

The Fallen

The Mortal Tower

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Chapter I

“You're an idiot, that's what you are,” Victor laughed, “a consistent and entertaining moron.” He turned away from his makeshift spear, raising a curved knife to point at Max, his best friend and partner in crime. “I still can't believe that you actually thought it through and still decided it was a good idea. You're lucky that she loves you.” The dark haired boy ended with a knowing smile before turning back to his weapon. He continued to gently brush the edges of it in an attempt to remove the new loose shavings, which were hung by threads from the now smoothed wood, working it to dangerous perfection.

“How was I supposed to know that she would see it that way!” Max finally exclaimed, throwing his own knife into the soft woodland mud. “It's not like I knowingly blabbed her secret, it just sort of related to the conversation... and I was asked, so I answered!” He gave an exasperated sigh and sat down on a mossy log, frowning at his brother. He ran his hand through his loose blonde hair, and was about to fall into deep thought when restrained laughter reached his ears.

Across the opening, Victor's back was shaking as he tried to hold in his hysteria. But it was obviously too much. He whirled around with tears in his eyes, mumbling,

“Haaaa! Y-you really th-thought that Harmony wouldn't find out, didn't you? Heee!” Victor fell onto his back, barely breathing through his uncontrollable wheezes of laughter. Max had been an honest idiot. It wasn't that funny; but as brothers, it was their sworn duty to harass each other, with no exception or reprieve. Victor shook on the dusty ground of the clearing for a minute while Maximus watched, very unamused. He took a moment to inhale

slowly through his nose. Every scent of sweet shaded dew and underbrush was familiar, and each worked to calm his senses. For mother's sake he would restrain himself.

Once Victor had steadied, he sat up to speak. Max sighed, waiting for an apology.

"I knew you were the dumber one of us, but oh boy are you really in trouble!" And in a split second, they were both struggling on the ground.

Victor was not in any position to wrestle, and even if he had been, it wouldn't have made a difference. Max was slightly older and more athletic, a true man from birth, and Victor, well, he was not quite at that level yet. Nevertheless, neither of the boys were to be scoffed at. Since their earliest years both of them had been known throughout the town for their wild nature and cunning intellect, conquering almost every type of challenge and practically ruling the rough lower class streets. It was almost as if they were born and bred to fight. However, the scuffle that occurred on the dirt ground of the forest was anything but impressive.

"Get off me!" Victor yelled, shoving at the shape of a body atop him.

"Say you're sorry! You can't just laugh like that! She was really upset!" Max responded, barely keeping his grip as the tussle violently moved.

"I'm not apologizing to you or your little girlfriend! It was funny!" Victor almost started to laugh again, but swallowed it with a mouth full of sandy mud. They continued to fight, the only sounds, an occasional grunt or mumbled cuss. After a couple of minutes of pointless tussling, Victor finally gave up.

"Ahh ha! Surrender," Max wheezed triumphantly, holding Victor's arm behind his back.

"Or what? You don't have it in you!" In truth, Victor had already accepted his defeat, but why not bother his brother while he could.

"Don't test me!" Max growled.

“You know, I think the both of you are idiots,” spoke a calm and feminine voice, “and deserve the lecture you're going to get when your mother sees your ruined clothes.” Both boys immediately stopped struggling, eyes shooting wide open. They both knew that mind muddling voice as much as they knew their own; so with the speed and nobility of hobbling drunks the brothers shot to their feet and stood side by side, embarrassed smiles on their young faces. Harmony stepped out from the shade and into the woodland clearing, her slightly curly dandelion blonde hair bouncing on her back, always landing in rhythm with her step. She was the epitome of gentle beauty, stealing the heart of every young man in Dasosa, and catching the eye of every envious woman who had the displeasure of meeting someone so stunning and kind. Her every step was deliberate, yet landed as lightly as a butterfly upon the ground, the silky grass embracing her thin boots. Her eyes seemed to shine with adoring amusement, and her gentle lips were curved into a wonderful smile. Even when she wore her simple work clothes, she was a sight to behold. Victor could never have denied that he was jealous of Max.

“Harmony... I thought you had decided to go home?” Max replied, some of his calm returning from the initial surprise. Harmony’s smile turned quickly into a slight frown of disappointment, her power over them seeming to rise with her displeasure.

“If you had been listening, you would have heard me say that I had to run home, and that I would return.” She stopped a step or two away, giving Max a once over.

“I was listening,” Victor interjected, hoping to steal some of her precious attention. Max simply elbowed him in the ribs, earning a disapproving ‘hmm’ from Harmony that quickly ended any further attacks.

“I left for one moment,” she took stock of their clothes once more, “and you both end up looking like homeless serfs. What did your mother tell you about fighting? Especially in

your newer clothes?" In unison, the boys looked at each other, and though they both knew, the message was clear: 'I have no idea, how about you?'

"So neither of you were listening to her either?" Harmony put her left hand upon her forehead, and gave a groan of exasperation. "Fine. I should have known as much. I'll help you both clean up at the stream, but you both owe me one." Victor smiled and said a quick thanks before heading back toward their small fortress, a home of their own creation.

"I owe you a lot more than one, and someday I'll make them all up to you. Just wait and see," Max quipped, halting their departure. He was an intelligent and cunning young man, but he was also still a boy, and often a begotten fool.

"Oh? And how will you do that?" Harmony grabbed his hand and scooped a little closer to Max, but remained far enough to avoid his filthy clothes.

"I will swear my undying loyalty to you as a knight and never leave your side for all your days." It was a sweet sentiment, but such an oath, though spoken for her, would be the fulfillment of his own dreams, not hers.

"Well... that sounds lovely. But I think a picnic or simple bouquet of flowers would suffice." Max smiled and pulled her closer for a kiss, and was met with a familiar finger upon his lips.

"You know better than that, and you're filthy anyway." Harmony released his hand and went to follow Victor. Max gave a deep sigh of disappointment before heading after her. He had known better, but he still liked to try every once in a while.

"Are you love birds done?" Victor hollered from down the road, taunting them. "The sun will set in an hour, and I for one don't want to face mother's wrath if we're late!" Victor turned back down the makeshift path, leading the way. Harmony chuckled and allowed Max

to catch up. Before long, they were strolling into the sunset, innocent children without a care in the world.

They were all late, which was to be expected; but on this night they pushed the boundary. Rebecca Shield, the loving and adoring wife of Matthias Shield, stood on the balcony of her small home, searching the darkened horizon for her two mischievous boys. While she watched, her blonde yet slightly graying hair waved gently in the wind, flowing over her small shoulders. She was not old yet, but on the verge. Her arms still held that uncanny strength and the lines upon her brow had yet to slouch. But she could feel the age shake within her bones, and her days of chasing children in the fields were soon coming to an end. Once upon a time many suitors had fought for her hand, and she alone held the local men hostage. Such times had fallen to the past. She had married the returning war hero who had somehow bested them all. Now, she was raising two spirited children, only one her own. While another mother might have worried about wolves, goblins, or other creatures of the night; Rebecca knew her boys were anything but ordinary, and could hold up against almost any minor threat. What truly worried her was that they could have hurt themselves trying to pull some crazy stunt in the woods, or that something had happened to poor Harmony. She sighed and adjusted her apron, which she had forgotten to remove. Meanwhile, Matthias sat on the lower porch, puffing smoke from his long pipe while humming an old military tune. His cane lay against the wall, its polished and sealed wood reflecting the light of the swinging lanterns. He gave a content sigh as he glanced down the road, the same old stone and wooden beamed shops and family homes that he had known from when he was young. Life was good. Sure, his freedoms were suppressed by their tyrant of a King, he was missing an arm, and he had plentiful enemies who could appear at any given moment; but that didn't faze him in the

least. He had his wonderful wife and two adventurous boys who could continue his line, what more could he ask for?

“Matt, I know our boys can handle themselves, but they usually aren't this late.”

“Meh. They'll be fine darling, I taught 'em myself, and it's not as if they've never been late before.” Mattias shifted his right hand, adjusting his pipe as he spoke.

“Well, if they're not home in the next ten minutes I'm going out to look for them, because this is too late.” Rebecca turned away from the balcony and headed inside.

Meanwhile, Mattias chuckled to himself and watched as three dark shadows ran from the forest edge and into a nearby alleyway. That was always one advantage that came with living near the edge of the city, he never had to search for the wonderful smells and sights of nature that he loved, as it was right in his backyard. Matthias continued to wait in his chair, the nervous yet faint tapping of his wife's foot almost lulling him to sleep. He surely loved his wife and kids more than anything, but sometimes, they could be a little overbearing. As his mind focused on his family and shifted to the future, his smile began to dissipate. He still had a year or maybe two, he couldn't remember the King's route, but the reality of what was to come still haunted him. The sound of the back door creaking shut brought him back to reality.

“Gah, I better get in there,” he muttered to himself, scratching at his well trimmed beard. Slowly rising from his chair, he quietly shoved open the dark wooden door, and headed inside.

“We really meant to get home sooner mother,” mumbled Max, twiddling his thumbs, “but we got sidetracked.”

Rebecca kept her frown at full force, but she was more relieved than upset.

“You boys ought to know better. How many nights have you come home late? Do you want me to worry?” Her tone shifted from stern to distressed, guiltily pulling both of them into

obedience. “And why do your clothes look so wet?” Victor and Max shot each other a knowing glance.

“Uhh, well, Harmony insisted on cleaning them after we tripped into some mud,” Max lied, trying to avoid any and all punishment.

“Do you really think that excuse will go over my head? Where were you this late at night!” Rebecca accused, staring at Max until he began to shuffle in place.

“I’m sorry mum, we had to take Harmony home,” Victor intercepted. All it took was one raised eyebrow for his excuse to crumble as well. “And I guess we did get a little bit distracted.” Rebecca nodded slightly in agreement. But before she could continue her lecture, Father stepped in to save the day.

“Alright boys, you've learned your lesson, haven’t ya? Grab your dinner and then go straight up to bed. We have a long week ahead of us.” Matthias’s deep and wise voice was enough to cool any temper, and the boys didn’t need a second chance to escape, especially when food was involved. Rebecca watched them scramble before turning to her husband, hands on her slim hips. Matthias brushed hair from his eyes and stepped farther into the house.

“I wasn’t finished Matt, and you know it,” she accused, fitting him with a knowing and slightly disappointed frown.

“Maybe, maybe not. But we do have one long week ahead.” At the mention of that future conversation, the familiar warmth of the room was stolen.

“Do you have to give it to them? We still have plenty of time,” she asked, lightly taking his only hand, “and I’m not ready for their childhood to be over. We both know that this particular burden comes with a heavy price.” Matthias sighed, and pulled his wife into a side hug, letting her head rest upon his shoulder.

“The sooner they know, the longer they have to prepare.” He lifted Rebecca's face and her eyes gazed into his. “They have a terrible road ahead of them, and if I know my sons, they won't walk the easy path, even if they have the choice.” Rebecca lowered her eyes in defeat, knowing he was right. Matthias closed the distance and gave her a full and reassuring hug, his singular arm wrapping around her warmly. “Let's go to bed darling, I have to be up bright and early tomorrow.” Rebecca sighed and nodded as she let go of her husband, turning to lock the back door.

The two of them, after securing all their first floor doors and windows, headed up to bed. They heard the sounds of laughter from Max and Victor's room, and elected to let them stay up. These moments were precious. Rebecca entered their bedroom first and prepared herself for sleep, changing into her light blue nightgown which had been gifted to her by her late mother, one of her few articles of clothing she possessed that was not designated for work. Matthias simply strutted up to the open breeze that was flowing in through the second story window and glanced at the sight of the waning moon. He gazed longingly out the old window toward the starry sky, which signified more to him than any man had a right to assign, and the scarce emotion of reminiscent pain crossed his face.

“It was a night like this my dear,” Matthias spoke, barely above a whisper.

Rebecca immediately knew the atrocious memory that the old soldier was reliving. Matthias ran his hand down the wooden weatherstripping, feeling its knots and missing splints. He eventually ended in the front of his torso, his ghost limb reaching to clasp his remaining hand.

“The first thing I want for my boys is a good and righteous life, peace even, if such a thing is still possible. But if they are the ones to get the chance, I want them to take that demon King Apates, and drag him all the way to the deepest levels of hell where he belongs. I know they are the only ones who can.” Rebecca turned, her green eyes staring at his heavily

scarred back. Neither of them spoke, for no words were needed. Matthias carefully climbed into bed. They lay in that peaceful silence, gradually falling asleep to the distant laughs, and ‘secret’ conversations of their children. There was no guarantee that either of the young boys would follow the path that was so unsteadily forced before them, and if they were honest, neither Matthias nor Rebecca wanted that struggle to fall on their shoulders, even if it was the only way.



Victor was not happy, again. He and Max had been dueling all morning, and he had lost nearly every match. With another strike, his opponent retreated, giving Victor a small advantage. He leapt forward with a half-hearted stab, quickly pulling back to slash down from his upper left. Max knocked the first attack to his side, and quickly parried the second assault. On the sideline, Matthias watched with keen eyes, observing technique and footwork alike. His eyes seemed to move constantly, catching every smack of the swords and every subtle drop of morning dew. It was a familiar sight to the outer city folk, but a lovely one nonetheless.

With a swipe at Max’s knees, followed by two quick attacks, Victor finally won the duel. A solid thud was heard, as coarse wood met body.

“Ouch! You didn’t have to hit me! My sword was on the ground!” yelled Max, shoving Victor away.

“Sorry, I guess I just got caught up in the moment,” Victor shrugged, nonchalantly walking away.

“Yeah sure, it was a total accident,” Max muttered, as he groaned onto his feet, following Victor toward his father, who sat with an amused smile on his face. Today, he wore

a simple leather vest and his favorite wood brown cloak, only armed with experience and his widely coveted beard.

“Well done today, Max! You as well, Victor, though I’m sure that we both know your performance was not at its best.” Victor frowned, but was in total agreement. Just two days prior he had stood on the other side. “Shake hands and go clean up, I believe today is the day.”

Both boys stopped their spontaneous staring contest, turning a quizzical eye on their father. They both knew that he loved to act mysterious whenever he got the unfortunate chance to do so, but there was a slight undertone of sadness in his voice, mixed with something neither of them could describe.

The brothers shook hands, their previous competitiveness fading. They took up their various wooden weapons, swords, spears, shields, and much more, to head back home. Meanwhile, Matthias stayed put, listening to the soft chirping of birds and the rustling of the field grass. He reached into his leather bag and removed two rings, each identically hanging from a silver chain. He glowed with a fatherly smile, pride and remorse mixing on his once handsome face. The time had indeed arrived. The following years would be hard, but he had faith in his boys. Max was loyal and righteous, always making the right decisions and putting others first, and Victor was cunning and wise for his age, both of them looking ahead and keeping each other from running off a cliff. A perfect team.

A brief memory surfaced of Max talking Victor out of trouble near the noblemen sector, as a rather influential gang of teens from the higher end of the city attempted to insult their honor. It had been a silly fight, started over that irremovable boundary between the wealthy and the poor, but a fight nonetheless. Victor had stood his ground, a determined and confident smile on his face, while Max tried his best to apologize for the both of them.

Matthias chuckled, shook his head at the memory, still content with his decision to let the fight play out. As the day dream faded, he slowly dropped the rings back into his satchel and raised his gaze to the peaceful morning. He caught a deer prancing on the edge of the meadow, its light hooves marking time with the morning's song, and marked it a symbol of tranquility. It was truly a fine day, so it was a total shame that it had to be one of the hardest days of his life. With a final sigh, Matthias rose from his chair, pushing up with his single arm, and headed to meet his boys for the last time.

“Do we have to go this far out?” Max whined, dragging his feet on the dirt road.

“Yes. So stop lumbering along like a troll and walk straight like a man,” Matthias responded, his annoyance blatantly obvious.

Max, who always wanted to please and impress, responded immediately, puffing out his chest and walking in time with his father. It was the same thing he had done ten minutes earlier, and like then, his posture would last about a minute. Young boys were quite forgetful, as their father clearly knew.

“You could at least tell us why we’ve been dragged out into the middle of nowhere, but no, it’s a secret.”

Victor had been trailing behind for sometime, and had somehow snuck up on the older two. Max turned around for a moment to follow his brother’s voice, a slight grin breaking out at his sarcasm; but he quickly turned to face his father. Both of them stared expectantly, hoping for a clue at the very least.

“Yes, it is indeed a secret. And this isn't the middle of nowhere. I’ll have to tell your mother that you both need a review on local geography.” It was a joke, well, sort of.

Victor gave a deep groan of annoyance in response, while Max genuinely nodded in agreement. The three of them continued to trek forward, following a dirt trail through the

meadows and scattered trees. The scenery had looked the same all day, but their destination was finally approaching. Matthias raised his walking stick and pointed toward a slight hill in the distance saying, “That’s the last ridge. Once we’ve gone over, I’ll tell you everything.”

Matthias then watched as his sons seemed to shred every ounce of tiredness and race up the hill. They laughed and pushed each other, struggling upward toward the rounded peak. Inevitably, they ended up on the ground, wrestling as Matthias strutted past them and into the center of the Trinity Lakes.

“Sit down,” Matthias motioned, “and tell me what you see.” The boys did as they were told, dropping down into the long and unkempt field. Max’s long blonde hair blew easily in the wind, his hand unconsciously moving to knock it out of his face. Victor simply sat cross legged, patiently waiting. After a couple seconds of blank staring, the boys realized that it was not a rhetorical question and he was actually waiting for their responses. Max glanced around, Victor quickly following suit.

“Well... we’re in a field?” Victor pointed out, a question hanging behind his words.

“I suppose we are in the center of the Trinity Lakes. This place is some sort of memorial to the first King of Ransom, right?” Max added.

Matthias nodded, but turned to point at a singular distant rock, almost circular in shape, raising his staff once more.

“You know of it. But do you know what that monument represents?” he questioned. Both boys scratched their heads in thought, but it was quite obvious they didn’t know. Max wasn’t even puzzled at the question, he was too focused on how his father could stay so incredibly balanced with only one arm while pointing his staff at the same time. “I didn’t think so. So let me tell you both a story.” Matthias set down his staff and withdrew the two rings from his satchel. “A story of loss, a story of humanity’s brokenness.” Max and Victor

frowned, an emotion almost equivalent to panic rising as their almighty and all knowing father was brought down to an old and tired man. He had been one of the strongest warriors in his year, and was known throughout the town as an unbreakable wall. So to see him reduced to such a state of elderly remorse was almost too much for his young sons to comprehend.

“It started with an end. An end to a war that is.” Matthias slowly lowered himself as he spoke, finishing the seated circle. “Not an ordinary war mind you, it was a war of worldly proportions. A war that determined the reality of future life.” Victor sat with a confused frown on his face, while Max leaned forward in intrigue. “Now I know it will come as quite the surprise to you, but I used to be a young man myself.” Matthias chuckled in an elderly fashion, deep and full of reminiscent humor. “And when I was a soldier, I learned countless things about our world. From simple combat studying to civil works, we were taught everything. But there was one important lesson I had to learn for myself,” Matthias paused for dramatic effect, his cloak flowing silently in the low tucked wind, “and that lesson was that there are four base powers in this world.” He raised the rings up once again, both dangling in the open air. On the rings were four engraved symbols, a silver inlay to contrast the golden rings themselves. “Greed. Fear. Selflessness. And Hope.” Each word was repeated with such force and emotion that both of the boys scooched closer to their father, hanging on to his every word. The symbols resembled a menacing rat with a crown upon its head, a coiled snake with one large eye and three fangs, a man on his knees holding what appeared to be an empty bowl, and finally a broadsword wrapped with a wordless banner.

“Now I am not the type of fool to believe that life is a simple game to play or mountain to conquer, no, these four powers are simply the flags that mortal beings will rally toward.” Matthias could tell that they were confused, so he elected to change his strategy,

knowing that the day would eventually come when all would be made clear. “I could tell you about our history, as I had originally planned, and explain to you the path that you must walk, but I realize now that you are still too young to understand such things, and that I could never put the journey into words. But nevertheless, I have brought you to this place so that I may pass the flag on to you, as I can no longer bear its weight.” Victor and Max both reached out to receive their rings, tentatively sliding them over their heads. Matthias smiled sadly before continuing, “We will walk to the center memorial. And there you shall each pay your respects to the fallen and be made a true man, as is tradition with our blood... For the day is coming soon when you will be taken from me and forced into the real world.” He rose, using his single arm to hoist himself off of the ground. Dust rained from his billowing cloak, flying off into the field.

“What do you mean by ‘real world’ father?” Max questioned. Matthias gave a “hmm” before taking a knee in front of his son.

“The world of the enemy, my boy. The near and true enemy.” He turned away and grabbed his walking stick from the grass. The old warrior then began a slow trek towards the center. The two brothers shared a solemn look before following their father toward the unknown future.

Chapter ???

Spring frowned in disgust as she gazed down from her balcony at the mob of nobles below. It was The Polar Eclipse, and as was custom, the high nobility and citizens of respectable stature gathered at Castle Aeternum to celebrate the beginning of a new decade. The castle was breathtaking in the bright light of the moon, rays reflecting from its crystal moat out onto the walls and decorative statues, creating a surreal and magical aura. The interior of the castle, like the streets of the capital city, was covered in the red, black, and silver colors of Ransom's flag, through tapestries, drapes, ribbons, and endless amounts of exotic flowers.

The well dressed aristocrats of Ransom's high society had, and would, arrive by chariot or decorated steed. Each passenger would then walk the smooth stone bridge, adorned with family crests, priceless jewelry, and clothes worth more than a peasants yearly salary. Each patrician would haughtily approach in their own manner, determined to showcase their success and influence. Somehow they managed to smile and speak to each other as if they had nothing to prove. To those who ruled at the peak of civilian life, it was a night of immense expectations and mounting pressure to please. To the middle class and below however, it was a night filled with parties, games, love, and everything in between. The Polar Eclipse was a time of honest joy and companionship. Unfortunately for Spring, her family name granted her power, wealth, stature, and no small amount of respect; and contrary to popular belief, she hated these parties and would rather stab out her own eyes than socialize with narcissistic royalty. So naturally, after her family's magnificent arrival, she escaped to a high balcony overlooking the courtyard, with no intention of returning.

The night had only just begun, and countless affluent families along with rising members of society continued to trickle in, sparkling like beautiful stars in the moonlight. Their careless beauty was always one of the most disgusting things she had to see. Little to none of the noble families had upheld their core values over the past hundred years or so. The majority had turned to chase their own desires rather than tend to the needs of their people, and it made Spring sick. An exceptionally fabulous carriage arrived, and the young teen allowed herself a small smile. After a lifetime of these events she knew who deserved their place and who did not. One such man had just arrived, a friend of her fathers, who governed a small town outside of Kandeth.

Spring sighed and leaned forward onto her arms, resting her head. They weren't all self centered and conceited, but when the majority were, parties were not exactly enjoyable. Below her was the wonderful sound of music, sweet melodies from the finest instruments taking flight throughout the castle, filling it with warmth. She wanted more than anything to enjoy the songs and dance with a smile, but it had been years since such an opportunity had arisen for her to do so. The young woman gazed away from the steady stream of newcomers to look down upon the city, scattered magical fireworks and demonstrations lighting up the night. She wanted to envy the commoners, but couldn't bring herself to do it. She was blessed with what she had, and did not have the right to covet the poor.

Unlike previous years, her wonderful solitude lasted past the hour mark, a true miracle. Her father, who usually retrieved her, was preoccupied in some political or social-economical conversation with a fellow councilman. So, when her mother's sharp voice stabbed her from behind, she was not prepared.

"Sapalia! What are you doing up here? The party is downstairs!" her mother interrupted, entering the balcony. "You have dressed up so fine! It would be a shame for no

one to see you!” she encouraged, turning her daughter, who was already annoyed at the use of her birth name, from the pleasant view. “I know for certain that there are plenty of young ladies and formidable men who are waiting to make your acquaintance. And, as you should remember, many prominent women of the court have written to me in hopes of seeing how you’ve grown. Come, there is nothing for you up here.”

Spring did not resist as she was guided from her hideout, a hand on each of her shoulders. She always knew that the devil would come calling, and had come to terms with her fate many years prior. So, with practiced ease, Spring brought a pleasant smile to her face and a grace to her step, descending the stairs as a main attraction rather than a disappointed and disheveled actress. Upon her entrance, she glanced around the vast and familiar room, daintily waving at anyone whose eyes met her own.

Aeternum’s ballroom was magnificent, but quite like all the others she had visited. The ceiling, which was around three stories high, and the walls, which expanded to the width of an entire tavern, were crafted of smooth white marble and gold. The walls were lined with statues and paintings, the art mirroring on either side. Among the aesthetic works were triumphant soldiers, plentiful rivers of food, and mounds of riches, showcasing the King’s success. Underneath these great works were the glistening floor tiles, which were covered in patterned stones and long strips of silk carpet. The ceiling was adorned with two glass chandeliers, with candles that reflected light all throughout the massive room, and rainlike pendalogues that swayed ever so slightly in the wind from the massive open doorway. It was an awe inspiring feat of architecture, but years of unpleasant memories had unfortunately distorted her view.

At the far end, facing the massive entrance, was a single occupied throne, upon it was King Apates, speaking nonchalantly to his advisors and servants. During this special event The King was wearing a royal mantle of black, red, and silver, matching his country in style

and presence. On his head was a silver and golden crown inlaid with blood red rubies, and at his side was a sheathed broadsword, an item that Spring had never seen him without. He had a young and handsome face with a short stubble beard and natural flowing locks of wood brown hair. Many had claimed that King Apates was immortal, but according to her knowledge and that of the surrounding nobility, he was simply one in a long bloodline.

Lady Beledona and Spring's return went quite unnoticed amidst the dancing, music, and scattered conversations, something that one hated and the other appreciated. However, a group of young gentlemen had most assuredly noticed Spring's arrival, and in accordance to their own private and unspoken tradition, they each set off to gain her affections. It was no secret that the young daughter of Sir Beledon was a true beauty. Even before she grew to be a young woman many had bargained and fought for her future hand in marriage. Fortunately, her father was quite protective, stubborn as a mule some would say, and made it plainly clear that no man could have her until she came of age. That was years ago. Now that she was a young woman of sixteen, her parents had allowed many wealthy and influential suitors to approach her, though she had ensured that they gave up their efforts in a week or less.

As Spring entered conversation with a young countess, the first of the young men appeared, politely parting the crowd. His name was Damien, the somewhat handsome and intelligent son of a prominent banker positioned near the center of Kandeth City. Spring had known Damien since childhood and had rejected him unswervingly on multiple occasions... every year for as long as she could remember. For reasons unbeknownst to her, Damien had no interest in any of the other prominent ladies of the court, and singled her out as some sort of prize he had to obtain. This year, he wore a black hose and frilled jacket, with a silver buckle centered on a brown belt. Damien had short cut orange to brownish hair and a dignified face that left him somewhat attractive, but not the most alluring compared to others.

Spring immediately recognized him and worked double time to uphold her facade of enjoyment. Damien nodded at her and waited patiently for the countess to remove herself from the current conversation. It only took a moment for the older woman to catch on, and she couldn't help but get a little excited herself at witnessing a young courtship. The countess brushed her graying hair from her shoulder and leaned in to whisper,

“I won't hold you any longer, my dear! That young man seems keen on making your acquaintance.” Spring gave her a respectful nod of thanks, and prevented herself from cringing as the countess winked and strutted away. Damien quickly approached, taking Spring's right hand in both of his, a hopeful and optimistic smile blooming beneath his steady eyes.

She allowed herself to be turned to face her old 'friend', giving him a slight curtsy. The poor lad had tried for years to keep a level head, but when a young man is truly infatuated with a single woman, he loses all sense and notions of intelligence. Her freely flowing rich dark brown hair that fell upon her shoulders and back, her dark blue eyes that reminded him of the ocean, and her red and white dress were all too much for him to take in at once. Luckily, some of his old manners kicked into high gear, reminding the young man to bow.

“Damien, it's a pleasure to see you here,” Spring sang, her steady and melodic voice causing sweat to break out upon her companion's brow.

“Ah, yes, it's always a pleasure to see you, Lady Beledona,” he replied nervously, beginning to guide her from the center of the crowd and toward a tall multiple story window. Spring gave him a pleasant laugh in reward for his politeness, allowing herself to be slowly led away. While walking they spoke formally about family, business, politics, and everything

else they were required to cover, until finally, they jumped the final hurdle and were allowed to speak about whatever they desired.

“I will admit that I was not expecting you to appear, as we both know that I depart in under a year for my ambassador courses. But,” she continued, “as I said before, I am pleasantly surprised by your presence.” Damien almost ran into a servant, mentally slapping himself across the face. Spring stepped to the side, releasing Damien’s hand. “You do remember that, right?” she asked, disbelief and a small taint of amusement appearing on her gentle lips.

“Oh, of course!” he responded, regaining some of his composure. “I simply lost my footing for a moment, nothing more!” Spring rolled her eyes and took the final steps to reach the edge of the giant room, which was lined with fine cushioned chairs. It was a prime location for private conversation.

“Anyway, how have you been?” Damien began, taking Spring’s hand and lowering her onto a seat.

“I’m quite the same, I am afraid. No ill has befallen my family or I, and for that I thank his majesty the King,” Spring lavished, little to no real emotion behind her.

Damien took the seat directly next to the most beautiful woman in the room, his attention entirely focused on her every word and motion.

“But?” he interjected, raising an eyebrow at her abrupt silence.

“But, that fortune has also proved to bring the most crushing amounts of boredom,” she sighed, glancing off into the shifting crowd, brief flashes of dancing couples appearing through the gaps. Damien shrugged, not entirely understanding her displeasure.

“Yes, I too have struggled with boredom,” he interrupted, trying his hardest to connect with her. “But, soon enough, my father’s business will be mine, and I shall be set for the rest

of my life. For what more can I ask? I will have wealth, stature, respect, and everything in between.” Spring watched her friend’s face flush with excitement and pride, his previous queasiness fading. “The only thing I lack at the moment is someone with whom I choose to share my fortune.”

Damien scooped closer to Spring, balancing on the corner of his own seat. He had tried many approaches, most, if you can believe it, more direct than this new strategy. Spring had caught on to his plan the moment he interrupted her, and saw his speedy approach as a perfect chance to move on. Afterall, she had many more suitors to turn down in the next couple of hours, not to mention meeting strange foreign diplomats and other required social activities. She had even seen an Aero couple waltzing through the crowd, their elegant wings parting the seas of velvet and gold, and she had met very few of them in her short lifetime.

“Yes, I suppose you would be quite lonely,” Spring responded sadly, giving the frequently heartbroken boy a small amount of pity. “I do hope you find someone Damien, and I wish we could talk about the future all night,” she lied, “but my mother has requested that I meet Governor Hand of Dasosa, and I cannot keep a man of such power waiting.” With a quick nod, Spring rose from her chair, said goodbye, and vanished into the mass of glistening wealth, leaving Damien with an all too strong sense of *deja vu*. She was going to leave for a place far from his reach, but for some strange reason, he had a feeling that he would get another chance to win her over.

As she had previously predicted, countless young men approached her throughout the night. Some were genuinely good men, whose wealth and power had yet to consume their motives, but others would strut up to her and almost command her to marry them on the spot. One way or another, she made it through the party without getting engaged or falling out of

routine. Just like all the other women, Spring was thoroughly enjoying the party, and was definitely not bored, disturbed, or feeling as if she desperately wanted to run away.

As the night was drawing to a close, the music stopped, dancing feet found their places on the floor, and even the light jingle of jewelry and heavy pockets ceased. King Apates rose from his throne, a golden goblet in his hand and a brilliant white smile upon his face. The entire crowd turned from their conversations and activities to give the King their full attention, his short and annual speech known to all by heart.

“My dearest and beloved people!” he began, swinging his empty hand across the room. “We have gathered here to celebrate the beginning of the new year and the success of the years that have passed! You have all contributed to the triumphs and rapid growth of our great country, and for that I owe you all a great debt! I would lavish words of approval and thanks upon you if I believed you did it all in my name alone. But alas, it is in the name of our great kingdom and people that we all act for the greater good.” Apates smiled charmingly. He then proceeded to vigorously raise his chalice above his head. “Raise your glasses and join me in a toast to Ransom and our great future!” All those present raised their glasses in honor of their King and chanted in one voice,

“Long live Ransom, long live the King!”

As one being they drank the wine and cheered for King Apates as he descended from on high to bid them farewell. Every year it was the same short speech and the same enthusiastic response. Spring was loyal to Ransom and to its King, but that didn’t mean that she didn’t have any doubts, some of which had grown stronger that very night.

“You look troubled, my love,” Sir Beledon observed, gingerly taking his daughter’s soft hand. Spring started slightly at his voice, unaware that he had approached. She turned to fully face her father, lovingly smiling at his concern.

“It’s nothing father,” she lied, clasping his other hand as well, “I have simply grown tired. Unlike you, I cannot celebrate for weeks on end.” She spoke the final line with a smidge of sarcasm, teasing the older man. He simply chuckled in response, beginning to slowly guide her toward the door, the night almost at its end.

“Yes, yes, I can indeed party, can’t I?” he responded lightheartedly.

“Don’t get too far ahead of yourself,” Spring laughed, “mother doesn’t want you to injure yourself like you did at our last party.”

Her father blushed in embarrassment, that all too hilarious memory likely to last in their family till his very death. The joke made him sound incredibly decrepit, but he had yet to become an old man. Kentar Beledon, descendant of the original Kandeth Beledon, was about forty-two years of age, with oak brown hair sprinkled with streaks of gray, a previously muscular body slowly deteriorated to that of a common workman, and a wealth that dwarfed the Gangars of the west. Alongside that, Kentar’s face had retained its kind glow and mischievous eyes over the years, something his only daughter adored, and his love for his family and country had yet to waiver. Overall, he was one of the most respected and honored men of the King’s high council, and was known far and wide by the peasants as one of the few remaining who had a soul.

“That was not my fault! The duke tripped me!” he exclaimed with indignation. But his defense only raised his daughter’s laughter to hysteria. He tried to keep up a face of disappointment, but Spring’s enjoyment caused his frown to dissipate within seconds.

“Sapalia!” Lady Beledona’s voice whispered hotly into Spring’s ear. “You should not laugh so freely here! It is disgraceful for a lady to be so violently loud amidst honorable company.” Spring immediately closed her mouth, but short giggles continued to escape. Her mother gave a groan and took her father’s arm, giving him a look that said ‘this is your fault’. Spring had to put a hand over her mouth to prevent further laughter as her father shrugged in

her direction, obviously in full knowledge of his actions. The three exited the hall, arm in arm, silently admiring the castle's decor. She was going to miss her parents when she left, that was for sure. Maybe not the posh parties of the high-born, but her family was all she had.