

The Lost Story of the Primal Kingdom

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Part I

“She Who Endured”

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Chapter 1

I could barely remember my name. It was once second nature to me; even in the simplest aspects of life, I would hear it. A denizen would rise to my pedestal. They would use address me with my royal title, plant a fruit or a flower at my feet, and give their request. After their departure, I would be left with a smile that would spark joy throughout the people, yet would never reach my eyes. My name was practically ingrained in the walls of the castle, but I could never quite comprehend just how reassuring it was to hear it. No acridness ever accompanied the questions or comments. Occasionally the excess fervent remark would come along, but it was never filled with true contempt. After all, every grievance that came with the suppliants were shared amongst all the people.

Yet now, in tormented solitude, my name is just a distant memory. The letters that once made up the title of an heir danced in the back of my mind with no true purpose. With the amount of my people seemingly lost through every hour, names had no reason to be remembered. Not even my own. I found it ironic; your position in an almost previous life did not matter anymore. Porter or prince, you were now just a subject to a king that's sheer presence fills you with a plaintive melancholy. While everyone here at least somewhat knew who I was, or what I did for most of my life, they didn't remember *me*. My name, my promises, my goals; it was just dust. Those still sane enough to recall an age now gone only remembered that I was the child of the Panahonian king and queen. Not that it would matter much in the days that never seemed to end.

Yet despite the urge, I would resist. I would not let my name disappear completely, not now nor ever. It was one of the few things that reminded me of who I was, filling me with reassurance of my sheer being. Even while I could feel it perform a perpetual dance around my conscious, I would not forget its comfort.

I focused on what I could remember. I was the princess of Panahon. It was destroyed by the Stellarian Empire. They took all that survived their attack deep into the east, and put us into Gliscon Citadel, their headquarters. I now worked to comfort lecherous men who found entertainment in betting how many deaths there would be each day. Despite the last 10 years ending only with almost the entire world subjugated under Stellarian rule, I had found the embrace of not knowing the actual details reassuring; we were almost completely ignorant to the world's continual progression into darkness. Our only hint were the different kinds of people that poured into our barracks, and made small banter of their previous life; the Masharans, the Lunarians, those from Collyeej. Even some from Lairatan. So many civilians, filled with cultures and tradition; now just mindless slaves.

Each passing hour was the same as every other in the citadel camps. You woke up and ate whatever watery broth they might spare you. You slowly make your way to the fields and work yourself until your back screams for absolution. It's work and service to a country you only thought of when one asked what death could be personified as. With every week, even more and more of your past family, friends, even subjects would seem to drift away. Now I greet once close knit friends, and all I get is a blank look back, with a lifeless smile that never reached their eyes. I couldn't even begin to fathom what they had gone through by themselves at the hands of murderers.

Today was special. It was the monthly Cleansing, and every person in the barracks knew it too. We heard the bell ring out from the steeple, a small ways from our sleeping boards. We rose from our wooden beds, and started walking out the door. I spotted those I knew from the past, again

with those blank eyes and faces far too pale. I so badly wanted to communicate with them, but it was too late. Their world was seemingly burnt to the ground, and I was just one of the lingering ashes.

We filed out of our building, and into the field. Bricked buildings filled the aisles of the green stripped meadow, and groups of circles were burnt into the ground. Those in the camp for long enough knew exactly where to go; the ones who didn't were assigned their own spots. Grabbing my tunic close to my thigh, I made my way into the left side of the prayer circle and sat. As soon as the few hundreds of us kneeled in the barren earth, the bells sounded once more. The priests of the Stellar Realm filed out of the cathedral and into the fields with us. One clergyman to one circle.

I still don't know the name of the priest. I've seen him for the past 10 years but his face melts with every other Stellarian I know. He gives the same sermon as everyone else does, with the same condescending words he masks as soothing. Yet I knew, as everyone else did, that he despised us for our religion, respective to our Panahonian upbringing. It was evident in everything they did; the snickers they gave as we walked by, the glares they would cast when we whispered our own small prayers throughout the day. No matter what happened, we could always sense their underlying hatred of us.

Though many in the camp had already decided to convert, the Cleansing still occurred every month. As everyone quieted down, the priest started to speak.

“Oh Great Tirigna,

I beg you to grant these lost souls your guidance.

The endless bounty granted by antimatter. By destruction.

Time brings lost lies floating on the great rivers of self.

Space lets the corruption grow within our bodies and minds.

Antimatter will never lie. It does not betray.

Lest we let yourself fall victim to our own devils of creation.

Oh Great Tirigna,

I beg you to grant these lost souls your guidance.

The endless bounty...”

His words soon faded once again in my mind. They would repeat the same verse perpetually, shaming our own religion into something twisted. Soon, our original thoughts would just be dark phantasms at the back of our consciousness. The others in the circle started to react. Some moaned, some hummed quietly, all actions that were only slightly reminiscent of their once human thoughts.

The surrounding groups now resumed the regular behavior that happened every month. Someone would bolt up from their seat, and protest the rituals. The priests would grab their staff, and send bolts of ‘fire from the heavens’. It was to cleanse their soul and mind, and slowly turn them into obedient servants of the Stellarian Empire. It was horrifying. The fire would consume their ability to think independently, and soon completely overtake it. They barely used it on Panahonians, who were already too scared to fight back. However, when the Lunarians had arrived, they resisted these practices of the Cleansing; they had not been nearly as decimated as we had been during the now named ‘Conquering’.

The Cleansing continued, hour after hour. The clergyman finished their repetitive speeches, and we all rose back up and continued down the path on the meadow. The crunching leaves appeared strangely loud to me today, the embrace of autumn quickly approaching at our doorstep. The sky was silent, offering no clouds or rain; only a somber blanket. No one else seemed to notice the small details, it was all the same to them by now. I truly didn't know why it seemed that I was the only one who still retained an aspect of humanity. Something warm always remained seated in my heart that compelled me to keep myself.

We kept on, continuing down the dirt road. The buildings seemed like carbon copies of each other, their doors leading to only Digala knows what. They were all for the Stellarians; perhaps lounges and churches that were aggrandized by the hubris of men. We were forced simply to accept our few barracks and buildings that we could go to. As we kept walking, those who started to cough or stumble were taken out of the line. Like with all the others before them, we knew where they ended up. We had to use sacks of fertilizer for our crop work. The bones of the sickly were not uncommon in those sacks, proving our suspicion.

We finally arrived at our next stop. The Food Dispensary; a small building that gave out the minuscule portions we could eat. There were 6 lines, and hundreds in each. Lunarians, Panahonians, people from all over Bovar were here. The food was always better on the day of the Cleansing; there was meat, this time was over boiled chicken. A slice of bread with a bit of pepper on it. A small cup of soup. These niceties only came with this day. I don't know why they decided this, to give us such succulents once a month. However, whatever the reason it was did not take up any care in my mind; if we were to get this food so rarely, then I will savor it each time.

As soon as we got our food, we left the line. We dropped our plates and bowls in the designated bins after we ate, and again started our march. We were on our way to where we headed to everyday. Now, our destination was the barren fields; to plant, to work, to sweat. Grabbing a trowel from the many racks near the fields, we started what we did for most of the day. The sky was still a somber quiet, but it was at least cool out, so only a few around me had fallen while working. Those who were truly unlucky arrived, picked up the cadavers of the fallen, and left, bringing their body to the human ovens. We all looked quickly and then returned back to our own jobs, stuffing seeds or yanking out carrot tops from the ground.

We finished soon enough, leaving our work spots. It was near dusk now, our backs tired and near broken. We put our trowels away, and once again, we started our march back towards the barracks. It was time to rest for the day. We made our way back to our bed boards. We couldn't feel neither our legs or our feet; the marching has tired us out so.

The dirt in front of the door is so worn out by now, it's a completely different shade of brown. The feet shuffling against the ancient earth left it scarred indefinitely by the evils of man. The Cleansing's great meal came with the lack of a dinner or breakfast, so we all go from the peak of noon to the end of the day significantly grumbling. Tired and lacking of will, we all climbed into our small bed boards.

I rested for an hour, until night had finally arrived. I was trained to wake up at this time by now. I quietly stepped down, the tired wood creaking with every movement my foot made. I reached the floor, and hurriedly made my way out the door, facing the other two sleeping barracks. Quietly and quickly, I hurried down through the Fields of Prayer. Each grass blade seemed like a whisper against my feet, moving slowly with the subtle wind blowing past. As soon as the trees started to close on the path once again, I knew I was near to my destination.

While I had to work the same labor that the other prisoners had to do as well, the Stellarians stationed here gave me an extra job as well. As it was the Cleansing, my service would be much more giving to the Stellarian conquerors today. I continued down the path, the leaves on all the trees bristling thoroughly. The soles on my ragged slippers groaning and growing open with every stone it grazed. I arrive at the Stellarian Church, the grand marble slabs adorning it's wretched interiors of religiously blinded knaves. The doors slowly opened, as if it could see me with it's handles. I moved, always noting the dirt road turning into marble, marking the entrance into the Church.

I step foot into the front room of the church. I note all of the things I could see to make sure it did not change from the last time I was here. The elaborate plants adorning each set of benches, all

facing towards a dark, navy hearth. Lamps dripping small amounts of wax onto the floor. A podium decked with gold orchids, facing the masses. This room is where the Stellarian soldiers and clergyman gather; to beg for repension.

Nothing changed. Good, I think to myself. I turn, right before the benches start in lines. The hallway seems long enough to once again slowly note my surroundings. The paintings were all the same, one of Marca'y Eahm, the supreme emperor. Many of Tirigna, depicting his birth from darkness. None representing the gods I worshipped, or the ones the Lunarians praised. It was all surrounding the Stellarian culture.

Many doors led off into different rooms. Finally, I arrive at the room I actually care about. It's door is pristine; oak wood decked with silver and gold linings, with a closable oval window at the top. I step in, the first thing I note being the fireplace blazing to the side. I looked to the client I had today in the center of the room. Surprising to me, it was not one of the clergymen. It was a Masharan. It was strange to me; the Mashara islands had already started to be annexed by the empire as well. It hadn't occurred to me that there could be people spared from the Conquering; those who abided and handed over their lands to the empire without a second thought.

Her hair was short and redheaded. Her eyes were a gleaming hazel. She had on a white button down tunic with brown, knee length shorts. She wore a circular cap on her head. Her sheathed sword was next to the couch she currently laid in. An apple in hand, she slowly opened her eyes and faced me.

She did nothing but eye me up and down, continuously. I didn't consider myself anything exceptional really. I'm still not sure why they gave me this job opposed to any of the other slaves brought here. She just stared, occasionally taking a bite of the fruit. I swore the crunch of the skin could be heard throughout the entire cathedral. The only other sounds I could note was the fireplace crackling and my one breath, going up and down.

"Are you just gonna stand there" she inquired, whistling almost obnoxiously before hand. I never knew many Masharans, or really anyone from the other continents. I knew a few Collyeejians from my time spent looking at those seeking refuge in Panahon. However, contact with the thief's islands were mostly cut off due to the gripes of neighboring kingdoms.

"Oh, I uh, I apologize for my conduct. How will you have me my lady?" I quickly recovered, remembering my position. I had never really serviced women before, mostly soldiers but this one; she was different than the rest. Her eyes had an amusement in them. What she found jestful, I could not tell. The fire seemed quieter now, I could only focus on studying her face. She didn't beckon or call, just dutifully watched me. My mind had already made the switch it always made, I was not a labor slave right now. At this moment, I was a sexual slave.

"Darling, why are you stumbling over your words? Have you already had such a terrible impression of yours truly? What have these men done to you to fill you with such anguish?" she called to me. I didn't think it was that deep, but then again I haven't done a lot of self inspection of my own mentality. Was I nervous? Perhaps; I never got women much in my work. I couldn't respond to her, just staring infinitely into those hazel eyes.

"Well, I still plan to feast. Come, child", she said. Her voice had a tinge of condescension in it. It wasn't intimidating, but it made me feel... not irked, but a foreboding sense. As if something was slightly off about the situation. I couldn't show this, however. My client was the priority; her pleasure ensured my ability to stay alive. I started to move. She had sat up by now, so I took the initiative and sat on her lap. I straddled some of the loose red bangs on her forehead, and moved the other hand to move down her face, tracing my finger over every small detail. The pirate, now seeing

my resolve, moves my hand away, down towards the back of the couch, and moves forward, planting a kiss on my mouth.

It all went like every other time from there on, for a bit at least. She increased the impact with every time our lips met. It was more and more brash, all the while she started to undress me. Women, I found, were much more elegant than men. Despite being a criminal from the waters, she still knew how to do such salacious things with grace. My lilac tunic soon drifted to the floor, joined only by the worn out sandals I wore all the way here. Her clothing was still on, however, marking me the only one who's skin would be grazed by the heat.

We continued; her mouth soon drifted down into my nether region like men did. It wasn't really that different; men would treat my groin as a delicacy for some reason, despite seeing my general self as a worthless Panahonian. She seemed to not give much care to the scars littered around my body. She went on and on, soon replacing wanting tongues with moving fingers.

At this point, we had moved around quite a bit. I was facing up, with most of my body following the large couch. Her body was slightly behind my legs, her face only a bit of ways above my clitoris.

With most men, I would always fake my climax; their own sexual deeds would never actually bring me to completion. However, with her... I could feel myself, for once in a decade, actually being close to my own pleasure. She kept on with her tactics, finding some kind of pleasure in it for herself. Sweat beaded my forehead, and soon I could tell what was coming. My wanton moans increasing in yearning, her brows furrowed together. Soon enough, I felt the oncoming oblivion exploding in my own mind, riding on a pleasurable high for seemingly eternity, which only truly happened for nearly half a minute.

We kept on like that for a while. I never even realized that she got undressed throughout it all. It was just so amazing to me; these feelings that I thought had abandoned me were really there, just waiting for someone to unlock them once more. I reciprocated the wet bounty she gave to me unto her, and she reached the same high I had for many a times. However, soon, I felt something.

A hand and it's result, a reverberation onto my bottom. I felt it, stinging red now. All of a sudden, the pleasure stopped. The world became clear to me again. I was still just a regular sex object, and she was a pirate, not a giving god.

It happened again. It felt so loud throughout the cathedral, and I began to yelp; no longer out of pleasure but of pain. Of wanting to stop. I didn't know how she could derive pleasure out of my own pain. My vagina soon grew dry, as if a desert had swept over it, leaving thorns in my side. She kept going, again and again until I was as red as the blood that had spilled, ran in the streets of my own kingdom. The shame building in my cheeks continued, and soon, without thinking, I yelled out.

"Please, stop!"

Silence.

We weren't allowed to ask our clients to stop. We had no say in any of the matter. It was all for her pleasure, I had to remind myself. Her face grew from a devilish grin to an unreadable, blank face, the one my old friends would make when I passed by them. But unlike them, those tortured souls, this was not like that. This was the face of a sadist.

She wouldn't let up. She would slap and slap, and when she saw the tears well up in my eyes, the fear dotting my face, she would laugh. She found gratification out of my pain. And like every other person I ever had to please, she would morph into one of them. She wasn't anything special, just because she was a woman. She was just as bad as the rest of them.

I don't know what kind of masturbation she was doing to get herself off to my own pain. She grunted and laughed, staring with those deranged eyes that once seemed so enchanting. She changed

her tactics; she changed between slapping to sucking to fingering, again and again. I just had to focus on keeping myself from another outburst. There was nothing but pain anymore. And during one of her switches, I felt it.

The rip.

It made an audible sound, and my core started to screech. It was nothing but discomfort and torment, confined in a physical cage that was myself. Soon, I realized the burgundy waterfall from under me, making its way down to the couch. I didn't know how to feel. I couldn't stop sobbing. I was crying, so many tears fell out and dotted the couch, but I would not dare make a noise. I could not risk crying out once more.

I don't know how long she continued for. Perhaps hours, but soon, it all stopped. She got up, without a word. She grabbed one of the towels nearby, folded so pristinely by the Stellarian Servants that would travel the halls. She grabbed one, and wiped off the evidence of this meeting, the pain and the suffering I had just went through. All of it, and threw the towel at me. She picked up her clothing, hiding the part of the red stain on her tunic with the sheath of her sword.

And then, she left. The door closed, and all that remained was myself, my tears and blood; my clothing now dotted with a pinkish liquid.

I got up, and truly considered my options. I was humiliated. Never before had a client taken my trust, nurtured it to health and let me feel pleasure to the highest high, and then take it. Force it into something awful and ugly; watch my eyes turn from oblivious pleasure into fear. I just...thought.

My friends were dead. My family was massacred. My conquerors abused me and the world around them, putting kids just like me into the same, awful position. I remembered the Cleansing. It was so funny. We spent so long praying to these gods that we thought would save us with their divine intervention, but what have they done?

I looked at the fireplace. It burned, so brightly. The only power I ever knew; flames, burning bright. It consumed all the wood under it, leaving nothing but ash behind. Just like the world, I thought.

I had truly nothing to live for. Not myself, anymore.

The lights seemed dim. The noises grew faint. Not even the opening of the fireplace gate made a sound. I looked at it once more. So bright. So consuming.

I grabbed, and fumbled around for the handle. I closed the gate.

So bright, the fireplace. So...bright.

And as I stepped in, the flames immediately reaching for my hopeless self, I remembered. Throughout all the pain, and all the suffering, I remembered.

Mestrine. My name was Mestrine.

And with that, the flames consumed me.

Chapter 2

Nothing.

I was nothing. I couldn't feel, or even imagine my actual self. I didn't know what I was anymore.

My name still rung out in my head. Mestrine. Mestrine. I was Mestrine Cathavor.

I found it ironic. I spent so long forgetting my own name, watching it escape in my mind over the long years of slavery. And yet, in the moment where I accepted a fate of oblivion, it came back to me. As if it knew how long I subconsciously yearned for it; to have the comfort of having a name.

I didn't know where I was now. I was in my mind; that was the closest thing I could guess. It was like having my eyes infinitely closed, seeing only a black that would sometimes change colors to match whatever sensitized it. I truly had nowhere to go.

Was this some kind of curse? Were we mortals doomed from the start to perish, and walk along a mortal plane of darkness? What kind of dark fate had these gods created for us, while they all slept in their own realms. I only wish I could ask. To get some kind of confirmation of what was our purpose in this world; why are we created simply to die and then have thought beyond physicality? This yearning; it is natural. I have been throughout a lifetime of hell, and if these gods were the ones who crafted it all in some kind of demented play, I will find out why.

I want to communicate with them. To truly understand what it must be like for these beings on high, who could dictate the world without even leaving their own world, wherever that may be.

People have told throughout generations how to communicate with one's god. In Panahon, all they said to do in sermons was to drift into a plane of mental nothingness and reach out.

To grasp time.

To consume it's great power.

Let the world stop.

Let people feel.

To the infinite realm of time.

To the presence of Lord Digala.

Lest we fall prison to our own life. Our fate.

My lord, the one who I worshipped throughout my early childhood, was Digala. A lord of time; his own world being a distorted, thick forest that would lead to the Tower of Time. I don't remember much else about him, anything but that he was confined within a bond; the Time-Space Continuum. That is what binded my kingdom and the Lunarians together. I don't understand why we had to fight, with our own gods being like kin.

I cleared my mind. I had one goal now; to communicate with Digala. It seemed silly, in this void, to have a goal. But I had nothing else in my life to do, to live for. And so, I started dissolving.

I first got rid of all thoughts; the blackness faded away. The name, Mestrine, which I took so long to finally recall, followed suit. All sounds that may have existed was now replaced with an eerie quiet. Everything about Bòvar, our world, soon drifted away. Gliscon Citadel, my slave camp, washed clean and gone from my mind. I was ready. I would transcend into a realm of gods; leave the mortal plane once and for all.

My eyes were shut. I did not think of anything but Digala, my lord. I felt the world rushing all of a sudden. I felt pain, as if winds thousands of miles fast blew past every hair on my skin; I had no skin however. It was just the feeling of pain. It would not cease. Wind changed to fire. Flames seemingly kissing my mind, turning it unearthly hot. The heat would turn to coldness. A wet flood washed over it all, submerging me under an ocean of burdens. I couldn't breathe. My breathless self soon was relieved by a crackling black coat of ash. It was choking me, holding me in a death filled grasp. It changed into a sandstorm, each particle grazing my mind, burning it. Finally, I felt it. My mind free, released by the blessing of life.

I couldn't open my eyes. Not after being assaulted by every magical element known to man, I still could not open them. Oh, but I had to. I needed to find out why I existed. And despite all of this pain, I had felt worse. I had dealt with far worse anguish. So, I willed it. Made my eyes open, even if it meant forcing them out of their own sockets.

They started to open. Flecks of light started to shine through. I don't understand. What else could I possibly do? I didn't dare let myself to try and start to breathe, to attempt anything that may disturb my current state. I didn't know what to do. I was oblivious to the world. Everything seemed so loud, but so quiet at the same time. Like you could hear an entire history, but it was eerily muted, so all you could hear were the mumbling voices of mankind. I wanted to see it. I yearned to understand the world. Why was I going through this now? Only the Gods knew. I wanted to see it all.

With one final push, I opened my eyes. All that greeted them was a road. It wasn't dirt or stone; it was just a clear, glass like road suspended on an infinite abyss of black. It looked as if there were stars dotting the surroundings.

I looked at where my feet lie. The road slightly reflected some of the starlight that came it's way. I looked again, closer to my torso. I was... here. I wasn't actually physical, at least that is what I presume. But, my body existed; more of an apparition than anything. It moved very slightly, with no physical tether to the world. I looked up once more. I slowly brought my hands, still weathered with scars, close to my face. I swore I could feel my breath on them. With one small touch, I connected my fingers to my cheek.

It felt so strange. I ran my hands all over it, feeling every mark or dimple. I moved them up, seeing if I could feel my hair, or at least whatever remained of it. I slightly felt it drift in the abyss, moving ever so slightly. I had my resolve. I was here now, mentally at the very least. I looked up, and started to walk down the road.

I didn't expect his world to look like this. I thought that it would have been just like the woods that surround the Tubig Marass; thick, dark, with nothing peering through the branches but the light from the sky above. I looked around once more, seeing if anything was noticeable but the infinite cover of darkness. When I looked, again, there was nothing. I trudged on down the road.

Was I truly on an already failed mission? Where did I even go? Was I better off in the world of nothing but mind, where I couldn't see or couldn't feel but could think; would it have been better if I was at least more at peace of mind than having to drift on endlessly in a world of darkness, of black. I looked around again; nothing.

The road seemed to go on and on, forever, as if it were a string that just kept being unwinded from an infinite wheel. I wanted to scream by now, I wanted a cathartic release. I wanted the world to go back to what it was; before everything went to hell. Before I was a slave, before mankind even existed. I wanted to experience life without divine intervention; I wanted just a planet of nature, with no one to dictate what may happen.

I tried to speak, but nothing came out. I wasn't actually here. I could not make noise, and I could not will it. But I could blink; I could feel my breath slightly bristling the hairs on my skin. I

could do things, but I was still silent. I had freedom of body, but not freedom of my own speech. I needed it.

I had to find out why. Why did we exist in such a hate filled world; why was I hear now, unable to speak but able to think. Who dictated how this life worked and functioned, and why are casted under it's horrible yoke. I couldn't scream, but I would. I will not let myself be silenced by anymore gods, and their strange plan for mankind. I won't stand idly by in a plane of nothingness; I will not let that be my fate. So taking in a breath, and preparing for whatever may come with it, I yelled out.

I felt the road grumble under me. The blackness around it even seemed to grumble with it. The scream wasn't out of hate; it was out of needing release. It was filled with history, far past my own. Conquerings, the split of the North and South of the world, the killing of so many people for little gain, the world and all the sorrow. It grew, louder and louder. Despite going on for so long, I did not falter in voice. I did not need to breathe. I had to let out. I needed the gods to hear, to have their attention.

Why were my friends killed? Why did my family die at the hands of murderers? Why was I casted into a slave camp, to be used for years without deriving any of my own pleasure? And most of all, why did I forget who I am? What kind of god would craft a fate that only lead to ruin like this. The four lords of Matter, the gods; where are they, not interfering with anything in our own world? What did they want out of this?

I continued; for how long, I didn't know. Had others before me tried the same? Had they reached the gods; do these divine entities even know of the blight and struggle that their suppliants had dealt with for centuries? If they didn't, they would know. I would make certain of it.

Originally looking just into the blackness, I changed; I looked down at my hands. Clutching them into a fist, I poured all of my own energy into them. Into these scarred parts, hoping that they may bring some hope to myself and to the world around them. I blinked, and all of a sudden, some light started to peer out. Not from the void around me; from my own eyes. I opened my fist, and a catharsis bloomed from my fingers.

Beams of light all of a sudden shot from them. It continued, going up and up into the endless abyss of blackness. I was still screaming, and this light only intensified it. It grew; my scream was no longer needing release, it was now pure power. This light; what did it symbolize? Was this magic inside me all along? Slowly, I felt myself materialize on the near invisible road. The light didn't burn, however. My hands were tired, and as I became whole once again, my will to communicate; my will to live only increased.

With the light continuing up and up, clouds began to roll and thunder above. The light still went through, scattering those clouds. I could now feel a presence; the sheer pressure it exerted tried and wanted to flatten me into oblivion, but I would not be defeated so easily. I would not go out like the others who must have tried before me.

I could see the outline of a beast now, swarming down from those scattered clouds. My light continued, and though I could see that primal form was far more gargantuan than I was, I had the perseverance. I focused my light, all of it. It formed a golden spear, glowing with ethereal hope. The blackness around me grew irrelevant to me. The screaming continued; it was now more of a growl than a yell. Clutching it closely, noting the warm feeling the light brought to my hands, I threw the spear up at the beast, who was quickly flying towards me; it's wings were rapidly flapping up and down through the sky.

I watched as the lance now shot up at the beast in the atmosphere. It dissolved into thousands of arrows, of shards of my own pain and suffering; of hope for a future. The beast roared; trying to

scatter my weapons of ambitions, of wishes to know why. My arrows would not be deterred. They continued, up and into the body of the beast.

I stopped screaming all of a sudden. The light disappeared from my eyes, but I didn't feel empty. I felt as if I was whole for once in my life, as if I had done something I was meant to do.

The blast consumed the primal form of the monster. It attacked and bombarded it, until the beast was nothing but the carnal husk of a man. It looked cadaverous. When it fell onto the ground, it seemed as if it could have been heard throughout the entire world around me. It was so powerful, I fell back. The road was wide enough to compensate for me falling. When I looked back, the man was near smoldering. I don't think he planned to fall like that.

So many thoughts raced through my mind. No murals had ever depicted the gods as men, or really illustrated the existence of any other entities. It was only the four gods, and their birthing of Bòvar, nothing more. This man... could he be one of the gods? It seemed the most likely.

As the smoke finally drifted from his body, I could see him clearly. He was breathing, at least to a certain extent, much like a regular person. He wore a black, short sleeve jacket over a red tunic. He had a pair of grey pants beneath him. His hair was a tufted mess, and was pitch black. Most notably, however, he had a small, crimson diamond in his neck. It seems like a heart that beats in men, but it was for this god. Slowly, the void around me started to drift away. The sky became a bleak, dull blue and the road around me soon was joined with a ground; brown and dead, but was ground, at the least.

The man, face down, coughed and started to rise. I panicked slightly; what had I done? I had just experienced magic beyond my own capabilities, and I angered and almost murdered the primal carnation of a god. Whatever I had just done, it was surely going to cost me wherever I was in this faraway realm.

The first thing I noted was his eyes. They were a dark burgundy, and they blinked in wonder when they faced me. He looked like a regular man, at least a man whose eyes were red. His skin was paler than a regular, white skinned human, but not to the point it was questionable. Coughing again, he moved one of his gloved hands to the diamond near his neck, and clutched it. Soon, a staff bloomed out of it and into his hands. It was adorned with a small, red orb on the top; the rest of it was bleak and black, with different symbols adorning its sides. He kept coughing, it became worrying. I never used magic that intense before hand, I don't know what repercussions it came with.

Hacking again and again, he eventually struck the bottom of his cane onto the dirt, and rose from his slumped position on the ground. As he finally got up, I stared into his eyes. Those red eyes, looking deep into my heart. When he was completely upright, he looked quite taller than I originally thought. He stopped staring into my soul and instead looked around, into the bleak world around us. The dirt ground and the muted blue sky; all of it. His pupils shone with a sense of strange melancholy.

"How are you here?" he asked. His voice was thunderous; unexpected, to say the least. I couldn't sense any anger in it like I originally had suspected. His eyes had turned to face me again. I didn't know what to say; the only thing I could do was fumble around, bringing my hands to the ground and pull myself up. Even standing, he was still at least half a meter taller than I was. His mouth quivered slightly, as if he was fearful of me.

I once again pondered throughout all that brought me here. I had yearned while in limbo to communicate with one of the divine entities that kept in every corner of Bòvar, and in doing so, with such willpower, I ended up in a world of black. I unleashed some kind of power through my own catharsis, and at least partially wounded a beast who now took the form of a man. Who it was, I still was not sure. I always assumed that Digala would have been more...blue? Every mural I remember

seeing as a child of the Time Lord was blue in color, and in spirit. This man differed in every possible way. He was dark; his colors reflected black and red. I couldn't see what his beast form had been colored like, but with his human form, it looked very similar to the murals of Tirigna that had been dotted around Gliscon Citadel.

"I'm-"

"Yes, you. Have you any idea of what you just truly did? Tell me, mortal, what do you think you have done?" he interrupted me. His voice still maintained the loud and brash attitude it originally had, but now it seems more determined than before hand. As if he had found some kind of resolve in the few seconds that just passed. I didn't know what to say now. Was he expecting a certain answer from me? More seconds pass, with my mouth open but no words secreting from it.

"I take your silence as shock. I'll tell you too, I'm also quite surprised. I never thought a mortal, let alone a passed one, would be able to unleash such a potent force of magic. I still can't truly comprehend it; what did you do to summon such force? Whatever you did was beyond anything that had occurred throughout millennia; you even knocked a god from their original, primal form. That alone takes great strength." he questioned and remarked. My confusion continued to blossom from the entire conversation. The one thing this remark confirmed was my suspicion that this was indeed a god. However, which one still remained a mystery.

"Not just that; you were able to do two more grandiose things. You weakened me so much that my original blanket over this world had dissolved, and you unleashed such a strong blast of light that you could deter the attacks I had sent your way. What have you...done?" he asked. His voice continued, still not anger but with a wonderment; a sense of determination lay yet within his confusion. I gathered the strength from the long seconds that still passed, and finally spoke.

"I am...Mestrine. Cathavor. I am Mestrine Cathavor of the Panahon Kingdom. I wish to speak with Digala." I said. His eyes knit in confusion at the last part. Why a god was now listening to my requests and so on was beyond me, but I sensed that even if he did attack me, in this state he would not be as powerful as he thought. He looked, once again, around the world that encompassed him. He soon started to pace on the dirt. Turning back to me, he spoke.

"Well, as I assume you could have guessed, you know I am not he. And yet you speak of Panahonian, your blood... it tells of a Stellarian youth."

This left my mouth open once again. I looked back from his eyes onto the ground. This man... did he speak the truth? He was a god after all; he contained knowledge far superior to the mortals of our own world.

"Your kind; your brethren. The Stellar Realm of Tlec. It's power yet looms over all. And it brands me as it's divine entity. How... amusing these humans are. And yet; you are of the Panahon people. It is marked all over you. Then, why would you also reek of a Stellarian descent?" he questioned. I don't know why he thought I could answer these questions. I was much more confused in the hindsight of it all; I now had a questioning god pacing around me.

"You must be confused. How funny; you could smite me and kill me in cold blood; as a barely mortal soul who walks now in this realm of antimatter. In return for, well, not murdering me, I will answer five of your deepest questions you may pose." This god was now offering me information. Not wanting to waste any time nor the stability of his calm demeanor, I shot my first question. I would not be hesitant or talk smally in these questions if I truly hold so much power over him currently.

"What was the magic I emitted? How could it have been so powerful, so potent, and why do I of all people have it?" I asked. The light I released had been bothering me for a while. The only magic I ever knew that I had was small fire power; sparks that would dance at my own fingertips.

“You released the power of light. It’s a very old art that had been sealed away after the wars of the Gubat and Lunarians. After one of my brother’s disappearance from the world, we broke it down into the main six elements you see to this day. Why you have it, I truly do not know. Magic comes in many forms for many people. You may just be a coincidence with it. It may have also come out of the deep, emotional outburst you had. Magic intertwines with one’s sense of self, and if it is danger, the power of it is increased ever so much. Next question.”

Before I could even think of asking another question, I had to wrap my head around all of the information he just spilled out in front of me. Magic was such a sacred power within Tlec, especially Panahon. My father had some kind of ability to wield magic; I could somewhat remember flames he had dancing around his hand, or having a sapling bloom instantly in one of our gardens. His powers most likely was passed down unto me.

“Alright then. Are you truly a god; why do you revert from beast to man, if so?” was the next question I proposed. This one was simple; I wanted to know why the beast had dissolved so easily, and why it turned from a primal, winged creature into a man.

“I was hoping you just guessed by now; I am truly, the one and only, Tirigna, lord of antimatter. My brothers and I take on the forms we were originally born with; beasts; primal lords with unimaginable power. However, when we are severely weakened, we take on a simple human form. While this is true, for most times, one could use this power to instead communicate to humans without needing to be a beast in the world we crafted.” This answer was easier to comprehend; it made sense that the gods being weakened would revert to human than stay a beast. It required less energy, I suppose.

“Okay then. I spent most of my life as a slave and being converted into the religion of... well, you. What can you exactly tell me of the other gods?”. This question was simple curiosity; I wanted to know more about each of the gods who existed throughout these far away realms. This question, unlike the others, made him sigh. It seemed the answer to this one may be harder than the others. We had both sat at this point on the dirt ground, which for some reason left no residue or specks.

“Well, as you know, I am Tirigna, the God of Antimatter. I am here to keep the order of everything; to keep the opposite forces of our world in balance. I am one half of the Death and Creation Spiral. The other half is Skabelse. He is the lord of creation. No one knows what happened to him, however. He just disappeared off the face of our earth right before the end of the Great War. Then there are the two gods of the Time-Space continuum; Digala and Palkori, respectively. Your god you’ve been taught was one of my brothers, Digala.”. This answer helped clarify much of my befuddlement at the entire world. I had always wondered why I saw so little talk or illustration of the Creation God, and now I know. He’s gone, leaving Bòvar behind him.

I pondered on my next question. I had aimed to talk with Digala; to understand why he created us like this. Instead of that, however, I had reached the dark god of Antimatter; the deity who spearheads the Church of my conquerors. Yet... I never felt angry or betrayed by him. Confusion, yes, but I also got a strange sense of nostalgia I couldn’t understand. My next question, that I saved for the time lord, came out in this moment of wonder.

“Why? Why did you create this world; why do we live just to die a death that’s almost meaningless? What purpose do we even have, to live and then just float in limbo after we perish?” I asked. This was more of a cry out than an actual, calm question. It is the thought that has plagued my mind for so long, I could finally get the answer.

“My brothers and I; we did not create the world. At least, to what I recall, we were born from the continent in the Southwest, or as you all call it, Harasten. It was the four of us; Skabelse, Digala,

Palkori and I. At first, we helped shape the world to be habitable. Skabelse birthed the fae and humans that inhabit the world. I created their weaknesses, so that they never may grow too powerful and desolate without repercussion. We also created the gift of magic that encompasses the world; the ability to harness the connection with the gods and turn it into a sacred power. Digala and Palkari helped establish time and how it will affect the world that we started to craft into our own vision. We didn't create the actual dirt or ground that we stand on now, but we did make the world living; we did make *you*.

As soon as the people in Bòvar finally started to flourish, our jobs as gods were done. We fled into our own realms, staying dormant. The gift of light was among the denizens of the world, and they seemed peaceful. However, Skabelse refused to stay forever in his own realm. He would go back and forth from Bòvar to Likha, his own dimension. Palkori, Digala and I always silently chastised him for this, however we never thought he would actually do anything too brash. We were proven wrong. His connection with mankind grew too deep. He started granting the fae more and more power; their magic bloomed so they could use it much more fervently. They created spells and books; they started to depend on Skabelse's gift for their own strength. Their increase in power led to their conquest of the world, coming up from Lairatan into Tlec. This started the Great War, as you know. We were carefully watching from far away; my brother disappeared from this world many years after the start of the war. However, when he disappeared, the Fae were weakened greatly by the loss of their power supplier. The humans were now able to rise against them, leading to the expulsion of fae from Tlec." My eyes shone with disbelief and shock. I didn't learn much about the world, or why it is the way it actually is. This god just revealed a history I never even expected to be true. I always thought they would answer vainly and that we were all just pawns in a game or play they were doing just for their own fun. He saw the bewilderment in my eyes, and continued.

"We did not intend for the rest of history to play out so violently. After Skabelse disappeared, Digala, Palkori and I agreed that we gods were not meant to interact so closely with the people of Bòvar. We broke the magic of light into the six elements you see now, and refused to ever again interfere with the daily lives of mortals. I suppose that the bonds and mistakes Skabelse made, however, still linger in the hearts of all that live in our world.

In regards to the strange limbo you reside in after death, that was an issue that we could not solve. Skabelse created you mortals, so it was him who also created the afterlife you would go to after death. With his disappearance, there is nothing to uphold the paradise he made. You just float in nothingness, but you still retain one of the things we planned for all of you to obtain; the ability to communicate with us. We still yearned for connection with our creation, and though we did not want to interfere with your actual life, we could be talked to after your death so we still would not actually interact with Bòvar."

He had a hint of sadness in the end of his answer; he seemed...disappointed if anything. I don't think Tirigna actually wanted to see the world suffer so much, but it was the errs of his brother that led to all of our suffering. It was the reason the god's sealed away light, why they never interacted with the world, and why we live in silence and suffering, during and after life.

"I can't control anything that the Stellar Realm does to the rest of the world. I see it as too far hopeless for any form of balance or hope to be restored to the world. It doesn't matter, however. Mestrine Cathavor, what is the final question you propose?" I thought long and deep. I could ask for him to send me to Digala, like I originally planned, but what could that lord possibly do for me that the one here couldn't? It took a catharsis of magic to even communicate with this one; to get him to listen to my mortal claims. I doubt that Digala would talk to me, nor could I even reduce him to his human state.

“Tirigna. Lord of Antimatter, grant me an answer of sense. What do I do now? I’ve asked myself over and over again, to no avail. I didn’t even think I could come out of the silencing limbo I was in when I died.” I catechized. This was the answer I needed; to find the purpose in myself now. I was alive, more or less. If so, I still had some kind of purpose in life.

“I cannot do anything that I imagine you would want completely. It’s been millennia since mortals actually materialized in our realms. If you truly want to try and communicate with Digala, the lord you worshipped for your short years, I could send you into his realm of Higayon. However, I do not think he will be so easily convinced of anything. While I am listening to you simply because it is interesting that you were able to even get here, there is also the fact that you currently hold great power over me. Do not mistake me for a friend, young princess.” he concluded. I twitched slightly at his last sentence. I didn’t think he was a friend, but I saw him as more of an acquaintance, at least. With what he said, it seemed like he also dealt with great loss. I lost family, friends and my own pride, while he lost a brother. And not even a regular one; him and Skabelse seemed closer as being in a bond of creation and destruction. And what of my future? I still had no idea of what I would actually do.

“If you truly wish so, I will send you to Digala. However, I can not make him listen to you. You might simply be killed by him without even communicating. I doubt you can create such a strong blast of magic again.” he remarked. How would I want to go about this? Tirigna was no doubt slowly recovering; it was apparent in his voice continuously growing with more steel. I truly only had one option; see Digala and ask. What do I do now, and what is my purpose in existing now that I have passed. I also had to consider that there was no guaranteed way I would communicate with him.

“I want to communicate with Digala. Alas, I know he will not be willing to communicate, at least most likely. However, I must try. He’s the lord of time; there is bound to be some way for him to redo the errs of Bòvar’s past.” I concluded. I knew it, I *felt* it within my bones; Digala has power that I can’t even start to fathom. He must know some way to reverse our timeline of now, to give some slimmer of hope taken under the Stellarian yoke of terror.” I stated. This would not be easy, and I truly do not know how I would communicate, but I would do it. If I had to burn that world to ash to make the god listen, I would do just that.

“How intriguing. You truly believe you can sway him to your cause?” he questioned.

“I don’t know what I can do. However, what I do know is that I was able to make *you* listen to my gripes; I was able to even harness power that could have fell a god. Call it a whim, but I think you gods have underestimated Bòvarians for a long time, especially from the lack of communication. He will not expect the hell I will bring to him.” I said. I had resolve in my voice; I got one of my goals completed. I knew why I existed; why the world is the way it is. However, I still must do something. I exist now in a physical body once again; I have meaning in this world.

“Your resolve is amusing. I forgot, after these long years, of how determined humans could be. Very well, Princess of Panahon. I will send you into Higayon; the distorted world of time. I have not seen it or my brother in a very long, long time; I do not know what exactly will await you in his world. I doubt it will be as...abysmal as my own.” he judged. It was hard to truly understand that the gods we worshipped so fervently were just like us humans; they made mistakes, the same as we did. Not only that, they were war more petty it seemed, compared to us. The three of them saw; they watched as our world fell into ruin, but there were too fearful to intervene. Fearful that it may only bring ruin, and take one of their lives as it did to Skabelse.

Sighing, he rose up. He dusted off his pants but stopped after realizing the dirt left nothing on him, and put his staff to the ground. As the bottom touched the barren earth, I felt pressure being exerted once more. Clouds above us started to form, and thunderous noises started to appear

overhead. He started muttering strange incantations, moving his staff over the ground. He sketched out a circle with many intricate symbols inside; they seemed like hieroglyphs, perhaps used in ancient times. As soon as he finished tracing over the last one, he once again bumped his staff into the ground. Slowly, his drawing glowed with a blue hue. It seemed to secrete its own energy into the earth around me. The blue turned into a dark purple, and small black wisps started to come out of the carefully drawn circle. Wind started to pick up, most likely from the clouds overhead.

“Cathavor, while you now have answers of a god’s intellect, you have not made an ally. However, you neither have made an enemy today. While you nearly killed me, you also showed me the will of humans that I had forgotten from so long ago. If you manage to come back here, to the world of antimatter, I will be most intrigued on what you have to say.” he said. As he finished, the circle of enchantments started to shoot out a sort of dark, crimson light. It shot up into the clouds, a magnificent cylinder of fervent light. As it finished, all that remained in the circle was what appeared to be a portal; a gateway into Higayon, the world of Digala.

I once again went over everything that went on and on in my head. I would now have to somehow reach Digala, and communicate with him; the same as I did to Tirigna. More so than that, I would have to figure out how to actually persuade him to my cause and goals.

Skabelse still lingered in my mind. What had caused him to disappear, leaving all of Bòvar behind him? Whatever it was brought nothing but true grief to the other gods and seemingly the entire world. I would have to find out.

Tirigna looked at me with his eyes and nodded. It seemed as if he regained his strength; enough at least to revert back into his primal form. He touched the crystal in his neck, and was surrounded by a bright, white light. It consumed his body, and all that came out was the original beastly form of the God of Antimatter. I could now see what it actually looked like compared only the shadow I saw from earlier; his colors were mostly gray, red and black. He had a long, arthropodic body and a face of six eyes and two dark horns on top. His wings sprouted from his side, and he flew off into the distance; back into the dark skies he originally came from.

I looked back from him flying off to the portal in front of me. This would lead me to my next destination; Higayon, the world of time. This is where I would finally greet Digala, the great lord of progression and time itself. The god who I had worshipped as a young Panahonian. Would my Stellarian descent that Tirigna foretold be an issue in communication? I could not predict anything.

The portal burned bright. As I peered into it, all I saw were crimson and dark purple flame like things coming off of the edges. However, I could tell it wasn’t actual fire. I breathed in and out, again and again. I saw my breath dissipate in front of the flames. My entire life went through once more in my mind. The suffering, the grief, but most of all, the fear. The lord that my father, the entirety of Panahon, had revered. The only actual entity I could generally remember throughout my life.

Fate, crafted by these gods, brought me here. It is the will I have now; to live and breath in a world that could possibly not know the same suffering as I did now. Courage, perseverance; shreds of hope that somehow survived through the dark times of this world. It empowered me; I will communicate with these gods. If I cannot reach their heavens, I will raise the hells they hid from.

Knowing all of this, and understanding the dark fate that may await me, I looked once more around me, and then back into the endless flames of the portal. Breathing in, letting hope and valor flow through my veins, I stepped into the abyss of flame.

Chapter 3

Currents continued to rush past me. I couldn't see, but I could still feel. It was just like limbo from before. However, this time, I felt the will of more than myself. I could detect the will of Tirigna; his goal of sending me here and intrigue of the world in general. It seems that after my conversation with him, he had renewed interest of Bòvar.

A stream of consciousness had been playing through my mind for a while now. Some of the thoughts were silly, while others were violently serious. An example was my home. Panahon was not as weak as many thought it was. My father established his kingdom hundreds of miles from the

Stellar Realm in the Southeast area of Tlec. From what he told me, he was a simple villager from the nearby kingdom of Keletande. He was greeted by many of the nomads who had suffered from the ageless diasporas of history with no contempt. He told me how he was able to gain land for them by helping to diminish the Ash Dunes around Panahon. That was more or less the emergence of our kingdom.

Had it not been for those nomads, we would have not even survived for more than a year. Why they lent their help to us; why they didn't just murder us strangers at first sight is beyond me. They could have used my father's magic for their own gain and then kill him in cold blood. They didn't have to at all give us aid for the construction of a kingdom, but they still did. They pledged unfaltering allegiance to Panahon and its people. They fought with us.

Did it even matter now? After the Conquering, I have no idea what came of those nomads; the brave warriors who selflessly put down their life for a kingdom they barely owed. Most likely vanquished; killed and forgotten by the Stellarians. Did they truly care so little about the other people in this continent?

The flow of thoughts continued, into the abyss around me. How long would I be here? Thinking, but not seeing, just like before? The god had not specified how long this would be, nor what I would have to do, if I ended up having to do anything. Do I have to will my eyes open once more, and endure the magical purgation? Or do I just wait; an abyss of nothing soon to fade away and reveal the dimension of time?

I kept thinking. Again, back to the Panahon people, to the world in general, and then of the gods once more; how they connect to Bòvar in so many more ways than I originally thought. These beings; they created the world that we live in, more or less. Even if they didn't create the terrestrial ground, the four of them still birthed magic; they still birthed the people, and they were the fathers of matter. They affected more in our world than I believe they could imagine.

Yes, Tirigna, Palkori and Digala are all gods in their own right who were just as important as creating mankind and letting us breathe in a world of magic and nature. However, Skabelse is the main lord that has plagued my mind. He left Bòvar, for some reason or other, and didn't think of the consequences it may cause. His disappearance caused the exile of Fae, innocent or not. It destroyed the spirit world we could once reside in. Most importantly, it sealed the loss of communication us Bòvarians may have with the gods above us.

I can't help but ponder; what was the creation god thinking? What had Skabelse hoped to gain out of leaving; I don't understand. Tirigna had said that his disappearance was subsequent to the defeat of the Gubat Fae, and that was due to the loss of their power supplier. However, I can't understand why. Had he aimed to end the Great War? There must have been a better way than to just disappear and leave this crippling world behind.

I continued like this for a while; just thinking; pondering upon the world. The tingling sensation that I felt from those flame like things subsided after a bit. I had to think about how I would actually make Digala listen to my requests. I was about to enter another God's realm, but this time I am not as naive as before. I know what I'm capable of, and the attitudes these gods carry. However, I don't know if my newfound light ability would actually come into help here. I didn't feel tired, per say, but I could feel a small hole in my mind. I felt it slowly refilling; as if my magic was a cup of water slowly being refilled by a pitcher. It was going to be quite a bit until I felt it completely filled once more.

How would I communicate with Digala? I still am not sure in any regard. Tirigna was only there as I willed it with a light filled catharsis; calling down light from my hands and smiting his ignorance with it. However, I don't have such magic. Digala might not even revert to its man form

to talk to me. Perhaps being a Panahonian royal would increase my chances, but even that felt like a stretch; princess or pauper, we were most likely all the same to these gods.

I knew, though. Digala was the embodiment of time; the function that our world needs to progress. His power would be critical; it would be the catalyst of where my fate goes. I just had to make him listen. He had to hear the cries of his creations; the denizens of his own world. Surely, he had some glimmer of care for Bòvar. It didn't matter if he didn't however. If it turns out he doesn't give a whit about the world, then I would make him. It could take my entire magic away, it could even kill me; I didn't care. I would give it all just to talk with him.

Once again, I came to the realization that I can't open my eyes. I keep trying, feeling dread once again creep up to my mind as I would have to force them open once more. I prepared, emotionally and mentally, on dealing with the magic assaults. Was it a test? Did each of the six elements want to see if I was truly fit to communicate with a god?

Breathe, I told myself. Even if I couldn't see, I could tell my body was there. I could think, but I couldn't touch. I couldn't smell, see, or talk, but I knew I was physically there. Perhaps in the portal, or maybe even already in Higayon; I was physically alive and here. I did as I told myself; breathing in and out at a steady pace. And I willed my eyes to open.

Just like before, I felt each element as coarse as before. Harsh and unrelenting, each came slowly and vigorously. The ridiculing zephyr turning into searing flames of absolution. A transition into typhoons of ice and churning waters. The solar elements passed, and the next mental trial came. I would not break, however. The unworldly elements came next; harsh storms of sand grazing every hair I had, slowly fading into branches of ruin. It was black and dark, and perhaps always the hardest to go through. Eventually, I felt the release of life; green and cathartic; the embodiment of pure release.

After all of this, just like before, my eyes would not completely open. However, this time, it was for a different reason. There was one more trial I would endure. I had unlocked light; a sacred magic sealed away ages ago that no one had anticipated might return one day. But now, I wield it. And just like the other elements, it would attack me.

I felt it slowly creep up into my mind, after the life magic that had relieved me of the other elements from before hand. It came slowly, burning into my mind. It was white and harsh; it seemed like stars were being seared into my mind. I breathed once more, feeling the pain develop. It continued to attack my mind, as if trying to find a break in it; to find me not worthy of its power. Despite the great agony, I did not break. I would not break.

The light was now me. I was the light. I was a being; a guardian of hope and pain. It soared through my body, still trying to find a break. It could not. I was determined; from the start of my divine journey, I had the one goal of communication. If it took my body being burned alive by the pure starlight from the gods, then so be it.

It seemed as if I passed the test of these elements. I held onto my humanity; I stayed sane under the great pressure of the magic. I would not break; I couldn't break from under all the stress. Even if I felt pain I had never felt before, in truth, I had felt much, much worse in comparison. And with this resolve, the light calmed. It turned from imposing to giving; no longer was it seeing if I could handle such an ancient art. Now, the light was one with me. I felt the hole in my mind fill. I was whole once more.

Feeling all the pain subside and letting power soar through my veins, I started to feel determination. To understand and to feel; to do something once more that may help this world. To burn the sins of our past and seek a new world of no gods. To find peace with no threat of war or conquering constantly looming over. To live.

This was what I was meant for. I felt it; the will and want of gods to amend for their past; to atone for what Skabelse had done and the trauma it caused within the world. Our world. I was Mestrine, a princess of a forgotten kingdom. I was a slave, forced to forget my own self. And now, I would find a way to fix it all. There has to be a way to fix the errors of gods and men alike.

I knew the resolve. I felt it just like when I was in limbo going to Tirigna; I had a goal and I would fulfill it. Digala would hear me, and understand what mortals can truly do. I felt myself glow, brighter and brighter. I was a candle that could not be doused; a current of magic that would not be deterred. I was Mestrine Cathavor.

I breathed once more, and opened my eyes. And in stark contrast to the world of antimatter, this world was alive. It seemed to truly be the dimension of time.

I was in some kind of forest that could have been mistaken for a Bòvarian set of woodlands. It looked so similar to my world; I was filled with befuddlement. The trees were monotonous; they were the same as almost every other in the area. The foliage around them were quaint; small flowers with tufts of grass appearing around the roots that leaked into the ground. Looking around, the sky seemed to shine on every aspect of nature. All of them were alive and so inexplicably green. Clouds overhead complimented the light blue blanket over Higayon.

I looked down at my feet, often blinking repetitively to make sure I could still see. I was still in my clothing from Bòvar, albeit cleaned and no longer worn. I had the appearance of a slave still, yet now I lay no longer under the yoke of Stellarians. But, if I'm free from them, why do I feel as if they weren't my true enslavers? Every piece of information I learn of our gods, the more it seems as if they're the true enslavers. It bothered me to a point where I just couldn't shake off this feeling of captivity.

I looked back up, and far from the meadow I was in, I could see the top of a building. It seemed like I had found my destination; the Tower of Time.

I again thought to back to all I knew of Digala. The Tower of Time wasn't anything that was super sacred in Panahon, however we did see depictions of it's interior; murals or dioramas of the tall building that loomed over Higayon. It was large; expansive to the point you could see the entire world of time from its windows. I remembered gears and turning, mechanical concoctions that would dot the walls of the tower. Most of all, I recalled the Orb of Time. It lay at the center of the tower, and was critical in keeping the world in order. It was revered as a weapon of balance that kept equilibrium throughout our world. We were taught at a young age how dangerous it could actually be if it fell into the wrong hands.

I took a breath, and looked back around to the forest around me. I couldn't see that far deep into the small spaces between the trees; I would have to go head first and hope to Digala above that I would survive. So blinking slowly, I took my first step forwards.

The grass that was tall enough to graze my ankles felt so soft; the blades didn't instigate any negative reaction like the dried, dead foliage back in Gliscon Citadel. I kept forward, noting the flowers and clovers that appeared in my path. The trees did not give up any space, so peering into the forests was pointless. I would just have to trust my instincts and hope I find my way.

It at least seemed that the Tower of Time was getting closer and closer with every step I took. The top I could see before started to bend into the shape of a very large spire, perhaps part of a steeple. Moving forwards, I kept moving in the path of nature that outstretched before me. I wondered; why would there be a clean path in front of me? Was it perhaps the road that men took before the Gods stopped communicating? Or was it just the bad design choice of a god? Whatever the answer may be, I thank the Gods above that it was traversable.

The road kept stretching. However, soon I realized that some light started to shine through the spaces of the trees. The conifers from before had nothing in between them besides darkness too hard to peer through. They became lighter and easier to see through; suffice it to say, I was intrigued. The sky didn't seem to get any brighter or darker; the world was stagnant in a sense. Perhaps it would change with time.

My eyes kept darting around; the path ahead of me, the trees on the side with lilies and chrysanthemums. The flowers were just like children sticking close to their mother. It struck me with awe and wonder that this was the world I was in now; the realm that my parents, nay entire kingdom revered. Higayon, the world of time.

Eventually the spaces between the nature around me grew large as well, as if it were to fit something. And very slowly, my suspicion was proven correct. I looked over to some of the area to my left, and saw what looked like an apparition of what seemed to be my life, suspended indefinitely without any progression of time. A still image made out of dust or dirt; sediments of the earth depicting my life and its passing.

In one clearing, where the grass was especially thick, I looked into the space. The trees directly next to it joined near the middle of their wood; it was a fusion of nature. It was a strange, green arc. This apparition was my birth, it seemed. There was a man sitting next to a woman on a bed, whose eyes were teary eyed set on a young newborn in blankets. That cloth wrapped behind was me; a baby who knew no pain or suffering. Despite the cries that the baby let out, I could tell it wasn't of anguish or fear. It was of change; things starting anew.

The memory rippled, and all of a sudden the apparition started to move; animated yet somber. I couldn't hear anything, but I saw the mother clutch the baby tighter to her chest. My father put one hand on her back and the other on his wife's hands that held their heir of Panahon. The way they held me was peaceful and quiet; appreciating the ignorance of newborns and the hope they may bring.

The mother kept quietly crying, while the father just sighed. He looked over to an area I couldn't see within the vision. His mouth moved; words being created that I couldn't understand. He looked at my mother and nodded, as if something had been established prior to this moment. My father slowly got up and walked out of the vision, leaving just my mother. The dirt started to dissipate, showing only the outline of my mother, and the child she so carefully clutched. The love parents give was truly illuminated within this moment. And with a last teardrop, the image completely cleared; specks of dust and dirt falling back into the ground.

I couldn't exactly tell what I was feeling. A sense of longing gnawed at my mind; the yearn for the warmth and love from the two people who never were able to give it. My mother, taken by a disease. At least, that's what the suppliants say. My father, killed in the onslaught of the Conquering. This left me, a young girl with no family; an orphan now having to face an empire of storms.

Shaking away any of the silver lined in my eyes, I moved on from this clearing and onto the next. Thinking about my mother and father; the warmth that remained in my heart for so long from their tears and blood, I blinked. Their memory was lost in my mind for so long; I wondered where their souls now lay, drifting endlessly in limbo.

I would avenge them. Their untimely deaths now joined my previous resolve of understanding the world. I felt their determination they must have felt at their end; for their child to be a beacon of light and hope for the Panahon people, nay the entirety of Tlec. This resolution I finally accepted, filled with their grief and wishes, filled me with an intrepid realization. I now carried their will within me.

I looked at the next clearing on the trail. I wandered off the trail at this point; the road to Digala was no longer my priority. I had to face my past within this forest, so it seems. I understood that this would truly prepare me, if I was to face a god. The trees blended together anyway to the point the foliage was just a conglomeration of green parchment against blue strokes of paint. Despite being off-trail, another road seemed to gradually grow right in front of me.

Shakily walking towards the next clearing, I mentally prepared for whatever the God of Time may have willed me to see. Blinking once again, I shook my head as if flicking away the doubt and fear; the desolation of loneliness. I looked down at some of the flowers dotting the roots of the trees in front me, clinging so close to their shade. Breathing in slowly, not knowing what to expect, I looked up between the trees.

The image was just as detailed as the last. Dirt particles floating adrift to create an image of my life; this time, I faced a warm, sunny day. It was me running across one of the gardens in the castle. The infant from the previous illustration now grew into a happy, carefree child whose blond locks blew so ever tenderly within the breeze. I had forgotten how quaint the gardens were; they were a home from all of the royal ruckus I was forced to deal with.

Oras, the capital of Panahon, was intertwined with nature from its foundation. I could remember how the capital was carved into a mountain that was not corrupted yet by the Ash Dunes. It was quiet and filled with wildlife; it was also inhabited primarily by the nomads who had to assimilate into isolation. Our kingdom flourished on the connection with nature; it was essential to our own survival. Thus, our gardens were practically just parts of the outside world that was left untouched as the castle was built around it.

The trees were wild in the sanctuaries; they grew tall and were giants in the ground. There were all kinds of wild flowers that would house thousands of bugs and insects. My father had walked here with me sometimes; though I was alone many times, there were few instances he could spare from his royal obligations to spend with his oft forgotten daughter. Those days were so warm; they were some of the happiest I could remember of my early life.

After looking at the image for a bit, it once again wavered and started to move. I could now see a young boy come into the picture, approximately the same age as me. We ran around some of the orange trees next to us, and fell onto the grass. We watched as the clouds in the sky moved so delicately, like smoke wisping away. From the close bond we had to the particulate face he bore, I knew exactly who this boy was. My closest friend from Panahon; the one I trusted all the way until his death in Gliscon Citadel. Cynder Meyalward, another young Panahonian.

His eyes were hazel, matching his dark brown hair. His smile was bright and unhindered by the turmoil of the outside world; freckles dotted all around his face. He was grinning, and seemed to be laughing. I was right next to him, feeling the warmth and joy radiate off of him. He got up, and started to climb up the tree next to us. I watched in amazement as he got near the top, plucked an orange off, and threw it down to me. I sat up a bit before hand, and caught the orange; he got back down next to me. I watched as he swiftly peeled off the rind with only his left hand. He never failed to amaze me with his physical demeanor; it was a beautiful sight as he could juggle almost eight items at a time, or crack an egg with one hand while flipping food in the other; it all paled when it came to his swordplay, however.

Panahon was in a dilemma; the Stellar Realm was intent on closing in on the small kingdom, and my father knew that. While our domain was not at all focused on our military strength, girls and boys alike were all taught the way of the sword. All of my peers, including I, had been quite average with swordplay, however we all paled in comparison to the sheer physical strength and skill of Cynder. I truly admired him like no other peer of mine.

In this image, we were both just children; I wasn't a princess and he wasn't some conscripted child of Panahon; we were friends in times of hardship. Oh, how I wish that could have lasted forever.

He peeled off a slice of the orange, and offered it up to me. Giggling slightly, I put the orange in my mouth and seemed to say something to him; in turn, he laughed as well. Finally, with the giggling image of my past, the earthen particles soon dissipated once more, leaving behind only the clearing of trees. This time, I felt an even stronger sense of longing. My mother died when I was young, and I didn't have to witness my father's murder. However, I saw Cynder as he deteriorated. I saw him in the camp; jaundiced and pale, he would walk around lifelessly. Both he and I lived through the horrors of the citadel, however he had succumbed to the pressure and hopelessness. I didn't blame him though; he fell like the majority of us did.

I looked down, and few tears dripped onto blades of grass below me. The sky was slowly turning darker, signifying the passing day. The leaves and flowers blew gently, and wisped my leftover tears away. This sense of longing for companionship was one I had ignored for so long; I was focused on only survival and understanding, but to what end? The people I knew and the bonds I made in my life; they guided me far more than I gave them credit for.

I turned away, and continued onto the makeshift path in front of me. Trees previously in front of me moved and made way for the steps I would take; I was single handedly molding the path the trees took, it seemed. Where the trees once were, only grass remained. I barely understood the world around me; did the God of Time truly spend his time just fiddling with a forest of memories?

I went on, occasionally letting my mind wander; the beginning of my childhood to the dark end of my young adult life. I had grown apathetic about it all, and doubt starting to creep up in my mind. Did Bòvar even need, nay deserve saving? I wanted to know why our world was the way it was, but what happens after I learn? What would I do with new information presented in front of me; would I even use it?

I shook my head multiple times to the intrusive thoughts that weaved in my mind, and walked in front of the only clearing I could see. I prepared for what may be in front of me; so far, both the images created were not sad in the sense that they were filled with desolation; they sparked long forgotten wants from within me.

I blinked, took a deep breath, and looked in front of me at the arching trees. The dirt came up from below, and started to merge into an image, just as detailed as the others. The image I saw depicted a small person, along with what seemed to be a larger figure in front. The face, however, was not visible. It was covered with a mesh mask. The smaller person soon completely appeared, and from the terrified expression she bore, I knew what this memory was.

The god brought me to the downfall of Panahon; the Conquering. This entire situation was blocked out of my head; I refused to think about it at all during the time of enslavement. I couldn't handle breaking from not only the pressure of the Stellarians, but the thought of my old home, scarred and burned by history's wretched hands.

Tears immediately welled in my eyes as the scene not only played out in front of me, but flashed back in my mind ever so vividly. The dark smoke rolling off the windows but into the room through the opening of the door; the smell of burnt denizens flooding my senses in every possible way. The shining yet lethally sharp sword of the man in front of me, slick with blood of the maid he had just cut down. His hand, beckoning me forward into the abyss of darkness I would remain in for so many years to come.

I desperately tried to yell out; to stop the young Mestrine from continuing into the arms of an evil that knew no bounds. Despite the yearning for a yell that could match the one I screamed out in

Tirigna's land, nothing came out. It was as if the burdens of my life I carried, and my knowing of what laid ahead for the young girl was caught in my throat, blocking any kind of resistance from coming out. And so I watched; I looked as the girl walked slowly forward into the arms of the Stellarian soldier. As they walked out of the room, the dust and sand once again dissipated.

I couldn't move, not even as the image in front of me completely disappeared. The only sound I could hear were my own tears that welled up in my eyes and spilled onto the dirt below me. All the other ambience that the forest of memories may have held had quieted. I just sat there, crying for only the gods knew how long. Time was distorted here, after all. Who knew how much time had passed on the world that was below me; how many more died at the hands of conquerors.

I had to move on. The memories of my life, tragic as they were, had always led me to the ultimatum; understanding the world. I had received wisdom from a god, and yet now it feels as if I knew less than I did before. The history of the world I resided in had been revealed, yet the revelation bestowed upon me was almost too wondrous to believe. It was so hard to believe the gods were actual beings and not just historical myths blooming and growing into deities worshipped throughout all the lands. After years of captivity, it was strange to think that these spirits actually watched over us during our demise. This anger only furthered my want to comprehend the world and how it may be saved; so others may not know the suffering I do.

I gathered myself, breathing steadily in and out. I had stood up, and wiped any specks of dust off of my clothes. I closed my eyes, feeling nirvana and resolve fill my mind. I understood my goal and what I would have to do to achieve them. I needed to talk with the time god. Even as the lingering images shown to me mocked me and hoped to break me; wanted me to cripple in fear and desolation, I would not crack. I couldn't; not after coming so far from my original place.

I opened my eyes, and faced where I was. I looked at the clearing of trees that had shown me the images of the Conquering. Taking one last breath, I sighed and turned away. The path behind me had changed from the one I had taken to get here. The path no longer parted; it was only a one way treading. The trees cluttered closely once again, and it grew strangely dark. I moved forward, breathing steadily and readying my mind for what may lay ahead. I could feel that my destination would be soon.

Walking slowly, I noted how the flowers no longer clung to the bases of the trees. They seemed to lean away, as if their great mother had done something to perturb them. That must have been the god's doing. For what reason, though? To mock me? It didn't matter, I reminded myself. I wouldn't let his nitpickings sway me from my goal.

I reached the end; it had grown especially dark near here. Little light peered through the leaves, and the trees here had grown especially thick. A slight wind blew past, gradually increasing in fervor. The dirt in front of me once again stirred, and started to rise up. However, instead of a picture, I could see the outline of a person. It grew in detail; the face, the stomach, the clothing. The physical attributes of a woman soon appeared, and the items she possessed started to appear with it. Her white tunic formed, followed soon by a sheathed scimitar on the side.

I didn't think this god would be this cruel. I refused to believe that he would show me this woman; the one who had defiled what remained of my dignity. My hope. But he did, and I was forced to watch as the dirt culminated continuously, and continued to grow to full size. Color started to appear, and the skin turned pink. Her colored clothing grew as vibrant as before; the wind started to pick up speed about now, and the hair that would appear on her head covered by a cap grew apparent. After a minute of detailing, as if a great artist sculpted a woman from bare earth, the eyes of the sexual sadist opened once more.

My left hand instinctively clutched close to my chest, and I looked down at my groin to make sure it was untouched. I felt fear and hatred build up from my stomach into my eyes. I couldn't fathom it; every other life event I had seen was made up of small dirt particles that, while was realistic, was easily detectable to be just an image. This creation; it was as if she was here. Perhaps she was!? What would this woman be doing in the realm of time?

I needed her gone; I couldn't bring myself to look back up at her eyes. For, if I did, I knew the crimson lust that would fill them. Yet, I understood that she wouldn't just *leave*. This was a trial set out by Digala, no doubt about it. I had to face her; my past. How long ago had I died, anyway? Had this woman passed from Bòvar as well?

"Are you just going to stand there?"

As soon as she spoke, I started to unclench my hand. I felt a warm blaze build up in them, capable of turning this forest to cinders. I started to breath deeply and less orderly. Anguish started to take control of my thoughts, and I felt a hot feeling of heartache build up. No, this wasn't light; it wasn't an ancient art sealed, screaming of ancestries past. This was fire; my personal hearth of agony and torment. This was *me*. I had to release it; I needed this out into the world. I wanted this woman to understand the dark desolation that struck even the thinnest marrow in my bones.

It seemed as if the world stopped around me. All I could hear was cackling embers, clutched close to my heart. The trees stayed inanimate, and all around me grew dark. The one thing I could see was this woman. I had to face her; see my past, and get through it once more. I would not be deterred.

I am Mestrine Cathavor, and I will not be afraid.

"Darling—" she started to speak, but I would not let her finish. Following the first word, I looked up straight into her eyes, peering to the darkest crevices of her mind. She would receive my own retribution of woe and need.

"*Enough.*" I grounded out. I felt a small breeze of wind turn into gusts around my feet, and I combined both of my hands in front of my chest. The fire built, up and up. It yearned to reach the sky; burn the world to ash. This emotion... It was the one that the gods were trying to test. Perhaps to see if my emotions were to get the better of me as they did with Skabelse in ages past. I would not let them; I would prove myself.

Elements breathed through me, and I knew that I was ready. I tore apart both of my hands and put them out, fire breathing in both. I rolled them both into fists, and clashed them together in front of me. Her eyes remained cold and seemingly lifeless, yet they continued to peer into my own world of need. I felt the fire grow in one hand turn into a solid formation, and the one in the right grow sharp. Taking a breath, I put apart both of my hands, and held in my left a sword. Made of an obsidian hilt, and a flaming blade with molten lava flowing through the middle. A blade of fire and pure, raw magic. My weapon filled with resolve.

"Oh, perfect, that's PERFECT!" she spoke and grew into a yell; it was followed with a wicked laughter. I watched but remained clutching my sword as she drew her scimitar from her side. It seemed like I could hear the metal cut through the wind. She pointed the edge at me.

"Now, my dear, let's commence. Oh, I so look forward to feasting upon you once more." she said. I didn't doubt her convictions. This trial now turned into a test of strength and resolve; I would have to strike this woman down. Understanding my situation, I breathed and looked into her eyes once more. Raising my sword, I charged.

I was met with a flurry of movements. I was never one for combat; I had sword training with my masters as a child, but I was oft scolded for my lack of agility. I always opted for magic battle, with tempests of blazes rather than strikes or swarms. Everytime she moved forward, I moved back,

and followed with my own strikes. Everytime the blades met, sparks flew off. This was truly a fight that would ring in my mind for a long time to come.

“I never caught your name, whore. What was it?” she asked, moving forward and continuing to defend against my upper attack. It had required me to jump up to land that high; descending down, I spoke.

“My name...the weight it carries is far too much for one such as you to comprehend. You do not deserve it.”

“Oh you silly girl. You think I want it so bad? I only thought I should have it, so when I feel you squirm under me once more I could whisper it into your ear; so you could understand just how powerless you are. I suppose you will always be a feckless slave.” she responded. She was able to speak with such precision; her words tied with her fighting so leisurely. Just how much combat was seen by the Masharan pirates?

We continued for what seemed like hours. I concentrated on my breathing during our fight; I would not let a small error get in the way of my goals. Her words struck me with hatred and anger, but I knew that if I let it get the better of me, all of this would be in vain. This woman was not worth all of the trouble I went through. Even if I died in the future, it would *not* be because of this monstrosity reincarnated as a human woman.

The dirt under me grew coarse, and some trees that bloomed around our perimeter had been set ablaze by flying sparks. Never once, however, did I draw from my well of fire. I would not use magic in this fight; I wouldn't let my power win. I wanted *me* to draw victory; not my flames.

We both took on sides of defense and offense many times in the fight, and it seemed like we both grew tired. However, I had finally backed her into a closely knit triangle of shrubs and trees. She fought back, but I knew that there was no way out for her. Screaming a battlecry of ascendancy, I struck my blade. It sliced through her hand, and it fell from off her arm. Every second it took for the flames to engulf her side seemed to ring out infinitely brittle; it was as if a tightrope was being pulled apart, and finally snapped as the hand fell. It laid on the ground, clutching the sword it was just wielding. She started to laugh as the blood rushed out. She fell back, sighed.

“It seems like you won. I never knew a bitch like you were capable of such power. Oh, how ironic that the worthless bug overpowers her conqueror.” she spoke. She never once flinched with her words; she showed no signs of pain.

“I have nothing to say to you. May you rot in the deepest pits of hell.” I spoke with a lethally cold passion. I had won in a fight against a sadist who had stripped me of dignity. Yet, I felt empty. Nothing in this hole was filled. Perhaps that was an answer I would have to keep searching for.

Nothing remained for me here. I breathed, and raised my sword.

Chapter 4

My bones felt an unearthly chill in them. That woman would not stop lingering in the back of my mind; she was another mental demon I would have to bear with for the long road ahead.

I didn't know what to think. Everything felt so quiet; it was like all the life in this clearing was leached from the soil itself. The only sound that I could focus on was the faint crackling of molten lava within the middle of my sword. The blade itself cooled and was now a plain black; it was like a thick layer of ash coated the flow. Despite this, I still heard the faint movement of the lava within. Interested, I put my hand to the blade of the sword. It was warm, but it did not burn me in any

capacity. I suppose it made sense; this weapon was birthed from the raging embers within my core. It was, in a sense, me, and currently, I did not want to hurt myself.

I didn't have any sort of sheath with me, so I just slung the blade over my shoulder. I considered countless names for the sword. After all, every great weapon within history held some sort of title. Ashglar, the tome of ages past, supposedly somewhere deep within the Stellarian capital, Calgon. Lenaar, the ancient staff of the Fae; lurking through the great meadows of the southern continent. Divsol, a hallowed sword inscribed in the gates of hell themselves. These weapons, as mythical as they were, provided all of us with some sentiment of bewilderment and pride. They felt like actual relics, despite the doubt they even still remained over the ages Bòvar has endured.

I stared back at where I just was; the first duel I had fought since my sword fighting lessons in Panahon. Back then, I knew each person I fought. Whether it was Cynder, or another one of my peers, I would know they never meant harm. In training, it was all for the sole purpose of enhancing our skill of the sword. However, in this case, it was not training. It was a fight that could have very well been the end of my journey.

The road behind me, to my surprise, had almost closed off. The trail that was once there was now a thick grouping of trees and bushes. It seemed hopeless to try and go back; return to where the Masharan still laid, smiling a grin so wicked it was seared into my very soul. Feeling shaken once more, as well as noting the sky turning a dull orange, I continued to ponder upon a name for the blade that was made up of my fiery catharsis, and started once more down the trail of memories.

The tower that was once ahead of me was no longer visible; I was truly in the deep confines of the forest. Despite this, I saw the same orange color of the sky faintly in the distance between trees far ahead of me. I assumed that marked the end of this long, nostalgic hamlet. After the woman, there were no more apparitions for me to watch. Was she a last trial? Old thoughts of the good, arrogant and cruel, started to flood back once more. Did Digala truly wish to see me suffer like this? The omniscient mind of a seraph truly knew no bounds for morality.

After walking the long trail, I faced now only a few meters from the end of the forest. The orange light was still there, yet I could see nothing else. I would have to make it to the edge to peer down to Higayon; to the Tower of Time. My sword, laying upon my shoulder, secreted warmth I had not felt in a long, long time. I felt a strange sense of peace; a calm before once more having to face my fate and irreparable world.

I knew that the time had come. I would have to face yet another god, and I got a foreboding feeling that this one would not be nearly as communicative as the previous. The lord of time, Digala. The god my home worshipped and revered for its tragic existence. Perhaps, I would not succeed. This entire journey would have been for nothing. Yet, I know somewhere deep in my scarred soul that would not be the case. I have come too far.

The clearings in front of me that once had a sunset peering through now closed. I looked around; turning behind me, I saw a patch of stone on the ground. I kneeled, and looked closely. On the edge, there were six carefully inscribed symbols. I immediately understood these as the great elements of magic; fire, water, earth, balance, death and life. In the middle of all these marks was a passage, inscribed through histories.

“Those who would stand in the face of providence,
Daring to circumvent divine will,
Plunge your resolve into the breast of the earth.
Look into the fate of the world, and stand undaunted.
Only then will the gods hear your call.”

An inscribement of warning? Or was it perhaps inviting me; did Digala truly wish for me to go forward? I remembered, however, that humans who passed into the afterworld could travel to the realms of the gods. I am not the first to read this, though I could likely be the last.

I thought thoroughly about what the slab meant by “the breast of the earth”. I assumed the resolve I must plunge referred to my sword. It was, after all, made purely of my hearth of emotions. It was my resolve. Not only that, but looking into the fate of the world, and coming out undaunted. What would I be forced to see; could it truly be worse than the woman I had to face?

I once again thought about my life. These gods continue to ramble about ‘fates of the world’, yet what about my own? There couldn’t be one end destiny for the entirety of the world, could there? Each person, born from the earth that birthed countless others, had their own will to make a choice. The fate of the world was only decided by ruthless conquerors; those steered in the direction of darkness. Perhaps, if that cycle of rulers was broken, the world could know peace once more. What was even happening in Bòvar right now? I could only pray the ground still laid intact; that the tides of the oceans still slammed against the shores and the wind still blew against the trees.

I knew there was no way to get around what I had to do, and where I would end up. I had to see in what way our world was fated to go, and still have the want to change it. I grabbed my sword off my shoulder, and held it in my hand. I breathed in, and once again reached into my well of magic. I felt the warmth, tender sparks of flame move. However, it felt as if I was only skimming. I tightened my focus, and dipped deeper down. The magic grew searing; I was now bathing my mind in pure light. I felt determination and resolve build within it; I had a goal to reach, and it was up to my own hands, scarred as they were, to grasp.

My sword grew hotter, and started to light once more. The middle veins of the blade shone once more, and the lava grew brighter. I pointed my weapon back at the clearing in front of me. I was ready.

I took my other hand and grasped both together. Taking one final breath, I plunged the blade into the ground. My eyes started to burn, yet they wouldn’t close. I couldn’t rub off the pain that screeched into my pupils. All I could see was white. I had to face it; the ‘fate of the world’.

Breathe.

I couldn’t stop heaving deeply. Everything was hot; bright, bright, burning.

BREATHE.

My mind was screaming at me to just calm; to face this with a mind of resolve and not one of fear. I knew it was right, yet I could not bring myself to stop focusing on the pain. I... I wouldn’t do it. Why? I was ready to face a history, and I thought about what I would see was just going to be more visions of the world. Was Bòvar truly fated to be engulfed in a searing light? Is this what the gods meant; ‘the fate of the world’? I never expected it would be so desolate; such a holy retribution.

I had to accept it. If I didn’t act; If I didn’t let myself understand that I could fail, nothing would happen. My home would then most definitely be destined to slavery and fear, and the rest of the world would follow suit. I had to act against my fear. Fate would not deter me; it continued to try and steer me into a place of desolation, yet I would not let it. I would ram it back into my own direction.

Knowing all of this, I breathed. I let my blood flow with magic; let the white light consume me. In this acceptance, the white vision in front of me started to appear with a figure. It started to laugh; the outline of it was a woman. I feared the worst; was it the Masharan once more?

This worry was quickly washed away when I saw the hair of this woman was not nearly as short. It flowed down, and rather than a scimitar, she held a staff. Continuing to breath, she slowly descended and came into vision. I didn’t see much of her; the blinding light around me almost

quivered in fear to light her. However, what I did see, was a gem of black shining through on her neck. It was as dark as the night sky, and her staff was adorned with one as well. It was reminiscent of a god. In fact, I could feel the same aura radiate. Yet, there were only four that I knew of, and they were all lords. The fate of the world... it was a goddess?

The laugh she had grew louder; unlike the sadist, this one was empty. It felt as if it was a vessel for emotion, yet none came out of it. This goddess.. She did not belong in this world. She had to be rid of. I looked down at my hands, and I was still holding my sword. This entire vision was only mental I assumed, yet I still felt the pain and need.

The woman kept laughing, with her dark, hidden face. I raised my sword up, directly at her neck. She didn't stop her cackle, even as light started to pour out the tip of my blade. It shot straight at her, yet it didn't seem to pierce the shadow. I breathed deeper, and felt the will that I carried within me. I could not be deterred from the goal; I had to get rid of the lady, at least in this vision.

The light intensified, and continued to shoot at her. Slowly, I could hear a cracking noise. It grew louder and louder; it was yet another memory I would have that will scar my mind for the gods know how long. Her laughs never stopped, even as my light finally engulfed her crystal. Her body followed, and was completely overtaken by the blinding light. This wasn't the end of it though. As soon as she disappeared, images overtook my mind almost immediately. Lands I could barely recognize, blooming with life in an instant and burning to ash in the next. A dark fortress, isolated on an island somewhere in the world. Quaint villages in lush meadows, turning to dust in some kind of twisted spell. The most prominent appeared; it was a lake. A man and a woman stood at the rim of the water, and for a mere moment their lips touched. In only a second, the man dissipated from the world.

More images rushed past, now harsher and quicker than before. The retreat of thousands upon thousands of troops, most likely the Fae from the war. Thick forests of red blooming from the ground, marking the creation of the treacherous Ash Dunes. The building of a large castle adorned with cobble and quartz; the establishment of the Stellar Realm. A man next to a hamlet, leading his own army against soldiers adorned with blue; the civil war of the Lunarians and Panahonians. The images grew and grew until it was just a white light once more, and then...

I felt myself breathe steadily once more, and I blinked. I was... alive. I was still clutching my sword, plunged into the earth. The blade now saw memories of ages past. I lived through the 'fate of the world' that the gods tried to shake me with. I had proven them mankind was strong, yet again. I looked up, back to the original end of the forest of memory. Directly ahead, in all of its magnificence, finally stood the Tower of Time.

Not even the tallest spires in Panahon could compare to the sheer magnitude of the Tower of Time seemed to hold. It was gargantuan, and trying to describe it was almost impossible. It was a spiral of mechanical wonders, far too advanced to be of our world. The bricks seemed pale, as if they were deprived of any light. They built up thousands of meters up, culminating into... well, something. I don't even know exactly what it is myself. It almost looked like remnants of a civilization; buildings and towers that seemed to once hold life lay desolate and gray, cradled by a large hemispherical crane. Perhaps it was once home to those who could freely communicate with the gods; when all four gods still existed.

I wonder what those people must have thought when no others came into the world; when Digala, Palkori and Tirigna isolated themselves from Bovar indefinitely. What even happened to those people? Had they disappeared? Or, in a dark twist of fate, were they slain by those they revered? The city upon the Tower of Time seemed truly dead, at least from afar. But with the sheer size of the Tower, the city above must have been enormous. Just how many people had lived here?

Well, I suppose it made sense. The Gods have been told across Bovar for generations; thousands, or even millions must have migrated into the spirit realm .

I slowly paced towards the Tower, my sword slung upon my back. The Tower wasn't exactly near to me; in fact, I gage it would take as long as it took to get from my barracks to the dispensaries in Gliscon Citadel. There was no more forest dotting the trail; in fact, little trees dotted the path forward. It was mostly open plains, surprisingly filled with what looked like abandoned carriages and wagons. They were mostly overrun with moss or thorns; nature retaking what was created from it.

This civilization, I wonder, was it more than the city upon the Tower? The Forest I had went through to reach here; was it perhaps hiding the rest of Higayon? I could only ponder, until I finally come face to face with Digala. Truth be told, I was scared. Tirigna did not sound sure in any capacity that Digala would be open to communicating once more with mankind, and even if the god of Antimatter had talked with me, it was not of his own will.

I cast doubt aside; it would do little in providing anything useful. I started to walk, faster than I had before, to the tower. A chilling wind seemed to perpetually blow past, grazing my hairs with whispers of fear; despair. I couldn't tell why, or how exactly the tower felt so, undeniably *empty*. It was as if a phantom swept through, leeching all of life itself from the ground, leaving behind only a cadaver of hollow anguish.

With minutes turning into hours, my thoughts continuously went back to the name of my blade. I had settled upon naming it Grys. It was a common tavern story of a young fae-human child had escaped certain death countless times, yet always ending in different situations every time. I felt so closely to her; the most common retelling of Grys's narrative, at least within Panahon, had ended with her starting a new life sworn upon vengeance; to die in the absolute fields of war rather than the warmth and comfort of a loved one's arms. I did not know where my life would lead me now, yet I knew it would not be easy.

Sometimes, I would note the countless carriages on the sides of the path. Some of them still had assorted grains and wood pieces within them; one even carried a strange weapon with a trigger and a long cylinder that released circular pellets. It was ghastly scary to think that drivers were just upon their way when they lost their life, again. We were in an afterlife, of course. I did not dare touch the items and wagons; fear of disturbing a slumber that should not be awoken.

Yet despite all the distractions, my head was not fully wrapped around my surroundings by the time I had reached the doors to the tower. Just staring at it was strange. The path never changed, even until the doors; it was just a dirt path with small bunches of moss and foliage. The tower itself was just dumbfounding; the main sector was perhaps most easily comparable to a bell tower; yet, rather than a pointed top, it curved upwards into a gargantuan sempsihere. And there, inside the curve, housed hundreds of houses and buildings. The remnants of those who worshipped Digala. Their reverence, only to be repaid with eternal blight and ignorance to their demise. It sent a shiver down my spine.

The doors to the tower were large; perhaps six times my own height. I wondered how I would be able to open such intricate monstrosities; their surface carefully colored and carved with seemingly endless patterns. A large circle in the middle, with hundreds of lines drifting off of it. It perhaps depicted time itself, through the long rivers of evolution. Yet before I could wonder more, the doors slowly opened. And as I took my first step, everything seemed to change.

The interior was a magnificent room; it held a large staircase in the middle that curved off into the sides, much farther up than I first thought. Many doors to the side that lead to enigmas I did not dare yet to ponder. Chandeliers dazzled off of the roof; what seemed like sapphires and

aquamarine glimmered evidently onto the blue tiled floor. The same kind of design that the door had. Glancing back to the staircase, I had resolved that I had to make my way up the stairs. Yet, within seconds, a small rift began to open. It grew perhaps as wide as the staircase itself, and at least twice my stature.

Through it, another room was visible. Same designs upon the floor, yet that was mostly all I could see. For the rest of it was covered by the god of time himself, Digala.

Chapter 5

I had not expected him to be so...*large*. He was as tall as Tirigna, yet he was not as lithe. He had considerable bulk under the robes and cape that flowed down around him. He had hazel skin, paired with turquoise eyes and navy hair. Like the god of antimatter, a crystal laid upon his neck. It was as blue as the sky itself. His staff was brown, leading up to the top with a spiral and a small gem that laid in it's center.

Here he was; Digala, the lord of time. All of my fears and wonders came flooding back into me, and no matter how many times Grys glew with warmth to stabilize my breathing, I just continued to grow deeper. I was not prepared for this encounter; I could not see how to fix anything.

If the sheer appearance of a god was enough for me to crumble, how would I be able to save anything else? I was floored with sheer oblivion; I did not know what to do.

“Mestrine Cathavor.” was all he said. The two words of my name cut across my thoughts like a knife through butter. Even if I had remembered it, my name being said by others was completely foreign to me. It was strange to hear and hard to process. I could not even begin to formulate a response before he spoke once more.

“It has been millennia since any has come to my realm. I must say, my curiosity easily overtook my good judgement. A single human girl who broke the continuous chain of oblivion, met a god she did not mean to, uncovered her own magic, even forged a blade unlike any other from sheer will. You have quite a story to tell, Cathavor.”

His voice, like he said, was filled with wonder and a twisted sense of amusement. As if all I had endured was just some simple play story. Yet I cannot deny that I felt a wave of relief wash over me. He would actually hear my story. In fact, I was just grateful not to be crushed into nothingness in mere seconds. So, with a breath, I began my story.

I took him through the journey of Panahon collapsing, and years within the camp. My encounter with the sadist, and my decision to end my life. Falling further into darkness as I travelled through the ‘afterlife’. All that I had to go through simply to reach yet another deity. I had not revealed what I saw in my vision; the woman with a ghastly laugh. I don’t know why, but I felt as if it was not safe for him to know.

His brow furthered to dip in perhaps wonderment, equally possible amusement. Just another human; it was a scary thought to consider that’s all I was to him. And as I finished my story, his face was unreadable. I did not know if it was in sorrow or humored ignorance. I had feared that either I had said too much, or too little. Something was off, and me not knowing what it was left me fearful. I had spent so much time in coming here, yet this conversation happened so quickly.

It was then, in my abundant confusion and disarray that he responded with a laugh; an eerie sound that filled the tower quickly. Was this really what the gods thought of our world? Their creation, now twisted by fate’s hand laid barren by war and refuge. All they could muster after seeing the carnage was a laugh?

“I tell you, Cathavor; humans are truly disgusting creatures. Even after hell is unleashed upon your world, you insects can’t even band together. It truly makes me think; what purpose is there in the world anyway?”

Those few words were enough to daze me. I couldn’t fathom how the effort I had put in to reach this being resulted in worthless chastisement. Even after blood, sweat and tears of humanity fell back into the dying Earth, the only thing that these hallowed deities could do was laugh, and humiliate. As if the fires of eternity that now sent the world into ash was something to laugh at.

I didn’t know what to say to him. Perhaps my words would mean nothing, yet I felt the urge to do something, *anything*. These gods had the ability to change the world for the better, yet something continued to hold them back. I ran through all of my thoughts; what kept these lords back from supporting the world they had made?

Through every river my thoughts had traveled through, it always ended up in the same conclusion: Skabelse. Digala, Palkori and Tirigna lost their brother to the hands of man. The death of the creation lord had led to countless disasters, perhaps even explaining the barren town that laid upon the Tower of Time. Were these immortal beings... scared? Was it, in fact, fear that held them back from helping the world? From what I’ve seen, I already could tell they were arrogant and always thought of themselves higher than us. Losing one of their own must have hurt them in a way we could never understand; the death of a person is inevitable. People live and die, and oftentimes

their death isn't of their own control. Skabelse was a god; magic incarnate that held power only rivalled by the pure Earth itself. His death proved to the gods that they were not inevitable; they now revere the world they once ruled.

"You...you're afraid." I churned out each word with so much anger, almost as to humiliate him. These deities, in their goal to distance themselves as much as possible from mankind, turned out to be more like them than they could have ever known. It was in our own nature to be scared. The gods, whether they accepted it or not, have shed their facade of cold, empyrean kings.

Digala's face quickly lost its stature of amusement. The transition from his laughter to a lethal state could have killed a man in how quick and *angering* it was. I had hit him in a spot he hadn't expected. Dare I say, no one had ever dared to tell him that he wasn't perfect, and that he had learned how to fear something. He opened his mouth to speak, yet nothing came out. I doubt he had internalized his own fears of mankind. I spoke before he had the chance to retort.

"You gods love to ignore our strife, acting as if it's because we're less than you. But, now that I know of *him*, I understand that you don't actually feign ignorance. You peruse our world more than our kingdoms do. Because if you don't, you would fall victim to it, just like he did." Each of my words were couched with fiery humanity. All of my worrying of Digala not listening to my words drifted away; I held a power over him now. Though he would not show it, he was afraid of me. Not only did I remind him of his failures, but I am the living possibility of life after death; I had the blood of pure will within me. It was the determination that saw me through to this point that scared him most, and it was what I was most proud of.

"You dare speak to a demiurge of his fears? You humans are blind and ignorant; you can not fathom the world at large. You had not witnessed the fall of creation, the countless wars fought by our world. Yet despite all of this, everytime an enigma presents itself, all you can do is bleed for hopeless retribution. Cathavor, you speak ill of an ancient benefactor. I could end your existence *forever*." he grounded out. I had actually reached him; his thoughts were now bare for me to feast upon.

"You could kill me again. Yet I would just come back, full of the resolve that had carried me here once already. I am the living proof that humanity can stand strong. It is not in our nature to shed blood as if it were something that was worth wasting. Something in the world has tainted the hearts of men, fae, all living beings in Bovar. Yet you watch it upon your throne of fears and thoughts. You, Tirigna, Palkori, you're *cowards*."

As soon as I spoke the word, he lifted his staff and hit it upon the marble ground with a fervency that left the tower vibrating with anger. The sound was deafening, and my sword dissipated off of my shoulder. The loss of heat on my shoulder chilled me to the bone; Grys had guided me here, and now it was gone. Panicked, I looked around, and slowly saw that we were rising. Digala and I, up into the heights of the Tower of Time. He said nothing as we went up, accelerating into great speeds. The Tower was so large that when I looked up, I saw no end. I looked back to around me, and everything changed. I was now looking into a large field. Digala was nowhere to be seen. Blue skies now draped my vision when I looked back up, with forests and streams filling the canvas of grassy plains. A remarkably tranquil moment of Bovar, that was soon cut off by the thundering noises of armies. I looked to both sides, and immediately knew what this was. Digala was going to show me the world, and its history; he would try to break my will.

This was one of the first battles between the Gubat clans and humanity; the mark of the Great War. The sight was nothing like training I saw in the Panahon courtyards. This was war incarnate; total destruction of the Tlecian humans. This was when Skabelse still walked upon the Earth. The Fae launched hundreds of spells from their tomes; magic soared through the sky, hitting

the humans with a heavenly fire. The Fae soldiers, enhanced from Skabelse's magic, ravaged the footsoldiers unfortunate enough to be on the front lines. The Fae easily destroyed the small alliance of humanity, and pressed further on into the field. I was shaken to the core; with all the other visions of war, I had only glimpsed it. This was real time; I watched it unfurl with my own eyes. As more died, writhing upon the ground, the voice of Digala radiated around me.

“Do you not see? Your world, even then, had everything it ever needed. Even the Fae, filled with magic and blessings from the divine held the key to a prosperous society. Yet they turned to meaningless bloodshed. They always do.”

Those words struck true like knives to a heart; it seemed true that mankind and even the Fae had always had the need for conflict within them. Some twisted reason brought upon countless wars and fights that only ended with the earth stained scarlet. Yet, the Great War was fought for a reason; Skabelse's foolishness. Thinking of this made me remember that this was God's active choice to remain ignorant that the millions of deaths during this war was not because of humanity's instincts, but the errors of a fallen god.

“You are unshaken, even at the sight of hundreds upon thousands of casualties in mere minutes alone? Perhaps you need to see something more...personal”. I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

The vision blurred, and morphed into one I had not thought of since a life long past. I looked upon the distant meadows of my home; the enduring Kingdom of Panahon. I knew where this would end, yet I felt no extra encouragement from that. I searched for my resolve, and found in its place nothing. I felt, for the first time since coming to the Tower, uncertain. My will that carried me here; it was gone.

I saw the emblems of my kingdom, their blue and silver armor sparkling in the distance. Despite being so far, their fears and worries set deep into the marrow of my bones; I felt their unease. I looked beyond to Castle Oras itself, within the capital. I could imagine my mother pacing around within her room. I could *feel* my breath slowly turn ragged with alarm. I was a child, yet I could still feel that something was off. I sighed, and counted my breaths until I finally heard the footsteps of the Stellarian army.

This was the first time I had actually seen it in 'person'. Their regiments were massive, easily making the ground below them look as the same black their armor donned. Their red crests were bore proudly upon their breastplates, almost as if they knew they were tainted with blood. The presence their army commanded was completely pulverizing; it felt as if life itself died when looking upon their soldiers.

Tlec, while big, was not this populated to command an army of such size. The Stellarians must have had to annex or ally with other nations, perhaps even from the Southern continent or surrounding islands. The Panahonian League looked upon the impending marches, the swords upon their backs. Despite having more tools of warfare, the picture was the exact same as the previous war from millennia ago. My people would be decimated.

The fighting happened so quickly, I couldn't bear to watch it. I felt silent streams of silver fall upon my face; I had not cried for so long. My will was so unshaken, I had no need for it. Yet now, having to face the reality of war, I felt apprehensive. How could I possibly change this? The North had been laid barren by war and turmoil; who knew how Lairatan was faring. I had no answer for any question that popped into my mind.

“Now you show yourself. It's ironic; you, only minutes ago, looked at me and said I was afraid. Yet look at you now; I show you a glimpse of reality and you start to break. Oh, humanity and it's fragility.”.

His words filled me with rage. A hunger for catharsis. I had felt this before; the pressure, want and need. I had to remember myself; I had to feel resolve. I needed to release this last bit of anger, fear, and confusion. I had now bore witness to how the world really was; in fact, I lived through it's atrocities. Mankind and Fae could know eons of neutrality; I knew it deep within me. I needed to release my antipathy; the consternation I held for foolish gods.

So I started to yell out. As men died below me in the fields of Panahon, I let out a yell so loud it could have fractured the heavens. I broke the barrier that stopped me from speaking, and I let out all my anger. The god of Time would hear my call, and he would heed it.

I screamed out, louder and louder. The sky above started to fracture; my voice was a hammer upon glass. I swore even some of the soldiers below looked up at me. I wonder what they thought I looked like; perhaps an angel, singing a plea for its people? Maybe I was imagining all of this, but it gave me even more hope for the world. That even men with hearts of stone would listen to me.

The world started to break around me. I could hear murmuring within my head; Digala saying empty words to somehow stop my resolve from building back up. Yet it was drowned out with pure light; I was Mestrine Cathavor. I am the princess who endured, and the queen who will succeed. These silenced gods will not bequeath my fate.

I yelled out more and more, until I looked back down to my hands and closed them. I closed my eyes, feeling them fill with valor. I slowly unfurled the lids of my eyes, and opened my fists. Pillars of light once again shot up from my palms. I twirled my hands, weaving the pure essence of the gods into something to defy. To break providence itself.

I watched my hands as it twisted the magic into a bow. A simple weapon with the power to end the ignorance of a god. My mouth closed, no longer of my control. My body was moving with the magic itself. My resolve moved my hands to draw back upon the bow, seeing an arrow form, ready to shoot. I looked upon the fractured sky, and truly internalized my position. I was about to prove that humanity could stand strong even when faced with the strongest adversities. Unsure of the future, yet willed to see it be a good one, I let go of the arrow. It flew up, higher and higher until it reached the sky. The world turned white.

I blinked, and saw my surroundings refocus back into the Tower of Time. We were back to where I started before we rose up into war and refuge. I stood up, and looked at Digala. He was laying on the ground, with smoke drifting from his body. It was just like Tirigna had been after I shot him. I had assumed that the visions I saw were just that; visions Digala sent to me. Were they actually...him?

He coughed, and slowly rose up to face me. He spoke with a heaviness I had never heard before.

"I don't know. You were on the verge of breaking, yet you rose back up. You saw through *me*, you broke my world. I am a god; a lord that carved the earth beneath you feet. Yet, you saw more than I did. What am I, if not a fool?"

His words were unexpected; his initial confidence had been lost. I was right in my assumption that he was afraid; his demeanor was a defense mechanism he had adopted to avoid his feelings of loss and fear. That showed me he was much more like a human man than I had originally thought.

"Digala, ancient benefactor. The world needs to change. If you gods will not do it, then I will. If I have to die, and return to every god over and over again, I will. I can not stand idly by as Bovar burns in fires of pathetic apathy". I wondered at this moment if my father would be proud; if I had grown into a leader that he thought was worth leading the world. Digala's brows creased, and slowly relaxed. He sighed long and hard in that moment.

“Cathavor, you truly are a symbol of mankind. You are filled with unpredictable emotion, yet you always end standing undaunted. You stand strong even in the face of empyrean tragedy. Fine, princess of Panahon. I will lend you my aid.”

Those six words were some of the most satisfying words I had ever heard. Tirigna doubted that Digala would listen to me; even I doubted it. Yet I bent him to my cause; I forced him to see what he had refused for so long. That humanity exists as more than just starters of war.

He dragged his staff upon the floor, and the marble moved as if it were dirt. I recognized the circle of elements, each symbol donned at a corner. He muttered small incantations, and a purple pillar once again shot into the sky. All that remained after a moment were the blue, flaming like ring around the circle. He looked into my eyes, and I swore for a moment I could see a tear fall down.

“Reach far, Cathavor. Reach into the past; into the earth itself. Grasp its roots, and breathe through it. Live, and change. Let the world be worth living in.” His words were somber, yet I could feel a twinge of hope within them. Digala now accepting his vulnerability to the world, and hoping one day to live among his creations in peace.

“I hope, one day, you and your brothers can live among us in peace. Until we meet again, Digala.” My words were encouraging in a sense. I wanted a future that not only those of Bovar could coexist in tranquil peace, but also for the gods to once again communicate or even live among us. So no more would have to suffer in silent despair.

I walked into the portal, feeling only resolve in my blood. I swore I could hear the god behind me whisper the words ‘Thank you’.

So I fell, far, farther and even farther down. Back to the world I had once escaped. I closed my eyes, reaching for the earth. I moved my hands, clawing for something, *anything* of Bovar. When I finally felt a slight breeze hit my palms, I opened my eyes and faced the scene in front of me. The same field I had witnessed battle in my trial. These were the fields of Panahon.

I looked around, noticing the town that would once grow into the capital of Oras. This was before the kingdom even amounted to an actual nation. I blinked, feeling the grass below me. I was truly back in my world, in my home. This was Panahon before I was born. I was in a world I had always known, yet now in a time I had never lived through. I thought of so many issues that would present themselves; would I still be born in this world? How would battles and invasions still play out? Where did I even begin to reshape the world?

I sighed in the face of confusion. I remembered how I had faced much worse compared to this. Now, I had possibility within my grasp. No more would I hide in fear. I am the Princess who Enured; I am Mestrine Cathavor, and I will not be afraid.

I looked to the town, and took my first step to rebuilding the world. The breeze blew past, bringing change anew. For the first time I could remember, a smile slowly spread across my face.

Part II

“She Who Walked”

Part II: She Who Walked

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Chapter 6

Men gawk at me more than I ever thought they would. At Gliscon Citadel, men would look at me as a doll; a personal toy they could play with however they wanted. In the tavern, men looked at me more as a prize to be won. It's different to be sure; in fact, I'm still not used to the new clothing I bore.

I had reached the settlement I saw a few days prior, yet the inhabitants told me that they my father, or as they called him, 'His Majesty', was out in Merridew to the far south. Despite the kingdom not being truly founded yet, the people still saw my father as a leader. I thought of the nearest nation to Panahon; Keletande to the east. I was told by my history professors that it had started to fall to the influence of Stellarian expansion the same time Panahon started to establish itself. I knew with my father gone, Panahon would not see the effects of the empire on Keletande until it was too late; knowing this, I set out to neighboring country. I had only made it to a border town until it dawned on me that I still wore the lavender rags from the camp. Knowing my journey would take me farther than the tattered fabrics could manage, I set my first goal for changing the world; getting better clothing. The notice board in the town of course had countless requests from helpless farmers and denizens; bandit attacks or wild wolves terrorizing their farms, houses, and the like.

Panahon never really suffered from bandit attacks; at least, not when I had lived. The beginning settlements most likely were safe as well though; my father, from what I remembered, commanded a strong presence that would have scared off local knaves. Yet I was now in no man's land; fields that no kingdom laid claim to. It was right between Panahon and the neighboring nation of Keletande; each country had their own issues to deal with, rather than try and control the bandits that generally claimed the no-man's land.

Knowing this, I wasn't surprised to find Cuvlore, the town I currently resided at, to have many requests for passing mercenaries or soldiers to help with the trouble around them. I found a hoping blacksmith post a request for an able swordsman to save their family's crops from thieving rogues; the notice said they were demanding a payment of their crops and weapons every month, or else the bandits would ransack the smithy's house and family.

I had fighting capability; while it was not comparable to a Gubat gladiator, it was enough to defend myself, and perhaps even counter one's attack. The notice offered some kind of service from the blacksmith as a reward; seeing this as my opportunity to get actual armor, I jumped on the offer almost immediately. I regret that I couldn't help everyone else at the same time; I was only one woman so far. Perhaps after Panahon stabilized itself, I could return to Tlec's no man's land, and help all of those victimized by corrupt men and evil rogues. However, for now, I had my mission.

I met with the blacksmith. His abode was at the farther edge of town, near the southern entrance. He retold a somber story of murdered cattle and lost weaponry; the thieves constantly posing a threat over their lives. I found it ironic a man who made swords couldn't wield one. However, I was grateful his lack of defensive skills gave me the opportunity to get what I needed.

I told him I could do it, however I had no sword with me. Grys hadn't reappeared since Digala had his tantrum, and I hadn't yet dared to try harnessing magic once more, now that I was in the 'real' world. In Tlec, magic was remarkably uncommon compared to the Southern continent. Humans, who dominantly populated the North, had less affinity for magic compared to the fae.

Showing my power of fiery light in such a remote location would only bring unnecessary attention to myself; I must first gain allies; some sort of footing in Bovar.

“No problem. I’ll do anything to rid myself of those bandits” were the exact words he spoke. He handed me one of his steel swords he had made a few days prior, and wished me luck. It was quite sad to see how he trusted one of his weapons to a woman he barely knew; his desperation was written all over blade he gave me. It wasn’t as intricate as other weapons a blacksmith would be proud to make. Of course, however, the blade was still metal and would slice through the flesh of men with ease.

It was quite strange to feel a regular sword after so long. I only used wooden training swords in Panahon, and Grys was nothing like a regular blade; she was made from my magic; my resolve. I’m sure these blacksmiths have gone through hard times, but dare I say I have felt worse. When they make blades, it’s for a job or maybe even a hobby. However, when I made mine, it was out of need; a catharsis. Sometimes I wonder if these people could tell I wasn’t truly of this world; though I avoided it, the thought of being from the future was just daunting. I could watch the world burn once more, and not even bat an eye. Only I, one young woman, knew how the world would conclude with fiery conquest.

The blacksmith gave me the area in which the bandits were. They had made camp a short way after the forest outside of town. He wished me luck, and I went on my way. The forest was not nearly as hard to trek through as the one Digala had set up for me, however it still had it’s occasional dangers. The remnants of the Great War still lingered upon the earth; sites where gargantuan battles were fought were now scorched by the onslaught; the pure malice and despair corrupted regular woodland creatures into amalgams of fear and mindless killing. It made my stomach churn with disgust.

I cut down rabid rabbits and wolves on my way; while their flesh was still succulent and safe to man, the idea of having to kill them because of something that was not of their own doing made me uneasy. I despised war; countless thousands murdered, and for what? It wasn’t just humanity; I started to think of how far back tensions between faekind and men were predominant in the world. Their squabbles lead to so many deaths and issues all over Bovar. It was just all so pointless.

After I reached the end of the forest, I could already see the bandit camp. It was nothing like the thieving capital of the Mashara Islands, but it was obvious why no ordinary peasants tried to challenge them. It was surrounded by wooden poles all around the perimeter, sharpened to a point that could pierce men within seconds. The inside were tents surrounding a central campfire, with other supplies strewn about. Perhaps most disgusting to me was the pile of bodies right next to the fire; humans and animals alike stacked on top of each other, as if they were firewood. The bile that rose in my throat was so vile, words could not describe it. In Gliscon Citadel, I had grown accustomed to the deaths; they died in a fashion that was almost cult like. Here, they were violently cut down and even maimed.

I couldn’t recall much of the fight, not that I wanted to anyway. One of the men had heard my footsteps from outside and walked out, wearing only hastily drawn trousers. As soon as my eyes met him, he had yelled some meaningless words; something about an intruder, me being a whore, and other lovely names that were practically commonplace for me. Other men came out, mostly chuckling; they hadn’t expected a skirmish to occur. Even as I drew my sword, they laughed. However, when my blade cut through the torso of one of their men, they changed. My mind focused only on winning the fight, cutting down the counted twelve men. It seemed almost impossible to win it, yet the bandits here had no coordination nor real goal to win; for them, I was just another whore.

However, for me, the battle here determined the fate of farmers and smithys; of the success of my journey.

They had all eventually fell, their blood staining the ground a deep scarlet. My blade was covered in it, and my dress from all of the fighting had been stained in countless spots a color I didn't want to think about. I searched each tent, seeing if I could find any of their stolen loot. Each tent contained a few gold marks, some other weapons, and quite a food stash. I was glad none of them held any kind of atrocity; at least, until I had reached the last tent to the left of the fire. The smell in it was putrid; the smell of death had lingered in the air. I looked inside, and on the bed was a woman. She was no more than 20, yet her life had ended much sooner than it should have. Next to her laid...a baby. Bloody and cold. Looking at how her uterus had been cut, it was clear what had happened. These disgusting bastards cut the child prematurely out of her. I screamed in my mind; 'What for?'; what reason did they have to murder an innocent woman and her child? Were these atrocities *amusing* to men? I can't wrap my head around the idea. I just could not. Feeling the need for this woman to know some kind of peace within the world, I took her body and set her upon the still burning fire in the camp. She would not have to lay with these men any longer.

I left quicker in that moment than I had ever had before; knowing of things bandits did and seeing it was astronomically different. I never wanted to see something so horrid again, yet I knew I would in the days to come. Even before The Conquering, the world was already corrupt and filled with sights that would make regular men quiver into mud. I braced myself for the upcoming journey and made my way back to Cuvlore.

When I had reached the town, I quickly went to the blacksmith. It was dark by now; all of the villagers were most likely asleep. However, the smithy was still outside on his porch waiting, desperate to know the answer of if I had emerged victorious. I recounted to him that they were taken care of, and that most likely a year of food supplies still remained at the camp. I also told him that there were many swords he could smelt and reforge into his own blades; he was ecstatic at that news. He had, however, also asked how my word was to be trusted. I took the sword he had given me, cut my palm, and spoke 'My words are not to be taken lightly. I swear upon the fathers of the empyrean that I speak the truth'. I'm not sure what compelled me to say the knight's oath of the old Lunaun Republic, but it seemed fitting. The words were spoken when one was knighted into the army of the Lunarian Resistance; it was a quote children loved to say when they played games about the Great War.

I'm not sure if the blacksmith understood the quote or not, but it seemed to be enough for him. He quickly got my measurements, color requests and got to work. I had chosen three colors for the armor; lilac for the clothing that got me here, sky blue for the armor my people wore, and grey for the morality of the world is never black and white. He told me it would be ready in three days, and to see other jobs available in the town. So while he worked, I fulfilled other missions for chasing of even more bandits near the Northern entrance, ridding the nearby forest of rabid wolves, even standing in as a local guardsman at the town's watchtower. I suppose word quickly spread of my presence, as whenever I stepped back into the square more than a few residents of Cuvlore would come to me requesting assistance. Almost all of my days waiting for my armor were now filled with purpose; when the people asked for who I was, I always just retold the story of an enduring roamer hardened by life's strifes. However, I always suggested that should the time come, the town should pledge allegiance to the rising Panahon Kingdom. They were eager to oblige; as Panahon had not yet truly been established, they had no reason to despise it. For now, in this world, the kingdom would come to the aid of those in no-man's land.

My armor set was ready two days later. It truly felt like me; It combined every shade that defined me. The blue meshed with the lilac upon a gray canvas that it truly felt like, well, me. The blacksmith, who's name I learned was Leil, even added a deep purple cape his wife had sewn. I truly felt like a knight; prosperous and ready to pierce the evil that had clouded Bovar for far too long. After thanking Leil, who let me also keep the blade he had given me from before, giving farewells to the townspeople, I set out from the southern exit to Keletande.

One of the merchants who travelled through Cuvlore had given me the tip to travel to Yore, a border fortress turned town in Keletande that bordered the no man's land. She was a young woman, with circular glasses upon her face. Our conversation was quick, and was during a visit to the local inn. Her name was Sa-Yeh; her words were fast and slurred into each other. She claimed how she was looking for something she could feel proud of finding; a story to call her own. Despite our conversation being so fast, I feel that I would remember her gaze for years to come. It was so invigorated; to look further into the world than those around her.

So, I set off. The road was largely quaint; I found in the days that I stayed at Cuvlore, the bandit activity had decreased by an impressive amount. My blade had cut through the bodies of so many men, I had lost count. The killing, as bloody as it was, did not feel strange. I had seen deaths happen in front of me so many times in the camps that I suppose even doing the act no longer frightened me so. I wasn't sure how long I had been through the plains of the no man's land. Yet when I started to finally see the red dunes of ash in the distance, I knew I was approaching the nearby Keletandan border.

I had seen the Ash Dunes a few times as a child. They were told as simply corrupted forests; sites where nature had met a dark force and turned into blackened ash. Even now I didn't know the true origin of their tainted roots. However, even not knowing it's history, I knew of it's danger; any person trying to brave through the forests would not make it through to the other side of the meadow. Not only did the dunes exude a strong, vile energy, it was filled with beasts corrupted by malevolent magic deep within the dunes. Perhaps they came about as another consequence of the Great War; yet another danger that our ancestors refused to think about.

The work of mages nearby had helped to reduce the Ash Dunes over the years. They had used the luh, the primeval substance that makes up magic, to help purify the scarred earth. It worked slowly, yet it seemed the only other option that Bovar had was to let the lands slowly heal itself through the luh within the earth's core itself. Even despite how slow the process was, the dunes had decreased to the point that countless trails now existed through healed patches of earth to make it through to the other side. The Ash Dunes were notoriously known to be the reasons for the borders of the Tlecian nations being the way they were, so as soon as I started down the trail parallel to the Ash Dunes around me, I could see the approaching line of Yore, the fortress town.

I had never visited Keletande as a child; it had already been so greatly influenced by Stellarian expansion at such a young age, both the kingdom and myself was not ready to bear witness to the brutal annexation of the neighboring country. Careful to stay upon the trail, I continued on. Not many travelers had passed through; after all, no man's land was quite dangerous if you're inexperienced in the ways of combat. After a few hours, the Ash Dunes soon dissipated out of my vision. All I could see besides the clumps of trees was the impending fortress of Yore.

At a closer perspective, it was quite a magnificent structure. Sa-Yeh spoke about the fortress being even during the Great War; millenia ago, it had supposedly been one of the first strongholds of the Gubat established in Tlec. It was massive, yet not as foreboding as the walls of Gliscon Citadel had been. This structure had spoken more of an outlasting beacon of history, weathered by the hubris of men. The Citadel, deep within Stellarian Territory, had been nothing like that; it had no history of

persevering through hardships; the fortress of the Stellarian Empire was one of despair and tormented solitude.

Even with the fortress supposedly being militarily inactive now, gatekeepers still remained at their posts high above. They bore the Keletanden crests; a deep maroon and scarlet crimson encircling a shield. I looked from them to the rest of the area around me; the fortress seemed to span across kilometres around me; even the center seemed to encapsulate a majority of the area. It was like the entrance to the castle in Oras; just a sheer massive size. It made me feel quite small.

By the time I had reached the town, nightfall had eclipsed the world in its dark embrace. There were little stars out; most covered by drifting clouds. With it being so dark out, it made sense that the gatekeepers gave a quick questioning as I approached; name, reason for visit, and my respective domain. It seemed that they had already started to realize the influx of Stellarian riot starters; those who poured into Keletande to help instigate revolts against the kingdom, and to support the Empire when it started to invade.

Merin. Passing through to reach the port of Kakuyaw. A Panahonian mercenary. Most of that was the truth, save for my name being slightly altered for safety. For the reason of visit, I truly did not know what to say. I can't exactly tell them that 'I know you are going to be invaded and slaughtered; I'm just trying to prevent it. I still didn't really even know how I could stop the Stellarian expansion. Perhaps there were battles being fought near the no mans land that was between Keletande and the Empire. I could help at the skirmishes; get my name known farther, and gain a possible ally. That was, again, one of my fathers biggest mistakes; he had not been able to ally with Keletande before it was destroyed, or find a way to convince the Lunaun Republic to join their cause.

If the Panahonian people had Keletande at their side, perhaps even the Republic of the north could join us as well. We would have a real stance against the empire. Even with that idealistic knowledge, I thought of the peninsula far to the east. It was a small group of city states upon the Arstonzan peninsula, and even more unfortunate, it bordered the Stellarian Empire. I couldn't think of any way to save that country before it was taken by the Stellarians; perhaps it had already been done. I just had to focus on what I was doing now. Remember that my father was currently in Merridew, securing good trade routes and supply influxes into the kingdom. Further than that, remember my own goals, and to make them happen.

The grassy fields soon turned into cobbled roads; leading inside to the town. It wasn't exactly 'lively' as you expected a border town to be. In Panahon, Merridew, while not being a border town, also bore witness to hundreds of different kinds of people. Those from every continent piling into the first country of Tlec in millennia to openly accept the fae, and generally live democratically. Yet it was by the fist of war that Panahon had fractured; Merridew with it. Either way, how I thought of Panahon painted my view of how border towns should also be; people coming in from both sides, visiting and exploring what the continent could be. Yet Yore proved to be far from what I hoped; the streets still held vendors of multiple items, yet there were few people to be seen on the streets.

In how the buildings are laid out so beautifully and with fountains and small patches of plants all around the city, it was strange not to see hundreds milling around the square. This must have been yet another consequence of the Stellarian expansion; to keep the townspeople inside, and prevent them from protesting against the riots in the streets. People power, one of the most important tools in Bovar, was purposely being restricted.

Aside from the gatekeepers and the vendors selling assorted potions and weapons, I could definitely catch the gazes of those in the shadowed corners; I had not realized them until a few moments ago, when I looked back to the gate and saw a scurrying silhouette. I wondered what they had wanted from me; perhaps I posed a threat to their goals of inciting conflict within the towns of

Keletande. It made sense; aside from the Gatekeepers, who were more fit to spectate than participate in battle, no one would oppose the riot starters within the towns. With their industry also seemingly being sabotaged by the Stellarian regime, the people had little money and thus couldn't pay mercenaries to guard them. They were ridiculously vulnerable to attack.

After I had passed out of the square and into one of the streets, it only took a few more steps for one of the men around me to finally speak out against my presence. His voice was brutish, and just like the bandits I had encountered in Cuvlore days before.

"This ain't a place for wandering whore" he had spoken. Perhaps when I was a child, I would have been frightened by his voice. Yet now, I had heard the same condescending tone countless times before that it no longer fazed me. Despite not seeing his face or clothing, I could immediately imagine what these men would look like. How exposed their side was to my blade. Another soon joined him in a different corner.

"She's pretty. Perhaps we could have some fun with her before we slit her throat". The voices merged to the same brutish tone I had heard countless times before. Listening to them was just exhausting; I had dealt with gawking men and their strange feeling of entitlement to my body for so long that it no longer surprised me. With the air almost dead through the night, I could hear the bristling of more men's clothing as they moved out. With the original two, I had counted a total of eight men around me. Perhaps there were more waiting in shadows, but I had to focus on what would happen now. I truly did not know how to respond; in my inner self, I wanted to speak out in an almost sense of sass. Yet, would people rally to my cause if word got out that their leader was one who could not keep her word in check?

"I'm not interested in whatever game your master wants you to play. Go home." was what I had ended up saying. There was a period of silence for a few moments; I don't think a woman had ever spoken back to them. It had left them a bit astounded; perhaps it was arousing to them. Who knew what went on in their minds.

Despite the conversation, the idea of people, and from my confusion to if they were now aroused, just sex overall frightened me. Even in Cuvlore, both women and men had come up to me and tried to sleep with me. Though I was there for only a few days, eight people in total had come up to me. Six men, and two women. Yet, even with all my denial and refusal to think of what had happened with the Masharan pirate, I accepted somewhere deep within my subconscious that I liked women. Much more compared to men. Even when one of the women came up to me in Cuvlore, we had started only for a few seconds before a feeling of dread and pure fear built up within me. These were good people, and this woman in front of me, that I'm only a few pieces of tattered clothes away from oblivious euphoria, only wants to share feelings of bliss in the dark times our world faces.

Even with those feelings being so close to my fingers, there was just an absolute feeling of hatred and, even if I didn't want to accept it, fear.

I snapped out of my somber thoughts that now I realize felt like an eternity yet only was perhaps a few seconds, and realized once again what was happening. The men started barking once more, but I still could only count eight total voices. I looked around once more at my surroundings. Even with my father's instructions about swordplay being from over a decade ago, I still remember every word perfectly.

Understand where you are. I was directly outside of the town square; the street I was on was quite wide, with parallel buildings on each side. Some trees and foliage dotted the ground in a patterned fashion. The men were in the spaces between the buildings, save for one who stayed a distance behind me from blocking my escape into the square. With only eight, I was confident I could take them on, even in such an enclosed space.

I grasped the hilt of my weapon. It was still a bit rough, yet it now felt strangely familiar. It was nothing like the warm feeling that Grys had given me, but specific parts of this handle matched with the calluses on my hands. It was something that would help guide me. I also thought of the blacksmith in Cuvlore was a good smithy, as the armor I bore proved to be easy to maneuver in, as well as being protective.

When the voices finally stopped, and no other words were spoken, the only noise that remained was the charging of the men. They ran to me, yet it was not nearly as sloppy as the bandits near Cuvlore. These were trained assassins. Could I truly survive against them?

They closed in faster than I thought. The first one to reach me was from right, and threw flurries of strikes at me. I pulled my blade out fast to meet his, and the skirmish began. Our swords rang out in the night; I would not have been surprised if the windows of the surrounding buildings soon filled with curious faces. I had no time to focus on that, though; I had to render all my senses into the fight.

The first man's strikes were precise; any wrong move and I would be slashed by his blade. I met his strikes with my blade, letting sparks fly off into the ground. As my heels dug into the soil, the earthy smell of dirt lifted into the air. When his blade grazed my shoulder, a sharp pain entered into my side. I hissed, and started to go into the defensive.

"What? Are you scared, you cunt?" he had started to yell as I moved backwards, meeting his forceful strikes with my own. I realized that as I moved back, the man who guarded the exit back into the square now waited with his sheath open.

"Don't kill the wench!" he yelled to his comrades. He seemed to be the captain of this group. As the first man who was dueling with me heard the words of his commander, I saw a moment of thought in his face. His eyes gazed to the yelling man, and my foot moved fast under his knee. He gasped to the surprise of his balance being lost as he turned back. I brought my blade up, and felt the steel cut through his flesh. As he fell back into the earth, I pulled by sword back out from his back. His gash grew wider and pooled into the street below us.

Footsteps of the other assassins started to growl from beneath me. I looked back; the captain had moved away from the exit of the square. I started to move back, blood splattering from the stained blade. I heard their swords leave the sheath at their side, as they started to run. I would not be able to win a fight against the seven in this narrow space.

Pressure built within me. I moved faster and faster towards the square, into the open circle. The men were yelling commands, insults; it mixed with the wind against my ears. I breathed again and again, heeding my father's words.

The large oak tree of the central square grew close. The forum started to open around me, and I was in a larger space. As soon as I had space around me, I looked back. The seven men now crowded in front of me. They moved forward, and started to charge, encircling me on all sides. Time seemed to stop. I knew I still could not win against seven trained men, even with all of my power. They ran closer, right until I could feel their breath in the air. It was now, in that moment, that the pressure that had built released.

I stomped my foot down, sending a wave of air against them. They fell back in surprise, clanging against the ground. I looked at their bodies now a mess on the ground as they got back up, some of their eyes showing visible confusion and fear. I felt my breath align with the subtle wind that picked up around us. I put my blade back into my sheath, and moved my hand to the front. I balled my fingers into a fist, and slowly opened. Warmth started to glow, and fill my callouses. To my amazement, the flames of Grys now appeared in my hand.

The blade was the same as before. An obsidian hilted sword, filled with ancient fire. I had not wanted to show magic power before this; if I had, the risk of ostracizing myself grew larger. Even so, it was done. The people of Tlec would know of a flaming heir who returned. Yet now was no time to think; there was still a fight to be done. If I was to defeat them, why not make it at least a symbol for the people.

The assassins had gotten up by now. They had scratches all around them from the harsh concrete below us. They started to run towards me. The conflict was far from over after all. With the burning of Grys in my hand, I charged at them with a scream.

With the warmth of my blade back in my hand, I felt a sense of strength and confidence grow with me. My strikes were bolder than before; they were faster, and fierier than before. Two came to me from the front, and I stepped back in time with their movements forward. They lunged from the back, I moved closer to the front.

“The bitch is using witchcraft!” one of them had yelled; his focus averted for a moment, which was his end. Grys rammed into his lower abdomen, and he crumpled to the ground. I could wait to slowly fell the six more, yet I wanted to let this go out with meaning. I crashed Grys into the ground, and felt fire grow through my fingers. As they curled outward, vying embers bloomed out of my hands, and a circle of flames grew around us. The men started to scream against the night, yet the voices of men could not pierce the oblivion of heat.

The flames grew up, farther and farther. It slowly engulfed each man, as they fell to the ground. And before they could realize their bodies were not actually burning, I had picked up Grys, and felt its currents rush through my hands. I slashed it through their chests, and watched as they actually started to bleed. Through all six of their soft flesh, each man soon would drift into oblivion.

The flames were not actually searing. It was a show; it was a ruse, and it had worked. The flames soon drifted back down, and the bright searing blade of Grys soon started to cool. After only a few seconds, it was just me holding my sword, and the cadavers of seven men.

I fell to the ground; I hadn't expected such power to cathartically release from my core. I panted out long and hard; I had surmised that without being in the God's domain, magic would take a much larger physical toll on me. I had to better prepare me for the magic that would be released after this. I mentally noted that I had to think about that later, but not now. Currently, I had to face the crowd of people who grew around me. As I looked up, my breathing still labored, I saw an intimidating sight; it was as if the entire town of Yore had gathered around me, slowly filling the surrounding square.

Murmurs slowly started to coalesce; I couldn't discern the individual voices. I looked off into the crowd, to the many faces that inevitably wondered about a woman who had the power to seemingly immolate trained assassins. Yet I could no longer think; my head was impossibly spinning. I tried standing, putting all of my weight on the hilt of Grys. Though it seemed like such a menial task, even raising my legs seemed to be too much pressure. I crashed back down to the dirt, Grys falling with me. I slowly felt my eyes close, and my mind collapsing. I looked up one more time, and saw what seemed like a woman rushing towards me. Yet, I couldn't tell who or what it really was before I drifted to sleep.

Chapter 7

I couldn't describe what I felt. I was asleep, drifting in oblivion. It wasn't like the dormant thoughts after death, but the lulling silence of sleep. I knew I could think, yet I still wasn't. I could move. Blank space all around me. I looked down to see my hands, yet I only saw more blank space. There was nothing but me, and yet there was everything but me. There was silence, almost lethal in its quiet nature.

I drifted for a bit, letting my mind lead my unseen feet. It moved like a phantom on a wind, slowly moving forth in a graceful limbo. Moving across a plane of intersecting time and space that occurred completely within my own head.

Like usual, I started to drift with my thoughts, and what had just happened. The assassins had come after me, almost overwhelming me entirely. Yet there in the square, I called upon the hearth of fire within me. Grys, my blade of cathartic steel, had come from my struggles. I again pondered upon all that was told to me. About magic, about the gods, and about myself.

A princess of Panahon; an heir to a kingdom that no longer existed; at least, in her own time. A woman who cut through the fabric of time to reverse her fate. Tirigna even said himself I somehow had a connection to the Stellar Realm; that I 'reeked' of it. Some might even call me a sage; a magic user who weaved the elements through their very blood. How did I have so much magic? I remember learning that it was possible for humans to have magic, though it was uncommon and far more accepted that magic was generally an art for the faekind.

Despite that, I had such a deep well of it. I was only a human, as far as I knew. There were still so many answers left untold. Yet even with all the questions, I had to face the situation as it was; I released magic in a square with hundreds of civilians around it. They all witnessed me unfold my palms with pure fire blooming from them. The people of Yore most likely saw their first demonstration of magic; the power bestowed upon us millenia ago. With that, it would call all kinds of attention.

Yet through all my thoughts, I still did not know why I was just drifting. I was just moving in silence until a voice rang out deep within my soul. I looked down once more, and all I saw was a reflection. It was blurred, as if someone dropped a perpetual pebble that vibrated unto the water below. I focused harder, intent on seeing what was in the reflection. It seemed the voice reverberated from there as well. I wasn't able to make out what it was saying; it was just mumbles here and there. The water slowly started to still, and I started to make out what was there. A face, though I couldn't make out any features. After a few seconds, blue eyes bloomed along with tufts of white hair. Skin kissed by the sun. The face of a man was complete. It slowly blinked at me, deep from within the water. I blinked, or at least I thought I did. As soon as I looked back, the face was gone. I tried to lean back in to see where it went, but doing so caused me to lose my balance. I fell into the water below, far deeper than I imagined it being. It slowly filled my lungs; my eyes starting to burn, along with every part of my body. I slowly lost control in this oblivion, and I jerked up.

I looked around, still breathing hard. I clutched my chest, and evened out my breathing. I felt the cool fabric of the sheets below me, covering the weathered frame of a wooden bed. I looked around, focusing on finding every color in the room. Counting every book in the bookcase far in the corner. I slowly remembered all that happened; the fight, the dream, and Grys. Where was Grys? I worriedly fumbled around, trying to find her warm hearth. I looked to the side, and found her blade

propped up against the small wooden table. I hurriedly grabbed her, and held her close to me. The obsidian hilt that I had crafted from my magic, the small vessels of lava that cooled in the center.

It was at that point I finally realized; I have no idea where I was. I could remember the sight of a woman running forward to me right as I collapsed in the square, but beyond that and the dream I just had, I really had no idea as to who she was, or again, where I am right now. I looked to the window on the side of the room; it was light outside, and the tides of the Myarian slowly rippled across the water. I looked deep at one of the waves, moving ever forward only to greet the stone dockside. Staring into its blue soul, I was taken aback when it stopped in its tracks, the other waves moving forward. I blinked, seeing if I was actually seeing true, yet when I opened my eyes once more, the wave had already dissipated.

“So you’re finally awake” a voice called out from the door. I looked back at the oak frame, and there stood a woman clad in grey and beige armor. Around her neck was a sky blue cape that fell to the floor. Her eyes was such a vibrant hazel; it was as if pure honey had crystallized in sap. Her hair fell past her shoulders, a color matched only by ravens’ feathers. Her face was so perfectly sculpted, and it was-

“Um, hello?” she asked, her eyebrows slightly furrowed. Shit, I was completely staring at her. She had taken all my thoughts in an instant, distracting me from everything. My cheeks burned scarlet, embarrassed from the fact I had gawked at a woman I hadn’t even talked to. I ran through my thoughts, planning on explaining myself completely to her; perhaps I would even beg forgiveness for my failure to focus.

“Uh, hi” was all I muttered out. I sighed heavily, mentally slapping myself. That was perhaps the worst interaction I had in all of my life. I was able to confront a literal god of time, but when I meet another woman, I lose all my sense of communication. She looked at me, and then laughed. It was hearty, deeper than I anticipated. My cheeks burned even harder; I felt like a complete idiot. Gods above, please help. I tried to recover from this.

“Ah, pardon my, uh, previous comments. Hello madam, my name is, uh-” I suddenly stopped. Was I truly able to say my name? Should it stay in the ashes of the old world; one where everyone and everything met its end, or should I bring it to the new? In that confusion, I remembered how it had guided me here, and through all of my life; it had given meaning to, well, me. I looked straight into her hazel eyes.

“My name,” I breathed in.

“Is Mestrine Cathavor”. It was the first time I had actually said my name out loud after returning to the world. I felt a strange sense of reassurance in myself after I uttered my name. She had stopped laughing by now.

“Well, Ms. Mestrine Cathavor, you should know it isn’t the wisest decision to collapse in the middle of a square with thousands milling around. Especially after the little show you performed. Magnificent job on that, by the way.” she spoke. So my intuition from before was right; almost everyone in Yore had seen what happened.

“Even so, there isn’t any point in dwelling on it. No doubt the people will speak of it for many weeks yet to come”. My eyes darted around, obviously a bit confused. Who exactly was this woman?

“Ah, I can see your confusion. You have given me your name, so I should lend the same kindness. My name is Ekuura Alvanac”. Ekuura... it rolled nicely off the tongue. It was as beautiful as her face.

I realized myself getting distracted yet again. I quickly recentered myself, and spoke out.

“Lovely to meet you, Ms. Ekuura Alvanac. I suppose you were the one I saw before I completely fell out of consciousness; if so, thanks are in order for helping me. So, thanks.” I said. She laughed once more.

“Will you lose the facade? There’s no need to be so formal, Ms. Mestrine Cathavor! What’s more important is what’s happening now, and what will happen.” she explained. I would try to be less formal, I suppose. It was just so hard; in the face of her beauty, trying to talk naturally and show my rougher side felt like a mistake. Yet, she was right; there was more to be discussed.

“Yes, you’re right. Sorry for that.”

“Aw, it’s no problem, Cathavor. What is perhaps a problem is what happened. The magic you released in the square... I could feel the luhur gather at your feet hours before you had even released it! I could feel the power radiate all the way from Lairatan!”. Those were a lot of words to take in at once. I didn’t realize just how much magic I had released after all. She said she could feel the change in luhur all the way from Lairatan, the southern continent. That’s ridiculously far from Yore. This could mean almost anyone with the faintest affinity of magic would know about me now. I caught her eyes looking now at Gryns.

“Even your blade is crafted out of pure magic. It’s scarily potent! I haven’t heard or seen a native of Tlec hold so much magic for the years I have lived on Bovar. How could you have such power?” she asked. I wanted to explain it all; I wanted to confide in someone about all that I had endured. Yet, who would believe me? If I thought about it, my tale sounded very far fetched. A lone girl who’s entire kingdom was consumed by an empire, forced to live years in slavery. Someone who transcended through realms of both antimatter and time, and had beaten gods at their own games. Who could even begin to believe that?

“I want to know all about you, but I won’t press for anything. Yet, I have the feeling that you could be the key in solving almost everything in Morphen! Could I ever convince you in confiding to me your story?” she inquired. Her eyes were so convincing; I so deeply wanted to tell her everything.

“You want me to trust you? Well, you know much about me; you know what happened. Yet, I only know your name. How is that fair?” I pointed out. Perhaps we could both learn something about each other.

“Fair enough, Cathavor. Let’s play a game; one of us will say a question, and both will answer. Then the next person will ask another, and we go on until both of us are satisfied with answers. Deal?” she asked. That seemed like a fair trade.

“Deal. First, though, my weapon is to the side. What about yours?” I asked. She rolled her eyes slightly, albeit with a smile on her face. She pulled out her staff that was sheathed behind her. It was exquisitely intricate; matching her armor, it had a beige body with a blue pommel. Crafted vines embraced the body, culminating at oval tip surrounded by an ellipsoid ring. Small wings came off from the side. It was truly magnificent. Shutting the door behind her, she walked to my bedside and laid her staff next to Gryns. She pulled up a chair from the corner of the room, and sat next to me.

“Who goes first?” she asked.

“You can go first.” I replied. Was that a mistake? I would soon find out.

“Alright, Cathavor. I don’t think you’re a regular mage. What exactly is your position?”.

Yeah, I should have expected that to come up. Yet to explain that I was a princess would perchance be confusing; the kingdom I was destined to one day rule did not yet exist in this world. I tried to answer as best as I could.

“I am a princess of a long lost kingdom.” That was technically true; Panahon was annexed, at least in my lifetime, fourteen years ago. Yet now, it didn’t even exist. I don’t know; I could only hope that my answer was enough.

“And that long lost kingdom would be named..?” she asked again. I found no reason not to share.

“Panahon. The Panahon Kingdom.” I replied. I shuddered, feeling a small ounce of sorrow run through my body.

“Alright then. Can’t say I have heard of it, though it’s possible I may have just been ignorant. Well, a deal is a deal. We have the same position; I am a princess to the Kingdom of Morphen.” I could feel myself blink a few times there. Did she just say she was the same as me? She was also an heir to a kingdom that, at least I assume, is washed away in turmoil. She could possibly also grasp the same troubles and burdens I had. She was someone who could actually understand.

“Alright then, I feel like I can trust you more now. I will admit, I am a bit naive in the grand scheme of geography. Where is Morphen?” I asked. She raised her brows; possibly in confusion, or disappointment. The thought scared me.

“The Kingdom of Morphen is in in the southern continent. Haven’t you heard of the Morphense Meadows? They’re perhaps what we are best known for! Well, perhaps it was what we were known for before; now, we’re just commonly referred to apathetic fools. Where’s Panahon?” she inquired. Her words now sealed in my mind that she must also have to deal with kingdom issues, handed down to her for no reason other than the hubris of rulers.

“Panahon would be found in the southeast of Tlec. Not too far from here; maybe a two days travel between the no man's land, and you would arrive in Panahon territory” I replied. I thought that made enough sense; without yet having to entail my entire story, I could give a slight subtext that there is more to Panahon than I was letting on. After all, it wasn’t anything yet. Now that I think of it, Panahon was technically under Lunarian land. The Lunaun Republic, originally formed from the Lunarian Resistance that dated back to the Great War, had controlled all of Eastern Tlec; they originally also held the West in their control, yet with the formation of the Stellarian Realm, they lost their power over that land. With the geographical barriers of the Ash Dunes, when my father had founded the kingdom, the Lunaun Republic really had no way to prevent the formation of Panahon; thus, they retreated north. The Republic was now mostly in the northeast.

“Alright, I can trust you on that. Answer me this: why were you here in Yore?” she inquired. This would most likely entail the beginning of me telling her my entire story. Sighing, I started to explain.

“This may take a while to fully explain” I had warned her.

“Good thing we have nowhere to go, then” she replied. I decided to trust her. So, I began.

“My name is Mestrine Cathavor, the princess of the Panahon Kingdom. I come from the future” I spoke. It was slightly amusing to admit I was, in a sense, a time traveller. Yet, it was true. She was taken aback, but listened carefully to all that I had said. I went through it all; the Stellarian Realm transitioning into the Empire, who slowly annexed all of Tlec. They reached our kingdom, and took all who survived their attack into Gliscon Citadel, deep into the west. How I stayed there for years as their sexual slave. I skipped the part about the Masharan woman; I wasn’t sure if I was ready to talk about that.

I continued into how I had died. How I drifted in an afterlife of nothingness, and willed myself to communicate with Digala, but ended up talking with Tirigna. How I harnessed the primeval magic of light, and brought him down to my level. I explained how I then faced the forests of Higayon, and peregrinate to the Tower of Time, finally convincing the Lord of Time to send me back into the past, and fix the errors of what the world was.

After all of that, I was surprised that she hadn’t laughed yet, or looked angry. I would have assumed she thought I was trying to trick her, yet she didn’t look at all doubtful of my story.

“I won’t lie; that is a lot to take in. Yet knowing the sheer idiocy of the world, and the strange kinds of shit it throws at us constantly, I find no trouble in believing it” she replied. She didn’t find any hardship in trusting what I said.

“Just so I am completely clear, I will ask; you, Mestrine Cathavor, are the heir to a kingdom destroyed by the Stellarian Empire, and now you’ve transcended through time to refuse that fate. Is that correct?” she spoke.

“In a nutshell, yes. I know what happens to the world if nothing is done to stop the preceding signs of peril” I replied.

“Well, at least you have more knowledge than most. Pray tell Mestrine, did any of those gods explain to you about the disappearance of the god of Creation?” she had asked.

“Yes, they did. Why do you ask?” I replied.

“The death of Skabelse is perchance the only reason the world is absolutely, eternally fucked right now. Yet people had always foretold that the reemergence of magic in Tlec could be the signs of his revival. I don’t know; it’s all just legends and blind hopes, passed down from the Morphenese elders. Yet I do wonder, if your recent outbreak of magic could be something more than what you think. Tell me, Mestrine, do you have any reason why your affinity with the luhr is so strong?” she said.

“None. I always knew I had magic; throughout my early childhood, I practiced with the few fae mages that our kingdom had harbored. Yet it was never anything magnificent. When I had appeared in the realms of a god, it felt as if something inside me had been unlocked. Like a deep well of magic within my core had overflowed and broke past floodgates. By the gods, I could even craft my own sword” I vocalized, giving a nod to Grys.

“Hmmm, that’s quite the enigma. Either way, if I had not pointed out earlier, that sword is one of the most beautiful blades I have seen, and trust me, I have seen a lot” she said. Her compliment made my cheeks warm once more; she wasn’t even complimenting me, but if she was at least giving nice comments to the sword, it in a sense was for me since I was the one who made it. Oh, gods above, I’m reading far too much into her words.

“Well, as you’ve told me your story, I suppose I should divulge mine. It’s not nearly as exciting, however. The Kingdom of Morphen was originally called the Morphenese League. The League was just a small military that had opposed the Gubat while they waged conflicts across the world during the Great War. After the defeat of the Gubat Fae, the League reorganized into the Kingdom of Morphen, spearheaded by a Royal Family. The following centuries were mostly peaceful, yet for some reason the remaining Gubat in Lairatan started to once again conglomerate into a force of destruction. Yet now, they no longer simply vied for power. They had a vendetta; not only just against humans, but most of all the fueman population. A population of which I am a part of” she said. I had a feeling she wasn’t completely human; her ears were slightly pointed, and she has such affinity with magic. I didn’t know too much about the fueman people, except for the basic knowledge that they were a mix of Fae and human. Yet, I did have the understanding many places did not want their kind; Tlec still bitter against almost all Fae, and the Gubat despising them for being tainted with Human blood. So, by power of deduction, it makes sense that most fueman found haven in Morphen. After a bit, it finally dawned upon me that Ekuura was a princess, but also a fueman; that meant the Royal Family itself had mixed with a human somewhere in their lineage.

“The Gubat wanted to start their domination once again, starting with Morphen. They incited riots and strife throughout our streets. They said that the reason for struggling crops and harsh winters were because of the fueman; for some stupid reason, they were using us a scapegoat for their own issues. My people, who once loved me, started to call me a ‘tainted heir’. I begged my parents

to take action against the riots now occurring in our streets, yet they would do nothing but appease the Gubat. Eventually, the Gubat had taken advantage of my parent's pacifism, and annexed over half of Lairatan in yet another bloody conquest. Even my people had finally rioted to the point they reached the streets of Flure, the kingdom capital, and stormed the castle. I had realized nothing would happen if I stayed there in idle refuge, and fled. I had no idea of what came of my parents after I left..." she said. For once, I could sense an emotion tie into her words. Somber sorrow filled each of her breaths, as she continued to explain.

"Even if I have regrets, I do not deny I made a decision that was for the best. Had I not left, the entirety of Morphen would have completely sunk under Gubat control. Yet now, with my survival, I still have a chance of establishing peace in my country. Even so, I can not do it alone. This is why I have come, searching for anyone who could aid me in my mission. However, I now see we have the same mission; we both want to find peace for our respective homelands." she said. That much was true; I realized if Panahon and Morphen could possibly ally themselves, they would have more power to not only oppose the Gubat, but stop the invasion of the Empire. The scary thing is that we were both just two lone girls against a greedy empire and a revitalized, ancient force. How could we even begin to start our mission?

"I understand. Ekuura, by the Gods I understand what you mean. I know what it's like to lose the ones closest to you, and even further that feeling of being alone. I haven't known the embrace of a family for so long. Please, know you can confide in me anything. Let us work together!" I said. This girl I had barely met completely encapsulated everything I wanted; she knew my story, she had the same problems I did, and she was willing to just listen to me. Yet she was also vulnerable; she was still a person. I still did not know what completely compelled me to trust her, yet I had a sense that she was a good woman; someone who meant true in her words. To Digala above, I could transcend through two planes of the Gods; if I could do that, we could stop a war caused by a mortal hand.

She had a small smile appear on her face, as she breathed in.

"Thank you, Mestrine. I truly appreciate it. I haven't been able to confide in anyone else about all I have been through; you give me hope that it will end up fine in the end." she remarked. Good; she trusted me as well.

"It will! Trust me, if I could survive what was practically death incarnate for years, we can get through this. If I may ask, however, how did you even manage to get here? The Myarian Ocean is much wider than any lake; a boat to Lairatan from here would take a few weeks, at least!" I inquired. She laughed a bit.

"How about I show you instead?"

I didn't expect that, but it did surprise me. I looked down, then back up to meet her hazel eyes.

"Alright".

"That's what I like to hear!" she exclaimed, laughing a hearty chortle. She stood up, her cape falling back down. She offered me her hand; while a bit intimidated, and of course like always blushing, I obliged and took it. It was warmer than I had thought. I got Grys, and stuck her in my nearby sheath, while she grabbed her staff. It still radiated the same beauty as she did. She put it on the small strap on her back, and we both realigned some of our armor. Nodding at her, we moved out of the door. We descended down a narrow stairway, as we reached the bottom. It opens into what looks like a lobby; light poured into the room from the windows. Ekuura flipped a coin to the nearby desk. I looked at one of the signs, and saw that this was an inn. That make's sense; where Ekuura got money, I had no idea.

“Just how early did you get here before I arrived?” I inquired.

“You returned to Bovar only a few days ago. You returning to a world, farther back in time than when you were supposed to be, obviously would have affected the flow of luhr on Bovar. I can sense when there's influxes in it, so I had come here as soon as possible. But enough chatter! I want to show you this!” she answered. What would ‘this’ be?

I will say, I truly did not expect what came next. We walked outside the door, onto the sunny streets of Yore. There were more people milling around now; it seemed as if with the assassins being gone, there was now more freedom. That kept reminding me that I still have to find out who those assassins were, and why the people of Yore had such little freedom. I still had a mission, after all. However, now I knew she had a similar situation. Even knowing my duty, it all paled to what I really wanted currently; to spend time with this woman.

After turning the street, we started to slowly walk back to the square. All of the men from before were gone; now there were just busy vendors and milling civilians. Ekuura, looked at me, and winked. I was so confused I hadn't realized we started running, down into the square. She quickly grabbed her staff with a mastery I had never seen, and hit it onto the ground.

“Mayvil! I summon thee!” she yelled out. Mayvil? Who or what was a Mayvil? I couldn't find an answer; the wind was rushing against my face faster than I could think.

“Get ready, Mestrine!” she exclaimed to me; I had no idea to what she was referring to, so I just held on to myself. She hit the staff once more upon the ground, and we jumped up. I felt a cold breeze rush past us; we were rising at a scary velocity. I yelled in shock, as the town of Yore got farther and farther. I couldn't even see if the denizens of the town gawked as we rose up. The trees and the fortress below us were so far down that if we fell right now, we would perish within a second. Yet, despite my fears, Ekuura seemed completely fine. As we ascended, I heard the rustling of the wind as what looked like a drake appeared below us. She stuck her staff onto her back, and slowly moved her one hand to extend outward; the other still clutched mine. Through my screams, I hadn't realized that we landed upon the back of the beast from below, as we rode rushed off into the distant horizon.

Chapter 8

Panahon prided itself in many things; not only was it a beacon of democratic freedoms, but it had done things many other of the Tlecian powers had not done before. It harbored many Fae, it cultivated an academy of magic, it encouraged the arts and ideas of the world to blossom; it was a kingdom that, despite it being caught in a turbulent era, could still pave the way for it's civilians to live their days in relative peace. Even so, despite the kingdom ushering an age of creation and breaking the limits of what a nation was thought to be, I can say I had never experienced anything quite like this.

My first reaction was relief; I was beyond glad that we didn't end up plummeting to our death below. The next thought was confusion; what manner of creation were we soaring in the air with? It was perhaps a bit bigger than a horse, if you could imagine the two scaling. It's wings went out far, and shone in the sun. It's, well, skin was a dull bluish color dotted with white stripes all around. From what I could see, it's face looked as much as I expected it to; it had spiked scales that ran across its head to the neck.

We landed, it seemed, on its back. It already had a saddle on it, showing that Ekuura had flown upon this beast before. It truly looked like a dragon out of a fairytale. We soared at speeds that I never thought possible. After what seemed like an hour but was most likely a minute, we slowed a bit and started what was, to her, a gentle cruise upon the wind. My hair became nothing short of a winded mess, flapping and tangling behind me. Though her hair had been far longer than mine, it seemed unfazed. It was only slightly rustled, if anything.

"That simply is not fair. Your hair is literally twice the length of mine, and it looks as if you stepped out slightly into a chilly autumn night. How does that even work?" I questioned.

"Darling, please. I've rode Mayvil hundreds of times; if I never found a way to keep it in one piece during rides like this, then I would have just gone bald in frustration." she replied.

"But how do you manage it?!".

"That's one of my secrets" she said with a wink. My cheeks turned instantly red. I don't know what it was about her, but whenever Ekuura did anything slightly suggestive towards me I felt like an utter buffoon. She laughed when she saw my scarlet cheeks, and looked forward once more.

We were no longer above Yore; though it seemed we had gone quite far in such a short amount of time, I could see the town slightly in the distance. We were still in Keletandan territory, then. Even so, it was beautiful. Massive forests and meadows bled into the Kodelian Plains, some of the most luscious greeneries in all of Bovar.

"So, what do you think?" she asked.

"It's... a lot to take in. I've never been so high up before." I responded. She chuckled.

"I'm glad I'm your first, darling". Again that word, darling. Perhaps it meant nothing and as usual I would read too much into it. Also, what was that about being my first? What did that insinuate? Gah, I haven't been this flustered, well, ever. At least, not for a long time. I could only remember one other person who made me this frazzled; Cynder.

Far back in the past (well, my past at least) did he compliment me on the day we went picking for oranges together. It was about the fact I was wearing a buttoned red tunic and wide pants that day; normally, the boys weared that kind of clothing, while girls kept to dresses and frilly shirts. He said no matter what I wore I looked very pretty, and even better than he did in those clothes. It got me so embarrassed. I haven't had much time to think about Cynder. When I went back to the

past, I got excited that I might one day be able to see him once more. Yet, I remember that I had gone so far back into Bovar that the time I was in lacked his life so far; he would be born... actually, I didn't know. I tried to make sense of the dates in my mind; I was born in 397 BC, while Cynder was a year older, making him born in 396 BC. The year I had went back to was...oh Gods, it was 396 BC. Cynder would be born this year in a few months time. That seemed wild to me. I truly did miss Cynder Meyalward; he was, perhaps, my only friend growing up. I hope that in this world he can blossom into a fine young man, without the constant shadows of the Empire.

"Ah, Mestrine. Look down over there, to your right" Ekuura told me. My eyes followed her finger which pointed outward, and eventually found what she was talking about; situated on a group of hills was a large manor. It looked foreboding; it was dark bricked, and had some surrounding forests around the hills. It had a massive dome on top, with a large banner facing the world. It had the Stellarian crest upon it. This was most likely where the regime started to leak it's influence into Keletande.

"This is the Manor of Madon, the base of those who seek to impose Stellarian influences into Keletande. I need your assistance in Morphen, so it is only fair I will help you in turn. If we take out those in the Manor, we would have a high chance of freeing Keletande from Stellarian rule. Not only that, we could give your rising kingdom a new ally against the Stellarians." she said. If this manor could be taken out, then my mission in Keletande would be complete; my father could return to Oras with a brand new ally. We could even persuade the Lunaun people to join us in a unified western alliance against the empire. This is exactly what we needed.

"Alright. What should our plan of attack be, then?" I asked.

"Slow now, Mestrine. First, let's return to Yore. I believe I know some people who could be of assistance to us back there. Those who oppose the Stellarians, the same that we wish to do". That explained why many in the square of Yore were originally seemingly gone or behind locked doors; they were planning on how to expel the Stellarians out of the region, the same as us.

"Ah, alright. Let us return." I told her. She nodded, and hit the side of her saddle. Mayvil let out a grunt, and slowly turned around as we set about returning to the fortress town. I wondered what the townspeople thought of the large drake out of nowhere. I suppose I would ask her later. I looked up at her, and decided to say one last thing before we landed.

"And, Ekuura..." I started; she looked back to face me with those eyes. Gods, those eyes.

"Thanks for the ride" I told her, with a wink throughout. She burst out laughing. Oh Digala above, did I mess that up?

"Anytime, darling" she responded. God damn it all, she still made me turn red more than I could make her do it herself. Between my blushing and her laughing, we made our way back down to Yore. As we travelled, I just thought about her in my mind. What a woman; a fueman princess of a kingdom on the verge of turmoiled destruction; a warrior who rode upon drakes and felt the raw elements of magic in the ground itself. She was, in the purest sense, cool.

It was only a few minutes back to Yore, and it was primarily filled with mindless banter of whatever came to her mind. She notably talked about Mayvil; he was a Azuwin Drake, and she had been with him since she was a child.

"Since I was young, I've been told about my abilities to tame the beasts of the Ash Dunes. In Lairatan, the dunes are far worse than here; after all, it was fae verses fae primarily in the southern continent. The drakes roam the ashen forests, and are savage to almost all those who approach it. My parents wanted me to try and tame them, as they had seen my affinity with animals throughout the kingdom lands." she said. It was true; the Ash Dunes of Tlec housed many tainted creatures, yet none

as wild as drakes. That was strange to think about; that those in Lairatan could step outside at anytime and simply see a creature that us of Tlec could only imagine out of a tall tale.

“Mayvil was special. I could pacify the many beasts of the dunes, yet Mayvil had actually followed me out of his forests. We flew around often, both for my own sense of adventure and also to appease my parents. They wanted to flaunt me off to the public; show that the heir to the throne was one who was capable and could defend their lands. All they thought of the drakes were that they could protect their feeble selves, not as actual creatures. That’s just asinine to me” she said. There was massive amounts of pressure on her since she was a child; while it was for her to be a ready and capable heir, mine was more focusing on my personal studies of magic and growth. Now that I think about it, my father had focused much of my time to harness magic and luh. I wondered why.

She continued on, talking mostly about how to differentiate between the different types of drake. The family of beasts she was most familiar with were the -win drakes. Mayvil was an Azuwin, while she had also met Redwins and Verdwins. The prefix seemed to denote their color. There were also completely separate species of their own she had encountered; there was one such as an Orican drake, which was pitch black and she had only seen twice in her life. I wondered just how old she was. To my surprise, she was just seventeen. That made her the same as I in yet another way.

Finally, the town of Yore came into sight; I had no idea of how we were going to land in it. We could stop outside and walk in like regular travellers, or perhaps just land in the square itself, the same way we had left. I figured she would let me know; that was, until we had slowed so that we were parallelly above the square. She grabbed my hand, and without and say or warning, we just jumped off.

I started flailing my hands and yelling out; was this woman really about to kill us? In the midst of my screaming, I looked over at her, and she was looking down hard at the ground below us. It was perhaps only two buildings in height away from us. Sweat had beaded on her forehead, as she finally breathed out.

“Got it!” she yelled. The people around us had scuttled around to the corners of the square, behind buildings and trees. She grabbed her staff and pointed it down to the ground, a flurry of wind shooting out from the winged tip. It formed what seemed like a cloud below us as we landed on top of it, slowly falling through the cotton like surface. I always wondered what a cloud felt like; well, it was very dense and wet I could note before we slipped through it and onto the street below us. Thankfully, it was a very short fall, and I almost didn’t feel it. We managed to not die! I looked over at her; she was already standing up, putting her staff behind her back. She looked over at me.

“So, how was that darling?”. I had no idea how to respond; I just looked back dazed. She extended her hand. I grabbed it, and she helped pull me up. Even with all my armor, she managed without any real effort.