was yes.

Chapter 25: Of Concrete and Leather

Huts surrounded the throne. These huts were not made of a silken cloth or a strewn together animal leather, but concrete and rusty rebar. The huts were triangle orifices that lead to the interior of dead buildings that were splayed out like fallen trees. Rather than doors, the entrances were covered by two hanging pieces of canvas. The buildings were monuments of the world before the current one. Clear evidence of seemingly a dreamlike place that no longer existed. People were active. They used bridges of metal meshes to cross between buildings and carry their workload. Ant workers that carried boxes of steel tools, tools that mostly consisted of weapons. They navigated brazenly across these meshes for they were accustomed to this process. Canteens and flasks filled with muddy water swung from their black studded belts. This chunk of city smelled like leather, sawdust, and grass. Grass had showered over most of the uninhabited areas. The tools were carried to another set of workers. More heavier objects would be pulled up with a pulley system that was fabricated from old service elevators. Children workers would sharpen the tools and ensure that they were practical for use. Those in the awkward state of adolescence would find hidden crevices to have sex or avoid work, they mostly did both. The buildings served a third purpose beyond a place for work and sleep. It formed a heavy border between that southern corner of the city and everyone else. A heavy wall that was needed for survival in this center of mist and pillaging.

It was nearly the end of the evening and most would end their duties soon enough. At the guarded entrance to this occupied section of the city was a man being dragged by two men with black leather jackets. The man being dragged had slow eyes. His entire face was empty. It was

pricked with stubby scabs. A red spray of dried blood covered the left side of face. The kids laughed at him, as he passed by. Some of the members threw chunks of concrete at him.

The prisoner was carried before the feet of a giant. A towering figure that blocked the sun for the prisoner. He was like a statue that could move. Slow and with purpose the towering figure looked upon the prisoner with a brown gaze. The prisoner, in his delirious state, only noticed the artifact that hung from the figures neck. It was a grenade and it swung back and forth slowly like a pendulum. Its pin was still attached.

“What should we do with him, boss?” The man who held the prisoner’s left arm spoke.

“Is he one of Gordon’s?” The towering figure asked.

“Yeah. Came here talking about joining the rest of The Spire in that alliance of theirs. Boss, they getting' closah.”

“You just worry about your job. Toss him out.”

“Daniel, are you sure? Maybe we should interrogate him or at least kill him.” Daniel’s grenade swung back and forth when he took a squat in front of the prisoner. He snapped his fingers in front of the prisoner’s face. Daniel looked up.

“Does he look like he can speak? Who gave you the order to rock his brains out? Is that what your line of fathers value? I told you boys to be delicate with how things are in this city.” Daniel looked up to see that people were watching the scene. He turned back to his boys. "The meeting of the clans is tomorrow, and this will not help. Whoever battered him made him too stupid.” Daniel flicked the prisoner with his index finger. Amongst the crowd there were those

that felt sorry for the poor bastard. They would never admit it, but they held their hands close to their chest and prayed to whatever higher power there was to spare him. The prisoner moaned.

“Forgive us, Basilisk Olympus.” One of Daniel’s underlings spoke.

“You are forgiven, just do what you are told.” The two guards shuffled the prisoner away. They would toss him out across some random asphalt street or into some ditch. He would certainly find death in a few hours. Daniel closed his eyes. The disappearance of an ambassador would not look good.

“You can’t blame them for not following your orders, Basilisk. You have been going soft lately.” Daniel looked to his left. The title of Basilisk was not said with respect. “With Gordon at our gates, the people are getting antsy. We need a strong leader in these trying times, you know what I am saying?” The man winked at Daniel. His serpentine smile always accompanied the act of slicking his hair back. Daniel saw the handle of his switchblade sticking out from his jeans.

“Three days. Remember that, Malcolm.” Daniel said.

“Don’t call me that chickenshit name.” Malcolm replied. He smacked his fist against his chest three times. “My line of fathers would look down upon me if I forgot such a simple rule. Did you forget about the ones that we sent west? The one in the Grasslands of Rhei. People have been wondering what the Great Daniel Olympus will do about the disappearance of our mates.”

“I have not forgotten. Leave now, so that I may have my own counsel.” Daniel said. Malcolm slicked his hair back one more time and left. His smile was still strong after he performed a sarcastic salute. Daniel heard his steel boots stomping on the ground. Daniel knew that he would be back to taunt him soon enough.

A throne crafted from the steel skin of a car stood atop a hill. From the throne, one could see the whole city. Even the spectral images of the last few foggy-tipped skyscrapers that still stood. His pride swelled. Five of his own blood sat on the throne. Two mothers and three fathers. He did not intend to give it away so easily. Malcolm's fight for it would be met with ferocity. Daniel did not intend to sit on the throne, but to walk behind it. Daniel's hut was directly behind the throne. There was no chair in the hut, so Daniel sat on a gray cushion. A strip of sunlight entered the hut from a window that Daniel carved himself. Directly in the sunlight was a woman tending to a brown teapot. An axe hung from her belt.

"How was the raid on the village? Were you able to acquire succor?" The woman asked. Daniel took a moment to respond. He looked at his large hands and his

"We were not able to get much.....They repelled us. I am sorry for my recent failures Mary." Daniel said.

Mary took the teapot and poured the tea into two mugs. Mary extinguished the flame that heated the pot and set a mug in front of Daniel. Daniel wasn't fond of tea, but he drank it to appease Mary. "Let me have you look at your face." Mary said. She squinted at him with her dark brown eyes. "It only makes sense, I suppose. None of our best were with you." Mary caressed Daniel's face. "Were you challenged on the trip to the village or back?"

"Yes." Daniel said.

"Who was it?" Mary asked.

"Malcolm."

“Well, fuck him. He only cares for the power that comes from the title. He doesn’t really care about our people.”

“It is not your worry. It is mine.” Mary stood up and took a sip of her tea. "I obtained the throne from my line of fathers and it is my job to keep it." Daniel clutched the grenade that hung around his neck.

“It would be a disgrace if you didn’t. To your fathers. The ones that are long dead. The ones that probably can’t see us talking right now.” Mary leaned against the wall. Her greasy brown hair stuck to the wall. "They imposed rules upon us when they themselves were brigands and bandits. They raped and stole gold, yet heavens forbid you don’t follow in their damn rules!" The sunlight in the hut started to dwindle. Mary looked through the opening in the tent. The sky was turning a deep purple with an orange tinge. The clouds were melting, it was nearing dusk. "You know, I had that dream again.”

“The empty green field? Was it any different?” Daniel asked. He took a sip of tea and ignored the taste as best as he could. His large hands made the mug seem smaller than it actually was.

“Tell me, is this the life that you really want?” Mary asked. "I know I have asked this before, but you haven’t been the best lately.”

“Yes.” Daniel said.

“Look at me.” Mary said. Daniel’s face was stone. His face snapped to Mary “What is all this for? The throne, the raiding of villages?”

“I want the same glory-”

“Fuck that! Daniel, we prey on the weak and take their goods for our own. What is glory to bandits? Why did you not accept Gordon’s invitation? Don’t you want a new life?”

“I am the Basilisk of this clan.” Daniel said.

“Then what is your plan? How are you going to deal with everything? Malcolm, Gordon, and the missing members in the grasslands? At least tell me that, so that I can alleviate my worries. Even the meeting of clans is tomorrow. I feel like I can’t breathe, and you just sit there with the same expression. What is your plan?” Mary asked.

“I don’t know, but all I ask is that you walk alongside me. Whatever I do, I just want you at my side.” Daniel said.

“I feel like there is so much anxiety in the air. As if something big is going to happen. I can’t even properly describe it. Please, just don’t do something rash.” Daniel nodded at his wife and drank his tea. “It’ll be dark soon.”

“Let’s rest for now. Maybe in our dreams we will find the answers to our problems.” Mary and Daniel slept in the same bedroll. A bedroll formed by several layers of stolen cloth from other villages. Outside they heard the clamor of their clan. Rowdy men and women prancing around and drinking. Daniel swiftly fell asleep but awoke just as fast. The sound of the others had died down completely to an uncomfortable silence.

Daniel looked down and found Mary in his arms breathing slowly and peacefully. Her thoughts in another world. He gave Mary a kiss on the forehead and dressed himself. He left behind the grenade necklace and walked out of the tent. The stars were out fully on this night, so was a crescent moon. Daniel watched his people resting during the silent night. Most were within

their tents sleeping away their aches and pains from battle. Others were unconscious from a night of hard drinking. Their bodies dozing near metal barrels that served as fire pits. Daniel looked at his throne and shook his head. He climbed the stairs of the tallest building in their corner of the city until he reached the top. Before he reached the very top, Daniel heard a sound of a stray piece of concrete fall to the ground. He squinted his eyes to the ground but could not see clearly where it landed. He realized in that very moment how tall the building was. That man had once created such a structure.

In the back of his head, he realized that this was a risk. A man like Malcolm could come around and push him off the edge. None would be the wiser. Then he pictured Mary's face. Her mouth agape in horror. The way she would cradle his lifeless body. She would surely seek the truth of his death. Then Daniel wondered if she would be the only one that would mourn his death. Would the code of honor that belonged to his sacred line of fathers continue after his death or would they rot away like the dead carcasses that Daniel had often seen after a successful raid? Would his forefathers welcome him into the afterlife? Daniel rubbed his large hand on the concrete in a lazy circle. He felt odd and he knew why. He didn't feel the weight of a weapon in his hands or strapped to his back.

"Fathers and mothers." Daniel whispered to the stars. "Why is there anxiety in my chest? Why are we struggling to find success amongst our raids? Please, I am begging you to grant me an answer." Daniel waited for a divine response. He heard another piece of concrete roll off the skyscraper. He stood up and caught the knife before it entered his back. Daniel held the hand that carried the knife and used his free hand to hold up Malcolm by the throat. Malcolm choked out a grunt and flailed with his free limbs. Daniel glared at Malcolm and crushed his neck. Spittle flew

out of Malcolm's mouth and his legs kicked Daniel's thighs. Daniel ripped the knife out of Malcolm's hand and tossed it to the side. Daniel threw Malcolm off the skyscraper. With Malcolm's crushed windpipe, he could only manage a distressed gurgle before his body splattered against the asphalt. Daniel sat back down on the edge of the skyscraper and took a deep breath. He turned his head towards the horizon and would enjoy the gentle sunrise.

Chapter 26: Clan of the Spires

The green water bubbled within the fountain. A currency that was no longer accepted, composed of a cheap alloy of tin and copper, glittered in the murky water like pyrite. A vine moss caressed the lip of the fountain and stretched to its base. The moss would end when it reached the ground floor. The floor where the fountain was resided was bespeckled with black splotches of soot. This ground floor would stretch out for nearly four hundred meters on four sides. This meeting ground could be reached by five different roads. It was this reason that it was chosen as the meeting place three hundred years ago by the five clans of the Spires. Now it was a meeting place for only four clans. Trees with overgrown roots cracked and lifted the flooring. The sounds of footfalls filled the air around noon along with the sounds of steel grinding against asphalt. The sun made the broken glass and bended steel infrastructure sparkle. Daniel shielded his eyes with his hand and watched the other roads for silhouettes. A posse followed behind him; Mary was one of them. She looked at the few alleyways towards the center and looked towards roofs and ledges. It was the ultimate perversion of tradition to attack or battle in the meeting center, but history was filled with examples of men and women breaking such rules. For a moment, she believed she saw a moving shadow across one of the rooftops, but it disappeared so fast that she believed it to be a trick of the light.

“Remember what we discussed this morning.” Mary said. She nursed her temple and scowled at his lazy left hand. “Pick up your sword. It’ll dull if you continue to drag it like that.”

“I know.” Daniel responded. He didn’t move his hand and the grinding continued. Mary placed her palm on his left hand and squeezed.

“Daniel....Relax. I am here with you. Take a deep breath.”

“Sorry.” Daniel raised his left arm and rested the large thin blade on his back. The grenade hanging from his neck shifted slightly to the left. Mary sighed once Daniel’s group stepped into the center.

That was when they heard a sharp bell and the ramp of a guitarist playing a tritone.

“Here they come.” Daniel rolled his eyes.

“At least they are mostly harmless.” Mary said. They strolled to the meeting place dressed in all black with three members dedicated to rolling a wagon on the broken street. The song continued. On top of the wagon was a contraption that looked like a silver gramophone. Some wore sunglasses and others had enough greasy hair to cover their face. The dress of the clan was not unified, but the color was. Purple, silver, with little spots of neon green. The leader of this black parade strutted to the center with his arms over his head and his eyes glazed with rock and roll. He pointed at Daniel with a long index finger and swung his right arm in a circle to mimic the musical crescendo of the song. The song seemed to stop for a moment. Then one surprise note was struck. After the impromptu concert had ended the leader of the clan walked to the fountain and placed his leather boots on the mossy lip. He smiled at Daniel and cupped his mouth.

“The Basilisk of clan MD, Anthony Gibb, has arrived!” Anthony said. Daniel growled. This man was truly the most foolish of them all. MD was short for Melodic Dissonance. A name that all the other clan leaders refused to acknowledge or say out loud, so they universally accepted the less painful shorthand. Daniel already felt tired. He looked to Mary for validation,

but found a grin threatening to form on her lips. She turned to him and his eyes flared with treason. Mary shook her head and shrugged.

“Like I said. They are harmless.” She spoke.

“Give me a good one!” Anthony’s voice cracked when he screamed. He snapped his fingers and a song reminiscent of an era known as disco started to play. Melodic Dissonance claimed that they were bandits, but they did not pillage villages or trade routes for money, food, or weapons. They scraped the remaining world for music and music technology. They did not discriminate in the music that they hoarded, and even hoarded copies of music sheets written by musicians of the current age. Even with The Entropy, music remained, and they were determined to maintain it all. Everyone born into the clan would bear a name crafted from a mixture of the names of two famous musician’s names. A Basilisk for the clan was determined by a trial of music trivia. Hundreds of questions spanning millennia of music would be asked. The trial by trivia that Anthony won lasted eight days. The trivia was a relatively new addition. Five decades ago, a Basilisk was chosen when he ripped a merchant’s eye right out of the socket for badmouthing a pop love song.

“I am going to cut off his head.” Daniel said.

“Don’t waste your energy. Here comes the rest.” Mary said. The entrance of the two remaining clans were certainly less bombastic than Anthony and his music addicts, but Daniel knew the message that was being sent when the clans arrived at the exact same time. Gordon Fren led his own clan. He wore an unbuttoned black peacoat and slicked back hair. He adjusted the tie that hung from his white-collar shirt. He wore a smile when he witnessed Anthony, but the smile faded once he glanced over Daniel. Gordon’s posse was filled with individuals that

each wore clothing that allowed one to ascertain their profession. A baker, a blacksmith, a trader. Only two people carried a weapon. A platinum blonde woman that walked right behind Gordon by the name of Abigail and Gordon himself. They carried sheathed swords that hung from their belts.

The clan that arrived alongside Gordon group was a clan whose Basilisk was a woman dressed in a fur coat made from bear skin and fur. She carried a weathered axe with her left hand and rested it on her shoulder. Her hair was a light auburn tangled into a messy braid. Her clan were dressed to mimic animals, but not all went to the extreme of their Basilisk. There was a white rabbit, a toad, an eagle. All members born into this clan were raised with a humble upbringing until their adolescent. It was during their adolescence when they were given a month to live amongst nature. The adolescents spend their month learning an appreciation of the natural world and the mission to seek out an animal which they value. They must return to the clan and say the animal that they wish to be attuned too and they were not limited to one single animal. They all carried weapons and their hands held them with a natural familiarity. The basilisk threw her axe off her shoulder and slammed it on the stone.

“Samantha Sommerfugl! Basilisk of the Oura clan.” Samantha said.

“I’ll repeat myself just this once. Anthony Gibb, Basilisk of MD!” Anthony struck a pose where he kept his legs far apart and pointed one finger at the sky.

“Daniel Olympus, Basilisk of the Olympus clan.” Daniel looked at the silver gramophone and balled his hand into a fist. Mary stepped in.

“Can you stop the music for a little bit until the words between Basilisk have ended.” Anthony stared at Mary while maintaining his pose.

“Thank you for asking nicely. I wish more people were like you.” Anthony snapped his fingers again and the song ended. Gordon smiled at Samantha.

“Gordon Fren. I lead no clan only those who seek change within the Spires. What shall we discuss today?” Gordon introduced himself. Anthony bounced up and raised his voice.

“First things first, did any of you-”

“We don’t have music.” The three other leaders said. Anthony lowered his head.

“MD has no further comments.” Anthony said. Gordon cleared his throat and craned his head slightly towards Anthony. “Oh yeah, sorry last night was wild. MD has decided to join Gordon’s journey for a unified and-what was it again, Gordon?”

“Unified and civilized.” Gordon said.

“Yeah! Unified and civilized Spires.”

“And who shall this leader of the unified Spires be?” Daniel asked. “You keep talking about a unified Spires, but I know what you are playing at. You just want all of these clans under your rule.”

“You’re foolish. My efforts are not a pursuit to inflate my vainglory. I don’t care who leads this new unified state. After centuries of being considered trash across the land, I want to prove them that we are worth more than that. We can gain much from being recognized as a true nation.”

“A leader of a clan should spend time learning how to care for his own rather than searching for novel words to say. We are not filth. We have honor. I know that. My people know

that and that is enough for me. You, Gordon Fren, are a disgrace to your fathers. You spit on the very tradition that led to your birth.” Daniel said.

“Tell me Daniel, is it honorable to steal from those who have never seen combat. Why should I champion a tradition that trains children to rape and pillage people just trying to survive in this world? You don’t want the Spires to grow because you are simply too scared. You fear the uncertainty that will come from a new life for our people.” Once Gordon had spoken his last words, Daniel approached him. Samantha positioned herself in front of Gordon and placed her axe in front of herself.

“You lay a hand on him and you shall regret it.” Samantha gripped her axe. "A man of tradition would not dare break the rules of peace in this center. I implore you to listen. Listen to him, as I have.”

“Those of MD have realized a lot from him, you know? We learned that we could teach people the greatness of music if we stopped threatening to kill em.” Anthony said. Everyone ignored him.

“It was my fault, Sam.” Gordon said. Samantha looked back at Gordon. Gordon pulled himself forwards and bowed his head. "I am sorry about what I said. I was raised to be a bandit not a diplomat. My words may not be adequately crafted. You can see why I am frustrated right, Daniel. Do you know how our people came to be? The clans of the Spires were formed from exiles of the Silver Sands.” Gordon motioned to the fallen skyscrapers and the broken stores. The spring sun had casted a blanket of light over them. “They dropped our ancestors into a broken city. A city of seemingly no potential for people that they believed had no potential.”

Gordon offered his hand to Daniel. "I want to prove them wrong. We are not savages. I don't want to be your enemy." Daniel looked at Gordon's hand and scoffed.

"Our people shall converse like all meetings prior and then we shall leave." Daniel walked away from the three leaders. Gordon's hand laid outstretched. He lowered his head and a shadow casted over his face. Samantha laid a hand on his shoulder. Gordon shook his head and rubbed his face.

Gordon looked over to Mary. "Is there anything that you can do to convince him?" Mary looked back at Daniel. He sat on a broken metal mailbox with his sword leaning on his knee and waited for the meeting to end.

"I agree with your words, Gordon." Mary said. "... But I cannot simply convince him to throw away all the lessons that built him. The traditions that you want to throw away are who he is. He also carries the burden of an entire clan on his shoulders."

"We all do." Samantha said. "I am tired of feeding off the exploits of others. I want my people to feel pride in being creators rather than destroyers. Besides, I am willing to make peace with your husband after what he did."

"I understand, but he is not convinced of your goals."

"So, will you continue to stand with him? Even if you personally believe him to be in the wrong?" Gordon asked.

"Would you stand with Basilisk Sommerfugl even if you disagreed with her?" Mary asked. Gordon looked at Samantha and nodded to himself. "I must go. I wish you three the best."

Mary stepped away from the three leaders and walked back to the road where the rest of the Olympus clan resided.

“He will not be able to stop us. We can change the Spires for the better whether he stands with us or not.” Samantha said.

“I know, but I would have rather had him as an ally. I don’t want a new nation to be born from blood.” Gordon sighed and signified the end of the meeting with a whistle.

“He refuses to talk. He refuses to listen. What other possibility would there be left other than strife.” Samantha said. “Whatever happens will be his fault.” Samantha carried her axe on her shoulder. Soon the meeting area was left empty just like before. A swift meeting where nothing was gained.

“Sometimes I wish that you would guide me with words.” Daniel whispered. He kneeled with his chin in between two knuckles. He closed his eyes and prayed while the wind swayed his salted black hair. He breathed deeply and waited for the moon or the sky or anything to respond. The land responded with another gust of wind that smelled of ivy. Daniel ended the prayer and sat down on the ledge of a skyscraper. Daniel turned his eyes north. He saw the mere inkling of light that fluttered from Gordon’s leadership. Forming a new identity apparently required the lack of sleep. “Finding out the ways to kill me, aren’tcha Gordon.” Daniel growled. He outstretched his arms. “Well come get me!” Daniel spoke to the dark city and silence was the only thing that returned. Daniel pounded a fist on the floor. A small crack was formed where the fist made impact.

“He who leads is always filled with anxiety. Your plight is not unique.” Daniel turned around to find Tabitha with her back to the stars. Her feet planted on an elevated edge that was higher than Daniel. She looked at him with her wicked smile. Her eyes covered by the brim of her hat.

“Who are you?” Daniel demanded, as he rose to his feet. He did not hear this woman. It was not like Malcolm. He heard Malcolm.

“Relax, I am here to help you. My name is Tabitha. I am a witch.” Tabitha’s thin fingers made shadows across the concrete behind her. She hopped off the ledge. She ran her fingers across the brim of her hat.

“I have no need for the help of a witch. Leave. These are my lands.” Daniel raised his voice, but Tabitha tilted her head and gazed at him with eyes that peeked under her hat.

“The borders that you claimed for yourself are shrinking by the day. Look upon that light that ever encroaches upon yours. Besides that, is not a proper greeting for your savior?”

“How are yo-”

“Silence. The night is short. I have no time to deal with your confusion. I will offer you a chance to claim that honor which you seek, to destroy the distrust in your people’s hearts, and the ability to hold dominion over a new piece of land that is safe from the exploits of Gordon Fren.” Daniel looked back to the concrete housing of his people. He saw his and Mary’s modest hut.

“I won’t be tricked. How will you be able to promise all of that?” Tabitha flourished to the west. Daniel followed her arms to the edge where the city gave way to the Grasslands of Rhei.

“There is a *weak* town to the west. Not governed by a nation or kingdom. A town by the name of New Nivalis. It is a little place that does not compare to the likes of Arcadia or Chalbis, but far from the worthless villages that your people ravage. New Nivalis can fall from the might of your conquest and in the ruins, you plant your new haven there. It will require your full force to bring it down. Do not bring your few, but your many. Such an act will rid those weeds that wish to overthrow your rule. You and your wife will live a full life.”

“How can you be certain that we will be able to siege those people? Even with all of my people, how can you guarantee that we will be able to claim the land?” Tabitha snapped her fingers and formed a small flame in her hands. Shadows danced across her white smile and the reflection of fire in her eyes raged.

“New Nivalis will not have a powerful mage at their disposal, but you shall.”

Chapter 27: The Storm to Come

Crow took off his gloves and threw them on the desk. He rubbed the wrinkled black leather.

“May I ask why you called me here?” Cora asked.

“I wanted to pick your mind for a concept.” Crow said. “An important distinction that we have to make.” Crow swiveled around and tossed the black gloves at Cora. Cora grabbed them.

“Ah, I see.” Cora nodded. “You wish to make me a set of invokers, as well?”

“Yes, that was my intention. Invokers are not that important unless you are expecting a fight, but for you it’s a different story. Necromancy essentially involves cutting a piece of your aether and giving it to another. Enough to stimulate life within your corpse. Of course, it is not perfect. There are many ways in which you are weaker than living creatures, plus you are missing one of the senses?” Crow raised his head.

“My sense of smell is dulled.” Cora admitted. Crow nodded

“The main issue comes when you decide to become a mage and you end up having a quarter of aether. You will always be behind most mages. You’ll burn out and get cracks faster than anyone on the battlefield.”

“I train my aether constantly, but I appreciate the concern.” Cora tossed the gloves back. Crow snatched them from the air.

“That is true, but what happens when you meet a normal person that trains as much as you. Cora you will always be at a disadvantage.” Crow said.

“Aren’t invokers created by sacrificing the aether of a living creature? It doesn’t have to be a human, but we can’t just sacrifice an animal for something as vapid as this. Even a rabbit should at most be used in stew rather than making me an invoker.” Crow equipped his gloves.

“What’s your least favorite type of flower?” Crow asked.

“Huh?” Cora asked.

“That’s how I created these gloves. I sacrificed about 250 roses to craft them into invokers, so what’s your least favorite type of flower.”

“Roses are your least favorite type of flower?” Cora asked.

“No. Roses were the only things that we had closest to the house. I couldn’t leave behind the cult and go pick random flowers at the time. Plus, they believed that invokers were a sign of weakness.” Crow stood up and opened the door of the study. He motioned for Cora to follow him. Cora walked into the hall. “Come to think of it, she would have put me in a casket for an entire day, if I even proposed the thought.” Crow grumbled. Cora and Crow left the castle and wandered into the grasslands. Cora found a sole daisy sticking out from the ground. It was a little wilted thing that was still struggling against the early cold snap of spring. Cora picked the daisy and showed it to Crow.

“Is this okay?”

“Yes. We only have 249 to go. There should be more around here.” Crow crouched down and squinted at the ground.

“You say only 249.” Cora said. Crow realized that perhaps Cora wasn’t ecstatic to pick flowers for an entire day, but this was important. Crow acquired around ten fresh flowers by the stem when Cora’s voice picked up again. “Is that Elizabeth?”

“Where?” Crow looked up. Cora pointed down towards the outskirts of New Nivalis. Crow saw Elizabeth running towards them. Elizabeth cupped her mouth and yelled across the field.

“Crow! There’s been a kidnapping!” Elizabeth said.

“What?” Cora and Crow asked.

“A shepherd's daughter has been missing for some time.” Elizabeth said once she fully reached them.

“How are they certain that she was kidnapped?” Crow asked.

“We found a knapsack full of her groceries scattered near the woods. Tristan and Kay are looking for her, as we speak.” Elizabeth said. Crow placed his chin on his hand. There could have been an explanation for why the young woman’s grocery was on the floor, but Crow knew that it was best to play it safe.

“The woods are expansive. If she was truly kidnapped, then we don’t have a lot of time before her captors are lost in the woods. We have to hurry.” Crow said.

“I’ll go as well.” Cora said. Crow, Elizabeth, and Cora ran down across the grasslands towards the woodlands and made their way through the center of the town. Vakaris, Marcus, and Ardea saw them running towards the woods. Vakaris was in town attempting to convince one of the few metallurgists in the New Nivalis, to make him a new dagger. The metallurgist called him

a fool and kicked him out of his shop. Marcus and Ardea were attempting to console the man. That is when Elizabeth, Cora, and Crow came running by.

“Hey what are-” Vakaris started.

“No time to talk about someone has been kidnapped.” Elizabeth shouted. Vakaris shrugged and followed them. Ardea and Marcus glanced at each other before following Vakaris.

The shepherd's daughter was bound both by her arms and legs. Seven bandits loomed over her. They smelled of cigarette smoke and mud. She was gagged with a dirty rag. They were located in a section of the forest surrounded by bushes. The sun was blocked by overhead branches and tree leaves.

“You’ll be a good girl and give us what we want right?” The supposed leader of the clan said. The shepherd's daughter's eyes widened in horror. The leader of the seven removed the gag. A muscled brute with dirty brown eyes. “We want.....” The bandit produced a map. “The structural weakness of your town. Who is the strongest among you?” The leader produced a map in front of the shepard's daughter. “You may point with your large ugly nose.”

“.....What?” The shepherd’s daughter asked.

“What would be the best place to attack from? Should we attack from the west or from the south? Give us those details.” The bandit brandished his club.

“Why would a shepherd’s daughter have that information?” She asked.

“So, you’re ugly and stupid.” The leader decided.

“Ugly?” The Shepherd’s daughter contemplated herself for a moment. The seven bandits looked among themselves and nodded. One of the bandits, a raven-haired woman spoke up. Her mossy teeth were revealed each time she rolled her r’s.

“Your cheekbones are strangely shaped.”

“I agree.” The leader nodded. "My father of fathers always told me to find a woman with real proper cheekbones.”

“.....” The shepherd's daughter stared at the mud.

“John let’s get back on topic. Daniel will eat us alive if we come back empty handed. What should we do? Kill her and kidnap someone else?” The raven-haired woman asked.

“Yup.” John replied. "You can have the honors.” The raven-haired woman drew her knife and approached the Shepherd’s daughter.

“That’s enough.” A regal voice called out. The seven bandits turned around. Elizabeth and Crow stood side by side. "Release her or suffer a quick death.” Elizabeth drew her sword. A leaf fell besides her.

“The white-haired girl and the cloaked man. They’re the ones that Daniel warned us about.” The leader spoke slowly. “Looks like the plan was a success.” The leader snapped his fingers. From the bushes, even more bandits came and surrounded Elizabeth and Crow. "Did you really think, we would just pick up a random girl from the street?” Elizabeth and Crow were shoved forwards. "Bandits do have a reputation for being simple, but you don’t survive in this world being stupid. Kneel.” Crow and Elizabeth complied with the demand. "Make sure to take

their weapons.” Elizabeth’s sword was tossed aside. Crow had nothing taken. Their hands were bound by rusty handcuffs.

“You mentioned the name Daniel. Who is he?” Crow asked.

“Daniel Olympus. The Basilisk of our clan.” John said.

“Clan? You’re bandits from the Spire. I heard that they were reforming their ways. I assume that was a trick to make the surrounding nations complacent.”

“No, you heard correctly. Gordon Fren, a quack, has gained control of the Spires, all in the name of achieving redemption for the old ways. Redemption that is needed not.”

“That’s why you come to our settlement. You wish to live far away from the threat at your gate?” Crow said. A leaf fell atop Crow’s head.

“Yes, but I won’t have to bother explaining every little detail. Now, you two will tell us the weakness in your puny settlement. Where are the blind spots? Who leads you all? Any important details that one would need for a siege. We heard that the two of you were threats, but it appears that was inaccurate.” John shook his head at Elizabeth and Crow.

“You will not harm these people. It is best that you go back to whence you came.” Elizabeth said. The leader looked at Elizabeth incredulously.

“What? A threat when you are kneeling before me?”

“It is best for you to surrender.” Elizabeth repeated.

“All right. Girlie.” Crow felt the cold blade near his neck. “I’ll gut this man right in front of you if you keep talking like you have the upper.” John said. “Give us what we want.”

Crow whistled. A knife found its way in John's forehead. Vakaris dropped from the branch and landed on the raven-haired woman and snapped her neck. The four men on the left drew their weapons, but a voice halted their movement.

“You should have surrendered.” Marcus said. He barreled through four men on the left. Marcus picked up a bandit by the heel and turned him into a blunt object to beat the other three away. A fight began in the small clearing. Elizabeth broke free from her handcuffs by pulling her hands apart. Crow tried the same thing but didn’t have the strength.

“Of course.” Crow huffed. Elizabeth rolled towards her sword, caught it and blocked an attack from an axe. She swept the brigand off his feet and planted her sword into his chest. Another man’s shaky hands aimed at Elizabeth’s head with a Refurbished pistol, but the firearm jammed. The man screamed a dammit before Ardea threw a fireball at his chest.

“Ardea!” Elizabeth said.

“What? I am helping?”

“You’ll cause a forest fire!”

“Oh.”

“I’ve got it.” Vakaris answered. A gust of wind threw the man off his feet and extinguished the flame like a candle.

“I’ll kill you!” A man with a pike said. Crow sidestepped the attack. The pike pierced through the tree trunk. The man tried to pull the pike out but failed. Crow shot the man with a lightning bolt. His leather clothing stained with a red mist. The attacker fell to the floor with a thud.

“Crow, behind you!” Elizabeth said. A woman bearing a wooden club found a crackling lightning bolt sticking out her chest. She dropped the club on the ground and fell into a pool of her own blood. Crow looked past the new corpse to find Cora. She nodded at him. The battle ensued for another minute until only a single bandit was left. The sole survivor dropped his weapon and held his hands above his head. Crow extended his hands towards Elizabeth. With one swipe of her sword the cuffs broke apart. Vakaris cut off the rope that bounded the shepherd's daughter. She received the simple command to go back to her family. Crow rubbed his wrist and looked at the sole survivor of the invaders. He sighed and gestured towards dead bodies on the ground.

“I wish we didn’t have to stain the grass with blood. Is everyone okay?” Crow asked. Everyone nodded. “Good.” Crow kneeled on one knee. “When’s the attack. We won’t hurt you. Just tell us.”

“I don’t know anything!” The man cried.

“Is that so?” Crow asked. Crow grabbed him by the collar and pushed him against the tree. “Did this Daniel reveal who you were dealing with?” Crow wrapped his left hand around the survivor’s neck. “I am a necromancer. You heard of them, you simpleton? I’ll kill you here and now. I can make you serve me for an eternity. There will be nothing left of you, but a servant made of rotten flesh.” The bandit attempted to wheeze out a response. Crow relaxed his grip.

“They are attacking in a month.” The bandit choked out.

“What else? Who revealed our location?” The man looked at the shadows and bushes of the woods. “Who?”

“A witch.”

“A witch?” Cora asked. “What’s her name?”

“All I know is that she dressed all in black. Honest!”

“Okay.” Crow dropped the man. “Vakaris. Marcus.”

“What? Oh, you want us to arrest him, yeah will do.” Vakaris and Marcus picked the man up by both of his shoulders and carried him back towards New Nivalis. Crow leaned against the tree with one arm and took a deep breath. He gave Cora and Elizabeth a glance.

“Sorry about that.” Crow said.

“We’ll have to warn the town. And we’ll have to bury these bodies.” Elizabeth decided. Crow sat on the ground.

“Are you okay?” Elizabeth asked. “Did you get hurt?” Crow waved his hand.

“I just need a breather.” Crow said. “I have a feeling that I won’t get one for a while.”

Chapter 28: Hearing Memories

Samuel sat cross legged on the large mountain cliff. His back was to the Nixian Mountains. He could easily flap his wings and reached the land of ice and snow, but he sat down stationary on the cliff. In front him stood the Grasslands of Rhei and beyond that the Woodlands. Samuel could also see The Spires. A large city of bandits was the only anecdote that he associated with the place. He heard the sweet wind of winter.

Samuel opened his stone maw and chanted a single growl. The growl was long and deep in tone. His eyes were closed, yet he could see the flashes of a different time, of a different world. His vision was vivid. He saw moments of his previous experience. The forgotten days and nights of his existence. The memories stopped and a single image remained in his mind. The first semblance of perception that came with the memory was the sound of a bell tolling. The next moment Samuel was not in Vetus.

The sky was blotted out. Broad strokes of black paint had completely removed all celestial bodies from the sky. Rain fell over the land making small puddles along the road. Samuel was in a city. A pre-Entropy city, yet it wasn't the ghostly empty cities that were eroded by time or made repurposed by the new generation of humanity. It was a city amid madness. Neon lights reflected off the puddles. The glass skyscrapers still stood. Cars were flipped over and aflame. Crowds of humans formed a sea of retreat. Their faces were hazy, but he could see that their mouths were open. The source of their screams. The crowd stumbled and turned the opposite direction from Samuel. A woman fell to the floor right in front of Samuel. She screeched and crawled backwards away from him.

“Wait! I won’t hurt you, human.” Samuel's stone jaw moved, but no sound came out. The poor civilian was snatched up by another gargoyle. Her body was shredded in midair and her remains across the street. Samuel witnessed his own hands. They were marked red.

A giant gold and brown clock tower shined in the distance. Samuel could see the wondrous architecture that stood in the old world, yet he had never even witnessed such engineering. What was strange was that a man stood atop that clock tower. His hands splayed out like he was orchestrating a symphony. He sat on one of the hands of the clock and continued a symphony. Samuel felt a sudden sickness. He had never experienced sickness before, yet it was undeniable that he was feeling something. Then the man sitting atop the clock tower winked at Samuel. From such a large distance. He winked. Samuel could feel that he winked. Then a gargoyle crashed through the clock tower. A gaping hole was left right where the twelfth hour was marked. The gargoyle collided into another brick building before landing right in front of Samuel. The gargoyle opened its mouth to speak, but couldn’t. The killing blow was done by a lightning bolt. Samuel picked up the pieces of his fallen brethren. Samuel’s face was painted by the powdery residue. Samuel looked to the side. He saw strewn about the bodies of his brethren and humans alike. He saw aflame automobiles and endless rubble. All the living humans were gone, except for one. A single man dressed in black that was immune to the madness.

This face was hazy like the rest of them, but this man’s features were familiar to Samuel. He had seen an inkling of this face once before, yet the features were slightly off. A stray stubble here and a slight adjustment to eyebrows there lead to an uncanny valley. The man in his vision shook his head at Samuel and put a finger to his lips.

“He controls you, doesn’t he? Don’t worry, I’ll put an end to this.” Samuel felt inclined to listen to this gentleman. A woman with brown hair caught up to the gentlemen.

“Albert. We need to get to the parliament building.” The man named Albert acknowledged once more at Samuel.

“Let’s go. Before he causes any more damage.” The ground rumbled. The memory distorted. Samuel was back in the modern age.

Samuel ensured that his hands were not stained. He was not in a city. He was not in a city. He was no longer within his memories, yet why did he still hear rumbling? Samuel looked down and saw where the rumbling came from. An army. Men, women, and even children with an assortment of weapons. They were dressed in ragged leather and stained boots. Samuel looked at The Spires and back at the army. With three flaps of his wings, Samuel flew back home.

Chapter 29: Decisions

“The four of you are going to decide how we are going to play this.” Crow said.

Elizabeth, Samuel, Madeline, Kay, and Baxter were in the room with him. Tristan was off with Vakaris and Marcus making their rounds around the city. The six of them were in Kay’s small little cottage near the edge of New Nivalis. A cozy place with a fireplace. Kay sat in a rocking chair. The simple talk of an attack added wrinkles and more gray hairs to his face. Crow and Samuel were the only ones standing. Baxter absorbed the information and stroked his beard. Baxter shook his head warding away any thoughts and looked at Crow.

“I am just a simple hunter. You got your nose between those tomes. What do you think?” Baxter asked.

“New Nivalis is still a settlement. Through word of mouth, we have had some people migrate here and we have gained the opportunity to trade for some goods. Be that as it may, our numbers do not compare to any other nation in all of Vetus. Beating the Bandits will not be an easy task. Especially taking Samuel’s account into consideration. New Nivalis is still in its infancy.”

“By our estimates, we have nearly two thousand and half citizens, but how many of them would dare to risk their lives? Besides not all of them can even fight.” Kay rubbed his temple. “They couldn’t have picked a worse time.”

“We should let the people decide. We can guide them along, but they-*we* must decide as a community. We were able to brave the journey here only because we all agreed it was the best choice.” Madeline said.

“Are you certain that is the best course of action?” Elizabeth asked. “Fear may very well cloud their judgment.”

“It is true. Fear is a factor, but we can’t just force the people to fight. They have to fight of their own volition.” Crow said. “I agree with Madeline. We’ll have a crowd of people in the center, by Fraser’s statue and feel the atmosphere. This process is going to be rough, but we don’t have time to set up a proper system.”

“Indeed. We must be swift. The enemy will be within sight in three quarter moons.” Samuel said.

“What are quarter moons again?” Baxter asked. “Weeks, right?”

“Right.” Crow said.

“Can we prepare for an assault in three weeks?” Kay looked at Elizabeth.

“I believe we can. I am willing to fight myself. It is my duty as queen, to protect the remaining people of Nix.”

“I am willing, as well. All of you have given me a new life among you all. It would be cowardice to not assist.” Crow said.

“Baxter spread the word. We will hold the meeting near the statue of Fraser. Let’s all get some rest for tomorrow.” The party dispersed and went their separate ways. The next morning,

talk of the meeting generated several rumors ranging from the simple to outlandish. A silhouette of anxiety followed the denizens of New Nivalis. They were already uprooted from their home and now something else was coming.

The call for a gathering was met with a crowd of people around the central hall of New Nivalis. The statue of Fraser was only three-fourths complete. The first king's face and body were completely done. The statue only missed his accessory. A crown, a sword, and the long cape that swung from his shoulders. It was the small stone platform in which Kay, Elizabeth, Madeline, and Baxter waited for the last few idle families to reach the center. They wanted to ensure that the rumors were kept to a minimum. Elizabeth scanned the crowd. Vakaris was atop a building. He flashed a grin and gave her a thumbs up. Marcus was near the building that Vakaris was standing on top of. He complained that he didn't have the ability to climb it. Ardea was near the center of the crowd. It was the easiest to pick her out. Her scarlet hair was vastly different from the brown, black, and blonde mops that most Nixians were known for. In a way that was one of the things that they shared. Then Elizabeth found the person that she was most concerned with. Crow was standing at the far reaches of the crowd. His arms were crossed. He gave Elizabeth an anxious smile. He was the first person that Samuel talked to, yet he chose to stand near the very back. Cora sat beside Crow. Elizabeth took note of the girl's inability to sit still.

"That seems to be enough. The rest will surely hear what we have to say through word of mouth." Kay stated. "We'll hold a second meeting if necessary."

"Quiet!" Baxter hollered. The crowd silenced except for an idle cough.

"We ask that you attempt to not grow too excited during this speaking. We want to ensure that everyone hears us well and true." Madeline said. "Now lend us your ears."

“Get on with it. We ain’t got all bloody day.” A farmer answered back. Kay cleared his throat and looked at the crowd of people. The older man stroked his facial hair and stood before his people. The remains of Jotun mixed in with the sprinkle of travelers from different lands that wanted to start a new life. In just four months, they had made an apt home, but perhaps that would all be gone soon enough.

“A large group of bandits will be attacking us from the east.” Murmurs sprouted from the crowd. Kay continued. “They are a group that come from The Spires. We obtained this information from the recent kidnapping of Melody Sun. Samuel has also confirmed this report. He caught a view of them. They were armed and there were many.”

“A rough estimate would be three-thousands.” Samuel certified.

“Yes. So, considering that these people are coming to do us harm. What shall we do? That is a question that we must decide today. They will arrive in three weeks.” The crowd was silent for all a moment before a wave of chatter filled the square.

“Bandits! Can we even deal with ‘em?”

“We run, that’s what I say.”

“That farmers have already sowed their seeds for the summer! We’ll be caught without food.”

“We thought this would be our home forever! Now some random highwaymen come to take away our new land. I say no!”

“I said not to get excited!” Baxter said. “We got to see the options before us. We run or we fight. We have no bargaining chips with the other nations. Arcadia doesn’t know us, Chalbis

is too far, and I don't think the far-reaching provinces of Magnus will even consider us. We are pilgrims from a fallen kingdom. We are on our own. There will be no way to appease those savages that come to strip us of our land. I for one am tired of running. I just want to have a home that isn't at risk of disappearing. I have made my choice, but we all need to agree." There was a short response that came from a mother holding on to her newborn.

"Fight? Are ye mad? We hardly have the manpower."

Then Tristan decided to speak up. "We have dealt with bandits before. Remember? Twenty years ago, when they came to our door and we beat them back."

"But we had knights back then, child." An apothecary spoke up. "The royal guard was there, as well. Now we have fuck all!" Tristan stepped back and patted his shirt. Crow witnessed the fervor that swept through the crowd.

"What do you think they'll decide to do?" Cora asked.

"I don't know. They're scared. It would be understandable if they choose to run." Crow said.

"What if they decide to fight? What will we do?" Cora asked.

"We? You have decided for yourself that answer." Crow said.

The following fifteen minutes were overwhelmed with the discussion of the two sides drawn in the snow. The ones that wished to run and those that wished to fight. Baxter and Madeline continued to be in favor of fighting. Kay didn't speak. The older man with gray hair. There was only a hint of his prime left within his weathered body. He just watched the two sides fight and he rubbed his eyes. Elizabeth looked up at the statue of Fraser and found

disappointment in her beloved ancestor. Was she only meant to be a bystander in this event? To not lead when her people needed a leader?

“So, that’s what I say. We pack up and leave. Leave the grasslands to the bandits and find ourselves a nice home in the woodlands.” A tailor stated. Encouraged by others the tailor continued. “We are only farmers, chefs, barkeepers. Our hands were made for pitchforks and kitchen knives not swords, guns, and destructive magic. We aren’-”

“Enough!” Elizabeth shouted. The tailor bumbled her speech to a halt. The crowd grew silent. They watched Elizabeth stand on Fraser's platform. Taller than the rest of them. Elizabeth took a deep breath. *Bryn, father, give me courage.* “Who are we?” Elizabeth asked. “Are we some random village? Are we fools that leave our land behind for ravenous wolves simply because we are scared?” Elizabeth found the words flowed freely from her mouth. “Why have we decided to let fear guide us now? We left our homes behind. We left our pride behind in the mountains. Our glorious land and monuments are now abandoned. Are we going to curse ourselves to nomadic lifestyles simply because the world seems to punish us at every turn? Even those that come not from Nix, I beseech all of you to relive the journey that brought you to these very grasslands. To the nights spent huddled by a campfire in hopes of trekking a new path. To all those meals that were simple soups and salted meats that barely gave you the strength to trudge on through the bitter blizzards and the thunderous rainstorms. Whether it be sand or snow. Swamps or gravel roads. We all struggled to find this place. I am certain that when we took those beginning steps, we did not let fear pool in our hearts. We built our modest homes, yet now we decide to abandon the bedrock that we have created for ourselves. I say that we fight. I say that fight not for the dirt beneath our feet, but for the future that can be sowed across these hills!” A

small cheer was started by Ardea. Vakaris decided to join in, but his clap could easily be confused for a sarcastic one. Marcus clapped louder than necessary. Cora whistled. It was only a single cry for battle, but soon enough people joined in the rally until it swept throughout the entire crowd like a fever. Their hearts and cries tempered by the words of their queen.

“Seems like we’ll have a lot of work ahead of us.” Crow said. He looked upon the Castle of Rhei.

“We’ll be very busy, indeed.” Cora responded.

Chapter 30: Training

Crow led Baxter and Kay towards the largest room in the castle.

“Before we enter, keep in mind. That much of the more technologically advanced weapons may no longer function properly.”

“What do you mean by technologically advanced?” Kay asked. “Firearms?”

“Grenades.” Crow said. Crow pulled on the wooden door and showed them inside. He gestured to the multitudes of weapons that lined the walls. Spears, shields, swords, and axes. Among the monotony of post-Entropy weapons there were some more archaic weapons. Three grenades sat on the floor in the corner, a bolt action rifle hung on the wall by a brown strap, and a silver revolver next to the rifle. Baxter took hold of two guns while Kay made a count of all the weapons in the hall.

“This is certainly enough for a small army, if there are truly more rooms such as this.” Kay realized. “We could use all of these.” Baxter checked the bolt action rifle for ammo but was disappointed when his search did not lead to much, but he was able to find a single bullet for the revolver.

“We’ll let people pick what weapon they want to practice with. Any retired soldiers could surely lend a hand in training.” Crow said. “The people are now hungry to defend their land. We’ll organize those who wish to fight to pick their weapons here.”

Kay witnessed an object in the corner of the room. The older gentleman held a lance in his hand. He smiled, as he felt the weight of the weapon. It was the type of smile that was only

capable of those that have lived long years. Kay released his hand from the lance and turned to the other two men.

“Crow?” Kay asked.

“Yes?”

“Having weapons is all well and good, but we need a proper formation. Organization will do us well for the coming battle. Perhaps you studied a war here and there in one of those tomes of yours?”

“War is interwoven into history that much is true, but it would help to have someone who has real battle experience. Reading and hearing old facts can only get you so far.” Crow said.

“Of course. I’ll see if I can gather some old dogs. Perhaps you can treat it like a learning experience.” Kay said.

“Hopefully experience that will never be used again.”

“We all hope for that, but nevertheless we can never be certain.” The three made their way towards the exit of the room, but Baxter stopped at the door.

“Don’t you want to pick a weapon?” Baxter aimed the question at Crow. Crow shook his head.

“Don’t worry about me.” Crow said. His hand glowed a brilliant yellow. “I have no need for a weapon.”

Tristan knocked on Elizabeth's door. The time was before breakfast. Lazy Sunday mornings no longer existed after the recent news. New Nivalis was now a ball of energy. Everyone trotted around the city in anticipation for the coming battle. Each searching for anyway to contribute to the defense. Elizabeth opened the door.

"Ah. Good morning, Tristan. What may I do for you?" Elizabeth asked. Elizabeth was already dressed.

"I just wanted to ask you for a favor." Tristan said. Elizabeth tilted her head.

"A favor? What does it concern?"

"I have other responsibilities pertaining to the defense, so it seems that I won't be able to teach a large group of civilians. I was tasked with teaching them swordsmanship. I realized that you would be a great candidate."

"Tristan, I have never taught anyone on how to use a blade before." Elizabeth said.
"Perhaps one of your father's friends would be better suited."

"I know. I know, but you are the only person, I can truly count on. You were trained by a captain of the royal guard. Please?"

"Very well. I'll do it." Elizabeth said. Tristan showed his gratitude and left. Elizabeth took her blade and ran towards the Castle of Rhei.

Elizabeth ran to the castle and barged into Crow's room. The man had a piece of burnt toast in his mouth, stacks of papers plopped along his desk and several treatises scattered around his floor. Crow took out the piece of toast from his mouth.

“Morning.” Crow said.

“I need your help.” Crow looked down at the several papers that were thrown into his arms by Baxter. A list of names that all wanted to try their hand at bowmanship. He heard the hunter’s voice in his mind. *I know nothing about formations, so how about I teach people how to use a bow and you tell them where to stand. We can both play to our strengths and the city is properly defended. Bob’s your uncle.* Crow shook his head.

“What do you need?”

“I will be teaching a group of civilians on how to properly use a sword. I have never taught anyone. If Bryn was here, she would be able to teach them in a day.” Elizabeth tousled her hair. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Well. I don’t know how to use a sword myself, but why don’t you use competition as a catalyst.” Crow said.

“What do you mean?” Crow raised The First King.

“Separate them into groups by how well they perform. Have each of those groups compete. It was how the knights in Nix used to be trained. Those who seem to have a knack for it, can fight among themselves and grow through competition. Then the groups that are lagging can have your personal attention. Of course, you can have lessons for all of them as you see fit.”

“Right and I can learn how well they perform by having a match with them myself. Perfect. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Elizabeth was already gone by the time these words left his mouth. Crow went back to his toast. Elizabeth left the room and closed the door behind her. The smell of

toast still lingered on her nose. She rubbed the small white splotch on her bottom lip. She would need to recall all those lessons that Brynhildr once gave.

“Again.”

Elizabeth looked at the snow before her palms and feet. A trickle of red stained the white canvas. Elizabeth tapped her bottom lip. A sharp sting withdrew her index finger. The blood leaked down her chin.

“Sloppy.”

“I know. I know. You don’t have to remind me.” Elizabeth spoke. Her weak grip tightened on the handle of the blade. She pulled her head back with a scream. She drew her sword and charged at her target. Brynhildr smacked her nose with the metal handle of her sword. Elizabeth fell back to the ground. The young girl growled and attacked again. This time, Brynhildr did not draw her weapon. She clocked Elizabeth in the back of her head. Elizabeth crumpled to the ground with her fingers massaging her head.

“I was expecting you to take this more seriously.” Brynhildr said. She pulled a cigarette from her coat. She tried to light it, but Elizabeth shrieked another war-cry. Brynhildr bit the cigarette and grabbed Elizabeth by the collar. She pushed her against the tree and rattled the consciousness out of the child. “You lost. You have a shattered nose, and a broken lip. Do not continue to fight as you are.” Elizabeth defied with one last burst of energy and headbutted Brynhildr. Brynhildr scowled. Once their heads made contact, Elizabeth fell to the ground and clutched her forehead. Brynhildr shook her head and lit her cigarette. She took a drag. “Don’t

ever start smoking. It'll kill you." She heard Elizabeth muffle something from the ground.

"What was that?"

"You're more likely to kill me first." Elizabeth wrapped her arms around herself.

Brynhildr took another drag.

"You asked for this. I still hold the belief that you are far too young for this. You were raised in a life of luxury. You were never meant to have a life like this." Brynhildr said.

Elizabeth tried to move. "Don't bother attacking me now. Even if you land a good blow, it won't matter, I will still say that your performance was lackluster. You are here to learn, not to impress. Tenacity and courage are excellent traits to have indeed, but they must be rooted in something. In a fight, it doesn't matter if you don't give up. The enemy will only get annoyed. You must have something besides that, whether it be skill, strength, or a trick up your sleeve." She heard a whimper. Brynhildr finished her cigarette. She scooped up Elizabeth into her arms and caressed the top of her head. "You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do. I won't be able to sleep if I can't do this." Brynhildr felt a tear on her shoulder. She hugged Elizabeth tighter.

"Let me show something." Brynhildr gently pulled away from Elizabeth and picked up the training blade that Elizabeth used during their spar. Brynhildr held it in front of Elizabeth's eyes and swung it vainly through the air. "This is nothing, but cheap steel. The body can grow resistant to this. We can take a lot of abuse. Especially the more battles that one survives. You must not cry that you lost. You will grow stronger with each attack that is done on to you. This blade shall always remain steel. Humans can grow tougher than steel, but only you endure it."

Brynhildr took the steel sword and snapped it in half with her knee. Brynhildr raised her hand and wiped the blood off Elizabeth's chin. "Are you willing to grow?"

Elizabeth stood before several men and women. A gaggle of civilians. They held simple wooden swords awkwardly in their hands. These people were carpenters, tailors, gardeners, and shepherds. They covered their eyes from the sun and breathed uneasily. Some of their eyes wandered to Elizabeth's sword. Many had never seen her fight with their own eyes. Maybe some believed it was just monarchic propaganda. Hunting was the extent some of them had over taking the life of another creature. Elizabeth fanned herself for a few minutes before the final stragglers had arrived. Elizabeth saw their soft faces and nodded to herself.

"Now. I am certain that all of you came here to learn how to fight with a sword. I will do my best to teach you as much as I can in the next three weeks. Before we start, I want to make one fact clear. I will not put the unnecessary lives at stake. If you are scared or if you cannot handle the pressure, there is no shame in giving up. There are other ways to help the effort." A young man waved his hand. "Yes?"

"Wasn't Tristan supposed to teach us?" The young man asked.

"Yes. He was, but he is busy with other responsibilities." Elizabeth said.

"Oh..."

"What is your name?" Elizabeth asked.

"Steven." The young man said.

“Alright, Steven. Step forwards.”

“What?” Steven asked.

“Step forwards.” Elizabeth said. The man walked away from the safety of the group. He felt a sheen of sweat to form in the small of his back. Elizabeth pulled out her own wooden sword and pointed it at the man. “We will spar.”

“Is this because of something, I said?” The man gulped.

“No. I will spar with each of you and ascertain just how experienced or inexperienced you all are. Now. On your guard!” Elizabeth gave the group a proper thrashing. Once all of them were defeated, she separated them each into four groups. None of the group stood out exceptionally, but it was expected from people that have never held a sword in their hands before. Elizabeth generally followed Crow’s advice. She walked around the groups during their practice and made certain to voice whenever they had failed to parry, block, or fail to go on the offensive. The practice would go on for four hours before everyone decided to have a rest. The people talked amongst themselves while they enjoyed their lunch. Small rivalries had even begun to form. Elizabeth noticed that Crow and Cora were off further away from the settlement.

Crow had his eyes along the mountains. He scribbled along the pages of his journal. Cora kneeled down on the ground and took out a piece of chalk.

“What are you doing?” Crow asked.

“I am going to make sigils. Perhaps they can act as a first line of defense. Take out some bandits before they reach us.” Cora said.

“That’s a good idea.” Crow rubbed his chin.

“Why do keep looking at the mountains.”

“Nothing, just some ideas for how to position the defense. Speaking of the defense, I wanted to ask you something.” Crow said.

“What is it?” Cora asked. She finished drawing a white circle with a hexagon on the grass. Crow bit his pen for a couple of seconds.

“I wanted to ask you about the defense of the town. Are you doing this because you want to or is it because of that thread that binds us? I don’t want to force you into anything, I was honest when I said that you could take control of your life.” Cora clasped her hands together. The circle glowed a faint yellow before disappearing into the ground.

“I don’t know. This longing to protect New Nivalis may come from me or it could be a desire that you foster. Until I discover the source, I’ll do my best to help these people.” Cora finished a couple more sigils before standing up and stretching her back. “Let’s go meet up with Ardea.”

“Yeah.” Crow said.

In the middle of town, Ardea saw the people of New Nivalis shuffle around. Smiles were on their face. They spoke of the coming heroics that they would perform on the battlefield. Ardea took out a flask, the light from her eyes were gone for a moment, yet with a voice so clear, she recalled.

“The day that everything goes down. Won’t be a day that you want to remember. Trust me on that.” Ardea would then form a smile when Crow and Cora approached.

Chapter 31: A Folktale and Nothing More

“Baxter.” Crow said. He knocked on the small wooden door to the hunter’s home.

“Hello? Baxter? I have some plans for the defense.” Crow knocked again on the door. The door cracked open slowly revealing the same woman that Crow saw Baxter intertwining his fingers with back during that night where they all sang.

“Good evening to you, boy. That black cloak, you must be the famous Crow. How can I help you?” The woman asked.

“I am here for Baxter? Do I have the wrong house?” Crow asked.

“No, you came to the right place. I am Lauren, his wife. He went to Doran’s farm. I asked him to buy us some eggs. Come in, come in. He should be back any minute!” Lauren said.

“Are you certain, I don’t want to intrude.” Crow said.

“Come in! Come in!” Lauren pulled Crow into the home and led him to a small wooden table near the rustic kitchen of the home. Crow sat down, “He told me about you, that he did. The magician that spends most of his time with his books or the young queen. He was annoyed by you at first. Thought you were a suspicious man.”

“Yes, he was vocal about his mistrust. I must admit that I would’ve shared the same apprehension. None of you have seen an outsider in nearly two decades.”

“I hope he wasn’t too rude to ya. He can get pretty red and make the wrong impression.” Lauren said. Crow heard the creak of the front door.

“Lauren, I am home.” Baxter’s voice was of the chipper variety. He walked into the kitchen and nodded at Crow. “Wasn’t expecting company. Hey there.”

“He came looking for you. The two of you look hungry.” Lauren said.

“No that’s all-” Lauren served three plates for the table. The meal consisted of a pork sandwich and potato wedges.

“Talks should occur after you’ve eaten.” Lauren said.

“I don’t want to intrude.” Crow said.

“You sound like an echo. It is always good to have some company. Baxter! Did you scare the boy!” Lauren asked.

“I did no such thing. Maybe in Jotun, I gave him the evil eye here and there, but not since we arrived. I swear on it.” Baxter said.

“Whatever you say, lover.” Lauren turned to Crow. “Wash up before you eat.” Crow listened to her and washed his hands in a small tin basin. He sat down, and Lauren served lunch for the three of them. Crow bit into the sandwich. The bread was doughy and fresh. The pork had a nice smoky and salty flavor. The potatoes were caramelized and held a sweetness that complimented the pork. With each passing day, Crow grew fonder of Nixian cuisine. It was always homely.

“This is a delicious meal.” Crow said. He took a napkin and gently wiped the corners of his mouth.

“Why thank you, dear. Next time bring that girl of yours.” Lauren said.

“Girl?”

“The queen. I have heard that the two of you are an item.”

“Was it really that obvious?” Crow whispered to himself. For the rest of the meal, the three made small talk. Once they were finished, Lauren picked up the plates and placed to the side.

“Oh, look at the sun. Got to head to the tailor’s shop. Baxter, remember to do the washing up.” Lauren said.

“Yes, dear.” Baxter said. In a few minutes, Lauren was out the door with a blouse and a little cap. Baxter leaned back in his chair and looked at Crow.

“She is a very kind woman.” Crow said.

“That she is. Doesn’t show it, but she worried sick about the looming threat. She hasn’t slept properly in a few nights. She struggled during the move, as well. She felt homesick the moment the air felt warmer.”

“It’s people like that.” Crow said.

“Come again?” Baxter asked.

“People like her are why we are risking our lives.” It was not just Lauren, but the farmers, the bakers, and the tailors. These people just wanted to live normal lives and turmoil seemed to bite at their heels at every moment. Crow couldn’t help but feel frustrated. None of them deserved what the events of the past month.

“Right. Listen, Crow before you go rattling on how we are going to defend the place. I just want to be honest with you for a second.” Baxter leaned forwards and scratched his temple.

“Yes?” Crow asked.

“I feared you. See there was a legend my Pa told me. It is a common freak show among the outskirts of Nix. It was a tale about a woman that lost her children to an illness.” Baxter said. “That mother spent countless nights in her basement. She sat motionless in the woods. She surrounded herself in darkness. Eventually she figured out a way to bring her children back to life. The children were mindless. They could hardly form a sentence. They had purple eyes that pierced the soul. The mother was not free from side effects. Pieces of her flesh started to rot away and she could no longer sleep. The children moaned all throughout the night begging their mother to rip out their black hearts. Apparently, that was the only way to destroy them. Eventually the mother went mad from the screams.... She...She destroyed her children. After she went through all that to bring them back, only to create monsters.... Hellish. To this day, I can’t look at the woods during the night without feeling shivers. What scared most of all, was that this story turned out to have some truth. The story was based on a group of mages called- “

“Necromancers. I heard a familiar tale from my mother.” Crow said. Crow himself imagined his mother, as soon as he realized where Baxter’s tale was going.

“Guess it is common around your parts of the world, eh? When I saw you in the black cloak, I felt a chill run down my spine, but then again how do you kill the immortal. I heard that the necromancers sought their own twisted form of immortality as well.” Baxter said.

“I’ll admit my appearance was unexpected and foreboding. I ask you not to worry about Immortals, Baxter. There is no such thing.”

“We live in a strange world. We must never consider something impossible. Our very existence is shrouded in mystery. I heard from Elizabeth that you were interested in the history of The Entropy.”

“Yes. I believe it is the greatest unanswered mystery of our time. I also believe that its mystery is the reason that the living creatures of this time are afraid of growth. We don’t want to repeat the mistakes of the past, yet we still don’t even know what caused it.” Crow said.

“I never fancied thinking about the big picture. I was never good at it. I keep my eyes firmly on the ground under my feet.” Baxter said.

“Perhaps that is the proper way to live.”

“Maybe so, but we need men cut from different cloths, don’t we? Now let’s go back to the topic at hand, shall we?”

“Yes, of course.” Crow said.

Chapter 32: Apprehension

Crow took off his gloves and cloak. He folded his cloak neatly and laid it on a stump. He pocketed his gloves. He stretched his arms over his head. This was far from any of the houses. Crow wasn't expecting anyone who already didn't know. If some random person were to walk by, he had a few lies ready. Plus shoving his rotten hand into his pocket was always an option.

"Your arms are really pale." Samuel said. The gargoyle examined Crow's ghost white arms. "I don't mean to offend, but you are not a vampire, are you?"

"My eyes aren't orange. If I pass out--"

"Get Elizabeth." Samuel said.

"Yes." Crow clasped his hands and exploded with electricity. Samuel shielded his eyes from the bright light. Crow wondered if the light of magic was even brighter for gargoyles due to their special sight but refocused on his goal. The blast of lighting left the ground seared. Crow had enough sense to position himself away from the forest. His magic would surely cause a forest fire. The light faded and Samuel looked again. Crow was already sweating and short of breath.

"You tired yourself after one spell?" Samuel asked.

"This one is of greater intensity. It would take too long if I attempted to train by casting my usual lightning bolt over and over again." Crow said. He wiped a patch of sweat and grinded his teeth. Electricity danced around the little corner in the woods, once again.

“Do you require words of encouragement?”

“Not necessarily.” Crow said. Crow exploded once again with magical energy. His arms had started to leak blood. His hair became wilder and unkempt with each spell. Crow wove the same spell over and over again. A small crater started to form in the ground beneath him.

“Those ‘cracks’ on your skin. Those are good?”

“Yes and no.” Crow performed another spell. “I-it’s a sign of my aether being used up.” Crow performed another spell. “The aether gets stronger the more...the more you train it. The cracks are signs that your aether is breaking under the intensity of spells.”

“Have you told people about what you are?” Samuel stared at Crow’s rotten hand.

“Not yet. I’ll tell them after we repel the bandits. They are far too stressed as of this moment.” Crow said.

“Nothing good will come from keeping the lie alive. I see bleeding. Is that a good sign?” Samuel asked. Crow blinked several times.

“S-stop asking so many q-ques-questions.” Crow said. Crow performed another spell. The cracks had reached beyond Crow’s hands and now started to spread across his arms. Crow created an orb of lightning. He closed his fist and orb combusted. Electricity danced around along the ground. A cloud of dust covered Crow. Samuel squinted.

“Crow?” The dust cleared. Crow’s skin looked like dried up soil. He stood motionless on the crater that he formed. Crow breathed out a raspy breath. Bloody tears fell from Crow’s face. “When should I consider looking for Elizabeth?” Crow body rocked back and forth. His knees buckled. Samuel scooped up the frail necromancer before he fell. He examined Crow’s face.

There were too many similarities and yet so many differences compared to the man in Samuel's vision.

"Who exactly are you, Pendragon?" Samuel asked.

"It looks bad, but I swear he's okay." Ardea said. "It's common among mages. He even took off his invokers to ensure that he was truly increasing his limit. I can't wait to see how many spells he can cast after he does this a couple more times. He didn't half-ass anything." Elizabeth looked at Crow's bandaged arms and face.

"He is pale white, and blood loss isn't something to scoff at. Is that truly the only way that mages get stronger?" Elizabeth asked. Ardea nodded.

"Yup. Exert yourself and get stronger. It's just like lifting heavier things to get more muscle. Just looks ugly with all the blood and everything." Ardea said.

"What about your fire? Can you use it?"

"Nope. This damage to his physical body was done because he was 'drying up' his aether so to speak. The cracks will go, once his aether gets back to normal. Elizabeth," Ardea placed a hand on Elizabeth's shoulder.

"Yes?" Elizabeth asked.

"He's fine. Feel free to breathe." Ardea said.

"I know. I was not worried for him."

“Of course.” Crow opened his eyes. He made to cover his left hand, but Elizabeth took a hold of the diseased hand before he could hide it.

“No need to hide it. It’s just me and Ardea.” Elizabeth whispered. Crow slumped back down. His eyes glossed over the corner. There he saw Samuel sitting with a book in his hands. It was comedic seeing a large stone beast flipping through pages. His claws swallowed the entire cover.

Crow opened his mouth, but it was too dry to talk. Elizabeth noticed and handed Crow a canteen of water. Crow could tell that Elizabeth was still worried. She looked ready to hold the canteen for him while he drank. Ardea maintained her eyes on rolling up the unused bandages and checking a teal ointment that smelled like mint. Crow replenished his dry throat and spoke. “Thanks for the bandages.”

“No worries.” Ardea said. She finished organizing the medical supplies.

“Mind passing me a book or two. Any will do. I’ll get lightheaded if I stand up.” Crow said. Elizabeth passed him two odds books. One was about the founding of the country of Arcadia titled *The Civilization within the Woods*. The second was a treatise detailing commonly discovered ruins of the pre-Entropy world. Most of these ruins were normal things such as amusement parks and markets. Crow cracked open *The Civilization within the Woods*. “How long should I stay in bed?”

“Four hours.” Ardea guessed.

“Four hours?” Elizabeth gasped. “Those cracks ran along his entire forearm. How could he possibly recover so fast?” Ardea and Crow glanced at each other.

"Magic is weird." They both said.

Elizabeth pinched the bridge of her nose. "The first time you, mages, don't have something to say."

"I can explain it if you really want to." Ardea offered.

"I have to go to train the commoners...." Elizabeth cupped her mouth as if she was a child that spoke a curse. "Forgive me, I didn't mean to say commoners. I meant the citizenry. They are learning quite fast."

"Most likely because they have a good teacher." Crow spoke without lifting his head from the book.

"It runs in my blood." Elizabeth shrugged. "Nevertheless, our mercenary friends invited us to another session at the bar."

"Ooh. I'll be there." Ardea said.

"You are always at the bar." Crow said while he flipped a page.

"Drinking is always better with friends. Our time is running short. We only have two weeks left. I got an idea! We should all go on the last day. Get our last batch of liquid courage." Ardea, satisfied with her brilliant idea, packed all her things. "Bye Samuel." Ardea and Elizabeth the room and left Crow alone with Samuel. Samuel hovered between Crow's desk and the door. Crow closed his book.

"Samuel." Crow said. "Let's talk."

"Yes, Crow?" Samuel asked. Samuel followed Crow's lead and closed his own book.

“You have been looking at me strangely ever since you came back with news of the bandits. Is something wrong?”

“Crow, as a man that studied the past, what is your theory on what caused The Entropy.”

“Nuclear war is the prevailing theory, but there were never any records of radiation sickness among the survivors. The diseases that hit them could be attributed to no longer having easy access to modern medicine and clean water. Another one is simply the collapse of society, but that would not explain the absolute decimation of humanity. I don’t know. There is a reason that we call it The Entropy. We know that it was horrid and that many lives were lost, but we also know that it created creatures like you, the Lubrums that raised Ardea, and even the creature of the Arbor Forest, the Corrhiza.”

“I see.” Samuel said.

“Why the curiosity and how is this connected to why you are looking at me oddly?” Crow asked.

“I have told you of the gargoyles mediation. We meditate in a single spot for an extended period. After some time, we see a vision. A vision of our early life. Some of these visions are ones that show us the first few years of lives, the years before our minds could form clear memories. Usually, these visions have us hear a bell. The Great Bell that we believe gave us life.” Samuel said.

“What did you see in your vision?”

“I saw the world before The Entropy.”

“Really?” Crow sat up. “Are you certain?”

“It is a bloody one. It seems that Gargoyles were truly created for war. I did see something that sparked my interest. It relates a bit to you, but I’ll explain it once I have a better grasp on it.” Samuel said.

“I have horrid memories myself. I hope that this vision does not haunt you like mine. Excuse my excitement over a bitter memory.” Crow said.

“It is fine. I am still not anymore closer to saving the gargoyles from extinction.” Samuel said. “I must return back to my tribe. Excuse me.”

“Of course.” Samuel walked over to the door. Crow couldn’t just leave him in this state. Samuel had treated him with respect like any other. “Samuel before you leave.”

“Yes?”

“Whatever this memory may be. Do not let them define who you are in the present.” Crow said. “There is no point in being haunted by moments that are long gone.” Samuel showed his fangs with a smile and shook his head.

“Thank you, friend, but I feel sometimes you should recount your own wisdom upon yourself.” Samuel left Crow alone. Crow considered his words for a moment before drowning himself in study. The next few hours lost in isolation among ink and paper.

Chapter 33: Mercs

Vakaris jumped from rooftop to rooftop. The New Nivalis houses were still in their infancy and had nothing beyond three stories. Vakaris planted his feet along the roofing and perched like an owl down upon the streets. His figure splashed thin silhouettes across the moon. His long scarf drew across the wind. Vakaris yawned and searched for another place to jump to. Then he heard feet crushing against gravel. He saw a young man running across the unfinished streets with a brown bag in his hand. Vakaris smiled. He bounced across the rooftop with nimble feet and shadowed the man from above. Vakaris got ahead of the man by a few houses and counted down the seconds with his hands. He poised himself to drop down and meet this night runner.

Then Marcus tackled the young man before Vakaris could perform his stunt. Marcus grabbed the man by the collar and pressed him against the wall.

“Stealing from your fellow brothers and sisters? At a time like this?” Marcus said. His brown eyes bore into the thief. Marcus tore the brown bag from the thief’s hand with his left hand while still using his right to hold the thief. Marcus looked inside and found an assortment of jewels, gold accessories, and refined cloths. “You’re lucky. This would be different if you tried to steal food.” Marcus relaxed his grip and let the thief fall to the floor. “Leave.” The thief picked himself up and scurried away into the dark. Vakaris dropped down behind Marcus and sighed.

“He was *mine*.” Vakaris said. “I had a whole thing planned.”

“Then be faster.” Marcus said. Vakaris looked inside the bag and took out a pair of earrings that were encrusted with sapphires.

“Could sell these. Earrings are easy to lose.” Vakaris waited for Marcus to chastise him, but Marcus did not. Vakaris turned to see Marcus silently staring at the woods. Vakaris would always boast the proficiency of his eyes, but he saw nothing. “Marcus what do you see?”

“Show yourself.” Marcus said.

There was a delay, but a voice did come. “I’d have hoped to speak with the two of you separately. Both of you appear to walk such different paths.” Tabitha stepped out of the shadows. She tipped her hat and showed her standard smile. Vakaris tossed the earrings back in the brown bag and kept his hands near his knives.

“Do magic people just like wearing black because it’s the easier color to look good in or does it come from some sort of deep resentment.” Vakaris said. Tabitha took off her hat and smiled. She pointed at Vakaris.

“We promise you wealth.” Tabitha pointed at Marcus. “We promise you wisdom. Assist Daniel’s tribe and both of you will receive exactly what you need.” Marcus and Vakaris turned to look at one another. Then Tabitha raised her hand.

A lightning bolt towards her. Tabitha shook her hand and dissipated the spell. “Such a rude child. Just consider my offer boys.” Tabitha disappeared before their eyes. Her figure lost to the night. Cora caught up and stamped her foot. Pieces of gravel disturbed by Cora were displaced. “What did she offer you? Revenge, riches, the solution to all your problems? That

was the witch that led me here. She's a trickster." Cora turned to Marcus and Vakaris. Vakaris yawned again. It appeared that his bed called to him early on this night.

"You think that's the first woman that offered me unlimited power? Shame on you, pipsqueak." Vakaris said.

"I believed you would have considered it." Marcus said. "Your goal was to acquire wealth in this country after all."

"I am not going to owe a debt to some random woman that I have never met before in my life. I don't want anything caveat behind the money I hold." Vakaris said. He stretched his arms out towards the sky. "Well, fellas. I am going to bed." Vakaris walked down the gravel street.

"He may not seem like it, but his heart is in the right place. I would have battered his skull long ago if he wasn't." Marcus said. With that finishing statement, the two mercenaries left Cora in the dark street alone.

"Idiots. The two of them." Cora said.

Chapter 34: A Nixian Knight

"Father?" Tristan called out. Tristan eyed his father carefully. Kay stood silently looking over the grasslands. The fence to the back of their house was only halfway finished. Kay held a lance. His knuckles were white from how tightly he held the weapon. Tristan walked towards his father slowly. "Father?"

"Ah. My boy." Kay said. "What brings you out back? Want to help me finish the fence?"

"Crow has finished the plan for the defense. He wanted more of you and your friends' insight." Tristan said. "He doesn't want to consider it done until you look it over."

"I see. That's good. The clock is ticking indeed. Our time is short. I assume it would be foolish to spend it building a fence." Kay said. Tristan had never seen his father act so inattentive. This was not the time to be worried about some odd fence.

"Father. Are you okay?" Tristan asked.

"Yes." Evidence of spring wind blew through father and son. Shards of warmer winds that detailed a good harvest.

"Have you been thinking about mother again? You're off looking towards the mountains." Tristan said.

“I will not lie to you. I have. These new lands are bountiful, but my heart grows heavy every passing moment. Not just because of the threat at our door, but because.... We left her behind.” Kay said.

“We couldn’t just dig her up. Carrying her body would be madness. Plus, we needed to get out of the capital, fast. The ferocity against the government threatened you, as much as it threatened the king.” Tristan said.

“I know. I know.” Kay turned to his son and clasped his shoulder. “My boy, you are all this old man got left.” Kay showed his wrinkled face and tugged at his white hair. “I lost my youth. I lost my love. I lost my knighthood. You are all I have left.” Kay closed his eyes and nodded to himself. “My time is coming to an end. Whether it be that my body is undone by age or by this battle, you must see my boy, I am old.”

“But you have plenty of tim-”

“Don’t talk. If you are talking then you aren’t listening.” Kay took a step back. “I can’t say that I have given you the best life.”

“Father-”

“I said to listen. There are undeniable holes that were made when your mother died. Traveling around a broken nation in your adolescent didn’t help either. I know it didn’t help me. For a time, my only concern was you. I didn’t care about the state of the nations, the laws of the land, or the people around us. I was your protector, not your father. Looking at you now.... I realized how lucky I am that you grew up to be a splendid young man.” Kay held Tristan close. “I like to think I know my son. I see the way you listen to the meetings and the way your voice

picks up when you speak your mind. I see vast potential in you. Lead the new generation of Nix. Lead it with that heart of yours but try not to forget the ways of old. There was some good stuff in there.”

“I promise, father.” Tristan said. Father and son broke their embrace. Kay looked into his son’s eyes.

“Damn your mother’s eyes. Come along. I need to find myself a horse.”

Chapter 35: The Cry of a Crow

Crow entered the bar, and the whiff of alcohol and jubilant cheers struck his senses. They had all acquired their drinks. Crow sat next to Elizabeth. Her cheeks rosy from already finishing two cups of wine. Ardea was again flirting with one of the barmaids. There was joy, but it could not marinate or ferment for more than a second before it turned sour with the coming battle. The bandits were due in roughly two days and when this realization started to set in, Vakaris manifested the main event. It was an old wooden chess board. He splayed the pieces and grinned at Crow.

“Let’s see how much smarter I am than you.” Vakaris challenged Crow.

“Is Chess really that fun?” Ardea asked. "Look boring to me.”

“It's just a bunch of wooden pieces knocking each other down.” Marcus said and took a swig from his beer. Marcus eyed his beer with a grimace and pushed the tankard away.

“Just because your small minds can’t comprehend strategy does not mean that you can call it boring.” Vakaris turned to Crow. "Ready?”

“I am actually poor at playing chess.” Crow said.

“I won’t fall for that. You just want to throw me off my game.” Vakaris said.

“I am sure you’ll do great Crow.” Elizabeth clinked her glass with Crow’s cup of water.

“Let’s make bets.” Ardea rallied. She swung her arms over Marcus and Cora. "I am for Vakaris.”

“I am for Vakaris.” Cora said. Vakaris roared with laughter.

“Your own won’t even support you.” Vakaris said.

“I already admitted that I was bad at chess.” Crow said. “It wasn’t a lie.”

“Well, I support you Crow.” Elizabeth said. The game began slowly. Vakaris and Crow locked eyes with the board and nothing else. The longest time in between moves neared up to five minutes. The rest of the party looked on to see both men and their methodical mind games. The watchers were either confused or bored. There was a back and forth between the two men, but at the current moment, Crow was at a disadvantage.

“Plan your next moves very carefully, my friend.” Vakaris almost sang these words while twirling one of Crow’s defeated pawns. Crow’s eyes moved between his knight, and his queen. He reached for his black knight and then the door opened accompanied with a shout from Tristan.

“Crow! There is a strange woman dressed in black looking for you.”

“What?”

“A complete stranger. She stands near the statue of Fraser. She is calling for you and is causing a commotion. Who is she?”

“Tabitha.” Cora said. “It has to be her.”

“Who’s Tabitha?” Ardea asked. Vakaris reached for Crow’s knight. Crow snatched the black knight and placed it in his pocket.

“Let’s just see what she has to say. I don’t want to cause anyone undue harm.” Crow walked out of *The Winchester*. The roads towards the center of the town were empty, as expected from a lazy afternoon. An orange tipped horizon traveled across the Grasslands of Rhei.

Elizabeth and the rest of the group followed close behind. They stopped in the center of New Nivalis and turned to Tabitha, who sat near the statue of Fraser. A crowd had already formed and kept silent. Some were curious of this hollering stranger that wanted to meet Crow. Those who didn’t know Crow personally were still present to see the commotion.

“Ladies and Gentlemen! The mysterious man in black has arrived.” Tabitha flourished at Crow and beckoned him closer. Crow stood his ground. “Look at his shuffling demeanors. He’s shy. Always been a shy boy. Must be a side effect from the way his mother raised him.”

“Why have you come here?” Crow said.

“I am here to adhere to my ultimate ideal.”

“To commit slander?” Elizabeth asked.

“Slander? What are you his guard dog?” Tabitha asked. “I’ll reveal the truth to these people that have welcomed you into their hearts, unknown of your wicked ways.”

“What is y- “

“Crow Pendragon is a necromancer. That is what he is.” Tabitha’s words hung in the air for a moment and then there was a noticeable ripple across the crowd. A network of whispers and theories began after the first few seconds of silent shock. “Yes. Yes. The vile necromancers. A cult of insane mages that seek immortality. They use the dead as servants. Those of the especially unsavory kind lust after cold bodies. They accept dead children and stillborns from

parents to experiment and pad their armies of the undead.” All eyes turned to Crow. He felt lethargic, empty, and heavier. “What do you have to say for yourself, Sir Pendragon?” Crow’s shoulders dropped. “Look up. Don’t be shy.” Crow raised his head and turned his back to Tabitha and wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. His feet started to drag him along. He choked out some words that no one could hear.

“I am sorry for everything. I am sorry. I shouldn’t have come here.” Crow said.

“What was that? Speak up! Tell them what you are. Crow for the sake of your fellow man! Speak up!” Tabitha held a smile as she projected her delirious voice.

“Crow! Wait!” Elizabeth ran towards Crow. “Defend yourself. This Tabitha does not speak the entire truth. You know that. I know that.”

“No. She’s right. All of this was a mistake. I pretended for far too long. I was never meant to live this kind of life.” Crow whispered.

“Crow, you can’t just run away.” Elizabeth said. “We accepted you. Can’t you see that you are not hated.”

“I can run away from this. It is the only thing that I am good at. I left Winnie behind. I lost track of Thane and Morrigan. I ran from Felicity.” Crow threw his hood on. Vakaris, Marcus, and Ardea just stayed silent. Uncertain of what words to say. Cora tried to speak, but her voice was gone.

“No.” Elizabeth attempted to grab Crow’s arm, but Crow just ran. Elizabeth frowned and stamped her foot on the ground.

“Very well. Go then. Be a hermit for the rest of your life. I am not going to bother any longer.” Elizabeth said. The chirping of spring birds punctuated Elizabeth’s word. Elizabeth turned back to the statue of Fraser. The crowd had yet to disperse, but Tabitha was gone.

Night had stretched itself across the sky. Crow didn’t know what time it was, and it didn’t matter to him. His walk was slow. The mere sight of his hunched back and long legs were sickly. His dark figure was thus stunted. His foggy breath drew out in front of him with every step. Shadows shifted around him due to moonlight. He didn’t react. Crow felt a drop of water on his head.

“They find you soon enough.” Crow repeated these words to himself. Then he stopped. His eyes moved forwards. Shapes danced in front of him. Crow started to recognize them. Crow laughed at them. He laughed until he croaked out a cough. “Why are you here?” Crow asked. Golden brown eyes stared at him. It was the same white summer dress. Crow shook his head. “I am dead, already? That sure was quick. Now, will I be judged by some god, or I am fated to walk in limbo forever?” Felicity did not respond to him. “Are you still scared of me? Don’t worry about it. Everyone is!” Crow stretched out his arms and smiled. “Such is my nature. A prodigal son. A creature of the night to the rest of the world. Utterly worthless.” Felicity walked towards him. Her brown eyes were still devoid of that warm light that Crow painfully remembered. Crow didn’t move. She reached out her hand. “If I am dead. Just let me know.” Crow ripped his gloves off and tossed them into the mud. He eyed his rotting hand deliriously. “Come on! Tell me! Is this my magic! Or some hallucination because of insomnia and hunger!” The sky opened up and more rain came down.

A second figure appeared from the darkness. A girl by the age of twelve.

“Winnie?” Crow asked. Crow’s sister walked closer to him and did the same as Felicity, but Winnie’s presence was followed by the sounds of thunder.

“Don’t look at me like that! I can’t fight against her. She still plagues my mind. She still haunts me to this day. What do you want from me!” Winnie tilted her head then disappeared. The sounds of thunder were so loud that they made Crow’s body tremble. He wiped the rain from his cheek. It was most certainly rain on running down his eyes. Crow saw an owl sitting atop one of the trees. The leaves and branches shielding it from rain. The screams of thunder came once more, and Crow was certain that the sky was speaking to him. Crow fell to his knees and shivered. The rainwater caused the dirt to bubble and soften. He heard Mordecai’s voice in his temple. *Remember your own ethics. Stay true to them. For if you cannot stay true to yourself. You cannot stay true to anyone.*

“Elizabeth, Mordecai, Felicity, Winnie, Vakaris, Marcus, Cora, Rhei, Samuel, Ardea, Tristan, Brynhildr how many faces have I betrayed by merely existing.” The lightning in the sky ripped apart the sky and spread out like a web of thunder. Crow collapsed and felt a sharp sting on his right arm.

The wind was noticeable, but not fierce. A small pond nearby was stuck in an endless ripple. The expansive field of grass defied eternity by going further than eternity itself. The grass and the leaves rustled only when the wind was not blowing. Crow could no longer feel his body. He was but a mere ghost. He looked at his left hand. It was normal. Healed of its necrosis. The wind blew once again, Crow blinked and the leaves upon the yew tree stood completely still until

the wind stopped and then the leaves decided to quiver. The air was colder than last time. How long has it been since he was here?

“I told you once. That it would not be easy to throw away Limbo.” The words were accompanied by hearty laughter. Crow turned to face Mordecai. The wizard looked the same as he always imagined. Long white beard and the robes to signify that he was not ashamed of what he was. Crow bowed.

“I have failed you master.” Crow whispered. Mordecai stopped showing his smile lined with old teeth and turned to the rolling hills. A pensive cloud wafted over Mordecai’s face.

“You have failed no one, but yourself. When you told me that you were going to run away from Lucia, I expected the years to embolden your mind and heart. Now, I see that you are still that scared child. A child that blames the world’s evil on himself.” Mordecai said. Crow didn’t bother to respond. What could he say? “Bah!” Mordecai walked over to Crow. His large brown hat bobbed up and down. He grabbed Crow by the chin and raised the boy’s head. “I will not raise you up. That is your job. I cannot lead your life. I cannot love for you. I cannot fight for you. I cannot stand for you. I am your teacher, your friend, your ally.”

Crow clutched his ears and looked at the wrinkled face of Mordecai. “You can’t plug your ears. What shall you choose, Crow Pendragon. That is your name, right? Like King Arthur himself. Now tell, Crow Pendragon, this world is filled with choices and no one can choose for you today! You need to choose.” Mordecai’s words boomed across Limbo. Then a second voice joined in.

“You promised me that you would find out what caused The Entropy. You wouldn’t want to be a liar, would you Crow?” Rhei said while she leaned against the yew tree.

Dark clouds circled around the yew tree. It started to rain in this world as well. The rain rose from the ground towards the sky. Crow clutched his ears. The storm crackled and boomed till his bones were powder. He somehow heard Mordecai's voice once again. His voice, tranquil as spring. "Come on lad. I trained you because I knew you had potential. I still believe that."

Then Rhei spoke, "Necromancer or not, you can't leave a job left unfinished. If you don't carry on, I won't let you live it down."

Crow fell to his knees and the world before him became empty. Disembodied, indistinguishable faces surrounded him. More tidings of the dead. Their mouths large and full of ichor that splattered against their own faces. Crow clutched his head until his fingers dug into his temple. The voices of the dead synthesized together to form a rambunctious gong. Crow shut his eyes hoping that all of this would end, but Crow knew that it wouldn't be that easy.

"Please just stop!" Crow couldn't hear his own screams. The faces floated towards him like tadpoles. They swirled around his body and with gaping mouths. Crow's ears started to bleed. Crow desperately averted his eyes. It was then when he saw the bodies beneath his feet. A land of the dead. Their jaws extended to form empty pools. Their fleshy bodies melded together to form a flooring of limbs and empty white eyes. Their bodies convulsed and screamed. Then Crow heard a sound break through the voices. It was the sound of thunder. The sound of lightning striking. Crow opened his eyes and saw a crease of golden light that bothered the darkness around him. Crow found the strength to stand up. The faces of the dead swam behind Crow's body for protection against the light. He stared at the golden light. He was entranced for a moment and nothing more.

“No.” Crow said. He looked between the faces and the golden light. He saw the tangled of appendages that wrapped around his legs. Crow’s face turned from horror to neutral. “I am tired of being miserable.” Crow closed his eyes once more and gathered his strength. The golden light dimmed, and the faces of the dead started to crack. The bodies beneath his feet were buried by dirt. The darkness rose and created a black sky. The dim golden light shot upwards and broke apart into glittering pieces. These pieces morphed into white stars. The yew tree and the hills of grass returned. Crow turned to the faces of the dead that still floated amongst him and spoke.

“My name is Crow Pendragon. With necromancy, I’ll ensure that your boundless history will not be forgotten. I ask that you see me as I am.” The faces mouths and eyes lids melded shut. Then the face cracked apart into pieces. The pieces fell to the ground like black feathers. Crow wiped his tears with his sleeve. Mordecai and Rhei returned.

“W-was that the land of the dead?” Rhei asked.

“No necromancer has ever seen the land of the dead.” Mordecai said. “Crow did you do what most men thought impossible?”

“No.” Crow said. “You two know more than me that magic is the balance of logic and emotion. Letting neither grow stronger than the other. Necromancy is just like any other magic. We just witnessed firsthand what can occur when the emotional overtakes logic.” Crow ran his hand through his hair. “Those faces, those bodies were nothing but the fermented trauma of ten years. What I imagined myself to wallow in.” Crow raised his hand over his heart and smiled.

“Looks like someone just figured it their own worth.” Rhei said.

“Aye, but the lad is probably collapsed somewhere.” Mordecai said. Crow rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’ll awake soon enough. Tomorrow will be a busy day.”

“The rain is devilish tonight, Samuel.” The elder said.

“Yes, it is-elder? What are you doing outside?” Samuel asked. He looked upon the broken body of the Elder of the Dame Tribe. Chunks of stone missing from his arms and legs. A large crack splattered upon his chest. The elder raised a holey claw at the sky.

“Watch the sky.”

“What am I looking for?” Samuel asked. The sky was a bubbled mess of clouds. Plumes of lightning erupted into elongated veins that touched the ground. The sky howled as one single sphere of chaos.

“The clouds.” The elder said. “Follow my claw.” Samuel focused on the sky and found a pool of clouds that all swirled around a particular spot.

“Why are the clouds moving in such a way.”

“Mages can often be forces of nature. I have seen this before. You will act in a moment.” From the center of the swirling clouds came a stream of blue lightning. “Seek him out, Samuel and bring him back here. Whatever happens, Crow will need rest.”

“Crow? Crow is the source of the clouds?”

“If you turn your eyes to the forest, you shall see a spark of light and dark. The very soul of our companion.”

“I don’t understand.” Samuel said. “Why would he be in the forest?”

“I do not know, but he is alone. No more words. My stone flesh fails me.” The elder scuttled back into his tent. The rain pattered against Samuel’s stone skin. The sky was ripped apart by more thunder when Samuel found the place where the lightning struck the ground. The lightning had undisturbed the forest. Only Crow was evidence of any lightning. The residue of lightning on his fingertips. Samuel scooped up Crow and held his limp body. One of his arms was cut by a nearby rock that jutted from ground like an overgrown tooth. Flecks of grass and clumps of dirt were stuck to Crow’s hair, face and clothes. Samuel saw Crow’s face. His eyelids softly closed, and his lips formed in the shape of a sleepy thin smirk. Samuel would have described his face as a man truly at peace.

Chapter 36: The Thirteenth Hour

Crow woke up. His hair and face were covered in dirt. He licked his teeth and gums. His mouth tasted earth and smoke. Crow looked ahead to find his gloves were placed nearby. Crow's journal and *The First King* were stacked on top of each other, and his cloak was draped over him like a blanket. Crow sat up and cradled his hazy head. Blue bells were sewn onto the canvas that surrounded him. The tent was the shape of a hexagon and Crow realized that he was in the gargoyle encampment. The smell of petrichor wafted to Crow's nose. Crow sat up and wiped the dirt from his hair and face.

"Thank you master." Crow heard a sharp yell in his skull. "You too, Rhei." The entrance of the tent was a simple split along the white canvas. A red eye peeked through the entrance before entering. Crow put on his gloves and cloak. He securely dusted off his journal and took *The First King* into his hands. Samuel entered the tent. Crow ran his thumb over the cover of *The First King*.

"It's nice to see you awake!" Samuel said. Crow pocketed both his journal and *The First King*. "I found you collapsed near the encampment. We thought you were dead." Samuel said.

"I guess you could say that I was dead." Crow turned to Samuel and smiled. "But you don't have to worry about such things. Has New Nivalis been attacked, yet?"

"We do not know. The battle is far enough where we won't know when it will begin. Both sides are relatively small. It is not like they have mortars or the grand spells of Arcadia." Cora threw herself into the tent and grabbed Crow's hand.

“I am taking you back! I won’t let you abandon the people of New Nivalis. Elizabeth said that she didn’t want to drag you into something that you didn’t want to do, but I know that you want to protect the people of New Nivalis, and I won’t take no for an answer! “Cora tugged at Crow’s cloak. Dirt flaked off of his cloak when she stretched the fabric.

“Relax.” Crow said and pulled his cloak back. "Samuel, can you get me a quick meeting with the elder?"

“Yes. He was actually expecting you to ask for a meeting.” Samuel said.

“Excellent.” Crow said. "Let’s go, Cora. I have no intention of letting New Nivalis fall.”

The civilians of New Nivalis hid themselves in the old Castle of Rhei. The green hills of the grasslands met with the clear blue skies along the horizon. Rolling white clouds watched and drifted over the earth. Elizabeth stood at the outskirts to New Nivalis. Her long white hair was tied into a long braid. Her sword was planted into the ground. Behind her a group of young and old stood ready for a fight. Kay was ahead of these men on a brown horse. His lance shined to a reflective polish. Tristan was at the opposite side of his father. Vakaris and Marcus were found inside the town. The two men shared no exchange. Vakaris repeatedly counted his knives. Marcus had his eyes closed and focused on his breathing. The spring wind picked up for a moment. Elizabeth recollected her thoughts. She looked on towards the familial lines of those before her and heard their voices clear. She cleared her throat and turned to face the crowd, the army behind her.

Elizabeth remembered those boring etiquette lessons from a different time. All these lessons were boring because they were meant to address nobility and foreign dignitaries. Nobles? They were the ones that fought bitterly against her father. Foreigners? They spelled nothing but trouble as her father used to say. Now she was no longer a child and understood the importance of etiquette. Rhetoric was a weapon just like her sword. She could never grow the mind for politics, there was too little action, but she understood the importance of moral. A speech was needed. It did not matter whether she was considered the monarchic leader on this day or the centuries to come. These people needed someone to lead them, and her words needed to be careful. One that was neither a call for bloodlust nor a call for surrender.

“Allow me to speak!” Elizabeth called out. The defenders were already somber and quiet, but now they all turned to Elizabeth. “My People, you are all my people. We no longer bear the name of Nix. Some may say that we carry no name at all. This battle that comes before us shall be the one where we earn a name for ourselves. Where we shall earn our spot on this piece of earth. I can feel the fear. I can hear the rattling of your courage, yet I do not blame you for this. This shall be the first battle for some, yet I dare say that we fought against the worst threats that man has faced. A broken civilization, the bitter winter, the uncertainty of migration. Those who come to our newborn lands with steel brandish only that. What is steel without resolve? What is steel compared to the dissolution of a civilization? To put it simply, they do not hold the unity that we have forged through our grueling journey.” Elizabeth paused. She didn’t want to dehumanize them. They were bandits, but surely it must have been born from desperation. “Perhaps they do, perhaps they have their own brothers and sisters, but that does not give them the right to attack us. I may no longer be your queen. I may no longer have a real duty to all of you, yet I will fight for my loving people. Why? Because I still bear the heart and mind

of the queen. I will not have anyone in my stead. I ask that you do not fight for me or a flag, but for yourself and the fellow defender that stands next to you!" Dust kicked up near the horizon.

"Now let us bear our unity against theirs!"

Black specks were headed directly towards New Nivalis. Elizabeth pulled her sword from the ground and steadied herself. The wave of black dots turned into fully fledged enemies in moments. The horde of bandits had arrived. Then they stopped. They were not close enough to start the fight, but not too far to be heard. Elizabeth raised her eyebrow and saw a single man step forward. Elizabeth did not expect a conversation. He held a car door like a shield. His black t-shirt was layered in pieces of thick leather armor.

"My name is Daniel Olympus. Can you hear my voice from such a distance? Who speaks for you all?" Daniel asked.

"They are more coordinated than most bandits." Tristan complimented.

"They are still wild and dangerous. Be ready for anything, boy." A veteran murmured.

"No need to call me, boy." Tristan said.

"I shall speak for New Nivalis." Elizabeth said.

"Very good. I assume you are Elizabeth. The white hair is quite distinct. I only have a simple request. I have a duty to my people. We need new land to nourish ourselves. If you accept my terms, then we can spare all the bloodshed." Daniel said.

"Let us see your terms first." Elizabeth said.

"Become part of our clan. Swear your loyalty to us. As simple as that."

“Are you asking for our fealty? You who have broken the peaceful land that we have journeyed to acquire. You who assault a settlement that is no more than four months old.”

Elizabeth turned her head back to defenders standing behind her. "Shall we give this man our loyalty?"

“NO!” All of New Nivalis roared.

“My people bear their steel.” Elizabeth said. "Daniel, if you truly want a peaceful resolution then come with a new proposition or walk away.”

“You have all made a terrible mistake.” Daniel said. A voice that was too low to be heard from the opposing side. He raised his large sword towards the sky. He prayed for a boon in this coming battle. *One last battle and we will never struggle again. One last battle. They shall see.* He pointed his sword at the defenders of New Nivalis. He steadied his trembling arm. “Come Brothers and Sisters! Let your actions in battle be retold for generations! Fight for glory and safety!” The bandits began their war cries and their assault.

“Prepare yourself!” Kay said. His older voice strained against the war cries of the young. The bandits drew closer and closer until a poor man on the frontline found the wrong footing. He stepped on a sigil. The magical mark glowed orange before his legs were blown by a blast of electrical fire. Many more bandits followed him in a sudden death before the fight had begun, but this did not halt their advance. They were a horde already drunk for battle. The two sides crashed into each other with a tumultuous force.

Kay led the left side of the New Nivalis defense. The old knight galloped along the battlefield with lance in hand. Any man within range found a swift end at the hands of the silver-haired knight. Sides by side with Kay, the first line of New Nivalis held a steady line.

“Show them the hearts forged by bitter winters!” Kay urged his part forwards while he clocked a bandit with his lance. “We shall all be knights on this day!”

Elizabeth met several of Daniel’s bandits in the field. One of them was a man with an axe. Elizabeth dodged all his attacks and struck the man in the gut. He crumpled to the ground and was dead in moments. A woman with a spear and a man with a sword attacked Elizabeth at the same time. The woman with the spear did not take advantage of the spear’s range and opted to attack Elizabeth within arm’s reach. Elizabeth cut the spear in half by its wooden handle and pierced her sword right through the woman’s neck. Elizabeth gasped when blood marked her face.

“I’ll avenge you.” The other attacker raised his sword with his left and grabbed onto Elizabeth’s shoulder with his right. Elizabeth grabbed the man’s left wrist and the two struggled to disarm the other. The man was able to land a small scrape on Elizabeth’s shoulder. Elizabeth growled. She raised her sword’s hilt and used it to bash the man’s mouth. Blood and teeth spilled out when the bandit opened his mouth from the shock. Elizabeth spun her sword across her palm and dug her sword into the man’s open mouth. Elizabeth felt her shoulder and found only a few lines of blood. “Your land belongs to us!” Another wild man ran towards him. He screamed violence until Elizabeth swiped once and chopped off his leg. He tumbled down to the ground. Elizabeth planted her sword into his chest.

The sound of a bowstring joined the battle cries. Daniel’s lackeys found themselves being attacked from the mountains, as a flurry of arrows rained down on them. The arrows were tipped with fire. Ardea and Baxter stood along a foot hold halfway through the mountains of Nix.

“Fight along the forest! Their arrows won’t reach that far!” Daniel ordered. The large mass of soldiers lurched and followed the border between the Arbor Forest and the Grasslands of Rhei.

“We can’t let them get anywhere near New Nivalis.” Elizabeth ordered. She didn’t want to break the line, but they couldn’t let them get anywhere near the castle.

“You heard her! Keep a tight grip on them.” Tristan’s voice followed. The east side of the New Nivalis crashed back into Daniel’s army. This was when a group of six bandits saw a large man running directly at them with an emotionless expression. Marcus collided into the six and used his sheer strength to displace all of them. Vakaris on the other hand grinned from ear to ear. He ducked under a sword swing. He reached his arm around and stabbed a woman in the lungs. He dangled that same knife before throwing into another man’s eyeball. He threw knives at every bandit he saw. One of them tried to face him directly. Vakaris just smiled even harder.

“Come on. Get a good hit on me. I know you can do it.” Vakaris welcomed with his arms stretched out. The man who challenged just squinted at Vakaris. Vakaris adjusted his scarf and raised his index finger. “But before you kill me! I know that a man of such caliber is most likely going to kill me. Take this note.” Vakaris threw a piece of paper towards the man. The man plucked a folded piece of paper from the sky. “Give it to one of many lovers.” Vakaris smiled. The bandit crushed the piece of paper. Vakaris stabbed the man in the neck and took back the paper. “No respect for romantics these days.” Another bandit took a rusted metal hammer and tried to get a hit on Vakaris. Tristan intercepted the blow and cut his torso.

“Watch yourself.” Tristan said.

“I knew he was there.” Vakaris said. Vakaris and Tristan saw Elizabeth draw her fist back and knock out the bandit. “Be careful out there. You are not invincible, Elizabeth. What would happen if Crow came back and found you dead?”

“Whether he returns or not is not my main concern right now, Vakaris.” Elizabeth threw herself at more enemies. Now certainly wasn’t the time to think about a man that wasn’t even present. Elizabeth was worried about him, but achieving victory was more important. Vakaris turned to Tristan.

“She may be a skilled fighter, but she doesn’t have that...drive and skill to make a fool of the enemy.” Vakaris said.

“Whatever. More importantly have you noticed something about their invasion?” Tristan asked.

“All the ones on the frontline are inexperienced and young. Trial by fire, I suppose or maybe they want to play fair considering our army is full of farmers.”

“I do not think that bandits would be so disposed to any form of honor. Perhaps it’s a coming-of-age ritual.” Tristan said. An explosion went off in the distance.

“That appears to be your answer.” Vakaris said.

Daniel watched the explosion decimate the citizens of New Nivalis and his own clan mates. He saw the silent green hills be stained with red conflict. He saw the witch beside him with her damned smile. The smile that made him shiver. He would never admit it to anyone except alone to Mary when they were in each other's arms and he could show weakness. Daniel

held his sword firm and waited for that feeling that he always searched for prior to a battle. That state of mind where it was easier to cleave his enemies. It was a haze that overtook his mind and let his body run wild. A bloodlust that would guarantee the conquering of his enemies.

But Daniel had not yet reached this feverish mind of battle, so he watched as Tabitha flung her spells. He saw her smile as she seared flesh. He didn't see a haze of battle in her mind. She wasn't fighting to survive or to indicate to the world that she was a stronger being. Her smile showed satisfaction with the destruction, but her eyes were empty. Her spells weren't contained or carefully constructed. They were explosions. Daniel saw some of his brothers and sisters being thrown aback by the flames. She took pleasure in this as well. He wanted to stop her.

Daniel had made a choice. He made his agreement under the moon and the stars. If this land was to belong to his and his own, they needed her. Daniel looked back to the battle. The enemy was courageous, but he saw the untrained bakers and carpenters. This battle would end soon enough and for once he would achieve peace.

Those who were not able to fight were huddled together in the halls of the Castle of Rhei. The halls were filled with mostly elderly and children. There were a few young men and women that were stationed within the castle as precaution, but each of them knew that if they had to bear arms then the battle was already lost. Anxiety piled on, as they were ordered to stay away from the windows and could not check which side was winning. Even if they tried to check, they would only see an amorphous blob of conflict from the castle windows anyway.

One such child perched near a suit of armor was determined to see the view. Against the orders of his grandfather, he navigated his way through the sea of scared people. He crawled

along the tall legs and searched for the rays of sunlight that blasted through the long windows. He saw splotches of sunlight peeked behind huddled bodies and followed the light until he came face to face with the tall window. He pressed his face against the cool glass and squinted for details. He saw specks of humans raging across the verdant grass. Oliver and Harry saw the boy sticking himself to the glass.

“We were told not to look out the windows, boyo.” Olivier said. The child ignored Oliver.

“It is only natural that a child is curious.” Harry said. Harry turned back to look at the flight of the stairs that signaled the end of the hall. He sighed and turned back to the window.

Then a statue swiped over the window. The child fell back in response. For a moment this gray statue with wings blocked out the sun. The boy on the floor pointed at the window.

“I saw something!” He said.

“What are you doing?” The grandfather grasped the hand of the boy and saw a second apparition pass by the window. “A gargoyle?”

“I thought they couldn’t help us?” Another person in the hall asked. The group within the castle shrugged amongst themselves and then a third gargoyle passed by the window. “What are they doing?” The company of people pressed themselves against the glass just as the boy had done. Oliver and Harry watched as Theodore and Isabella joined the crowd. It was a tight fit to see out the window due the horde that crowded around to see outside.

“What do you see, Theodore?” Harry asked.

“Those are certainly gargoyles, but Crow said that they couldn’t help us because....”

“Because we needed a bell to ring.” A voice called out. Harry snapped to the bottom of the stairs and saw Samuel at the bottom.

“Samuel! What are you doing here?” Heads turned faster than they searched for gargoyles. Half of the mob stayed at the window and the other half scurried to the top of the stairs and looked at Samuel. A cascade of questions rang in the air.

“We don’t have time to explain. I need some people to come with me. Crow’s orders.” Samuel said.

Crow stood atop the walls of the castle with his hood on. He looked down upon the conflict and turned his head towards the long walls of the castle. The battle was still far enough from the castle, but Crow could see the rudimentary picture of conflict from where he stood. Daniel and his clan attacked New Nivalis with the prowess of wild animals, but that witch’s spells were something else. Crow tried to look for familiar faces, but it would be impossible for his eyes to distinguish anything beyond shapes. A deep hollow chime echoed from the castle. The bell rang for a few moments before it stopped. Crow assumed that the old bell must have fallen when he heard a crash a few moments later. Samuel ran out from the courtyard. He flapped his wings and perched himself right next to Crow.

“The bell?” Crow asked. Samuel nodded.

“The bell was old and crashed to the floor. No one was hurt.” Samuel said.

“Samuel was that enough. If it wasn’t....” Crow held up his left hand. “I can even the odds myself.” Crow saw Mordecai and Rhei appear behind Samuel. Their feet standing on thin air.

“That was more than enough. Declarations of war are not fickle.” Samuel said. Dozens of gargoyles flew upwards from the forest like a cloud. “We shall even the odds.”

“Thank you for this, Samuel.” Crow said.

“You probably think you’re so cool standing atop the castle with that hood on, don’t you?” Rhei asked.

“Sometimes a spectacle helps morale,” Crow adjusted his hood.

“They can’t see you from down there.”

“How will you face the witch?” Mordecai said. “She’s got years on you.”

“Have you seen her spells? There’s something odd about that witch.” Crow said. He smirked and added. “I was trained by the best mage in antiquity.”

“Excuse me. I would like to declare that I am also a gifted mage,” Rhei said.

“You didn’t train me. Look at me, I am wasting time speaking with dead people.” Crow said. “Samuel can you drop me down there?” Crow watched bear his fangs.

“Hop on!”

Elizabeth witnessed as a bandit was tackled by a blur of stone. The man was tossed aside with a bleeding head. Claw marks across his skin that revealed themselves through his torn cotton shirt. The dazed man raised his head in a grunt before fainting.

“Look like we are going to win.” Vakaris said. He shattered an enemy’s kneecaps and then jabbed a knife in the nape of their neck.

“Not yet.” Elizabeth said. The bandits had yet to retreat. They pushed forwards even after the battalion of gargoyles had arrived. Tristan saw plumes of smoke in the sky. Residue from Tabitha’s magic. She weaved spells aimed towards the sky. One such gargoyle had one his wings clipped with arcane fire. He fell from the sky and left a streak of disturbed soil where he landed. A group of Daniel’s men hacked away at the cracks and shattered the fallen gargoyle’s limbs. This group of bandits was then in turn swarmed by a volley of gargoyles and the bandits were turned into red mist.

“Samuel! Drop me here! I need to get to Tabitha before she kills anymore of your tribe.” Crow dropped besides Elizabeth. “We need to get rid of Tabitha and Daniel.”

“I know.” Elizabeth said. A bandit ran towards the two of them. A lightning bolt erupted from his chest and he fell to his knees. Crow and Elizabeth turned to see Cora with golden hands.

“What’s the plan?” Cora asked.

“Vakaris!” Crow said. Vakaris craned his neck to see Crow. He held up an index finger before sweeping a bandit off his feet and plugging a knife into each leg.

“You know your little fit could have been avoided if you just screamed you were a necromancer from the beginning.” Vakaris said. “You should’ve seen the people. None cared about your necromancy.”

“You can make fun of me later. Take Marcus, Tristan and Kay and have them push the non-injured and the willing forwards.” Crow said.

“You want us to push against a small army of angry bandits?”

“We need to create an opening to Tabitha. She is their greatest weapon. The gargoyles will assist your push.” Crow said. Vakaris shrugged his shoulders and ran towards Marcus. “Elizabeth, where is Ardea?” Elizabeth pointed across the field. Ardea held her hands over a fallen New Nivallite with a bleeding arm.

“Cora take Ardea and round up those who can’t fight further. Get some assistance from those in the backline and try to stabilize as many as you can.”

“Got it.” Cora said.

“One more thing.”

“Yeah?” Cora asked. Her feet were jittery from Crow’s order.

“Not everyone’s going to make it, but don’t let it haunt you. Even saving one life is valuable.” Crow said.

Cora nodded and crossed the field. Marcus, Tristan, Vakaris, and Kay had already reorganized a file of fighters. Kay raised his spear.

“Forwards!” The makeshift soldiers of New Nivalis smacked against Daniel’s bandits. Swords, axes, spears, and screams all collided into a tumble of blood and screams.

“We need to end this now.” Crow turned to Elizabeth. “I am going after Tabitha.”

“And I am going after Daniel. Both sides are getting worn down, if we take Daniel and Tabitha down, they’ll be more willing to surrender.” Elizabeth said.

“Then we go together.” Crow witnessed as Marcus grabbed a short man by the face and shoved his entire body into the ground. Vakaris laughed at Marcus' action before throwing a rock at the enemy's face. Kay abated foes with his spear. Tristan covered his father’s side. Crow confidence grew when he saw all his allies fighting together. Now he just needed to play his own role in all of this.

“Crow?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yeah?”

“Let’s do this carefully. I don’t want to see you harmed.” Elizabeth said and raised her sword. “Come my knight, let us dispense of these aggressors.” Crow and Elizabeth ran into the blend of enemy and allies.

“The Basilisk said to kill the man in black!” An enemy charged towards Crow and swung his axe. The axe grazed Crow’s cloak. He fainted an attack and Crow dodged the wrong way. Crow was forced to catch the axe head with his necrotic hand. The axe head sliced through the leather of his gloves and the dead flesh of his hands. Crow yanked the axe out of the man’s hand. Without a weapon, the man wrapped both hands around Crow’s neck.

“This land will be ours.” The bandit said. Crow drew his palm across the man’s face and squeezed his face. The bandit recoiled when electricity seared half of his face. Crow drove his hand through the man’s chest. He flicked the blood off his hand and arm.

“Since when is your lightning blue?” Vakaris asked after kicking a bandit in the knee.

“Focus!” Crow said. The next enemy that stood before Crow had tears in his eyes. He may have very well been younger than Tristan. This was not a bloodthirsty brigand; this was a boy. He swung his sword with no technique. Crow ran forwards and his hand glowed blue. He disarmed the boy by tearing his sword out his hands with his necrotic hand. He tapped the boy’s stomach. The boy yelped from a static shock. “Roll on your back and play dead.” Crow whispered. The boy followed his orders and feigned a scream. It was terrible acting, but neither side would notice in the heat of battle.

Another gargoyle was eradicated above. Tabitha’s fire magic spread across the grasslands and scorched the grass. Crow saw some of the fire spreading towards the forest.

“Vakaris, take out those flames when you have the chance!” Crow said. Crow followed the trails of the flames. At the central point of the trails, he found Elizabeth and Tabitha. Tabitha kept Elizabeth at a distance with her magic. Elizabeth had to jump and roll out of the way, while Tabitha made the gap between them even larger.

“Tabitha!” Elizabeth called out. “Why must you do this? What is your reason for killing your countrymen?” Tabitha didn’t respond. “Do you not remember when you taught me as a child? Why are you not talking to me?”

“The battlefield isn’t a place for words.” Daniel said. A gargoyle attempted to attack him, but Daniel hacked away at his wings and bashed his head with his sword. “You shouldn’t have interfered.” Daniel said to the gargoyle. He turned away from the broken gargoyle. He dragged his sword against the dirt. Daniel went to attack Elizabeth but stepped back to dodge a lightning bolt. Daniel spat at the ground. “The necromancer. You told me that he was not going to partake in this battle.”

“A miscalculation. I thought he had thinner skin.” Tabitha said. Crow caught up to Elizabeth. He was panting and his clothing was splotted with blood and dirt.

“Elizabeth. Let me handle Tabitha,” Crow said.

“Do you know something about her?” Elizabeth asked.

“I won’t know for sure until I get close. Can yo-”

“Worry not. I can handle Daniel.” Elizabeth rushed Daniel. The two of them brawled away, so fast that neither Tabitha nor Crow could react. Tabitha shook her head at the conflict between the two.

“They are both brutes.” Tabitha said. “She is a refined brute, but a brute nonetheless.” Tabitha eyed Crow. “Now, what reason has the vile *necromancer* for returning. I saw some of those enemies that you killed. You can be quite destructive.”

“They were men and women that bore ill will towards me and the people of this settlement.” Crow said.

“So, you are their protector?” Tabitha asked.

“Why are you talking to me yet you held your tongue for Elizabeth?” Crow said.

“Perhaps you don’t truly remember her. I also wonder why a witch of Nix would be so intimately attuned with fire magic?” A circle of flames appeared around Crow. The flames were high enough to block the view of anything except for the mountains and the sky. Tabitha walked through the flames. She threw off her hat and showed her fishhook smile.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Tabitha said.

“I am sure you don’t.” Crow said. "And I am not being sarcastic.”

Tabitha drew hands over the ground beneath Crow’s feet. Red lines pulsed across the floor like veins. Crow rolled out of the way and a pillar of fire rose where he had once stood. Crow reached out for the pillar and squeezed his hand into a fist. The pillar condensed into a ball and Crow launched it at Tabitha. Tabitha formed her own ball of fire. The two spheres collided. Sparks of fire filled the air. Tabitha pulled the sparks towards herself and combined them into waves. Crow’s face was brightened by the wall of fire.

“Tabitha.” Crow looked past the wave of fire. The sky darkened. Gray clouds appeared in the sky. "Cease your magic, Thrall!”

Injured soldiers and bodies were dragged into the houses. Scraps of clothing were used to stop bleeding. Those who were dismembered were given immediate attention. Ardea oversaw the mending of these wounds. Splints were made for broken legs and arms. Some bodies were strewn about the dirt roads. At first, they were placed in neat rows, but the anxiety of the battle and the rising number caused them to be tossed into general piles. Ardea’s red hair was flecked

with bile from unfortunate defenders that vomited at the sight of blood. Cora followed her around with a pail of cool soapy water to disinfect the smaller cuts and wounds.

“Some of the bandits passed through the line!” A healthier man said. Cora turned to see a squadron of bandits headed for them. Their faces slick with blood and sweat. Cora dropped the bucket. One bandit found his right leg blown off by lightning. The rest were snatched by Samuel and flung into the ground. Cora cupped her mouth.

“Thanks Samuel.” Cora said. Samuel looked down and gave a thumbs up. Cora pointed towards the castle. “Can you make sure that everyone in the castle is safe?” Samuel nodded and took off towards the castle. Cora sighed and picked the bucket up.

“I should have made that invoker.” Cora muttered. A patient in the corner of the room started to pry the rags wrapped around her eyes. Ardea gently pulled her hands away from eyes. Ardea cupped the woman’s cheek with a red hand.

“I’ll take the pain and the itch away.” Ardea said. “Listen to me, you cannot touch your wounds.” The woman’s hands dropped to her sides. Ardea flicked the dirt from her hair. “Come on, everyone. The bodies are piling up.” Cora looked onto the battlefield and saw the clouds darkened. It looked as if it would rain.

Crow snapped his finger. The sound of thunder came quick, and Tabitha collapsed. The wave of flames in front of Crow faded out and Tabitha fell to the ground. The circle of flames that acted as a barrier also died out. Crow’s hands trembled. Cracks bisected his fingernails and trailed down to his elbow. Blood started to leak from his good hand. He had never performed

such a powerful lightning spell. He made lightning fall from the sky, but Crow couldn't wait to relish this. Tabitha's body was motionless. There was enough evidence for Crow to realize that his hypothesis was true. A normal body would be convulsing, screaming in pain. Crow walked over to Tabitha's body. Her eyes sparkled purple. Crow's trembling hand grabbed Tabitha's wrist. The screams of battle were gone. The houses of Nix, the castle, the forest, the mountains all it was gone. He was back in Limbo.

Crow looked on to the quiet grasslands before him. The lifeless wind blew his hair. A small pond nearby was stuck in an endless ripple. The expansive field of grass defied eternity by going further than eternity itself. Crow felt lethargic. He assumed it was because he was out of practice. He looked at his left hand. It was normal. Healed of its necrosis.

Crow heard Tabitha before he saw her. He turned around to find that her clothes were not the black garb, but an elegant robe. Crow had read a description of what a court wizard in Nix wore. His mind must have attributed this to Tabitha. Tabitha examined the world before her.

"Is this the world between life and death?" Tabitha said. "I have heard tales of necromancers creating things like these, but I have never seen one firsthand."

"You are correct in your assumption." Crow said. "This is Limbo. A place where Necromancers can speak with the dead." Tabitha closed her eyes.

"Are you the one that made me into a thrall?" Tabitha asked. Crow shook his head.

"I am not. Most thralls are aware of their master's identity. I assume that whoever did this to you is skilled." Crow said. Tabitha squeezed her hands shut.

“In the world of the living, my mind feels scattered. None of my memories were ever affixed, yet here it feels at peace. Like all the pieces have realigned. Thank you for the clarity. No matter how fleeting this may be.” Tabitha said. Crow put a hand to his chin. Tabitha’s necromancer had enormous skill. Not only keeping his identity a secret but scrambling the sentence of his thrall as well. Crow was impressed and horrified.

“I wish there was more to give. A necromancer that can alter the memory of their thrall in such a way is powerful. I am sorry that I have no information to provide for you.” Crow said.

“I do see things, but such perceived images are hard to witness fully. I see my countrymen. I see Elizabeth. She is not a child. A grown woman with immense courage. Is she safe?”

“I think so. Look, try not to feel guilty, you were a mere slave.” Crow said.

“Once a tool for the king and now a tool for a necromancer. I was hoping to guide Elizabeth during her reign. She was a promising girl.” Tabitha smiled. “She was different from her father and mother. She was warmer.” The wind picked up and the pond rippled faster. “I suppose that means that our time here is running out.

“I must admit that I haven’t used this power in a long time.” Crow said. “I only just started using it again the night before.”

“I would like your name, necromancer.” Tabitha said.

“Crow. Crow Pendragon.”

“Huh, like the Arthurian legend?” Tabitha asked. “Well, that does not matter now. Crow, can you make sure that Elizabeth is safe. Can you do this for me?” Tabitha asked.

“Of course. I am technically her knight after all.” Crow said. Tabitha studied the necromancer before her. Crow wondered what she thought. Did she believe him to a successor of sorts? Or was she unimpressed by his character? They only exchange a few words.

“A necromancer and a knight in one, eh? It is about time that mages get the recognition that they deserve.” The world started to decompose before them. The sky turned black, and a fog drew over the world. Crow could no longer see Tabitha’s face. He was startled by her voice. An ethereal voice that came from within. “You know what to do with me. Now make it quick and don’t give the puppet any sympathy.”

Crow drifted back to reality. The thrall opened her eyes. Crow drew back his decrepit hand and sparked it with electricity.

“I am sorry.” Crow said. Crow ripped out Tabitha’s heart. The heart of a thrall. The heart squirmed once before turning into dust. Tabitha’s body followed soon after. Crow laid her body on the grass before it faded away. He kneeled before her body until the process was done. “I’ll figure out who did this. I promise.” Crow whispered.

“Crow?” Vakaris asked. He placed his arm on Crow’s shoulder. “Are you okay? You’re breathing heavily.” Crow struggled to stand up. His body was heavy, yet he could see that the battle was petering out. New Nivalis was seizing victory.

“Let’s get going.” Crow said. “Let’s make sure that this battle truly ends.”

Elizabeth stared down Daniel and drew steel. This was the man that foolishly endangered her people. Daniel wiped the blood from his face and dropped the car door. He gripped his large sword with both hands. The grenade that hung from his neck was still.

“Our duel shall be honored by our forefathers.” Daniel said.

“Honor?” Elizabeth asked. The literal bandit was speaking of honor. This man truly was misguided. “Do you understand what that word means? They are not the vernacular of a bandit.”

“Everyone in Vetus is a bandit. We were birthed from a destroyed world. Our culture is the only one that accepts it.”

“Murdering those who cannot defend themselves? Is that part of your honor? A culture of pillaging innocents?”

“Like I said we came into a world that was already fucked. The only honor that can be gained in this world is one that lies with our family. Our forefathers. Doesn’t a monarchy act the same? Responsibility to tradition and people?” Daniel asked.

“It is more complicated than that.” Elizabeth said. What gall to compare his brutish ways to her own.

“Is it? Well, enough talk. Words do not belong in battle.”

“Battles are more than blows. The leader of his people must be more than a mutt with fangs. A leader like that will singe the yield that provides for his people. Crops and trade are not nourished by blood.” Elizabeth said. Daniel attacked Elizabeth. Elizabeth raised her blade and blocked the attack. Daniel pushed all his weight behind the sword.

“Tradition is everything. My ancestors will look upon me and I will be welcomed by their glory.” Daniel said. Daniel freed one of his hands to strike Elizabeth with his fist, but Elizabeth kicked Daniel’s shin. He caught his footing and rolled back to create distance.

“You are right. I have a responsibility. The responsibility to protect these people.” Elizabeth said. “Surrender and I won’t hurt you.” The sounds of battle around them started to dampen. Daniel smiled.

“No. We shall fight here and now. Let me see your ancestors in this duel!” Elizabeth and Daniel clashed their swords. Their blade singing a chorus of metallic collision. Daniel swung heavy and slow. His weapon of choice gave him the range advantage over Elizabeth. Elizabeth ducked, and sidestepped all his attacks. She attempted to parry once, but the weight of Daniel’s attack caused her to lose balance and nearly cost her the fight. Elizabeth examined each of Daniel’s swings. The way his hands moved and the sight of his dilated eyes. After another two sets of swing, Elizabeth rolled under one of Daniel’s long swings and cut him near the elbow. It did not draw blood. Daniel snapped and punched Elizabeth in her right eye. A second fist caught her in the stomach. She almost vomited but readjusted herself in time to parry one of Daniel’s attacks. She pushed his blade away with a swing of her own and this time was able to land a slice of Daniel’s chin. Elizabeth kept on target and attacked Daniel’s face. Due to Daniel’s aether, the third attack was the one that did actual damage to his skin. It was another slice at the chin. The blade cleaved through the flesh and bone. A stream of blood drooled out of the chin like a second mouth. Daniel clutched his chin. He tossed his sword aside and tackled Elizabeth. He pushed all his weight on her and wrapped his arms around her neck. They were right in front of Daniel’s sword. It stayed solid in the ground like a monument. Dark spots appeared in Elizabeth’s vision.

Elizabeth clutched at the ground until she found a nearby rock. With one hand on Daniel's arm and the other on the rock, Elizabeth swung the rock behind her in hopes that it would meet its target. It did and Daniel found a sharp rock entering his left eye. He released his hold on her neck but when Daniel stamped his boot on Elizabeth's knee. This didn't stop Elizabeth. She swung the rock again at Daniel's temple. Daniel was dazed for a moment. Elizabeth yanked a tuft of his hair and smacked his face right into the hilt of his own sword. Elizabeth adjusted her grip and placed one hand on the back of his skull. She kept smashing his face against the hilt and ended it by throwing him to the ground. His gnarled red face up towards the sky.

Elizabeth drew his large sword from the ground. She needed both hands to raise it properly rather than just using the hilt as a blunt object. Her hands trembled. Then she steadied the blade. The sword ready to chop his bleeding. A man who caused all this damage did not deserve to walk away from this.

"Wait! Please, mercy, I beg of you!" Mary ran towards them. Her face contorted in despair. Mary tossed her iron axe to the side and bent her knee before Elizabeth. "We respect the strength of your people. Please, spare us. We surrender before you." Mary cried out. Daniel muffled through his broken face. Elizabeth planted Daniel's sword and picked up her own blade. She couldn't see her own reflection in it. She turned to Mary.

"That battle is nearly over. Let's surrender, Daniel. Our fellows are already ragged from battle."

"No." Daniel said.

Elizabeth growled and raised her own sword to strike him down. "Give us a moment, please." Mary said.

“Convince him. I do not want to keep battling this fool.” Elizabeth said.

Elizabeth sheathed her weapon and turned away. Elizabeth looked on to the rest of the battlefield. Some of the ground was razed from the fire spells. The screams of fighting had almost reached a desolate silence. Mary took Daniel’s hand and smiled at him.

“We lost. We can be free. We can retreat and find a new life somewhere peaceful. We don’t need to have this responsibility. We can find a home for the both of us.” Daniel’s broken face was still. He caressed Mary’s cheek and stood up. He grasped his grenade with a single arm. “Wait! What are you doing? Please, Daniel! We can have a fresh start!” Mary latched on to Daniel’s left hand. “Don’t do this.”

“I have a responsibility.” Daniel released his hand from Mary and wiped the blood from his eyes.

“Please don’t!” Mary cried out. Daniel held his grenade like a beating heart. His tongue scraped the blood on his teeth. Elizabeth had her back turned to Daniel. There she saw Tristan hunched over a dead body. He was crying. He was holding his father. Vakaris and Marcus watched over Tristan. Crow consoled Tristan. Elizabeth touched her swollen eye and sighed. She didn’t want to continue this. Elizabeth reached for her hilt. Even if he did kill her, it would change nothing. Daniel had lost this battle and New Nivalis had lost lives.

“Face me!” Daniel screamed. His words spilled out with spit and blood. He pulled the pin on the grenade with the tooth that wasn’t knocked out.

Elizabeth unsheathed her blade with one hand. Elizabeth swung once. Mary’s scream made Elizabeth shiver. Daniel’s head rolled onto the hills of grasslands. Elizabeth dropped her

sword and fell to her knees. She saw Daniel's grenade roll to her knees like a tumbling egg. The grenade was a dud.

Chapter 37: The Remaining Pieces

Ardea eyed the hall. She knew that this would be the result of a conflict. When she began her pilgrimage in her adolescent, she had come to learn that all larger human conflicts ended with at least some lights being extinguished. It wasn't the case that she felt complete apathy for the injured men and women that were being attended or those that died. She just felt it was unnecessary to waste energy on a cause that was already decided. New Nivalis was going to have dead after the battle whether victory or defeat.

It wasn't hard to find Elizabeth. Her snow-white hair was easily spotted even when it was mucked with dirt and blood. She walked past a man's broken whispers. His hands wrapped around his chest, away from his diseased leg. Ardea could alleviate their pain, but it wouldn't help for long. She only used her magic when they started to rave about their injuries.

Elizabeth watched over Crow. She sat in a short wooden stool. Her right eye was still swollen from the battle. Elizabeth had draped Crow's cloak over him like a blanket. Ardea found it resourceful considering blankets were scarce and comfort had lower priority over being alive. The cloak was a tattered mess just like the owner. A dried patch of blood was stuck to his forehead. White bandages covered his right hand, forearms, and shoulders due to excessive aethereal cracks. His left hand presented to the world. The people of Nix occupied with the caring for its soldiers didn't have time to question it. A sea of injured needed to be tended to.

"Tea?" Ardea saw a stray woman ask Elizabeth. Ardea scoffed. If anything, Elizabeth needed a hard drink.

“Yes, thank you.” Elizabeth accepted the black tea. The woman looked at Crow and his rotten hand.

“The two of you are heroes. It’s the least I can do.” The woman walked off to aid another injured defender. A man silently grieved at the end of the hall. He shed many tears, as he carried a recent addition to the dead, but never made a sound. Ardea shook her head. One would think after the fifth or sixth deceased they would cease their crying. Nothing else could be done. Perhaps Crow could, but his necromancy served the same purpose as Lubrum's kindling. The material form was brought back, but they were different people by the end of it. It was the cycle of life, the cycle of fire. It dies and ash is all that’s left, yet the flames always come back. Elizabeth kept her eyes on Crow as she took tentative sips from her tea. Ardea approached him. She checked his breath.

“How is he?” Ardea asked. Crow was fine. Ardea knew the answer to her own question. He was fine. There were other men and women that were on their deathbed. She knew that, but she didn’t know them. She didn’t lie to herself. Crow was a friend, they were not. Ardea kept this rational to herself. She knew that Crow and Elizabeth would play the hero act and say that their lives mean nothing compared to others.

“Still unconscious.” Elizabeth said. Ardea noticed how different Elizabeth was. She beheaded a man, hours prior, and now here she was worrying Crow.

“Elizabeth, I can tell that he is unconscious. Has his condition changed?” Ardea asked.

“No. He has just been resting. No labored breaths, no mutters, nothing.”

“How about you.” Ardea stared into Elizabeth’s eyes. “How long have you been awake?”

“Someone needs to watch over him.” Elizabeth said.

“You need to rest, as well. You both fought in the battle.”

“I’ll sleep later-”

“Go the fuck to sleep. I’ll be back in an hour to check on him again.” Ardea said. She didn’t have time for this. Lack of rest would benefit neither of them. Elizabeth nodded. Ardea maneuvered her way through the injured but did turn back to spot Elizabeth yawning. When Ardea came back after the hour was up, Crow was the one sitting in the stool and Elizabeth was the one wrapped up in his black cloak.

“Idiots.” Ardea said. Ardea decided to let them continue their shenanigans.

“Help us, Ardea!” A caretaker called out. Ardea ran to their side. It was a man that had a chunk of his torso split open. Ardea clasped her hands together and added warmth to the wound. She saw the pieces of flesh and muscle stitch together. The man continued to thrash around.

“Restrain him if you want me to save him!” Another caretaker came and the two held the man’s arm, but he continued to twist around and scream. The wound was almost sealed when the man stopped moving. His last breath was warm. His arms flopped to his sides. Ardea witnessed his fire dying out. Ardea looked at her own hands. They were foreign to her. The man could have survived. What happened?

“Is he....” One of the caretakers started. Ardea looked away. Then she felt a man grab her by the arm. He twisted and pulled it. Ardea grunted.

“Why couldn’t you save him? You have all that magic, and you couldn’t heal a simple wound!” He screamed. “You couldn’t even make it painless. Your hands are shaking! Are you drunk?”

“It’s not her fault.” The caretaker pulled him back. “Sorry, Ardea.”

“It’s ok.” Ardea said.

“How about you take some rest, love?” The caretaker said. “You’re running ragged. I am sure your magic is suffering as a result of that.”

Ardea didn’t protest and decided it was best to leave the sickly castle for a bit. Ardea rubbed her eyes and walked out of the castle. The town was mostly empty. A majority were occupied with the recuperation process, the rest were only in the town to get supplies. They looked like ants from so far away. Ardea patted her pockets. She took out a tin flask. She hugged it close to her chest before she screwed the top off. She tilted her head back and drank it all. Once it was all out, she tossed the flask to the side and leaned against the castle walls.

“Drinking makes you less attentive.” Marcus said.

“Marcus, I rather be alone right now.” Ardea said. Marcus was always quiet, but of course the man decided to be talkative now.

“I can tell from your eyes.”

“You can tell what?” Ardea asked.

“I can tell you have seen this before.” Marcus said. “That you had to save people before, and you couldn’t do it.”

“Can you go away?” Ardea asked. Marcus sat down on the ground. Marcus clasped his hands together and took a deep breath. “What are you doing?”

“I am clearing my mind before speaking.” Marcus said. “You are lost. Like me.” Marcus thrust his hand forwards. His large palm waited for Ardea. “Give your hands. Take some deep breaths.”

“I know how to breathe, Marcus. I don’t think this will help.” Ardea put away her flask.

“What would the Lubrums that raised you think? If they saw that flames you carry are not at their fullest potential?” Marcus asked.

“They would say the same fucking thing that they said when I left. I am human. I cannot harness fire like they can.” Ardea said and stood up. “I am a big girl, Marcus. I don’t need you to follow me around and give me advice.”

“You should clear your mind before speaking.” Marcus said. “Did Crow not explain that magic is reliant on the emotional and logical strength?”

“Thank you for interrupting my break.” Ardea shuffled back inside. Marcus closed his eyes and took another deep breath.

It was a beautiful spring afternoon, and the flowers were in full bloom. The sky had a twinge of orange due to the setting sun. The birds chirped a sleepy melody and fluttered to their nest. It was on this day that the first cemetery for New Nivalis was finished. Those who gave their lives for the defense of New Nivalis were buried on a hill that overlooked the river. No markings as there were far too many to make in such a short time, but a list was created that

contained the name of every fallen soldier. What mattered in the moment was ensuring that no corpse was left to be picked clean by wild animals. Tristan kneeled in front of the fresh dirt that signified his father's burial site. Madeline, Baxter, Crow and Elizabeth formed a line behind. It was a common tradition in Nix for attendees of funerals to wear an article of clothing that was purple. Elizabeth wore a purple bow that was tied to the front of her hair, Madeleine wore a purple shirt underneath her coat, Baxter wore a navy band around his left wrist, Crow had to borrow one of Baxter's bands. The immediate family of the dead would not wear purple in the same tradition. All they had to do was mourn.

"I am sorry. You couldn't be buried next to mother." Tristan said. He stood up and kicked a stray pebble. "Thank you for being here."

"It was no issue." Elizabeth said. "It is unfortunate that others could not be here, but-"

"I understand. Many lost someone. I don't blame them," Tristan said.

"Yer father. He helped us plenty," Baxter said. He scratched his beard. "He led his people well."

"He was always a gentleman and a leader during our pilgrimage. It is my hope that all will remember him," Madeline said.

"He was a great man. Even back in the castle, every person respected him," Elizabeth said. "His devotion to his people was unparalleled and his devotion to his son was even stronger."

"Forgive me for this, but your words won't bring him back," Tristan said. "He's dead. It's over."

““There are many ways to beat death. Leaving a mark on history is one, but I would argue that your father did something else. He died fulfilled,” Crow said.

“How can you be certain of that?” Tristan asked. "How did he die with fulfillment?"

“New Nivalis still stands and so does his own son. He lives on in both.”

“I see, so what should I do? What do I do now?” Tristan asked.

“You mourn and then you continue living,” Crow said. Tristan wiped a tear away and turned away from the burial.

“I’ll speak to you some other time,” Tristan said. He descended the hill. Madeline clasped her hands together.

“I wish there was more for me to do,” Elizabeth said.

“We still have some pieces to deal with,” Madeline said. "I know that we must mourn the fallen, but-”

“We got a home to build. We got lives to live.” Baxter said. "Me and the Missus will watch over him. The least I can do for him.” Everyone dispersed and went home. Crow walked down the gravel street. He spotted many familiar faces, there were no pleasantries exchanged, but merely a passing glance. The people that he had come to break bread with. All of them were mourning. The quiet that Crow experienced as he walked down the gravel road was heavy. The weight reminded Crow of the burial for Gargoyles. The funeral of gargoyles was loud. Bells were rung to signify the death of a clan member, yet there was the same pressure that Crow felt as he walked the street. Then Crow saw Cora along the gravel road with her hood on.

“Can we talk?” She asked.

“Of course,” Crow said.

“I wanted to talk in the forest. I understand if you're apprehensive about it, but I feel like that would be the best place to say what I have to say.”

“Let’s go,” Crow and Cora found themselves a spot near an entrance to the forest. Cora sat down cross-legged on the grass and wiped her face with a palm. Crow sat down adjacent from her. “What did you want to talk about?” Crow asked.

“I don’t know how to express this. I wanted to talk about me, well, my being.”

“As a thrall, correct?” Crow asked.

“Yes.” Cora said. “As your thrall, you and I converge often on thoughts and emotion. I was angry, I despised myself, yet never did I have the self-awareness to realize that all my sadness and anger was essentially multiplied. We felt the same.”

“I have been trying to be more aware of that. It is my goal to grant you as much autonomy as I can,” Crow said.

“I appreciate that but it is undeniable that I will never be a true human. I’ll be honest Crow, I wanted to take my own life. I knew that I could never be human. I don’t even know who I was before all of this. I was going to do it after the battle or perhaps during it.”

“Then you saw all the carnage during the battle. Fear seized you. I felt it,” Crow said.

“I-I was scared of dying.” Cora hands began to tremble. “I didn’t want to die. I knew it was unnatural, but I didn’t want to die. That’s why I came here to talk to you.”

“Cora,” Crow put his hand to his chin. “What if I can give you back the life that was stolen from you?”

“Is that not what necromancy is? This is not the life I want.” Cora said.

“No. To make you a normal human,” Crow said.

“But how? If such a thing existed, then it would have been discovered centuries ago.”

“The necromancers that I know wouldn’t study a way to free their own thralls. In fact, I would argue that they would destroy such knowledge at all cause.”

“You think there is a way to bring me back like a normal human?” Cora asked.

“I know that it won’t be free,” Crow said. “But I will do whatever it takes to free you.”

“Even if it means destroying yourself?”

“Oh,” Crow said. He chuckled. Crow hesitated. After such a struggle to find a reason for existing, but that was the irony of living. “Perhaps I should have undergone this promise when I didn’t value my own life. Nevertheless, if that is the price, I’ll do it.”

“No. Those are not agreeable terms,” Cora said.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Cora turned the settlement of New Nivalis.

“We both had our childhoods taken from us. I won’t accept your solution unless the both of us can experience our lives to the fullest.”

“That’s a very naïve methodology, yet it may not be theoretically impossible.” Crow said.

“I meant what I said,” Cora extended her hand to Crow. “We share a burden, you and me. A burden that forced upon us. I don’t want any sacrifices.” Cora said.

“Very well,” Crow shook Cora’s hand. “We’ll work together. Not as a thrall and necromancer, but as conspirators against those who placed this burden on our shoulders.”

“Conspirators, eh? I like that quite a bit.” Cora said.

Chapter 38: A Fresh Start

“Are you sure about this?” Crow asked. Elizabeth nodded.

“I can’t let it end like this. Crow, I killed her husband.” Elizabeth said.

“That is why I am worried. I wouldn’t trust Tristan to be here.” Crow took Elizabeth’s hand. “I’ll be here in case something happens. Just be careful, please?” Elizabeth squeezed his hand.

The evening was darkened by clouds and the remnants of Daniel’s men were located west of New Nivalis. The empty marketplace tents stood behind them. The remnants buckled hunting knives to their belts and tied burlaps sacks to their backs. Mary was all the way in the back of the crowd. She looked beyond her fellows and out towards the horizon.

“Hello.” Elizabeth said. Mary turned on her heel to face Elizabeth. Mary raised her eyebrow.

“Yes?” Mary asked.

“Many of your people are still inj-”

“This is not our home.” Mary said. Elizabeth straightened. Now wasn't the time for her to look dull. She came here to compose some scrap of respect. “It is for the best that we leave quickly. We don’t want to overstay our welcome.”

"I hope that your travels are safe." Elizabeth said. She tried to form a disarming smile. Then she saw a few in Mary's party spit at the ground. Elizabeth knew that her words would mean little to these people, but she was determined to make this attempt.

"I will be honest with you." Mary asked. "There is a part of me that will never like you." Mary said. Elizabeth raised her chin. Mary glared at her, yet her voice was sedated. "You are the murderer of my husband."

"I understand." Elizabeth said.

"No, you don't. You can't understand it because I don't understand it myself. I know that you were trying to defend yourself. I know that our hands are not clean either, but you will never understand how painful it is that I can't hate you fully." Mary said. Elizabeth kept her lips closed. This would not be a conversation, but a one-sided discharge. All that mattered was her presence, so that Mary could have an outlet for confusion and rage. Mary stepped closer to Elizabeth and then she stepped back. Elizabeth knew why. Mary's eyes were directed behind her. Crow must have done something. "I hope we never see each other again." Mary sucked in a breath like it was her last. She gave a whistle. "We're leaving." The bandits now turned pilgrims began their journey. Elizabeth watched them until their figures were swallowed by the horizon.

"Assuming from what I saw of her expression, she wasn't happy." Crow said.

"She said that she hated me and never wanted to see me again." Elizabeth said. "I do not know where they are headed. More dangers may await them. This continent does not treat travelers the best."

"This situation wasn't an easy one."

“Yes, but maybe now they can make a home where they can build rather than take. A place of growth rather than leeching off trade routes and small villages.” Elizabeth said.

“Perhaps.” Crow said. “Their history was one built on that very way of life. It is not so simple to wipe away centuries of actions. It shall be a slow process.”

“New Nivalis is an example, is it not?” Elizabeth said.

“Indeed.” Crow said. He scratched his chin. “We should start heading home. We haven’t fully recovered from our wounds.”

Elizabeth shook her head and sat on the grass. She placed her hands on her lap and surveyed the horizon. Her eyes strained to ensure that she could catch any movement. Crow sat next to her and did the same. Elizabeth wondered if Crow knew why she was staring at the horizon. Her question was answered when he reached his hand over to her own.

“I know that they have no reason to come back and antagonize us again. That it wouldn’t be feasible, but you still have that feeling that they could come back at any moment.” Crow said. “Elizabeth.” Crow squeezed Elizabeth’s hand. “Let’s go home.”

Chapter 39: A sense of Normalcy

Crow sat at the roundtable with a new black cloak. Crow had ordered water because he was still uncertain of what spirit to try. Marcus and Cora had water as well, but Marcus had water with a splash of lemon and sugar. His new mantra was to keep his mind clear. The owner refused to give Cora any alcohol no matter how much magic nonsense she spouted. Ardea and Vakaris were satisfied with beer. Elizabeth maintained the tradition of wine. Their group wasn't the only one drinking and chatting. Batches of patrons clinked tankards and glasses together. Spirits spilled over the tables and the floor. There were a few gargoyles who were present. Crow looked for Samuel among them but couldn't find him. Crow made a note to invite him for their next late-night excursion.

"The battle would have been lost if not for me." Vakaris said. "My prowess clearly was too much for the bandits to handle." Vakaris chugged his drink. Marcus squinted his eyes at Vakaris.

"How does such a small man have such a big ego? I don't get it." Marcus said.

"If it wasn't for Crow and the gargoyles, we would all be done for!" Ardea said. She took a sip of beer and reached around Elizabeth to punch Crow in the shoulder.

"I am curious as to why the two of you are still here?" Crow asked. "Aren't mercenaries supposed to leave once the work is dried up?"

"I like it here," Marcus said. "The grasslands are a good setting to collect one's thoughts. I was also curious if the library within the castle has a particular text."

"The library is open to all," Crow said. "I can come help you find it whenever we find the time."

"Thank you,"

"What about you?" Crow asked. Vakaris cleared his throat by taking a sip of his beer.

"I am collecting future debts," Vakaris said.

"What?"

"Don't worry about it, friend. Just know that I do everything with purpose." Vakaris winked.

"He likes it here," Marcus said. Crow nodded and looked behind Marcus. Crow saw Tristan sitting with Baxter and a couple of other hunters. Baxter patted Tristan back with a hearty chuckle. Tristan's smile was weak, but it wasn't forced. That was a step forward. Crow was glad that he was making an inkling of progress.

"How about we go back to the topic of who was the key figure in winning the fight against Daniel's bandits. What do you think, Elizabeth?" Vakaris asked.

"Crow's assistance turned the tide of battle." Elizabeth said. Elizabeth was already on her second glass of wine. The owner had specifically bought the wine for Elizabeth. No one else could touch it.

"You're only saying that because you sleep with him." Vakaris said.

"Excuse me? Have you no shame! What goes on in my bedroom is none of your concern." Elizabeth said.

“Elizabeth, you can’t convince a vagrant like him with that language. You gotta tell him to fuck off.” Ardea said.

“I can’t imagine Elizabeth saying fuck.” Cora said. “She’s too proper, you know.” The thought made Crow smile. He didn’t understand why the concept of Elizabeth shouting obscenities amused him.

“Crow is the one that is most likely to know what Elizabeth is capable of,” Marcus said.

“That’s true. What do you think? Do you believe that my dialect is too proper? Should I adopt the language of Ardea and Vakaris? Perhaps, it will allow me to appear less arrogant?” Elizabeth asked.

“I don’t think you should force it,” Crow said. “Just talk naturally. I am sure your speech will adapt over time.” Elizabeth nodded.

“That sounds reasonable to me.” Elizabeth said. “Now, Vakaris, I do not want to hear you speak about my relationship in such a crass and scummy manner.”

“All, I said was that you two had sex. I have done it. Ardea probably slept with every barmaid she’s ever met,” Vakaris said. Vakaris dunked under a mug of beer.

“What! Is that what you think of me? Some whore who goes around-” Crow didn’t really feel the need to focus on the coming argument, so he turned back to the people around him. They were all smiling, cheering, and having conversations about daily life. It was strange to see how the people of New Nivalis could bounce back after a savage battle. Crow knew that this was the resilience of a people that endured harsh weather. They had lost their homes once before.

Although it was inspiring, the partying within the bar was almost suffocating for him. Crow stood up.

“I am going to get some fresh air,” Crow said. His announcement was only halfway acknowledged. Outside, the only sound was the rustic ambience of swaying trees and grass. Crow leaned against one of the odd fences that built along the bar. While many had turned in for the night, Crow could see pockets of groups that were still awake. One such group was having a Nixian skald. Crow could not hear the voice of the speaker, but he could see their figure. The campfire painted the outline of the figure orange. Crow remembered the cold nights, the solitary campfire across the dark landscape, but those days were over. Crow turned his head towards the horizon and wondered how many in the continent were nomads. How many were wanderers. Always running from something. Crow let his mind slip away.

“Stepping out for a moment?” Mordecai asked.

“It’s very loud in there,” Crow said. “I don’t desire to be alone anymore, but some solitude here and there is helpful for the mind.”

“You should enjoy your youth while you can. You’ll find your twenties long gone soon enough.”

“It’s only a moment, Mordecai. There won’t be anything life changing in there,” Crow said.

“Well, how are you certain that this is the case?” Crow heard Mordecai’s raspy laugh. “Don’t fall for the wizard’s trap, lad. There is nothing glamorous with locking yourself away from the world. I would know.”

“So, do I. You know I have experience with that.” Crow said.

“That I do. Believe or not but watching you now versus watching you then. It is undeniable how much you’ve changed. Right now, you’re using necromancy,” Mordecai said.

“And he is not just talking to his old master,” Rhei said. “You remember our agreement, right?”

“Yes. You don’t need to worry. I am up for the challenge.” Crow said. “We’ll figure it out soon enough.”

“Good. Now don’t be shy to call upon our help. You’re still a fledgling compared to us.” Crow pictured Rhei wagging her finger at him. “We’re here to guide you. Remember that above all.”

“Crow?” Elizabeth asked. She tapped her knuckle on the wall. Rhei and Mordecai’s voices dissipated. Crow could once again hear the loud cheers and talking of the bar. Elizabeth let the door close behind her. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just thinking. It was loud in there,” Crow said. Crow looked at the Castle of Rhei. Still standing after all these years. Boundless text within its libraries another thing that he would have thrown away if he ran. Elizabeth looked at the stars.

“Such a beautiful night. One that shouldn’t be spent alone.” Elizabeth said. “But I do agree that our companions can be loud.”

“All I did was step out for a bit,” Crow said. He held Elizabeth’s hand. “I am not planning on wandering anymore. I have a place to call home and people at my side. It feels nice to know that I have some worth in this world.”

“That’s good. I’ll admit you had me quite worried when you stepped out with that brooding face of yours,” Elizabeth said.

“Brooding? Was I brooding?” Crow asked.

“Yes,” Elizabeth caressed Crow’s cheek. “When we first met, you always wore a face like that. You always looked so down.” Elizabeth said. Crow formed a large grin. Elizabeth pinched his cheek. “I didn’t ask you to force it.”

“Well, now that you are here, I wanted to show you something.” Crow said. He dropped his fake smile and dug inside his cloak.

“What is it?” Elizabeth asked. Crow took out his leather-bound journal. He held it before her. He waved it in front of Elizabeth.

“Take it.” Crow said.

“This is yours. I would not dare to take such a thing.” Elizabeth said.

“I want you to have it.” Crow said. Elizabeth took his journal.

“What do you want me to do with it?” Elizabeth asked. She flipped through the pages aimlessly.

“Whatever you want. I want to start a new journal.” Crow said. “One that depicts who I am now.”

“Who are you now?” Elizabeth asked.

“A necromancer. A vile one at that.” Crow said.

“Really now.” Elizabeth crossed her arms. “I suppose I should keep my eyes on you from now on.”

“But seriously, I will be staying here with all of you, and I know what I am going to do, but what about you? What will be your goals now that there isn’t a lingering threat?”

“I will continue to bolster New Nivalis’ growth. I may only be Queen in name alone, but I want to ensure that they walk a path of prosperity.”

“You answered so quickly,” Crow said. “I guess you’ve known your path for a while.”

“Don’t assume that I haven’t been met with uncertainty,” Elizabeth said. “But yes, I know my path for now.”

“Well, know that I am here with you.” Crow said.

“Well of course. You are my necromancer, are you not?” Elizabeth asked.

“I thought I was your knight?” Crow asked.

“Semantics. They mean the same to me.” Elizabeth said. The two of them heard glass shattering come from within the bar. “Well, everyone else might be wondering where we went. How about we go back inside?” Crow asked. Elizabeth stifled a yawn with her palm.

“Someone has to ensure that they do not kill each other.” Elizabeth said.

Chapter 40: The Living Dead

The light from every window had faded away and the moon gave a shimmering quality to the grass. The spring threw out a chill wind that was made perfectly for reflection of the old days. Silence and rest washed over the houses with a sleepy coating. Even the obsidian castle from its mountaintop was gentle. Its silhouette conjoined with the stars and the sky to form a landscape that was odd and dark, yet at peace with its own contradiction.

Drawn upon the land with shovels and tools was a strip of land that was recently disturbed. Chunks of mud and dirt crusted stone were compacted together in the shape of beds. A litter of graves were marked by piles of rocks. One grave was revered to be a hero's grave. The grave of an old man. The grave of a father. There was still blood in his inactive heart. The wind howled. It was the wind on an unseen presence. The piles of pebbles that marked graves were disturbed. The earth opened its jagged mouth revealing the ravaged, but still recognizable undead.

Kay's eyelids melted away. *I need you to see. I don't need an old soldier whose has no eyes.* The sound of internal organs swirling, and bones cracking overtook the night air. Kay's jaw snapped open to reveal an empty pit for a mouth. No teeth. No tongue. No voice. A guttural grunt came out and ash fell out of his mouth. *You'll look strange without a mouth. Can't have a man with no mouth running around, but I don't you need to speak.* A maggot squirmed out of Kay's left eye socket. *Disgusting, make sure to pull them out.* Kay doubled over and withdrew the rest of the maggots from his body. When his deed was done, Kay awaited his next order.

Alright, let's get a move on, shall we? I need you here right now. Sorry you have to be the one that comes back, but I'll need bodies to get the job done. And so, the dead man walked.