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Prologue: Winds of Change

A wise man once said, " It doesn't take a thousand minds to change one, but one mind to change a thousand.

Wind is often associated with change; it is said that the wind blows people together, whether it be fate, luck, or something else I do not know. But tonight the wind blows exceptionally strong. A large city lay on the horizon of a field entirely covered in snow, the silhouette of a large tower looming ominously over the world. The eye of the moon stares down at the surface below, its piercing glow giving a faint light to the hard snow on the ground. The wind is cold tonight, as if trying to discourage people who seek change or escape. I, however, see it as merely a test of courage.

A young woman no older than sixteen is out in this field. Her hair is long, blond, and messy, the moonlight reflecting in her blue eyes as she pushes forward toward an unseen goal. Her body turns purple and blue from frostbite; the air she breathes is dry and heavy, and with each breath it feels like it weighs her down. She can no longer feel the cold; her body is barely covered by clothes made of tattered and frayed fabric, barely stitched together, riddled with holes. This woman bears a mark on her back, a brand, the symbol of an N eclipsing the sun. She wears no shoes or gloves; her hands and feet are calloused and rough like sandpaper. But most horrifically of all, her body is covered in thousands of scars. The only places free of them are her hands and her head. They are the kind of marks that could only be made by burns, cuts, and beatings. Around her wrists are metal shackles, each one having the end of a broken chain rattling from it. Before us stands a woman who has lived through what could only be described as Hell.

She stumbles forward through the frozen field, one small step at a time, with gritted teeth and a look of pure determination. After hours of walking, she finally reaches the end of the field and enters a dense forest. It is much darker in the woods; the trees form a roof that keeps out most of the moonlight. The air, however, is slightly warmer, offering some relief to her lungs. But due to the lack of light, she trips over a root hidden under the snow and falls forward, her arm getting caught on a branch, ripping open a large gash from which blood oozes. She lies face down in the snow for a moment, catching her breath before getting up onto her hands and knees. She takes in a deep breath and rises to her feet once more; she doesn't even feel the wound on her arm.

More time passes, and through the trees the moon is at its apex. The young woman still pushes forward, but each step slows her pace more and more. Her limbs look nearly necrotic now, and the gash on her arm is frozen shut, yet she keeps walking. Eventually she enters a large clearing in the woods, likely a frozen lake. But just then the world begins to spin around; exhaustion is catching up to her as she falls to the ground, lightheaded. She makes her way back up onto her hands and knees again, breathing heavily, every exhale shooting out mucus and phlegm onto the ground. Tears nip at her eyes as she bites her lip, causing it to bleed as she triumphantly makes her way to her feet once more.

Her heart beats with pure determination and will to keep moving. She fights for each step, inching her way forward. But life does not care about determination, nor courage, nor will. As she takes her next step, she falls again, but this time her legs will not move. “Not yet, come on, not yet.” She cries, her voice dry and raspy. She begins to crawl forward, digging her fingers into the snow as she inches forward, her heartbeat slowing. She makes it a few feet before her arms give out on her. The world is still spinning, and her eyes grow heavy; she begins to lose consciousness. She uses what little is left of her strength to turn over and look up at the moon. Its unforgiving eye looks down at her as she closes her eyes. “So this is it...” She whispers, her voice weaker than before. She looks peaceful for a moment before breaking down into an ugly sob. “This can't be it! No, I won't accept it! This isn't the end! It's not! I can't be!” She cries out with a broken voice. “I want to live!” She screams.

But no one is there to hear her plea; the trees don't care, the snow doesn't care, and the moon does not care. She looks up at the moon through blurry eyes one last time. “This can't... be... it... Please... someone... please...” Her voice fades away as she closes her eyes for what she thought would be the last time... her heart slows, the wind howls, and then silence.

That night, a young woman faced the test of courage; she ventured out into the cold winter night with nothing but rags on her skin and a fool's hope of seeing the sun once again as a free soul. No matter how hard it became, no matter how cold, no matter how dark, she never gave up... and she never will. The next day, a search party followed her tracks at the trail's end; they found only an empty imprint in the snow...

Chapter 1: Dride wants to be a Hero

In the far west corner of the continent of Iyastay, there lies a small, quaint town known as Goldvale. With a population of seventy-one, there are few homes and even fewer businesses. The homes are made of wooden boards and thatched roofs. The windows have no glass; shutters keep the elements out—the town slumbers on a cold, damp spring night. The moon's eye is open on this night, and the wind blows harshly. The night is peaceful for most, but not all of the Goldvale's residents. At the top of a hill on the outskirts of town, there is a house made of stone and wood, with glass windows and a shingled roof. The house is two stories tall, and all the lights are out except for one in a study on the second floor. In this room, we find several tall bookshelves filled with adventure novels, history books, and even a few children's picture books. Such classics as "The Lost History of the Dwarves", "The Empress of the Stars", "The Queen of Hearts", and "The Pixie Light Guides My Way". Each book is a cornerstone of any collection, featuring famous stories from across Vallia. A few books are missing from each shelf, and they are piled on a desk in the room. The desk is littered with paper and handwritten notes, symbols, and artwork. A symbol of a shield, adorned with lightning bolts and nature, appears over and over again on these pages; one of the notes reads, "Shield of the people."

At this desk, covered in notes, sits a strange young man, his face buried deep in a book called "Artifacts of the Old World by Rishtioian Mantysug." He looks about sixteen, maybe even a little younger; he is quite short for his age, and skinny, too. He wears white-and-blue striped pyjamas and plain white socks. His hair is long, curly, and golden with completely natural pink highlights, and his eyes are a bright orange.

He looks up from his book and sighs. He looks down at his handwritten notes, then closes the book and sets it on the table, folding the corner of one page as a bookmark. He leans back and stretches in his chair when suddenly a large gust of wind blows the window open, sending pages flying everywhere and blowing out the candle. A small wisp of smoke emanates from the wick of the candle. The boy stands up and walks toward the window, looking annoyed. He reaches out the window to grab the latch when a peculiar sight catches his eye. Floating there outside the window is a young woman with long blond hair, wearing nothing but rags poorly stitched together. The boy looks confused for a moment before rushing out of the room.

He dashes through the house and out the front door, his socks made damp by the wet grass. He rushes toward the girl in the sky, but as he approaches, the once loud wind of the night disappears, and she begins to fall. The man leaped forward, managing to catch her in his arms. He lays her down on the grass and kneels next to her. "Hey, can you hear me? Are you okay?"

He says urgently; he begins to shake her lightly, but realizes that she's cold to the touch. He looks at her more intently and sees that her body is riddled with frostbite. He leans in and places his ear to her chest, and he can hear a faint heartbeat. "Oh no..." The boy exclaims, his voice dripping with concern. He picks her up and begins running down the hill into Goldvale.

The next morning, back inside the house on the hill, the young woman lies in a large bed with blue blankets. Slowly, she opens her eyes and looks up at the roof. A thousand thoughts race through her mind at once as she bolts upright and looks around. Next to her is a nightstand with a vase of blue roses and a small framed photograph. The photo is of a family: a young boy who looks like the young man from the study, and an older boy with dark hair and brown eyes. A young girl, no older than twelve, also appears, sharing her brother's eye and hair colour, along with an older woman, about thirty-five; she has dark hair, but her eyes are green. The rest of the room is rather bland; only a window is covered by a curtain.

Thoughts ran through the young woman's mind; she wondered how she was alive, if she was alive, and why she couldn't feel anything on her skin, but most of all she felt a ravenous hunger, and the thirst of a drought. She looked around for anything to satisfy these basic needs, and her eyes fell upon the vase. She reached for it, ripping the flowers out, and tossing them onto the floor. She peered inside and saw a little water at the bottom. She brought her lips up to the rim and drank. She chugged back the water and could only think it tasted green. Once it had dried up, she huffed and puffed, setting the vase down on her lap. She looked down and saw she was now wearing white-and-blue striped pyjamas, not unlike the ones the young man had worn the night before; they were a little small on her. She looked down at her hands and placed them together, taking in the sensation for a moment. She could feel them touching each other; she could feel her face, and she could feel her blanket, but only when she touched it with her hand. She could not feel the weight of the covers, nor the fabric of her clothes. It was a strange feeling, not feeling. But she quickly cast those thoughts from her mind and began to wonder where exactly she was. She moved to place the vase back on the nightstand, but as she was letting go, she accidentally knocked it and the photograph onto the floor. The vase shattered with a loud crash, and inside, she began to panic. Suddenly, footsteps approached the room; the door slammed open, and the young man who had saved her the night before stood in the doorway, now wearing a plain white shirt and blue pants. He looked concerned.

"What happened? Are you okay?" He blurted out as the girl hid under the covers of the bed, a natural instinct of fear. The boy noticed and stepped back, his eyes moving to the shattered vase on the floor. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. Are you okay? I heard a crash and got worried." He said with sorrow in his voice.

The young woman apprehensively lowered the blanket to look at the boy; somehow, she could tell that he meant her no harm. She slowly nodded her head to say yes. The boy sighed in

relief. "Thank Sallia." He said as he sat down on the floor. "I almost had a heart attack when I found you floating in the air outside my window last night." He explains.

The girl lowers her blanket further, showing her whole face. "What?" She asks, confused.

"It was strange; you were fully unconscious. When you fell, I caught you. You were wounded and frost-bitten, although looking at you right now, I don't think I would assume that you were on death's door less than twenty-four hours ago." He answered.

"You... helped me?" The young woman asked nervously.

The boy smiled widely at her. "That I did, though I can't take all the credit; a friend of mine helped too, and you definitely healed quickly after treatment." He replied, nearly grinning ear to ear.

"Thank you." The girl said, looking down at her lap. "Don't mention it." The boy said.

The young man's face turned serious once again, "Do you know how you got here?"

He asked. The young woman shook her head no. "The last thing I remember was that I was walking in the woods near Noitastine, trying to get away... and then my body stopped working; I fell into the snow..."

The young man interrupts her. "Snow? It's spring." He said, confused,

"What?" She replied, shocked.

The young man stood and walked to the window; he flung open the curtain, revealing a bright, beautiful spring day. "See, it's spring." He said as the girl sat with eyes wide with confusion and wonder.

"It was the 19th of Rosei, The night of the full moon, with its eye open. I was looking up at it while I was dying..." She utters, confused.

"Last night would have been exactly three months since then; its eye was open last night too. I've heard stories about strange things happening on those kinds of nights. But that doesn't matter right now." The young man responds.

The girl takes the blanket off and flings her legs over the side of the bed. She carefully places her feet on the floor before standing. She walks toward the window; her legs wobble a

little, but she keeps her balance. She leans against the window frame and pushes open the window; she gazes down at the town below, children playing in the sun, people going about their lives, the green grass and the leaves of trees swaying gently in the warm spring breeze. She takes a deep breath as the wind blows against her face, her hair billowing as she takes in the fresh, clean air and the scent of nature. In this moment, she smiles for the first time; she closes her eyes and enjoys the bliss of freedom. “You saw my back last night, didn’t you?” She asked, her smile not wavering as she reached over her shoulder and her hand onto the large brand on her back.

“I did...” The boy replied somberly.

“It’s okay, you can turn me in; I don’t mind. I’m glad I got to experience the fresh air again one more time.” She said, as she looked over at the boy, her smile still there, but her eyes showing a twinge of pain.

“No...no... I could never do anything like that. I’ve heard stories of what they do to people in those places. I know people who have gone through torture, labour, and death. I could never send anyone to a place like that.” The boy replied seriously.

The woman looked at him with pure curiosity. “Why?” She asked.

“I just think it’s wrong, is all.” He answered.

The girl chuckled a little. “Thank you.”

The boy smiled back. “Anytime. Uh... I don’t think I caught your name?”

“It’s Alice, Alice Asyilin.” She said. She couldn’t help but notice the boy’s eyes twitch slightly at hearing her last name.

“I’m Dride, uh, just Dride.” He replied, sort of embarrassed.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Dride,” Alice said, grinning.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Alice,” Dride responded.

The two looked at each other for a moment; both smiled. Alice couldn’t quite explain why, but she believed everything Dride said; she could tell he had a genuine heart; she could just feel it, or, to put it a different way, she could feel how he felt; she could feel how honest he was being. She looked back out the window, taking in the wide world once again; it felt like the two of them were alone, basking in the wonder of everyday life. It was calm and peaceful, but not for

long, as Alice's stomach let out a thunderous growl, and the two of them couldn't help but break down in laughter.

"Sorry, I guess I haven't eaten in three months," Alice explained. She placed her hand on her stomach and looked slightly embarrassed.

"If you want, I have a pot of stew simmering on the stove downstairs; you're welcome to join me for a meal." Dride offers.

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble... I could eat." Alice says, trying to deny how hungry she really is, though the drool dripping down her face gave it away.

"I always make much more than I need, so come on." He insists.

He waves his hand, signalling for her to follow. He and Alice step into the hallway; three doors line the walls: the bedroom they just left, the study, and the bathroom. The two walk down the stairs into the hybrid kitchen dining area. The kitchen area has ample counter space, a large wooden stove, a table with six chairs, and lots of cupboards. On top of the wood stove sits a massive stockpot of simmering stew, its scent wafting to the noses. Alice takes in the pleasant yet bizarre aroma. "Take a seat anywhere," Dride says, gesturing at the table. She pulls back a chair and sits down at the table, while Dride pulls out two bowls, some spoons, two glasses and an empty pitcher. He places the bowls and spoons on the counter, then carries the rest of the stuff to the table. He sets down the pitcher and glasses, closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath. He raises his hand with an open palm toward the pitcher, and his eyes glow a little. Water suddenly begins to fill the pitcher and stops just before reaching the rim. He lowers his hand and exhales as Alice stares at him, wide-eyed, her face twisted in utter amazement.

"You can do magic?!" She blurts out in shock and awe.

"I can, but I'm not very good yet; I'm only just a beginner." He replies, but Alice can tell he's just trying to be humble.

"That's amazing! Is it... safe to drink? I've never had magic water before." She asks.

"It's totally safe; it's just water, nothing magical about it really, other than making it, I guess. It took me a while to get it down; the first time I tried, it was basically mud. Purifying it was the hard part." He explained.

Alice reached for the pitcher and picked it up, skipping over the glasses and drinking straight out of it. She chugged it back fiercely, water dripping down her chin and onto her shirt. Once finished, she set it back down with a satisfying thud.

Without a word, Dride refilled the pitcher, and Alice drank fiercely again. “Okay, while you're doing that, I'll go get you some good ol' fashioned Drideicus stew.” He said, walking toward the stove. “I am no chef, but it's got everything you need: protein, uhh... vitamins, other things too, carbs! Lots of carbs. He exclaimed as he poured two bowls of stew. He picked them both up and turned around, only to see Alice had already drunk the water again. He looked down at the bowls in his hands and turned back around, pouring the one of them back into the large pot. He picked it up and walked over to the table, setting the pot down with a loud thud. “Eat up!” He said, flashing a smile. “Thought it probably won't taste great.” He laughed.

Alice looked at the giant pot in front of her, then up at Dride, then back at the pot. She grabbed it with her bear hands and lifted it to her lips, and she began to eat, careful not to spill a drop. She eats, and eats, and eats, and eats, and eats, until the pot is half gone. She lowers it back onto the table. “So how's it taste? Bad?” Dride asks.

Alice nods yes, looking down at her lap. “Yeah...” She said, sounding a little choked up. Tears welled up in her eyes and began streaming down her cheeks. “It's also the best thing I've ever tasted... Thank you.” She said, her voice breaking slightly with each pause. After a few moments, she sniffled and wiped away her tears. “Sorry... God... you must be thinking I'm weird.” She blurts it out, emotion still dripping from her voice.

Dride leans back in his chair. “We're all a little weird. You cry over bad stew; I cry at the end of every book I read, even if the ending is never sad. I guess I just hate endings.” He explains, trying to strike a cool pose as he sits. “Keep on eating; I can still see the hunger in your eyes.” He said, gesturing to the pot. Alice looks at it, her mouth watering again, before she picks it back up and eats the rest in less than a minute. Dride refills the water again, and Alice drinks it.

Once she's guzzled down the water, she leans back in her chair, rubbing her tummy, satisfied. She looks over at Dride, who is sitting there looking shocked. “I'm sorry, I forgot to ask if you wanted any,” Alice explained, embarrassed.

Dride points at a bowl on the counter. “I got myself some earlier, saving it for later. I'm just shocked. I mean, I know some people who can put back food, but I've never seen anything like that before,” he said, still somewhat shocked.

“I’ve never eaten like that before either. I don’t know when the last time I felt full was..., but I’ve never eaten that much ever, and to be honest, I think I’m still hungry.” She said the last part under her breath.

Dride stood, walked over to his bowl, picked it up, and set it back down in front of Alice. She looked up at him, and he looked down at her. “Eat up.” He said with a smile.

Alice looked down at the bowl. “But what about you?” She said, concerned.

“I’ll be fine; you need it more than me. You haven’t eaten in three months, remember.” He said, laughing. Alice picked it up and ate it all in one big gulp. She set the bowl down and leaned forward onto the table, as Dride sat back down across from her.

“Have you noticed any changes with your body recently? Like a change in your mood, or strength, or growth?” Dride asked.

“Like, puberty?” Alice replied, confused.

“No... well... kinda, just have you noticed any other weird changes lately?” He questioned, embarrassed.

“I don’t think so.” She answered.

Dride leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. “Strange... I thought maybe you awakened your Voice.” Dride explained. Alice looked at him, confused.

“My... Voice?” She asked, thoroughly perplexed by what Dride meant.

Dride took a moment to compose his thoughts before explaining. “It’s a form of ancient magic; some people call it the echo of the heart, or most commonly, the Voice of the soul. Some are born with it fully awakened; others later in life. I don’t know what causes them to appear, but I know a few people who managed to awaken them. They mentioned that some of the side effects are increased power and magic sensitivity, faster healing and increased appetite.”

Alice thought for a moment, reflecting on her increased appetite and the fact that after only one day, her life-threatening injuries are already gone, as well as the bizarre feeling she had toward Dride earlier in the morning. “If I had something like that, what do you think it would be?” She questioned.

“It could be anything. I know a guy who can turn into other people, a guy who can fuse objects together with his bare hands, and a lady who makes invisible barriers, and there’s probably a lot more out there in the world that I couldn’t even imagine!” Dride shouted excitedly.

Alice’s eyes lit up, and she leapt from her chair. “I hope it’s something cool, like summoning lightning from the sky, or flying like the wind, or freezing things with my hands, or BREATHING FIRE!” She exclaimed, elated at the thought that she might be able to do something really cool like that.

“I hope so too.” Dride smiled.

Alice slammed both her hands down on the table. “I wanna meet someone with a Voice. Where do you find them?” She asked, still giddy.

Dride looked out the window and grinned. “Out there, in the wide world. People just like you and me. The ones I’ve met I found on my adventure.” Dride explained, filled with joy.

Alice looked down at Dride with a twinkle in her eye and wonder in her heart. “What kind of adventure?” She asked.

“The greatest adventure ever! My grand adventure.” He answered, grinning wildly. “Can you tell me about it?” She inquired.

“Of course. Where to start, though? How about that time I got lost in the forest when I was a kid? I wanna say I was five. My best friend wanted to go looking for treasure, and so I wanted to go with him...” Dride began to tell a long set of stories about his life; hours passed in the blink of an eye for the two of them. Alice stared at Dride as he told the stories he used his freedom to forge, and for every laugh, every happy moment, she couldn’t help but feel like she missed out on so much of her life. Her heart pounded with each passing story, each happy memory; despite how much she enjoyed listening to Dride talk, she felt like crying the whole time. The only thing that prevented her from doing so was Dride’s smile. For some reason, it made her feel at ease; his smile was like the breeze on a summer afternoon, making the day warm, not hot. In these moments with Dride, she began to revive something that had long since lain dormant in her heart. What happened next only fueled it more.

“And then I did a backflip, almost snapped my neck, and did not save the day. My other brother was so embarrassed, but the other two just laughed and laughed. I never lived it down.” Dride said, finishing one of his stories.

Alice and Dride chuckled at his past the humiliation. "It's incredible you've done so much with your life... I'm jealous." Alice said somewhat somberly.

"I'm only sixteen; I have a lot of life left to live, and so do you; the grand adventure has only just begun!" He asserted with gusto.

"You're the same age as me," Alice stated, surprised. She wasn't sure how old Dride was, but he looked younger than he was.

"Apparently so; it's never too late to start. You got a long road ahead of ya, I just know it. The world is vast, and neither of us has seen even one percent of what it has to offer." Dride stated, looking at Alice with a reassuring grin, and rising to his feet before continuing. "There are many people still to meet: friends, enemies, lovers, haters, daydreamers, believers, doers, losers, and mountain movers. People who need help, support, love, friendship, guidance, and definitely a lot who need a good kick in the ass. I want to see all those people and help as many as I can. My mom used to tell me stories about the great heroes, warriors for the weak. My mom used to tell me never to abandon someone in need. She told me to be whoever I want to be, so I decided I want to be a Hero!" Dride exclaimed, losing his breath near the end of his long-winded, excited rant.

Alice started crying with laughter; she laughed so hard she fell from her chair onto the floor. Literally rolling on the floor laughing.

Drides' expression soured as he said. "It's not nice to laugh at someone's dream, you know." He crossed his arms and looked away, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry. I just couldn't help it." Alice choked out between laughs. "It just sounds so funny, and utterly fantastic all at the same time. Dride wants to be a hero! I love it!" She finished, tears streaming down her face and dripping onto the floor as she howled with laughter. She felt moved in a way she couldn't put into words. Dride eventually joined in on the laughter as well, knowing how silly it sounds when he says those words to people.

Most people find the concept hilarious; in a world like this, how can someone even be a hero? To Alice, and everyone else, the thought wouldn't even cross their mind. "People always tell me it's impossible; how could anyone be a hero in a world like this? But I think maybe that's why we need one." Dride said, extending his hand to Alice as her laughter subsided.

He helped her to her feet, and she wiped away her tears, sniffing as she did. "I've never met anyone quite like you, Dride." She said, a little choked up.

Dride chuckled a little. "I actually get that a lot." He replied.

Later that day, as the sun began to set, Alice looked down at Dride from the second-story window of the study as he walked toward town. He had told her earlier that he needed to head into town and look for an important letter and find something for them to eat tomorrow. Alice's face grew dim as he walked into Goldvale; an all-too-familiar loneliness set in again. She looked over at the books lined up on a shelf, and she grabbed one. She sat down at the desk and flipped it open, staring at the words lining the pages before sighing deeply. "Right, I forgot I can barely read." She said, sad and confused. She put the book back on the shelf and looked for something a little easier to read. She read the spines of books for a moment before her eyes landed upon one titled "The Queen of the Cosmos." It was thin and colourful; she pulled it off the shelf and saw a beautiful woman with golden hair and a blue dress painted on a backdrop of a starry night sky. She sat back down at the desk and opened the book to the first page. Inside was a beautiful illustration, and the words were simple and printed in large text; it was a children's picture book after all.

The story is as follows. *Once there was a little girl who lived alone on a hill; her family long gone, she had been abandoned. She worked hard day and night, hunting, farming, fetching water, and making clothes all to survive. Until one day, a young boy with dark hair arrived at her front door, half dead. She took him inside, treated his wounds as best she could, fed him, and took care of him until he was healthy again. For once, she was not alone, until one day the boy had to say goodbye because he had to get back to his family, but he promised one day he would return. She cried alone that night. Years passed, and the little girl grew into a beautiful and strong young woman. One day, when she was cooking in her kitchen alone, she heard a knock at the door. When she opened it, she saw a familiar face. The young boy she had saved had grown into a brave warrior. He was a knight for the kingdom, and he had finally come back to repay his debt. He took her out of that house and into the wide world. They soon fell in love, and then got married; the woman who had spent her life alone finally had a family again. More time passed, and they lived happily in a house in a large city, full of people. The woman herself became a knight as well, so she could protect those she held dear. But one day a great darkness spread over the world. Her husband, her city, and her kingdom were all taken by the darkness. She was alone again. She heard a voice call out to her from beyond the darkness: her husband, now changed into something dark, something evil. The two fought, and fought, until everything came to an end. She found herself adrift in the starry sky, looking down on the world; she could feel the man she loved somewhere down there, but she couldn't join him. She held onto the hope that one day they could be together again, so she now protects the world from the skies above, hoping to reunite with her lost love. She became known as the queen of the cosmos, protector of the starry sky. She looked down on the world with a smile and said, "My love, darling, it is forever, and until we meet again here in the starry sky, I will be watching over the world for you, in the long nights ahead."*

Alice set down the book, and a single tear rolled down her cheek. She looked out the window and saw that the sun had set. She carefully put the book back and walked into the bedroom. She yawned as she laid her head down on the pillow and looked up at the ceiling. She didn't feel tired; a torrent of emotions whirled around inside her: joy, sorrow, loneliness, love. "Thank you, DEL!" She screamed at no one. "Thank you for giving me another chance. Even if I'll never see you again!" Tears rolled down her cheeks again, and she smiled. "It looks like the possibilities are endless. Dride wants to be a hero, but who do I want to be?" She whispered as she closed her eyes, reaching her hand to her brand once again and trying to drift off into sleep. Her stomach rumbled, and she sighed.

Chapter 2: Dragon's Brew

Alice slept soundly in the bed at Dride's house; she only wished she could feel the bed as she lay there. Near dawn, she heard a soft knock on the door that awoke her from her slumber. She growled as she sat up, her hair falling into her face. She brushed it aside as she heard Dride's voice from beyond the door. "Hey, it's morning. Are you up?" He asked.

"Yeah..." She answered softly, still partially asleep.

He opened the door and stood with his hands behind his back. "Oh, did I wake you up? Sorry," Dride stated apologetically. Alice yawned and stretched her arms back.

"It's alright, what's up?" She asked playfully; she could tell Dride was excited about something. Even if she didn't have a bizarre sense of what was going on inside his head, she could tell from his body language; he was shaking with anticipation.

"Stand up, and close your eyes... please. He said, barely holding in his excitement. Alice did as she was told; she stood up and closed her eyes.

"HERE!" Dride yelled, startling Alice. She opened her eyes in shock to see Dride holding out a simple yellow dress with long sleeves. "I got this for you yesterday when I was out. I sewed the sleeves on myself; if you don't like the colour, we can exchange it." He says, grinning.

Alice reaches her hand out and touches the light fabric. She grabs it from Dride and looks down at it, feeling it with her hands. Her face lights up, and she hugs Dride. "I love it, thank you." She said with glee. Dride didn't commit to hugging her back; he blushed a little. She let him go. "Sorry." She apologized.

"Uh, I put the rest of the outfit in the bathroom; you should have a shower; it'll be refreshing to get cleaned up." He said.

Alice took a step back and sniffed her arm; to be blunt, it reeked. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea," she said, embarrassed at the thought that she might have smelled really bad this whole time.

"I'll be downstairs cooking breakfast; come on down when you're done," Dride said as he walked down the hallway.

Once he was out of earshot, Alice broke down. “That was stupid, Alice... Stupid, stupid. That was so embarrassing.” She exclaimed, beating herself up over the awkward hug. After she gathered her composure, she stepped out of the room and toward the bathroom.

After she had finished her shower, she walked out of the bathroom with slightly damp hair that glistened in the sunlight beaming through the windows; her skin looked brighter, and she was wearing the new outfit Dride bought her. The long yellow dress fell just above her knees; she wore white pants and tall brown boots with laces tied into cute little bows.

She stepped into the kitchen and looked out the window to see Dride waving at her. She walked to the door and flung it open. She greeted the bright, damp spring morning with a smile. Dride was sitting on a log roasting a large animal on a spit over a fire. A bucket of water sat next to him. The aroma of the roasted beast filled the air with a wonderful scent. Next to Dride, on another stump, were two plates and some utensils like a large butcher's knife. “How are you liking the new threads? They look great on you.” Dride complimented.

Alice looked down at herself and blushed as she examined her new outfit. “I love it; it fits perfectly. I’ve never worn anything this nice or cute before.” She answered, smiling.

“I’m glad you like it; we’re the same clothing size, so I knew it’d fit.” He explained joyfully. “Does that mean...” She stammered.

“I couldn’t have you walking around wearing something that doesn’t fit.” He explained. Alice chuckled at the thought of Dride wearing a dress, but thought he must be joking.

“Anyways, dig in; it should be ready by now,” he said, gesturing at the massive chunk of meat standing before both of them.

“What is it?” Alice asked. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it.” She continued.

“It’s called a nero boar. They live in the woods around here. They are really hard to get your hands on because of their tough skins and Meni-infused tusks, but they do taste amazing once cooked- well, properly cooked. I’ve heard people say they taste divine at restaurants. One of the best dishes on Iyasaty, maybe even Vallia itself.” Dride explained, while Alice stared at the Nero Boar, her mouth watering at how amazing it sounded.

“How expensive is it?” Alice inquired.

“One slice can cost over fourteen hundred Illia,” he answered.

“Is that a lot?” Alice asked.

“Most people don’t make that much in two months, anyway. Are you gunna keep asking me questions, or are you gunna try some?” Dride answered, yawning.

Alice walked over to the stump with the plates and utensils, grabbed the butcher's knife and a plate, and sat down in the grass across from Dride. She then cut a large chunk of meat off the boar and sat down in the grass across from Dride. She then began savagely eating the chunk of meat, her eyes lighting up with each bite. “Is it good?” Dride asked. Alice didn't stop to answer; she just nodded vigorously as she kept eating. Dride took the knife from her and cut off a small piece for himself; unlike Alice, he ate with a fork. “That is good!” He exclaimed after his first bite.

Once Alice was finished with her first chunk of meat, she stood up, grabbed the knife, and cut off another large piece. “Why don’t you sell this and make a bunch’a money?” She inquired in between bites.

“I’d rather just give it away, and there's no one around here who could afford to buy it anyway. I could travel, but I’m waiting for that letter.” He explained while chewing slowly.

“What’s in that letter anyway? You mentioned it last night as well.” She asked with her mouth full of food; thankfully, Dride understood what she meant.

“Just an important document.” He answered. For some reason, Alice felt his mood shift from happy to slightly nervous, just for a split second as he answered her question.

Deciding not to pry any further, she swallowed her food and simply said, “Alright,” before going back to devouring her Nero Boar. The two ate and talked until half the Nero Boar was gone.

Alice fell backward onto the grass and closed her eyes as she let out a burp from the very depth of her soul. She and Dride burst into laughter. Once subsided, Alice sat back up and said. “I am stuffed; that was amazing.” A sense of euphoria emanated from her voice as she said it. “There's still so much left; what are you going to do with the leftovers?” She asked. “I’m planning on going into town in a few minutes to give the rest away.” He answered. “Oh, cool...” Alice replied, her voice slightly saddened. While she thought giving food away to those who needed it was definitely nice, she also couldn’t help wanting more.

“I could use a hand bringing it into town if you're feeling up to it? Dride asked as he stood up.

Alice sat up and opened her eyes. “Sure.” She answered. Alice made her way to her feet and brushed the dirt off her skirt. The two stepped over to the boar, and each grabbed one side of the pole, lifting it in unison. Dride then kicked over the bucket of water, turning the fire into a plume of smoke. “This thing is heavy,” Alice remarked as the two began walking downhill toward Goldvale.

“If you think it’s heavy now, imagine what it felt like last night carrying it uphill,” Dride stated.

“Wait, if you carried it yourself last night, then why do you need my help?” She asked, puzzled; she also wondered if Dride was stronger than he looked.

The two walked into town together, Dride waving at passersby as they stopped to say hello to him, before continuing to go about their days. Alice was pleased walking through Goldvale; it felt nice to be around ordinary folks. But soon they reached their destination, a nice building with a large glass window in the front: Helen's Finest, tea and coffee. A small sign sat on the outside of the door; it had a logo which was a painting of two tea leaves resting in a cup, and under it said “Est. 146.”

Dride pushed the door open, and a little bell rang, alerting the patrons and staff to his arrival. The inside of the cafe was cozy and almost empty, except for a few elderly patrons enjoying hot drinks and conversation; the pleasant aroma of coffee filled the air. After a moment, a teenage girl stepped out of the back. She had long brown hair that went down to her shoulders, and she wore an apron over a practical outfit. “Hey Faith, is your mom in?” Dride asked.

“Yeah, I'll go get her for ya. You got quite the haul this time.” She remarked as she opened the door to the back of the cafe. “Mom, Hero boy is here!” She yelled into the kitchen. She turned back around to Dride and looked at him. “She might be a minute. Uh, who’s your friend?” She asked, her voice dripping with a slight southern drawl.

“Oh yeah, Alice, this is my friend Faith, and Faith, this is my friend Alice,” Dride said as Alice poked her head out from behind the giant Nero Boar and waved.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Alice said, smiling.

“It’s nice to meet you two.” Faith smiled back.

Soon after the introductions, the back door opened, and a middle-aged woman with short brown hair stepped out. She was about a foot taller than both Dride and Alice and looked mean. She wore a white apron over a black outfit. Alice looked at her and felt a little bit of fear for this

scary lady; that was until she felt joy come from her, and the woman smiled widely. “Now that’s quite the catch you got there, Dride. Is that Nero Boar?” She asked, surprised, her voice carrying a similar southern drawl to Faith’s.

“Yeah, it is. Let me tell you, Helen, it was tough to take down.” Dride explained, excited.

“I can imagine. I’ve never seen one in person before, but how is there only that much left? Those things have like 200 pounds of meat on em.” She puzzled aloud.

“That would be courtesy of my new friend Alice. Alice, Helen. Helen. Alice.” Dride said, gesturing back to Alice. “Helen was the one who helped me treat you after I found you,” Dride explained.

“Thank you!” Alice said, grinning.

“Hey you! You’re still in the world of the living; it’s great to see you. I’m surprised you healed up so fast, but it’s good to see!” Helen exclaimed excitedly.

“Me and Dride are trying to figure that part out ourselves.” Alice laughed as she grunted from holding the weight of the heavy boar. Alice shifted a little, trying to redistribute the weight to a different part of her shoulder.

“Oh, right, you two should put that down and take a seat. Just set it on any of the tables. Faith, take their orders and then go get your brother from school.” Helen said as she walked back into the back of the cafe.

“Alright, Mom,” Faith answered.

Dride and Alice set the Boar down on the table closest to the window and then sat down at the next closest table. Faith walked up to them and smiled. “What can I get for you two today? The usual, I assume, Dride.” She said, giggling a little.

“Of course,” Dride answered, smiling at her.

“I’ll make sure to make it with extra love today. Now, how about you, Alice?” Faith inquired gleefully.

Alice sniffed the air, taking in the scent of coffee. “I want whatever kind of coffee you have that is making that smell. I have always wanted to try some; I grew up smelling it all the time.” She explained, her mouth beginning to water.

“You got it, and Dride, my Dad is coming home today, by the way. I bet he’ll have that thing for you.” She said as she walked into the back, too.

Alice looked out the window at the town as Helen appeared, folding out a large table and setting down a big stack of plates on it. A very large butcher's knife was tied around her waist. Helen reentered the cafe through the front door, causing the little bell to ring again. She kicked a doorstep under the glass door, walked over to the remains of the Nero Boar, and carried it outside all by herself. “Should we go out and help her?” Alice asked, still staring out the window.

“No, whenever I asked to help with this part, she says...” Dride paused for a second, switching his voice to his best impression of Helen. “You’ve already done enough; let the rest of us take a turn. You're just going to burn yourself out, kid. He and Alice laughed at his impression as Faith returned from the back holding a tray with two cups.

Faith approached the table and set one of the cups in front of Dride. Inside was a bitter green tea with a pleasant aroma; the tea was specially made to have foam on top like a latte. Faith did a little bit of foam art and put a heart in Dride’s drink. “Here you go, Dride, with extra love as I said,” Faith explained before moving closer to Alice and setting down her drink. “And here you are, Alice, one cup of the Faith Special, Dragon style.” She continued. The drink she made Alice was Helen’s finest, most special blend of premium coffee beans, roasted in a special secret way only Faith knows. The name Dragon style comes from how hot the coffee is, and the foam art dragon inside the cup.

Alice took a deep whiff of the coffee and grew excited, anticipating how it might taste. “Thank you.” She said, picking up the cup and sniffing it again, taking in the divine aroma. She then brought it up to her lips and took a sip. Her mouth burned with flavour, but for some reason it didn’t hurt. Alice set the cup down on the table, as Dride and Faith waited for a reaction. Alice sank into her chair, smiling with intense satisfaction. “Yummy, that might be the best thing ever. It’s so hot, but I don’t feel a thing, and it's so bitter, and still tasty, and now I feel all warm on the inside. That might be better than the Boar.” Alice grinned with her eyes closed, while Faith blushed a bit at her compliment.

“It gets praised all the time, but it always feels nice when people say they like it.” Faith explained. “But uh, Dride, try today’s brew; I tried something a little different today, and want to know how it turned out.” She asked Dride, fidgeting with her hands a little.

“Right, thanks.” Dride picked up his cup and smelled his tea, the perfume filling his nostrils with a pleasant scent. He took a sip and placed the cup on the table, taking in the new taste. “It’s good, but not great. I can feel the energy flowing in my body, but the sensation is missing something, and so is the taste.” He explained.

Faith lifted her hand to her chin and looked puzzled. "I was sure that today's was going to be the winner. Dang. I wonder if I tweak the amount of leaves, or infuse the leaves with Meni before turning them into tea." She mumbled under her breath.

"You're getting there, though; each day you get a little closer. Soon enough the Hero's brew will be complete," Dride said as he took another sip of his tea. "You just got to keep at it." He continued.

"Right!" Faith stated, giving Dride a thumbs up. The two looked at each other, smiling, and Alice could feel Faith get a little worked up while looking at Dride. Faith quickly looked away and said. "I've got to get my brother; Mom will be mad if I forget. Oh, and Alice, my mom told me to tell you not to listen to anything Dride says; he's exaggerating." Alice laughed as Faith walked out the front door into town.

Alice watched as she walked out of view before turning back to Dride and taking another sip of her coffee. "This is so good; every sip, like, fills me with energy. I don't know how to explain it." She said joyfully.

Dride takes a sip of tea. "I know what you mean. Faith figured out how to liquefy the Meni in the air and put it into her special brews; that's that tingling sensation you're feeling across your whole body right now, that and caffeine." He explained in between sips.

"Wow, you can use Magic in all sorts of ways," she said, still enjoying her hot coffee.

The two sat and made small talk for a few more minutes; Alice finished her coffee, while Dride still savoured his tea, taking a sip every two or three minutes. The conversation was light and soft until a dark sense of foreboding washed over Alice; fear crept into her mind, a fear that wasn't hers; she felt as if everyone in Goldvale, all at once, suddenly felt afraid for their lives. She began to breathe fast, and she clutched at her mark on her back. Her vision blurred, and her mouth would form no words. Dride placed his hand on her shoulders, concerned. "What is it? Are you okay?" He said, panicked.

Alice could do nothing but point out the window as she closed her eyes and rocked back and forth in her chair, memories flooding back from her time in Hell. Dride looked out the window, anger flooding from every pore in his body at what he saw outside.

Standing just outside the window was a short man, wearing a suit of Silver plate armour, adorned with the Noita Empire's Crest. Over his shoulder was a red cape, and around his waist was a short sword. Behind him stood two soldiers, holding up a man beaten and bloodied.

Chains bound the bloody man's wrists together, and the clothes he wore were once fancy, made of fine silks, but now were nothing but torn-up rags. The man's hair was the same colour as Faith's. Dride clenched his fists at the sight and stepped toward the door. "Hide." He demanded, his voice stern, yet caring.

Dride stepped out of Helen's Finest with fury and stood staring at the man with the red cape still holding his cup of tea. Behind the man were two more men holding another man in chains, and behind them was a platoon of twenty more soldiers. It seemed all of Goldvale was out here, quivering in fear; Helen and Faith among them. Faith stood with her little brother Hector, holding his hand tightly as she cried into her pant leg, Helen standing behind Dride, holding her hand over her mouth, tears streaming down her face.

"Ah, another one comes out to join the fun." The man in the red cape said. "Now is everyone in town gathered?" He continued.

"Must be," Dride said, calm, despite the fire raging inside him. He gently set down his teacup on the ground before turning back to the man in the red cape. "What do you want?" Dride asked calmly.

"Well, it's a little bit of a story, you see. I am Captain Less Than Nothing, of the Noita Empire, and this sorry man is one you know all too well," he explained, gesturing at the man in chains beside him. He took a step back and kicked the man in the head with his metal boot, sending blood spraying from his mouth. The man in chains coughed, clearly conscious. "This is my former Commander, Frederick Pellows, and he has been charged with the ultimate crime, treason against the Noita Empire!" He shouted, clearly getting off on the power he had over everyone here. He reached into his breastplate and pulled out a letter, sealed with the mark of the Blue Rose, torn open from the top. "Inside this letter was information about the inner workings of some of our systems, addressed to this town, to someone with the code name Princess. This is all classified information, and there is also a traitor in this town. I tried beating the info out of ol' Fred here, but he wouldn't budge. So here we are: either this Princess steps forward, or we will have to integrate everyone in this town." Less threatened, taking a step toward Dride.

Dride steps back, trying to maintain the distance between him and Les. "Let me see the letter. I know this town pretty well; maybe I can figure out who it's for." Dride offered, holding out his hand.

"Oh, I don't think so. I am not careless enough to give away my ticket to the big leagues. I wonder if you're Princess; you kinda look like one, boy. Although..." Les trailed off, drawing his sword and pointing it toward Faith and Hector. "The most obvious answer would be daddy's

little princess; he never would shut up about you, Faith. Although I can see why; you are a cute one, especially for someone so young.” He concluded, smirking.

“Shut up,” Dride said under his breath, clenching his fists.

“What was that, boy? Did you just tell me to shut up?” Captain Less asked, his smile fading.

Alice watched from inside as Les quickly lunged toward Dride and hit him with an uppercut, sending Dride to the ground. Despite the panic attack, Alice sprang to her feet, and despite her fear, she rushed outside to Dride’s side. “Are you alright?” She exclaimed, holding Dride’s head in her hands. Blood dripped out of his mouth, staining his white shirt crimson.

“I told you to hide.” He said sternly, not averting his gaze from Les.

Les grinned wickedly as Alice met his gaze. “Now, who is this, another young lady who might fetch a high price?” He said, stepping toward her. “How about this boy? Maybe I’ll leave her peacefully if you give me your friend and Frederick’s daughter.” His voice was dripping with pleasure.

Dride sat in silence, his body language not betraying any emotion. But Alice could feel the storm brewing inside of him. Dride stood up and walked past Les, toward his teacup. “Oh, what’s this? A little thirsty. Taking a moment to think before you make up your mind.” Les teased.

Dride picked up his teacup and drank the rest in one gulp. He then placed the cup back down. “I’m growing impatient, boy. Will you side with Justice, or should I take you too?” Les chuckled. Les walked toward Alice and grabbed her by the arm. “Either way, I’m going to take this one; she looks like she’s at least a Pig, maybe a Deer,” Les explained, laughing, using the terminology to refer to enslaved people meant for manual labour.

Dride stepped toward Les as he laughed, and without hesitation, Dride grabbed Les’s arm and snapped the bone clean in half with nothing but brute force. Les screamed and fell to his knees. “I won’t let you touch her again!” Dride screamed, kicking Les in the head, sending him flying back toward his men. Les landed with a thud, and one of the soldiers grabbed him, leaning him up against the wall of Helen’s finest.

Les managed to murmur, “What are you fools doing? Get him...” The soldiers looked at each other before one stepped forward, charging at Dride with his spear. Dride dodged out of the way, punching him in the chest, leaving the imprint of his fist in the soldier’s armour, winding the

man and sending him falling to the ground. The two men holding Fredrick fell back behind as the rest of the soldiers maintained formation, each readying their weapons.

One of the soldiers looked at the others and said, “Who is this guy?”

Dride walked over to the man he had just knocked over and stole his gauntlets. He stood back up and looked over at the platoon in front of him. “I sure hope I didn’t kill that guy,” he said, the man on the ground raising a thumbs-up in response. “Good.” Dride breathed a sigh of relief. Dride slipped on the gauntlets; they were a little too big for his hands, but he clenched his fists anyway. “The name’s Dride, and I want to be Hero. That letter is for me; no one here knows who I really am, so leave them out of this; it’s me you’re after.”

The soldiers all looked at each other, hesitantly, before Les screamed, “GET HIM, GET HIM NOW OR HANG ALONGSIDE HIM!” The hesitancy didn’t vanish from the soldiers, but they began to advance anyway.

“I’ll give you one chance: turn around, take him with you, and leave Fred here, and no one else has to get hurt.” Dride offered.

“NOW DAMMIT, NOW! GET HIM NOW!” Les hollered at the top of his lungs. The hesitant advance became a full-on charge toward one lone boy.

Dride smiled warmly, looked back at Alice, and then over to Faith. “Thanks for the Tea! I’m feeling all fired up!” He yelled, grinning. He turned back toward the soldiers coming at him, and he snapped his fingers inside the gauntlets, yelling “Ignite,” as he did so. His fists sparked a blaze, and as the first soldier reached him, Dride saw fear in her eyes as his fist made contact with her side, knocking her over.

“This kid can use Magic!?” Another one of the soldiers exclaimed in shock before Dride’s fist made contact with his head. Eighteen now stood against Dride, Eighteen versus One.

“Show em what you can do, Dride!” Faith yelled, smiling. The rest of the town began to cheer for Dride as well. A chorus of voices rose behind him, all screaming encouragement for this one lone man.

Dride stepped toward the group of soldiers as they began to quiver with fear. His heart raced. As two of them attacked him, they swung swords at him, but he dodged both with the grace of a well-trained dancer and punched one in the leg and the other in the shoulder. Cracks were heard when his fists made contact with his targets; two more down. He kept on fighting the

soldiers two, three, four at a time, each one falling before him, but he didn't notice Captain Les, stumbling toward Alice again, with his sword in hand.

Alice tried to move, but fear immobilized her; all she could do was scream. Dride turned to look at her, and his face twisted with concern. During that instant of distraction, one of the Soldiers managed to stick his sword in Dride's back. Dride ignored the pain and rushed to Alice's side. "I'm going to kill you for what that fool did to my arm!" Les shouted as he swung his blade at Alice's neck.

Dride managed to arrive just in time to grab Les by the neck and pull him back. His blade missed Alice's neck, but sliced her arm as it fell to the ground. "I said you wouldn't touch her!" He screamed as he slammed Les into the dirt, and then brought his flaming fist to Les's face, breaking his nose and jaw. Dride grabbed Les by the head and held him up to the soldiers. "Who wants more, huh!? I'll take you all on right now!" Dride yelled, blood running down his back. He let go of Les, dropping him onto the ground.

Alice looked up at Dride in this moment, wind howling, blowing his long hair around. She felt a torrent of emotions: fear, anger, and something else, something stronger. It came from every person in town, as well as herself: hope. She remembered those words, words that changed her life forever: Dride wants to be a Hero.

"We can beat this guy." One of the soldiers squeaked out.

"We have to, or Les will kill us; we have orders." Another said, fear in his voice.

"That's right... kill him, kill all of them... in the name of Justice." Les blurted out, spitting blood from his mouth.

"Justice- what is just about this? Attacking innocent people, turning a bright, normal day dark, making a family look at the bloody image of their father as he's dragged in chains. What is just about that?" Dride screamed at the soldiers.

One of the soldiers bit her lip and dropped her sword. "I guess it's my head then." She said, walking toward Fredrick. A few of the other soldiers also laid down their weapons.

Once she reached Fredrick, she knelt beside him, grabbed the key to his shackles, and unlocked them. He looked up at her and spoke, his voice weak, "Well said..." She helped him to his feet.

"I am sorry, sir. Please resume command of our unit." She requested.

Fredrick nodded yes. "Is everyone all right?" He asked, as his men all slowly made their way back to their feet. "Good." He said, smiling.

The last soldier to make his way to his feet was the first one Dride knocked over; once standing, he saluted his commander and said, "Commander, I apologize for letting this traitor trick us into imprisoning you. Recent evidence came to light that he wrote that letter for the revolutionaries and framed you." The soldier ran over to Les, grabbed the letter from his breastplate, and then handed it to Fredrick.

Frederick chuckled, "Good plan." He opened the letter and pretended to read it. "Yes, it is all here, clear as day!" He yelled.

The soldier carrying Fred piped up. "Indeed, that is the truth; furthermore, Captain Les used this operation as a cover to deliver that to a revolutionary who was supposed to be stationed in this town; too bad for him that his partner was not here and betrayed him." She stated falsely.

One more soldier raised his hand and said, "Yeah, yeah, and it was a good thing that this guy was here to stop the treasonous Captain Les; he saved the day!"

"That's right! Three cheers for Dride, everybody!" Frederick yelled, and the town erupted in cheers as Dride waved his hands and put out the fire. Fred hobbled over to Dride and placed his hand on Dride's shoulder. "It's good to see ya, kid."

"Yeah, same," Dride said, smiling; his smile didn't last long as he heard Les speak once again.

"Fools... heads... will... roll... heads... will..." Les trailed off as he lost consciousness. A few of the soldiers walked over to Les and cuffed him.

"Alright, men, set up base camp outside of town, and treat the wounded, including Les; he will need to be alive in order to stand trial. In the morning, head back to Temo, wait for me there." Fred orders, as he moves to stand on his own.

All of his men salute and yell, "Yes, sir!" Les is dragged away, the chains around his wrists clanking.

Dride falls over, exhausted. "You okay, Alice?" He asked, out of breath.

“Yeah... What about you?” she asked, concerned about the sword sticking out of Dride’s back.

“I’ll be fine...” Dride trailed off, not wanting to interrupt what was to come next.

Faith, Hector, and Helen all rushed toward Fredrick. “Daddy!” Hector yelled, tears streaming down his face. Fred knelt down and hugged his family, rubbing Faith’s head as they all cried together.

“I missed you, Princess... and I missed you too, buddy,” Fred said, smiling. “And of course, I missed you, Helen... I’m glad to be home...” He finished, breaking down harder.

Dride couldn’t help but cry as well, as Alice smiled at the family newly reunited.

Chapter 3: A long day's end

Day turned to night as Alice, Dride, and the others recuperated inside Helen's Finest. Alice wore a large white shirt, sat at a table, and drank a glass of water as Dride stitched closed the wound Les had inflicted on her arm. Across from them sat Fredrick holding a sleeping Hector in his arms, as Faith and Helen sat close. The lights were dim, and the mood was low. Everyone was visibly exhausted from the day's events, none more so than Fredrick.

His face and body were still bruised and cut, and pain radiated from all over his body. Still, Alice could tell he was happy. They all sat in silence until Dride said, "Alright, there we go, all patched up." He reached down into a small medical bag and pulled out a black bandage. He wrapped it around Alice's arm and stuck a small piece of medical tape to it. He continued, "Now, that bandage is waterproof, but don't overdo it until the wound closes. Let me know if it gets too uncomfortable, and we can fix the bandage. I know a guy that makes em, so it's not too big a deal." He smiled at Alice, and she just looked down at her drink.

Alice stared at her cup and somberly said, "Thank you. I'm sorry I got myself hurt and ruined that dress you got me."

Dride smiled and said. "Oh yeah, right. Dride stood up and ran into the back of the cafe, and came back out holding Alice's dress, freshly sewn back together and cleaned. He handed it to her, and her heart fluttered. "Good as new, right?" Dride stated, grinning.

Alice looked at the faint bloodstains and the fresh stitchwork, done with yellow thread to hide the damage better. Alice smiled softly and looked up at Dride. "I didn't know you had so many talents, and that you bounce back so fast." She laughed.

Dride laughed back and stretched his neck. "Well, it still hurts, but I won't let that get me down, and my mom taught me everything I know about stitch work, on both clothes and people."

Alice looked back down at her glass, still clutching the dress in her hand. "I've been meaning to ask this for a while, but I think I already know the answer. Why do you live alone, Dride?" She asked, bracing herself for the answer.

He sat back down beside her and smiled. "Well, if you're asking where my family is, my mom was killed by the empire nearly a decade ago." He paused, and his smile softened. "And my sister was taken from me on the same day... but I still have my brothers, and soon I'll get Lily back," Dride explained.

He turned his head over to Fredrick and nodded. Fred reached into his pocket and pulled out the envelope from earlier that day, and slid it across the table. "Before I open this, and the conversation shifts, any of you who hear our discussion will be labelled as traitors or co-conspirators. So you should leave the room now." Dride stated.

Alice shook her head. "Well, I am already a criminal." She reached over her shoulder and touched the mark on her back. "I have to say, I was surprised when you yelled in front of the whole town that the letter was for you." She said, grinning.

"I want to hear too, I mean... if it's about Dride..." Faith whispered, blushing a little bit. "And you too, Dad... if it's dangerous, I want to know." She finished, stumbling over her words.

Frederick placed his hand on her shoulder and nodded approvingly. Dride opened the envelope and began reading the contents aloud. "To Mr. Lilois, you are hereby invited to appear at this year's Auction, taking place on the thirty-first of Hydri, at the Ultima theatre in Temperwrath. You are allowed to bring no more than eight people, including yourself, and no more than four servants, person or otherwise. We look forward to meeting you in person after a long correspondence; who knew one so young could be so business-savvy. Again, I am looking forward to finally meeting face to face later this year. I do not expect a response anytime soon; the spring harvest is nearly here, and I can imagine you being busy running your plantation until the season's end. I eagerly await your arrival. Please be sure to bring Agatha with you as well; I would like to meet her. She sounds so lovely. Once again, I cannot wait to meet you face to face. Sincerely, R.A. Guthier." Dride finishes, places the letter on the table, and reaches back into the envelope, pulling out old letters and a manifest for the auction. As he looked through the other letters, he said, "Mr. Guthier really doesn't seem like he knows how to write well, but he seems eager to meet Mr. Lilois." The other people at the table laughed, but Dride's eyes were fixed firmly on the manifest.

The manifest has five tiers, and each tier lists names. First are Pigs, the least expensive tier of enslaved people, weak labourers, and house hands. Second are Deer, stronger labourers skilled in housework, clothes making, cooking, and other mundane tasks. Third are the Ox; Ox are great manual labourers, house workers, and each one of them can use magic. Fourth, we have Birds, fair-skinned, strong, and wielders of magic, used for anything. Last but not least, we have Angels; they are neither strong nor wielders of magic, but are mostly young women, raised from a young age, sculpted into a beautiful trophy for those wealthy enough to attain one.

Hundreds of names are written across the page Dride is reading; it takes minutes for him to scan them all until, under the Angels section, he finds the name he was looking for. "Lily Snapdragon." His heart skips a beat, and a single tear rolls down his cheek. "She really is there..." He whispers.

“I checked a few times; all the records of that girl Lily match your story. That’s your sister, Dride. Frederick explained, as Dride looked up at him. “Moreover, I have made you an entire fake identity, Mr. Tetro Lilius, a wealthy farm owner on the Elderlands, seventeen years of age; you inherited your farm and business sense from your father, who passed a few years ago. Agatha is your girlfriend, and she’s quite the feisty personality. Inside, there are fake business records, and more to your story. Study up. You have six months to get to Temperwrath.” Fred elaborated.

Dride nodded his head in understanding, as Alice placed her hands in her lap and gripped the fabric of her shirt. “So you’re going to save her, right... Mr. Hero.” She said hesitantly.

Dride slammed his fist on the table and yelled. “Damn right!” Helen shot him a dirty look, and then gestured over to Hector, still sleeping in his father’s arms. “Sorry...” Dride whispered meekly.

Alice closed her eyes and then blurted out. “I want to come with you...” Alice opened her eyes, looked over at Dride and continued. “I have nowhere else to go, no friends, no family. I know I can’t do much; I can’t fight, I can’t do magic, but you can teach me things, right? I’m willing to give it all I’ve got; I’ll learn whatever I have to. I owe you my life; please let me help you.”

Dride turned to face her and said, “You don’t owe me anything; we’re friends now, right? If you want to come along, you’re welcome to, but I don’t want you to do it because you feel you owe me. I want you to do it because you want to.”

Tears well up in her eyes, and her face turns determined. “I want to go with you because I want to have an adventure, the greatest adventure ever! I spent twelve long years in a hole in the ground, digging, crying, and screaming. Now that I’m free, I want to see a bunch of different places, eat lots of yummy foods, make lots of friends, and have as much fun as I can; I owe that much to someone important to me. I also want to help people as you do! There are so many kids like me who grew up in places as I did, and I can’t stand knowing that while I’m free, people like me are suffering, when maybe I can get strong enough to do something about it.” Alice exclaimed, clutching her chest.

Dride only smiled and placed his hand on her shoulder as she wiped away the tears. He looked her straight in the eye and said. “We’ll take on the empire together, and save Lily all on our own. But there is going to be a lot of danger on the road there. Battles, tears, pain, but also laughter, excitement, and a fair amount of treason and other illegal actions.”

Alice chuckled and replied. "I'm ready for it all!"

Later, after everything died down, Helen, Fredrick, and Faith all went to bed, so Dride and Alice headed home for the night. The moon cast little light on this cloudy night, but a few stars could still be seen twinkling in the sky above. The wind blew softly. "So, are you excited to see your sister again?" Alice asked apprehensively.

Dride jumped up in the air and exclaimed, "Yeah!"

Alice laughed and said, "You're rather chipper for someone who had a sword in their back earlier."

"As you said, I bounce back fast, and how could I not? I just received the best news ever! I can't wait to tell Isaiah!" Dride excitedly explained. Alice could tell Dride's statement was true, but for some reason, it felt like he was lying a little.

"Isaiah?" Alice asked, confused.

"My best friend. He's great, sometimes. But we should be meeting up with him on the road to Temperwrath. I called him a few days ago, so he should be close." Dride explained.

"Well, I look forward to meeting him." Alice said, still confused about what exactly he meant by "call." But before too long, they reached the door to the house. Alice looked over at Dride and stared into his eyes. They were full of hope, and so was his heart; she could feel that, too. She got lost in the blizzard of sensations she was feeling, both her own emotions and his, still trying to wrap her head around how she was feeling what she was feeling.

Her concentration broke when Dride looked at her and said, "Is there something on my face?"

Alice shook herself out of thought and responded. "Oh, sorry, I must have zoned out..." She then fake-yawned and stretched her arms back. "I think I'm just tired; it's been a long day." She finished, grabbing her arm where she was cut.

"Yeah..." Dride replied as he finished, unlocking the door. The two stepped inside the house, and then he continued, "Well, you go take the bed; I've got like two more things to do before I can head to bed. I'm hoping to leave tomorrow afternoon, so get some rest."

Alice began to walk up the stairs, as Dride knelt on the floor. As she walked up the stairs, she heard scratching sounds, and Dride say, "See me, hear me, know me." She then heard a little rustling downstairs, but quickly entered the bedroom and lay down in the bed.

She stared up at the ceiling, letting the day's events run through her mind: the fear, the anger, the hope, and the excitement. She dwelled on one thought in particular: the fact that she can't feel anything on most of her body. Her arm was sliced open, and she felt nothing. The thought saddened her greatly; had the years of pain taken something from her that she could never get back? She thought maybe that it was the price of freedom, but why did freedom have to have a price? She looked back on Dride's battle earlier in the day, and what he said about justice was: Was he right? Is his justice real justice? Does justice even exist? In a world that allows pain, is there a right answer? Must all things come at a cost? Is the cost opposite? Is Alice the opposite of someone else? Does that need to happen, or is it just luck... She thought all about these questions, but slowly her mind quieted, and she fell asleep.

Chapter 4: The Grand Adventure

The sun rose over the trees on a beautiful spring morning, the morning Alice Asyilin would finally begin The Grand Adventure, with new friend Dride.

Alice awoke to the sun peering in through the window. On the nightstand beside her was the outfit Dride bought her, clean and waiting. She picked it up, walked to the bathroom, and took one more shower, unsure of the next time she might get clean like this. Once she was dried off, she got dressed and stepped out into the hall, her yellow dress sparkling in the sunlight.

She walked downstairs and tripped as she entered the dining room. She fell flat on her face, and Dride woke up, shocked.

“What the!” Dride exclaimed, his heart racing. He was sitting near the bottom of the stairs, with his legs outstretched.

Alice turned around and saw Dride sitting there, and began to laugh. “Why are you sitting on the floor?” She asked.

“Well... There's only one bed, so... I slept on the floor.” He explained.

“Why didn't you tell me? I would have been more than happy to sleep on the floor.” Alice stated, feeling bad that she had taken the only bed in the house.

“I couldn't do that to you. I don't know what kind of bed you've slept on in recent times, and I don't know when the next time we're gonna have bed is. It's at least a week until the next town over.” Dride explained.

Alice smiled at him. “Well then, thank you.” Alice rose to her feet before continuing. “Anyway, get ready; let's get this adventure started!” She exclaimed with excitement.

“Alright, but first, magic is useful, but I'm not a great teacher, so I want you to pick out a weapon,” Dride explained, standing up.

“Oh cool, do we like going to a store or something?!” Alice asked, still excited.

“Not exactly,” Dride said as he stepped over to the dining table and moved it out of the way. He then knelt and removed a few of the floorboards, revealing a secret basement with a ladder leading down. He gestured to Alice to come over, and then he jumped into the basement.

Alice slowly climbed down the ladder and found herself in a dusty stone room, just under the floorboards. It was very dark until Dride opened a hanging lantern and snapped his fingers, lighting the lantern into a blaze. Inside the room were lots of large crates that filled the room. “What is all this stuff?” Alice asked, confused.

“Well, aside from helping me track down Lily, Fred has been helping me smuggle supplies. I was sent out here for that in the first place.” He explained as he lifted the top off one of the crates; inside were neatly stacked piles of various types of swords. “I have swords, bows, axes, slings, and more, armour too,” Dride explained further.

“I know you said you were a revolutionary, but I wasn’t expecting this... how many of you are there?” Alice queried.

“Not enough, but the more supplies, the better. Someone else will be here in a few days to collect all of this, so while we’re still here, I want you to take something. Pick whatever you want.” Dride stated.

Alice looked at the piles of swords and shook her head. She moved to one of the other boxes and opened it. Inside were axes. “Where are the bows?” Alice asked.

Dride pointed to a box in the corner. “Over there.”

Alice stepped over to the crate and lifted the lid. Inside were several bows and a few quivers full of arrows. Alice picked up one of the shorter bows and drew it back. It was heavy, but manageable. She slowly released the string, letting it go back into place. “I want this.” She stated, smiling.

“Fine with me.” He replied. While Alice was choosing her bow, Dride grabbed a set of small gauntlets that fit him well. Alice reached back into the box to grab a belt with a quiver attached; she then buckled it around her waist. The belt was clearly meant for someone much larger than her, as shown by how tight she had to pull it. She loaded the quiver with about 20 arrows and stood confidently holding her bow.

“You look awesome!” Dride exclaimed. “At one of the stops, we gotta get you some leather armour or something; you’d look even cooler then!” He finished.

Alice blushed a little at his compliment. “Thanks... you too.” She replied bashfully. “Anyways... Let's get the adventure started.” She continued.

“Right, we have to stop by Helen's first; I want to say goodbye,” Dride explained.

“Me too!” Alice replied.

The pair quickly cleaned up, hid the basement, and headed out the door. As she stepped through the threshold, Alice couldn't help but look back one more time at the inside of the house. It had only been three days, but it held a lot of memories, ones she would cherish for the rest of her life. She smiled as the wind blew, shutting the door behind her as if to urge her to move forward. Goldvale awaited her at the bottom of the hill, and then the Usui forest beyond it.

The two walked toward the town with light hearts, and outside Helen's Finest, Helen, Frederick, Hector, and Faith all waited. Helen was holding two backpacks filled with supplies. Alice and Dride approached them.

“Well, look at the you, getting ready to go out on your own, eh, Dride,” Helen said jokingly.

“I've been on my own before, and I'm not alone this time,” Dride responded, smiling.

Helen looked over at Alice and nodded. “You better keep him out of trouble, ya hear me?” Helen stated.

“I'll try my best.” Alice laughed.

Dride looked up at Fred and smiled. “Thanks for everything. If you or your family ever need any help at all, head to Aertosa. I know it's a long way, but just outside of town, you'll see a large house on a cliff; flags with shields will wave from it. Head there, and tell them I sent you.”

“It was an honour, Dride, and I look forward to seeing you again. You'll grow into a fine young man, I'm sure,” Fred responded.

Dride then looked back over at Helen. “Thanks for everything, Helen, all the free food, coffee, and more.”

“It was a burden, and one day you're going to pay me back.” Helen laughed, only half joking.

Dride chuckled and then turned to face Faith; she looked like she was holding back tears. “Faith...” Was all Dride got out before she hugged him, crying.

“I’m gunna miss you.” She cried out.

“I’ll miss you too,” Dride replied, hugging her back. Helen, Hector, and Fred all joined in on the hug. Tears welled up in Dride’s eyes, but he held them back and wiped them away. They all stepped away from each other, and Faith wiped her eyes.

She walked over to Alice and handed her a bag of ground coffee, Dragons Brew. “I made this for you; it won’t be as good as if I made it, but it should help,” Faith said, smiling.

“Thanks, I appreciate it,” Alice replied. She reached out her fist, and Faith gave it a bump.

“Now take these kids; I won’t have you starving on my watch, or freezing, for that matter: sleeping bags, water skins, a few military rations, and a little bit of love,” Helen stated, handing both Dride and Alice the backpacks she was holding.

“Thank you so much,” Alice said, gleefully. She put her Dragon's Brew into her pack.

“I guess this is it then. Be careful on the way to Northeast South Town; bandits roam parts of those woods.” Fred said, concern in his voice.

“Don’t worry, no matter what happens, nothing's going to stop us!” Dride exclaimed.

Now that goodbyes were said and warnings given, Alice and Dride turned to face the road ahead. They began to walk, but Dride only made it a few steps before he burst into tears and swiftly turned around. He ran back to where Helen and the others were standing and pulled them into one more hug. “Thank you for everything!” He screamed between sobs; a crowd gathered soon after, each member of the townsfolk wanting to see Dride off as well.

Alice waited silently, stirred by the emotions of the moment, feeling the love between Dride and the others. She smiled as Dride ran back over to her, wiping the tears from his eyes, as the town waved goodbye. Ran past her, patting her on the back as he did. “Come on, we got to get going,” He said.

She took off after him, grinning from ear to ear. “This is the start of my Grand Adventure.” She thought to herself as she ran.

From behind, Faith yelled one last message: “Next time I see you guys, I’ll have perfected the Heroes Brew. Look forward to it!”

Chapter 5: Breaking Sticks & Punching Trees

A few hours after departing from Goldvale, Dride and Alice find themselves walking through the beautiful Usui forest. The trees tower overhead, creating a welcome break from the afternoon sun. Birds are chirping, bees are buzzing, and the wind is rustling through the leaves.

The pair walk as Alice takes in the sights and smells, enjoying being in nature, while Dride is face-deep in a large map of Iyastay. “On this path, we should make it to Northeast South Town in about three days.” He explained, rolling the map back up and tucking it into his pack.

“North... East... South... Town?” Alice asked, confused by the bizarre name, chuckling at it a little.

Dride looked over at her and said. “Yeah, it was named after a man named John North. He was at war with a local group. The East South part was meant to confuse the enemies and hide the town's true location.”

“Did it work?” She asked.

“Oh no, he died. They killed him, and then captured the town. Someone actually wrote a children's song about it.” Dride explained, laughing. He took a deep breath and began to sing. “Ol’ John North was a Dunderhead, Enemies came, and now he’s dead.” Alice laughed and actually joined in during the second part, so the two in harmony sang, “Under his town was put to rest, seventeen arrows in his chest: his small brain, his cause of death, widowed wife, a gal Beth. The singing and dancing there is the BEST! Ol’ John's town in the northwest.”

The pair broke down in laughter. “I’m surprised you know that one,” Dride said.

“Oh yeah, a guy named Del taught it to me when I was young; he used to sing it to me as I fell asleep, along with some others. It’s one of the few things I wish to remember from back then.” Alice explained, smiling.

“Well then, let's hear another one! I bet you know more songs than me.” Dride said.

She smiled and thought for a moment before taking a deep breath. Alice and Dride sang songs for hours as they walked side by side. Eventually their voices grew hoarse, with singing and laughter, and a quiet calm settled over the forest as the sun began to sink low in the sky.

Dride and Alice found a nice forest clearing to set up camp for the night. Alice gathered a bunch of sticks and made a ring of stones for the campfire, while Dride wore his gauntlets and punched a large tree, each hit breaking off more and more wood. The sound of metal hitting wood rang throughout the forest. After she was done setting up the campfire, Alice sat down on the grass and happily watched Dride chip away at the tree. After about an hour, the tree fell with a loud crack. Dride wiped the sweat from his brow and said. "I forgot to bring an axe, but I should be able to break it down into firewood. In a few hours."

"While you do that, I think I'm gonna eat one of the rations Helen packed us. I haven't eaten in at least two hours," Alice stated.

Dride laughed. "Don't eat all our food tonight; we do need some for the week ahead." He explained.

"I know, I know..." Alice replied somberly.

"How about instead of that, I take a small break from this, and I teach you some magic?" Dride asked.

Alice was already rummaging through her pack by this point, but Dride's offer caught her attention. Her stomach rumbled, but her urge to learn magic was greater than her hunger. "I'm in!" She exclaimed.

Dride signalled Alice to follow him. She stood up and walked over to Dride as he led her toward the tree line. Dride took a small hunting knife from his belt and sat on the ground. She sat as well. "Before I start with the basics, do you know anything at all about magic?" Dride asked, stabbing the knife into the ground.

Alice shook her head no. "I know some small things, but let's start at the beginning anyway in case I'm wrong." She answered.

Dride nodded his head and began to draw a little picture of a stick figure in the dirt with the knife. "There's a whole spiel, and some technicalities that we'll talk about some other time, but the very important thing to understand is that magic is simply what we call anything supernatural. For example, the Voice of the Soul- I said it was a form of ancient magic, which is true, but its power originates from something different than the most common type of magic,

which is what I am going to teach you about today.” Dride explained, drawing two more stick figures. Above one, he wrote “Spiritual”; above the second, he wrote “Physical”; and above the third, he wrote “Primordial.”

Dride took a deep breath before diving into a big explanation. “There are three types of magic: Spiritual, Physical, and Primordial. A basic explanation of all of them is that Spiritual powers come from your Soul; your Voice is a form of spiritual magic. If you have one, then it comes from your Soul. Next is Physical; it is the type of magic most people use, and anyone can learn to tap into the Physical world. This is what I use.” Dride put down the knife and snapped his fingers, igniting the tip of his finger; he blew it out before continuing. “Physical magic shares its similarities with the other types and can do some of the same things, but it is more taxing on one's stamina because it uses Meni. The last and most mysterious form of Magic is Primordial; its origin is unknown, and it is possessed by very few in the world today. Those who use Primordial magic are the gods.”

Alice takes it all in, trying to commit Dride's long explanation to memory. “So, Rosalia, and Krako, and Hy, they all use Primordial Magic?” Alice asked, curious.

“Yes, but that's not important. I just wanted to give the explanation in case someone else asked you about it later, so you could seem smarter.” Dride answered, standing up. “But... Today, I am going to teach you about a little physical magic.” Dride looked around on the ground for a few sturdy-looking sticks. He grabbed a few and leaned them against a tree, then took off his gauntlets and dropped them on the ground as Alice watched eagerly.

Dride grabbed one of the sticks and pointed it at Alice. “Meni exists within all things. It is a building block of all life on our planet: the grass, rocks, trees, animals, and the very air itself. Our bodies use it and store it naturally; we expel it when we walk or talk, and take it in when we breathe, eat, or drink. You need to learn to feel it in your body, and eventually the world around you, or so my teacher says. I haven't figured out that part quite yet. But anyway, if you feel the Meni in your body, you can move it into things and strengthen your muscles.” Dride explained. He then took the stick and tried to snap it in half without magic, and failed. After that, he took a deep breath, grabbed the stick in the center with one hand, closed his fist, and crushed it. “This is what you're going to do first, before anything else: you are going to crush a stick with your bare hands.” He stated, throwing a stick at Alice.

She caught the stick as Dride sat down with her again. “Are you ready?” He asked.

Alice nodded her head eagerly in response. She gripped the stick with one hand and waited for Dride's instruction.

“First, close your eyes and take long, deep breaths. Relax.” He said, calmly doing the same.

Alice followed, shut her eyes, relaxed her muscles, and took long, deep breaths.

“Good, now picture yourself alone in a black void, surrounded by blue dust, and with each breath, you suck some of it into your lungs, and then down into your body; it spreads from the chest to the top of the head, the tips of the fingers, and down to your toes. Keep breathing.” Dride said. Alice listened and slowly faded into the black void with the blue dust he described. All emotion vanished from what she was hearing; deep focus set in, and she listened to the words Dride spoke, but to her they seemed to come from nothing, simply a voice in the void.

“Now feel the Meni in your body, make it move from side to side, gather it all in your chest, and then bring it into your arm. Push as much of it into your hand as you can; feel the energy pulse into your muscles, and then close your hand.” Dride commanded.

Alice did as he said; she pictured the Meni moving in her body. She brought it to her fist, and then cracked. A loud noise broke her out of her trance; her eyes shot open, and on her lap were the shattered remains of a stick. She looked up at Dride, who was staring at her in stunned silence.

“You did it!?” Dride exclaimed in shock.

“I did...” Alice muttered, shocked herself.

Dride jumped to his feet, excited; Alice followed, wiping the dirt and splinters off her skirt. “Most people don’t manage to do it on their first try,” Dride explained with a smile.

“I just did what you told me, I breathed, and pictured the dust moving through my body,” Alice elaborated. She was happy she managed it so quickly, and she could sense Dride was impressed.

“Well then, if you nailed that, then maybe you’ll nail this; try punching the tree,” Dride said, pointing at one of the trees nearby.

“Al... Alright.” Alice replied apprehensively. She took a step toward the tree anyway, took a deep breath, pulled her fist back, and then moved it forward as fast as she could, but nothing happened. She tried again and again, but got the same result every time. She felt a little disappointed in herself.

“It’s alright, Alice. I wasn’t able to get it my first time either; you’ll get there with some practice. Keep going.” Dride said encouragingly.

Alice nodded her head and attacked the tree again. Over and over for minutes on end, each punch grew weaker, and she grew more frustrated. Dride watched her concern growing each passing minute. She huffed and puffed, and sat down exhausted. “Why isn’t it working?” She questioned, exhausted.

“Let’s stop for today. I’ll get the fire going; we’ll try again tomorrow.” Dride said, placing his hand on her shoulder.

She stood up, still catching her breath, and made her way back to the fire pit. Dride set the fire, and the two ate; then, once the sun was low, they rolled out their sleeping bags and lay down for the night.

Alice couldn’t sleep; she tossed and turned, but was restless. Slowly got up and checked to see if Dride was asleep. Dride was sleeping peacefully, so Alice stood and snuck off into the woods. She found a sturdy tree and then began to punch it. For hours, she stood trying to break the tree. Over and over again, she struck to no avail, but she gave up, and soon the sun began to rise; the dawn of a new day came.

Chapter 6: The Man Wrapped in Bandages

The next morning, Alice and Dride packed up and continued their journey down the forest trail. Alice was still exhausted from staying up all night punching trees. It was a cloudy, foggy day, with high winds making it relatively chilly for the two of them as they made their way toward North East South Town.

“Boy, it was chilly last night. I forgot how cold spring nights can be; I shoulda made the fire hotter.” Dride said, rubbing his arms.

“Was it... I didn't really notice.” Alice replied, placing her hand on her chin, thinking back to the previous night she spent exercising. “I guess exercise'll do that to ya.” She mumbled to herself.

“What was that?” Dride asked, looking over at Alice.

“Oh, nothing, just talking to myself,” Alice answered, deflecting. She looked down at her bruised, red-and-purple hands and hid them under her sleeves. “Um, anyways, uh, I was wondering how you learned to use magic?” She asked.

“Well, I learnt some stuff from books I had when I was little, but most of what I know I learned from Master Physalis. She taught about the technical aspects of magic, as well as the visualization stuff. To be honest, I forgot most of it.” Dride said, laughing and rubbing his head nervously. “But uh, my friend Isaiah is way better than me; I'm sure he'll have a lot to teach you... If we can convince him to help, that is...” He trailed off.

Alice stretched her arms back and yawned. “So like, when you do magical stuff, do you do the visualization thing, like whatever we were doing yesterday?” She inquired.

“Well, sometimes, when I'm, like, punching and things, I don't have to, but if I'm doing something more complicated, like making water or whatever, I have to. If I close my eyes, I'm probably visualizing.” He explained, mimicking the movements he does while manipulating the Meni in his body.

“Interesting,” Alice replied, thinking back to the previous few days. “Well...” Alice was about to say something, but she was cut off when they heard a chorus of voices nearby.

They both went quiet and crouched lower, remembering the warning Frederick had given them a few days ago about the bandits living in the woods. They continued to follow the path,

and eventually reached a point where one side banked down; at the bottom of the large hill was a camp. They looked down the hill at the camp and saw a few rickety buildings, mostly logs nailed to trees with tarps and cloth hanging from them. Surrounding the camp were wooden spike defences; inside the encampment, next to the main area, were several carts and wagons, some with designs on them. In the center of the camp, around a small fire, several men were dancing, singing, and laughing. Next to them, a little ways away, was a hanging metal cage with the base of one bar rusted slightly, and inside was a young woman, no older than twenty. She had long dark brown hair, green eyes, and wore a long white dress.

Alice and Dride went prone and tried to take a look down the hill. “What do we do now?” she asked in a whisper.

“Those look like merchant carts; these must be the bandits, I don’t know... I...” Dride was cut off while answering because he noticed the girl in the cage. “That can’t be who I think it is...”

“Who?” Alice inquired quietly.

“I’ll explain later, but I’m going down there. I gotta help them.” Dride explained.

“What cage?” Alice asked, confused.

“That one,” Dride stated, pointing at it.

Her eyes followed the tip of his finger to the spot he was pointing at, but it was all a blurry mess to Alice. “I can’t see anything; it’s all blurry,” She said. As she began to feel the emotions of the people down at the camp, she could tell they were all joyful, and that there were eleven of them total.

“Whatever, stay here; I’m going down there,” Dride said as he began to stand up. Alice grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him back down.

“Be careful. There are eleven people down there, eight by the center, and three in those tents or whatever.” Alice explained, concerned.

“You can’t see the cage, but can tell that?” Dride said, puzzled.

“I’ll explain later; just be careful.” She stated, letting go of Dride's shirt.

He nodded and quietly crawled toward the camp. Down at the camp, in the cage, we found the young woman taking long, deep breaths, quietly meditating.

It was then that a voice arose from one of the shelters in the camp, and a very tall, very muscular, and very hairy man emerged, saying, "Eat well today, boys; our most recent catch will definitely fetch a good price." His voice dripped with pleasure. The man approached the cage. "It was fortunate for us that we found you walking alone in these woods. I look forward to all the fancy meats we get from selling you. Boys! Get her loaded on a wagon. And don't forget about that little bug too. I'm sure we can find one of those weirdos who likes pinning bugs to things in the big city." He ordered, while turning his back on the cage to face his men.

"Not so fast!" A voice called from beyond the trees. All of the bandits turned to look at where it came from. The woman opened her eyes and did as well, and there stood Dride, gauntlets already on his hands.

"Oh, now who is this?" The large man smiled.

"The name's Dride, and I want to be..." He was cut off by the large man lunging at him and landing a punch straight to his face.

"An idiot, clearly. I think you already got that part down, kid." The man explained, laughing.

"Ha, funny." Dride replied.

"I know, I know, I love doing that bit." The man explained, still chuckling to himself. The other bandits nearby laughed at his joke too.

"Yeah, it's pretty good," Dride said, laughing, before turning stern. "Now let them go, and I'll be on my way," Dride demanded.

"Now, now, don't be hasty. I can't do that, but how about you join my gang? Not many people get my particular brand of humour. We'll cut you in on the profit from selling the girl; she's worth a million." The man offered.

"Please, I am worth way more than that measly sum." The woman in the cage said, opening her eyes and staring daggers at the large man.

“It’s a kind offer, but I have to refuse. You cut me off earlier. My name’s Dride, and I want to be a hero! I can’t bring myself to stand by and do nothing when someone is in need.” Dride exclaimed.

“That is a shame, but I can’t let her go. You see, my name is Thev, Thev Avery, and I want to be filthy rich!” The large man exclaimed, taking a fighting stance.

“For the record, I am not in need.” The woman in the cage piped up.

“I know that dude, but they don’t,” Dride stated, looking over at her, confused, and only receiving an annoyed look back.

Thev relaxed his stance and looked back at the girl in the cage, and then back to Dride. “What, are you two boyfriend and girlfriend? Aw, so cute.” Thev teased, grinning. At the top of the hill, Alice’s cheeks turned red for a moment.

“NO!” Both Dride and the girl exclaimed at the same time.

“Nope, I’m not dating him; we’re just friends.” The woman explained.

“Yeah, good friends, close friends, best friends,” Dride said frantically, failing to deflect with a big, dumb grin on his face.

They just laughed and laughed as the woman in the cage yelled. “Shut up, Dride!”

“Sorry.” He said meekly.

“Oh, man, you guys are funny; it’s a shame I’m going to have to kill you.” They said, wiping tears from his eyes. “Well, just you, Dride. I still want to sell your girlfriend.” He clarified.

“Not his girlfriend.” The woman stated.

“Yeah, what he said,” Dride exclaimed, as Thev laughed again.

“It really is a shame. I do love teasing you two.” Thev said, grinning, before dashing toward Dride and landing a sucker punch that sent Dride to the ground.

“Ow... Dick.” Dride said, rubbing his jaw. He made his way back to his feet and began a counterattack. The two exchanged blows, with Dride prepared this time; neither gave any ground

at all. Minutes passed; they grew more and more tired. They both breathed heavily, and Theyv smiled menacingly.

“I am having so much fun right now! I take back what I said; I will enjoy killing you.” Theyv laughed, charging toward Dride.

Back at the top of the hill, Alice watched the fight from afar, both Theyv and Dride looking like blurry blobs to her. She knew what was going on, because she could read their emotions. With each blow, Dride grew weaker and more desperate, while Theyv only got more confident. Fear crept over her; she was afraid Dride might die down there. “I can’t do nothing...” She whispered to herself. But what could she do? She couldn’t fight whoever Dride was fighting, but maybe she could save the girl in the cage?

Alice stood and began to creep toward the side of the camp where the girl was. As she snuck toward her, she finally noticed something peculiar: as the woman watched the fight, she felt nothing particularly strong at all. She had some emotions, yes: curiosity, disappointment, embarrassment, but nothing particular, and nothing strong. Alice was confused by this, but continued on.

Once she reached the outside of the camp, she looked in and saw Dride and Theyv going blow for blow, still, but Dride was running out of stamina faster than Theyv. Alice turned her attention to the woman in the cage and crept to just outside it. “Psst, hey,” Alice called, trying to be as quiet as possible.

The woman turned her head to face Alice. “Now, who might you be?” The woman asked.

“I’m going to get you out of there. Hang tight, and be quiet.” Alice stated, getting closer. She grabbed the bars of the cage and said. “I’m going to try to bend the bars, then you need to jump out, and we need to run. Hopefully Dride will follow.”

“That’s a strange name. I’m going to get you out of there. Hang tight, and be quiet. I’m going to try and bend the bars, then you need to jump out, and we need to run. Hopefully Dride will follow. Or is that what you’re here for?” The woman scoffed, rolling her eyes.

“I’m trying to save you, lady; why are you acting like this?” Alice asked, annoyed. “Anyways, I’m going to try and bend the bars,” Alice said, as she began to pull as hard as she could on the bars, thinking back to last night, trying to recapture the feeling during the guided meditation with Dride. The woman in the cage turned her attention back to Dride’s battle with Theyv as Alice struggled with the bars.

Dride rushed toward Thev and leaped into the air, catching him off guard. On the way down, Dride grabbed him by the hair and slammed Thev into the ground. “How’d you like that one?” Dride said breathlessly.

“That one hurt,” Thev replied, smiling. Thev jumped to his feet and then said, “But you’re getting weaker.”

“You kidding? I’m just getting started.” Dride responded, spitting a little bit of blood onto the ground. Dride was bluffing, and anyone could tell; he was nearing the end of his stamina.

Thev began to clap, slowly. “Bravo, bravo, take a bow, my friend. This is the greatest fight I’ve ever been a part of, one man fighting a foe far stronger than himself for his one true love. A classic tale of a Hero and Villain, with the Princess trapped in a cage. I think I might put on a play about this with my cut of the profits. But the ending is so tragic; despite how hard he fought, the Hero dies at the hands of the Villain, who turns into a monster.” Thev explained, dramatically. He took a bow himself and began to grow larger. The already hairy man grew fur across his body, his ears grew pointy, and his teeth grew sharp. His face grew a large snout, his hands grew long claws, and his eyes turned yellow. Thev had now transformed into some sort of beastly canine.

“In this form, this thief won’t leave you alone.” Thev laughed menacingly.

Dride and Alice both looked shocked, while the woman looked uninterested, like she’d seen it before.

Alice continued to try to bend the bars, to no avail, while Dride fought Thev, now much larger and much fiercer. What was before a pretty evenly matched battle was now a one-sided slugfest. Thev began beating Dride up and down the camp, staining the grass with his blood. “What... Are you?” Dride coughed out, lying on the grass, bloody.

Thev laughed maniacally, grinning from ear to ear. “This is my Voice, Wolfheart. I don’t get to bust this out too often, and I was hoping not to need it here. I prefer the last face people see to be my normal, more handsome state.” Thev explained, his speaking voice lower and more growly. He ran up and kicked Dride really hard, sending him flying against a tree. Thev approached slowly and methodically as Dride tried to make his way to his feet. Thev reached him first, grabbed him by the neck, and lifted him into the air. He began to beat Dride mercilessly, while everyone watched.

From behind the cage, Alice watched as Dride was beaten; her heart raced, and she tried desperately to pull on the bars. The more panicked she got, the less she could focus on bending

the bars. She looked up at the person who needed her, and it helped her recenter. Alice closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She recalled how it felt yesterday, breaking the stick, moving the Meni to her arms. She focused, deeper and deeper, pulling as she did. She was startled out of her trance by a loud squeak. She opened her eyes, and everyone in the camp was now looking at her. The only person who noticed what made that noise was the girl in the cage. She looked down and saw the rusty bar, the one Alice was pulling on, was slightly askew.

“Well now, who is this? Dride, I didn’t take you for the type to cheat on your one and only.” Thev laughed as he dropped Dride on the ground.

“I don’t have any Girlfriends,” Dride stated softly.

“Well, I do, as many as I can pay for!” Thev replied, laughing.

“Yeah... Heh... Heh... well, let's see how many you have after I knock all your teeth out.” Dride threatened, still on the ground. Thev kicked him in the stomach and turned toward Alice.

“You must be the one I smelt earlier.” He snarled, taking a step toward her. Alice froze in fear.

“I’m not... done with you yet,” Dride murmured weakly, reaching out and wrapping his hand around Thev’s ankle.

“Oh, and what are you going to do from down there, knock out my teeth?” Thev boasted. His attitude quickly changed when Dride squeezed as hard as he could, breaking Thev’s ankle with a satisfying crack. The scream Thev let out could probably shatter glass.

“Heh... heh... did that one hurt?” Dride laughed, spitting blood.

For the first time since the fight began, Thev’s smile faded. “Oh, yes.” He said softly, with a straight face. Thev leaped into the air with his one good leg, and snap... Thev landed on Dride’s neck. “Tell me, Dride, did that hurt...”

Alice let out a blood curdling scream and began to bawl; she could no longer feel anything from Dride. The woman in the cage closed her eyes and shook her head.

“YOU BASTARD!” Alice screamed, charging toward Thev and landing a barrage of punches against his chest. Each blow did nothing. Thev simply picked her up by the neck. While

she struggled, Thev noticed some of her scars. Alice kicked, screamed, and cried as Thev passed her into his other hand. He pulled down the back of her dress, saw her scar, and shook his head.

“Too bad, you're just damaged goods,” Thev stated coldly. The words cut Alice like a knife. Anger bubbled up from the depths of her soul; the wind began to roar, and she managed to get one of her hands free and punch the hand he held her with, causing Thev to drop her. Alice ran back toward the cage, as the bandits began to surround her.

“Boys, dispose of the damaged goods.” Thev sternly commanded. His men approached Alice; she began to fear that this was the end when she felt a presence from behind Thev.

“Don’t call her that...” Dride said, rising to his feet. Thev turned around, hopping on one leg, to look Dride in the eye.

“How in the hell are you still Alive? I snapped your neck; I heard your heart stop beating.” Thev snarled, his smile returning.

“I bounce back fast...” Dride replied, wiping the blood from his face.

“I’m glad I didn’t kill you; I acted a little prematurely. You ready for round two?” Thev asked, grinning.

“Oh yeah...” Dride answered.

“Boys, kill her; I’ll take this one,” Thev ordered, lunging toward Dride on one foot. Dride dodged; he seemed to be faster now, or his stamina had returned.

“Isaiah, I got this clown. Can you protect her for me? I won’t be able to focus if she’s in danger.” Dride asked, dodging Thevs' attack while looking at the girl in the cage.

The woman in the cage rose to her feet and picked up her flower basket. “Your sentimentality has always been one of your many weaknesses, Dride.” She stated firmly.

“Yeah... Yeah... I’ve heard this lecture before; save it for later and help me out!” Dride yelled angrily.

“Fine.” The woman replied. She kicked open the door to the cage, shattering the lock, and stepped out calmly. She walked past Alice and stood in front of her. “Stay out of my way.” She commanded.

The woman's basket began to melt away into the shape of a Katana. The sword was inside a white scabbard, adorned with carvings painted in gold depicting a dragon. The hilt was white, black, and gold. The image of the woman in the white dress began to melt away, and in her place stood a tall man with finely toned muscles. He did not wear clothes; inside, black bandages stained with blood wrapped his body, and any exposed skin was black as night. His eyes were a piercing white. Around his head was a red band with long ends that swayed in the wind; he wore gloves on his hands, black and bloodied like the rest of him. His name was Isaiah. This was his real form.

“Oi, how in da hell did you do that!?” One of the bandits yelled in a thick Cockney accent.

“Wait a second, you look familiar for some reason.” Another bandit said, confused.

“Yeah, I know him; that’s the bloke who beat up da boss a few days ago.” A third piped up.

The rest of the bandits nodded in agreement.

Isaiah rushed toward one of them, and before the bandit could react, Isaiah jabbed the end of his scabbard into the bandit's stomach, winding them and sending them to the ground.

“Buggar me!” One of the bandits exclaimed before Isaiah bashed him on the back of the head with the hilt of his sword. The rest of the bandits backed away a step, afraid.

Isaiah scoffed at them. “Is that it... really... I would have expected more from a group of scoundrels if your boss wasn’t so weak.” He explained coldly.

Isaiah turned back to look at Alice. “You’re too close, move!” He demanded. Alice nodded her head and stepped back a few feet.

“Now, this has been a really annoying day. Dride disappointed me, and you’ve all been insufferable.” Isaiah stated calmly. Beneath his calm exterior, Alice could feel his rage bubbling beneath his skin. He clutched the hilt of his sword tightly and closed his eyes. He began to draw his sword, its black blade reflecting the light of the afternoon sun. As he drew his blade, he uttered an incantation: “Sharpened Focus, fueled by rage.” The blade blazed with a roaring light, and its flames sparked fiercely.

Isaiah’s whole demeanour changed; the calmness was gone, replaced by burning rage. His stance tightened, and his muscles tensed. Fear flashed across the faces of the bandits. In an

instant, all of them were on the ground, bleeding, but alive. Isaiah sheathed his blade, and the fire went out. Alice looked on in awe at the powerful warrior before her.

Meanwhile, Dride continued to fight Thev. Dride threw a punch at Thev, but he dodged it quickly, countering Dride's blow and landing a flurry of punches. Thev stood hopping on one leg as Dride stood back up.

Dride took a deep breath, raised his arms, and clapped his hands together. Fire roared from his fists like it did when he fought Les.

"What, do you think I'm afraid of a little fire?" Thev taunted.

Dride did not reply; instead, he ran toward Thev. As he got close, Thev swung at Dride, and Dride dodged to the side of Thev's shattered ankle and rammed his fist into Thev's side. He then grabbed Thev's arm and took another deep breath. "Ignite!" Dride yelled, and the fire on his hands burned hotter, superheating the metal of the gauntlets until they turned red.

Thev screamed in agony as his flesh was seared, and his fur caught on fire. Dride held on firm, as Thev's voice echoed through the forest. After a few moments, the fire began returning to Dride. His eyes glowed as the fire crept back toward him, beginning to be absorbed into his skin. He let go and stepped back as Thev fell backward, silent.

Dride stepped back to him, knelt, and pressed his ear to Thev's chest. "He's alive, for now, goo..." He was cut off by Thev, who grabbed his head and slammed him into the ground. Thev got to his knees and kept slamming Dride's face into the ground as hard as he could.

"My flesh burns, my eyes, my ears, my heart, they all burn. This isn't fun anymore; you should have stayed dead! So DIE! DIE! DIE! DIE!" Thev screamed, slamming Dride into the ground over and over, and over again, each time Dride's face got more bloody.

Alice watched as Dride was beaten mercilessly by Thev once again. Isaiah stood watching on, expressionless. "What are you doing!? Go help him; he needs help." Alice pleaded.

Isaiah looked back at her coldly. "No. He needs to do this himself." He stated.

"What? If you won't help, I will," Alice said, standing and taking a step toward Dride. She was stopped when Isaiah drew his sword and blocked her path.

"Do you want to die?" Isaiah asked her sternly.

“What?!” Alice answered, surprised.

“Then stay put, and have faith in Dride,” Isaiah stated calmly, turning his attention back to the fight. Alice did the same.

“DIE DIE DIE DIE DIE!” Thev continued to scream as he brutalized Dride. While it was happening, Dride could hear what Isaiah and Alice were saying. He smiled, and as Thev brought him back up, in the instant before Thev could slam him back down, Dride grabbed him by the arm with his still red-hot gauntlets. Thev screamed again as more of his flesh burned, and he let go of Dride, recoiling in agony.

Dride rolled forward and took off his gauntlets. He rushed at Thev with his bare hands and wound up a single strong punch. Dride channelled all the power he could back into his fist. “Heavy Iron!” Dride exclaimed as he brought his fist to Thev’s jaw, lightning fast. The sound of Thev’s jawbone shattering into a hundred pieces rang throughout the forest, as his teeth clattered to the ground.

Dride fell backward, exhausted, sitting on the ground. Breathing heavily. Isaiah and Alice both approached him.

“That was incredible. Are you okay? You look pretty bad?” Alice exclaimed, both amazed and concerned, sitting down next to him.

Dride turned his head to face Isaiah. “Thanks for the help, Isaiah,” Dride said.

“That was a disappointing display. I expected more from you.” Isaiah replied scornfully.

“It’s good to see you too, man, and at least I wasn’t the one who was trapped in a cage,” Dride responded playfully.

Isaiah scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Please, you think I was in the cage for any other reason than my own? I simply wanted to see how much you have grown.” He said sarcastically.

“You know we could have just fought,” Dride replied, annoyed.

“We both know that neither of us would go all out against the other,” Isaiah responded.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever, I’m still gunna tell everyone back home that I saved you, princess.” Dride teased.

“Princess!? If anyone around here is a princess, it is you.” Isaiah began an exaggerated impression of Dride. “Oh look at me, I’m Dride, a skinny punk who thinks he’s so awesome. I want to be a hero, but I can’t punch good, and I look like a girl, and I’m sad about it.” He mocked.

Dride and Isaiah stared at each other for a moment before they both burst into laughter. Isaiah helped Dride to his feet. “How have you been, Isaiah?” Dride asked, gleefully.

“Yarrow has been working me like a dog since you left,” Isaiah answered, smiling under his wraps.

“Sounds about right; you look stronger, though- more muscles,” Dride said, flexing his arms in a humorous manner.

Isaiah laughed, “You look taller, maybe by a millimetre or two.” He replied, turning to face Alice. “Who’s the girl, by the way?” He asked.

Alice stood up, held out her hand and said. “I’m Alice, Alice Asyilin. It’s nice to meet you.” She wasn’t sure, but Alice could swear she saw Isaiah’s eyes twitch a little bit when he heard her name.

Isaiah looked down at her hand, and then back up at her eyes before responding. “My name is Isaiah, and that remains to be seen. Alice lowered her hand, feeling rejected.

“Don’t worry, Alice; he’s always like that. But deep down he’s not a total jerk, probably.” Dride explained.

Isaiah scoffed again and turned to look at the bandits on the ground. “What should we do with them?” He asked.

“Are they dead?” Dride inquired back.

“No, just wounded; they weren’t worth killing,” Isaiah answered.

“Then let’s just tie them up and leave em here. It’s a popular trade, so someone is bound to find them sooner or later, especially when they start yelling.” Dride answered.

Isaiah turned back around to face Dride. “Isn’t that a little irresponsible? What if someone sets them free, and then they kill that person?” Isaiah questioned.

“Not to mention, we don’t have any rope or anything.” Alice piped up.

Dride thought for a moment before answering. “Well, I assume someone will alert the empire when they find what’s clearly a bandit camp, but we can leave a note or something, and They seemed like the kinda guy who’d keep rope around, for like, kidnapping people and stuff.” He explained.

“Good point,” Alice replied.

“Any objections? If not, then let’s go look for rope?” Dride asked. He waited a moment for an objection, and when none came, he said. “1... 2... 3... go team DRIDE!”

“We are not team Dride,” Isaiah replied, fiercely.

“I’m okay with it,” Alice said gleefully.

“Whatever, Dride, while we look for rope, can I speak with you in private for a second?” Isaiah asked, annoyed.

“Yeah, of course,” Dride answered. “Alice, go look over here, and we’ll go over here.” Dride pointed at one of the tents. Alice nodded and walked over to the tent, while Dride and Isaiah walked over to the other one.

From inside her tent, Alice could hear a small bit of the conversation Dride and Isaiah were having.

Dride said, “I’m not sure.”

Isaiah answered, “Interesting.”

Alice ignored the conversation for the most part, not thinking it was about her, and she searched the tent for any rope or something rope-adjacent. She had no luck until near the back; she saw two things that shook her to her very core and filled her with excitement. “GUYS, GET OUTSIDE, I FOUND SOMETHING COOL!” She exclaimed.

Dride and Isaiah exited the tent and stood in the camp for a moment as Alice dragged something heavy. Alice left the tent dragging a comically large white drawstring bag.

“That doesn’t look like rope, Dride said, confused.

“No, it’s way better, opening it.” Alice squealed with excitement.

Dride climbed up the large bag and looked inside; it was filled to the brim with dry foods. Bread, Meat, Vegetables, Fruits, all a little dirty, but fresh enough, and no doubt pillaged from the traders whose carts and wagons littered the camp. He stepped down from the bag, in shock.

“That’s a lot.” He exclaimed.

“Just wait, it gets better,” Alice said, rushing back into the tent and emerging a moment later, dragging a small treasure chest. She kicked it open, and inside were many coins, jewels, jewelry, gold and more. Their eyes wandered over the treasure, Alice’s glued to a gold amulet with a light blue stone. Dride noticed.

Isaiah reached into the chest, felt something solid under the coins, grabbed it, and lifted it up. It was a large stack of two-hundred-fifty Illia bills. At least a hundred of them. Isaiah felt around and felt a few more stacks of bills under the jewels and coins. “I may not agree with Thev’s methods, but he was effective.” He said.

“How much do you think is in there?” Dride asked, excited.

“One and a half, maybe two million,” Isaiah answered, stunned.

“Is that a lot? I think that’s a lot.” Alice asked, confused.

“Yeah, that could buy like... 1500 Nero Boar slices,” Dride answered.

Alice’s mouth started watering as she thought about the Nero Boar again.

“But wait, should we take this money? I mean, it does belong to other people.” Dride inquired, feeling a little guilty now that he had thought about it for a moment.

Isaiah responded, “Well, Thev stole it, and now we stole it from him; it’s not like the people he probably killed for are going to use it, and we can put it to good use.” He explained calmly.

“I agree with Isaiah,” Alice said, eagerly.

“Good point, okay, but how are we going to bring this with us? There’s too much to carry in our packs.” He pondered.

“I thought about that, actually.” Alice piped up and pointed over at some of the wagons. “We could take one of those.” She said excitedly.

Dride and Isaiah both thought that it wasn't a bad idea, but they had the same thought. “How are we going to pull it?” Dride asked.

“I also thought of that...” Alice said coyly. “I was thinking one of you big, strong guys could pull it with some rope or something.” She explained, nudging Dride with her elbow.

Dride laughed. “Ha, I nominate Isaiah!” Dride exclaimed, on board with the idea.

Isaiah swiftly turned to look at Dride. “What, no, you do it.” He said, also on board with the Idea.

They argued for a while before deciding to settle the debate with some rock-paper-scissors. Best of three, Isaiah won all three rounds; the last one was just to rub salt in the wound. The group split up again, and they found some rope, some chain, and a bridle for a horse. With these items, they tied up Thev's men, chained up Thev, and used the leftovers to turn the bridle into a makeshift harness and tied it to the wagon. With that, the group set off, the food and treasure packed into the back of the covered wagon. The one they chose was large and covered by a big white cloth. The sides were painted with a large golden skull symbol, that of the Everdeadly merchant company. One of the largest trade factions on all of Vallia, having dealings on all six continents.

As Dride pulled the wagon, Alice and Isaiah rummaged through the chest and donned some of the gold jewelry. Isaiah sat back with his feet up, wearing five gold chains, a crown adorned with red jewels, and a gold ring on each finger, counting a large stack of bills. While Alice put on a silver tiara, the necklace that had caught her eye earlier, she held a silver-plated fan.

Isaiah grinned under his wraps and exclaimed, “High ho, Dridey away!” He and Alice laughed.

“Shut up, you're doing this tomorrow, you know,” Dride responded, embarrassed.

“Yes, I am, but you see, I am significantly better than you at everything.” Isaiah taunted arrogantly.

“Ya, that includes significantly better at looking stupid,” Dride replied, laughing. Alice laughed too, while Isaiah stayed silent, clearly annoyed by the minor burn.

Chapter 7: Queen of Hearts

The night after the fight with Thev, the group of Alice, Dride, and its newest member, Isaiah, found themselves in another forest clearing. They sat around a campfire, eating dinner from the large bag of food that Alice stole from Thev.

Isaiah watched in horror as Alice gorged herself on dried meat and bread, scraps flying everywhere. Dride was eating a small loaf of bread, with a small bit of mold on the end. “Yeah, I’m sure where it all goes.” He said, taking a bite.

“It’s disgusting; did no one teach you manners?” Isaiah snipped at Alice.

With a mouth full of food, Alice replied. “Well... I was a slave, so no.” She kept gorging herself and finished, “And this stuff is good, and there's barely any mold on the bread!”

Isaiah shook his head and stood up. “I’m going to sleep. I suggest you both do the same. Temperwrath is still a long way from here, and we have to be there before the auction. I expect you both up bright and early.” He entered the wagon before anyone could respond.

A little while later, Alice finished her food and went to sleep in the wagon as well, leaving Dride alone by the fire. She lay down next to Isaiah, who was sleeping, sitting up with his sword on his shoulder. Alice closed her eyes, wanting sweet dreams, but instead she only got more nightmares.

She dreamed of that place and those people. The cracking of whips, the scent of burning flesh, and the face of an old man, saggy with age and pain. The words “Run, Alice, Run!” echoed through her mind until she found herself back in the snow, looking up at the moon, dying. She then woke up sweating and breathing heavily. She looked over at Isaiah, who was still sound asleep, and then at her hand; they were trembling.

She stood up and left the wagon, finding Dride sitting alone with the fire still burning. He looked up at her and asked, “What are you doing up?” Alice walked over to him and sat beside him.

“It’s going to sound stupid, but I had a nightmare.” She explained. She looked at her feet.

“No shame in that; I get them all the time too,” Dride stated.

Both of them ran through memories of the past in silence for a while; Alice could feel the sadness and anger bubbling in Dride.

"I'm sorry I brought it up." She said.

"What? No, it's fine." Dride replied.

"No, it's not. I don't know how to explain this, but I know how you feel, like literally." She explained, feeling Dride go from angry and sad to mostly confused. "A second ago you were angry and sad, and now you're confused." She said softly.

"What?" Dride exclaimed, even more confused.

Alice looked over at the wagon, and then back to Dride. "Right now, Isaiah is happy; he must be having a good dream." She explained hesitantly.

"Whoa, that's weird," Dride said, shocked.

"It's been happening ever since I lost the feeling in my body." She explained somberly. Alice buried her face in her knees and reached back to touch her brand.

"Hold on. Let's go back a second. What do you mean you lost feeling in your body?" Dride asked, concerned.

Alice began to cry softly and looked over at him. "Ever since that day, I can't feel anything except for my face and my hands. My body's too scarred." Alice stated, her voice cracking. "I can't even sleep through the night." Alice began to cry harder.

Dride looked over at her, thought for a second, and looked her straight in the eyes. "I'm sorry. Your mind and body have been through so much trauma, and I think the frostbite was probably the last your nerves could take. I also relive the bad times. I remember the fire, the smoke, the marching of countless footsteps, and I remember watching my mom die." Dride looked over at the fire and flicked his hand, making it burn brighter and hotter. "I have no scars; I can't even imagine the pain you've been through, but you survived. You endured so much pain and so much suffering, more than anyone I know. I don't know the full story, but it's inspiring." He looked back over at her with a firm expression. "You are so much stronger than you realize." He finished with a soft smile.

Alice smiled back a little bit and wiped her eyes. She relaxed a little and stretched out her legs. "Thank you. I can tell you mean that." She said.

“I will never fully understand your pain. It will always be part of us in some ways, but we have to look forward.” He said, nodding.

“I can’t tell if that’s good advice or not...” She chuckled.

“I don’t know if it is or not either; I’m just trying to pull something out of my ass to make you feel better.” Dride laughed back.

“Well, it’s working...” Alice replied.

“I’m glad,” Dride responded. He leaned back and stretched, throwing his arms up. “About the other thing you said, about feeling my emotions, have you ever heard the story of the Queen of Hearts?” He asked.

Alice shook her head no.

Dride then told the story of the Queen of Hearts. It goes like this.

Once upon a time, there lived a Princess. She lived in a castle on a small Island nation just off the coast of the Elderlands. She lived with her parents, the king and queen, and they were happy until one day, when a new power began to rise in the west. It began to spread across the world swiftly; this was the Rise of the Noita Empire. The Empire claimed lands across Vallia and subjugated nations. One day, fearing the worst, the king and queen left their home to talk with the Empire... they never returned. The Princess was distraught when she found out that her parents had been killed, and in her anguish she awoke a power that had always lain dormant within her: the ability to feel emotions in others, and even manipulate them. She had sway over the hearts of all those who lived in the world, and so she became known as The Queen of Hearts. In time, her grief faded, and she ruled her kingdom well; its people loved her. She worked hard to ensure her people lived long, happy lives, and just being around her made them feel good, loved and protected. Until one day, she felt fear from all across the kingdom. Several Empire warships approached from the east, fifteen in total, enough to wipe out her country. The Queen ran to the cliffside and felt despair as she saw the impending doom on the horizon. But then a hero appeared. A man blew in on a western wind and, with one hand, wiped out all the ships from afar. He was on a quest to defeat the empire for the free peoples of Vallia. He gathered the strongest warriors from around the world and formed the order of the Blue Rose. They made the small island nation their home base, and the Queen of Hearts used her power and influence over people's hearts to garner support for the resistance movement. Years passed, and the resistance movement gained momentum day after day, and The Queen and Hero grew closer. Eventually they fell in love. They got married, and things seemed to be going well. One day, The Hero sent his four most powerful warriors on a mission to the Elderlands, and there they were ambushed by Velnentus Noita himself. He defeated the four warriors and permanently altered the landscape

forever. People soon began to abandon the hero, and even the power to sway the hearts of those around did little to help the growing despair. The Hero had one last idea to save the world, but before then, he and The Queen of Hearts married. It was the happiest day of their lives. One last time, The Hero looked at his love, and he left to face a battle from which he never returned. The Queen of Hearts had once again lost everything; her people's hope still perished, and they surrendered to the Empire. She spent the rest of her life alone in the castle where she was born.

Dride finished the story and cleared his throat. "Well, yeah, that's it." He said.

"That was sad," Alice replied.

"Yeah, it's one of my favourites, though. I like the Hero a lot." Dride explained with a grin.

"Oh really, I wouldn't have guessed." She joked. "But I guess maybe the Queen of Hearts' power sounds like mine. But I can't manipulate people's emotions, at least I don't think so." She said, puzzled.

"Well, this whole thing is new, right? Maybe you just need to get used to it." Dride said, smiling.

"Yeah, maybe..." Alice was interrupted by herself yawning loudly, and her eyes growing heavy. "Oh man, I forgot how tired I am." She stated, blinking.

"Why don't you go to sleep, rest some; I'll be in bed soon anyway," Dride explained with a soft smile.

"Yeah, okay," Alice replied, standing up and walking toward the wagon. She stepped up into it, and then turned around to look at Dride. "I was wrong earlier. When I said that the whole feeling-others-feelings thing started when I lost sensation in my body. Thinking back now, it started when I first met you." She smiled, entered the Wagon, lay down, and drifted off to sleep. This time, she had good dreams; she dreamed about that old man again, but this time he was smiling widely. In her sleep, she murmured, "Thank you, Del," with a smile on her face.

Chapter 8: The road less traveled.