

Realm of Night

Book 5: Heart of Darkness

By Sarah C.E. Parker

Heart of Darkness

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Prologue

The war room was ringed with officers and sorcerers carefully stationed around the broad wooden table upon which was laid out a map of the realm. Dreith sat at the head of the table, calm and terrifying, an eerie reflection of his father with no less authority in the eyes of those around him.

“The weak leaders of the south do not matter,” he told Veran and the other gruff faced commander before him, Hylen. “They are empty symbols, puppets who will remain in their cities cowering behind their men. They will break with the fall of their allies. Zairya of Altair, Viera Tyrellen of Venir, and Raylus, the traitor. These are the enemies who must be eradicated. Kill them, and we will have won this war.”

“What of Seria Desirey?” the forty-some captain sitting at the side of the room grumbled. Dreith recognized him faintly as Dathur Regon, a disgraced former general who had recently been stationed at Sol’aira.

Dreith’s expression was unchanged. “She is to be executed at the first opportunity,” he affirmed. “However, for all her airs, Seria is a loner. Raylus’s men do not follow her, nor do any of the southerners. She is a low priority threat, though anyone who does manage to kill her will of course be commended.”

“The question remains of how we are to dispose of all these powerful individuals,” Elena Prior prodded softly. The sorceress was head of the House of Nyx now in wake of a string of recent deaths and exiles that had taken place both on the battlefield at Kaleth and right here in the capital. “For if you mean to send out assassins...”

“Nothing so elaborate is required,” Dreith responded coolly. “All these enemies will be in one place: on the battlefield, where it will hardly be difficult to exterminate them.” He placed one gauntleted finger on Faelyon. “Captain Toris,” he addressed a short-haired woman at the side of the table, “you will lead your forces to Faelyon alongside Captain Regon and occupy the city.”

“You mean destroy it?” the woman pressed.

“I mean precisely what I said. You will break through the gates and take control of the city. Veran and her Demor will shadow you, but they will not reveal their presence to anyone. You and

Regon shall slaughter the so-called garrison of soldiers posted in Faelyon, but leave the citizens alive.”

“For what purpose?” Regon grumbled.

“Bait. It should only take a few weeks for the Venishians and Raylus to arrive and engage you. Be assured that Viera Tyrellen and Seria Desirey will accompany them.”

“On what grounds do you make that assumption?” Regon prodded, drawing incredulous looks from his peers. His tone was growing dangerously disrespectful.

“The Tyrellen girl is an impulsive fool,” Dreith stated simply. “She never remains at the sidelines to wait out a battle. She fights on the front lines, as does Seria. The response of the rest should be common sense. The southerners will need to respond to our attack on their city. They will send Raylus so he and his unit have a chance to prove their loyalty, for the traitors are clearly just expendable grunts to this alliance of our enemies that they have so naively committed themselves to.” He paused, gesturing to the jungles directly west of the mountainous city on the map below. “You can count on the Altairens also participating in the battle. Kaleth’s garrison is too weak and King Gabriel too paranoid to leave his own nation defenseless by moving his troops that far north this soon after Cammen’s demise.”

“Even if the savages are present, it is doubtful their queen will join them,” Veran observed.

“I know,” Dreith conceded. “Zairya will remain in Altair, but she *will* send her war chief, Dakan, to lead the troops in her place along with the rest of her commanders. Executing him should serve just as well to destabilize the savages’ forces, make them reluctant to venture out of their jungles again until the rest of their allies are dead.”

He shifted his gaze to Veran. “Once the enemy forces arrive, they will move to evict Toris’s troops from the city. At that point Commander Veran and myself will lead in the Demor and slaughter them before they have a chance to break through.”

“Raylus’s unit has quite a few dark magic wielders to combat us,” Veran stated hesitantly.

“Not to mention the most pressing threat whom our commander here has repeatedly neglected to mention,” Regon grumbled, bringing every eye in the room to stare at him. Some wore wary expressions and gave looks of warning, but most simply watched in disdain, aware of where the captain was going with this and wisely staying out of it to watch him self-immolate. “You all know of whom I speak,” the pig-headed fool continued, oblivious. “There has been much word about this boy who fights for the Venishians. He turned the tides at both Sangheir and Kaleth from what I hear. And we have all heard the rumors...”

“He is not your concern.” Dreith stated coldly. “If he interferes with our attack, I will deal with him. That is all you need know of the matter.”

“So the rumors are true,” Regon pressed, refusing to let the matter die. “You protect this traitor. Word from some of my subordinates even suggests you saved his life after Sangheir. Pardoning his crimes and--”

“His crimes have not been pardoned. He is indeed a traitor and a threat, one that I will deal with personally. If you have a problem with that, you may take it up with the emperor.” Regon paled. “Though you will not survive the audience if you address him with the same disrespect that you have shown here.”

Sweat stood out on the captain’s brow: a fear awakened far too late. “I meant only to clarify the circumstances surrounding this...”

“Threat,” Dreith supplied.

Regon nodded. “Indeed. I meant no disrespect, commander.”

“What you meant matters little,” Dreith informed him coldly. “You are dismissed from this meeting. Captain Toris will take charge of your men and inform you of the remaining details of this operation when we move out into the field, for you have forfeited your seat here, both now and in the future.”

The elder officer flushed, trying to hide his rage, though the ugly shade of crimson spreading up from his beard made it clear regardless. “That is hardly fair, Lord Dreith. I spoke out of line, it is true, but--”

“Leave, Regon.” The armored sentinels at the door of the room stirred upon hearing the tone of the statement, weapons raising. “And be grateful you were not dealt a more permanent sentence.” Everyone at the table knew the implication behind those words. It was clear to Regon as well, whose eyes instantly darted to the sword sheathed at Dreith’s hip.

“My apologies, Lord Dreith,” he murmured quickly, head bowed low, as he backed away from his seat and past the sentinels flanking him. Dreith could still see the resentment carved deep into the lines of the conceited captain’s face however, even shadowed as it was turned down toward the floor. *I should kill him now.* He thought, hand twitching toward the hilt of his weapon. Veran was eyeing him warily. Clearly, she sensed his impulse and did not fully agree with it. An execution here would only unnerve his other officers, it was true. *Better they be unnerved and fearful than cocky and disloyal.* He thought. Still, Dreith held back, allowing his hand to fall, even though he could hear his father’s voice echoing through his thoughts, telling him that it was a mistake to do so.

The doors boomed shut behind Regon, and the sentinels resumed their post. Dreith returned his gaze to the other officers around him. "I suggest the rest of you refrain from encouraging any similar gossip among your men. Rumors only weaken morale." *Especially when they speak truth, a truth these officers' ruler has kept hidden from them.* He reflected.

"This plan of yours is a good one," Commander Hylen praised, bringing them back on topic. "Though I do wonder what the rest of us will be doing, and why you are sending only a small portion of our forces to Faelyon if the city is indeed the key to our victory."

Dreith shook his head. "The city itself does not matter. It is the trap I outlined that shall win us this war, and in order for that to succeed, our invading force must be small. Any group larger than Veran's hiding outside the city is sure to be spotted by scouts, even in so dense a hiding place as the mountain's forest. As for your role in this, Hylen," He pointed to a small gathering of turrets sketched far in the northern sector of the map. "you will lead the rest of the army to Cazour, then carry on to Talme. Obliterate them. They should give little resistance."

Hylen nodded, scarred face stamped with a smile. "A perfect excuse for our enemy to underestimate the unit occupying Faelyon. A fine plan indeed."

"I'm glad you're enthused. Begin your preparations tonight. We leave by the end of the week." Hylen nodded, and he and the rest of the officers departed the chamber, all except Veran and Elena Prior.

Veran seemed desperate to speak with Dreith in private, she had since the beginning of the meeting, but Elena reached him first. She approached him with arms crossed, her tone low and menacing. "Hylen and the others may approve of this plan, but I do not," she whispered. "I am sure Veran here shares my doubts."

"This is a topic you'd do best to avoid, Elena," Dreith informed her, already anticipating where she was going with this.

She pressed on, heedless. "You have not at all addressed the threat of that dark magician. Regon was a worm to call you out publicly for it, I agree, but I for one deserve an answer." Dreith's stare was blood-chilling, but Elena held his gaze, chin raised and eyes dark. "He wiped out a third of Veran's unit at Kaleth in case you've forgotten. Should he show up at Faelyon as well, this ambush of yours may very well backfire."

"I've no doubt Seth will show up at Faelyon." Her eyes narrowed at the use of the name. She had no idea as to the truth of matters though, and Dreith was not about to reward her prying. "He will join in the battle, and when he does, *I will deal with him.*" She pursed her lips, eyes lowering. "I understand your personal vendetta in this matter, Elena. And for that I will pretend

you never spoke of this. But you are not a part of this endeavor. You will remain here in the capital. Now go.”

The sorceress looked down. “I apologize. It seems rumors do indeed have quite the demoralizing effect.” The look she gave him then indicated that she had already heard much more than she should have regarding the truth of Seth’s role in all this. Still, Dreith said nothing further as the sorceress gave a shallow bow, departing the room.

Dreith turned his eyes on Veran. “I have said nothing.”

“I never assumed you had, Veran.” The woman was loyal to a fault. She alone knew the truth of Seth’s parentage, and that was because Dreith had told her point blank during the botched assault on Kaleth that the boy was his brother, but she had stoically kept the secret, asking no further questions of Dreith and simply letting the matter lie. The others of his people were not nearly so disciplined it seemed, and the rumors were spreading. *Hard to keep a secret when half the south knows all about it.* Dreith reflected. His father need only make a statement, step out in front of this rumor of Seth’s identity and either squash it or take charge of it, but the man had said nothing. He had not left the palace in weeks. He had not spoken to Dreith... *Nothing since my failure at Kaleth.*

Dreith needed now for this plan of his to succeed. He needed to redeem himself, to gain back the honor he had lost through his weakness at Kaleth. *And Sangheir, and everywhere else Seth has interfered, helping our enemies, destroying my reputation...*

“You need not worry about this battle, Veran,” Dreith assured his fellow commander, his back to her as he strode off toward the exit. “My brother has driven us back in the past only because I went easy on him. He has been given every chance to see the truth of matters. He refuses to do so. As such, he must be removed, and he will be.”

He strode out through the doorway, leaving Veran alone within the chamber. *The Altairens’ forces are primitive and work only from the shadows. Dreith assured himself coldly. The southerners are weak, and the Venishians are ever over-confident. They will not see us coming. Not any of them.* His plan would succeed, and this three decade long struggle would be ended. *And you, little brother, will either come to your senses or you will die with the rest of them.*

* * * * *

Chapter I

Shadows

The child followed the twisting line of the corridor, his steps light and silent despite his age, as he followed the tremors shaking the halls towards the raging shouts of his father. "I do not care for your excuses! I was not to be disturbed!" The boy's father hardly ever lost his temper. He was strong and stoic, an immovable rock, always. He was terrifying at times, it was true, but it was a quiet rage, a looming shadow of deadly disapproval, not like now.

The child peered around the corner and into the study just as the bands of dark magic around the servant released. The woman dropped dead to the floor, eyes wide and staring. The child's dark blue eyes rose to the broad-shouldered figure standing right behind the corpse, hunched now in grief as he slumped against the desk before him, fists clenching to still the shaking of his hands.

The boy left the protective shadow of the doorway and crossed the floor to where his father stood, putting his hands gently around his legs and holding him close. The emperor did not react for a moment. Then a hand drifted down to brush back the ragged mop of black hair. "You should not be here, Dreith," the man stated softly. It was as close to kind as he could manage, but with still a frosty quality to his tone.

Dreith knew what had caused this grief. It was the same tragedy that had opened up a hole in his own heart and sent him crying to sleep for months, carefully in the dark when no one could see. His mother was dead. His brother as well, a new presence in their household that everyone had seemed so happy around, especially his father. Now he was gone, and so was the woman who had sung Dreith to sleep every night, gone without a word into the dark. His father had told him exactly what had happened. "The truth must be heard, no matter how difficult." Those were his words, and Dreith had tried to agree with them, despite how his mind wanted to shut down upon hearing the awful truth of what mother had done. Now it was simply the feelings that shut down sometimes, but that was alright. It made things easier, and his father shared his grief. He was the one who needed him now.

The hand on his head lifted, and the emperor knelt down beside him, strong face composed and resolute once more. "You will be emperor one day, my son. It is a grave responsibility. We cannot bend to weakness. Those who betray us must be purged from our hearts, lest we perish along with them."

Dreith did not truly understand the words, but he nodded still, eyes intent upon the man before him. The emperor rose, looking down at him. "Return to your rooms. It is too late for you to be up."

"Yes father," Dreith murmured, hurrying off into the dark with the emperor's eyes tracking him as he went. The dark eyes lifted suddenly and focused on Seth watching voiceless from his position at the far side of the room, a reluctant observer dragged along by his Sight. Seth stared in silence at the man he hated, the tyrant who he thought would have surely killed his wife with his own hands had she not taken her own life first.

The truth must be heard...

* * * * *

Seth opened his eyes. It was a struggle now to trust his dreams in the wake of what had happened with the Lilith, Mera. Still, he knew there was no reason to suspect anymore that the visions were false. He was in a camp of his allies. The only telepath here was Seria. Still, every time his visions centered around Dreith, he felt like he was being tricked, manipulated into feeling sympathy for an enemy who hardly deserved it. *So why do the dreams keep showing him?*

Weekly sessions with Salerea had taught him how to control his visions in waking, but they still seemed to take free rein whenever he was asleep. Salerea said that was simply a lack of discipline, but Seth suspected she was just being snide. She herself had regular, uncontrolled nightmares of the past according to Viera. One was simply more susceptible while asleep. *So what does it mean?* Was it supposed to mean something that their mother's death had been hard on Dreith? It would be hard on any child. *Still...*

He cut off the thought before it could complete, sitting up slowly and dismissing the matter from his mind. He looked up at the thick walls of the spacious tent around him. He could not tell how far it was from dawn, not from in here. He swung his feet over the side of the fur-lined cot where he had been sleeping. These were kingly accommodations compared to the rest of the camp. They made Seth distinctly uncomfortable, but Seria had insisted. *"It is a show of station. We need to stay on equal footing to the Venishians and the southerners. Their leaders each have their own tents with suitable accommodations. You should as well."*

Seth had tried to retort by pointing out that he was not in fact their leader, but both she and Raylus had evasively insisted that he should take the quarters regardless. *It's just a bloody tent. It doesn't mean anything.* Still, you didn't see the Altairens taking quarters in anything this ridiculous. They were minimalists to a fault, sleeping under the stars despite the still frigid temperatures of the mountains this early in spring. *"The earth herself warms us. We do not feel the cold."* An Altairen sorceress had asserted, and though their allies had all found it hard to believe such a thing, they had not bothered to voice their skepticism, leaving the Altairens to their "barbaric" accommodations and speaking their criticisms well under their breath.

Seth poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher on the small table set up near the tent's entrance and stepped out into the night. There was no light at the horizon, no hint of gray yet entering the sky, though the moon was dipping low over the mountains. *Still hours from dawn after all.* His eyes flitted over the sprawling mass of tents before him. Raylus and his unit were quartered in the tents closest, keeping watch on their section of the perimeter with effortless skill, so much so that it was hard for Seth to even pick out the sentinels. The Venishians and southerners sprawled out to the north were a much more evident presence. Their armor caught the light in a far too obvious manner, and the bright colors of their tents and the standards they insisted be propped up outside every general and noble's dwelling drew far too much attention. *Hardly a stealthy presence.* He reflected dryly.

The Altairens, on the other-hand, were nigh impossible to spot. They stayed on the outskirts, hidden in trees or deep in the brush. They showed up to meetings where battle plans were discussed and otherwise kept their distance, foraging their own supplies and asking no aid from the several thousand allies camped right beside them. Hadrian and some of the others had been irked by this reclusive behavior, railing that it was a danger, what with hundreds of enemy troops filling the city only miles away and feral creatures roaming the forests around them. It had been a strain on the Keepers, maintaining a perimeter around their camp so that none of these beasts would intrude. The Altairens on the other hand seemed to need no shielding to protect them.

"These are not normal animals like those of your jungle," the tracker, Caleb Ryker, had cautioned the natives their first night in these mountains when they had settled down outside the Venishians' shield. "They are blood-thirsty. They hunt for the kill, not the food."

The Altairen commander, Arye, had simply cocked her head. "I have traveled this region many times, tracker. I feel these beasts' nature. I know of their danger to you, but they would not dare attack my people, for they feel us too, and they know how that attack would end."

Ryker had not seemed sure what to make of the statement, neither had the Venishians, but in the end they had decided not to argue, leaving the Altairens to their own mysterious protections and setting up wards around the rest of the troops. Dark magic was not used for the simple reason that the enemy in the region might detect its presence. *And also because the Venishians don't trust it.* Mused Seth. He suspected however, that no matter how stealthy they attempted to be, the Nocturne occupying Faelyon would sense them coming. *They probably already know we're here.*

"As I have been saying, time and again." The voice was Seria's, and Seth's eyes narrowed upon hearing it.

"I told you to stay out of my head."

"And I told you I would be listening these next few days," the telepath replied, stepping out of the shadows of her tent set up right beside his own. "as part of your training. Your thoughts should always be guarded."

Seth's glare did not lessen as he summoned up the wall of nothingness he had been honing and maintaining for weeks now. Seria did only a cursory scan before nodding in satisfaction. "Better. Though it still wouldn't hold up to anything serious."

Seth rolled his eyes, but the wall stayed in place as they continued their discussion.

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to sleep in one of these days," Seria remarked.

"It would if the Nocturne attack, which they will if they've spotted us camped out here."

Seria shrugged. "Not necessarily. They might be waiting for us to attack the city where they have the upper hand."

"Or sending for reinforcements."

"I doubt it." Seria smirked. "Wouldn't be a very effective trap if thousands of additional troops showed up and tipped us off before our targets revealed ourselves on the front lines."

Seth exhaled. "So you still think it's a trap."

"Those civilians in Faelyon would not still be alive if it wasn't. Dreith's forces would have killed them weeks ago and moved on to other targets long before we arrived."

"Cazour and Talme are already burning," Seth muttered. "What targets are left to destroy?" News of the attack on Talme had arrived just last night, sent by an intercepted carrier pigeon apparently on its way to Kaleth with the news. "And why bother with trying to hide our approach anyway if those Nocturne are just waiting for us to show up?"

"Well ideally, we could have hidden *when* we were coming and attacked with some element of surprise, but with the southerners here bumbling through the woods, lighting fires and carrying those ridiculous standards, that hope has pretty much evaporated. I just hope our scouts

find out how many other soldiers Dreith has stashed throughout these woods, and soon. Before we reach the city.” She paused, cold blue eyes flickering up to fix on Seth. “Had any telling dreams?”

“Nothing about what Dreith’s plan is. So no, nothing useful.”

She shrugged. “Well whatever you saw, there was probably a reason for it.”

Seth studied her coldly, suspecting now that she had spied on his most recent vision while his defenses had been lowered. He said nothing about it however, shifting his gaze to the valley below as a leather-clad soldier started toward them from the southern side of camp. It took a few moments more for Seth to recognize him as Caleb Ryker, the captain of Gabriel’s trackers. “Looks like you might be getting that report you were looking for.”

Seria followed his gaze to the approaching tracker. “It’s about time. Though I’d be surprised if it ended up being the southerners who uncovered Dreith’s forces. Most of them are pretty poor woodsmen.” She started down the hillside. “I’ll find you later, and we’ll work on that mental wall of yours. I can still feel it wavering.” Seth rolled his eyes. “In the meantime, go back to sleep. Today’s march will land us right outside Faelyon’s gates, and I doubt you’ll have much chance to rest once we’re on the battlefield.”

She headed off without another word, and Seth instantly disregarded her suggestion, wandering off with an agenda of his own. Returning to his quarters to rest would be a waste of time. Whatever news Ryker was relaying to Seria right now, it was sure to lead to a larger war meeting later on in the day. What Seth needed to do now was find out more about what they were facing once they arrived in Faelyon before that meeting happened. He had been working with Salerea for weeks now, meditating and trying to get a glimpse of his brother’s plans. Unfortunately, his efforts had been met with little success. *Though that’s probably why I keep having these unwelcome dreams of Dreith’s childhood.* He speculated.

It wasn’t as hard as it should have been to find an empty patch of hillside where he could meditate undisturbed. Dozens on the Nocturne side of camp were already awake it seemed, but Raylus’s men always gave Seth a respectful distance, approaching him only on business or with news from the captain himself. Such men did not share the nervousness and mistrust that the Venishians and southerners felt toward him. This silent avoidance was just how the Nocturne treated most nobles, according to Seria, but it was also a respect for Seth’s personal distaste at being saluted or greeted as “my lord” which Raylus’s men had all caught onto fairly quickly. The occasional demure nod was all he got now, and he far preferred it that way.

Seth sank down on the frost-coated turf, closing his eyes and trying to focus his intent while at the same time letting his mind drift the way Salerea had rather confusingly instructed him. *"You need to open your senses to the spirit to properly utilize Videre."* Had been her exact words. *"So relax already, and stop trying to force it."* It helped of course if one had an object of the target's to focus the visions while maintaining this "relaxed" state. Seth had nothing of Dreith's however, except of course that they shared the same blood. *And the family history lessons aren't helping me anticipate much of what he's planning here.*

He sat in rigid silence, seeing nothing for about a half-hour before a blunt voice disrupted his efforts. "Nice to see you're practicing, but you'll probably freeze to death sitting out here." He opened his eyes, taking in the crossed arms and defensive stance of the blonde-headed Keeper hovering over him, eyeing the Nocturne soldiers around her with more than a little unease. "You should just practice inside your tent."

"It's easier out in the open."

"Colder and noisier, you mean," she muttered. "Not to mention it means I had to wander around looking for you. Today's march will land us right outside Faelyon."

"I know." He exhaled, already able to tell where she was going with this.

"So, have you seen anything yet?"

Seth knew she was asking about Dreith's battle plans, and he had no answer to give except: "No."

"Great. So we're walking in blind tomorrow."

"You could try yourself, you know," Seth stated darkly, rising to his feet. "You have a lot more experience with Videre."

"Yeah, but he's your brother. You should be able to look through his past without much trouble. I have no connection to go off of."

"I can see his past," Seth grated in response. "I just can't focus when."

"Then you're not trying hard enough," came her rather condescending answer, before she gave a more thoughtful insight. "Or it could be that you just don't want to see any more of that monster than you have to, which would be understandable. Reluctance to watch would definitely interfere with your control of the time period."

"He's not a monster." Salerea's face instantly hardened at the comment, and Seth exhaled. "I just mean... He's not as bad as the emperor."

"Maybe you shouldn't be looking then, because if all you're getting from this is sympathy for that twisted family of yours--."

“It’s not sympathy,” he snapped. “It’s just...” He trailed off, not really having the words to describe it to someone like Salerea. *Especially not after what Dreith did to Morgan.*

“Forget it,” the Keeper grated. “I don’t know why I bothered coming out here. If you do see anything, you can tell the generals at the war meeting today.” She walked off without another word. Seth did not bother to pursue her, remaining there frozen, as he debated whether or not to resume his mediation or just give up entirely. *Maybe Seria was right. I should have just gone back to sleep.* He could not deny that he could have used the rest.

Almost every day of the long march out here to Faelyon had been taken up by some new, exhaustive form of training for Seth. Whether it was telepathy trials with Seria, Videre practice with Salerea, or dark magic lessons with Chaser, each day brought on new and increasingly difficult tasks supposedly designed to hone his skills for the upcoming battle. Seth had not asked for any of it, but each of these individuals had insisted it was necessary that he develop more control in all areas of his abilities, and Seth had found it hard to disagree with them. Still, it was growing exhaustive balancing all these various forms of training, as his many mentors kept thinking up new ways to challenge and frustrate him, and of all his self-appointed teachers, Salerea was the most frustrating to deal with.

Nobody asked her to train me. He reflected bitterly. She had simply come up to him after his recovery in Kaleth and asked point blank if he was making any progress with Videre. When his answer had not been a definitive yes, she had started up these daily sessions of tutelage, imparting all the knowledge she had gleaned from the elders of Venir who had taught her how to utilize this gift. *“Before they were all butchered.”* Those had been her words to him their first day of practice, for just because Salerea was helping him apparently did not mean that she could not still be irrationally angry with him. Her fluctuating hatred surfaced every couple sessions, making it more than clear that she blamed him still for many of the crimes his family and his people had committed against her. This constant anger and impatience made Salerea a horrible teacher, and the clarity of Seth’s visions was not improving. *I should just stop the lessons entirely, focus on a more important skill.* He mused, though the only other talent of his that sorely needed honing was the magic, and his lessons in that field had been similarly infuriating.

“If your aim is to defeat the emperor, you will require much more competence in your arts.” Dienna Raylus had said that to him not two days past while watching him train with Chaser. The sorceress had seemingly been baffled by the apparently rudimentary task that Seth had just failed to complete. Seth had gotten rather angry at the comment, and even angrier when Dienna had then offered to duel him, for the sake of training of course.

"The kid doesn't need to work on destructive magic." Seth heard Garrin whisper. "He's quite good at killing. It's just everything else that needs improvement." At that point Seth had promptly left the arena.

There were many here who were still nervous around him because of his magic, and it did not matter how much he trained to control it. He could see the looks of fear and suspicion in the eyes of nearly every southerner, Altairen, or Venishian he passed. He tried to tell himself that it was just dark magic in general that made them uneasy. The *Falir Al Tear* and the Altairens were wary of all Nocturne. They fought alongside Raylus and his men now only out of necessity, rejecting still the Nocturnes' use of what they termed "volatile and profane arts". Grudging respect was the best any of them could hope for in such circumstances. *And respect at least I have.* Seth reflected dully, a respect that was equal parts fear and begrudging acknowledgment.

Seth felt a sudden prickling along his spine, and he instinctively turned to scan the woods behind him, a familiar sense of foreboding tugging at his senses. There was no one there, no one except a pair of Raylus's sentinels, their backs to him as they kept careful watch from the shadows behind the almost imperceptible shimmer of the Keepers' shield. Seth retained the uneasy sense however, that he was being watched, and he knew better than to ignore such feelings.

He drew up beside the nearest watchman, a man he recognized and had spoken with before. The bowman gave a nod of silent greeting.

"Seen any movement?"

The soldier shook his head. "Nothing these past few hours. Around midnight there were several of those animals Captain Ryker warned us about circling the perimeter, but nothing since..."

The man trailed off, eyes flickering to a patch of brush a hundred meters back from the shield as the faintest flicker of movement caught both their attention. The archer nocked an arrow, and their watcher panicked, taking off in a blur of black and melting into the shadows of the forest around them.

Seth took a half-step forward to follow before he remembered the barrier in front of him. He could not pass through this shield without a Keeper to accompany him and allow passage. A regular soldier would have no trouble exiting the camp without triggering the wards, but they were said to react badly to the presence of dark magic. *Meaning that unless I find Salerea or Viera within the next few seconds and get them involved, I can't do anything.* He could not follow the spy. He could not even warn the Altairens outside the shield that they may be attacked at any

moment by the enemy. *Not unless I tear this down entirely.* He amended, and destroying their shield would certainly not help to protect the camp.

“Find Raylus,” Seth told the watchman beside him. “Warn him that the enemy is much closer than anticipated.”

“Yes, my lord,” the sentinel answered, absentmindedly lapsing back into the uncomfortable address in his haste as he departed. Seth wasn’t about to comment on it now though, setting off on an errand of his own after a quick word to the second watchman to keep alert for any further movement.

Dreith’s men were not necessarily moving to attack them right this instant. The figure they had spotted might simply be an advance scout, reporting back to his superiors in Faelyon about their movements. Still, it was better not to take the risk, for Seth had the uneasy feeling still that this presence he had detected boded something much worse than a simple scouting mission.

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“Eight hundred Nocturne are camped inside the city near as I can count,” Caleb Ryker told Seria coolly. “A single battalion of ordinary foot-soldiers and dark magicians. There were no signs of other troops in the area. Nothing suspicious at all.”

“It is inherently suspicious that the initial letter of troop counts we received from this city was accurate, Ryker,” Seria countered, “and that the garrison that took the city has not sent for reinforcements.”

“They may not know we’re coming.” She arched an eyebrow. “They may think us too weakened after Kaleth to retaliate.”

“They know we’re here, Ryker. Just because your men didn’t spot any troops in your comb of the forest doesn’t mean they weren’t out there.” She shook her head. “I should have gone with you.”

Caleb’s face grew hard. “I am telling you this as a courtesy, Desirey, because you asked me to bring it to you first. I did not come here to be corrected about what I did or did not see.”

“It wasn’t a correction, Ryker, just a warning. Dreith’s forces are much better at concealing their presence than you southerners are. There will be a unit of Demor or some other powerful enemy waiting in these woods when we march on the city. They will fence us in and wipe us out if we’re not careful.”

“So you have told the generals. Though I’ve seen no evidence of any such trap.” Seria’s eyes narrowed, but she voiced no protest, simply waiting in icy silence for the captain to continue. “My

scouts and I did a thorough sweep of the area. We were not spotted by the enemy, and there were no Nocturne in this region aside from the garrison occupying Faelyon. We have the superior numbers. There is no logical reason why we should not move forward with the attack.”

“I never said the attack should not proceed. I’m simply saying you should not taint the generals’ views by telling them that there are no enemy troops outside the city, for it will be a false assurance.”

“I will share what I saw,” the tracker shot back. “I do not care how it affects your personal plans to take back our city. It is up to General Ryan to decide how to lead our men. You have shared with him your theories of what you think the enemy is planning here, but until there is evidence to support that--”

“So you found nothing?” Seria cut in coldly. “No tracks like what I told you to look out for?”

Ryker stared at the ground, exhaling. “We found claw marks, churned up earth...”

“Then that right there is evidence I was right,” she retorted, growing short of temper in spite of herself.

“It is evidence of nothing. The tracks were scattered and they led nowhere except up into the rocks, toward the dens of the beasts that roam these woods no doubt, beasts with claws that would have left very similar markings to what we found.”

“I do not expect you to recognize the tread of a Voterre, tracker,” Seria stated flatly. “Having never even seen one, it is not your job to judge the authenticity of their tracks. I’m simply asking you to trust me when I tell you that the trail you just described was left by the enemy’s cavalry.”

“Well I have a hard time believing that. It would be damn difficult to get cavalry up into these woods, and I will not taint my report to General Ryan just to support you. I will say what I saw and what I judge to be out there. Nothing else.”

Seria swallowed the angry retort brimming on her lips and simply shook her head, frustrated. Caleb had been considerably on-edge ever since what had happened in Kaleth with the Lilith, Mera. Despite his admirable mental defenses, Mera had still managed to manipulate him, duping him into endorsing her lies, and she had needed no telepathy to do it. Ryker had been devastated upon first learning of the treachery of the woman he had spent so much time protecting, saving her life and defending her ever afterward from those who had dared question her motives. He had hardly spoken to Seria since that day in Kaleth when Mera’s body was brought before the council, her treachery exposed, and when he did, his words were much harder than they had been, his demeanor far less affable. Seria did not know if this change in attitude was a lowering of his opinion of her personally because she was a telepath, or simply a general

shutting out of everyone because Ryker no longer trusted his instincts when it came to judging people's character. Either way, it was much harder to work with him now, and today he seemed especially hostile.

"I was not trying to sway you into endorsing me, Ryker," Seria stated finally, swallowing her own anger and trying to smooth over the tension between them as best she could. "I am simply informing you of what you really saw out there, along with what you failed to detect."

Ryker shook his head. "I'm not saying your theory is impossible, Seria. It makes sense that the empire might try to lure us in and take out our leaders, but if there truly were hundreds of additional troops hiding in these mountains, especially mounted soldiers, we would have found some trace of them."

"No, you would not have. I led a garrison of hundreds across the breadth of the south and we were never spotted. Nocturne soldiers have decades of experience working from the shadows. We do not carry torches or erect bulky pavilions like you southerners. You do not see our armies unless we want you to."

"Quite the patriotic spiel," he stated dryly, "but I am not some amateur who just looked for lights and then gave up, Desirey."

"That is not what I was saying." She exhaled. "But this is an enemy I know far better than you do, Ryker."

"I'm not trying to debate that, Seria. But I will report to the general what I saw. Nothing more," the captain repeated. "And if you're so worried about this being a trap, then speak with your friends, Viera Tyrellen and the emperor's son. They're the ones whose words will hold sway in front of the generals. They're the ones supposedly in danger from all this."

"Seth can take care of himself. Besides, I'm not entirely sure he's a target."

"Maybe not," Ryker conceded, "but you certainly are, so shouldn't it be you staying away from this fight?"

Seria was a little caught off guard by the statement, surprised by the still present concern in the captain's demeanor, despite the tension that had lain between them these past few weeks. She had no chance to respond though, as a flicker of consciousness caught her attention. Her eyes darted to the shimmering wall of magic beside them. "Enemy scout at your ten," she whispered.

Ryker instantly drew his bow, nocking and releasing in one rapid-fire motion that caught their startled watcher in the shoulder before he could dodge. Still, the man would be up and running in a moment.

"You missed," Seria observed.

“No, I just figured we would question him. Figure out how long he’s been watching, who sent him--”

“Well you better hurry up and catch him then,” she remarked dryly, cold eyes locked on the shadowy figure of their target as the man took off running.

Ryker swore, charging after the man. He passed right through the Keepers’ barrier with never a falter in his step. Seria did not follow, nervously eyeing the wall of watery magic in front of her. This shield had initially been designed by the Venishians to only warn of any intruding presence so that it would take less energy to maintain and be easier to conceal, but after a dozen watchmen had been mauled by the creatures that roamed these mountains, the *Falir Al Tear* had strengthened the wards, re-designing the shield to bar all dark presences from passing, be they creatures of the night or the empire’s forces. Seria herself highly doubted she could pass through the wards unaided. Telepathy was a manifestation of dark magic after all. *I guess Ryker’s on his own*. She sighed. Hopefully he could run down the wounded scout and bring him back unaided.

A black-feathered shaft slammed into the section of shield right in front of Seria, rebounding off the single square inch area level with her right eye and clattering useless to the ground. Her gaze darted instantly to a second intruder clad in the loose folds of black cloth that cloaked most of the empire’s scouts as the woman lowered her bow. Seria had not sensed the girl’s presence. Even now she could not get a read on her thoughts. She could not even mount an attack with telepathy. *Not through the interference this damn shield is giving off*. The barrier fragmented her efforts, making it impossible at the moment to get into the would-be assassin’s mind. *Though there’s no need to go digging for her motives*. The telepath reflected. *Killing me was clearly at least one of her objectives*.

The woman drew her sword, walking right up to the barrier and eyeing it bitterly, searching for some weakness or else simply resenting its presence. Her face was covered by a scarf and she wore no armor, clearly preferring speed over defense for this mission.

“Did Dreith send you?” Seria demanded coldly.

The woman gave no response, but a blur of wood behind her soon forced her into action. She leaned quickly to the side, neatly dodging the arrow that had been headed for her back and taking off at a sprint in the opposite direction of the approaching southerner. Caleb staggered to a halt in front of Seria, quickly giving up the pursuit. A bloody gash spanned the front of the tracker’s breastplate, and Seria eyed it in disapproval, resisting the impulse to reach out and yank the foolish southerner back behind the protection of the Venishians’ infuriatingly effective shield. “Get over here before you bleed out,” she snapped instead.

Ryker looked over at her blearily, glancing down at his wound. “This? It’s just a graze. Bastard scout pretended to lose his footing, then pulled a knife on me when I got too close.”

“So they both escaped.” The telepath sighed. “Great. Now get back over here.”

Caleb shook his head. “You seem to forget that this shield doesn’t allow anything to pass through from this side, Desirey.”

“Fine. Just stay close then. I’ll go find some Keeper to let you back in. And bind that, before you lose any more blood,” she commanded, unable to stop herself from staring at the seeping wound, “graze” or not.

The tracker obediently removed his cloak, tearing off a strip and binding up the knife wound as best he could. “I’ll do my best to warn you of any other assassins in the area,” Seria told him, her tone grim. “But I can’t always detect them, not when they’re my own people.”

“I’ll watch my back. Though I highly doubt any of those scouts would bother running back here just to shoot me. I’m not exactly a well-known officer, too lowly a station to be a target.”

Seria just shook her head. “Anyone vulnerable is a target,” she stated coldly. *In times like these it’s either enemy or ally, and the former dies, no matter their station.*

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Chapter II

Disruption

Viera did not know what it was that prompted her awake so early in the day. The sun was not even up yet, and the world outside her tent was dark and silent. Still, the Keeper knew it would not be long before some attendant came and summoned her to some war meeting or consultation with her fellow *Falir Al Tear*, and so she saw no point in going back to sleep. She rolled her way free of her blankets, wrapping herself tightly in the folds of a heavy wool cloak and stepping out into the chill predawn. She had gotten far more sleep than she would have needed normally, but her shift maintaining the shield that surrounded this camp alongside Naomi and Angeline had drained her more than expected, and so she had retired to her quarters the moment it had ended, wasting her evening in the deep slumber of one exhausted. Not that she minded the exertion. In truth, it was nice to be working alongside her peers like any ordinary Keeper of the Light and not have people obsessing over her safety, telling her that her duties lie elsewhere and “a queen must not drain oneself needlessly” or some other nonsense, as would doubtlessly have happened back in Kaleth. She still dealt with attendants and meetings of course, but at least here such gatherings revolved around important developments and plans for the upcoming battle. *Not the bickering of bureaucrats like how it was in Kaleth’s council.* Now admittedly, the princess was not much of a strategist. She attended each war meeting simply because of her station, and she contributed little to the generals’ and Seria’s plans. It felt productive regardless, and the rest of her time during the long march toward Faelyon was finally her own for once where she was free to train and consult with whomever she chose. Such freedom was rare these days, and she cherished it while it was hers to enjoy. *Though soon enough we’ll be in battle.* She reflected. *Struggling to retake one of the last cities in the south before the Nocturne butcher everyone there.*

The thought instantly darkened her mood, and she thought back on Seria’s warning to her a week past that this attack was all some trap designed to get Viera and the other leaders of the south killed. The news had not really unnerved Viera much at the time. The emperor had been targeting her for months after all, as the last living heir to the Venishian throne, the only one with a blood right to rebuild the nation he had broken. The worst part about the revelation really

had been Seth's reaction to it. He had attempted repeatedly to exclude Viera from this coming battle on account of it being "too dangerous" for her to participate and had even tried to talk her into staying back in Kaleth, though he himself of course had stubbornly insisted that he would be needed in Faelyon to drive back the emperor's forces. *Like I can't protect myself any better than he can.* She thought. *He's the one who always charges into these encounters and winds up wounded and half dead.* Any magic wielder, especially a healer, was an invaluable thing to have on the battlefield, and there were far too few surviving Keepers of the Light left among her people for Viera to have stayed back and not aided in this fight all because of the possibility that she would be targeted.

"The empire will always be trying to kill me," she had told Seth when he had made the impossible request that she not come with them to Faelyon. "That's no reason to cower in the shadows and let everyone else risk themselves in my stead. Besides, if you get wounded out there who else is going to heal you?"

"One of a dozen other Keepers who isn't a personal target of Dreith's." Had been his rather pointed response, but Viera had not budged in her insistence. If he was going, then so was she, and that was not a selfish decision. Her people needed her here on the battlefield like a true leader, fighting and bleeding alongside them, not hiding out in a fortress a hundred miles distant like some bureaucrat.

The Altairens understood. Their war chief, Dakan, had been outraged when Seria had made the suggestion at one of the war meetings between their camps that the chief not lead the charge when it came time to retake Faelyon. The warrior had not responded to her directly, but had instead rather rudely growled something to Arye which the commander had artfully translated to mean: *"The chief takes offense that you would dare suggest such a craven course of action, Nocturne. Your kind may fight from the shadows and hide from confrontation, but we do not fear the challenge of the Sur'Aterre. We will take the heads of such would-be assassins and mount them outside our camp as a warning to those who would dare take up such a foolish task."*

Such a graphic statement had of course ignited another argument among the factions, as Raylus and Seria took offense to the Altairens insulting their courage and the southerners' disapproving mutters about "savages" were overheard and reacted to. Seria had made no mention of the empire's trap in any meetings since then, but Viera knew the telepath still fully believed it to be true. She had even suggested to the generals a plan to combat the suspected ambush, but the dark nature of her ploy had only caused more outrage. *I guess it's a good thing she brought it*

up in private. Viera reflected, thinking back on the meeting she had happened upon a few nights previous.

The midnight gathering was not something that Viera had been invited to. Only General Ryan, Hadrian, Raylus and Seria had been supposed to be present in that tent while Seria related the details of her plan, but Viera had caught sight of Hadrian entering the war pavilion and her curiosity had gotten the better of her.

"It does not set a good precedent to be found lurking outside a private meeting, Keeper." The words were Seria's, and it was the first thing that Viera overheard while passing by the entrance to the tent.

"I was not lurking," Viera retorted, calmly stepping inside the interior of the tent. "I was simply curious as to what all of you were doing here at this hour."

"Well, princess, I suppose there is no harm in you hearing this." Hadrian exhaled. "Commander Desirey was just getting into the details of this... unsavory plan of hers to combat the enemy."

"All here agree that dark magic is an invaluable tool, one we must rely upon to win us this battle and the war at large," Seria replied, eyebrow arching. "Unsavory as you may see it, general, it is a necessary edge we must exploit."

"You Nocturne can use your magic as you please in the defense of your own unit," Hadrian disagreed, "but this tactic is no simple attack, Desirey. It is a perverse and unreliable warping of nature, and neither my people nor the Altairens will abide by such methods."

It was then that Viera learned of the spell that Seria planned to implement: a twisted type of magic that had even Ryan unsettled once it was fully explained.

"I am aware it is a difficult and potentially dangerous technique," Seria conceded. "But Chaser has the training and the experience to put in place the necessary safeguards."

"It is the only way to guard our backs against the troops waiting to ambush us once we reach the gates," Captain Raylus agreed. "And Dienna has assured me it is perfectly doable."

"We do not even know if there will be an ambush, captain," General Ryan had protested. "There has been no evidence of any enemy troops in the area outside of those waiting within Faelyon's walls. This elaborate trap the empire has planned for us is just Commander Desirey's theory. Something as drastic as what you're proposing hardly seems necessary when it is nothing more than a precautionary reaction to a groundless suspicion."

"My suspicions are not groundless, general," Seria replied, pale eyes frigid as they locked on those of the Kalethien. "The 'theory' of this ambush is the only reasonable explanation for the empire's behavior in taking this city with so few troops."

“Even if you are right, Desirey, I will not authorize the use of this magic,” Hadrian grumbled. “If we employ such methods to win us this victory, then we are no better than the empire.”

Seria rolled her eyes at that, but it was Raylus who replied. “It is our magicians who will put in place these defenses, general. We are informing you now as a courtesy, not to ask permission.”

That statement had caused considerable outrage from both generals, and Seria had quickly smoothed over the situation. “It’s late. It does no good to stay up and keep snapping at each other. Exact details can be hammered out in the morning, once we’ve all had a chance to rest.”

“I will hear no more of this,” Hadrian had stubbornly asserted. “This discussion is over. We will drive back the empire with a proven strategy and strength of arms, nothing more.”

Seria’s eyes had grown icy at that, her features hard and unreadable, as she exited the tent without another word.

I guess it really is hard to trust someone like Seria. Viera reflected, not only because the woman was a Nocturne telepath who had spent her life learning how to manipulate people, but also because she would seemingly do whatever it took to achieve her own ends and win this war. *“Dark magic is an invaluable tool, one we must rely upon.”* The telepath had said, and clearly she believed in those words, for like all Nocturne she saw no harm in utilizing such arts. She commanded the magic the same way she did her telepathy, without hesitation. *She says she worries about Seth losing control of his magic, but then she goes and recommends something like this.* The Keeper shook her head. It was a good thing the generals had refused to go along with such tactics. *A simple shield will serve just as well to guard our backs against any ambush once we reach the city gates.* She reassured herself coolly, though the lie did little to quiet her doubts. After all, what good were the efforts of only a dozen scattered magicians and Keepers when the enemy might have ten times that number of Nyx or Demor waiting for them out in these woods?

She lifted her gaze to the hill of tents ahead of her, shoving aside such pointless worries. None of the torches that lit her own section of camp were present in this southern sector of the encampment, and the men on watch were invisible shadows, impossible to pick out in the darkness. She had not really meant to cross over into the Nocturne side of camp, but it was not much of a surprise. Her subconscious path always seemed to lead her toward where Seth was, even with how difficult he had been this past week trying to talk her out of risking herself. She could see him already, she realized, gliding down the hillside on a straight course toward the Venishian encampment. Their eyes locked, and all sense of comfort she had felt upon first seeing him instantly vanished. This was no simple visit. Something had happened.

“What is it?” she immediately inquired, as he closed the last of the distance between them.

“Enemy scouts. We spotted one of them listening in at the perimeter. He ran off before we could do anything about it. I sent someone to alert Raylus, but I can’t say how many more are out there. We should warn the Altairens, just in case there’s...” He trailed off suddenly, eyes drifting behind her.

She followed his gaze and spotted a cluster of Altairens drawing up to the faintly visible wall of light that ringed the encampment. The leader was a woman clothed in long diaphanous robes. She placed a finger on the surface of the Venishians’ barrier, and the magic flared an ugly yellow at her touch. “Considerately open the barrier, princess,” was all she said, her tone cool with the easy authority of someone used to command.

“So there were more of them,” Seth muttered, and Viera glanced past the sorceress and spotted finally the trussed and beaten figure of a Nocturne scout. The enemy soldier was being dragged along in the center of a knot of warriors, one of which was a man Viera recognized quite easily from his impressive height to the skull-adorned scythe at his hip: the war chief, Dakan. At his side stood Arye, her arm hanging limp at her side, dislocated.

Viera swallowed the myriad of questions she wanted desperately to voice and simply did as the sorceress had requested, gesturing sharply and opening a small six-foot gap through which the Altairens and their prisoner could enter the camp. “Chief Dakan,” she greeted, giving a nod of greeting to Arye as well.

Arye returned the nod, but Dakan simply grunted, motioning to his men who tossed down the enemy scout they had been dragging. “It appears the telepath was correct in her assumption that the Nocturne would send assassins. This worm and four of his compatriots snuck into our camp, killing our brothers on guard.”

“They tried to butcher the great Dakan while he slept, but his guards prevented them,” Arye concluded.

“I would have killed the snake myself had he gotten closer,” the chief growled. “The commander here took the brunt of the attack.”

Viera glanced once more at Arye’s bruised and disjointed shoulder. “I can heal that for you,” she assured her, but the woman dismissed her concern, reaching over with her free hand and calmly popping the joint right back into its socket.

“I will bind it later. Now, we must deal with this one.”

She nudged the Nocturne sprawled out at her feet, and the boy glared up at her coldly, his almost black eyes burning with an icy determination that Viera found rather chilling when paired with his bruised and swollen face. Underneath all the swelling and discoloration though, the boy

looked even younger than Seth. “We should take him to the generals, see what intel he and his compatriots gathered, as not all of them were here to attack us,” Viera advised, glancing over at Seth who silently confirmed her assertion.

“Do what you will with him,” Dakan grunted, already turning as if to depart. “Those he came with have already paid for their folly.”

Viera raised a hand, forestalling the group before they could set out. “You and your brethren should stay here within the protection of our shield for the time being.”

“Such is impossible, Keeper, with our brothers still outside,” Arye responded simply.

“Then I will ask my comrades to extend our shield to cover your camp, but you are too open to attack if you stray beyond the wards.”

“Viera’s right,” Seth agreed. “We don’t know how close the emperor’s troops are. They could attack at any moment. You can’t stay isolated outside our defenses. It leaves you vulnerable.”

Dakan frowned, eyeing Seth darkly, but Viera smoothed over the situation before he could protest. “I know you do not normally have need of our protections, Dakan, but at the moment it is prudent. We must stay together as we set out today, for by sunset we will be at Faelyon’s gates, moving into battle.”

The chief gave no response except to mutter something in Altairen. It did not sound overtly hostile, yet at the same time he seemed far from content. Arye gave Viera a coy smile. “He agrees that caution is needed,” she reassured the Keeper. “Your offer is graciously accepted, princess.”

Viera nodded, content, and watched mutely as Arye dispatched one of her warriors back outside the shield. “To inform our brothers of what is about to happen,” she told Viera coolly.

The Keeper glanced over at Seth and found him studying the Nocturne scout sprawled out on the ground in front of them. The boy’s jaw was locked, having said not one word, despite having no gag to inhibit him. “He hasn’t said anything about who sent him, has he?” Seth stated coolly, his eyes lifting to fix on Arye.

The Altairen woman shrugged. “We questioned him briefly. He divulged nothing. Though he made impressively little noise for an *Aterre’Ro*.”

The scout’s eyes hardened, but he spoke no word still, seemingly intent on maintaining his silence.

Seth shook his head sadly, seeing that there was no point in questioning the boy directly. “We should find Seria,” he told Viera instead. “She can get more out of him than any beating will.”

“Your telepath may be of use, yes,” Arye admitted, glancing back at her chief who was already moving off with the rest of their men. “Tekan and Neowye will help you transport him for questioning,” she told them in parting, waving two of her warriors forward to yank the silent Nocturne to his feet.

“That is kind of you, Arye. Though I will insist I fully heal that arm before you go,” Viera stated, green eyes fixing on Arye’s bruised shoulder. “You will be hard pressed to defend yourself in battle with an injury like that.”

Arye glanced down at the wound, shaking her head. “If it pleases you, Keeper,” she gave in finally, stepping forward and allowing Viera to fully cure the appendage. She flexed her arm experimentally as the light of Viera’s magic died away and the muscles finished re-knitting. “It is a true gift you Venishians have. I expect it will be of great use in this coming fight.”

“Indeed, though I hope it will not be too greatly needed,” Viera replied, and the woman moved off without another word, leaving Seth and her alone with the two Altairens and their prisoner. Viera waved over a pair of guardsmen from the pavilion behind them and dispatched them to find Seria Desirey, as well as seek out Tylen or Aleria so that they could alter the wards and extend them around the Altairens’ encampment.

She glanced back at Seth and found him still studying Arye who was discussing something with her comrades a few yards away. “Funny how she can frame you healing her and the extension of your shield as a favor they’re doing for you,” he remarked softly, and Viera shot him a look.

“She was being courteous. Not begrudging, the way Raylus and his men are when they need a Keeper to heal them.”

“They just don’t like Light magic.” Seth shrugged, setting off deeper into the Venishian sector of camp with Viera and the Altairen guards following after. “The same way your people feel about dark magic being used in their presence.”

Viera looked away uncomfortably. “That’s hardly the same thing. Dark magic is...” She shook her head. “Well, you know what it’s like. And the generals have accepted it...”

“As a necessary evil needed to depose the emperor,” Seth corrected her softly. “A viewpoint that makes it pretty hard to work together with all your allies looking at you like some explosive about to go off at any second.”

She followed his gaze to the Venishians around them, noticing now the glares and furtive glances that she had previously been blind to as they wandered through the awakening camp. Row upon row of Venishian Keepers and soldiers had stopped what they were doing and were staring at the strange procession of Altairens, a Nocturne, a Keeper, and the prisoner they held.

Each time the onlookers gaze came to Seth though, they would turn away just as quickly, out of fear or disdain, she could not always say which. Either way, the mistrust was clear. “They’re looking at me as much as they are at you,” Viera insisted stubbornly, rejecting the insight. “Not to mention the enemy scout we’re escorting.”

“You think they’re afraid of the tied-up kid with the swollen face?” he commented wryly.

“He has quite the fearsome escort,” she shot back. “All four of us.”

Seth shook his head, smiling faintly. “A nice effort, but that lie would’ve worked better if you hadn’t counted yourself. You aren’t exactly the intimidating sort.”

She crossed her arms, eyebrow arching. “I am an esteemed Keeper of the Light and Queen of Venir, no less imposing than you are.”

His smile broadened. “Act imperious all you want, princess,” he teased. “You couldn’t scare someone if you tried.”

She raised her hand to hit him before she noticed General Hadrian standing outside the pavilion just ahead and quickly resumed a more dignified pose. “Princess Viera,” the general greeted dryly, jade gaze flickering briefly over Seth before fixing on the bloody scout being held by the Altairens behind them. “I see it’s been an eventful morning.”

“Dakan and his comrades were attacked by a party of the empire’s assassins,” Viera informed Hadrian coolly. “This Nocturne is the only survivor.”

“Other scouts were seen circling our perimeter though,” Seth concluded.

Hadrian nodded, expression grave. “I heard from Tylen that there had been some disruption in the wards. I suppose this explains it.” He exhaled. “We can’t exactly resume our march on Faelyon if there’s the chance we could be ambushed at any moment.”

“There’s no sense worrying about it, general.” It was Seria Desirey who spoke, her pale blue eyes fixed on the trussed scout bent over on his knees behind Viera. “Not until we’ve questioned this one.” The telepath was trailed by a roughed-up Caleb Ryker. The man’s leather breastplate was rent and stained with blood, though he had no visible wounds. *Another Keeper must have already healed him.* Viera mused. “He may be nothing more than a scout who took it upon himself to carry out an assassination,” Seria finished, her gaze never having left the enemy assassin.

“Do what you will, telepath,” the Nocturne replied, speaking up for the first time, with his voice a deadly whisper. “The emperor will see all of you dead soon enough.”

Seria crouched down across from the scout, her icy gaze holding his own. “The emperor is not here,” she asserted, and the boy’s lock-jawed reaction made it clear that her assumption was

correct. "You are alone now, soldier, and your silence will not serve you. Your superiors will not hear of your bravery. They would not care even if they did. Failure is failure to them."

"I said do what you will," the scout repeated, seemingly intent on resuming his steely silence.

"Very well," Seria resigned, her pupils dilating and her eyes gaining an unfocused look as the boy jerked sharply upright and the telepath began to dig out the answers she was seeking.

* * * * *

"My lord, Dreith." The commander could tell by the woman's tone that the news she carried was dire, even before he lifted his gaze from the map spread out on the table before him and took in her anxious expression. He stared at her in silent expectation, waiting for her to proceed. "Eight of our scouts attempted to enter the enemy's encampment. One was captured, and many were killed."

"Did any of our enemy die in the attack?" he prodded, and the woman shook her head.

"A few ordinary savages were slain. No one of importance was successfully eliminated due to the wards of Light magic that guarded the camp, though an assassination did seem to be our soldiers' aim."

Dreith's expression hardened. "Who ordered the incursion?"

The messenger looked down. "I do not know, sir. It was Syl and Malen who spotted the group while maintaining routine surveillance on the enemy. Syl tracked them back to the city of Faelyon, so evidently the mission was Toris's doing." *Or that idiot, Regon.* Dreith reflected. He knew that a man like that would have had a hard time letting go of his authority. He would want to prove he was still at least partly in charge of this battle, likely through something rash like this failed assassination attempt.

Dreith kept the suspicion to himself however, saying simply, "Go to Faelyon, deliver my message to Toris; this pointless incursion into the enemy camp has spoiled our advantage of surprise and revealed our awareness of the enemy's pending attack. The perpetrator of such a rash plan will pay for it dearly." *And if it was Regon who ordered it, I will kill him myself.* He promised. "Toris will name every individual involved in its planning, and any one of those names still alive after the battle will be executed."

"By your order, commander," the messenger breathed, unable to hide the nervous look in her eyes as she departed. Dreith could not quite discern whether the expression was fear for herself or sorrow for her colleagues, but he cared not either way. His men must learn that there were consequences for their disloyalty. Even the slightest disobedience could no longer be

pardoned. Mercy was a weakness, and people like Regon were far from deserving of such a naive gift. *I should have killed him back in Nocturne.* Dreith reflected coldly, but he should not rush to judge just yet. He would give Toris the chance to deal with the matter first and execute her insubordinate captain, and if she herself was in part responsible for Regon's crimes, she too would be removed.

* * * * *

Chapter III

Discourse

Seth stood back against the wall of the tent with Viera and the others and waited for Seria to finish her interrogation of the captured Nocturne scout. By the boy's pale-faced expression Seth could tell that Seria's prying into his mind was getting quite painful for him, but the boy was apparently quite stubborn, for it had been a half hour already and yet Seria had still seemingly not found what she was looking for. *Didn't expect someone so young to have such strong mental defenses.* Seth reflected ruefully, studying the boy in front of him with his own expression kept purposefully blank. It was hard to tell the scout's exact age under the mass of bruises that had been dealt to him by the Altairens, but it seemed to Seth that the scout could be no more than sixteen, despite his chilling demeanor and hard-eyed resolve that normally would have painted him as a veteran of this war.

Seria pulled away finally, and the boy collapsed limp to the ground. Seria paid no heed to his distress, turning to face those gathered behind her. "You need not worry about an attack, general," she informed Hadrian coldly. "This boy has nothing to do with Dreith. He was sent by one of the captains who took Faelyon: Regon, an incompetent lout."

"For what purpose?" Hadrian pressed.

"Well to kill me for one. And Dakan, and Viera there if they could have managed it."

"The knowledge will do you no good, telepath," the Nocturne gasped, struggling back up to his knees. "The captain will strike you down in battle soon enough, and my compatriots will return to him with all they have learned of you and your defenses."

"I highly doubt Regon has either the courage or the means to strike me down himself, soldier," Seria stated dryly. "That's why he sent people like you instead to attack from the shadows."

"Do not insult the captain's courage!" the boy spat. "He did far more to earn his place as our commander than you ever did."

Her eyes narrowed at that, but in the end she simply shook her head. "Regon did far more to lose his place as a general, soldier, than he ever did to earn it. He is hardly someone worthy of your loyalty. Hate me all you want, but the man you serve has far less honor than I do."

The boy clearly did not believe her, but General Hadrian obviously did not care about that particular debate and he cut it off before it could evolve any further. "So this scout and his compatriots came here as assassins, nothing more?"

Seria nodded. "They were also sent to gather certain intel," Seth caught the brief flicker of movement as Seria's eyes shifted to fix on him then, and he made a silent note of it, knowing she was keeping something from Hadrian, something Seth would have to ask her about in private later on. "information on the wards around our camp, that sort of thing. Dreith already had scouts of his own watching us, however. He has for days, so having failed to kill any of our leaders, the mission was rather redundant."

"You're certain of this?" Hadrian pressed.

"Yes, general, I am," Seria responded flatly. "For as little as this scout knows of Dreith's operations, he knew at least what I have been telling you all along: that taking Faelyon was a trap and we will be walking into an ambush tonight."

"Very well, commander. I will relate this news to Ryan and our Keepers, and we will consider implementing the precautions you have long been suggesting."

"And the plan we discussed the other day?" Seria pressed. "You will authorize that as well."

It was more of a statement than a question, and Hadrian's eyes instantly darkened. "No, telepath, I will not. Nor will Seydrid or any of the others. They would be outraged even to hear of it."

Seth did not know what it was they were referring to. Viera however, seemed to have far more knowledge of the matter. Her eyes were locked firmly on the ground, and Seth could tell just by looking at her that not only was she aware of this plan of Seria's, but she shared Hadrian's distaste for it. Seth wondered briefly why no one had bothered to tell him of this scheme, not that he was much of a strategist, but then again neither was Viera. It was yet another thing he would have to press Seria about after this interrogation was ended.

His eyes lifted back to the telepath. She was studying the enemy scout keeled over at their feet, seeming to come to a decision about something. "You'd best be on your way then, general. I can get no more information out of this boy without doing him permanent damage."

"It hardly matters how you damage him, Desirey," Hadrian said. "We're going to execute him as soon as this interrogation is finished anyhow. Any details he has about the coming battle will be useful."

"Normally, perhaps, I would agree. But not in this case." The scout's eyes jerked up to fix on the telepath, clearly surprised by the statement. "This soldier was one of my men once, at Sol'aira. I did him wrong, and I do not care what side he has misguidedly chosen now; I will not abuse him as a prisoner. He has given us all the intel we need. I will not pry for more."

"We are not taking prisoners, telepath," Hadrian protested. "We are headed into battle. This is hardly the time to be getting sentimental."

"It is not sentiment. And it is my decision to make. We will keep him on our side of the camp and detain him ourselves. You Venishians need not concern yourselves with the details."

"I will not play along as your prisoner, Desirey," the boy retorted. "Just kill me and be done with it."

Seria studied him in cold silence for a moment before giving a simple, "No." The boy stiffened. "I will keep you captive and give you the opportunity to decide your own fate, and if after the battle you still insist on serving the empire, then we will take you outside Faelyon's walls and release you." The scout blinked, clearly caught off guard by the assertion.

The general obviously shared his disbelief. "You cannot be serious, Desirey," Hadrian hissed. "This scout is our enemy. I do not care what your history is, we are going to execute him."

"It does seem ill advised to release him," Viera agreed, albeit somewhat tentatively. "Though I will admit, I have a hard time accepting that we must kill him."

Hadrian sighed. "He may appear to be no more than a child, princess, but he has made his decision to stand with our enemy. He is a risk, and he must be eliminated." The words were hard and unbending, yet Seth had a hard time disagreeing with them. He himself had killed dozens of Nocturne soldiers no different from this boy. *It's what happens in war.*

"This boy has spent his life indoctrinated by the empire to blindly follow his superiors," Seria countered. "And he is hardly a risk now that he is detained."

"I am not a child," the scout grated. "I stand with my country because that is what I choose, not--"

"I will not murder him in cold blood, general," the telepath continued on, completely ignoring the boy's protests. "Nor in this case will I allow you Venishians to. He is Nocturne, one of our people. It is our choice how to deal with him. He has no magic. He is a threat to no one, so I can do with him what I will. I will bring the issue up with Raylus as well since it is his men who will be guarding him, but he will agree with me."

“You sure this isn’t just something you’re doing out of guilt?” Seth questioned her softly, speaking up for the first time since he had entered the tent. “I don’t know what your past is with this guy, but he chose to side with Dreith. He serves the emperor, and he’ll keep serving him and this Captain Regon you mentioned. You keeping him prisoner isn’t likely to change that.”

“He is right,” the scout insisted stubbornly. “And if you do not kill me now, Desirey, I swear I will carry out my mission and execute you at the first opportunity.”

“I don’t think you will, Taneth,” Seria asserted, addressing him by name for the first time. “I can see in your mind the kind of man you wish to be. You can become that if you admit to yourself that being loyal to the emperor just means ignoring all your better instincts and doing as you are told by old and arrogant cowards who send you out to die in their stead. But if you were to die today, it would be as nothing more than an expendable tool of your captain. That is not the end you want.”

“Do not pretend to know me, telepath!” he snapped, finally losing a hold on his temper. “Being a part of the same garrison for a few months gives us no bond. You did not even recognize me until you invaded my mind with your foul tricks!”

“True,” Seria admitted. “Still, the fact remains I will not kill you, and I will not allow anyone else to kill you, for in your current condition you are no threat to anyone here.” That comment was directed rather pointedly toward Hadrian, though it seemed to make Taneth all the more irritable. “You can stay alive if you just behave yourself as a prisoner until after our battle to take the city. Perhaps if we lose, your captain may even wind up freeing you.”

The comment was dry, giving it a layer of sarcasm, and Taneth swallowed nervously, eyes lowering. “He wouldn’t rescue you, would he?” Seth guessed. “Captain Regon is just like Dreith, right? He’ll execute you for your failure here.”

The scout studied him coldly, eyes narrowing. He said nothing in response however, seemingly resigning himself to silence once more.

“Well, this rather circular debate seems to have reached its endpoint,” Hadrian grumbled. “Deal with this burden of a prisoner however you choose, Desirey, but should he escape or cause any harm to this camp there will be a reckoning for it,” he promised, heading off to inform General Ryan of all they had learned.

Seria’s cold eyes shifted to Viera. “You can tell your compatriots to lower the shield around the camp, Keeper. The sun is almost risen, and we’ve no cause to fear an attack from the empire, not until we reach Faelyon’s gates. We should get on with our march toward the city.”

Viera nodded. "I suppose. Though I would rather not leave this scout without one of us to guard him, even if he has no magic of his own."

"I wasn't planning to leave him alone, Keeper," Seria assured her, eyes shifting once more to lock on Seth.

He arched an eyebrow. "You want me to stay and guard him?"

"Unless that's too much responsibility for you," she challenged, and his eyes darkened.

"Where will you be?" he demanded, catching the way she shifted her weight toward the entrance of the tent, preparing to set off just like Hadrian.

"I need to have a word with Chaser. A quick errand we have to complete before we reach the city. I'll have Dienna send fresh magicians to guard Taneth here after we're finished."

Seth knew she was hiding something from him, a purposeful deceit that went hand in hand with keeping him here watching this unnecessary prisoner instead of accompanying her and Chaser on whatever "errand" it was that so urgently needed completing. "I guess a single tied-up scout won't be too hard to keep an eye on," he stated flatly, hiding his suspicions behind the black wall around his mind that Seria had been so insistent he maintain earlier. "And if he does escape, you can blame yourself for neglecting your prisoner."

"Your soldiers appear to have little faith in you, Desirey," Taneth muttered darkly.

"He's not my soldier," Seria replied. "He's the emperor's son." The boy's eyes widened, though he was quick to try and mask the reaction. Seth's own gaze darkened, not sure why Seria had felt the need to share such information with this spy from the enemy. "For all your blind faith in your captain, I guess I shouldn't be surprised you knew so little of your unit's true mission in coming to our camp," the telepath continued coldly. "But you did overhear that conversation of Regon giving your head scout, Rana, such a detailed description of the target she was to shadow, someone she was not to execute but simply gather intel on."

Seth kept his expression purposefully blank as he took in the revelation, though Viera it seemed could not keep down her questions. "But why?" the Keeper demanded. "Why would the empire bother sending their spies here for that? The entire south knows who Seth's father is."

"The emperor has only one son," Taneth protested, though the three before him made a point of ignoring the comment.

"The south knows about Seth, yes, but the entire empire has been kept in the dark by Dreith," Seria answered Viera coldly. "Your identity is quite the dangerous secret for your father right now, Seth. Still, after Kaleth, there's obviously a lot of officers within the legion questioning who you are. Regon is not one to sit quiet and accept that there are secrets above his station. His

arrogance will not allow him to be excluded, so he sent these scouts here to find out exactly who you are and why Dreith has been protecting you.”

“Why would the emperor’s own son fight for the Venishians?” Taneth whispered harshly.

Seth cast him only a brief glance before returning his eyes to Seria. “Either way, you didn’t have to share that news here,” he muttered, making a point of avoiding the scout’s question.

Seria just shook her head. “Regon knows who you are now, Seth, and I highly doubt he’ll keep his mouth shut about it. The whole empire will soon know of your existence. There’s no point anymore in keeping secrets.”

She headed out of the tent without another word. He and Viera watched her leave, though the Keeper soon shifted her attention back to Seth, green eyes rife with concern. “I don’t have to go,” she whispered, casting an uneasy glance toward the captive Nocturne eyeing them darkly from only a few feet away. “Tylen and the others will lower our wards without being told once they receive orders to march.”

The ghost of a smile lit Seth’s face, and he shook his head. “It’s one kid, Viera. I’ll be fine.”

“I am not a k-”

“Fine. One scout,” Seth corrected testily, cutting off the boy’s rather predictable protest.

Viera nodded, still not entirely reassured. “Alright, but be careful with him. All the empire’s agents are dangerous, no matter their age. I don’t know what Seria’s thinking, keeping him here.”

Seth studied the battered scout, his face a swollen mess and his armor crusted with blood that may or may not be his own. *Still...* “He’s not really much of a threat, Viera,” he whispered. “After all, the Altairens were pretty brutal with their questioning.”

The boy’s eyes narrowed into a glare, but Viera’s own gaze softened somewhat. “I suppose you have a point.” She paused. “He’s probably in a lot of pain right now.”

“Yeah, I would guess,” Seth muttered.

“I could heal him before I leave,” she offered, eyes meeting Seth’s own in search of confirmation.

“I will not take your charity, Venishian,” the boy snapped. “You are foolish to offer it.”

“Nevermind then. I’ll check in with you later,” she told Seth in parting.

He nodded, and Viera’s hand slid out of his own as she headed for the exit.

“She worries for you far more than I would expect from a Venishian,” Taneth stated hollowly. “And what advantage did she think to gain, offering to heal a prisoner?”

“Not everything is about gaining an advantage,” Seth responded dryly. “She offered to heal you because she felt sorry for you.”

“You underestimate me at your peril, all of you. The emperor--”

“...will see us dead. Yeah, so you’ve said,” Seth cut in, unimpressed. “And if that’s all you have to threaten me with, you can just go back to keeping your silence.”

The boy’s dark eyes were cold and dead as they locked with Seth’s own. “My silence is meaningless now. The telepath took everything of import.” He looked down. “She plays people, uses them as tools to forward her own ends. It’s what all telepaths do.”

“You sound like a southerner,” Seth muttered, trying to put an end to the discussion.

“If I were ever to betray my captain and feel compelled to take your side in this conflict,” Taneth continued, uncaring of Seth’s obvious reluctance to continue the conversation. “I would not trust my own feelings. I would know they were simply the manipulations of a telepath, so there is no point in keeping me prisoner here. Kill me now. If you are truly the emperor’s son, Desirey cannot punish you for the act. Not when you’re her only hope of taking the throne.”

“I’m not taking the throne,” Seth stated flatly. “I’m just stopping the empire from tearing apart this realm. I’ll kill the emperor, then I’m done with this, all of it.”

Taneth’s eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. “That makes no sense. Killing the emperor would end nothing. It would only throw our nation into chaos.”

“It will stop the war. That’s all that matters. I don’t care who holds the throne after that.”

“The war will never stop,” Taneth insisted. “There will never be peace between the Venishians and us, and you...” He shook his head. “You are being used by Desirey, the same as any tool.”

“Just like you were used by your captain to try and eliminate his rival,” Seth countered. “Just like all you soldiers are used by the emperor to achieve his own ends.”

“We serve the emperor out of loyalty! Because he is the rightful ruler--”

“I really don’t care.” This conversation was going nowhere, and he hadn’t the patience to hear any more of it. He summoned his magic, and Taneth instantly stiffened, seeing the aura of black light gathering around him. The boy’s fears were groundless though. Seth kept the magic carefully in check as he put in place a barrier of dark energy along each wall of the tent, sealing it in place with a weave Chaser’d had him practicing for weeks now. He walked toward the entrance of the pavilion without another word, and Taneth stared after him in confusion. “You will not kill me, but you will earn the commander’s ire anyway by leaving me without a guard?”

“You have no way of getting through this shield. It’s as strong a guard as any, and a shield at least I can hold from outside.” He pulled back the entrance flap, creating a small opening in his wards through which he could exit.

“Do you know why my garrison never trusted Desirey?” the scout demanded, freezing Seth in his tracks. The boy had risen to his feet, and Seth watched him warily. With his shaky stance and swollen features, he hardly looked in any shape to put up much of a fight, but Seth knew it was foolish to underestimate him. Just because the boy stood no chance of fighting his way free of here did not mean he would not still try something. *It’s what I would do after all.* He reflected.

“She was handed her position by the emperor after only a few years in the field simply because of her giftings and the name of her family,” Taneth continued, sure now that he had Seth’s attention. “But we would have accepted that had she not earned her promotions by using people however she saw fit to advance her own standing. She executed my father, a veteran in our garrison and a loyal servant of the empire. She cut him down without trial or ceremony.”

“And who was it who ordered her to do it?” Seth responded flatly, knowing already that it was the emperor who must have passed the sentence.

“It does not matter,” the scout insisted. “The blood is on her hands. She thinks she can smooth over her crimes by turning her back on the liege who supposedly drove her to such acts, but all she is doing is killing more of our people. All you are doing by standing with her and the Venishians, is killing your own people.”

There were a dozen responses that Seth could have given voice to, such as how he was not truly one of the Nocturne, how he had grown up in the south and cared only for ending this war before there were no more cities there left to save. In the end though, his response was quite different. “People have to die in war. It doesn’t matter which side I pick in that respect, good people end up dying either way. Seria, me, all the others in this camp, we’re all doing what we think is best to protect those we care about.”

“Then do not bother playing at mercy,” the scout denounced, stepping closer. “Accept that we are enemies and kill me now, before I strike you down.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “Why are you so determined to die?”

“Because it is what I believe in,” the boy insisted, eyes bright with fervor. “It’s the path I have chosen, and I will not allow that manipulator, Desirey, to take that away from me.”

“Seria hasn’t done anything to you. Trust me. I know what it’s like to have a Lilith screw with your head, and it’s a whole lot different than that voice inside you’re so angry with right now,

the one telling you that Seria is right and the leaders you serve are corrupt pieces of shit unworthy of your loyalty.”

Taneth’s eyes darkened, jaw clenching. Seth could tell the scout was sizing up the open tent flap just behind him, though the boy was careful to never look directly at the opening. Still, it was clear nonetheless that he intended to make a break for it. “You speak like a southerner,” the scout criticized, shifting his weight to close even more of the distance between them. “It’s quite convenient for Desirey to find another heir to the throne, one that fights with the Venishians and supports her coup.”

Seth shook his head, feeling a strange urge to smile though he kept it subdued. “You’re the first person I’ve met who actually doubts I’m his son. It’s kind of refreshing to be honest.”

Seth effortlessly sidestepped the kick that was headed towards his ankle, intended to knock his feet out from under him before he ever noticed it coming. He could have used the magic then and either detained the scout or granted his wish and killed him with fairly little effort, but he preferred a more traditional approach. His fist shot out in a quick jab and struck the boy square in the nose, a blow Taneth had no chance of blocking with his hands still lashed behind his back. The scout reeled back, and Seth’s foot came down on the back of his knee, knocking him to the ground.

The boy stared down at the trail of blood dripping from his broken nose. “You shouldn’t have been able to dodge that in time after you let me that close,” he complained, his tone a dull mutter.

“Next time you want to make a break for the door, maybe find a way to get your hands free first,” Seth responded bluntly, heading out the entrance without another word and leaving the bloody yet still eerily defiant prisoner locked inside his shield.

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