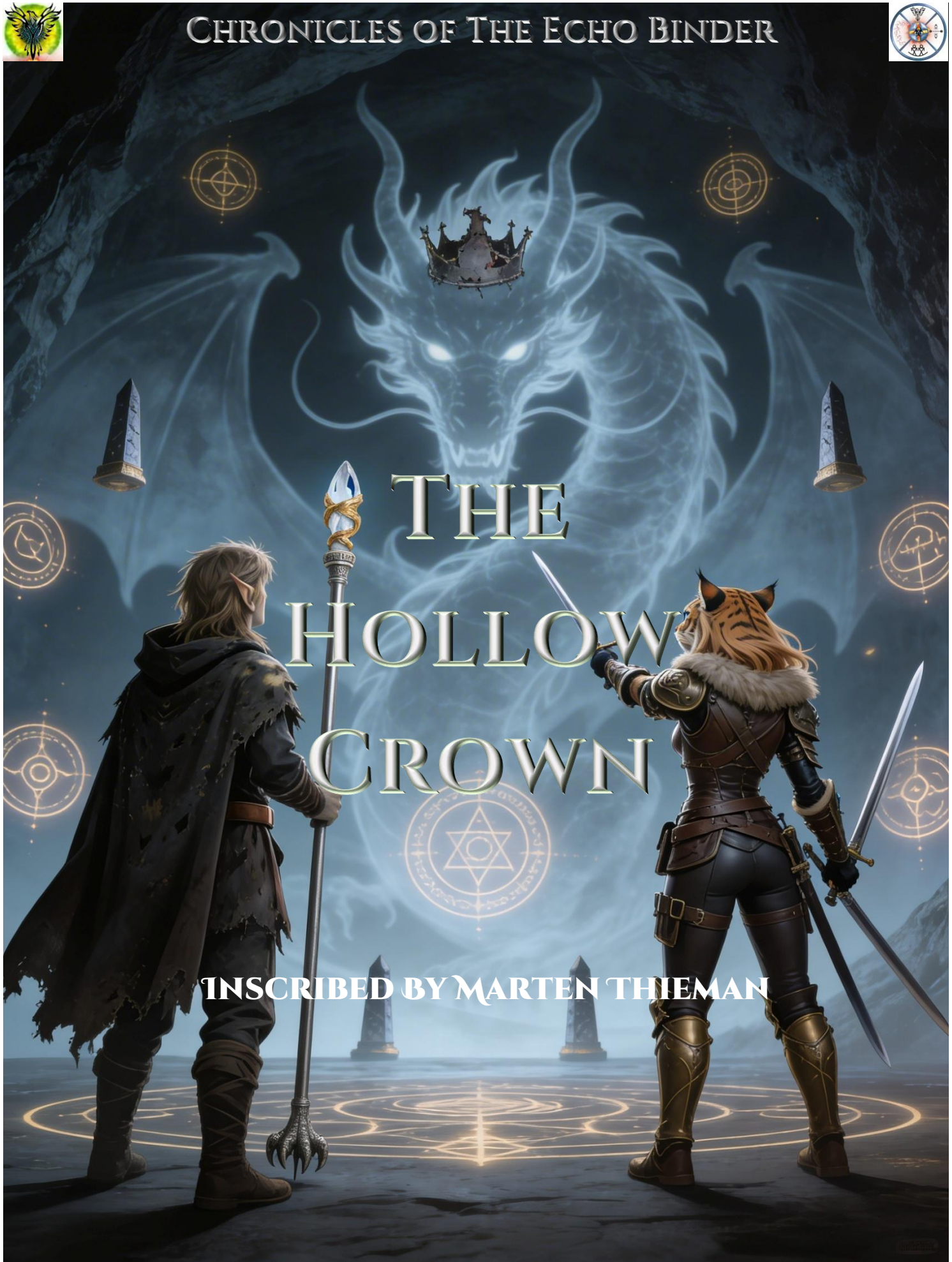




CHRONICLES OF THE ECHO BINDER

THE HOLLOW CROWN

INSCRIBED BY MARTEN THIEMAN



On the Hollow Crown

There are crowns that are forged by kings...
and there are crowns that are found.

The Hollow Crown is not worn—it is answered.

It does not grant dominion. It reveals it.

Those who stand before it do not claim power. They are weighed by it.

For the Crown is not empty.

It is filled with Echo—with memory, with oath, with the will of those who came before.

And the question it asks is not one of worth...

...but of truth.

Will you stand... when it sees you as you are?

Marks Upon the Veil

The symbols upon this cover are not decoration.

They are witnesses.

The Eye of Daron sees what others cannot.

The hawk of the Shadow Veil walks where memory thins.

And the sigil carried by Elmon... is not a mark of power—
but of forces bound to him beyond his choosing.

Some will recognize them.

Most will not.

CHRONICLES OF CRAGNEARTH'S ECHO
BINDER

The Hollow Crown

MARTEN THIEMAN



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***This ledger is bound in flame and memory.
All echoes remain sacred***



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The Hollow Crown

Prologue

Before the lattice was named—before Perdina pulsed in crystal sleep—the worlds sang in silence.

Threads of memory, temptation, and truth wove themselves into seekers.

And one, Elmon, was chosen to walk the echo.

There was a time when silence meant peace.

Now, it means forgetting.

Lost loves and broken bonds linger within him.

And in the quiet, he wonders:

To whom does he still call?

The Guardian Worlds stir, not in harmony, but in ache.

Their veins pulse with memory.

Their skies tremble with consequence.

The Titans falter.

The Heralds whisper.

And the veil thins, like breath on glass.

Elmon Magus walks, not as a man, but as memory made flesh.

He carries Perdina, the staff that remembers what even gods would rather forget.

He has faced time.

Silence. War. Sorrow.

He did not conquer them.

He became them.

Now, the realms do not ask for salvation.

They ask for reckoning.

In the hollows of Wishar, where light forgets its name, he whispered a lullaby and turned shadow into silence.

In Brittia, where war danced upon parchment, he did not rise to fight.

He sat and remembered.

And the drums paused.

But the echo is not done.

Dragos stirs.

Not as a beast, but as a question.

Not to destroy, but to unmake.

And Elmon, Warder of Realms, must decide:

Will he become the seal?

Or the song?

This is not a tale of victory.

It is a tale of memory.

Of breath held.

Of the moment, before the blade falls.

Chapter |: The Curse of Elrinana

Elmon's journey had only just begun, and yet he stood far from the boy who once trembled before the Candle Pyre at ten years of age.

Then, fear had burned outward. Now it burned inward.

Elcrull.

Her name struck through him like iron on stone.

She had chosen the War Blade — not as rebellion, but as inheritance. The path was written in her blood long before she first lifted steel. Had she walked it cleanly? Or had it cut deeper than she expected?

Was she whole?

Or had the blade claimed something it was never meant to take?

He did not fear her strength. He feared what war does to the heart.

He had to find her.

Not only to see if she lived.

But to know whether the fire within them both still burned true.

Elmon sought passage to the nearest citadel to Baron's Pit. They must know her location and whereabouts.

He looked to the sorcerer in Scathnard for a Gate to the location. He was not schooled in Gates but did know of the witch of Norcrase in the south who did.

Elmon had been to Norcrase in visting Justin and Gorith. He opened a gate before the sorcerer and stepped through.

The sorcerer was puzzled why search for agate when he could already. He pondered a few moments, then returned to this work, dismissing the perplexity of the moment.

Elmon sought passage to the nearest citadel bordering the Baron's Pit.

The King's Knights would know her last reported location. Someone would have a record of her recovery.

He went first to the sorcerer of Scathnard.

"I require a Gate," Elmon said.

The old man adjusted the crystal lens over his eye and studied him. *"You are not schooled in Gates,"* he replied. *"There is a witch in Norcrase who binds southern corridors. She is precise. Expensive."*

Elmon nodded.

He had walked Norcrase once before — in the days of Justin and Gorith. He remembered its stone alleys, the scent of brine, the echo of old wards in its harbor walls.

He stepped past the sorcerer.

Placed his hand upon the air.

Elmon was not schooled in Gatecraft.

He had never apprenticed beneath its doctrine nor sworn to its lattice.

But once — in the south — he had stood beside a sorcerer who wove one.

He had not watched idly.

He had listened.

To the Echo of the seam.

To the cadence of gesture.

To the invisible lattice that trembled before it parted.

His mind did not forget patterns.

It trapped them.

He did not know how to open a Gate to an unknown place. That required attunement, anchor stones, and disciplined binding rites.

But to a location he had seen?

To a corridor, he had felt?

That was different.

He stepped forward.

Found the remembered thread.

And drew it open.

Elmon did not look back.

He stepped through.

The Gate closed without thunder.

The sorcerer remained where he stood.

For a long moment, he stared at the space where nothing now existed.

"Why seek a Gate," he murmured, *"when he carries one?"*

He frowned.

Then slowly returned to his desk, though the quill in his hand paused longer than usual before touching ink.

Elmon arrived at Justin's house on the southern edge of the city.

Justin was in the yard, wooden axe in hand, sparring gently with the boys. Brell raised his shield too late and took a soft tap to the shoulder. Ganda laughed.

Justin looked up — and froze.

"Elmon?"

"Where is the witch?" Elmon asked without greeting.

Justin straightened. *"Western gate. Why?"*

"I need passage to Baron's Pit." His jaw tightened. *"Elcrull is in trouble."*

Justin did not hesitate. *"I'll fetch me axes."*

He turned toward the shed.

Elmon called sharply. *"No."*

Justin stopped. *"You have a family. A forge. A life built."* Elmon stepped closer. *"I am not bound."*

Justin's brow hardened. *"You walk toward slavers and nobles and pits. No one travels alone toward the unknown."*

The door opened behind them.

Gorith stepped out, wiping flour from her hands, eyes sharp as hammered steel.

"You mind explaining yourself, my Knight?"

"Elmon needs aid. Elcrull is in danger. A man never travels alone—" Justine snapped.

"Perhaps you are tired of us and want excitement is your path now."

"Elmon is incapable of handling himself?" she interrupted coolly.

Justin turned slowly toward her.

For a moment, dwarven pride flared.

Then it softened.

"No, my Glistening Hammer. I'll not braid my beard over foolishness. You are my stone and my gold."

He stepped close, kissed her brow, and drew her in.

"You know mine heart."

Elmon placed a hand on Justin's shoulder.

"Good man. If I need you, I will call."

He turned to Gorith and tossed her a platinum coin.

She caught it cleanly. Bit it, tasted its metal. Nodded once. *"And why do you pay me now for a friend's walk?"* she asked.

Elmon met her gaze.

Paused.

"No. There may be a long point to our lives," Elmon said quietly. *"Some hunts take years before the arrow finds what it seeks."*

Gorith studied him a long moment.

"Ah. Advance passage, or security for a future call?"

"No," Elmon said quietly. *"Lives braid for a reason not yet spoken."*

She tucked the coin into her purse.

"His call will be answered," she said with a crooked smile. *"If that point comes."*

Elmon walked through the western quarter toward the city gate.

He found her seated on the porch of a narrow stone house, fingers tapping lightly against a weathered table.

She did not look surprised. *"You're late."*

Elmon stopped two paces from the steps. Two fingers lowered slightly — grounding himself.

"Late for what?"

"She waits for you in Raven Claw."

Elmon did not answer.

Instead, he sifted.

Echo. Lattice. Seam.

He listened to the hum of the house, the grain of the wood, the subtle resonance of the earth beneath it.

Then he listened to her.

Nothing.

No rhythm.

No hum.

No lattice.

Cold.

Void.

Intentionally silent.

“You guard yourself well,” he said at last.

She laughed softly. *“You are as I expected.”*

“I am Misery Elclot,” she said. *“My mother did not think much of me.”*

Elmon’s gaze softened.

“Then she did not know your rhythm. Or your clarity.”

A flicker of approval crossed her eyes. Elmon started a Word *“I need passage—”*

“To the nearest citadel bordering Baron’s Pit,” he finished.

“Elcrull is not there. Cornell’s Half fell months ago to slavers. She is in Raven Claw. South.”

Elmon searched her face again. Listened to the air. The yard. The stones.

No fracture.

“How do you know this?”

“Your uncle lives in Raven Claw. Seek him.”

Elmon inclined his head. *“You are more than a witch, Mistress Elclot.”*

She smiled faintly. *“And you are more than a mage, Master Silverwood.”*

Silence settled between them.

Then Elmon asked quietly,

“How does one traverse lands unknown?”

She stepped from the porch, stopping just short of him.

“Why does a wizard need training?” she replied. *“Are not places like thoughts? And the unknown merely whispers in the Veil?”*

Elmon tossed her a platinum.

She did not look at it.

With a small gesture, the air beside her thinned.

Not a Gate.

A Veil-walk.

The tunnel that formed was narrow, soft-edged — like memory stretched thin.

He studied it carefully.

Very different from the Gates he opened.

He turned back to her with a faint smile.

“Which Veil do I walk today?”

Her scrutiny sharpened.

“You know of more than ours?”

“Yes,” he answered. *“Those, one can perceive.”*

He remembered Ortis’s classroom. The lesson of layered veils. The difference between cutting space and walking memory.

“You do not Gate,” she said slowly. *“You walk the Veil’s memory.”*

“If you know its name,” Elmon replied, *“you know its path.”*

He stepped forward.

Measured the Echo.

Felt for his uncle’s house.

Adjusted.

The tunnel wavered once — then stabilized.

He emerged before a familiar wooden door.

He knocked.

The door swung open.

Miky stood there, smiling widely. “It took you long enough.”

Elmon blinked. Something in her tone unsettled him. “Long enough?”

She wrapped her arms around him with a hug.

“Father expected you months ago.”

“Why?” Elmon frowned. “I received no notice. Is something wrong?”

“We heard you’d been in Break.”

“Breach,” Elmon corrected gently.

“What?”

“The city is properly called Breach.” A faint smile touched his lips. “May .. I .. come in?”

She stepped aside at once, then darted down the hall.

“Father! Elmon is here!”

A chair scraped inside.

Emor appeared moments later, older but steady-eyed.

“Ah,” he said. *“Let us sit.”*

They gathered in the greeting room. The air smelled of cedar smoke and bread.

Emor folded his hands.

“So, Elmon... what brings you to Raven Claw?”

“A visit,” Elmon said quietly. *“Research. Direction.”*

He paused.

“Much has changed since Breach.” Emor nodded. *“We heard whispers.”*

Elmon's gaze lowered slightly.

"I survived the battle at the Sage Crypt. Master Emuroil Fethermor was imprisoned. I... am not what I thought I was."

Silence held the room.

For hours — through fading light and into lamplight — Elmon recounted it all.

The Veiled city. The waking. The crypt. The prison. The weight of it.

Emor listened without interruption.

When Elmon finished, his uncle exhaled slowly.

"An entire city," Emor murmured. *"Veiled. Sleeping. Awaiting your call."*

Elmon nodded once.

"Ishan of the Catar said I was created for such a time. By the Great Whiteheart."

Emor stood at that.

"The Great Whiteheart..."

He paced once across the floor.

"That reminds me of something your Aunt Eliha said years ago."

Elmon looked up.

"She said what?"

"A father's son will call to the Maker — and answer the call."

Emor stopped walking. *"It made no sense at the time."*

His eyes sharpened. *"?"*

"No," Elmon said evenly. *"A prophecy was found. In an old Catar book Galewell carried."*

He reached inside his coat and withdrew a small leather journal.

His thumb brushed the cover.

The clasp loosened.

He read:

'El Ole Mon's time will come... Benevolent in peace, fierce in knowledge beyond his years. From Elfen lore and the cries of war he will rise. He will domesticate the silence of stone. Seek clarity within shadow. And defile the evil of creation. Wizardry renewed — no longer throne, but tool.'

The room felt smaller after the words faded.

Emor stared.

"El Ole Mon..." he whispered. *"That is Catar for your name. It can mean 'God Over'... though I do not know what MON signifies."*

Elmon sank slowly into his chair.

Miky, meanwhile, was far less interested in theological unraveling.

She leaned forward brightly.

"So when do we get to talk about Elcrull? Is she still faster than you? Did she win that blade trial? Does she still cheat at cards?"

Elmon blinked — then laughed softly for the first time that evening.

“Elcrull is one of the reasons I came,” Elmon said quietly.

Emor leaned forward slightly.

“She was called to the Baron’s Pit,” Elmon continued. *“Slavers took her there. She felled four of them... but the fifth brought her down.”*

Miky covered her mouth.

“I have to find her,” Elmon said. *“She made a covenant to her clan — to become a War Blade before anything else.”*

“I heard the King’s Knights rescued her,” Miky said quickly, hope rising in her voice.

“Yes,” Elmon replied. *“That is what I was told.”*

Emor leaned back heavily in his chair and exhaled as if a stone had been set upon his chest.

“You walked into a storm, nephew.”

He folded his arms and stared into the fire.

“The slavers took Cornell’s Hall months ago. They seized the river barges first — controlled every road and ferry moving through the valley. When the Prince marched north to the war front, they struck.”

Emor shook his head slowly.

“They executed the Field Marshal. The last of the royal household there as well.”

Miky sat silent now.

“When the Prince learned what happened,” Emor continued, *“he called upon the Sorcerers’ Guild in Hackermen East of the Citadel.”*

Elmon raised an eyebrow. *“They didn’t retake the citadel,”* Emor said grimly.

“They erased it.”

“Turned the place to rubble and broken flagstone.”

“Nothing survived Cornell’s Hall after the Black Eyes Slavers took it.”

“The masters were captured,” Emor added. *“Most were tortured for information.”*

He looked up at Elmon. *“It’s still a war zone.”*

Miky was all tears, wracked with grief.

Elmon nodded slowly.

“A woman named Misery told me Elcrull was here — in Raven Claw to the south.”

He paused. *“She is no ordinary witch. I believe she is a Sage... perhaps even a Mystic.”*

Emor frowned thoughtfully.

“If the Knights rescued her,” Elmon continued, *“they must be stationed somewhere here.”*

He looked directly at his uncle.

“Where would the King’s Knights be quartered in Raven Claw?”

Emor paced the room for several minutes.

Now and then, he raised a finger, as if catching hold of a thought, only to let it slip again. Finally, he stopped and shook his head.

“There are possibilities,” he said slowly. *“But I am not certain.”*

He sighed.

“I will place an inquiry with the magistrate in the morning. First thing.”

He glanced toward the window.

“There have been many soldiers in Raven Claw lately. Guild agents. Mercenary companies too. Something is moving across the lands.”

Elmon nodded, though his thoughts were already elsewhere.

He rose and wandered toward the kitchen.

Mirelda, the family cook, sat alone at the table.

Her eyes were red, her hands folded tightly in her lap as if holding herself together.

Sorrow filled the room like a quiet storm.

Elmon stepped closer, feeling the Room.

And the world shifted.

For the briefest moment, he was no longer in the kitchen.

He stood in a vast chamber.

Seven doors circled the room.

Each bore an elemental sigil — flame, stone, wind, water, shadow, light, and something deeper he could not name.

The floor beneath him shone like polished emerald glass.

The air hummed.

Then—he was back in the kitchen.

Mirelda stared at him, pale. *“Elmon...?”*

Her voice trembled. *“Are you here?”*

She rose from the chair, fear creeping into her eyes.

“Emor!” she cried. *“Come quickly!”*

Footsteps thundered down the hall.

As Emor rounded the corner, a faint mist was collapsing around Elmon.

For a moment, his body looked wrong.

Translucent.

Half-present.

As if the world had not yet fully decided where he belonged.

With a sharp motion of his hand, he sealed the room.

A sanctum lock settled over the walls — old magic, heavy and silent.

He did not yet know what had happened, but nothing inside the room would escape.

Elmon drew a long breath and leaned heavily against the kitchen table.

For a moment, his legs nearly gave out.

A voice whispered inside his mind.

“Steady your mind. Focus on the now.”

Elmon answered aloud, though no one stood before him.

“This is new... like something I created.”

Emor quickly slid a chair beneath him as Elmon sagged into it.

Elmon’s head rested on the table for a moment as he breathed slowly, drawing himself back together.

Then he murmured softly,

“Thank you... Virelyndra.”

Emor stiffened.

He stepped back from the table.

Eyes closed.

Old words formed under his breath as he cast a probing sight into Elmon’s mind.

For a brief instant—he saw it.

A Black Dragon.

Ancient.

Immeasurable.

A single star burned upon its brow.

The creature stared directly at him.

Then it spoke.

“Be careful what you seek, Mage.”

The dragon’s jaws began to open.

Emor severed the spell instantly.

He staggered back a step.

Emor’s hands trembled slightly — something he had not allowed in decades.

His eyes were wide now, breath quick, face flushed as he stared at Elmon.

Elmon felt the shift immediately.

Inside his mind, Virelyndra spoke calmly.

“He has seen me.”

Elmon slowly lifted his head.

“So... you have seen Virelyndra.”

Emor took two steps backward, then turned and walked unsteadily into the meeting room. He sank into his chair, staring at nothing.

“A dragon...” he muttered to himself.

“...in Elmon.”

Elmon followed slowly, Miky supporting his arm as his legs steadied themselves.

“Uncle,” Elmon said quietly. *“I can explain.”*

He reached into his coat and withdrew the dagger.

Emor slid farther back in his chair.

Elmon held the blade carefully in both hands, offering the hilt forward.

“This is Virelyndra.”

Emor studied it in silence.

The handle was carved from a dragon's tooth.

An earthen crystal sat in the pommel, deep and ancient.

The blade itself hummed faintly with runic script. Its edge gleamed like restrained lightning.

Its Echo was unmistakable.

It did not belong to this world.

Emor's gaze slowly rose from the blade to Elmon.

"Where..." he began.

"What..."

The words stumbled out as his mind raced through fragments of lore, searching old memories like a scholar rifling through half-burned archives.

Emor steadied himself.

"He..." He paused, drawing a slow breath.

"He was one of the First."

His mind reached into an old legend.

"Stories speak of him. He walked beside the Firstborn... and then vanished from the histories."

Elmon's voice lowered as he reached for what he knew.

Elmon's eyes flicked briefly to the dagger, then back to Emor.

"He is the flame of the Elder Breath. Veil-born."

"He walked with Adama in Eyona."

Emor listened carefully, barely blinking.

Elmon continued, half remembering a fragment once told to him by a dwarven acquaintance.

"It is said of the blade... 'Its magic binds the evil within its vault of eternal submission.'"

Emor nodded slowly, absorbing it.

"It chose this form in its death," Elmon said. *"Its essence and power live in the blade."*

Emor's eyes lit with wonder and quiet reverence.

He bowed his head and whispered a prayer under his breath.

Inside Elmon's mind, Virelyndra spoke:

"He is of the Elnar Archives. Binder of the Dragon Tongues."

Elmon slowly sheathed the dagger.

Then he knelt beside his uncle and gently lifted his chin.

Emor's eyes were unfocused, as if staring somewhere far beyond the room... somewhere deep in memory.

Then suddenly he snapped back.

His mouth opened, closed again.

He focused on Elmon.

“Where... did you find him?”

Elmon answered simply.

“In the Furnace.”

Emor leaned back into his chair. For a moment, words abandoned him.

His thoughts spun like a storm breaking open.

“I must send word of this new lore,” Emor said.

He hurried into his library and pulled a heavy ledger from the shelf.

Placing both hands upon the cover, he wove his fingers slowly across its surface.

The book opened.

Emor turned to a blank page.

Words began forming across the parchment as he spoke them softly, though no quill touched the paper.

Now and then, he paused, glancing back toward Elmon as if measuring each detail against what he had just witnessed.

At last, he closed the ledger with care.

Then he looked directly at Elmon.

“Who is the evil he binds?”

Inside Elmon’s mind, Virelyndra answered immediately.

“That is not of his concern.”

Elmon paused, weighing the words.

“Virelyndra says that is not for you to know,” he said slowly. *“And I assume it is not meant to be spoken openly.”*

He folded his hands for a moment before continuing.

“The dwarf forger, smith, and archivist who helped identify the blade nearly lost his life because of it.”

Elmon’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Someone does not want this known.”

“Or someone wants it for themselves.”

Emor breathed deeply.

His eyes moved slowly around the room, settling on several specific points along the walls and ceiling.

“The bound one’s followers, I would assume,” he said quietly.

He began reciting a short chant under his breath.

His hands moved in small, precise gestures, touching the air at several places around the room.

To Elmon, it felt familiar.

It reminded him of Master Ortis's sanctum—sigils and runes hidden in every structural surface. Ortis often walked the chamber, chanting softly as he inspected each ward one by one.

The final sigil flared.

The door slammed shut.

Miky nearly caught it with her shoulder and jumped back just in time.

Now, only Elmon and Emor remained inside the room.

Silence settled over the chamber.

Emor turned back to Elmon.

"Do the Fili know of this?"

Elmon frowned slightly.

"In the Furnace, I revealed a little to them. Only the name of the dagger."

Emor's reaction was immediate.

"That may have been too much."

He rubbed his forehead slowly.

"You must keep it concealed at all times from public scrutiny."

His eyes returned to the dagger at Elmon's side.

"This explains much."

Elmon studied him.

"Does this have something to do with the Elnar Archives?"

Emor turned toward him sharply. *"How do you know of that?"*

Elmon's face remained calm. *"I know more than I should about many things."*

Emor stared at him for a long moment.

"That," he said slowly, *"is becoming very apparent."*

"I have witnessed demons, wraiths, and zombies. I have seen demonic witches with my own eyes. I personally know a Myst Gazer."

He spoke without pride.

"I fought beside Bareck Lord and Eric Tabound, High Paladin of the Holy Hand. Sensto, a Sigil Cleric of Mensotor Abbey. A Ghost Walker... and many others."

He paused a moment.

"I have touched evil."

"And I have smelled its acrid lust."

His eyes lifted to meet Emor's.

"So... I am familiar with much."

Emor stepped back and studied Elmon carefully.

"You have lived a life many cannot imagine," he said quietly. *"And you have only just come of age."*

He shook his head slowly.

“Yet here you stand — sane, aware.”

A faint smile crossed his face.

“I can understand now why the school changed its name.”

“All of this before you even graduated.”

He rested a hand briefly on Elmon’s shoulder.

“Your father must be proud.”

Elmon gave a small nod. *“It has been a few years. Perhaps I should visit him.”*

“Where is he now?” Emor asked.

“He works with the Mystic Society at the Abron Hill Archives,” Elmon replied. *“Ever since my mother died.”*

His voice softened slightly.

“She planted a treent at the school... in the Watchers’ Garden.”

Silence settled between them for a moment.

Eventually, they gathered themselves and retired for the night, waiting for the rising sun.

Emor was gone before dawn fully broke.

He left at first light without even taking time to break fast.

Elmon, however, remained.

He sat with Miky at the kitchen table, eating Elven burin-berry cakes and drinking fresh cider flavored with mulberry and saffron.

Miky watched him over the rim of her cup.

“So,” she said with a knowing smile, *“what are your plans with Elcrull?”*

Elmon raised an eyebrow.

“I am not sure.”

He studied the table for a moment.

“No... that has not been part of the conversation lately.”

Miky leaned forward slightly.

“Elmon... she truly loves you.”

Elmon sighed quietly.

“She carries a covenant to her clan,” he said. *“To become a War Blade before anything else.”*

He looked out the window at the morning light spreading across Raven Claw.

“I do not know if I am ready for that step...”

He paused.

“...in a world that is already churning.”

Miky’s mother, Elrinana, entered the room.

She stopped when she saw Elmon.

Her eyes narrowed.

“What brings you to our hovel?” she asked, the words sharpened with contempt.

She had never forgiven Elmon's father, Nacrious, for marrying a human — even if that human had been a druid.

Elmon forced a polite smile.

"I am searching—"

Miky cut in quickly. *"For his lost love."*

Elrinana's lip curled. *"What kind of drudge is she, may I ask?"*

"Oh, no one you would care to meet, Mother," Miky said sharply.

Elrinana's voice rose. *"The family withers into half-breeds and syndicated evils."*

Elmon stood slowly.

Fire lit behind his eyes.

"And what of your sister?" he said. *"She married a human who became a noble. You approved of her."*

He stepped forward slightly. *"My father is far more noble than your ancestral hatred of mixed blood."*

Elrinana's expression hardened. *"You speak boldly."*

"Do you know the events that have shaped my life?" Elmon continued. *"Or what has happened at the school?"*

"Elroola Emwinster of the Noble House of Erailia had no difficulty accepting Christin — or Elcrull's lineage."

Elrinana hesitated.

"You have met the emergent queen of the council?"

"Yes." Elmon flared.

"We studied together under Master Ortis... of Black Orc ancestry."

Silence hung in the room.

Elmon's voice lowered.

"You never cared much for my mother."

"The only kindness you ever showed her was thanking her for saving the Treent."

Something in Elrinana's face flickered.

Elmon turned sharply and strode out of the house.

Rage and sorrow surged through him.

The timbers of the house creaked.

The walkway stones cracked.

The structure twisted slightly as if the building itself felt his anger.

Miky hurried after him.

She tapped his shoulder.

Elmon spun around with frightening speed.

"I do not need a new house, cousin," she said dryly.

The words caught him off guard.

The tremors stopped.

Elmon's breathing slowed.

"Mother may not show concern for your father," Miky added quietly. *"But she defends him in gatherings."*

Elmon shook his head.

"Only because he is a pure elf."

Elmon's eyes darkened as if he were staring into a fractured future.

The voice that spoke was not entirely his own.

Miky took a step back.

A quiet unease crept over her.

Elmon suddenly staggered.

He blinked and looked around. *"What were we talking about?"*

Miky hesitated. *"Your mother seemed... heartsick."*

"She was berating your family a little," she added honestly.

Elmon lowered his gaze.

"I saw something in her," he said softly. *"Something deep... clawing at her echo."*

Miky stared at him, unsure whether to believe what she had just heard.

At that moment, Emor appeared in the yard, breathing hard as if he had hurried back from wherever he had gone.

"Mom was at it again, Father," Miky said as he approached.

Emor stopped when he saw Elmon.

The young mage looked unsettled, as though part of his mind still wandered elsewhere.

"What is wrong, Elmon?" Emor asked.

"Something claws at Elrinana's echo," Elmon said slowly. *"Like a shade."*

Emor froze.

He glanced at Miky. *"Not a word of this to anyone."*

Then he turned back to Elmon. *"Her family is cursed."*

He steadied his breath before continuing. *"She feels it every moment of her life."*

Emor explained quietly.

Long ago, an elder AlèDün had seized her father during a dispute. Instead of striking him down, the elder cursed his bloodline.

Only daughters would be born to the line.

And those daughters, it was said, would weaken the lands of the elves.

"It happened during the AlèDün uprising," Emor finished.

Elmon hesitated. *"I believe I can remove the curse."*

Emor raised an eyebrow. *"We have had sages, wizards, and mystics attempt it. Even a Cleric. None succeeded."*

Elmon closed his eyes and drew inward.

Slowly, he lifted his hands.

A faint sphere of light formed before him.

It grew and stabilized, like a window opening into another layer of the world.

Inside the sphere, a vision appeared.

A shadow-like creature clawed at Elrinana's essence as she wailed in darkness.

Emor stepped back in shock.

"How...?" he whispered. *"What is this?"*

Elmon opened his eyes.

"I call it Echo Vision... or Veil Sight," he said quietly. *"I have not decided its name."*

He studied the creature carefully.

"I have seen something like this before, at the school."

"When Master Emuroil Fethermor was still Chancellor."

Elmon exhaled slowly.

The window vanished.

"The Myst Gazer bound that one," he continued. *"All of its evil."*

He looked back at Emor. "Is there a Myst Gazer in town?"

Emor was still staring at the place where the vision had been.

He had no answer yet.

Words stumbled from Emor's mouth.

"You are more special than you know, Elmon."

The words struck a memory.

His uncle had said the same thing years ago at his fourteenth birthday celebration.

"You told me that once before, Uncle," Elmon said softly, remembering the cake, the laughter, and the lantern-stars lighting the courtyard.

He shook his head slightly.

When he looked up again, Emor was gone.

Miky was sitting on the ground staring at him with a mixture of surprise, fear, and awe.

Elmon looked down at her.

"What? . . ." A beet *"Where did Uncle go?"*

She slowly shook her head. No words came to her.

Elmon turned toward the house.

The front door opened with a creak.

He stepped inside as carefully as if entering a crypt.

He steadied his breathing and slipped between layers of perception, Veil-walking into the kitchen.

Elrinana sat at the table.

Tears poured down her face.

"Damn you," she muttered. *"Leave me!"*

Elmon listened with more than his ears.
He heard it.
Hideous laughter.
“*I cannot,*” the voice whispered.
Elmon focused on her echo.
The lattice of existence around her shimmered.
Within it was something wrong.
A weave of blackness threaded through her spirit — coiling across two intersecting axes.
A parasite.
At that moment, Emor returned.
He was not alone.
A Myst Gazer walked beside him.
Elmon remained unseen.
The Myst Gazer studied the air around Elrinana.
A single spark pulsed from his fingertips.
His mystic sight brushed against something unexpected.
“*Elmon,*” he said quietly. “*Someone is searching within her.*”
Emor turned sharply.
“*Elmon! Are you here?*”
Elmon hesitated.
Then he allowed himself to materialize.
The veil thinned.
His form resolved where he stood.
Around Elrinana, the shade became briefly visible — like a serpent sliding through a woven net, slipping in and out of her essence.
The Myst Gazer’s eyes widened.
“*A manifested curse.*”
Elrinana’s head snapped toward them.
First to the Myst Gazer.
Then to Elmon.
A slow smile crept across her face — a smile that made the room feel colder.
“*Guests so early in the day.*”
The Myst Gazer straightened. “*I am Emercuk Soldermyre.*”
Elmon’s focus slipped slightly, and his echo-vision collapsed.
The spectral image vanished.
Emercuk looked at him carefully. “*How are you able to show this?*”
Elmon drew a steady breath.

“I combine an echo sift, a weave pattern of revealing, and a unbound Echo as a canvas,” he explained. *“Focused through the mind’s eye.”*

He rubbed his temples.

“It can be very tiring if held too long.”

“This could be very useful... Elmon, I presume.”

Emercuk stepped forward and lowered his hood.

The change in his body was unmistakable — the visible mark of SINN transformation.

Elmon studied him carefully.

“You are different than Relis,” Elmon said. *“He was darker.”*

Emercuk tilted his head slightly.

“So Master Relis still lives?”

“He serves on the council of the School of Magic in Scath,” Elmon replied.

“He was raked by a Demon Witch. I watched her flesh burn from the inside out.”

Emercuk nodded.

“She must have been marked by death.”

“That is what Relis said,” Elmon confirmed.

Emercuk folded his hands.

“We all bear the marks of what SINN makes of us. You are unique... but so are we all.”

“Sigils share similar functions, but they manifest differently depending on how the SINN transformation shapes the one called.”

He turned to Emor.

“Your wife was cursed by what, exactly?”

Emor recounted the story again.

When he finished, he said quietly,

“An elder Dün.”

Emercuk nodded slowly.

“A lineage curse.”

“Usually a form of possession.”

His eyes shifted back to Elmon.

“Removing such a curse will require more than a common spell.”

“Elmon,” Emor said carefully, *“you claimed you could remove it.”*

“Yes, Uncle.”

Elmon looked toward Elrinana.

“But I cannot bind the creature itself.”

He turned to Emercuk.

“A Myst Gazer can.”

Emercuk’s eyes narrowed with interest.

“How do you propose we remove it?”

Elmon closed his eyes for a moment, studying the unseen lattice above them as if solving a puzzle in his mind.

“Two entities bound to one lattice,” he said slowly.

“Assuming we can put her into a deep sleep...”

He looked toward Emercuk.

“Can you dream-walk?”

Emercuk nodded.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“If you enter her dream,” Elmon said, *“you should see the parasite shade when I ignite an Echo Burn directly upon it.”*

“The creature will flee the burn.”

“For a moment, it will be forced out of her lattice.”

Elmon tapped his temple thoughtfully.

“That is when you bind it.”

Emercuk’s eyes brightened.

“And you?”

“I will place an Echo Lock on her lattice,” Elmon replied.

“Then I will Veil-slide her away.”

“Shades and demons cannot cross a Veil barrier.”

“It will be forced to manifest in the physical world.”

He looked back at Emercuk.

“You will need to exit the dream and deal with it there.”

Emor rubbed his forehead, struggling to keep pace with the unfolding plan.

“There is a problem,” he said.

“If you fail to direct the Echo Burn precisely...”

He glanced toward Elrinana.

“It could kill her.”

Elmon turned calmly toward his uncle. *“The creature has its own Echo.”*

He paused. *“Its name is Hellsha.”*

Emor’s eyes widened.

“That was the name of the Dün who cursed her.”

Elmon’s gaze sharpened.

“Then the burn will rid the world of two creatures of malice.”

“Miky,” Elmon called gently.

“You must not remain in the house or anywhere within the immediate echo of it.”

She looked confused.

Elmon smiled reassuringly.

“Find the sanctum echo of the house and move away from it until you can no longer sense it.”

“Like the ward walks across a battlefield?” she asked uncertainly.

“Yes,” Elmon said. *“The same principle.”*

Miky nodded and hurried out.

Elmon turned to Emor.

“Uncle... you have a sleeping potion, I presume?”

“I will place her into a stasis sleep,” Emor replied.

“Good.”

“Let us begin.”

Preparing the Sleep

Emor mixed the potion carefully into Elrinana’s tea.

They sat with her at the kitchen table, speaking casually of small things — Miky’s last birthday celebration, family memories, harmless conversation meant to calm her.

Elrinana took a couple of sips, on the third sip Emor tilted the glass up.

Anger stirred in her, and she rose, raised her hand, and collapsed to the floor.

Elmon remained in the meeting room, speaking with Emercuk about Relis.

Moments later, they heard the cup fall.

Elrinana collapsed.

They hurried to her side.

Together they carried her to the guest room and laid her gently upon the bed.

Her breathing slowed into the deep rhythm of enchanted sleep.

The Echo Burn

Elmon closed his eyes.

His mind sharpened like a blade. He laid on the floor next to the bed.

He reached into the echo of her and saw the lattice surrounding it — threads of existence interwoven with shadow.

The parasite paused.

It felt him.

The creature turned its attention toward Elmon’s gaze.

Elmon did not hesitate.

He ignited the Echo Burn.

The shade screamed.

Emor watched Elrinana’s body thrash. Her hands grabbed the bed coverings.

She gritted her teeth and growled.

Smoke rose from their form.

The Dream Realm

Emercuk lay upon the floor beside the bed.

When the scream tore through the echo field, he slipped fully into the dream.

The creature stood before him.

“You cannot have her,” it hissed.

Before the sentence finished, Elrinana vanished from the dream.

Elmon had already Veil-slid her away.

The parasite writhed in agony.

Its body flickered and smoked.

Then the shade collapsed outward like mist peeling away from bone.

The true form revealed itself.

A Dün stood there.

White-eyed.

Twitching.

Ancient hatred burning in its face.

The Gazer’s Response

Emercuk began forming the Sphere of Annihilation.

Not to destroy the spirit outright —

—but to force it off balance.

The Dün turned to flee.

Instead, it collided with something unexpected.

A Silf.

She tangled the spirit instantly in strands of living memory.

She glanced at Emercuk with amused curiosity.

“May I have him?”

“You were about to bind him into uselessness anyway.”

Emercuk stared.

“I must bind him to break the curse. He is anchored to a living bloodline.”

The Silf smiled.

In the blink of an eye the Dün was trapped within a crystal sphere.

She studied it thoughtfully.

“Have you ever wondered,” she asked calmly,

“What happens when a lattice is extracted from an entity, Gazer?”

Before he could answer, she reached into the sphere.

It was like pulling a cloth from a table.

The Dün’s structure tore apart.

Its echo fragmented, twisting violently as it tried to hold form.

The sphere shattered into glittering crystal fragments.
A scream rippled through the dreamscape — a sound felt more than heard.
The Silf smiled with unsettling delight.
She gathered the fragments into a small coffer.
A drop of liquid fell from her fingertip.
The crystals began melting into a glowing pool.
She stirred the mixture slowly while the fading echoes of the Dün's screams reverberated through the dream.
A large hand appeared in the dreamscape.
Palm open.
Massive.
Ancient.
The Silf froze.
For the first time since appearing, she looked terrified.
The coffer slipped from her hand into the Palm
It fell and vanished.
A moment later—she vanished as well.

Emercuk Returns

Emercuk withdrew from the dream as quickly as he could recall himself.
His eyes snapped open.
Elmon lay on the floor beside his aunt.
“*I did not see it materialize,*” Elmon said weakly as he struggled to sit up.
Emercuk explained what he had witnessed.
Elmon listened, visibly shaken.
Emor knelt beside his wife and cast a waking spell.
Her eyes opened.
But she did not respond.
Something was wrong.

The Veil Problem

Elmon focused on her echo.
It appeared stable.
Her lattice flickered slightly but remained intact.
Yet something was not right.
Elmon slipped into the Veil.
There he saw her.
Elrinana lay upon the ground as if separated from herself.
Elmon touched her.

She screamed.

Elmon slid partially back into the physical world while maintaining contact.

Her presence followed him.

He grabbed Emor's arm.

Then he pulled them both into the Veil.

"You must believe she is part of you," Elmon said firmly.

"When I bring you out, hold her as if she is your own breath."

Emor did not hesitate.

He wrapped his arms around her.

Elmon began pulling them back.

Resistance pressed against them.

The Veil fought their passage.

"Emor," Elmon said through clenched teeth.

"Think of home."

"Like walking into your house."

Emor closed his eyes.

He held his wife tighter, felt her warmth, and remembered her laughter.

Elmon dragged them through.

A crackle of static filled the air.

Then—a sharp pop.

All three collapsed onto the floor.

Something Still Wrong

Elrinana breathed rapidly.

Her eyes were wide with terror.

Emor tried to calm her.

But something was still wrong.

Elmon examined her echo again.

The lattice appeared whole.

Yet a darkness surrounded it.

It pulsed like waves crashing against a shore.

Elmon slumped back.

He was exhausted.

The Final Purge

Emercuk stepped forward.

"i..." he said quietly.

Elmon lay on the floor, barely conscious.

He mumbled through dry lips.

“Need... Celestial Light...”

Emor was completely wrapped in his wife’s pain, holding her as she trembled in his arms.

Emercuk raised his hand.

But what he cast was far more than a simple illumination.

He invoked a holy consecration.

A wave of radiant power surged from his sigils and struck Elrinana.

Instantly, a shriek tore through the room.

Black soot burst from her body like ash expelled from a furnace.

Then—

silence.

The darkness vanished.

Elrinana’s breathing slowed.

Peace returned to her face.

The Death Signal

Elmon lay on the floor, staring at the ceiling, trying to understand what had happened.

Emercuk knelt beside the scattered black dust.

He gathered a small amount and rubbed it across a particular sigil burned into his own skin.

The sigil smoked violently.

Emercuk screamed in pain.

He recoiled. *“That was a death call.”*

He looked toward Emor with a troubled expression. *“I do not yet know what it means.”*

His voice hardened. *“But I will find out.”*

Emor looked into Elrinana’s eyes.

For the first time in his life, he saw peace looking back at him.

He held her hand in silence.

Hours passed.

Eventually, the door opened slightly.

Miky peeked inside. *“Is it... okay?”*

She stepped in cautiously. *“That was really weird.”*

Elmon looked up at her. *“What was?”*

Miky frowned as she tried to explain.

“It started raining. Then this black cloud formed right over the house. Lightning kept cracking inside it.”

“The town guards got scared and ran for the magistrate.”

“When they came back... it started snowing over the house.”

She shook her head.

“And then the house looked like it was going to disappear.”

Elmon raised an eyebrow.

“Disappear?”

Miky nodded quickly.

“Everything went pitch black around the house. Completely black.”

“They sent for the Town Mystic.”

“She just stood there watching the sky and the house flicker.”

“Then suddenly it all stopped.”

“She’s still outside,” Miky added. *“Walking around the house, casting spells, and looking at things.”*

Outside the House

Elmon slowly pulled himself to his feet.

His body felt like he had run twenty miles.

He staggered to the door and stepped outside.

Fine ash flakes drifted down, covering the ground.

Elmon looked around in confusion.

Then the Town Mystic rounded the corner of the house.

She stopped abruptly when she saw him.

“What kind of shenanigans are you causing in this house, boy?”

Elmon studied her for a moment before answering.

“We removed a curse from my aunt, Elrinana.”

Her eyes widened. *“What kind of curse?”*

Before Elmon could answer, Emercuk stepped out of the doorway behind him, pulling his hood back over his head.

He paused beside Elmon.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

Then he turned and noticed the Mystic.

Emercuk took two steps.

His form twisted into a curl of smoke.

And he vanished.

The Town Mystic marched to the door and burst inside.

“Someone is going to explain what is happening in this house.”

Her eyes moved across the room, measuring every face.

“You could have destroyed the entire house... possibly half the city.”

Elrinana slowly rose from her chair.

“My dear nephew released me from a curse my family has endured for one hundred and forty years.”

She folded her hands calmly.

“All is well now.”

The Mystic blinked, clearly not expecting that answer.

She turned toward Emor. *“Master Emor.”*

“I require a detailed report at the magistrate’s office tomorrow morning.”

Her voice sharpened.

“You know as well as I do that wild magic is not authorized within city limits.”

Emor bowed slightly.

A faint smile tugged at his beard. *“Of course.”*

“It would be my pleasure, Madam Helria Nota.”

She paused.

Something about his calm answer seemed to puzzle her.

Then she turned sharply and walked out of the house.

Halfway across the yard, she glanced back once more before continuing toward the magistrate’s hall.

Chapter †: The Search For Elcruil

After the events surrounding his aunt Elrinana, Elmon found himself restless and frustrated.

No word had come of Elcruil.

No message.

No report.

No trace of her whereabouts.

The silence gnawed at him.

Determined to force answers, Elmon went directly to the magistrate's hall and demanded assistance in locating the missing Catar.

The magistrate barely looked up from his desk.

He dismissed the request with a careless wave of his hand.

He had greater concerns, he said, than chasing rumors about a missing Catar.

Elmon's temper flared. *"You will find her,"* he said sharply.

The magistrate leaned back in his chair, unimpressed. *"And why would I do that?"*

Elmon stepped closer.

"Because if you refuse, I will send word to the School of Magic in Scathnard."

"I will advise them to silence your students and expel every one of them from their halls."

That caught the magistrate's attention.

His eyes narrowed. *"And who exactly are you, sir?"*

Elmon stood straight. *"I am Elmon Silverwood."*

He paused.

Suddenly, he felt eyes upon him.

Someone in the chamber was watching.

He expected to find someone powerful... or someone familiar.

But he saw nothing unusual.

A lone sentry stood near the stairwell leading downward, watching the room.

An elderly man waited quietly to speak with the magistrate.

Then Elmon felt it.

A presence.

He looked up.

A hawk stared down at him from the high window, its eyes fixed on him as if studying him.

Elmon frowned.

He sifted the echoes around the room.

"This one is peculiar," he thought.

The hawk had no echo.

But something did.

At the window.

Where no one appeared to be standing.

Elmon raised a hand and pointed upward.

“What is that?”

Everyone in the room looked up.

In that instant—

Elmon slipped into the Veil.

Inside the Veil

The room shifted.

Colors dulled.

Sounds muffled.

At the window stood an elder Catar, formally dressed, watching him closely.

The hawk was gone.

Elmon passed easily through the magistrate’s desk and stepped through the outer wall of the building.

Outside, he saw two Catar guards standing watch.

They were cloaked in a strange shadow—misty, swirling around them like drifting smoke.

Either they did not see him...

—or they did not care.

The elder Catar stood on the branch of a nearby tree whose shadow seemed unnaturally deep.

He watched as Elmon emerged through the wall.

The elder dropped lightly to the ground.

He landed six feet away, just behind the two shadowed guards.

The elder Catar spoke quietly to them.

His words were muffled by the Veil.

The guards turned their heads, searching the area as if sensing something.

Returning to the World.

Elmon stepped backward out of the Veil.

Reality snapped back into place.

Standing before him now were two figures:

An Orc.

And a Human.

Both recoiled as if they had just seen a ghost.

Elmon spoke in rough Catar. *“Nice illusions.”*

The formally dressed Catar appeared as well, his form resolving from shadow.

He spoke in broken Aluan Elvish. *“Why do you seek her?”*

Elmon did not hesitate. *“Her fur is life to me.”* Elmon said.

It was a Catar expression — the way their people spoke of one whose life was bound to their own.

He straightened. *“I am Elmon Silverwood.”*

“I was awakening the city of Breach,” Elmon said calmly. *“When I returned to the School of Wizardry in Scathnard, I heard of her fall in the Baron’s Pit.”*

“I came immediately.”

His eyes hardened. *“Where is she?”*

Two fingers slid slowly downward beside his hip.

The Orcish illusion reacted instantly.

A blade rose.

Elmon slipped into the Veil.

A Small Distraction

Elmon concentrated and projected an echo illusion.

Above the guards, the shadow formed of a massive black dragon hovered in the air.

One of the Catar guards dropped the swirling shadow cloak around him and stared upward.

The dragon vanished.

Elmon watched two city guards approaching nearby.

He sent them a brief thought-image drawn from memory.

‘Criminals, I think.’

Both guards immediately drew their swords and rushed toward the Catar.

“What are you doing there?”

The Catar guards spun to face them.

The formally dressed Catar ducked smoothly into a swirl of mist and appeared beside Elmon.

“So,” he said quietly, *“She never mentioned you, Elmon.”*

The Introduction

“She carried a covenant vow to her people,” Elmon replied.

“To become a War Blade.”

“I stepped aside to pursue my own path while she trained.”

The elder Catar nodded once. *“I am Nozdaek Red Tongue of the Sharptooth.”*

“Come with me.”

As Noz moved, the human illusion faded, revealing another Catar.

A tiger-striped Warden — sleek, short-haired, and watchful.

Through the Veil

Elmon followed them through the Veil.

Buildings and trees meant nothing there.

They passed through them in a straight line as if the world were only smoke.

They climbed a hill.

At the top stood a small stone-and-timber citadel.

An Interruption

Noz suddenly stopped.

Below them, a man moved cautiously through the shadows.

He was watching the Catar guards above.

Searching.

The man wore dark clothing and carried two daggers.

Something slick coated the blades.

Poison Elmon thought.

He sifted the man's echo.

Then he triggered an *Echo Burn*.

The man erupted into flames.

Screaming, he ran across the clearing and threw himself into a small pond, thrashing wildly.

Noz watched him carefully as the man fled.

Then he turned to Elmon. "*What did you do?*"

Elmon answered calmly. "*I tangled his personal echo within itself.*"

"His emotional and physical resonance fought to correct the distortion."

"The friction tore at him."

"The heat you saw was his reality collapsing under the strain."

The Sharptooth Stronghold

As they moved through the outer grounds, Elmon counted more than twenty Catar warriors stationed around the complex.

Armored.

Alert.

Watching every approach.

One Catar stood apart from the others. His appearance was not muted but vibrant.

He held a staff.

His eyes followed Elmon carefully, measuring his movements even in the veil. He must also be veiled. Elmon thought.

The Inner Circle

Noz stepped out of the shadowed Veil.

Elmon followed.

Four Catar waited there.

One was black-furred and muscular, carrying a dwarven war hammer.
Another had a large, fluffy tail and held a bow.
A tall, slender Catar carried two long swords and a crossbow strapped across his back.
The last stood with arms crossed.
No visible weapons.
But fire burned behind his eyes.
A sorcerer.
They were clearly waiting for someone.
Noz signaled quietly with his paw.
The sorcerer and the bowman followed him.
They moved through narrow passageways and down a set of stone stairs.
At the bottom, Noz stopped before a plain wall.
He placed his paw against it, claws extended, and pushed slightly.
The wall shifted.
With another push, it slid open.

The Interrogation Room

Inside was a large chamber.
Several humans hung from chains fixed to iron rings.
Their bodies bore cuts and bruises.
The Room was filled with groans and occasional shrieks.
Black-cloaked Catar moved among them.
One dug his claws into a prisoner's shoulder.
“*Answer the question,*” he growled.
“*Or feel more.*”
Across the room, a female Catar with burnt patches of fur knelt beside a wounded warrior, bandaging his arm.
Noz stopped beside her.
He placed a paw on her shoulder and murmured something softly.
The burns faded slightly.
Then he continued onward.

The Council Chamber

Noz entered another room.
Several formally dressed Catar stood inside.
Among them was the Yowl from Breach.
They had been speaking quietly.
When Elmon entered, the room fell silent.
The Yowl stepped forward and bowed slightly.

In Elvish he said, *"Greetings, Scar Walker."*

Elmon's eyes widened.

He returned the bow.

In his best Catar he replied, *"Greetings, Deep Sleeper."*

The Yowl laughed.

Then he turned to the room.

"This is El Ole Mon Silver-da-Wood," he announced.

"With the aid of Master Galewel and others, he solved the riddles of Ishan of the Night Eyes and awakened the city of Breach."

"To him is honor."

The room murmured.

Many eyes turned toward Elmon.

The Claim

Nozdaek raised his paw.

The room quieted.

"This one," he said, pointing toward Elmon,

"Claims that Elcrull, Mistfers of the Red Tongue..."

"...her fur is life to him."

The chamber erupted.

Voices rose in argument, disbelief, and whispers.

Finally, Noz lifted his paw again.

The room fell silent.

"She should say."

Noz nodded to someone in the back of the room.

The Waiting

A young Catar standing near the back door nodded and slipped out.

For several long minutes, the room simply stared at Elmon.

Some studied him carefully.

Others crossed their arms in quiet disapproval.

An occasional murmur was heard.

Elmon noticed many different breeds among them:

Tigers.

Persians.

Wardens.

Eln-Sha.

Others he did not recognize.

Then the door opened.

Elcrull

A battered tiger-striped Warden stepped inside.
Her shoulder was burned.
A scar crossed her face.
She walked with a limp.
She closed the door and slowly moved toward the center of the room.
Her eyes scanned the gathering.
Then she saw him.
Tears filled her eyes.
Her knees nearly gave out.
Elmon caught her before she fell. *"I said I would find you."*
He held her close. *"Your fur is life to me."*
She pressed her face into him, nuzzling his cheek and licking his chin.
The room fell silent.
Elmon cradled her gently.

Noz's Judgment

Noz knelt beside them. *"I see your heart, my child."*
Elmon lifted Elcrull into his arms.
Then he slipped briefly into the Veil.
The room exploded into shouting.
But Elmon simply stood there, holding her.
He carried her through the door she had entered.
Then stepped back out of the Veil into the hallway.

Outside the Chamber

They sat together against the far wall.
Wrapped in each other's arms.
Elcrull cried quietly. *"They hurt me so deeply."*
The door opened.
Noz and two others stepped into the hallway.
Elmon held her close.
Then he remembered a spell.
Mensor Aberelli's Spell of Wholeness.
He had seen it used once on paladins during the battle at the crypt.
Elmon kissed her forehead.
The scar softened.
Her breathing eased.

She relaxed in his arms.

Noz turned back to the council chamber.

“They are here,” he announced. *“Resting away from the corda.”*

Elmon looked down at Elcrull with a puzzled expression.

“Corda?”

She smiled faintly.

“‘Da’ means troubled or dissenting. ‘Cora’ means a Catar gathering.”

Elmon nodded slowly.

“So... the troubled gathering.”

“We needed privacy and quiet,” she said looking at Noz.

Noz stepped back into the chamber and raised his paws.

“Nādàý.”

The door shut firmly and locked.

Elmon looked up, pondering.

Elcrull chuckled softly.

“‘Nā’ is the formal command to silence your temper. ‘ādàý’ means ‘you band of rebellious short-hairs.’”

Elmon laughed. *“Rebellious children.”*

“Not so different from lectures at the school.”

He rubbed his nose gently against hers and stroked the end of her tail.

“Remember how we used to sit on the lawn by the garden?”

“You would flick your tail under my nose until I sneezed.”

“And then you laughed so hard you started coughing.”

Elcrull reached up and gently grabbed his ears, pulling him closer until their noses touched.

“What about Christin?” she asked quietly, staring deeply into his eyes.

Elmon met her gaze calmly. *“I have heard nothing of her.”*

“She no longer matters.”

“Besides... she was too pushy for me.”

He brushed a finger down her nose as he leaned back slightly.

“Can you walk?”

The familiar phrase made her smile.

Elmon tilted his head playfully. *“And what is it you desire, my flirtatious jaguar?”*

She lightly punched him in the chest.

Elmon helped her to her feet.

They walked slowly down the corridor.

Her steps were steadier now than when he had first seen her.

They passed several open rooms.

Young Catar practiced basic combat drills, wooden blades clacking in rhythm.

Another chamber held a small prayer altar.

Then storage rooms.

Finally, they climbed a set of stairs into a quieter wing that appeared to be living quarters.

Elcrull stopped at a door.

Blood stained the wood.

Deep claw marks gouged across its surface.

She lowered her head and sniffled.

Slowly, she placed her paw against one of the dark stains.

Her shoulders trembled. *"Why were they so cruel?"*

Elmon quietly lifted the latch.

The door creaked open.

Inside was a modest room.

A large bed stood in the corner.

Beside it was a wardrobe.

Across from the bed stood an armor rack with a chair beside it.

The armor drew Elmon's eyes immediately.

Medium leather.

But it was ruined.

Several deep gouges scarred the midsection where heavy blows had landed.

The right pauldron was completely missing.

The left gauntlet hung twisted at an unnatural angle.

The short tasset had been ripped away on the left side, its fringe blackened by fire.

Elmon helped Elcrull to the bed and eased her down.

Then he turned back to the armor.

He studied the Gorget.

Banded leather reinforced with metal.

The right side had been crushed inward.

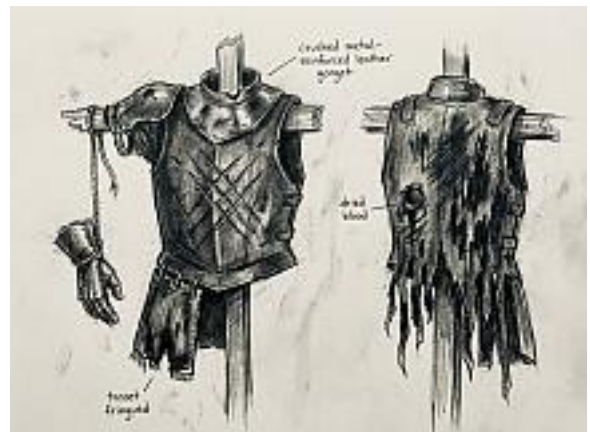
Where her neck would have been.

Elmon walked slowly around to the back of the armor.

And froze.

The entire center of the back had been burned away.

Only shredded strips of leather remained, hanging like charred skin.



On the left side was a burned puncture.
A dark stain of dried blood surrounded it.
The straps along the right side had been cut away.
Either to remove the armor...
—or after the battle.
Elmon stepped back.
Slowly.
He sifted the echoes clinging to the armor.
Fragments of violence brushed his senses.
The crunch of blades.
The smell of burning leather.
The sound of someone fighting long after they should have fallen.
Elmon tore himself away from the echoes.
He turned.
Elcrull lay on the bed with her back to him.
Silent.
A large scar ran across Elcrull's right hip.
Much of the fur along her back was gone.
What remained showed patches of healed, burned skin.
Across her withers were layers of whip marks and deep cuts.
Elmon sat beside her.
Gently he rubbed her back where the fur should have been thick.
Tears ran down his face.
"Slavers are hardened and cruel," he said quietly.
He hesitated. *"Are the ones in the torture room some of them?"*
Elcrull slowly nodded.
"Yes."
Elmon stood.
Without another word, he left the room.
He walked down the corridor, then slipped into the Veil.
Walls and doors meant nothing there.
He passed through them until he reached the interrogation chamber.
Then he stepped back out of the Veil.

The Interrogation Room

Several Catar immediately stopped their work.
Blades flashed as they turned toward him.
"What is it you seek from them?" Elmon asked.

“We want the location of the slavers’ camp,” The tall catar warden said.

Elmon directing. *“Bring a pail of water.”*

The Catar exchanged puzzled looks.

But they complied.

A bucket was brought.

Elmon dragged a chair across the stone floor and set it directly in front of one of the prisoners.

Something deep down in Elmon boiled with hate and a desire to destroy.

Elmon looked at the slaver. The man was large and brutish.

He looked up at Elmon and smiled through cracked lips.

“I will never reveal anything to you, Elf.”

“Good,” Elmon said quietly. *“A challenge.”*

He studied the man, carefully sifting the echoes that clung to him.

Then a small sphere of flame appeared in the air before the prisoner.

Elmon’s expression remained bleak.

“Do you know what happens when a man’s insides become fire?”

The brute stared at him.

The smile slowly faded from his face.

The sphere drifted closer.

The hair on the man’s chest curled and singed from the heat.

Slowly, the flame touched his skin.

The flesh blistered.

Elmon pulled the sphere away.

The man stood rigid, teeth clenched, refusing to cry out.

From the pail of water beside them, another sphere rose into the air.

A perfect globe of water.

Elmon held the two spheres side by side.

Then he pushed them together.

The water boiled violently while the flame twisted within it.

Elmon reached forward and placed his hand on the man’s chest.

He seized the man’s echo.

And twisted it.

The prisoner’s eyes rolled back as his body convulsed.

He nearly collapsed.

Elmon released the tension slightly.

The man sucked in a desperate breath.

Without warning, Elmon pushed the merged spheres into the man’s body.

The prisoner thrashed.

His scream never found its voice.

Elmon withdrew the magic.

The man collapsed forward, gasping.

His stomach swelled slightly as heat fought against flesh.

Elmon glanced at one of the Catar.

"Release the pressure."

A claw twisted briefly against the man's navel.

Steam escaped.

The smell of burned flesh filled the chamber.

The slaver wheezed.

A thin line of blood ran from the corner of his mouth.

His eyes were wide with terror.

Elmon lifted the man's chin.

He looked directly into his eyes.

"Now," Elmon said calmly,

"Would you be so kind as to help these fine ladies and gentlemen?"

"Answer their questions... and spare them the trouble of getting their hands dirty with what remains of you."

The man spat weakly.

"You'll never get anything from me."

Elmon sighed softly.

"I am not going to kill you."

"But you may wish that I had."

He leaned closer.

"That was only a test of your physical endurance."

Elmon sifted deeper into the man's echo.

He found a memory.

Something he, a slaver, had done to a captive.

Elmon's expression darkened.

"Ah."

"So you believe you can endure what you give to others."

Elmon seized the memory.

Then forced it back into the man's mind.

But twisted.

Replacing the victim with the slaver himself.

The man suddenly shrieked.

His body jerked violently against the chains.

The Catar in the room stepped back in astonishment.

They had never seen a man suffer so intensely without a single wound being inflicted.

His face twisted.

His muscles convulsed.

His skin began to flake as if his body itself were trying to shed the pain.

Blood began to seep slowly from around his navel.

Elmon released the active echo.

The man sagged in his chains like a discarded rag.

Elmon spoke calmly.

"I can stop using your own mind against you... if you answer the lady's simple question."

The slaver lifted his head weakly.

"Nev . . . er."

Elmon sighed.

"Then we must look deeper."

He sifted through the man's echo.

Years of cruelty passed before him.

Until finally—

something different.

A memory of tenderness.

A small child.

His daughter.

Elmon paused.

Then, carefully extracted the echo of the memory.

He twisted part of it and replaced it with what the slaver had just experienced.

Then he placed the slaver himself into the role of the torturer.

Elmon looked directly into the man's eyes.

"How much do you love your family?"

The man spat weakly.

"I have no family."

Elmon's voice remained quiet.

"You have a daughter."

The man froze.

Elmon continued.

"How would you like to do to her... what you have done to others?"

The slaver's eyes widened with terror.

"It isn't real," he whispered.

Elmon nodded slightly.

"You are correct."

"But when a memory is replaced... the mind cannot tell the difference."

Elmon raised his hand.

A small sphere of light formed in the air.

“You Catar may wish to turn away,” he said quietly.

“You may not wish to see what this man has done in his life.”

The sphere expanded into a window nearly three feet wide.

Inside stood a small girl.

Bright-eyed.

Innocent.

The slaver stared at the image.

His breathing became ragged.

He understood exactly what Elmon had done.

Elmon focused and forced the twisted memory into the slaver’s mind.

Inside the illusion, three Catar stood nearby, urging the slaver on, feeding the madness that now consumed him.

In the vision, the slaver screamed at the small girl before him.

“Why won’t you tell us where you hid them!”

His voice cracked with rage and desperation.

The brutality and irrelevance of her flesh.

The mind could endure only so much.

Eventually, the slave’s thoughts collapsed inward, hiding from the horror.

Elmon released the image.

Several Catar in the chamber gasped and cried out.

Even hardened warriors recoiled from what the man had done.

Elmon’s own heart tightened.

The cruelty in the man’s mind sickened him.

Elmon searched deeper through the slaver’s echo until he found the fragment where the man’s mind had retreated.

He dragged it forward.

The slaver convulsed.

He screamed, drooled, and thrashed against the chains.

Elmon lifted the man’s chin.

“You don’t have to torture your daughter anymore,” Elmon said quietly.

“If you simply answer these fine ladies’ questions.”

Elmon inhaled slowly.

Then he attempted something he had never tried before.

He pushed the echo outward into the room.

The illusion shifted.

The chamber itself appeared inside the vision.

Everyone present could see it.

The little girl lay helpless on the floor.

Abandoned.

Elmon spoke calmly.

"I can heal her."

He paused.

"Or you can continue what you began."

The slaver trembled violently.

His voice broke into a whisper.

"The... Carrion Desert..."

He gasped for breath.

"North of the Furnace. Tangan's Hollow."

Three of the female Catar turned and left the chamber in tears.

Even warriors could only endure so much.

Elmon quietly repeated the slaver's words to the Warden, who stood nearby, pale-faced.

"The Carrion Desert," Elmon said. "North of the Furnace in Tangan's Hollow."

The Warden nodded slowly.

Elmon turned back toward the echo image of the little girl.

He knelt beside the vision and spoke a quiet chant.

The broken memory shifted.

The little girl stood again, whole and unharmed.

Behind him, the slave sobbed and thrashed against the chains.

Elmon lifted the man's chin and looked directly into his eyes.

"That was not pleasant," Elmon said softly.

"I can remove this memory and give you peace."

He paused.

"Or you may keep it."

"As a lesson of what your victims felt when they begged you for mercy... and you denied it."

Elmon stepped away and sank into the chair.

His body trembled.

He cringed at what he had forced the man to experience.

After a moment, he stood again, wiping tears from his eyes.

He looked at the slaver once more.

"I think the memory should remain."

"So you never forget what your life as a slaver has truly been."

Elmon turned and walked toward the door.

Behind him the man screamed desperately.

“No! I will serve you, master!”

Elmon stopped at the doorway.

He spoke to the Warden without turning.

“Have the healer mend his belly.”

He glanced back at the prisoner. *“You may have gained an ally against the slavers.”*

Then Elmon looked at the remaining prisoners chained along the wall.

Tears filled some eyes and grimacing faces trembled. *“Who is next?”*

The men had all witnessed what the brutish slaver had done to his own daughter in the vision.

Her cries.

Her pleas.

Calling him *father* until her voice fell silent.

None of them could look Elmon in the eye.

Elmon approached the first man slowly.

He touched the man's echo.

Searching.

He found the memories of the men's loved ones.

Elmon drew those images forward.

Within the lingering vision, each slaver now stood face-to-face with those they cared for most.

And with what they had become.

“Remember this,” Elmon said quietly.

“Remember it for the rest of your lives.”

“Every time you raise a hand against another... every time you witness cruelty...”

“...you will see only those you love.”

Elmon twisted the echoes in their minds, binding the memory with a trigger that would awaken whenever they saw suffering.

Then he took the whip hanging on the wall.

He struck one of the slavers.

The crack echoed through the chamber.

Every prisoner screamed.

In their minds, they saw not the man before them—

—but their own loved ones are being beaten and begging them to stop.

Elmon dropped the whip.

The weight of what he had done struck him all at once.

He collapsed to the floor.

The illusion shattered.

The chamber returned to silence.

Elmon lay there, sobbing.

The Warden stepped forward and lifted him gently to his feet.

He began guiding Elmon down the corridor.

After a few steps, Elmon pulled away.

He stood shaking.

Somehow, he managed to reach Elcrull's room.

The fortress was now alive with activity.

Messengers ran through the halls.

The Warriors prepared themselves.

The information he had forced from the slavers was already spreading.

Perhaps... he had helped end some of the terror they caused.

Elmon entered the room and collapsed onto the bed beside Elcrull.

He buried his face in his hands and wept softly.

She rolled toward him and studied the sorrow in his eyes.

"What happened?" she asked gently.

Elmon struggled to speak. *"I tortured the slavers."*

His voice broke.

"I forced them to see themselves beating their own loved ones... over and over."

"Whenever they witness cruelty... they will only see those they love suffering in its place."

He closed his eyes. *"I may have created monsters and killed men."*

Elcrull laid her head against Elmon's chest and sobbed softly.

"My love," she whispered, *"You did what you believed would stop it."*

"War is never easy."

"Slavers are cruel."

She lifted her head slightly. *"And you did not harm them with your own hands."*

A gentle knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," Elcrull said.

The door opened.

Yowl entered the chamber.

Elmon turned his face away, hiding his tears.

Yowl crossed the room quietly and knelt beside him.

"Your pain will pass," Yowl said softly.

"You have revealed the den of those who desecrate the Catar."

"Again, you honor us."

He paused thoughtfully. *"You may have frightened a man's mind."*

"But sometimes the truth of one's own evil can change a path for good."

Yowl raised three fingers and slowly rotated them in the air before Elmon's chest.

Then he made a gentle plucking motion, as if lifting a flower from the air.

"Time will call you," Yowl said quietly.
"When the world needs your heart, Elmon."
Elmon's breathing steadied.
The sobbing faded.

The Vision

Suddenly—
Elmon stood somewhere else.
The chamber around him was dark.
Ancient.
A massive dwarf stood before him with arms crossed, staring at him.
"You have riddles to solve," the dwarf said.
"Or I own you."
Elmon blinked.
The vision vanished.
He was back in the room.

The Warning

"Who is he?" Elmon asked quietly.
Yowl looked around the chamber.
"What have you seen?"
"A recurring vision," Elmon replied.
"A dwarf stands before me with arms crossed."
"This time he said I must answer three riddles... or he will own me."
Yowl studied him carefully. *"What did the place look like?"*
"I held a staff," Elmon said slowly.
"The floor was made of arcane stone... older than time."
A voice whispered in Elmon's mind.
'They are the Guardians of the binding of Dragos.'
Elmon's eyes turned cold.
He looked directly at Yowl.
"They are the Guardians of Dragos's binding."
Yowl stepped back.
His mind raced.
He remembered an old prophecy.
He spoke the words slowly.
*"El Ole Mon's time will come...
Benevolent in peace, fierce in knowledge beyond his years.
From Elfen lore and the cries of war he will rise."*

He will domesticate the silence of stone.

Seek clarity within shadow.

And defile the evil of creation.

Wizardry renewed — no longer throne, but tool.”

Yowl looked at Elmon. *“And defile the evil of creation.”*

He spoke the final words carefully. *“That evil... is Dragos.”*

Elcrull stared at Elmon with wide eyes. *“We will face him together.”*

Yowl gently took her hand. *“No.”*

His voice was calm but firm. *“He will not have love in that hour.”*

“Our lives are shorter than Elmon’s.”

“He does not yet carry the staff he spoke of.”

Elcrull wept quietly.

“Why?” she asked.

Elmon brushed a strand of fur from her face.

“Your memory will always be with me,” he promised.

Exhaustion finally claimed him.

Elmon lay beside her until sleep took him.

Sometime later—A knock sounded at the door.

Elmon woke slowly as Elcrull stretched beside him.

He rose and opened the door.

Three Catar stood in the hallway.

Between them stood one of the chained slave men from the previous day.

“He wishes to speak with you,” one of the Wardens said.

Elmon stepped into the corridor. *“What is it?”*

The slaver lifted his head.

Tears streaked down his face.

“Master... what must I do to rid my mind of these memories?”

His voice trembled. *“They burn inside me.”*

Elmon stood silent for a moment, pain in his eyes.

Then he said quietly, *“Kneel.”*

The man dropped to his knees.

Elmon looked upward for a moment, gathering himself.

Then he sifted through the man’s echo and removed the trigger he had placed there.

“I have removed the involuntary recall,” Elmon said.

“But the memory itself must remain.”

Elmon knelt before him and lifted the man’s chin.

“You now know the pain you caused.”

“Remove that pain from this world... and you will find peace.”

Elmon rose and looked toward the Catar guards. *“Unchain him.”*

“We cannot do that within our halls,” one of them replied.

Elmon reached toward the chains.

He saw their lattice.

With a quiet motion, he tore it apart.

The metal crumbled into dust and fell to the floor.

The Catar stepped back, hands moving toward their weapons.

Elmon ignored them.

He looked directly at the kneeling man.

“What is your name?”

“I am Dark Bender of the Halder Clan,” the man said.

“From the Binden Mountains.”

“My father was a soldier.”

“My children were killed by the Dün during the uprising.”

His voice broke.

“I used my hate to hurt whoever I could.”

He lowered his head. *“You are my master now.”*

Elmon’s eyes hardened. *“If you seek to ease your pain by hurting others...”*

“I will burn you down.”

The man nodded.

Elmon gestured toward the door. *“Go.”*

“Help the Catar destroy the slavers’ camp.”

“When it is finished... come find me.”

“Then I will remove the memory.”

Bender slowly stood.

He looked at Elmon with a faint smile. *“I have a cause greater than myself.”*

Elmon stood in the hallway and watched them disappear down the corridor.

Then—

a still, small voice sifted into his mind.

‘I have called. Will you answer? Will you serve?’

Elmon looked around sharply. *“You know the answer!”* he shouted.

Elcrull stepped into the hallway behind him. *“What answer?”* she asked. *“I did not ask anything.”*

Elmon held his breath. Slowly he looked up toward the ceiling.

He closed his eyes. Shook his head.

Then turned and walked back into the room without another word.

Chapter 7: Meeala – The Anchoring of Stars

Elmon remained at the Catar citadel in Ravenclaw for another four weeks.

During that time, he discovered the Temple of the Healing Hand.

Twice each week, he walked Elcrull there. The journeys themselves helped her regain strength, and the healers worked patiently with her wounds.

Slowly, the fur along her back began to grow again.

The burns faded.

Her limp lessened until only a slight unevenness remained in her stride.

During those weeks, Elmon also met Elcrull's younger sister, Sunara.

Their father had died during a slaver raid years earlier.

Their mother was very old — nearly ancient by Catar standards, 106 years.

Her name was Shadow Dancer.

Often, Elmon would sit with them while they spoke of Elcrull's childhood.

Shadow Dancer especially enjoyed telling stories.

She recalled the first time Elcrull spoke about the young elf she admired.

"So different," she said with a quiet laugh.

"So curious. So clever."

She even repeated the stories Elcrull had told about the battle at the crypt.

Elmon shook his head at that. *"You make me sound far greater than I am."*

Shadow Dancer smiled.

Elcrull spouted out a few fun moments, then snuggled with Elmon.

"My uncle told me about how you awakened the city of Breach."

"That is not something many could do."

"And there was also the Ulrick Test."

She studied him carefully.

"You are more than you believe."

Elcrull smiled quietly beside him.

One afternoon Elmon sat on the sentry wall overlooking the city.

The wind carried the scent of distant markets and cooking fires.

He was deep in thought when a gentle paw tapped his shoulder.

Shadow Dancer stood behind him.

Elmon nearly slipped from the wall, startled by her sudden touch.

"What do you intend to do with my daughter?" she asked quietly.

Elmon steadied himself and looked at her.

He pondered his heart before answering.

"My mother is dead," he said after a moment.

A deep pause.

"My father works among the archives now... sometimes practicing alchemy."

"I have no brothers or sisters."

He glanced out across the city before continuing.

"I work on special projects."

"And at the moment I am searching for a unique staff that seems... meant for me."

He paused.

"When we were at school, she was always something more than I realized."

His voice softened.

"Elcrull's fur is life to me."

"That is why I came to find her."

"I stepped aside while she fulfilled her vow to the clan... to become a War Blade."

Shadow Dancer nodded slowly.

"And it nearly killed her."

Her eyes softened.

"You should take her to your own people."

"It would please my heart."

She leaned slightly closer.

"She does not know this."

"But her great forbearer, four generations past... was a Zilanos Elf Ioheth`oolsah Markle."

"His daughter married Gashnar Mister."

"Their second son Muoi bonded with Shondra Magaar of the Red Tongues."

"Their first son, Emile, bonded with my mother, Adeli."

Her brother was Nozdaek Mister.

"We had three: Duane. Elcrull and Illicrum."

"Duane is dead."

Elmon blinked in surprise.

Once.

Then again.

"She could live two hundred years easily," he said quietly.

Shadow Dancer watched him carefully.

Elmon lowered his voice.

"I have been troubled by the difference in our lifespans."

"We would only just begin our life together..."

"...and she would already be fading."

Shadow Dancer nodded slowly.

"Most of the Wardens in this region carry Elven blood," she said. *"Many live one to two hundred fifty years."*

She glanced toward the citadel.

“My brother, Nozdaek, is nearly two hundred and fifty.”

Elmon raised a finger.

“His family name is Red Tongue, not Mister.”

Shadow Dancer smiled faintly.

“When he lived in Toris, his first wife died there. After that, he left the valley and came here to the Sundered Mountains and Ravenclaw to begin again.”

“He dropped his family name so others would not question his age.”

She sighed.

“Some Catar still believe half-bloods are tainted.”

Elmon nodded. *“I know that feeling.”*

“My aunt is much the same.”

“I am half human.”

“My mother was a druid.”

He looked toward the city below. *“My uncle lives here in Ravenclaw.”*

“Emor Silverwood.”

Shadow Dancer placed her paw gently over Elmon’s hand.

“Speak with your uncle,” she said quietly.

“My days grow short.”

“I wish to see my daughter cared for.”

She studied him carefully. *“You are unique in this generation, Elmon.”*

“She adores the ground you walk on.”

“No one knows the day their star burns out.”

The Decision

Elmon sat quietly for a long time after that.

He began to consider visiting his uncle with Elcrull.

But first, he would need to prepare her.

His aunt’s views were not kind.

The following morning, Elmon sat with Elcrull.

“I want you to meet my uncle and aunt,” he said.

Her ears lifted immediately.

“Really?”

She looked excited.

Elcrull rubbed the back of his neck with a teasing paw,

“There is something you should know first.” as he twitched.

“My aunt hates half-bloods.”

“She is not fond of me either.”

Elcrull blinked.

“We don’t have to tell them anything about us.”

Elmon looked at her and slowly smiled.

“A man brings a woman to meet his family...”

He shook his head. She looked at him, *“You see me as a woman.”* She kissed his nose.

Elmon continued, *“That would not make anyone suspicious at all.”*

“Yes, you are a beautiful woman,” Elmon exclaimed

She laughed. Darting from the statement.

“You did say you were searching for me.”

She slid closer and flicked her tail beneath his nose.

Elmon sneezed.

“And I haven’t seen Miky since school,” she added.

Elmon sighed. *“I know my aunt.”*

“Just be prepared to be berated.”

He raised an eyebrow. *“Uncle should be home tomorrow.”*

“We’ll see him then.”

Elcrull wrapped her arms around him and purred softly.

Elmon kissed her forehead.

Suddenly, she popped a claw and poked him in the back.

“Ow!”

“What was that for?”

She grinned.

“Wanting to play.”

Elmon suddenly pushed her away and slipped into the Veil.

He stepped a few paces behind her.

Elcrull immediately dropped into a crouch, paws spread wide, swiping at the air as she spun and searched for him.

Then Elmon reached out and touched her.

Elcrull blinked as the world tilted.

She staggered and dropped to one knee.

Elmon stepped out of the Veil at once and checked her breathing.

She seemed fine.

Suddenly, she grabbed him and tackled him to the ground.

Elmon laughed—and slid back into the Veil, taking her with him.

Inside the Veil

Elcrull froze.

The air had no temperature.

Colors looked softer... almost pastel.

Sounds seemed distant and muffled, as though the world had been wrapped in cloth.

She stood slowly and looked around.

She could not feel the grass beneath her paws.

The earth itself felt unreal.

She turned to Elmon.

“What happened?”

“We are in the Veil,” he said calmly.

She walked toward the wall of the citadel and tried to sit on it.

Instead, she slipped right through.

She yelped and jumped back, nearly stumbling down the hillside.

Elmon caught her quickly and pulled her against him.

He gently pinned her paws behind her back and nuzzled her nose.

“Things are different here,” he said softly.

“Where we were a moment ago is not solid here.”

“You can pass through it. We can’t be seen.”

“You just have to be careful.”

Elcrull’s eyes widened.

“This would be incredible for scouting.”

She looked at him eagerly.

Elmon frowned slightly.

“In due time.”

He eased her down onto the ground.

Then leaned in and kissed her deeply.

She pulled him close and returned the kiss with enthusiasm.

“I’ve been waiting all week for that,” she whispered.

They remained together in the Veil longer than Elmon ever had before.

Elmon stood and pulled her close.

“I need you for mine,” he said quietly.

Elcrull’s mind paused at the statement. *‘What is he saying?’*

He tried to slip out of the Veil—but something resisted him.

Elmon steadied himself.

He focused on the world around him.

The grass.

The flowers.

The wind.

And the scent of Elcrull beside him.

He kissed her deeply. She pulled herself tight to him.

Then the Veil released them.

The sounds of the world rushed back.

Grass prickled beneath their feet.

The smells of the trees and Elcrull's fur filled his senses and eased the brief tension he had felt.

Meeala

They lay beneath a tree near the edge of the wall, Elcrull curled warmly against him. After a while, Elmon spoke.

"Where would you like to go first?"

Elcrull looked at him with a puzzled smile.

"What do you mean?"

"I need to find the Staff of Perdina," Elmon said.

"I don't yet know where it is."

"There are archives I must search... answers I still have to uncover."

She rolled on top of him and rested there comfortably.

"Anywhere with you," she said, laying her head on his chest.

Elmon studied her for a moment.

"What do you want from our life?" he asked softly.



She felt warm and gentle against him.

He could feel the rhythm of her heartbeat.

The scent of her fur was almost intoxicating.

His words finally exploded in her. She lifted herself slightly and looked down at him.

"Our life?"

"Yes... oh yes."

She stared directly into his eyes. Something sparked in her like a dream come true.

For a moment, Elmon forgot where he was. His mind went blank, as if everything else had vanished.

He suddenly rolled, pinning her beneath him.

"What did you just do to me?" he asked, half laughing, half confused. *"My mind went blank. It felt like... everything became one moment or thought."*

She smiled softly.

"I claimed you."

"You can't leave me now."

Elmon pushed himself back slightly.

"What — you own me or something?"

For a moment, she hesitated, her ears leaned back. Elmon felt that strange sense of unity again, tinged with sadness, as if their thoughts were brushing against each other.

"No," she said gently.

"Some Catar have an ability called Meeala."

"Maybe that is what we experienced."

"It can be... unusual, I'm told."

"My mother once told me it is like..."

She paused, searching for the words.

"Like two lives touching so deeply that they begin to share the same rhythm as one being."

She looked into his eyes again.

"You and I have permeated each other, like the echo globes at school."

"We are one."

She tilted her head slightly.

"Is that what you meant when you asked about 'our life'?"

Elmon blinked in confusion.

"Yes... sort of."

He laughed nervously. *"This is all very new."*

"Catar don't get married?"

She wagged her head. *"We do."* As she nuzzled him.

"I had not expected this to happen."

She rested against him. *"I longed for you even back in school."*

"It used to make me angry seeing you with Christin."

"She always seemed to control everything."

"I wanted to scratch her."

She grinned playfully. *"I wanted to scratch you too in a special way."*

"To mark my territory."

Elmon frowned slightly.

"What does this oneness actually do?" he asked.

Elcrull grinned.

"Let's go ask my mother." She shrugged.

She reached out her paw toward him.

Elmon paused, looking at her paw, then took it.

She was feeling euphoric and almost dizzy.

The moment their palms touched, his head swam, and he staggered slightly.

"This is going to take some getting used to," he muttered.

They walked together down the corridor and stopped at Shadow Dancer's chamber. Elcrull knocked.

The door opened.

Shadow Dancer looked first at her daughter... then at Elmon.

Something lingered in his eyes.

Her ears lowered slightly.

"What have you done, child?"

Elcrull smiled and clapped her paws together softly.

Elmon suddenly felt strange again, as if something within him had shifted.

Elcrull spoke quietly.

"I looked into his eyes... like I have many times before."

"But this time I felt as though I were trying to see the bottom of a deep well."

"Something sparked."

"For a moment, everything became one."

"No direction... no future... no past."

"Only now."

She paused, her voice softening.

"It was... relieving."

"As if all tension simply disappeared."

Shadow Dancer stepped aside and motioned for them to enter.

"Sit." Pointing at a couch.

They settled onto the padded couch.

Shadow Dancer studied them both carefully.

Then she asked Elmon directly.

"Did you ask her to be yours?"

Elmon hesitated.

"Sort of."

"I asked her what she wanted from 'our life'."

"She pounced, rolling me over, and looked into my eyes."

"I felt like she was seeing something, then everything was gone."

He shook his head slightly.

"And then... I felt something change."

Shadow Dancer looked at her daughter and slowly shook her head. *"Meeala"*

"You are a strong one, child. I have not heard of this with a non-catar."

Then she turned back to Elmon.

Dancer's voice grew more serious.

"I need you to go sit in that chair."

She pointed to a seat on the opposite side of the room.

Elmon stood and nearly collapsed.

His knees buckled, and he caught himself on the wall before making it to the chair.

Each step felt heavy, as if he were walking up a hill through mud.

He finally sat.

Shadow Dancer watched him with quiet amusement. "Relax, close your eyes."

Then she turned to Elcrull.

"I want you to focus on Elmon," she said calmly.

"And kiss him."

Elcrull blinked.

"But he's all the way over there."

"Focus," her mother repeated. Touching Elcrull on the lips with a single paw.

Elcrull closed her eyes.

She imagined leaning toward him... the warmth of his face, the touch of his lips. His breath. She licked him.

Across the room, Elmon suddenly inhaled sharply.

He felt it.

The warmth.

The scent of her fur.

The gentle brush of lips.

Her breath.

His eyes flew open.

"Wow... what was that?"

Shadow Dancer stood and walked over to him.

She leaned close and whispered something into his ear.

She smiled.

Elmon's eyes widened.

"What? Here? Now?"

He went to get up. She pulled him down slightly. *"From here."* She said softly.

"Think of her deeply,"

She nodded slowly.

Elmon swallowed, then closed his eyes. "Hmmm..."

He focused on Elcrull the way she had focused on him.

Across the room, Elcrull suddenly gasped.

Her breathing deepened.

Her heart began racing as emotion flooded through her.

She pressed a hand to her chest and grabbed the chair with the other as the sensation overwhelmed her.

After several moments, she sank back into the couch, stunned. Part of her was energized. Shadow Dancer watched them both carefully.

Then she nodded with satisfaction.

"It seems you Meeala, and have already bonded as well."

Elmon and Elcrull spoke at the same time.

"Bonded?"

Shadow Dancer smiled. *"You have both wanted each other for a long time."*

She looked at her daughter knowingly. *"And you, child"* waiving a paw at Elcrull.

"You have clearly wished to mark him as yours in your heart."

Elcrull's eyes widened.

She slowly nodded.

Shadow Dancer folded her arms.

"Well then."

"By Catar law... you are already married. You shared breath and touch without physical contact."

They both looked at each other, and Elmon swallowed hard.

Elcrull's mind raced with cuddly ideas, and Elmon's eyes almost crossed.

Shadow Dancer tapped Elmon on his shoulder and smiled, *"Thank you."*

She winked at Elmon and showed her fangs in a smile.

That puzzled him.

Later that evening they returned to their chamber, finding themselves alone.

Elmon sat on the edge of the bed, still thinking about it.

"When your mother smiled earlier... she showed her fangs deliberately when she smiled at me."

"What does that mean?"

Elcrull frowned and looked at him.

"She did?"

"It was a little unnerving," Elmon admitted.

Elcrull thought for a moment, searching her memory.

"Did you make a deal or something?"

Elmon looked genuinely confused.

"Not that I am aware of."

"Did she ask you to do something for her?" Elcrull pressed.

He nodded slowly.

"She asked me to take you to my people. She said it would make her heart glad."

Elcrull's expression fell. She looked down toward the bed, sniffing softly.

"So... you agreed to do this for her."

"Not for us."

“That’s why you answered her the way you did.”

Her voice trembled slightly.

“When a Catar shows her fangs in a smile... it means the agreement is accepted.”

Elcrull lay down and turned her back to him, still sniffing.

Elmon sat there, completely bewildered.

“I... no... what?”

“I never agreed to anything.”

“I was thinking about us.”

His voice softened.

“I realized something.”

He reached toward her.

“Your Fur IS Life to me.”

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

Finally, Elmon lay down beside her and gently ran his hand along the curve of her back.

Her fur bristled slightly beneath his touch.

She arched just a little, and a quiet purr escaped her throat.

He leaned closer and kissed the side of her neck. Something in her tensed for a moment, then softened into a quiet warmth. His affection deepened, and he drew her closer.

For weeks, she had fought, searched, healed, and survived. Now he had finally found her again, and the quiet between them felt almost unreal.

Elcrull reached up and touched his face.

Elmon breathed in the scent of her fur, and the familiarity of it stirred something deep within him.

She reached, and with a single claw, she hooked his shoulder, drew him to her, panting, kissing. *“I want you. Fill me, I want you.”*

Elmon smiled faintly. *“Are you mine?”*

She purred deeply and stuck her tongue out, licking her top lip.

The bond between them pulsed again — that strange sense of shared warmth and thought that Shadow Dancer had called Meeala.

Elmon kissed her, slowly at first. Their breaths mingled, then their bodies followed. The bond between them seemed to ignite like a spark in dry tinder.

What followed was not a gentle courtship.

It was Meeala.

It was no longer frightening.

It was comforting.

Elcrull leaned forward and kissed him, slowly at first, then with growing urgency. Months of longing seemed to pour through that single moment.

Elmon pulled her close.

For the first time since they had met at the school gardens, there were no vows to keep, no enemies hunting them, no wounds to mend.

No interruptions or intrusions.

Only each other.

Their bodies moved together in a fierce rhythm neither of them had known before. The connection between them felt almost supernatural—mind, spirit, and flesh entwining.

Elcrull gasped as waves of sensation rolled through her. Elmon felt the same fire building inside himself, stronger than anything he had ever experienced.

At some point, the world beyond the room vanished entirely.

They were no longer thinking.

Only feeling.

In the darkness, he seemed harrier, more muscular as she explored him.

The bond between them tightened until it seemed their very echoes had become one.

At times, their passion seemed unbearable.

Hours later, they collapsed together, exhausted, wrapped in each other's arms.

At some point, the candles burned low.

The room fell quiet.

Wrapped in each other's arms, exhaustion and warmth finally overtook them both.

Sleep came easily.

The Morning After

Sunlight crept through the shutters the next morning.

Elmon groaned softly as he tried to sit up. Every movement hurt.

Every muscle in his body protested.

Elcrull stretched and winced, rubbing her shoulder.

She stretched carefully, grimacing slightly before breaking into a quiet laugh.

"I feel like I fought three ogres," she muttered. "*Everything hurts.*"

Elmon rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the sores on his shoulder.

"I think we may have."

Elcrull giggled despite herself.

They washed and dressed slowly, moving like warriors after a hard campaign.

By the time they reached the courtyard, Shadow Dancer was already seated beside the fire with bread and roasted meat.

She studied them both carefully.

Then one eyebrow rose.

"So," she said calmly.

"*Training was... intense?*"

Elmon glanced at Elcrull.

"*We may have overdone it.*"

Shadow Dancer raised a brow.

“*Oh,*” she said knowingly.

“*What kind of training?*”

Elmon and Elcrull answered at the same time.

“*Bed.*”

Shadow Dancer chuckled softly.

“*Ohhh... that kind of training.*”

Elmon stood and immediately gasped at the pain.

He bent forward, bracing his hands on his knees.

Shadow Dancer leaned closer, noticing the bite marks and faint claw scratches and hook marks along his neck.

“*You should have that looked at,*” she said dryly.

She turned her gaze toward Elcrull.

“*You were not trying to eat his flesh, I hope.*”

Elcrull buried her face in her hands.

“*Mother... Shhh*”

Shadow Dancer chuckled softly.

“*An elf and a Catar discovering each other for the first time,*” she said.

“*I think it was... energetic.*”

Elmon slowly sat down beside the fire.

“*I hurt in ways I didn't know were possible,*” he admitted.

Shadow Dancer nodded seriously.

“*You should see a healer.*”

“*Catar bites can become infected.*”

Elcrull groaned.

“*Mother!*”

Shadow Dancer only smiled.

“*I may see a short-haired before my death.*”

Elmon blinked.

“*A short-hair?*”

Shadow Dancer smiled faintly.

“*A cub, Elmon. A grandchild.*”

Elcrull stared at her mother.

“*What? It was one night!*”

Shadow Dancer shrugged calmly.

“*You will know in a few days... if what I suspect is true.*”

Elmon rubbed his forehead.

“*We need to see my uncle,*” he said.

“Before any surprises arrive... if that’s true.” His mind raced with many questions and calculations.

Citadel’s Healer

After finishing their meal, they walked to the citadel’s hall of healing.

Inside, Nozdaek sat at a long table surrounded by open tomes. Shelves of powders, bottles, and strange tools lined the walls. The room smelled faintly of herbs and metal.

It looked half like a library and half like an alchemist’s workshop.

When Elmon and Elcrull entered, Nozdaek looked up from his book.

He blinked.

Then stood immediately.

“What happened to you two?”

“You run into more slavers?” he asked.

He pulled chairs forward for them.

“Sit.”

Elmon lowered himself carefully into the chair.

He winced slightly.

“Shadow Dancer says we’re already bound.”

Nozdaek’s eyes widened.

“Oh.” Noz noted scars on Elmon’s neck.

He leaned against the table and studied Elcrull thoughtfully.

“How long have you been wanting him?”

Elcrull lowered her head and spoke quietly.

“Since he called me his flirtatious jaguar the first time.”

Elmon laughed.

Then immediately regretted it.

The movement hurt.

He coughed and held his ribs.

Elmon paused, searching through old memories.

Seeing her in them now in a different light. ‘

‘That moment... she remembered that?’

Then he smiled faintly.

“I suppose I did want you,” he admitted. *“I just wasn’t aware of it.”*

“Studies... Christin... the crypt... Perdina...”

He exhaled slowly.

Nozdaek folded his arms and studied him carefully.

“Take off your shirt, Elmon.”

Elmon struggled with the movement. Elcrull stepped forward and helped him pull the shirt over his head.

When it came free, she winced.

Bite marks.

Claw scratches. A couple of digs.

Bruises shaped like paws darkened his chest and shoulders.

Nozdaek turned slowly toward Elcrull.

“He is not a Catar,” he said calmly. *“You could have seriously injured him.”*

“You two have experienced a Meeala bond,” he said finally.

“That happens only once in a Catar’s life.”

He studied Elmon with particular interest.

Elcrull nodded quickly, *“And something unusual happened as well.”*

“He changed,” she said. *“For a moment he seemed almost... animal.”*

Noz nodded slowly.

“That can happen when strong bloodlines mingle.”

He looked between them.

“You should also know something else.”

Elcrull lowered her head and sniffled.

“It was... overwhelming.”

She glanced at Elmon.

“He wanted..., and I responded. I wanted he responded.”

Nozdaek’s expression grew serious.

“You are bonded.”

He crossed the room to a cabinet and began gathering small dishes, cloths, and tools. A moment later, he returned with sutures and a few bottles.

“Remove your trousers, Elmon.”

Elmon hesitated.

Nozdaek raised an eyebrow.

“You are already bonded. Do not grow modest now.”

Reluctantly, Elmon complied.

“Oh my.”

Nozdaek worked quickly and efficiently, cleaning wounds and stitching where necessary.

When he finished, he handed Elmon a small vial.

“Drink.”

Elmon swallowed the potion.

Warmth spread through his body as the worst of the pain eased.

Nozdaek looked between the two of them.

“Now listen carefully.”

“Control yourselves.”

He turned to Elcrull.

“Remove your clothes, Elcrull,” Noz requested.

She did so without protest.

Noz slowly walked around her, examining the marks across her shoulders and back. After a moment he shook his head.

“How did you claw your self Elcrull?”

“That must have been quite a Meeala session.”

Elcrull lowered her ears slightly.

Noz pointed to several marks along her back.

“It looks like you fought the battle of your life.”

“Bite marks... Strange like a small bear paw bruise. Shanked fingers dug into your back...”

He chuckled quietly.

“If I didn’t know better, I would say you were with another Catar or a beast.”

Noz had Elmon come over and stretch out his hand over a large claw print with five deep nail prints. It was a good three inches larger than Elmon's hand.

He glanced over at Elmon with a smirk, then a frown.

“You, however, need to learn some control.” Studding Elmon.

Elmon frowned.

“What do you mean by a Meeala session?”

Noz paused and continued finishing the small stitches along Elcrull’s shoulder.

“I’ll explain that in a moment,” he said calmly. *“Let me finish first.”*

He cleaned the last of the wounds and tied off the final stitch.

“That should do it.” He leaned down and took a small, smooth stick and touched some tender areas. She sat up as if she were on fire. *“AHHHH..”*

He stepped back and wiped his hands.

“You can get dressed now.”

He handed her a small vial as well.

She drank it, and her tensions eased; the burning sensation subsided.

Elmon and Elcrull slowly pulled their clothes back on.

The potion and Noz’s work had eased much of the pain.

They both felt considerably better.

Noz looked between them thoughtfully.

“Now,” he said.

“Let’s talk about Meeala.”

Noz walked across the room to a small sitting area with a few sturdy chairs and a cot.

He motioned toward them.

“Sit, both of you.”

Elmon and Elcrull obeyed.

Noz leaned against the table for a moment, studying them carefully.

“From what I have seen,” he began slowly, “there has been a desire between you for a long time.” That drove you in ways I can’t even imagine.

Elcrull shook her head slowly, looking down, lowering her ears.

Looking more at Elmon than Elcrull.

“Buried perhaps... but very real.”

Noz folded his arms and studied them both.

“A Meeala session only happens once in a Catar’s life if it happens at all.”

“I have never heard of one between different races with catar.”

“It is not simply passion.”

“It is the anchoring of your souls.”

“Everyone wants their bonding to be as one. But many it is not.

“It is a long relationship with work.”

He pointed toward Elcrull’s chest.

“It defines your star.”

Elmon frowned slightly.

“Your star?”

Noz nodded.

“In Catar belief, every life is a star.”

“A bright star is a life lived well.”

“A shallow star is a life burned poorly.”

“A missing star...” he paused.

“...is a life that meant nothing.”

He gestured between them.

“When two Catar bond through Meeala, their stars anchor together.”

“It changes the path of their lives.”

“Your emotions will rule the other at times. Even at great distances.”

Noz smiled faintly, looking at Elcrull. *“You may be carrying a cub.”*

Her mouth opened in surprise as her hands instinctively moved to her stomach.

Her eyes widened. *“But it was only once.”*

Noz chuckled. *“Once is often enough.”*

“Not yet,” she said quickly.

Noz laughed.

He glanced at Elmon.

“If so, the cub will arrive in seventy-five to ninety days.”

Elmon’s eyes went glassy.

His face went blank.

Inside his mind, thoughts began racing in every direction at once.

Noz folded his arms and looked between them.

“What I am about to tell you only applies to those who experience Meeala.”

He paused, making sure they were listening.

“As I was saying... You two are new to this. Regardless of the bond.”

He turned his attention to Elmon.

“Now listen carefully.”

“In a male Catar’s life, when a Meeala cub is conceived, the male will watch over the short-hair for the first three to five weeks.”

“During that time, the mother will often flirt with other available males.”

Elcrull’s ears flattened slightly.

Noz raised a hand.

“We call this Nasheth.”

“The building of desire.”

He looked directly at Elcrull. *“You may lose your desire for Elmon for a time.”*

“It can strain the relationship.”

He turned back to Elmon. *“You will have to win her again.”*

He shrugged slightly.

“That is the usual pattern.”

“But Meeala is rare.”

“It does not always follow the usual ways.”

Then he studied Elmon more closely.

“You are an elf.”

Elmon shook his head.

“Half High Elf... and half Cion Human.”

Noz blinked.

Old histories stirred in his memory.

“The Blood Lust.”

“Oh my.”

“That could cause... other complications.”

Elcrull looked at Elmon with wide eyes.

“A what?”

Noz frowned slightly.

“Cion humans can fall into Blood Lust.”

He hesitated.

“When it happens... things can change.”

Elcrull’s ears lowered slightly.

“Like... what?” she asked quietly.

Elmon leaned back, thinking.

“My mother used to tell me stories of her people.”

“When family is threatened... something awakens them.”

“An unnatural strength.”

“They become vicious toward enemies.”

He paused, remembering.

“The Cion believe freedom is sacred.”

“To protect the innocent is one of their highest calling.”

“We do not shed blood for unjust causes.”

He paused.

“And in our heritage... women are sacred.”

Noz interrupted, *“To strike a woman unjustly awakens what they call the Rageborn heart.”*

Elcrull stared at him.

Elmon continued.

“Sometimes it comes with a form of shape-shift... into a beast of legend.”

“A great bear.”

“They have been known to overpower even dwarves when the rage takes them.”

He looked around the room, more memories surfacing.

“My father used to say High Elves think too much.”

“They analyze everything.”

“Where a Hobbit or a Gelfling might laugh and move on. We Don't.”

He sighed.

“Elves are a race for whom time means little.”

“But humans...”

He shook his head.

“They burn fast.”

He looked down at his hands.

“The Blood-Rage of battle.”

“The drive to seek truth.”

“A ...” Elmon paused. Slowly lifting his head, looking at Elcrull.

“You said I changed.”

“Like an animal.”

Noz watched him thoughtfully.

“I have heard of the Cion blood-lust,” he said slowly.

“That would explain why your night was...”

He paused, searching for a word.

“...remarkable.”

Then he smirked slightly.

“Epic.”

Elmon rubbed his forehead.

“That same rage is what I used against the slavers... in my own way.”

“I am dangerous,” Elmon murmured.

He looked down at his hands.

“I could hurt you, Elcrull.”

Noz folded his arms and leaned back slightly.

“Highly unlikely.”

Elmon looked up at him.

Noz continued calmly.

“I have never heard stories of a male Cion harming his mate.”

He gestured toward Elmon’s chest.

“Somewhere deep in your being is the belief that females are sacred.”

He nodded toward Elcrull.

“Sacred things are rarely harmed.”

He studied the bruises along Elcrull’s shoulder and smiled faintly.

“Bruised, perhaps.”

“But not harmed.”

Elcrull reached out and placed her paw over Elmon’s hand.

“I am not afraid of you,” she said softly.

Family Reunion

Elmon stood and took Elcrull’s paw.

“Come,” he said quietly. *“We’re going to see my uncle now.”*

They left the hall. Noz wished them well. Laughing to himself.

“There is a wonderment.”

They began walking down the slope toward the lower streets.

As they walked, Elcrull kept glancing at him differently than before.

Learning about his lineage... and the sacredness his people placed on women... had changed something in how she looked at him.

Halfway down the hill, Elmon suddenly stopped.

A man below caught his eye.

Worn clothing.

Light armor.

Three swords hanging from his belt.

Something about him felt wrong.

Without hesitation, Elmon slipped into the Veil, pulling Elcrull with him.

“What?” she whispered.

Elmon did not answer.

He changed direction and walked straight toward the stranger.

They stopped only inches from him.

The man was scanning the street nervously, his eyes darting back and forth.

He was expecting trouble.

One hand dropped to a sword.

The other hovered near a dagger.

Elmon studied his face carefully.

Recognition struck him.

It was the same man he had echo-burned days earlier.

Elmon leaned close to the man's ear and spoke with quiet authority.

"Shall I burn you again... completing what I started?"

The man jerked and drew his dagger, slashing wildly through the air.

"Who are you, devil?" he shouted.

Elmon stepped back easily.

"I would sheath that dagger," he said coldly.

"Or I will bind you and extinguish your life."

The man hesitated.

Then slowly returned the dagger to its sheath.

Elmon watched him carefully.

"Are you a slaver?"

The man paused before answering.

"No."

"I am a watcher."

His eyes continued scanning the street nervously.

Elmon nodded slowly.

"Ah."

"A spy."

He folded his arms.

"What are you watching for?"

Elmon suddenly heard movement behind him.

He spun.

A figure cloaked in shadow was moving toward them.

Without hesitation, Elmon anchored his Echo to the Veil.

The shadowy mist around the figure dissolved.

Standing in its place was a Catar.

Elcrull narrowed her eyes.

"Pigjja Noola effee ruma."

The Catar tilted his head slightly.

"No."

Elmon glanced at Elcrull.

“What was that about?”

“A hunter?”

She paused.

“I think a hired assassin.”

Elmon’s eyes hardened.

“Who is his target?”

Elcrull hesitated only a moment.

“Not me. I assume you.”

Elmon turned back toward the assassin.

In rough Catar speech he demanded,

“Who hired my death?”

As he spoke, he traced a complicated sigil in the air and held it there, glowing faintly between his fingers.

“Last chance.”

The Catar shifted his stance slightly.

Elmon studied the movement.

He was trying to reposition.

Trying, perhaps, to slip out of the Veil.

Elmon smiled faintly.

“The last time I used this sigil,” he said calmly,

“I fragmented eight zombies.”

“You cannot run.”

“You cannot leave.”

“You are bound here until I release you.”

His voice grew colder.

“And if you refuse...”

“You will never be found.”

Beside him Elcrull crouched low.

Her claws extended.

She pulled a small piece of metal from her pouch and quickly etched a rune into it.

Then she flipped the shard into the air and whispered a command.

“Arath Shad.”

The metal struck the ground and hardened instantly into a jagged spike of stone.

Elcrull lowered herself into a ready stance.

“You really don’t want to fight a wizard and a Warblade at the same time,” she said quietly.

The Catar suddenly dropped his weapon.

His hand slipped inside his coat.

Elcrull reacted instantly.

She flicked the etched metal shard toward him.

It spun through the air.

Mid-flight, it shattered into six razor-sharp darts that struck the assassin before he could finish whatever he had begun.

At the same moment, Elmon released the sigil he had been holding.

It fell toward the ground.

The moment it touched the earth, the air distorted violently.

A ripple of force burst outward and raced toward the Catar.

His body fragmented instantly—yet remained bound to the same space by Elmon's Veil anchor.

Elmon grabbed Elcrull's hand.

He focused and released the Echo binding.

The moment the restraint vanished, the shattered body exploded outward into the open air.

Elmon had already moved them twenty yards away.

They slipped out of the Veil together.

Behind them, the air shimmered faintly where the Catar had died.

Elmon stared at the distortion.

He had never seen the result of a spell cast inside the Veil before.

"What was that sigil?" Elcrull asked quietly.

Elmon glanced at her.

"The same one the celestial cleric of the Holy Hand used during the collapse in the Crypt siege back at school."

He paused.

"It disperses flesh."

Elcrull blinked.

"You are full of surprises," she muttered.

Elmon closed his eyes briefly and sifted the surrounding Echoes for hostile intent.

Nothing.

The street felt calm.

He opened his eyes again.

"All clear."

He took her hand once more and started towards the main town.

They slipped back into the Veil.

Elmon changed direction and moved quickly toward his uncle's house.

'Why were they after him?'

Chapter X: The Joining of Houses

Elmon reached his uncle's House.

He inspected around the house. All seemed clear.

They passed through the wall and entered the kitchen.

The room was empty.

Elmon released the Veil.

The moment they stepped fully into the world again, a loud ringing filled the air.

Elcrull cried out and dropped to the floor, clutching her ears.

From the hallway, Emor rushed around the corner, a spiraling globe of energy floating before his hand, ready to strike.

The moment he recognized Elmon, the spell vanished.

Emor made a quick gesture with his fingers.

The ringing stopped instantly.

Elcrull slowly pushed herself up, breathing heavily.

She rubbed her ears.

A thin line of blood trickled from her nose. She wiped it away and licked her paw clean.

"That hurt," she muttered.

At that moment, Miky came running around the corner.

She stopped abruptly when she saw them.

Then she threw her hands in the air and ran straight toward Elcrull, hugging her tightly.

"You're here!"

She turned excitedly to her father.

"This is Elcrull — Elmon's lost love!"

Emor's eyes widened in surprise.

Emor stepped forward and bowed politely.

He took Elcrull's paw gently.

"It is a pleasure to meet you."

He slid his fingers between her paw fingers and squeezed gently.

She smiled warmly.

Then he turned to Elmon.

"Why the secret entrance?"

Elmon sighed.

"We encountered a spy... and an assassin on the way here."

A Change of Heart

At that moment, Elrinana peeked around the corner.

The moment she saw Elmon, she rushed forward and wrapped him in a deep embrace.

"Your mother raised a beautiful son."

Elmon froze.

Wide-eyed, he stepped back and looked first at Emor... then at Elrinana.

He leaned toward his uncle and whispered quietly,

“What did you do to her?”

Emor chuckled softly.

“It was all you, my boy.”

Before Elmon could respond, Miky grabbed Elcrull’s arm.

“Come on!”

She dragged her down the hallway toward her room.

“We have a lot to talk about!”

Elmon stood there completely speechless.

Elrinana gently placed her hand on his arm.

“Come,” she said softly.

She guided him into the meeting room.

Once inside, she sat down and motioned for him to take the chair across from her.

Elmon remained silent for a moment, studying her carefully.

Finally, he spoke.

“Who are you?”

Elrinana paused, considering the question. Giggled.

Then she looked directly into his eyes.

Peace rested in her expression.

“I am your Aunt Elrinana Silverspire–Silverwood.”

Elmon leaned forward slightly and studied her Echo.

It was completely different.

The bitterness he remembered was gone.

Her intent felt like that of an entirely different person.

“All of this... from removing a curse?” he asked quietly.

At that moment, Emor stepped into the room.

“You mentioned an assassin earlier.” Emor, Whispered.

Elmon shifted his attention to his uncle.

“He is dead.”

“He died in the Veil.”

Emor frowned slightly.

“Did you know who he was?”

“No,” Elmon replied.

“And I had no intention of investigating him after I shredded his form, Uncle.”

Emor raised a brow then paced slowly across the room, thinking.

“Was it witnessed?”

Elmon shook his head.

“No.”

“It happened in the Veil.”

Emor folded his arms thoughtfully.

“What exactly is this Veil?” he asked.

“I have heard stories of Veil walkers, but I have never seen it.”

Elmon stood. You see it every day, but do not realize it is there.

“I’ll show you.”

“I’m going to enter the Veil... and then bring you with me.”

Before Emor could respond, Elmon faded from sight.

Elrinana’s eyes grew wide, “Where did he go?”

A moment later, Elmon placed a hand on Emor’s arm with intent.

With a sudden shift of sensation, Emor slipped into the Veil.

The world changed instantly.

Colors became softer.

Sound grew distant and muffled.

“This,” Elmon said quietly, *“is the Veil.”*

“It’s like a fabric that borders the reality we live in.”

He gestured around them.

“Most things here are only reflections of the real world.”

“They cannot touch you.”

“Only things that can interact with the Veil itself can harm you.”

Emor looked around carefully.

“So from the world outside... You cannot be seen?”

Elmon nodded.

“Correct.”

He tugged gently on Emor’s arm, never releasing contact.

“Come.”

They walked straight through the wall and stepped outside.

The city stretched out before them.

The wind moved through the streets.

Yet everything felt distant and muted.

Emor watched with quiet fascination.

After a moment, Elmon released him.

Emor slipped back into the normal world and found himself standing in front of the house.

The evening air felt sharp and clear.

He looked around.

Elmon was nowhere to be seen.

“*You still here, Elmon?*” he asked.

“Yes, Uncle.”

Elmon’s voice sounded muffled and distant, though he remained invisible.

A moment later, Elmon grasped his arm again with intent and pulled him back into the Veil.

Together they stepped through the wall and entered the house once more.

Inside, Aunt Elrinana was moving from room to room.

“*Emor?*” she called.

“*Where did you go?*”

Miky and Elcrull stood in the hallway, watching her search the house, growing more confused.

A moment later, Emor stepped back into the normal world.

Elmon followed a heartbeat later.

Elrinana rushed into the meeting room.

“*Where did you go?*” she demanded, breathing hard.

“*I’ve been looking everywhere!*”

Emor sat calmly in his chair.

“*I was right here,*” he said.

“*Elmon was demonstrating a new concept of invisibility, my dear.*”

Miky walked into the meeting room with a huge smile on her face. All bubbly.

She looked at Elmon... then at everyone else.

“So,” she began cheerfully, “*what do you call a cousin’s wife who is about to have a...*”

She paused and glanced at Elcrull.

“*...a baby cub?*”

She tilted her head.

“*Did I say that right?*”

Elcrull shook her head slightly.

“No.”

Elmon suddenly looked pale.

He glanced nervously at his aunt.

Elrinana frowned in confusion.

“*Who is having a baby cub?*” she asked.

Miky looked at Elmon and gave a small twitch of her head toward Elcrull.

Elcrull answered calmly in perfect Aluin Elvish.

“*I am.*”

She glanced at Miky.

“*Wonderful!*” Elrinana exclaimed.

“Who is the father?”

Emor gestured gently toward his wife.

“She mentioned a cousin.”

He thought for a moment.

“To answer your question... the cub would be a second cousin. Once removed.”

“Why do you ask?”

Then it dawned on him.

Emor’s head snapped toward Elmon in surprise.

Elrinana froze.

She stared at the ceiling and tapped her finger against her chin — a habit Elmon himself often had.

Elmon slowly motioned for Elcrull to come sit beside him.

She walked over and settled onto his lap.

Elmon hesitated for a moment.

Then spoke quietly.

“We are.”

Elrinana’s eyes widened.

Her mouth opened as well.

Elmon closed his eyes, bracing himself for condemnation.

“When did you get married, Elmon?” she asked.

He hesitated.

Paused.

Looked at Elcrull.

“Three days ago.”

Inside, he was squirming.

Elcrull looked directly at Elmon’s aunt — then leaned in and kissed Elmon deeply.

Elrinana suddenly stood.

She pointed a finger at him.

“And you did not invite us?”

Elmon blinked in confusion.

“It was a Catar binding.”

Emor raised a brow and tilted his head.

“What... exactly is that, Elmon?”

Elmon sat stunned.

“It is when the Catar binds with their partner’s spirit,” he muttered.

Elcrull raised her hand.

They both turned to her.

“Actually,” she corrected gently, *“It is when a Catar binds her spirit with her chosen mate.”*

Elrinana looked utterly aghast.

Tears welled in her eyes.

“Why did you not invite us?” she sobbed.

“Are we a disgrace to you?”

Elmon stared at her, dumbfounded.

He stood up so quickly he nearly dropped Elcrull from his lap.

“That is why we are here!” he burst out.

“And... and...”

He looked helplessly between his uncle and aunt.

“We wanted to have an Elvish ceremony.”

Miky suddenly screamed with excitement.

“I get to be the Esharatia!”

Elrinana turned toward her.

“Well... I suppose you do.”

Elcrull looked at Elmon, clearly mystified by everything happening around her.

Emor smiled quietly.

Elrinana’s mind, however, was already racing.

She marched into the back study.

A moment later, she returned with a large ledger.

She sat down in the chair and immediately began writing.

Miky bounced beside her, practically glowing with excitement.

Elcrull looked at Elmon, puzzled.

“What is an Esharatia?”

Elmon blinked, still trying to gather his thoughts.

“It is the one who carries the family crest,” he explained.

“The Esharatia holds the rings... or crystal bands... sometimes tethering bands.”

“They represent the joining of one life to a House.”

His voice began to drift slightly as the realization settled on him.

“In our case...”

He looked at Elcrull.

“...you would be joining the House of Silverwood.”

For a moment, his mind seemed far away.

Then the weight of everything caught up with him.

Elmon slowly sank back and collapsed into the chair.

Emor looked at Elcrull thoughtfully.

“Actually,” he said, *“the Esharatia is responsible for quite a lot.”*

“Throughout the entire ceremony, she oversees everything.”

“Your clothing... the invitations... the family crest during the ceremony... and the defining of the ceremonial bands.”

Elcrull tilted her head.

“What are these bands you speak of?”

Emor folded his hands.

“That depends on the House,” he explained.

“The bands often represent wealth, lineage, or position.”

He paused for a moment.

“We have not had a covenant alliance in this family for one hundred and ten years... not since Elmon’s parents married.”

He looked between them.

“So we will need to learn the name of your clan or house, and any heraldry associated with it.”

“As Elmon’s uncle — or his father — it will fall to one of us to create a new crest and present it to you.”

Elcrull glanced at Elmon and smiled.

“I am glad the Catar way is simpler.”

Elmon looked at her, *“Ours is less painful.”*

Elmon went completely quiet.

His gaze drifted somewhere far away.

One thought echoed in his mind.

‘What will the Loreholder think about all of this?’

Before anyone could say anything else, Elcrull stood and scooped Elmon up in her arms.

She carried him down the hall toward the guest room.

“He is mentally broken,” she said with a giggle.

She laid him gently on the bed and curled up beside him.

“I have never seen you without control,” she teased softly.

“Without answers... without words.”

She leaned closer and kissed him.

“It is nice to know you can be stunned.”

Elmon wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close.

“I have never seen my aunt act like this,” he murmured.

He was quiet for a moment.

“I wish my mother could have seen her like this.”

Miky stepped into the room and sat on the bed beside them, practically glowing with excitement.

“This is going to be so much fun!”

She leaned forward eagerly.

“What is your clan name, Elcrull?”

Elcrull straightened slightly.

“We are the Red Tongues. My family line is the Misters.”

She placed a hand on her chest.

“I am Elcrull Alora, Mister of the Red Tongues. And soon to be of the House of Silverwood.”

Elmon looked at her thoughtfully. *“You actually already are.”*

“Did you know you have elven blood in you?”

Elcrull snorted softly.

“No, I don’t.”

“You are just fooling with me.”

Elmon shook his head.

“Your mother told me. Your great forebear was Zinolus.”

“We call them Grashen Elves.”

“Many have the ability to shape stone like clay.”

Elcrull frowned.

“Why would my mother tell you that?”

Elmon looked down for a moment.

“I was afraid to take you with me.”

His voice carried a quiet ache.

“If I took you... In twenty or thirty years, you would be gone.”

“I did not want to watch you leave this world so soon.”

“Your uncle is over two hundred years old.”

“No, he is not,” she protested.

“Ask him.” Elmon countered.

“Tell him you know he carries Grashen blood.”

“You know about the Sword.”

Elmon suddenly sat upright so fast that Miky tumbled off the bed.

He froze for a moment and closed his eyes.

Miky climbed back to her feet.

Elmon slowly lifted a hand and began tracing something in the air, writing unseen sigils.

He paused, took a breath, and flicked his fingers as if tossing the thought away.

Then he leaned back again. He looked at Miky.

“Sorry.”

Miky brushed herself off.

Elmon continued quietly.

“That is why the Grashen hate the Darklings with such passion.”

“Remember when we were archiving items from the Crypt?”

“Mystal’s Hammer was there.”

“It had been missing for decades.”

Elcrull smiled slightly.

“That is the Elmon I remember.”

Elmon nodded.

“The Darklings betrayed them during the Red Horde War.”

“They shared their magic with the Horde.”

“That allowed the Horde to enter the Sanctums of Stone.”

“They nearly destroyed everything.”

He held up a finger.

“So the Grashen forged six artifacts to prevent such a disaster from ever happening again.”

He counted them slowly.

- **Mystal’s Hammer** and we know where that is now at the heart of Stone Citadel.
- **The Eye of Light.** Is at the Stone Citadel.
- **Sun Crystals.** Missing to this day.
- **Shadow Striker Blades.** We know where one of the ten is.
- **Shadow Dispersion Dust.** It is in the missing Stone Lore Tome. Taken by the red Horde.
- **Guardian Light Armor.** I know where the Guardian Armor is.

Elcrull nodded thoughtfully.

“My uncle Nozdaek owns a Shadow Striker blade.”

Elmon glanced toward her.

“Relis the Myst Gazer had one as well. He used it during the siege at the School.”

Elcrull nodded.

“My uncle hangs it in his study.”

“It has been passed down through our family for generations.”

Her voice softened.

“He is the last male of the Red Tongues.”

“His sons were all killed during the Dün uprising.”

Elmon raised a brow. *“He could get married and have Cubs. Probably another sixty or more years easy.”*

Elmon looked at her with a gentle smile.

“Maybe we can have a son,” he said quietly.

“And raise him as a Red Tongue–Silverwood.”

Elcrull’s eyes filled with tears.

She leaned forward and hugged him tightly.

“You would do that for the Catar?”

Elmon held her close.

“It is all in the family.”

The weeks passed quickly as preparations for the ceremony consumed the household.

Nearly two weeks into the preparations, Elmon received a courier notice.

Elcrull entered the room just as he was examining a small rod in his hand.

"This should be interesting," Elmon said thoughtfully.

"What is it?" Elcrull asked.

"I believe it's an Echo Ledger reply," Elmon said. *"From Master Embook Ungilent of the Heraldry and Archives Department back at the school."*

He turned the rod over in his fingers.

"Though I must admit... I've never seen one delivered like this before."

He set the rod carefully on the table.

"Do you remember when I suddenly sat up and knocked Miky onto the floor a couple of weeks ago?"

Elcrull nodded slowly.

"You threw something invisible into the air."

Elmon smiled faintly.

"I sent a request through the Echo Ledger for your family's heraldry for four generations."

He removed the cap from the rod and slid out a tightly rolled parchment.

Carefully, he opened it.

At the top was written in precise script:

Master Embook Ungilent Servant of the Archives

At the bottom of the parchment were three symbols arranged in a triangular pattern.

Elmon leaned closer.

"They're not sigils," he murmured.

"Or runes."

He pulled his small personal ledger from his belt pouch and began paging through it, comparing symbols.

Page after page.

Nothing matched.

Elcrull looked at the images, *"They are Archival notes."*

She placed her palms on the top and bottom of the tube.

Without lifting her hands from the cylinder, she pressed her fingers against both ends of the bar and twisted.

The rod spun.

With a soft metallic whir, four sheets of parchment shot free and drifted slowly to the floor.

At the same moment, the rod expanded and unfolded, transforming into a finely crafted metal scroll tube.

Elmon noticed a small greeting symbol engraved on the lid. He studied it for a moment, then quietly recited the proper reply.

The lid clicked and opened.

Inside was a highly detailed family crest.

Elmon carefully gathered the four scattered sheets from the floor.

The first sheet displayed the symbols of the clan groups tied to the Red Tongues.

The second listed the pedigree of the Red Tongues, tracing fathers and prime cubs through generations.

The third was a High Elven document of authenticity, confirming the legitimacy of the Elven crest.

The final sheet contained recommendations for a new crest to symbolize the bond between Elmon and Elcrull.

Elmon studied the documents for a moment, then smiled faintly.

“He is always so thorough.”

Elmon looked at Elcrull. *“How did you know how to open that?”*

She smiled.

“The first symbol means open palm.”

“The second symbol means sun rays.”

“And the last symbol means storm.”

She pointed toward the markings.

“The sun rays point downward. That means the palm faces up — obviously the bottom.”

“The only thing the fingers can do then is pass the storm along.”

She twisted her fingers slightly in the air.

“Twisting.”

She shrugged casually.

“That was some of the material we studied while cataloging the seventeen hundred items recovered from the crypt.”

“Relics, jewelry, weapons, and other artifacts.”

“He walked us through three generations of archival variations... and his personal preferences.”

Elmon frowned slightly.

“Really?”

Elcrull grinned.

“I knew something you didn’t.” With a sly tone.

Then she leaned forward and kissed him.

Elmon chuckled softly and returned his attention to the parchment.

He read aloud.



“It says here that Lord Markle gave shelter to the families in the Tointo Valley during the Dun Rising.”

“Eventually, the Lord’s daughter, Cerila Markle, bonded with Gashner Mistars as his wife.”

“They had three male cubs: White, Eeilora, and Muoi.”

He turned the page slightly.

“Muoi bonded with Shondra Magar. They had cubs.”

He traced the names with his finger.

“Emble, Emile, Bloodtooth, Rasar, and Florool.”

“Emile bonded with Shadow Dancer and Crolia Soul Bane.”

He paused.

“Soul Bane died during childbirth with twin cubs: Mooshi and Silvertongue.”

“Shadow Dancer later had five cubs.”

He read slowly.

‘Black Claw, Harmuia, Elcrull, Sunara, and Duana.’

‘Duana died during the Second Ildrol Uprising.’

Elmon slowly lowered the parchment.

He looked at Elcrull.

“Your mother is hiding something.”

She blinked.

“What do you mean?”

Elmon tapped the page.

“She told me she only had three cubs.”

He looked back at the record.

“But this says she had five.”

“Elmon opened his personal ledger and annotated the findings about Shadow Dancer.

The new crest information parchment was delivered to Emor for consideration in designing possible crest combinations.

Miky had already sent notifications to the Silverwood families.

Most of them were coming.

Yowl had also agreed to attend to perform the Catar blessing.

When Miky finished explaining the guest list, Elmon leaned back in his chair.

“That’s... over a thousand people.”

Miky nodded enthusiastically. She was so excited.

She rambled about cousins and people she had not met yet as part of the family.

“Five Catar lords will be present,” she said. “And nearly every Catar currently at the Citadel.”

“Your father is Coming Elmon.”

Elmon rubbed his face slowly. The scale of the ceremony suddenly felt overwhelming.

Chapter †: The Hidden Archive

Elmon tried to stay active by doing something other than talking with Miky about the wedding she and her mother were planning.

A few days later, Elcrull appeared one afternoon and practically dragged him out of the house.

“I found something,” she said. *“You need to see it.”*

They walked out of town and climbed the largest hill on the northern edge of Raven Claw. At the top stood a large stone that faintly sparkled and emitted a low humming vibration. When they stepped onto it and looked down over the city, the layout of Raven Claw became clear.

The entire city was built like a great wheel.

Elmon stared in fascination.

He tried to sift the Echo of the stone.

It resisted.

The structure did not yield its memory or purpose.

That alone intrigued him.

Elmon slipped quietly into the Veil.

From within the Veil, the structure revealed itself more clearly.

It was not a simple stone.

It was a short column, very similar in construction to one at Break.

But this one bore no runes.

No sigils.

Only three carved Catar hands with raised fingers.

Nothing rested on top of the column.

No device.

No crown.

No artifact.

Just the empty platform.

Elmon became completely absorbed.

He began measuring everything.

He drew diagrams.

He took compass bearings.

He charted the stars above its position.

Anything that might provide data or implications.

Elmon went down to the Catar citadel to investigate.

Perhaps something within the citadel archives would reveal the purpose of the strange column.

His first stop was Noz.

He explained what he had found.

Noz listened carefully, then nodded.

"I want to see this."

They climbed the northern hill together until they reached the humming stone.

Noz studied the city below.

"Yes," he said slowly. *"The wheel shape makes sense."*

He looked toward the center of the city.

"But the hub should be important."

"A well... a plaza... a council ground..."

Instead, the center appeared to be nothing more than a burned-out structure that had collapsed long ago and been left to ruin.

Elmon watched him carefully.

"Try your shadow walk."

Noz nodded.

When he slipped into the shadow walk, the column revealed itself.

He stared at it for several long seconds.

When he returned, his expression had changed.

"Why hide it there?" he asked.

"Only a select few could ever see it."

Elmon, Elcrull, and Noz stood on the hill discussing the possibilities.

Elmon finally asked,

"Is there any record in the citadel archives of something that might sit on that column? Something ceremonial... or mechanical?"

Noz shook his head.

"I have no idea."

"The citadel was abandoned for generations. We only confirmed it was Catar in origin a little over six years ago."

Elmon nodded.

"That's when Break was awakened."

Noz crossed his arms.

"Most of the citadel still hasn't been explored."

Elmon smiled faintly.

"I think it's time for some archival investigation."

Elcrull squealed happily.

"My specialty."

They descended the hill toward the citadel.

As they approached the walls, Elmon walked along the cliffside behind the main structure, studying the stonework carefully.

Something caught his eye.

A square black pedestal.

One side rested against the cliff face.

The opposite edge touched the rear wall of the citadel's main chamber.

Elmon crouched, looking at it from his vantage point.

It was too small for a human to stand comfortably.

But it was just large enough... for a Catar.

Elmon, Elcrull, Noz, Shadow Dancer, and the current citadel archivists began searching and mapping the citadel.

The archivist had a current map of the grounds with areas shaded with red chalk that they had already investigated.

There were two levels to the citadel: the eastern wing, and most of the second level was totally unexplored.

Elcrull and Elmon took the bottom floor, and the Archivist with Noz would take the east wing. Dancer would start at the edge of the east wing and work her way towards Noz.

Elmon found a vault-like door that led down into the basement.

He conjured an echo light and focused one above Elcrull's head.

Most of the rooms were fairly empty. A crate here and there. Beds and a few empty, deteriorating wardrobes.

They found no other hallways but one that seemed to run the length of the citadel.

It appeared that most of the rooms on the lower level were dorm rooms.

The map ended, but the corridor proceeded on.

Elcrull continued mapping. It appeared the corridor entered what appeared to be part of the hillside.

The stonework ended, and now it was a rough-cut natural earth corridor.

The corridor proceeded another thirty feet. No doors, no rooms.

The corridor just ended. It had not been finished.

Elmon slid into the veil.

He was totally caught off guard. He looked in the corridor. There were doors. He walked to the first one. He stepped out of the veil.

Elcrull moved to him. *"What is it?"*

"There is a door here in the veil. How is that possible?" Elmon was unaware of any ability to build in the veil.

He took a Small hand shovel he brought with him and dug at the wall.

He managed to create a Hole that looked into something.

He looked at Elcrull. *"Wait here."*

He slid into the veil; she also slid. Elmon attempted to walk through the earth next to the door.

He could not pass it. He tried and found an edge around the room.

He stepped out of the Veil, she came with him.

He looked at the door.

He dug out the area around the door.

A foot back, he found a metal-bound door anchored into bedrock.

He cleared the earth away to find the entire door. Common size.

The door was not locked.

He grabbed the ring on the door and pulled. The door did not budge.

The veil door was a few inches in front of the other door.

Elmon slipped into the Veil and grasped the iron ring on the hidden door.

He pulled.

The door slid open.

Behind it was... nothing.

No corridor. No chamber. Only empty darkness.

Elmon frowned.

He stepped back out of the Veil and grasped the ring again, to the door he could see.

This time, when he pulled, the door slid open normally into a short corridor.

Behind it lay a hidden room roughly fifty by sixty feet.

The chamber was filled with crates and boxes, many of them rotted and collapsed with age. Rusted weapons and old tools lay scattered among the debris. Shelves sagged beneath the weight of ancient books and ledgers.

Elmon and Elcrull began moving carefully through the room, shifting what they could and searching through the decayed piles.

They placed credible items in a single pile.

They looked for anything unusual.

Spheres.

Devices.

Artifacts.

Eventually, buried beneath the jumble of collapsed materials, they uncovered three large stone chests.

Elcrull knelt beside one and studied the carvings.

"These aren't Catar designs."

Elmon nodded slowly.

"We'll need help," he said. *"We should bring the others down here."*

He paused suddenly.

Through the bond, he felt Elcrull's presence — her warmth, her breathing. A desire for him.

Without moving, he reached for her mind and kissed her gently through the connection.

Elcrull felt the touch and smiled, returning the sensation instinctively.

Elmon slipped back into the Veil.

To his surprise, Elcrull moved with him.

She looked around in wonder as the colors shifted and the sounds of the world grew muted.

“Are we in the Veil?” she asked.

“Yes,” Elmon said quietly. *“And I didn’t even touch you.”*

He stepped closer and pulled her into his arms, kissing her deeply.

Her eyes were warm and curious as she looked back at him.

Elmon smiled slightly.

“I wonder how far away I can do this...”

He paused, thinking.

“...and how it’s even possible.”

Remaining within it, they moved slowly down the passage.

About ten feet beyond where the finished stonework ended and the rough-hewn tunnel began, Elmon noticed a single polished stone set into the wall.

He paused.

Carefully, he sifted the Echo.

The stone glimmered faintly in response.

Elmon stepped out of the Veil.

Elcrull slipped out with him.

He had not touched her.

Elmon stood still for a moment as the realization settled over him.

He no longer saw Elcrull as separate from himself.

Through the Meeala bond, she had become something else entirely—not another presence beside him, but a part of him.

One mind.

One echo.

One life moving through the world.

They looked back toward the wall where the polished stone had been.

Nothing was there.

Elmon frowned slightly, then turned away.

They continued down the corridor until they reached the stairs leading upward. Hand in hand they climbed, talking quietly about the coming ceremony.

Elmon shook his head slightly.

“Why so much fuss over it?”

Elcrull glanced back at him.

“When lives are joined, it is a celebration,” she said. *“A mingling of bloodlines. A focus on something new... yet ancient.”*

They reached the top of the stairs.

“I understand that,” Elmon said. *“But what does it actually achieve?”*

He gestured vaguely.

“It doesn’t produce anything you can carry with you.”

Elcrull stopped and turned to face him, placing her hands on her hips.

“How do you trace histories?” she asked. *“Even my lineage?”*

Elmon blinked.

“What are archivists for,” she continued, *“if nothing worth carrying forward is produced?”*

“That’s not what I meant,” Elmon said quickly.

“I’m talking about the ceremony itself. The gathering of people.”

“The bonding could happen without all the travel, the formalities, and the spectacle of families.”

“Nothing would really be lost.”

Elcrull stepped closer. She placed a paw on his shoulder, her claws extending slightly as she pulled him down face to face.

Elmon winced.

“How would I know your family?” she asked quietly and sternly.

“And how would you know mine?”

She held his gaze.

“What bonds would never be forged if people only remained distant?”

“What structures of friendship and loyalty would never exist?”

“When people travel far to stand together,” Elcrull said, *“they invest themselves in what they witness.”*

Elmon opened his mouth to reply.

Elcrull lifted a finger.

“You think this ceremony is about us.”

“It isn’t.”

“It is about the Red Tongues and the Silverwoods standing together.”

Elmon tried to speak again.

She placed a paw gently over his mouth. Her smell was enticing.

“Shh. Listen. You might learn something.”

Her voice softened slightly.

“This ceremony is not about today.”

“It is about the cubs that will come after us.”

She tilted her head and smiled faintly.

“And at least one of them is already on the way.”

Elmon stood there staring at her.

In his mind, a quiet voice spoke — the whisper of Virelyndra.

“Where would the great Whiteheart ask, ‘Who stood for him?’ if no one had gathered to witness it?”

“I was accepted because of such a gathering,” the blade continued softly. *“That is why I stand with you today.”*

Elmon gritted his teeth.

“Fine,” he said. *“You all win.”*

Elcrull purred softly.

“I know.”

She tilted her head slightly.

“All?”

Elmon blinked at her. He opened his mouth, then stopped.

“Never mind.”

They went to the east wing and gathered everyone together.

Elmon described what he and Elcrull had discovered.

The sun was already dipping toward the horizon, and the light through the citadel windows had begun to fade.

They decided to wait until morning before continuing the investigation.

Noz walked the halls with them for a while. Several swords still hung on the walls of the old rooms—dusty, but not rusted.

Eventually, Elmon and Elcrull returned to their uncle’s house.

That evening, they sat around the table together, sharing a meal.

Elmon looked over at Miky.

“How many are coming now?”

She smiled brightly.

“Last count? One thousand one hundred.”

Elmon froze.

“Where are we going to put that many people?”

“What if it rains?”

“What if some strange weather rolls in?”

“What if bandits decide to attend uninvited?”

Emor chuckled and leaned back in his chair.

“That won’t work either, Elmon,” he said calmly.

“We are completely outmaneuvered in this delicate matter.”

He pointed toward the women at the table.

“They are handling it.”

“Relax.”

Elmon rubbed his forehead.

“There aren’t even enough rooms in the town,” he muttered. “Even if we kicked everyone out.”

Elcrull tossed a cloth at him.

“The citadel has sixty unused rooms in the lower halls and the east wing.”

“Yes, they’ll need cleaning,” she admitted.

“Some of the furniture might still be usable. Some will need repair.”

Emor raised a finger.

“Ah. Something I can actually do.”

A Few Weeks Later

A couple of weeks passed quickly.

Elcrull was beginning to show now. Nearly forty days had gone by.

Aunt Elrinana constantly reminded her not to overwork herself.

“You might hurt yourself,” she would warn.

Elcrull only smiled.

The Stone Chests

Elmon, Elcrull, the Archivist, and several workers entered the room where the stone chests had been discovered.

The chests appeared to be carved directly from the chamber's stone.

They were not separate containers placed there.

They were part of the room.

Elcrull studied them closely.

“How unusual.”

The lids appeared separate, but there were no hinges, seams, or locks.

Six men carefully lifted the lid from the center chest.

Elmon conjured a soft Echo-light to illuminate the interior.

Inside lay a long wooden structure.

It resembled a case, but there were no hinges, locks, or visible seams.

Perhaps it was not the case at all.

They carefully placed it on the floor.

Then something remarkable happened.

The object began to unfold.

Panels shifted and opened in precise movements until the structure fully revealed itself.

It resembled an altar.

Very similar to the one Elmon had seen in the throne chamber at Break.

The Archivist and Elcrull immediately began examining it.

They annotated every mark, notch, and symbol they could find.

Eight workers carefully pushed the altar-like structure against the far wall of the chamber.

They removed the lid from the first chest.

Inside was a light gray liquid.

One of the workers pushed a stick into it.

The wood dissolved instantly, releasing a foul-smelling vapor.

Everyone stepped back.

“*Acid,*” one of the workers muttered.

Elmon moved his Echo-light over the interior.

At the bottom of the chest, they could clearly see objects resting there:

several small bars of metal

two scroll tubes

a small blank-faced ledger

Elmon frowned.

“*Those items should not exist in that liquid.*”

They began experimenting. As each item enters the liquid, they just release it.

A metal rod dissolved.

A wooden pole dissolved.

Rope dissolved.

Even a Quinline sash vanished.

Everything they tried disappeared within seconds.

Elcrull stared into the chest, thinking.

Then something struck her.

“*There’s no residue,*” she said slowly.

“*What do you mean?*” Elmon asked.

“*Nothing remains after the items dissolve. No ash. No sediment.*”

The workers exchanged uneasy glances.

Eventually, most of the crew went upstairs for food.

Only Elmon and two workers remained behind.

“*Perhaps it’s an illusion,*” Elmon said thoughtfully.

The workers shrugged their shoulders.

One of the workers heated a metal bowl on a firestone to cook something for himself.

While sitting beside the chest, he set the bowl on the edge and turned away to grab something.

Dangerous Dance

The bowl slipped.

It fell directly into the liquid.

They all froze.

The bowl floated.

It did not dissolve.

Now they were truly confused.

They grabbed another metal bowl and carefully placed it on the surface.

This one dissolved within thirty seconds.

Elmon leaned over the chest, studying the liquid carefully.

Then he did something that made the workers gasp.

He thrust his hand into the liquid.

Nothing happened.

He pulled his hand back out.

Still nothing.

“No pain,” he murmured.

He removed his cloak.

Then his jacket.

Then his shirt.

The workers stared.

“Master... perhaps that is not wise—”

Elmon ignored them.

He leaned over the chest and reached down into the liquid.

His arm disappeared almost to the shoulder.

Yet it felt as though he had barely reached a foot down.

His brow furrowed.

“That’s impossible.”

He removed the rest of his clothes.

Then he stepped up onto the edge of the chest.

Before either worker could stop him, Elmon dropped into the liquid.

At that exact moment, Elcrull and the others returned.

She saw him vanish into the chest.

“Elmon!”

She screamed.

Her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the floor, pounding the stone with her fists.

“He’s gone—!”

The Archivist stared in horror.

Several seconds passed.

Then suddenly—A book slid over the edge of the chest and landed on the floor.

Elcrull froze.

She scrambled to the chest and looked inside.

Her breath caught.

Elmon was swimming.

Nearly ten feet below the surface.

He looked up and waved.

The Archivist gasped.

Elmon began handing objects upward.

A bowl.

A pole.

A rope.

A staff.

A sword.

Two Scroll tubes.

A sash.

A ring of keys.

Then three small hand-sized chests.

Several bars of metal. 16 to be exact.

When Elmon handed them the bars. He could barely get a bar above the liquid's edge; they were so heavy out of the liquid.

Finally, he climbed out of the chest himself.

He stood there naked.

Dry as bone.

Not a drop of liquid on him.

Elcrull stared at him in stunned silence, walking slowly around him as he dressed.

Behind him, the liquid that had splashed out of the chest was gone.

She looked back inside.

The chest was now empty.

The liquid appeared to be gone.

Everything had disappeared.

She turned toward Elmon, eyes wide with fury and relief.

"Don't you ever do that again!" she shouted.

"Do you hear me?!"

"I nearly died when you jumped in!"

Elmon leaned back slightly as Elcrull waved a claw at him, scolding him furiously.

When she finally finished, he raised his hands in surrender.

"I was perfectly fine," he said calmly. *"Trust me."*

She glared at him for a long moment.

Then Elmon knelt beside the objects they had pulled from the chest.

He examined the keys and placed them in his personal ledger bag on his hip.

He touched the metal bars. Mythril and Quinline.

He picked up the book.

Every page was dry.

He opened the front cover.

The first pages were blank.

His excitement faded.

He flipped through them slowly.

Ten pages.

Fifteen.

Twenty.

Still blank.

Elmon sighed in frustration.

Then he turned another page.

He froze.

There, carefully drawn across the parchment, was an illustration of a staff.

At the base was a ring shaped like a dragon's foot — five talons gripping a circular frame, with a spike extending from its center.

Above it ran a shaft of silvery metal.

Further up was a casing ring and a mounting frame.

At the top rested a large crystal bound by three braided cords that spiraled around it, ending in a ring just below the crystal's tip.

Elmon's mind ignited.

"Perdina," he whispered.

He began turning the pages rapidly.

The next pages contained notes.

Diagrams containing failure notes and runic letters.

Corrections to formulas, time tables, and charts he was not familiar with.

Problems with structural supports. Various theories and failures.

Mount failures.

Crystal resonance calculations. MANA resistance notations, displacement definitions, and formulas.

Manufacturing attempts by various individuals.

Scaffolding designs for lattice formulas.

Vats of Carisa Soul Fluid.

Elmon looked up at the Archivist.

"What is that?"

The Archivist leaned closer to the page.

"A compound," he said slowly, *"that can be mixed in various formulas."*

“It is an ethereal fluid.”

“It appears they used it to keep unwanted creatures away from the items.”

Elmon nodded thoughtfully.

“Anything without living resonance is simply... displaced.”

“Blanked away.”

He turned to the final page that contained writing.

Elmon read slowly.

“We have moved it to the Crystal Sarcophagus. The Curator waits.”

Elmon stared at the page.

The room fell very quiet.

“These must be the remnants,” Elmon said quietly. *“What they did not need.”*

His heart pounded in his chest.

“They didn’t move it to the dwarves after all,” he murmured. *“It came here.”*

He began studying the documents more carefully.

It was difficult work.

Elmon could read seven languages, but the writing in the tome was scattered across several tongues.

Dwarven.

Ildrol.

Hobbit shorthand phrases.

Elvish inspection remarks.

There were others, some foreign to him.

None of the languages dominated the text. The notes were a patchwork—whoever worked on Perdina had simply written in whatever language they preferred at the moment.

It was a collaborative effort.

A hodgepodge of annotations, corrections, and recorded failures.

Elmon handed the tome to the Archivist.

Then he examined the metal bars they had recovered.

“Three gold bars,” he said.

“Four bars of Quinline... I think.”

“Five bars of mythril.”

He paused.

“This is a kingdom’s worth of resources.”

He lifted another piece.

“One bar of Elven steel.”

Then, three carefully cut blocks of crystal. *“Asnien crystal ore.”*

Elmon slowly lowered the materials back to the table.

“Who should this belong to?” he asked quietly.

“It did not come from the Catar.”

The Archivist looked at him curiously.

“What is this Perdina?”

Elmon did not answer.

His face went blank as his mind raced.

His heart thundered in his chest—excitement almost as intense as the night of his Meeala.

Thoughts collided in his mind as he began linking concepts and discoveries from the notes.

He flipped through the tome rapidly. Rehearsing primary points and doctrines.

- ❖ Diagrams.
- ❖ Measurements.
- ❖ Mount failures.
- ❖ Crystal resonance issues.
- ❖ Structural scaffolding.
- ❖ Failure archive. It needed studying.

He suddenly felt dizzy.

His breathing became shallow.

Across the room Elcrull staggered.

She clutched her head and dropped to the floor.

Then she vomited.

Elmon barely noticed.

A phrase echoed through his memory—words once spoken by *Ishan of the Night Eyes*.

“Perdina’s path awaits in the hallowed archives of the Forgotten Thread.”

Suddenly Elcrull’s pain crashed through the Meeala bond.

Her head throbbed violently.

It felt as though something inside her mind was going to explode.

Elmon froze.

Misery washed over him as well.

He looked around the room and finally saw her.

Elcrull sat beside a small pool of vomit, holding her head.

A thin trickle of blood ran from her nose.

Understanding struck him.

The bond.

His emotions—his intellectual frenzy—had overwhelmed her.

He rushed to her side and lifted her gently.

Turning back to the Archivist, he spoke quickly.

“Move those items to our chamber.”

“I need to conduct Echo studies on them.”

“I need to see their lattice structure and any discernible resonance.”

“You record everything you can determine.”

Then he carried Elcrull up the stairs.

In their chamber, he laid her carefully on the bed.

He brought water.

He cleaned her face and wiped away the blood.

Elcrull slowly looked up at him.

“My insides felt like our Meeala session,” she said weakly.

“You must control yourself, Elmon.”

“That hurt me.”

Elmon’s eyes filled with tears.

“I need to put a barrier between us,” he said quietly. *“So I don’t hurt you again.”*

Elcrull reached up and ran her paw slowly down his chest.

“Don’t lock me out,” she said softly.

The Next Day

A crisp morning of the month of wraith.

Elcull, laid next to Elmon. Talking about their coming Cub.

A nock came to the door.

Noz, *“Are you coming down to open the last chest?”*

Elmon, *“Yes I will be there in a minute.”*

He got dressed and pulled Elcrull from bed.

They cuddled for a minute and then headed down to the Room.

They opened the last chest.

It was filled with fragments.

Chips of metal.

Broken pieces.

Failed forging attempts, shafts and other shapes.

The remnants of experiments that had not succeeded.

Everything would need to be sorted and separated.

Elmon studied the pile thoughtfully.

“These pieces should be smelted,” he said. *“Refined into proper bars and given to the Citadel.”*

He stepped back, drew a sigil in the air, and opened a portal.

Without hesitation, he stepped through.

Scath – The Dwarven Forge

Elmon emerged inside the familiar dwarven workshop in Scath.

Hngen nearly jumped out of his boots.

“Don’t do that!” the dwarf barked. “You’ll scare a man to death.”

“What do you need, lad?”

Elmon folded his arms calmly.

“I have a chest containing several hundred pounds of mixed metals.”

“I need them separated and smelted into bars.”

Hngen scratched his beard.

“I’ll need to gather a crew. Might take a day or two.”

He squinted at Elmon.

“Got any idea what metals we’re talkin’ about?”

Elmon nodded.

“Gold. Silver. Quinline. Mythril. Elven steel. Bronze.”

“There could be others.”

The dwarf froze.

His mouth slowly fell open.

“You... what?”

Elmon repeated calmly.

“Mythril. Quinline. Elven steel.”

Hngen stared at him in disbelief.

“You lost yer mind, lad?”

“Hundreds of pounds of that?”

“That could take weeks to sort and smelt properly.”

Elmon shrugged.

“You can keep half of it.”

Hngen blinked.

“What?”

Elmon began counting on his fingers.

“I have already. Three gold bars.”

“Four bars of Quinline... I think.”

“Five bars of mythril.”

“One bar of Elven steel.”

“And three carefully cut blocks of crystal.”

He paused.

“Asnien crystal ore.”

“A foot square each.”

The dwarf staggered backward and smacked his head against the wall.

“Lad, ya have any idea what you have . . . there?” his eyes almost glossed over just thinking of what Elmon revealed.

Elmon nodded calmly.

“Yes.”

“I’ll be back in three days.”

“You’ll need to build a forge and furnace large enough to handle the work.”

“The blacksmith in Raven Claw is useless.”

Another portal opened behind him.

Elmon stepped through.

And vanished.

Chapter †: Family Union

There was now only one week left before the ceremony.

Elmon felt increasingly panicked.

Elcrull simply watched him.

Through the Meeala bond she could feel everything within him—

his excitement

his fear

his confusion

his growing sense that events were moving beyond his control.

She only smiled.

It had been nearly eight weeks since the Meeala event.

About sixty-four days.

Elcrull was carrying the cub heavily now.

She was showing clearly.

Shadow Dancer checked on her almost every day.

Noz examined her every couple of days as well.

Elmon had already opened a portal and brought the dwarf and his crew through.

They were now hard at work.

They had not realized at first that the chest containing the metal fragments was more than a couple of feet deep. Maybe five or six feet.

The dwarves formed piles of the recovered metals. Sorted them.

Then they smelted them.

Then separated the refined metals again.

Then smelted more.

This process had continued for four days.

Hngen kept a careful tally of everything.

Nothing was allowed to go missing.

It was, quite literally, a mountain of precious metal.

Elmon tried his best to keep his mind occupied.

Most of the citadel rooms had been restored and prepared.

Many of the visiting families brought their own tents.

Others stayed in the inns of Raven Claw.

Raven Claw itself was a medium-sized city of nearly half a million people.

Now it had gained almost two thousand more, all arriving for the ceremony.

It appeared that more than three hundred people had come from Breach alone to witness the ceremony.

Yowl had arrived as well, along with the heads of several Catar clans.

Elmon practiced meditation daily, trying to keep his mind steady.

He had recently learned that the wizard school had declared a holiday for the week, allowing any students or instructors who wished to attend the ceremony.

Ortis was there.

So were Justine and his wife Gorith, along with her bows.

Despite everything, Elmon was deeply stressed.

He had no authority over the ceremony.

No position in the planning.

No control over the events unfolding around him.

Nothing he said seemed to matter.

One afternoon Ortis approached him quietly.

Without warning, he cast a subtle spell that drained the emotional tension building inside Elmon.

The effect was immediate.

Elmon nearly fell asleep.

The relief was overwhelming.

Through the Meeala bond, Elcrull felt something suddenly change.

Elmon's mind went quiet.

Too quiet.

She hurried to the place where he often sat beneath a large tree—the place where he had begun his struggle to manage the growing stress.

There she found him lying peacefully in the grass.

Ortis sat nearby on a stool, speaking with him.

When Elcrull approached, Ortis stood and bowed slightly.

“Ah,” he said calmly. “*The bonding is done, I see.*”

Ortis sifted her echo for a moment.

Then he looked down at Elmon with a faint smile.

“*You do everything on a grand scale, Elmon.*”

Elcrull paused, studying the words carefully.

Then suddenly—

She felt it.

A kick.

Then another.

Something struck in a different direction.

Her eyes widened.

She looked at Elmon and quickly sat beside him, taking his hand and placing it against her stomach.

Inside, chaos reigned.

Elmon's eyes widened.

He looked at Ortis.

Then back at Elcrull.

"How many?"

Ortis smiled slightly.

"Two," he said.

Then after a pause—*"Possibly three."*

Elmon slowly fell backward onto the grass.

"Three cubs..."

He stared up at the sky.

"How fast do they grow up?"

Elcrull smiled faintly, though worry crept into her eyes.

"Two to three years," she said.

Then she added teasingly,

"But with you... who knows? You tend to do things on a grand scale."

She laughed softly.

Elmon struggled to keep control of himself.

"I wish my mother were here," he whispered.

Tomorrow would be the ceremony.

It had now been *seventy-three days* since the Meeala.

Elcrull was close to delivery.

Suddenly, Elmon stood.

Frustration surged through him.

His body began to change.

His height increased nearly a foot.

Grey fur spread across his arms and shoulders.

Claws emerged from his fingers.

His face twisted into something almost monstrous.

Ortis immediately stepped back.

Then just as suddenly, Elmon collapsed.

Elcrull rolled away as he fell.

Moments later, the change faded.

Elmon returned to himself.

Ortis carefully sifted Elmon's echo.

What he saw made his eyes widen.

The lattice structure within Elmon's echo was shifting.

Ortis looked at Elcrull.

"He is part human," he said slowly.

“Do you know his human lineage?”

“Yes,” Elcrull replied. “*He is Cion.*”

Ortis’ eyes widened.

“*He has the trait.*”

Elcrull nodded.

“*I have witnessed partial transformations three times before.*”

“*They all occurred during our Meeala.*”

Elmon slowly regained consciousness, breathing heavily.

Elcrull leaned over him.

“*Ayy... calm down, Elmon.*”

Ortis smirked slightly and helped Elmon sit upright.

Then he looked at them both.

“*What exactly is this Meeala you speak of?*”

Elcrull answered.

“*It is rare, even among Catar.*”

“*Almost unheard of with other races.*”

“*Our spirits joined.*”

“*Our echoes became one.*”

Ortis studied them both carefully.

He sifted their echoes again.

There were minor differences.

But otherwise—

They looked nearly identical.

“*You feel what he feels?*” Ortis asked.

Elcrull nodded.

“*What he smells... tastes... most of his emotions... his mental fatigue... sensual things.*”

“Yes. Most of the time. Especially when he wants me to.”

“*Some days it takes all my strength to control myself when he forgets what he is doing.*”

Ortis studied her carefully.

“*I need to help him,*” he said quietly.

“*If I don’t... he could truly harm your mind.*”

He looked at Elmon again.

“*I have witnessed the evolution of his mind.*”

“*And I am not connected to him the way you are.*”

He paused. “*It was something that troubled me.*”

“*I believe it could be terrifying.*”

“*One thing that has fascinated Elmon,*” Elcrull added.

“*When he slides into the Veil, and I am yards away... sometimes I slide with him.*”

Ortis looked at her with growing curiosity.

"We have done this four times," she continued.

"The first two times were... unstable."

"But the last two times we entered and exited the Veil within yards of each other."

"I understand fairly well the basics of the Veil," she said thoughtfully.

"There have also been times when he slid into it, and I did not."

Elmon spoke quietly.

"It happens when I consciously sense you... Or when I desire you."

Ortis folded his arms and thought for a moment.

"Let us try something."

"Elcrull, I want you to internally desire Elmon to be with you. However, you do that."

Elmon nodded and slid into the Veil.

Elcrull vanished with him.

Ortis blinked.

"Come out now."

Elmon stepped out of the Veil.

Elcrull emerged beside him.

Ortis rubbed his chin.

"Now we try the opposite."

"Elmon, clear your mind. Do not think about Elcrull at all."

"Slide into the Veil."

Elmon focused and entered the Veil.

Elcrull remained where she stood.

Ortis immediately began sifting their echoes.

He frowned.

Elcrull's echo lattice shifted—almost spinning slightly.

But it did not align with Elmon's.

Ortis exhaled slowly.

"I believe I understand something."

"When one of you emotionally desires the other, a form of alignment occurs."

"The echoes synchronize."

"When that happens, you move together."

He looked between them.

"In simple terms... your echoes walk the same path."

"We will experiment further later."

Elmon's thoughts drifted to the corridor with the polished stone visible in the Veil.

"Ortis," he asked quietly, *"is it possible to build structures in the Veil that correspond with our world?"*

Ortis nodded slightly.

“Remember, Elmon—the Veil is real only as far as we perceive and comprehend it.”

“So... theoretically, yes.”

Elmon suddenly felt exhausted.

His mind was drained.

He stood and lifted Elcrull gently to her feet.

“Good day, Ortis.”

“Tomorrow is the day I fear,” Elmon admitted quietly.

“And I do not know why.”

Elcrull reached for him instinctively.

When he placed his arm around her, she felt warmth and safety.

The connection calmed them both.

Later that afternoon, Elcrull visited her Esharatia.

When she entered, Miky was nearly vibrating with excitement.

“I have something for you to try on!”

She produced a beautiful ceremonial outfit.

It had long flowing sleeves and a high collar that opened slightly in the front.

Golden embroidery ran along the collar and sleeve edges, forming intricate patterns of family crests.

A hood draped over the back, designed to partially hide the wearer’s face.

Elcrull tried it on.

It was beautiful.

But slightly tight around her midsection.

Miky frowned.

“I’ll fix that tonight.”

“It will be perfect by morning.”

Elcrull studied herself quietly. *“I like it,”* she admitted.

Miky smiled proudly. *“It’s Elven in design.”*

Elcrull hesitated. *“Will the family... see us wrongly?”*

Miky shook her head.

“When the invitations were sent, we explained that you were already married.”

“We also included a portrait of you, which is a common Elven custom.”

Elcrull felt her tension ease.

She smiled faintly.

She walked back to their room.

Elmon was sitting on the edge of the bed when she entered.

She walked toward him as alluringly as she could, despite the weight she carried now.

Elmon smiled softly and lifted her onto his lap.

He nuzzled her gently, rubbing his nose behind her ear.

She purred.

Turning toward him, she leaned in and kissed him deeply.

Part of her still wanted him with all the passion she had always carried for him—but at this stage of her bearing, she could not.

Elmon felt warmth flow through his body.

His eyes darkened slightly, shifting toward a deeper shade of green.

He laid her down gently on the bed and cuddled beside her.

His fingers traced slowly along the curves of her body.

She purred again, low and content.

They spoke quietly about the first moments their eyes had met at the school.

How she had burned for him even then.

“Christin always made me angry,” Elcrull admitted. *“She ran your life, like she owned you.”*

Elmon chuckled.

“I always wondered what Christin would look like with a tail.”

Elcrull laughed. *“Probably a beast.”*

Elmon’s hand rested on her stomach.

He felt the chaos inside her womb—the movement of the cubs.

She winced slightly as something shifted inside her.

She looked deeply into Elmon’s eyes.

“I honestly don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t come for me,” she said quietly.

“I was ready to give up.”

“You seemed lost to me.”

Elmon glanced toward the table for a moment, calculating.

“When the cubs are born,” he said thoughtfully, *“we will get you the finest warblade equipment that can be made.”*

“I spoke with the dwarf.”

“There are already more than twenty ounces of mythril smelted.”

“Two pounds of Quinline.”

“Eight pounds of Elven steel.”

“And nearly four pounds of gold.”

He nodded toward the worktable.

“Not counting what is still over there on the table.”

“I asked him to cut the mythril into half-ounce cubes.”

“We will give them to the heads of each family.”

“I’m also having him flake two bars of Quinline for honored guests.”

He paused.

“He believes there will still be enough metal left to forge four or five bars of each metal.”

“We can give those to the Catar citadel to help restore and equip your people.”

Elcrull’s eyes widened, though another wave of pain made her wince again.

She looked at Elmon carefully.

“I know I claimed you,” she said softly.

“But... do you want me?”

Elmon smiled.

“Before I even knew I wanted you, I fantasized about you.”

He chuckled quietly.

“Every time I noticed another woman, I wondered what she would look like with a tail.”

“When you walked, my heart would start beating faster with every twitch of your tail.”

“When our eyes met... I wondered what your purr would feel like on my chest.”

“When you cornered that first-year student that day...”

He laughed softly.

“Part of me wished I had been him.”

“When you leaned close and asked, ‘Why not you?’ and looked straight into my soul...”

“I smelled your fur.”

“It was heavenly.”

“I wanted to pull you into my arms right then.”

“But I forced myself to stay focused.”

“Your smile melts my heart.”

“Your walk is mesmerizing.”

“Your breath intoxicates me.”

He brushed her cheek gently.

“Your fur is life to me.”

“My sensual jaguar.”

She nudged him gently onto his back.

Then she climbed over him, straddling him carefully and letting her rounded stomach rest lightly against his chest.

She leaned down and began nuzzling him.

For a long time, she simply kissed him, licked his cheek and jaw, and rested against him.

There was no urgency now—only warmth and closeness.

Eventually, she fell asleep atop him.

Elmon smiled softly and pulled the blanket over them both.

A loud hammering bang on the door woke them.

Elmon’s eyes opened slowly.

Sunlight streamed through the window.

Another Wraith month morning had arrived.

He gently lifted Elcrull and helped her to her feet.
Then he pulled on his trousers and went to the door.
When he opened it—his father stood there.
Elmon froze for a moment.
Then a wide smile broke across his face.
He had never been so glad to see him.
Behind him, Elcrull staggered forward, pulling her cover around herself.
Elmon's father looked at them both and laughed warmly.
"Well," he said.
"You certainly know how to choose them."
He nodded toward Elcrull.
"She is as beautiful as they come."
Elcrull blushed.

The Shrine of Whiteheart

Miky had spent two weeks preparing the altar site.
South of Raven Claw, in a quiet oak grove, stood the ruins of the Shrine of Whiteheart.
Something about the place had spoken to her immediately.
She knew it was the right place for the ceremony.

The grove was peaceful and shaded by ancient oaks.

Most of the shrine had long since collapsed.

The fallen stone had been cleared away, leaving the remaining back wall, which stretched nearly forty feet wide.

Carved into the stone wall was a massive sword pointing downward.

The blade alone was nearly twelve feet long.

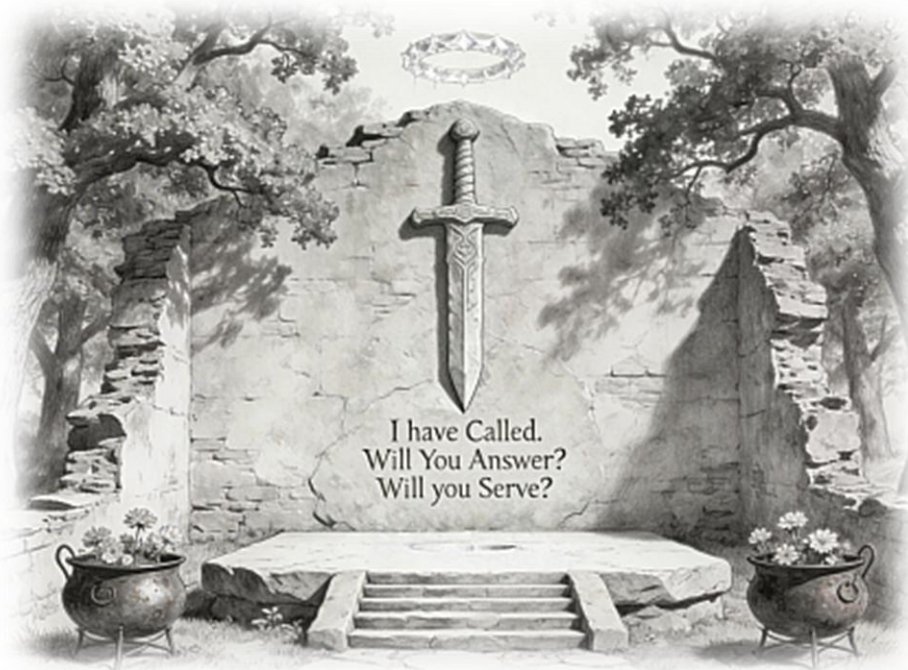
Below the sword were

carved words worn slightly by time:

I have called. Will you answer? Will you serve?

Two feet beneath the sword stood a broad stone platform nearly twenty feet across and two feet high.

Stone steps led up to it from the front.



Above the sword's hilt hovered the broken remains of a crystal halo, fragments still floating above the stone.

Several pieces had fallen long ago and now rested upon the stone platform.

Behind the wall, the oak trees spread their branches, shading the altar beneath a living canopy.

On either side of the stairs stood two massive iron cauldrons.

Flowers now grew from them.

Miky had arranged benches for nearly five hundred people.

Shade tents were raised behind them so others could stand or spread blankets across the grass.

The shrine rested in a shallow hollow of the grove.

The surrounding ground rose gently, forming natural hills where people could stand and easily look down on the ceremony.

From almost anywhere in the grove, the altar could be seen.

Miky was so excited.

The Ceremony

Miky arrived at Elcrull's room and immediately shooed Elmon away.

"You can't see her again until the ceremony," she declared firmly.

Elmon sighed but obeyed.

Meanwhile, Elmon's father had brought the family crest garments for the ceremony.

He was visibly proud.

His son had accomplished much—and now he would bring a wife into the family.

And children as well.

Not cubs.

Children.

He helped Elmon dress in the formal attire.

Elmon had never worn anything like it before.

The garments were stiff, layered, and carefully structured.

Elmon shifted uncomfortably.

"I feel like a man wrapped in armor made of cloth," he complained.

His father laughed.

"It is only for one day."

"We will return it to the family wardrobe after the ceremony."

Elmon reached into a small pouch and handed his father two Mythril cubes and a small sack of Quinline flakes.

His father studied them carefully.

His eyes widened.

"Are these...?"

“Yes,” Elmon said calmly. “Mythril and Quinline.”

“We had a little left over from the smelting.”

“We’re giving some to the heads of the families.”

His father shook his head slowly.

“Accomplished... and wealthy.”

Suddenly, there was a loud banging at the door.

Elmon’s father opened it.

Standing there was a dwarf dressed in formal Mythril attire.

The armor gleamed like silver fire.

“Is the lad hiding here?” the dwarf demanded.

Nacrious looked at him calmly.

“Who?”

“Elmon! The Echo Binder and bearer of the blade, Virelyndra Black Dragon!”

Nacrious slowly turned toward his son.

“I believe a dwarf is here to see you.”

Hngen brushed past Nacrious and strode into the room.

“I’ve got four Catar guards watching the gifts,” he said.

“I also forged a few pairs of Elven-steel clawed gauntlets for them as payment.”

He struck the wall with his fist.

“Good stone in this house.”

The impact left a small dent.

Nacrious raised an eyebrow.

“How did you meet my son?”

Hngen looked up at him.

“Oh! Father to the blade bearer.”

“He brought me a dagger older than SINN itself to inspect and register.”

“It contains the essence of the Firstborn of the Blacks and the Land Barons.”

The dwarf shook his head.

“I was so honored I nearly forgot my own work.”

“Not common one can touch History of the beginning.”

He walked toward Elmon and looked him over.

“Now look at ya,” Hngen said, grinning. *“All polished up like a noble.”*

“Something to be shined at.”

He opened a sack and withdrew a scabbard.

“I had my boys make this for you.”

“So the blade would feel at home.”

He handed it to Elmon.

A voice whispered in Elmon’s mind.

'Black Beral hide. Mythril rivets. Black woven dragon hair. From my own brood.'

Hngen suddenly staggered backward and bowed deeply.

"I am honored, Virelyndra, by your approval."

Nacrious looked between them in confusion.

A voice again spoke within Elmon's mind.

'He does not need to know of me formally.'

Elmon answered his father's questioning expression.

"I have a dragon guide from the Faey who speaks to me."

"I believe Master Hngen heard the voice as well."

His father opened his mouth to ask more.

Elmon raised a hand.

"I need to finish putting on this restrictive garment," he said.

"And get to the ceremony."

The dwarf looked at Nacrious, then at Elmon, and shrugged.

"Your cousin, Miky?" he said. *"She bound me to a duty for you, lad."*

"I am your Bonder and Gofyer."

He turned to Nacrious.

"Did I say that right?"

Nacrious was laughing.

"No, Master Dwarf, you did not."

"It is pronounced—"

He carefully sounded it out.

"Goo-Ala Guardar."

"GōArGurdr."

Nacrious laughed again.

Hngen nodded.

"Yes. What he said."

Then he looked back at Nacrious.

"What does that make me, then?"

"You are his protector," Nacrious explained. *"His guide. His watchman."*

"And if necessary... his death bearer."

The dwarf's eyes widened with satisfaction.

"Well now," he said proudly.

"That's something to tell the family."

"I was an Elven Goagr."

Nacrious and Elmon both laughed.

"Yes," Elmon said. *"You are my Goagr."*

Elmon snickered.

Elmon finished dressing and presented himself.

The dwarf turned immediately and strode to the door.

He swung it open and peered down the hallway.

“Clear.”

Elmon laughed.

Hngen marched ahead, checking every corner before moving forward.

Nacrious simply shook his head and smiled.

They entered the courtyard.

The Catar guards straightened immediately, watching the dwarf and Elmon with new interest.

Hngen led them to a wagon that had been freshly cleaned, painted, and decorated for the ceremony.

He helped Elmon into the wagon.

Elmon helped the dwarf climb in.

Nacrious simply hopped up behind them.

They rode down the hill, leaving the main road and following a newly cut wagon trail.

When they crested the next hill—

The sight before them was breathtaking.

Miky had transformed the ruined shrine.

The entire grove buzzed with guests.

People covered the hillsides.

At the top of the rise stood hundreds of Catar, singing and celebrating loudly.

Among the crowd were nobles from the House of Erailia.

At their forefront stood Elroola, arms crossed and smiling.

The moment she saw Elmon, she straightened and began walking toward him.

But before she could reach him—The dwarf raised a hand and stopped her.

His stare was hard. *“What’s your business here?”*

“I am the GǫřĜur.”

Elroola burst into laughter. *“I can see that, Master Dwarf.”*

“It is properly pronounced GǫAřĜurdr.”

“Yes, that’s me,” Hngen replied proudly.

Still scanning the crowd.

“I would like a word with the Echo Binder,” Elroola said.

“We were friends at school.”

“Ah,” the dwarf said. He looked at Elmon, who nodded.

He stepped aside slightly, still watching the crowd.

Elroola bowed slightly.

“Master Elmon, may I have a word?”

Elmon turned toward her stiffly.

She glanced at the dwarf and smirked.

“Well now,” she said.

“Aren’t you something to be shined at.”

Hngen raised two fingers in approval.

“Christin is here,” Elroola said quietly.

“She married the noble son Elira Furimor.”

“That is why she never contacted you again.”

“Binding of Houses.”

She glanced toward Nacrious with a charming smile.

Elmon exhaled slowly in relief.

Elroola raised a closed hand toward the crowd.

Christin rose and approached, her husband by her side.

The dwarf stepped in front of them instantly.

Blocking the path.

Elroola leaned over and whispered something into his ear.

Hngen looked at Elmon and winked.

Then he stepped aside.

Still scanning the crowd.

Christin approached.

She bowed, lifting her hand.

Elmon hesitated before taking it and kissing the large ring she wore.

She stepped forward and gave him a formal embrace.

Her husband nodded permission.

She whispered softly. *“You will always be my love.”*

Elmon said nothing.

He simply gestured toward the tent where Elcrull waited. *“You should meet my bond.”*

He escorted her to the tent.

She entered.

Elmon returned to his place.

He greeted Lord Furimor with the best bow he could manage inside his stiff ceremonial garments.

Furimor returned the bow.

Then placed a hand on Elmon’s shoulder.

A voice spoke in Elmon’s mind.

He is searching your thoughts. Close your mind.

Elmon shut his thoughts instantly.

Furimor paused.

Then stepped back.

“I know you loved her once,” Furimor said.

Elmon shook his head.

“She loved me,” he corrected gently.

“She adored the ground I stood on.”

“I only appreciated her affection.”

“She was kind, caring, and generous.”

He gestured politely toward Furimor.

“You have gained a beauty, a formidable mage, and a mind of clarity and foresight, my lord.”

Elmon placed a hand over his own heart.

“And I have gained my heart’s desire.”

“A battle-worn warblade.”

“And the mother of my cubs.”

Elroola suddenly placed a hand on Nacrious’s forearm.

He subtly tucked two fingers into the sash at his waist.

She withdrew her hand and instead clasped his arm above the elbow.

Her smile was... suggestive.

Elmon blinked.

What was that about? he wondered.

Suddenly, voices rose from Elcrull’s tent.

Elmon smiled knowingly.

Christin emerged moments later, flushed red and clearly embarrassed.

She walked past Elmon with a strained smile.

Taking Lord Furimor’s arm, she pulled him away while muttering angrily.

Furimor looked back at Elmon.

Grinning.

Almost approvingly.

A single trumpet blast echoed across the grove. Not an Elven orchestra.

All conversation stopped.

Miky stood upon the altar of the Shrine of Whiteheart in a magnificent ceremonial gown.

She began to speak, but her voice barely carried across the crowd.

Emor stepped forward beside her.

He closed his eyes and murmured quietly while moving his hands through the air.

A moment later—Miky’s voice boomed across the entire grove.

She cleared her throat and addressed the gathered thousands.

Miky stepped forward upon the altar.

“We are gathered here today to celebrate the—”

She paused, glancing toward Elmon with a teasing smile.

“—bonding of my beloved cousin to his heart’s desire.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd.

She continued by recalling their school days together—stories of mischief, study, and the first moments when Elmon and Elcrull had crossed paths.

Then her voice grew more formal.

“Elcrull is a blooded Warblade, carrying the honor of the severing of the Slavers’ Halls in the Furnace.”

She gestured toward the gathering.

“To speak further, I present Elroola.”

Elroola stepped forward, as poised and expressive as ever.

She began with Elmon.

“Elmon Silverwood,” she announced, *“prime wizard of his day—a true Magus of exceptional character.”*

She described the moment when he completed the Engis Ulrick Test in only ten minutes, as recorded by Chancellor Emuroil Fethermor, who now sat smiling quietly at the far edge of the shrine.

She spoke of Break's awakening.

At the mention of Break, the Catar gathered upon the hillside erupted into a thunderous cheer that lasted nearly two minutes.

She described the survival of the Sage Crypt battles.

“And remember,” she said with a smile, *“he had not even completed his second year of mastery.”*

She bowed toward him.

Elmon’s face turned completely red.

The crowd laughed warmly.

Elroola raised her hands.

“Now, with great honor, may I present the reason for our gathering?”

She gestured toward Elmon.

“Echo Binder. Amoquindo Lord. Keeper of the Second Sage Hall.”

Before Elmon could react, Hngen, the dwarf, grabbed his pant leg and tugged him toward the platform.

Elmon stumbled forward.

Hngen followed him like a vigilant sentinel.

Elmon bowed to the crowd and took his seat.

Elroola resumed.

“It is not often that I have the pleasure of introducing two hearts of such character and accomplishment.”

She then began speaking of Elcrull.

“For those who do not yet know her—she is far more than she appears.”

“In her culture she is rare in many ways.”

“She holds sway over Elmon.”

She smiled.

“And that is no small feat.”

The crowd laughed again.

“She was the one who discovered the Slavers’ Hall in the Furnace.”

“With the aid of her bond.”

“They captured a master slaver—child killer, known as Bender of the Halder Clan.”

She gestured toward a chair beside the platform.

The man sat there with his head lowered.

At that moment, Elmon rose.

Elroola paused, confused by Elmon.

He stepped down from the platform and walked toward Bender.

The crowd watched in confusion.

Elmon placed a hand on the man’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

He noticed the man’s legs were chained to a post.

Elmon closed his eyes briefly.

He opened his mind and shredded the lattice binding the chains.

They crumbled instantly into dust.

The guards behind the man stepped forward, hands on their swords.

Elmon turned toward them with a low growl.

His fangs showed slightly.

They stepped back.

Elmon exhaled slowly, remembering where he stood.

He lifted Bender’s chin.

“You are no longer Black Bender.”

“You are now the hands of the Echo Binder of the Silverwoods.”

Elmon reached into the man’s mind.

He found the memory he had planted there during the man’s punishment.

He stripped it away—leaving only one fragment.

The image of Bender’s daughter raising her hand and crying:

“Daddy.”

The man gasped.

For the first time, he was free of the horrors of what his hands had done.

Tears streamed down his face.

“You are a man true to your word,” Bender said.

“I will always serve you.”

The crowd was completely silent.

They had no idea what had just happened.

Elroola stood stunned for a moment.

Then she simply clapped.

The crowd joined her uncertainly.

Elmon wiped tears from his face and returned to the platform.

His father watched every step, wondering what had truly occurred.

Elroola cleared her throat.

“Without further ado…”

“Elcrull Alora, Mister of the Red Tongues.”

Elcrull emerged from the tent.

The crowd fell silent.

She walked slowly toward the platform, wincing occasionally.

Some in the crowd smiled warmly.

Others gasped at how far along she was with the child.

Then suddenly—A large group near the center of the gathering stood and cheered.

Their friends from school.

Justine and Gorith raised a banner reading:

‘Beloved of the Catar.’

The Catar gathered on the hillside erupted into joyful shouting.

Streamers flew through the air.

Elmon rose and helped Elcrull carefully into her chair.

After the celebration quieted, Elroola raised her hands again.

“Now I present Yowl, an Elna Sha Catar.”

“He slept for three Tringleams, awaiting the birth of Elmon so that he might be awakened.”

Yowl stepped forward.

He bowed to Elroola and moved to the center of the altar.

Then he signaled for Elmon and Elcrull to stand before him.

They faced one another.

Yowl spoke in Catar:

“Mura oliana Shamoya. El Ole Mon bonder Yesu El Oo crull. Tooth mia Shoolaa ofaya luvaya.”

Elroola translated for the gathering.

“Breath of life from their stars joining. Elmon is bound in oath to Elcrull.”

“At the severing of teeth, this bond be broken, they stand by love everlasting.”

The Catar upon the hillside answered with a low, rumbling chorus—the sound of a thousand voices acknowledging the ancient words.

Yowl stepped forward.

He took Elmon's hand and Elcrull's hand and clasped them together.

With a thin metal cord, he wrapped their joined hands and tied them fast.

Then he took a long silver cord.

He placed one end gently between Elcrull's teeth.

Slowly he walked the cord around Elmon's body.

When he returned behind Elcrull, he removed the end from her mouth and laced the cords together behind her back.

He began pulling the cord tight.

The rope drew them closer.

Closer.

Until Elmon and Elcrull stood nose to nose, their breath mingling.

She took a deep breath and rubbed noses.

"Hold me."

Elmon was puzzled.

Yowl tied the cord into a seven-spiral braid knot.

Then he stepped back and released himself from the binding.

Elmon had not expected this part of the ritual.

He flushed slightly with embarrassment, standing so close to her before the gathered thousands.

Behind them, Yowl turned toward the great carved sword in the shrine wall and bowed deeply.

The crowd watched in complete silence.

Few had ever witnessed a Catar-Elven bonding ceremony.

The joining of hands was Elven tradition.

The binding of bodies was Catar.

Yowl spoke again in Catar.

"Ow Whiteheart Agria of hevo. Bond thos in Csarto oo Star."

Elroola translated for the gathered crowd.

"O Great Whiteheart, Creator of all heavens—Bind these in heart and soul."

Yowl fell forward onto his face and remained there in worship.

Above the sword, the crystal halo suddenly ignited.

Light burst across the grove in a spray of rainbow colors.

At that moment, the silver cords tightened violently.

Elmon and Elcrull were pulled even closer.

For an instant, it felt as though the ropes would cut them in two.

The pain was real.

Elcrull collapsed unconscious.

Elmon caught her and held her upright.
Her head fell back.
Her mouth hung open.
She looked lifeless—except for the faint rise and fall of her breath.
The ropes continued tightening.
Every heartbeat, another braided knot exploded in a puff of smoke.
The cords pulled tighter still.
Elmon began to fear.
He tried to remain calm.
He imagined the pain Elcrull must be feeling.
Elroola stepped forward suddenly.
She reached out and touched the cords.
A violent arc of energy surged through her body.
She cried out and collapsed to the ground.
Elmon’s father raced to her side. Checked her breathing.
Lifting her and moving her off the stage.
The Catar upon the hillside raised their hands toward the heavens and began singing.
Their voices rose in a powerful ancient chant.
The final knot burst into smoke.
The silver cords ignited in a brilliant flash of flame—and vanished.
Elmon caught Elcrull as the binding released them.
He held her tightly against his chest.
She stirred slowly.
She whispered into his ear, her voice barely a breath.
“Your skin is my life.”
The Catar phrase would have said *fur*—but Elcrull had changed it for him.
Elmon closed his eyes and held her tighter.
The Catar erupted into frenzy—cheering, chanting, praising the moment.
When the last of the silver rope vanished, the crowd released a collective sound.
“Aww.”
The sigh rolled through the grove almost perfectly in unison.
Yowl rose and lifted his hands.
The crowd instantly fell silent.
He turned toward Elmon and smiled.
“You bite her ear.”
Elmon blinked.
His brow rose in confusion.
Yowl tilted his head and gave him a stern look.

Elmon leaned toward Elcrull's ear and bit down gently.

Yowl leaned closer and whispered:

"You must draw blood."

Elmon stared at him in disbelief.

Then he reluctantly bit a little harder.

He tasted her blood.

Elcrull shivered and stuck out her tongue slightly.

Elmon released his bite.

From the hillside, the Catar proclaimed in Elvish:

"In the mingling of blood, they are one."

Elcrull raised her hands and pulled Elmon closer.

She bit his lip and licked the blood away.

Then she looked deeply into his eyes.

"You are mine, Echo Binder."

She kissed him.

The crowd erupted in applause and cheering.

Chapter †: The House Recognized

For the rest of the day, they wandered among the crowds.

They greeted guests.

Accepted gifts.

Shared embraces.

Four Catar followed them everywhere, carrying a small ceremonial chest.

Whenever Elmon and Elcrull met a *Head of Family*, Elmon would reach into the chest and withdraw a cube of Mythril.

They bowed respectfully and presented it.

When they met close friends or honored guests, Elcrull would take out a small pouch containing flakes of Quinline and offer them.

The gifts were received with awe.

A murmur of disbelief rippled through the gathering.

Mythril and Quinline were treasures few had ever held in their hands.

When the last of the gifts had been distributed, the Catar carried the empty chest away.

Soon, they returned with a smaller chest and placed it beside the platform.

Elmon and Elcrull stepped forward and raised their hands.

The crowd slowly quieted.

Miky stepped forward again.

“I ask that the elders of the Knor Kiret Citadel come to the platform.”

The Citadel investment

Five figures approached.

Among them were Noz and Shadow Dancer.

Miky gestured toward the chest beside the platform.

“To you we give these tokens of our love and appreciation.”

The guards opened the chest and slid it forward.

Inside lay four one-pound bars of gold, one bar of Mythril, and one bar of Quinline.

Shadow Dancer gasped.

Then collapsed to the ground.

Noz quickly caught her before she struck the stone.

When she recovered enough to stand, Noz turned toward Elmon and Elcrull.

He bowed deeply.

“*You honor the Citadel beyond measure.*”

He then instructed the guards.

“*Take the chest to the new vault.*”

The guards lifted the chest and carried it away.

As the sun began to fade and the light softened across the grove, the crowds slowly dispersed.

Songs and laughter continued throughout the town.

Elmon eventually found himself carrying Elcrull up the hill toward their quarters.

She leaned close and whispered into his ear.

"We are staying in the large silver tent."

"The one with smoke rising from the chimney."

Six guards stood watch around the tent as they approached.

They entered and pulled the curtains closed behind them.

Inside waited a small feast.

Food.

Sweets.

Wine.

In the center of the tent stood a large bed filled with lamb's wool and feathers, nearly two feet thick.

Compared to the straw mattresses they were used to, it felt like floating on clouds.

Outside, the town roared deep into the night with celebration.

Elmon spent most of the night rubbing Elcrull's back and hips.

She moaned and purred for hours.

Just as her uncle had ordered.

Time had taken its toll on them both.

The next day, when Elmon was up and moving about, packing things, Shadow Dancer arrived to check on Elcrull.

Elmon stopped Dancer as she walked towards Elcrull.

"May I talk to you for a moment?"

Dancers stood holding their hands together in front of her, looking at Elmon.

"I received a ledger definition from a heraldry researcher regarding your family line," Elmon said.

"There are some inconsistencies."

He tapped the chair beside him.

"Please, join me."

Shadow Dancer's face tightened slightly with concern. She moved and sat down.

"It states that you had five cubs."

Elmon paused, recalling the names.

"If memory serves me correctly, they were Black Claw, Harmuia, Elcrull, Sunara, and Duana."

"The document mentioned Duana died during the Second Ildrol Uprising."

He looked at her carefully.

“Why did you tell me you had only three?”

Shadow Dancer lowered her head and remained silent for a moment, gathering her thoughts.

Finally, she spoke, her voice strained.

“I only have two cubs who still want me.”

Anger crept into her tone as she sniffled.

“Black Claw went to the Atherya Monastery.”

“He has never spoken to me since.”

“Harmuia... is a Pearly Eye.”

She cleared her throat, uncomfortable.

“She is a bed-warmer for hire.”

Elcrull gasped.

“I have...,” she swallowed, glancing at Elmon, *“...Elayor for hire?”*

Shadow Dancer shifted uneasily, fidgeting and looking around the room, refusing to meet their eyes.

Elmon looked puzzled, caught off guard by the tension.

After a moment, he spoke carefully.

“Let me offer something you may not know.”

“Black Claw joined an elite monastery of Manija. World-renowned in fact.”

“He likely does not speak to you because he cannot leave unless assigned a duty that takes him beyond its walls.”

Elmon paused.

“As for Harmuia... did you ever consider the meaning of the name you gave her?”

Shadow Dancer frowned slightly.

“I believe it means something like...”

“Lives with Love.”

Dancer barked out suddenly.

“She cuddled with everyone who would allow her into their lap.”

She stood abruptly, clearly ready to dash out of the tent.

Elcrull stepped in front of her mother, blocking the exit.

“Why did you not tell us?”

Dancer’s voice hardened.

“We do not shame our Clan... or our SOC.”

Elcrull bit her lip.

For a moment, she wanted nothing more than to strike her mother.

She stomped the floor, pacing back and forth, glaring at her and pointing while muttering under her breath.

Elmon realized it was time to calm the storm.

This was not what he intended at all. He had only wanted the truth so he could understand.

He stepped forward and grabbed Elcrull gently by the shoulders, rocking her back and forth with a playful grin.

She glared at him and growled.

Through their bond, Elmon felt a surge of hate... and hunger.

“My flirtatious jaguar wants something she cannot have.”

She paused.

Slowly, she tilted her head and looked up at him.

Her teeth showed for a moment as if she might take a pound of flesh from him.

Then the snarl softened into a smile.

She turned back toward her mother.

“Where is she, mother?”

Elcrull planted herself in front of Shadow Dancer, hands on her hips, crouched slightly like a hunting cat.

Her eyes burned with intensity.

Shadow Dancer broke into tears and fled from the tent.

Elmon grabbed Elcrull by the sides of her head and pulled her nose to nose with him.

“She did what she thought was best for her family.”

“Your culture shames some of the things your sister is doing.”

He relaxed his grip on her head and hung his head a little.

“Your brother...” he paused, *“...I may yet find a way to mend that.”*

Elmon’s voice hardened.

“Hate kills. It destroys.”

He took a breath and continued.

“My aunt caused more grief than anyone alive for all the years I knew her.”

“She saw my mother as trash—reckless, a heretic—something proper humans would never accept.”

“Every day we were around her, my mother would smile and treat her kindly, as if none of it mattered.”

“It gained her nothing.”

He tightened his grip slightly.

“But you—”

“You treated your mother as though she intended these things to happen.”

Elmon released her abruptly and stormed out of the tent.

Outside he stopped, bent forward, hands resting on his knees as he drew in a long breath.

The early evening spring air bit at Elmon’s face as he strode out of the tent.

A moment later, Elcrull followed.

Tears streaked her cheeks as she came up behind him and wrapped her arms around him, leaning against his back.

"I have a brother... and an older sister," she said quietly.

"She never let us know."

She wiped her eyes.

"There may have been something we could have done."

Through their bond, Elmon felt the weight of her grief.

After a moment, she spoke again.

"I understand now why my father was so distant when I was two."

Elmon took her hand.

Together they trotted up the hill searching for Shadow Dancer.

They checked her room first.

She was not there.

They went to the healing hall next.

Noz had not seen her.

Elmon explained what had happened.

Noz listened carefully.

Elcrull broke into tears again and collapsed against her uncle's shoulder.

After a few minutes, she gathered herself.

Noz gently sat her down and wiped her tears.

"When your sister was four," he said slowly, *"she was discovered in the bed of the Clan's war master."*

"His wife knew... and did little about it. She had her own plaything."

"Word spread quickly."

"Some in the clan blamed Shadow Dancer, saying she was trying to manipulate the Elders to gain favor."

Noz pressed his forehead gently against Elcrull's.

"The family was embarrassed."

"She disowned her daughter to protect the clan from shame."

"She left Winter's Camp and came here at my request."

"To begin again with you and your sister."

Noz paused before adding one more thing.

"Your father is still alive."

"He still lives and works at Winter's Camp as a scout."

Elcrull felt as if someone had pulled the ground out from beneath her.

Her breath caught.

Through tears, she whispered, *"He went out on a patrol and never came back."*

"Mother cried for days."

"We thought he had been killed."

"She would never speak of it."

She sat there, tears streaming down her face, staring at the ceiling as she struggled to breathe, as if life itself were choking her.

Finally, she rose and hugged her uncle.

Then she grabbed Elmon's hand.

"I know where she is."

She pulled him along as they hurried through the town.

They passed the burned-out building, crossed the bridge over the Samder River, and there they found her.

Shadow Dancer sat alone on the bridge, bent forward and weeping.

The sound carried the weight of deep pain, like someone mortally wounded.

Elmon gently pushed Elcrull back and motioned for her to wait.

He walked forward and sat beside Dancer.

He placed an arm around her shoulders.

She leaned into him and began to cry like a child.

"Yorali... my mate left us," she sobbed.

"He disowned us."

"We had nothing."

"Nozdaek called us here... told us we could start again."

She sniffled and wiped her face.

Elmon raised his hand and signaled Elcrull to come forward.

Elcrull slowly approached and sat beside her mother.

"I am sorry, Mother," she said quietly.

"I did not understand your heart or the events."

They sat there holding her, watching the sky as the sun set.

The sky was like fire reflecting Dancer's Sorrow.

They eventually all stood up and walked Shadow Dancer back to her room.

Elmon and Elcrull went back to the tent.

They packed something they would not be needing and were used in the ceremony.

Elmon left Elcrull in the tent.

He told her he needed to check something and would return shortly.

He walked up the hill and crossed the grounds toward the back of the main building.

Sliding along the cliff face behind the structure, he eventually reached the square black box.

Here, the earth had been dug away from the cliff, forming a small alcove hidden from view above.

The cube sat partly embedded in the ground.

At each corner of the top surface were four narrow slots.

Elmon crouched and examined them.

Eventually he conjured a small Echo light.

In the pale glow, he could see that the inside of each slot was carved with tiny ridges and valleys along one side.

He reached to the satchel at his hip and removed his personal ledger pouch.

Inside were the keys recovered from the hidden archive.

Each was thin.

One side smooth.

The other was etched with matching ridges and valleys.

Carefully, he tested them one by one.

Eventually, he found four that fit perfectly into the corner slots.

There were two left.

Behind the alcove lay a large flat stone.

Elmon lifted it and placed it carefully across the keys.

He pressed down.

The stone sank slightly.

A distinct click echoed from inside the mechanism.

He removed the rock.

A thin gap had appeared between the lid and the base of the cube.

Elmon paused.

He examined the device carefully—checking for heat, echo lattice distortions, or any signs of a trap.

Everything appeared calm.

Slowly, he lifted the lid.

Inside rested a metal sphere, roughly eight inches in diameter.

Elmon reached toward it.

The sphere suddenly flashed with light.

He pulled his hand back.

The sphere floated three inches upward, shifting colors and brightness in slow pulses.

It reminded him instantly of his Echo Seed Vault back at the academy.

The shape and glow were almost identical to the vault Ortis had used to store the seeds.

Elmon remembered reading about it in one of Ortis's books.

To receive knowledge from an Echo Vault, one had to remain calm—certain of one's identity.

Otherwise, the torrent of echo memories could overwhelm the mind.

Elmon took a breath.

He believed he knew who he was.

He stilled his mind and entered meditation.

Holding his hands forward, he focused on accepting the vault.

Something touched his fingers.

He focused on the words Ishan had spoken the day the Catar awoke at Break.

Elmon grasped the sphere.

A storm of faces and memories rushed toward him.

He pushed through them—until suddenly he stood inside a single clear memory.

Four figures stood before him:

Two Catar.

A Hobbit.

And an AlèDün.

All four had their hands upon the sphere.

They looked directly at him.

“We will see you at sunrise on the Hill of Calling.”

“Cancel the Veil.”

The vision ended.

The sphere rested quietly in his hands, shifting gently through colors and light.

Elmon carefully removed it from the box, taking great care not to damage the mechanism.

Night had fallen.

He dared not attempt a Veil walk while holding the sphere.

He had no idea what the artifact might do.

Instead, he made his way cautiously back to the tent.

The guards simply nodded as he passed.

Inside, he found Shadow Dancer and Elcrull seated at a small table.

Several empty wine cups sat before them.

They were swaying slightly, burping occasionally, and appeared thoroughly inebriated.

Elcrull looked up and smiled.

“Well,” Elmon said, raising an eyebrow,

“I see you are both feeling better.”

Elcrull rose and staggered toward Elmon, her eyes fixed on the sphere in his hands.

Elmon lifted it high above his head.

He looked down at her and smiled.

“My loving jaguar.”

Through their bond he projected calm and a sense of awe for the object.

Elcrull hesitated and stepped back.

“Do you remember Ortis’s class at the university?” Elmon said quietly. *“The lecture on Echo Seeds?”*

“This is a Vault.”

“He warned everyone—if you do not know how to communicate with a Vault, do not touch it.”

He shook his head gently.

“You are in no shape to touch this.”

“It might kill you... or scramble who you are.”

Elmon walked to one of the chests in the room, placed the sphere carefully inside, and locked the lid.

He then helped Shadow Dancer onto one of the couches set along the wall and covered her with a blanket.

Next, he lifted Elcrull.

She projected a playful friskiness through their bond.

Elmon resisted the temptation.

She was nearly ready to deliver the cubs.

He laid her gently on the bed and covered her with a blanket.

As he dimmed the lanterns and blew out the candles around the room, Elcrull swiped playfully at him with her claws.

Finally, Elmon slipped into bed beside her.

He rubbed her belly softly.

Elcrull purred.

Within minutes, she was asleep, curled against him.

Chapter †: The Birth of Legacy

The morning sun rose with Elmon and Elcrull fast asleep.

It had been a couple of days since the ceremony had finished.

They slept through most of those days, waking only occasionally for food and drink before drifting back into exhaustion.

Late one afternoon, Elmon sat beside her, gently rubbing her belly.

Suddenly, Elcrull screamed.

The sound cut through the room like a blade.

Three guards rushed inside.

One took a single look and immediately ran for help.

Within minutes, Noz and Shadow Dancer burst into the room.

Elcrull had entered Ebloba.

Labor.

Elmon froze.

He had no idea what to do.

He stepped back and let the elders work.

Shadow Dancer glanced toward him.

"Elmon!"

He stepped forward nervously.

A moment later, she placed a tiny cub into his trembling hands.

"Take him to the basin," she said calmly.

"Wash him in the warm water."

"And chew the cord."

Elmon stared at her.

"What?"

"You must chew the cord near his tail," she explained.

"It awakens him to the world."

"Your firstborn."

Elmon carefully lowered the small cub into the warm basin.

The cub squirmed weakly in his hands.

He lifted the cord gently and pulled it straight.

The cub wiggled.

It anchored just below the tail above his butt.

Elmon cringed a little.

He closed his eyes.

Then he bit down.

It felt like biting into a rope.

He chewed and pulled.

The cub howled and cried.

Finally, the cord snapped.

The cub's cry filled the room.

Elmon's mouth was filled with a bitter fluid he spat on the floor.

Grimacing at the flavor he couldn't get out of his mouth.

Elmon stared down at the tiny life in his hands, stunned.

He looked around, unsure what to do with the cub.

Noz pointed toward a pile of blankets.

Elmon carefully wrapped the cub and set him aside.

"ELMON!"

Shadow Dancer called again.

Elmon spat on the ground and hurried back.

She grabbed his hands and placed them firmly at the birth canal.

"Stay," she commanded.

Elcrull was sobbing and twisting in pain.

Noz held her shoulders down to keep her steady.

Shadow Dancer reached inside Elcrull and twisted her hand slightly.

Then she withdrew it and moved up to Elcrull's chest.

She pressed down hard on her stomach.

Elcrull screamed.

Elmon stood frozen, unable to understand what was happening.

Then he saw it.

A tiny head was emerging.

"Push!" Shadow Dancer commanded.

Elcrull screamed again and pushed with everything she had.

Shadow Dancer pressed down again.

Suddenly the cub slid free into Elmon's waiting hands.

The tiny body convulsed.

Elmon lifted the child in terror.

"Blow gently into his nose," Noz said quickly.

"Tilt his head back."

Elmon obeyed.

He barely noticed the blood covering his hands and arms—some even smeared across his face.

The cub struggled to breathe.

Elmon blew again.

And again.

Suddenly the cub spat something from his mouth—Straight into Elmon's.

Elmon gagged.

The cub gurgled.

Elmon quickly handed the cub to Noz and turned away, vomiting onto the ground.

Noz flipped the cub upside down and slipped a finger into the child's mouth, scraping out thick mucus.

The cub coughed violently.

Then cried.

A strong, angry cry.

Noz handed the cub back to Elmon.

"You know what to do."

Elmon washed the cub carefully.

Then he looked for the cord.

"There is no cord," Elmon said in confusion.

Noz hurried over and examined the cub.

Indeed.

There was no cord.

Elmon looked down at the tiny child in his hands.

This cub was much smaller than the first.

Her face looked more Elvish than Catar.

Her ears were long and sharply pointed.

Her nose was shorter.

Her tail was longer than her brothers'.

She opened her eyes.

For an instant, Elmon felt something touch his mind.

A faint grasping sensation.

He wrapped her gently in a blanket and stepped back toward Elcrull.

Elcrull was thrashing now.

Kicking.

Gasping for breath.

"What is wrong?" Elmon shouted.

Shadow Dancer answered immediately.

"There is a stillborn lodged."

Before anyone could stop him, Elmon thrust his hand into Elcrull's womb.

He was no longer thinking.

Only feeling.

Then—Something moved.

It kicked.

Elmon grabbed hold of the tiny legs and began pulling slowly.

A rush of fluid and mucus slid out first.

Then the cub.

The tiny body slipped into his hands, weakly squirming.

It coughed.

Noz snatched the child at once.

He flipped the cub upside down and cleared the mucus from its throat with his finger.

The cub sputtered.

Still struggling.

Noz leaned forward and sucked at the cub's nose and mouth.

The cub spat out a thick clot of mucus.

Noz turned and spat it onto the floor.

For a moment, the cub was silent.

Then it inhaled sharply—

And began breathing.

Noz pointed toward the basin.

Elmon understood.

He carried the cub to the warm water and gently washed her clean.

Then he wrapped the tiny body in a blanket.

Elmon paused.

He searched for the cord.

There was none.

"No cord again," Elmon said quietly.

He hurried back to Noz and lifted the cub's tail slightly.

Noz leaned closer, studying her.

Then he nodded.

"Female."

Elcrull had settled down somewhat now, breathing deeply.

Shadow Dancer knelt beside her, helping her maintain a steady rhythm.

Suddenly Elcrull began coughing.

Then gagging.

Noz moved instantly.

He slid a thin instrument down her throat, twisted it carefully, and pulled hard.

A small lump of flesh came free.

Elcrull immediately relaxed, breathing freely again, holding her chest.

Noz carried the mass to the basin and washed it clean.

Then he carefully peeled it open.

Inside was a crystal, about the size of a large marble.

Noz pocketed it for the moment.

Lovers Revenge

At that moment, Elcrull reached for Elmon in his mind.

A deep, instinctive longing stirred inside him.

He moved to her side without thinking.

Elcrull lifted her hand.

Her claws slid out.

Before Elmon could react, she raked them down his chest.

The claws tore through his skin.

Elmon screamed and stumbled backward as a deep gash opened across his chest.

Blood poured down his torso.

Noz washed his hands quickly, grabbed his satchel, and rushed to Elmon immediately.

He dropped to his side as he collapsed to the floor.

Working fast, Noz cleaned the wound and began stitching the torn flesh closed.

Then he shoved a small vial into Elmon's hand.

"Drink."

Elmon swallowed the potion.

Darkness swallowed him.

When Elmon opened his eyes again, he was lying on the bed.

His chest burned and throbbed.

Beside him lay Elcrull.

She was gently licking the wound she had made.

Elcrull reached out and brushed her arm across Elmon's face.

He turned his head slightly.

Beside them on the bed, the three cubs twitched and wiggled.

Elcrull carefully moved to the other side of the bed.

One by one, she lifted the cubs and fed them from herself.

She looked peaceful.

Content nursing the cubs.

A short time later, Noz entered to check on Elmon.

"How are you feeling, father?" he asked.

Elmon groaned.

"Like I just lost a fight with a very angry cat."

Noz chuckled.

He examined the stitching on Elmon's chest, pressing lightly along the wound to check for infection.

Elmon screamed.

Elmon glared at him.

He pointed weakly at his chest.

“Do they always rip you open like this?”

Noz opened his own shirt.

A long scar ran from his left shoulder all the way down to his hip.

“At least once,” he said calmly.

Elmon stared.

“Why?”

Noz thought about it for a moment.

“I believe they want you to feel what they feel.”

Elcrull looked over at them and smiled.

“No,” she said softly.

“A part of us simply wants to feel your warmth on our hands.”

“To taste your blood.”

“It makes us feel closer.”

Noz shook his head with a small laugh and wandered out of the room.

She continued, *“Maybe to give a little revenge for what you put us through. Maybe.”*

A couple of hours later, Shadow Dancer arrived.

She placed a hand on Elmon’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“You gave me three cubs.”

“None died.”

A Star is Born

She paused.

“If you had not been there... one might have died.”

“And possibly Elcrull as well.”

Elmon and Elcrull both raised their brows in surprise.

Shadow Dancer continued.

“You had an unusual birth event, daughter.”

“You birthed a crystal as well.”

She looked toward the cubs.

“One of your children will be exceptional.”

The room grew quiet

”What does a crystal . . . have to do . . . with . . . a cub?”

“It is not like she was holding it or something.” Elmon declared.

Elmon turned his gaze toward the cub whose face looked more Elvish than Catar.

“She will be,” he said quietly.

Shadow Dancer tilted her head.

“How do you know?”

Elmon looked down at the tiny cub.

“She touched my mind.”

He gently placed his finger on her tiny nose.

Warmth flowed into him.

For a moment Elmon forgot to breathe.

Shadow Dancer suddenly smacked him hard on the back.

He gasped and inhaled sharply.

Elmon arched in pain.

“What was that for?”

“You stopped breathing when you touched her,” Shadow Dancer said calmly.

She looked at Elcrull thoughtfully.

“She may be a Tom Cat.”

“Like you are.”

She looked at Elmon, *“In every event when a Catar spits out a star, as we call it, a crystal, the cub has had an unusual ability.”*

Elmon raised a brow, “Hmmm.” He looked at Elcrull. “

“Really?”

Elcrull shrugged and looked down at Vacus squirming.

She squealed, yanking her hand back.

Vacus extended his claws and tore her arm a little. “You vicious jaguar.” Laughing.

They moved back up to the citadel and fashioned small cribs from broken furniture found in the unused rooms.

Elmon was amazed at how quickly the cubs were learning to move.

Within days, they were running across the floor on all fours and wobbling upright when curious.

The cubs wandered around the room exploring everything they could reach.

Elcrull watched them with deep satisfaction.

She turned to Elmon.

“What do you want to name them?”

Elmon looked at her, surprised.

“They aren’t named yet?”

She shook her head.

“No. Among the Catar, we wait about a week, sometimes two.”

“We name them after their behavior... their spirit.”

She pointed toward one of the cubs wrestling with his sisters.

“Like our bua there.”

"He likes to roughhouse and taunt the guas."

"I would call him Vacus."

Elmon tilted his head.

"What does that mean?"

She reached gently into his mind with intent.

Elmon inhaled slowly as the meaning formed.

"Fire?"

She smiled and rolled onto his shoulder.

"Like the fire you light in me."

She playfully nibbled his nose.

"I would name him Ezmsweeew."

"Ezm means fearless. Sweeew means war-maker."

Elcrull considered it.

"We could call him Vacus Ezmsweeew Red Tongue - Silverwood."

Elmon thought about the name.

"We could shorten it to VES or VERS."

Elcrull burst out laughing.

Elmon frowned.

"What?"

"I will not call my son colorful or song."

Elmon thought for a moment.

"Hm. Just an idea, ... He could be . . . you know."

Elcrull pointed toward the smallest cub.

"And our little runt?"

Elmon watched her *closely*.

"She is thoughtful."

"And she can touch my mind."

"Ithful."

Elcrull leaned over and licked his nose.

"Silva," she said softly.

"For the same reason."

They looked at the tiny cub together.

"Silva Ithful Silverwood."

Elmon nodded.

"SIS for short?"

Elcrull smiled.

"Yes." Elcrull agreed.

She pointed toward the third cub who kept spinning and tumbling around the room.

“And what about the dancer there?”

Elmon looked into Elcrull’s eyes.

For a moment, his thoughts drifted toward her.

Elcrull felt the ripple of his desire through their bond.

Her body shivered slightly.

Elmon smiled.

“Tangela means dancer in Elvish.”

Elcrull’s breathing deepened.

She suddenly leaped onto him, grabbing at his trousers.

“They won’t come off,” she complained.

Elmon grinned.

“Is that uncomfortable?”

She rubbed against him and begged him to stop teasing her.

Finally, she leaned down and pressed a paw firmly against his chest.

Elmon stopped immediately, gasping at the pain from his still-healing wound.

Elcrull smiled mischievously.

“Tangela Silverwood.”

SIS was hungry, as was Tengela.

Elcrull nursed the two of them while Elmon played with Vacus.

Vacus was a little fire.

Elmon had to be careful. The cubs’ claws were already sharp.

He unusually was able to extend them and lock them out sometimes.

To protect himself, Elmon had small armor guards made for his arms and legs.

Even so, Vacus would sometimes climb Elmon like a tree, which was painful.

Eventually, Elmon decided it was easier simply to wear light leather around the house.

Over the next two years, with Elcrull’s help, Elmon learned much about Catar customs and language.

Vacus proved to be very particular about food.

He only demanded it when his mother was eating.

By the time the cubs were a year old, Vacus was already eating meat.

He had learned to lock his claws, or even lock individual claws at will.

Among the Catar, this ability is called Raig.

Those who master Raig often become Manija, the Special Guardians of Catar society.

SIS preferred fruits and plants.

She would eat some meat, but she clearly favored foods more common to Elven culture—something that amused Elmon greatly.

She also showed an unusual interest in Elven traditions, much like her father.

Tangela, however, was becoming quite the acrobat.

One afternoon, Elmon was teaching her a flying leap.

She misjudged the landing and sustained serious injuries.

Elmon grabbed her immediately and Veil-walked to Noz.

The examination revealed two broken ribs and a fractured foreclaw.

After splints and wraps were applied, Tangela stared at Elmon thoughtfully.

“Apa (Father) El Ole Mon,” she asked, “why can we walk through the world?”

Elmon did not understand the meaning of the question—Until she vanished one day.

Elmon’s heart stopped.

Elmon immediately slipped into the Veil.

There she was.

Standing quietly and looking around.

He picked her up and gently rubbed her nose.

“You must not do this when Apa is not nearby,” he told her.

“Elcrull does not know this yet.” He paused, “El Oo Crul eda own.”

Wiggleing her gently. “*You feel me walk?*”

“*We will have to teach her.*”

By the time the cubs were two years old, Elcrull spoke to them only in Ashar and Cattish Catar tongues.

Elmon spoke to them only in Alua and Elioma Elvish languages.

Between them, the cubs were growing up bilingual.

With Tangela’s help, Elmon began teaching Elcrull how to Veil-walk.

Tangela slipped in and out of the Veil effortlessly.

SIS, meanwhile, had begun speaking to her Apa in his mind—often without realizing she had not spoken the words aloud.

Many times, Elmon answered her without thinking.

Other times, he did not even notice, simply looking at her as though listening.

Elcrull would glance between them, puzzled.

To her, it appeared that Elmon was occasionally carrying on a conversation with himself—only now and then pausing to look toward SIS.

Tangela would pop out suddenly, often scaring Elcrull half to death.

It took Elcrull nearly seven months before she could slide into the Veil at all.

Even then, it was difficult for her.

After long, exhausting training sessions, Elmon would bring the cubs to Gana Dancer—their grandmother.

While she watched them, Elmon spent the time making sure Elcrull felt loved and cared for as his mate.

Elmon spent considerable time learning the rhythms of Catar life.

One of the most difficult things for him to understand at first was Elcrull’s heat cycle.

After careful observation, he determined it occurred three times a year.

One year, it happened four times, which Elmon jokingly attributed to Tangela's constant shadow-dancing antics and the chaos she seemed to bring with her.

During those times, certain activities were wisely kept off the table.

By the time the cubs reached four years of age, they were approaching adulthood by Catar standards.

Tangela was confirmed to be a Mrkay—a Shadow Dancer capable of walking the Veil.

Because of this, she would eventually need to be sent to the Elder Councils for formal training.

Tangela, had grown even taller than her brother, standing nearly five and a half feet at the same age.

Vacus faced a different path.

He would soon need to taste what it meant to become Manija, a spirit warrior of the Catar.

Whether he chose that path or not would ultimately be his decision.

Because the cubs were partly Elvish, they did not have to follow traditional Catar roles if they chose another path.

Vacus grew rapidly.

By the age of five, he stood nearly five feet tall, already broad-shouldered like his mother.

Elmon spent time teaching him how to read and trace echoes.

This ability was highly valued among the councils and trackers of the Catar.

Little Silva, being the runt, was only four feet tall at five years of age.

Silva often spent her days with her grand-uncle Emor, studying alchemy and basic spellcraft.

She proved to be a quick learner.

And she was becoming a beautiful Cat-Elf.

One afternoon, she asked Emor why she was different from everyone else.

Emor paused. He took her by the hand and led her to a chair.

“Well... that is a difficult question,” he said thoughtfully.

“When different families mingle, their cubs do as well.”

He tickled her gently.

She burst into laughter, popping a claw out instinctively and catching Emor's hand.

Emor's eyes widened for a moment, then he smiled.

“The best parts somehow find a way to show the world their beauty.”

He picked up a small vial from the worktable and held it up to the light.



“Think of it like a potion.”

“You choose the best ingredients you can find.”

“And when they blend together properly...”

“They create something stronger and more beautiful than any single piece alone.”

SIS tilted her head and smiled, thinking about herself.

“Why am I shorter than everyone?” she asked with a little pout.

Emor smiled warmly.

“Because,” he said slowly, *“beautiful gifts sometimes come in small packages.”*

SIS had proven quite adept at many spells and the basic foundations of magic.

After a moment, she looked up at him again, curiosity shining in her eyes.

“Why can I talk to Apa without using my mouth?”

Emor blinked, uncertain of her meaning.

“Without your mouth?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. *“I say things without words... and he hears them.”*

Emor leaned back slightly, realizing what she meant.

“You have telepathy,” he said thoughtfully. *“That is a rare gift. Use it wisely.”*

He studied her for a moment.

“Have you tried speaking to your Muay?”

SIS wrinkled her nose.

“No. I don’t have things to say to her.”

Emor chuckled softly.

“Well, you should try. It would make her very happy.”

SIS nodded slowly.

“I will try.”

Each Cub seemed so different than the others.

Tangela, however, had grown even taller than her brother, standing nearly five and a half feet at the same age.

Within another year, the cubs would be allowed to choose their independence.

They could either leave the citadel to explore the world or move into their own rooms within the fortress.

Either choice meant accepting the duties of the citadel.

Shadow Dancer had grown very old by this time.

She struggled more each year to care for the younger short-hairs.

Elmon was proud of his cubs.

Throughout their childhood, he spent many long hours studying the mysteries of the Veil.

Walking through it was one thing.

Understanding how it worked was something entirely different.

Why did travelers always appear on the same plane within the Veil?

How could someone step out over open air and look down upon cliffs that were solid in the waking world?

Could structures be built there?

Could paths be marked, partitions made, or trails carved into the Veil itself?

These questions fascinated Elmon.

From time to time, he traveled through his gate network to visit the many archives he had discovered over the years.

These journeys often lasted a day or two.

More often than not, Silva insisted on coming with him.

She was endlessly curious.

When Vacus was nearly six years old, he chose to leave the citadel and find his place in the world.

Elmon gave him one hundred platinum coins to begin his journey.

He watched his son walk away with pride.

Silva was already becoming a wizard in her own right.

She showed a strong affinity for elemental magic, studying eagerly whenever she could.

When Tangela left for the Elder Council's school of Shadow Dancers, Elmon also gave her one hundred platinum coins to start her path.

Silva received the same gift when it was time for her to travel.

For a time, Elcrull, Elmon, and Silva journeyed together across the lands seeking knowledge of the Veil.

Their travels took them to many forgotten libraries and hidden archives.

They even spent a season studying at Break, where Elmon had once awakened something that the world still did not fully understand.

After arriving home one afternoon, Elmon opened the locked chest and retrieved the Echo Vault he had placed there nearly six years earlier.

Elcrull had wanted to touch it for a long time.

Elmon spent several hours teaching her how to anchor her mind.

He tested her focus, thrusting waves of mental and emotional pressure against her concentration.

After enduring the assaults for hours, she was exhausted.

She dragged Elmon down beside her and fell asleep.

Later she lay quietly, stroking his brown hair and twisting it into strange little shapes.

"Why do you love me, Elmon?" she asked softly. *"You could have anyone."*

"Why is my fur life to you?"

Elmon stared upward for a moment, as if searching the sky for the answer.

"Because of your rhythm," he said at last, turning toward her.

"Something in you calls to me like nothing else."

"Your breath has a scent... it stirs my heart and my soul."

Elmon rolled over onto her. She wrapped her arms around him and they rubbed noses.

“And besides,” he added with a quiet smile, *“who could keep me as warm as you?”*

“Your fur is... alluring.”

“I love braiding your tresses and mane.”

“I love the way your hair bristles beneath my hand as I stroke your body.”

“Your quick and skillful play.”

“The way you tease me with your claws,” he said, winking.

“How you desire me.”

“Your stride... mesmerizing.”

“And the twitch of your tail—my heart keeps rhythm with it.”

Elmon had been teaching himself control.

It began almost as a game between them.

Elcrull would sit close to him, teasing him with slow movements and playful glances, testing his focus while he struggled to keep his mind steady.

He forced himself to breathe slowly, anchoring his thoughts the same way he did when working with the Echo Vault.

Minutes would pass while she smiled mischievously, enjoying the challenge.

He was improving.

But eventually the tension always broke.

When it did, Elmon would pull her close and lift her easily, her arms wrapped around his neck while laughter and breathless whispers filled the room. Their passion was fierce, wild, and full of the same energy that marked everything they did together.

Elcrull loved pushing him.

She loved seeing the moment his restraint failed.

And he loved the fire in her.

But sometimes that fire grew dangerous.

That day, something inside him changed.

The shift came suddenly.

Elmon’s body surged with the raw strength of the bear form that sometimes overtook him.

His frame expanded, muscles swelling with unnatural force.

In that state, his passion became something deeper—instinctive, overwhelming.

Elcrull gasped as the power of it overtook them both.

At first, she held on, laughing breathlessly as she always did.

But then pain flashed across her face.

Elmon froze.

Blood.

The sight of it shattered the haze of instinct.

He changed back instantly, horror replacing the wildness in his eyes.

“Elcrull—”

She was trembling.

Without another word Elmon gathered her carefully into his arms and stepped into the Veil.

They appeared moments later in the healing hall.

Noz looked up—and immediately understood something was wrong.

He stared at the blood, then back at Elmon.

“*She is not a training dummy,*” Noz said flatly.

Elmon’s voice was rough with guilt.

Elmon had never shown Noz his shape change.

He paused.

Something deep inside him stirred, rising like thunder in his chest.

A growl escaped his throat before he could stop it.

Then he transformed.

His body surged outward, bones shifting and muscles swelling until a towering bear-man stood where the elf had been. Nearly ten feet tall, his massive shoulders brushed the rafters of the chamber.

Noz swallowed hard and instinctively stepped back.

Only then did he fully realize just how immense Elmon was in this form.

In a deep growling voice, he said. “*I lost control.*”

Noz shook his head and returned to finish with Elcrull.

Noz’s mind pictured all kinds of possible scenarios involving Elmon in his shape shift.

Noz worked quickly, cleaning and stitching her wound while Elmon stood nearby like a statue, his claws clenched at his sides.

Elcrull whimpered softly but endured the treatment without complaint.

Eventually, Emon returned to his Elven form.

When Noz was finished, Elmon lifted her again and carried her back through the Veil.

He laid her gently on the bed.

For a long time, he sat beside her, quietly cleaning the room and washing away the evidence of what had happened.

Finally, he returned and gently touched her fur.

She flinched at first.

The sight of that nearly broke him.

“You must tell me when to stop,” he said quietly. “I never want to hurt you again.”

Elcrull turned toward him.

She took his hand, licked it softly placing it against her chest, causing him to lean in a little.

Then she raised a claw and pressed it into his shoulder—just enough to draw blood.

Elmon did not pull away.

He simply lay beside her, letting the pain settle between them.

“That,” she said quietly, *“will help you remember.”*

“Next time I will hurt You.”

The next day, Elmon lifted Elcrull and carried her to the table where the Echo Vault hovered.

“Anchor yourself,” he instructed gently. *“Hold to the essence of our oneness. Feel my love and search for me.”*

Now take the Vault. Focus on finding me.

She reached out and took the Vault into her hands.

Immediately, her mind flooded with memories—faces and lives she had never known.

Visions flashed past her like wind through leaves.

Then she found it.

A memory of Elmon watching her dance across the campus courtyard, teasing a new student.

She smiled.

Beneath the memory, she felt something deeper.

A longing. A hunger.

His desire for her.

Yet the memory showed him restraining that desire—anchoring himself instead to his duty to the school.

She looked at him while he carried her slowly up the hill, careful not to stumble.

At the summit, he slipped into the Veil.

The stone podium stood before them.

Elcrull placed the Vault upon the raised fingers.

Nothing happened.

“How does one negate a Veil?” Elmon wondered.

Then a quiet voice entered his mind.

Virelyndra.

It is not a Veil, the voice whispered. *It is a shadow of history that veils the column.*

Elmon stepped out of the Veil and searched again.

He traced the lattices and the lingering echoes.

Finally, he found something strange.

At first glance, it looked like any other lattice.

But the energy within it was wrong—constructed from something beyond the world itself.

He grasped it.

The structure shifted in his mind like cloth caught in the wind.

Focusing on its form, he saw it clearly.

It resembled a man's outline.

Carefully he grasped it and slid it away like pulling a tablecloth from a table.

It resisted at first.

Then it slipped free.

The covering fell away.

Sunlight struck the Vault.

A rainbow fracture of light burst across the air.

A shimmer formed.

Then a dozen ghostlike figures appeared.

At their front stood a small figure—a hobbit.

The same voice that had once spoken before.

“Perdina awaits your hand, Called One,” it said.

“We have sent it to the Watcher in the Hidden Veil.”

Both Elmon and Elcrull heard the voices.

Elmon and Elcrull stood on the hill overlooking the city.

When they turned back toward the streets below, Elmon paused.

Far below, in the very center of the city, something had changed.

What had once been a burned-out ruin—the shattered hub of the district—was no longer rubble.

The broken structure was shifting.

Stone folded and lifted as if guided by an unseen hand.

Before their eyes, the ruin reshaped itself into a short tower of black stone.

Both Elmon and Elcrull heard the voices as the transformation finished.

He set Elcrull gently upon the ground.

With a gesture, he opened a Gate.

Taking her hand, they stepped through.

They appeared ten feet from the tower.

The stone resembled the dark tower Elmon had once seen in Break.

He asked the onlookers to step back.

Slowly, he and Elcrull approached the structure.

There were no doors.

Elmon released her hand and slipped into the Veil.

But this time she did not follow. The crowd pulled away.

On the wall he saw a claw mark—six inches across.

He placed his hand within it.

The tower shimmered.

A section of the wall crumbled into dust, revealing a passage.

He stepped back from the Veil, took Elcrull's hand, and together they entered.

Inside, the air was cool and still.

There were no stairs.

In the center of the chamber stood a short podium with three sets of raised fingers.

Elmon opened a Gate to the hilltop, retrieved the Vault, and returned.

He placed it upon the fingers.

A beam of fractured light erupted upward.

Within the light stood a figure.

Ishan of the Night Eyes.

“Elmon,” the image said. “I greet you. As I foretold, mine would guide you.”

Elcrull stepped forward.

She reached out.

Her hand passed through the image.

Ishan spoke again.

“Lead him with your heart.”

“You are chosen as his heart and his soul.”

“For his ways are not yet clear to him.”

“He wrestles with his nature.”

“He was made for such a time.”

“Benevolent in peace. Fierce in knowledge beyond his years.”

“From Elven lore and the cries of war he will rise.”

“He will domesticate the silence of stone.”

“He will seek clarity within shadow.”

“And he will defy the evils of creation.”

“Wizardry renewed—no longer throne, but tool.”

“He has called.”

Ishan lifted his gaze toward the heavens.

“Will you answer?”

“Will you serve?”

“Choose this day whom you will serve.”

Elcrull frowned, clearly puzzled.

“Whom will I serve?” she asked quietly.

Elmon suddenly sank to his knees. He shook his head in frustration.

“Why must I serve?” he muttered.

Virelyndra’s voice answered softly within their minds.

“One only discovers truth through the one they serve.”

“Service is the path to understanding. A fellowship with the Eternal.”

“He made you for such a time as this.”

“In Him you will find a truer purpose, just as I have.”

Elmon bowed his head.

Tears welled in his eyes. "*I have answered,*" he said at last. "*Now I will serve.*"

Elcrull looked at him, then repeated quietly,

"*I will serve.*"

Chapter †: Glimmerfen

They searched for the archives and expanded their world.

Elmon and Elcrull traveled far with SIS tagging along, following rumors of forgotten libraries and hidden records. Along the way they befriended many people. Some became trusted allies, others remained little more than acquaintances.

Among those they met was Ezmerelda Ulrick, a Faey mistress who walked often among the Elves.

Through her and others, they learned to follow faint signs left in the world—ancient sigils, broken trails of magic, and at times the delicate threads that marked the Veil itself.

During one of their trials, Elcrull noticed something unusual.

The Veil before them was not dark with shadow.

It was dark with resistance.

Something within it did not wish to be followed.

Elcrull narrowed her eyes and pointed at the area.

‘Something does not want us there.’

She took Elmon’s and SIS’s hand.

Together, they stepped through.

They emerged in a pristine glade.

Crystal trees shimmered in the light, their branches chiming softly in the wind.

At the center of the clearing lay a great white dragon, resting beneath the glittering canopy.

The dragon slowly lifted its head.

Its ancient eyes were fixed almost entirely on Elmon.

The gaze alone felt powerful enough to split a man in half.

Elmon suddenly heard a sound.

Not music.

Not a voice.

A memory-song echoing forward through time.

The dragon inhaled deeply and rumbled in a low voice.

“Elmon Silverwood... you are known.”

“Celestials have spoken. Time has awakened. And memories have guided you through its currents.”

The dragon’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“It seems but a moment since I last saw you.”

“I have watched you since.”

These were not words of greeting.

They were words of recognition.

Elmon stood still.

A memory stirred.

He had seen this place before.

Long ago.

When he was still a student.

He slowly raised his hand and pointed toward the dragon as he stepped closer.

“Why...”

He paused.

“Why was I not in time yet?”

Elcrull shook her head.

“Like the dragon is going to listen to you.”

SIS looked from Elmon to the massive white dragon and then back again.

Her eyes widened.

“Apa... that is a dragon.”

“You are going to die!”

She screamed toward him.

“Apa, come back!”

The dragon gave a strange sound that was half snort, half laughter.

A crackle of lightning rolled through the air as it exhaled.

“You were early... far too early.”

Its voice rumbled across the crystal glade.

“You had not yet manifested an understanding of who you truly are.”

“You were not ready to leap veils, cross an axial veil, or comprehend veiling as a persistence through time.”

“That is why.”

The dragon lowered its great head slightly, studying them.

Its gaze settled on SIS.

“Your prodigy... I assume?”

He leaned closer, examining her carefully.

“Three-quarters Elven,” the dragon murmured.

“A dash of Catar... and a pinch of Anorlian.”

Elmon froze.

He slowly turned and looked back at his daughter.

“Anorlian?”

Then he looked up at the dragon again.

“They have been extinct since the First Sundering—according to the archives.”

The dragon snorted softly.

“You Elves believe everything you read?”

Elmon shrugged slightly.

“Me... or Elcrull?”

“Neither,” Daron crackled with amusement. *“Either outside influence... or someone is hiding something.”*

Elmon frowned, looking upward in thought.

“Nothing I have encountered has contradicted what was written.”

He paused.

Then something dawned on him.

Slowly, he looked around the chamber.

“Where... am I?”

Elmon looked around the clearing.

Several faeries hovered nearby, staring openly at him.

A rock that had been standing upright suddenly trotted away as if startled.

Elmon blinked.

A young girl stood nearby.

She looked vaguely Elvish, but her ears stretched nearly a foot long—perhaps longer.

She watched him with bright eyes full of gleeful mischief.

Near Elmon’s feet, several flowers began speaking all at once.

The sound was melodic and strangely pure—clean, if a sound could be clean.

The voices sent a shiver down his spine.

Then he heard something else.

Something moving quickly through the glade toward him.

The dragon lowered his voice slightly.

“This needs to be quick. Follow my lead.”

“My name is Daron Mowtooth.”

“I am... sanity in a world gone Faey.”

Before Elmon could respond, movement stirred at the edge of the glade.

Two enormous ogre-like creatures stepped out from the forest, clad in heavy armor.

Between them walked a tall, slender woman who looked almost Elvish.

Almost.

She wore a delicate crown and very little else.

Her long limbs moved with unsettling grace.

Daron and Elmon both turned to look at the newcomers.

Then they glanced back at each other.

Elcrull and SIS moved closer, hearing the approach.

Daron continued speaking smoothly, as though nothing unusual had happened.

“As I was saying, Elmon,” the dragon said in a casual tone, *“this is the Shimmering Vale of Glimmerfen, perched among the dew-laced Mian crystal trees.”*

“These are not the Eyared trees you are looking for.”

“They are in the next glade, just past the guardhouse tower.”

Daron gave Elmon a knowing look.

“It is good to see you again after all these years.”

Elcrull stepped forward and gave a graceful curtsy as the slender, nearly unclothed woman approached.

Elmon watched the crowned figure carefully.

“Is that her?” he asked quietly.

Daron nodded.

“Yes. Right on time, as usual.”

“This is Elder Myvalia—a noble, as you can plainly see from the crown.”

“And rash as a thunderstorm.”

“Resident of the guardhouse tower in the next glade.”

Daron cleared his throat, a faint crackle of static puffing from his nostrils.

“Queen Myvalia,” he said warmly, *“it is good to see you again.”*

“I would like you to meet an old friend.”

He gestured toward Elmon.

“This spry elf is Elmon Silverwood—wizard, echomancer, and veil-walker.”

“He is personally responsible for the awakening of Break.”

“And he has contributed several rather refined definitions to the mapping of the Cosmic Veil within the Mortal Realm.”

Daron then motioned toward Elcrull and SIS.

“His wife, whom I have just had the pleasure of meeting today...”

“She is quite the fox.” Looking back at them. *“I mean Charming and Beautiful.”*

“...and their daughter, Silva Ithlful Silverwood.”

Daron turned slightly toward Elmon.

“I said that right, did I?”

“Ithlful, is it?”

Elmon smiled.

“Yes.”

“And at times,” he added, glancing toward Silva, *“I think she understands more than I do.”*

Myvalia looked genuinely startled, her eyes moving quickly between Elmon and Daron.

“Why is he here?” she demanded.

“Now?”

“Why?”

“Answer me!”

Daron slowly rose to his full height and extended his great head toward her.

Static crackled softly along his teeth as he spoke.

“I do not answer to you... or to anyone who speaks with that breath.”

His voice deepened.

“You question me?”

“The Spirit of this Glade?”

“Warden of the Glimmerfen?”

“A Noble Eldee of the Faey?”

The dragon’s eyes narrowed.

“You step far beyond your authority, Myvalia.”

The glade fell suddenly still.

Myvalia stepped back.

Her image shifted subtly—her posture softened, and the glow of her crown dimmed.

“Noble Daron...” she said carefully.

“I was caught off guard.”

She hesitated.

“I acknowledge my rash assertion and the peril of my position.”

She lowered her head slightly.

“I ask your grief guidance.”

Elmon watched the storm pass in silence.

He walked over to a nearby stone and sat down, arms folded.

A faint smile touched his face.

Not one of triumph.

One of recognition.

Myvalia straightened and adjusted the apron of flowers and silver leaves draped at her waist.

Then she spoke again, her tone more measured.

“May I inquire as to these mortals’ purpose here with you?”

Daron slowly settled back into his resting position.

His breath crackled softly with static calm.

“You may,” he said.

“But it will not gain you anything.”

He winked at Elmon with one eye.

The other remained fixed on Myvalia.

A small Faey gesture of dual awareness.

Daron paused, allowing Myvalia a moment to breathe.

Then he spoke.

“He was merely tracing a Veil thread when he encountered a shaded Veil.”

“They stepped through to investigate.”

Daron tilted his head slightly.

“He is seeking the Staff of Perdina.”

Elmon raised an eyebrow, his gaze turning thoughtful.

“Yes,” he said calmly.

“I have been wandering for some time, searching for the path between veils and shadows that might lead to the Forgotten Thread.”

He studied Myvalia carefully.

“Did you perhaps hide it somewhere?”

Myvalia recoiled as if struck.

Indignation flared across her face.

“I know nothing of this thread you speak of!”

“How dare you accuse me of such a thing?”

She drew herself up proudly.

“I am, next to Daron, the oldest of the Faey here.”

“My brother serves as judge of the Moraden Council.”

“We vow in righteousness.”

“And we guard our duties as nobles should.”

SIS looked at her mother and then back at Myvalia.

“She is more pompous than the Old Sigil Guard in the floating city.”

Daron chuckled softly.

“So you have visited Hail Corion of the Avion.”

He glanced toward Elmon with quiet approval.

“You are schooling her well.”

Then he looked back at SIS.

“Good. I am glad you brought her along.”

“We need a little reality here from time to time.”

Elmon spoke calmly.

His eyes rested on Myvalia, but his voice carried the edge of truth.

“Nobility does not always lend itself to righteousness.”

“Where I come from, I often find the opposite.”

Myvalia huffed.

Her crown pulsed faintly with light.

“Mortals are power seekers.”

“Malevolent in heart.”

“You are beasts.”

Elmon did not flinch.

His voice remained steady.

Not angry.

Simply certain.

“Ferries, brownies, kindris, ya gean, and the Sidhe are not always friendly either.”

“Often mischievous.”

“Sometimes cruel.”

He folded his arms lightly.

“It is easy to declare those who do not fit our hearts as beasts... monsters... or vile.”

The glade grew still.

The flowers murmured softly, and even the crystal trees seemed to lean closer, as though witnessing a rare debate of heart and nature.

Myvalia’s crown dimmed slightly.

Her posture shifted—not in defeat, but in reconsideration.

Daron exhaled a slow breath of static, the air curling like threads of silver.

Elmon remained seated, arms crossed, his gaze steady.

Not defiant.

Simply open.

“Perhaps,” he said softly, *“we are all beasts.”*

“But some of us choose to remember.”

A single blossom near his foot unfurled, releasing a scent like old parchment and rain.

Daron chuckled, low and crackling.

“Well said, Threadwalker.”

“The glade approves.”

Myvalia straightened and regarded Elmon with a narrowed gaze.

For a moment, she glared.

Then something shifted behind her eyes.

She laughed.

“Yes,” she said slowly.

“We wear that same skin at times.”

“When we forget.”

Her voice carried no scorn now—only echo.

A truth admitted.

Not surrendered.

Elmon nodded, his smile deepening.

Not in victory.

But in understanding.

“Then let us remember together.”

Elcrull simply shook her head, watching the exchange with quiet disbelief.

“True Faey,” she muttered softly, *“in all their strange colors.”*

A nearby blossom hummed a single clear note.

Daron exhaled a small puff of static, clearly amused.

“Well then,” he rumbled.

“Shall we walk to the Keep?”

“The tea is waiting... and the beasts are getting restless.”

The Guard Keep of Glimmerfen

Refreshments and Revelation

Elmon and his family, still dusted with veil-thread and Faey pollen, accepted the invitation to the Guard Keep beyond the next glade.

Daron’s tone was casual, but the air around him rippled with quiet intent.

“Come,” the dragon rumbled. *“The Keep brews a fine essence tea.”*

“And you have earned a moment of stillness.”

Nestled among the dew-laced Mian crystal trees, the Keep hummed with quiet authority. Its pale stone walls were etched with ancient sigils—marks of beasts long bound by oath. Between them ran thin lines of echo-script, inscriptions that shimmered faintly and revealed their meaning only when truth was spoken aloud.

The place felt less like a fortress...

and more like a memory that had chosen to become stone.

Elmon and his family entered the Guard Keep—not as trespassers, nor as mere guests.

He was received as a Threadwalker.

The air shifted.

The Keep listened.

Behind him, two ogre-like creatures lumbered in, scratching their thick brows and muttering to one another in a language braided from metaphor and exaggeration.

Their speech came in bursts—colors, emotions, and half-formed ideas drifting around them like pollen they themselves could not quite grasp.

“Friendship,” one muttered thoughtfully, *“is a sword made of soup.”*

He paused, frowning.

“Or perhaps... a spoon made of silence.”

The other snorted.

“He walks beside a dragon,” it said, nodding toward Elmon.

“But he wears no scales.”

The creature tilted its head, puzzled.

“Curious.”

They were guardians, yes—but not interpreters.

Their understanding came through scent, rhythm, and beast-memory.

They felt the shift in the room.

They simply could not name it.

Elmon glanced back at them, half-smiling.

Not at their confusion—

but at the fact that they had followed.

Elcrull stepped beside him and snuggled close.

SIS spotted what appeared to be a pillow mushroom and immediately plopped down on it. The mushroom released a burst of soft pansol mist spores, spraying the room with a faintly glowing haze.

Elmon settled onto a mound of moss—soft, inviting, and quietly resilient. His posture relaxed, but his eyes continued tracing the rhythm of the room.

Elcrull slid easily into his lap.

She ran a finger slowly down the bridge of his nose, kissed it gently—then sneezed.

Myvalia whispered softly to the air.

A pale cloud formed beneath her feet, hovering just above the floor, perfumed with silverleaf and dew.

She sat with practiced grace, her crown subtly adjusting to the new height.

Daron lumbered in, searching for comfort.

He found a dense tangle of bramble stoth—thorned, tangled, and perfect.

With a satisfied grunt, he rolled into it.

The bramble rustled as he settled, and a cloud of golden pollen burst into the room.

The ogres sneezed.

Loud.

Echoing.

Almost musical.

Elmon coughed and waved the pollen away.

Elcrull leaned back, sticking out her tongue like someone who had just been thoroughly wowed.

Myvalia flicked her fingers and whispered a small glyph.

The pollen scattered away from her in a soft spiral.

“Daron,” she muttered,

“*Must you always bring the forest with you?*”

Daron grinned, static crackling faintly along the edges of his scales.

“*I bring what listens.*”

Three Kindris glided into the chamber—slender beings braided with living vines. Their translucent skin shimmered softly, and their eyes shone like pearls of morning dew.

Each carried a tray woven from living bark.

Upon them rested delicacies that shimmered, hummed, or gently levitated above the surface.

A Brownny followed close behind.

He was short, moss-bearded, and grumbling cheerfully. His tray was far less elegant—but far more aromatic. Roasted root clusters steamed beside honeyed thistle cakes, and a bubbling drink released a fragrance that smelled strangely of memory and moonlight.

The Kindris presented their trays with a bow that rippled like water.

One of them spoke, its voice whispering like wind through reeds.

“For the Threadwalker and his companions—gathered in glade and Keep.”

The Brownly snorted and set his tray down with a solid thump.

“Eat before the words get too heavy,” he muttered. *“Faey talk makes the stomach forget.”*

Daron chuckled, the air around him snapping faintly with static.

Myvalia raised a delicate brow but accepted a floating petal tart, examining it before taking a careful bite.

Elmon studied a shimmering fruit that pulsed softly with its own light.

The ogres sniffed cautiously before beginning a slow, puzzled nibbling. Between bites, they muttered strange metaphors to one another.

“Sour star,” one said thoughtfully.

“No,” replied the other, chewing slowly. *“Sweet thunder.”*

As the chamber settled, the conversation drifted naturally toward the subject of Faey belief.

Elmon spoke first, reflecting on what he had observed during his travels—how Faey creatures seemed bound not only to place, but to memory, oath, and perception.

Daron listened with amused interest before rumbling his own view.

“Elves,” he said with a grin, *“have long insisted they are the self-ordained higher form of men.”*

His eyes sparked with quiet humor.

“Most of them believe it too.”

The Staff of Perdina

A Mortal Creation of Mythic Memory

The Keep hummed with quiet tension, softened only by floating petal tarts and shimmering fruits drifting lazily above the trays.

The ogres continued nibbling thoughtfully.

“Does ordained taste sweet... or craggy?” one muttered.

The other flinched.

“No! Sweet would be wrong. It must be fern-baked muskmule.”

Myvalia turned her gaze upon them.

One look was enough.

The ogres froze, bowed awkwardly, and began hurriedly shoveling the remaining gimber black mushroom torts into their mouths.

Silence returned to the chamber.

Myvalia turned back to Elmon.

Her voice was sharp—but now edged with curiosity rather than irritation.

“What is this Staff of Perdina you seek?”

Daron grumbled, lifting his head from the bramble stoth.

"It is nothing you could use, Myvalia," he muttered.

"It is a mortal creation."

Elmon's voice shifted.

There was color in it now—resonant, searching.

"I have studied this mortal creation for some time," he said quietly.

"My readings suggest that the wielder of the stave would know his calling."

He paused.

"In dreams... it calls."

"In veiled shadows."

"In pulses of memory that seem to lean toward me."

Elmon hesitated, sensing the concern forming behind Myvalia's eyes.

"There is darkness in it as well," he admitted.

"And judgment."

"And war... should it fall into the wrong hands."

He drew a slow breath.

Then continued, his voice settling into the careful precision of myth.

Elmon's voice deepened, carrying the cadence of remembered lore.

"It is Quinline—forged in mythic fire by the Dwarves.

Gold-bound crowns of dragon claw, wrought by the AlèDün.

Elvish crystal fortifiers and attunement matrices, set to stabilize its resonance.

At its heart lies a white, flawless noble soul shard, drawn from the Mythos of the Ethereal.

And the whole of it bound together with runes—cut by Dwarf, Elf, and Hobbit alike."

The chamber fell still.

Even the Kindris paused, their trays hovering silently in the air.

Daron exhaled a slow breath of static.

"Well said, Threadwalker."

"The staff remembers you."

Myvalia's lips curved into a faint smile—half taunt, half fascination.

"At least it carries a respectable pedigree."

"Quinline," she mused softly.

"The noblest of crystal..."

She leaned forward slightly.

"But tell me—where would such a white, flawless noble soul shard even be conceived?"

Elmon answered with quiet assurance.

"Celestials," he said.

"Or perhaps even a god."

Myvalia scoffed, though something like old grief colored her voice.

“Let us not bring Him into this.”

“He defines what we cannot... and delivers what we often do not want.”

She looked away slightly.

“A very one-sided arrangement, I must confess.”

Daron lifted his head slowly from the bramble.

Static crackled along his scales.

“He gave you life.”

“He shaped your mind.”

“He placed you among the noble.”

“And still you speak this way.”

The dragon’s eyes narrowed.

“Contradiction... you are.”

Elmon considered the exchange carefully.

“Gods are often like that,” he said thoughtfully.

“They define. They create.”

“And they do as they will.”

He tilted his head slightly toward Myvalia.

“I do not know which one you mean when you say him.”

Myvalia’s eyes widened.

Her voice dropped to a whisper that carried both awe and fire.

“Whiteheart of Corse.”

She drew a slow breath.

“The only GOD.”

Elmon spoke calmly, his voice relaxed yet reverent.

“On Cragnearth, there are many conceived gods,” he said.

“Celestials. Daemons. Even Titans.”

Myvalia nodded slowly, her tone shifting between agreement and mild disdain.

“Titans...” she mused.

“Those mythic beings whose duty is to maintain the very structure of where we exist.”

She waved a hand dismissively.

“Better them than me. That must be exhausting work.”

Her expression sharpened slightly.

“And Celestials? Hah.”

“I receive visits from a few of them every year. They simply check on things and leave again.”

Her gaze darkened briefly.

“As for Daemons... they are best left alone.”

“Power seekers. Deceivers.”

“Witch-makers and raisers of the dead.”

She turned toward Daron, her voice softening.

“My pardons, noble Daron.”

“You are right.”

“And He is right in His deliverances.”

She paused, the words measured.

“But that does not mean I must agree with everything He does.”

At that moment, a sharp thunderclap split the air.

The ground trembled.

Myvalia’s floating cloud vanished instantly.

She dropped face-first into a soft burst of pollen and brier.

Daron smirked, static crackling with quiet amusement.

“You claim to know Him personally,” the dragon rumbled, *“and yet you sit here judging Him.”*

He tilted his head slightly.

“It is a wonder He has not turned you into a pixel faerie or a wandering cloud of thought.”

The Kindris bowed their heads.

The ogres blinked slowly, uncertain whether the proper response was laughter... or prayer.

Elmon remained seated, watching the drifting pollen settle through the air like quiet judgment.

“You know Him personally?” Elmon asked calmly.

“That is a noble gift indeed.”

“The closest I have come to knowing Him was through the words of Ishan of the Night Eyes.”

Elmon rose slowly.

“Not entirely true, Elmon.”

“We always seek complete understanding, do we not?”

The dragon’s eyes flickered with quiet amusement.

“Your benefactor—Micrium Ortis, of the Black Orc lineage—introduced you to Him once.”

He chuckled, static rippling faintly through the chamber.

“Those Orcs are among the truly intelligent mortals.”

His tail shifted lazily behind him.

“The Shrine of the Healing Hand spoke of Him long before that.”

Elmon shook his head slightly.

“Benefactor?” he replied.

“He was my instructor.”

“I benefited from him.”

Daron's grin widened. *"Believing only what you believe."*

The last grains of pollen drifted through the chamber as the echo of thunder faded beyond the Keep.

Elmon's voice was not loud.

But it carried.

"This was not a dream."

"It was a memory placed before me."

"One given five years ago... during the awakening of Break."

He looked first to Myvalia, then to Daron, and finally to the Kindris who still bowed quietly.

"She appeared in the celestial light of the helix crystal roof."

"Ishan of the Night Eyes."

"Her words were not spoken. They were inscribed."

He drew a breath.

The room listened. Then he recited the memory exactly as it had been given.

"Elmon—You are called for this generation. They need you.

Whiteheart has sanctioned you and shaped you for such a time as this.

Perdina's path awaits within the hallowed archives of the Forgotten Thread.

Return to your school.

Ortis waits for your heart.

He has seen the archives once before and can teach you how to find them.

There is much I would teach you...but your heart must learn the ways.

And your memories—the scriptures now written within you—must one day be forgotten.

Mine will guide you."

Daron nodded slowly, static pulsing along his scales.

"Ten years... and the words still burn."

"That is how you know they are true."

Myvalia, quiet now, brushed pollen from her sleeve.

"Then let us see if the archives remember you as well."

Chapter ○: The Weave Revealed

Just as the last echo of thunder faded, the doors of the Keep burst open.

A cloaked figure strode through the threshold, boots striking a sharp rhythm against the stone.

He marched straight toward Myvalia.

“What did you do now?”

The room fell silent.

Even the Kindris froze mid-hover.

The newcomer’s gaze swept the chamber—Daron, the servants, the ogres, the moss pile, the drifting pollen.

Then his eyes settled on Elmon ... A Cat person and a mixture.

“I find myself puzzled,” he said slowly.

“By the guest in the Keep.”

He inclined his head briefly toward Daron in formal respect.

Then he turned sharply, cloak flaring behind him like a judge’s mantle, and faced Elmon squarely.

He began to circle him.

Slow.

Measured.

Like a commander inspecting unfamiliar troops.

His eyes narrowed.

“Who... are... you?”

He gestured toward Elcrull and SIS.

“And who are they?”

Elmon rose.

His posture remained relaxed, but his voice carried quiet authority.

“I am Elmon Silverwood—wizard, echomancer, and veil walker.”

He gestured slightly toward Elcrull.

“My wife, Elcrull Alora, Mister of the Red Tongues.”

Then toward SIS.

“And my daughter, Silva Ithlful Silverwood.”

He paused.

“We were discussing the awakening of Break—both its physical and veiled nature.”

“A matter which, by decrees unknown to me, appears to have been placed in my path.”

The cloaked figure stopped.

The room seemed to hold its breath.

Even the tangled bramble stoth beneath Daron shifted slightly, as if leaning closer to listen.

Daron lifted one massive clawed foot and pressed it over his face.

Then he rolled his head back and laughed—static giggling like wind through copper leaves.

“Why so formal, Quen’ar of the Moraden Council?”

“Judge of the Faey Guard!”

He gestured lazily toward the chamber.

“This is your sister’s keep.”

His tone was pompous, playful, and crackling with mischief.

Quen’ar did not react.

“I have duties,” he replied evenly.

“And requirements that attend them.”

Daron waved a claw in exaggerated ceremony.

“Yes, yes... we know.”

“You carry the weight of beasts who remember the First Betrayal.”

His eyes flicked briefly toward the mask.

“Your mask bears the mark of the Celestial Thrya.”

“His sigil.”

“His duty.”

“And his endless requirements.”

The Kindris glanced quietly at one another.

The ogres blinked slowly, trying to remember what betrayal smelled like.

Myvalia sighed, brushing pollen from her sleeve.

Elmon remained silent.

What he saw now was not simply brother and sister—but a fracture within Faey formality.

A place where *duty and memory collided*.

Quen’ar began circling Elmon, his tone edged with thin amusement.

“An Elf... Silverwood.”

“Hmm.”

He tilted his head slightly.

“A rather common name.”

“So tell me—why... here and now?”

Elmon met his gaze calmly.

“Someone created a shadowed veil.”

“During our search for the Forgotten Thread, we encountered it and passed through to investigate.”

He narrowed his eyes slightly at Quen’ar

.

“Do you know who might do such a thing?”

He paused, smiling.

“It would be... very uncommon.”

“Very deliberate.”

Quen’ar recoiled as if struck.

His mask flared faintly with the sigil of Thrya.

“How dare you!”

“You accuse me of such an irreverent act of deceit?”

Daron rolled his eyes, static puffing lazily into the air.

“Oh, here we go again.”

Myvalia stepped forward, her voice firm but controlled.

“Brother!”

“Throttle down your evasive pride.”

She gestured toward Elmon.

“He is searching.”

“He knows who we are.”

“And rightly, he should ask.”

Her eyes sharpened.

“Did you do this?”

The chamber fell silent.

The Kindris leaned forward slightly.

The ogres blinked, still trying to decide what *“deliberate”* tasted like.

Elmon tilted his head thoughtfully.

“I remember reading something about you... back at the school.”

He paused, searching the memory.

“It was a desecrated tome. The fragments were incomplete—glyphs, sigils, and strands of Echo threaded through damaged stone and brittle record.”

“But what remained spoke of a time before time.”

“A period when the Faey were not tricksters or wandering spirits...”

“...but dragons.”

“Judges of realms.”

“Ancestors even to the Treents themselves.”

He studied the masked figure carefully.

“Quen’ar.”

“You were always associated with the Feasts and Festivals of the Moon.”

“A Faey arbiter appointed by the Celestial Thrya.”

He narrowed his eyes slightly.

“The first among your kind to breathe... and to emote.”

“I find that historical reference... most inspiring.”

Elmon bowed slightly.

Quen’ar’s mask dimmed faintly.

He did not answer.

Not yet.

He pondered.

He paced.

He paused—then paced again.

At last, he spoke.

“A shadowed veil.”

“You passed through it to investigate... and arrived here.”

Daron lifted his head and injected a correction sideways, his voice thick with static and mischief.

“Actually—not here.”

“But in the Glimmerfen glade.”

“My favorite resting place.”

“Right beneath the ringed Mian crystal tree.”

The dragon grinned broadly, a strand of deliberate slobber escaping his jaws.

“It is nearly time for the birthing of the Pian crystal fruit.”

“So delicious.”

“Flavor light as clouds... sharp as lightning... broader than the Mirrored Veil Falls.”

He licked his lips thoughtfully.

“I suspect this year will bring a magnificent, bursting harvest.”

Daron turned his great head toward Quen’ar.

“What do you think?”

The chamber fell silent.

Elcrull raised a paw.

“Why all the formalities?” she said flatly. *“Can we get to the point?”*

Even the ogres stopped chewing.

The Kindris leaned forward, their trays hovering motionless in the air.

SIS tilted her head, studying the masked figure.

“Who are you, really?”

She squinted slightly.

“You seem lost in your position.”

“And you are not as smart as Apa.”

An awkward silence drifted across the chamber like settling pollen.

Daron blinked slowly.

Then his tone shifted, grounding the moment.

“But to your point...”

“No, they did not appear in the Keep.”

“Myvalia was alerted by the Wonder Rock.”

“Quite a surprise, really.”

Myvalia nodded, her gaze steady.

Quen’ar’s pacing slowed. He paused, looking around.

The mask did not brighten.

Quen’ar scoffed, absurdity curling in his tone.

“You veil walk? Marvelous.”

“Now we have elves wandering everywhere.”

He tilted his head slightly.

“What is this Forgotten Thread you search for... and what purpose does it serve?”

Elmon answered lightly, his voice a subtle thread in the room.

“I seek the Stave of Perdina.”

“And it lies within the Forgotten Thread.”

“In the hands of a tinkerer.”

Quen’ar’s eyes widened.

Disbelief etched across the faint glow of his mask.

“You seek the Mad Tinkerer?”

“He has traded much to earn that title.”

“His mask is old... gray... shadowed and forgotten.”

Daron blinked slowly, static crackling around his horns.

“Who is this Mad Tinkerer?”

“I have not heard of him.”

Elmon looked between them, puzzled.

Quen’ar’s voice lowered, the edge of memory sharpening his tone.

“He is, in many ways, responsible for the mischief within the Shadow Glade.”

“He sought a black memory crystal... from the grave of Mistress Ponder.”

“We never discovered why.”

He paused.

Then continued, his voice darkening.

“He vanished into a spiral vortex of diminished light—some form of gate, I presumed.”

A brief silence settled over the chamber.

“Afterward,” Quen’ar said, *“the plants began to migrate out of the region.”*

“A void of living flora spread outward—nearly half a league wide.”

“Even the beasts refused the ground.”

He lifted a hand slightly.

“That place is now called...”

“Voiden Hollar.”

Myvalia stiffened, irritation flashing across her face.

“You never told me a word of this.”

Quen’ar did not even look at her.

“It was none of your concern, sister.”

His voice was abrupt.

Cold.

Myvalia stepped forward, her crown pulsing with faint silver light.

“And why not?” she snapped. *“I wear the Crown. You guard.”*

The two erupted.

Words clashed like blades.

Duties were hurled like spears.

Proclamations rang through the chamber in elaborate, pompous Faey dialect.

The argument carried on for nearly *a daily nap of time*—a Faey measure of both exhaustion and absurdity.

Elcrull watched with open amusement.

It reminded her strongly of a leadership meeting at the Citadel.

“Everyone wants their position,” she muttered aloud before realizing she had spoken the thought.

The Kindris quietly retreated to the corners of the chamber.

A moment later, they fled the room entirely—nearly leaving themselves behind in their haste.

The ogres, meanwhile, simply fell asleep mid-chew, pollen dusting their brows.

Elmon watched it all in silence, his gaze tracing the tension like a thread through cloth.

Daron rolled deeper into his tangled bramble stoth, muttering to himself.

“And they say mortals are dramatic.”

Then, with a slow grin and a deep breath, Daron lifted a massive claw.

Lightning exploded across the ceiling.

Blue and yellow arcs burst outward in a spiraling spiritual serenade, crackling through the chamber like living veins of Faey resonance.

The festival of words died instantly.

Masks dimmed.

Crowns quieted.

Even the hovering trays froze in place.

For half a moment, the lightning sang—then faded.

Daron lowered his claw.

He spoke—not loudly, but with elemental finality.

“It does not matter what occurred... or when.”

“It has occurred.”

“And apparently nothing will change here and now because of your endless jousting.”

The room exhaled.

The echo of lightning lingered like a truth too bright to ignore.

Elmon slowly raised his hand.

His fingers opened.

He wiggled them once—testing the air.

Then he curled them inward and closed his hand into a fist.

With deliberate motion, he struck downward, as though punching through the tension itself.

When he spoke, his voice carried a veiled cadence.

Not loud.

But woven with echo and memory.

“vōzw EŌMīxōn SūdōcsōLĒd vōūkū... pōrūūY DōKcstō.”

The room stilled.

Breath returned.

The ogres snored themselves awake, blinking in confusion as if the thunder had returned.

Myvalia flared.

“How dare you charm us.”

Elmon remained stern but composed.

“If I had charmed you,” he said evenly, *“you would be washing floors and knitting socks.”*

“I used a simple realm-calm spell.”

“It reaches about half a league when pushed to its extent.”

“You were gaining nothing from that pompous sundering of words.”

“So I calmed us.”

SIS smiled brightly.

“So much smarter.”

The Kindris nodded quietly, their trays descending like leaves in a windless glade.

Quen’ar’s mask flickered once... then dimmed—its sigil quiet, its judgment suspended.

Daron grinned and rolled deeper into his tangled bramble stoth, static humming around him like a lullaby.

“There,” he muttered contentedly.

“I knew it would come.”

“Peace. Tranquility. Sensibility.”

“Just like a bunch of mortals finally coming to their senses.”

He tilted his head slightly.

“Crafty creatures, those mortals... don’t you think?”

The ogres snored, one muttering something about “sweet... craggy socks.”

Myvalia sighed, brushing pollen from her sleeve with regal resignation.

Elmon sat again, his fingers still tingling from the spell of realm calm.

Elcrull settled comfortably onto his lap.

SIS climbed onto hers.

The Keep breathed.

The veil held.

And somewhere beyond the glade, the Pian Crystal fruit began to stir.

Daron's head snapped upward.

His ears twitched into the wind.

"Did you... hear that?" he murmured.

"Fruit calling."

He rose, trotting forward with surprising grace. Then he lifted into the air, gliding on static winds toward the Ringed Mian Crystal tree, its branches humming with imminent bloom.

Elmon walked to the doorway, watching the arc of Daron's flight.

"What is so delectable about this fruit?"

Myvalia answered without ceremony. She removed her crown and placed it into the clasp of the Golden Hand—a gesture she had performed a thousand times, each one a surrender to joy.

Then she darted down the path like a child chasing huckleberries in spring's first thaw.

Elmon and Quen'ar wandered toward the tree together.

The air was sweet.

Expectant.

Quen'ar spoke at last, his voice softened.

"These fruits are like nothing in your world."

"They calm the spirit."

"One bite can fill the hollow places of want."

"The flavor is unmatched in any realm."

Elmon smirked, his eyes gleaming.

"You have never tried huckleberries in winter haze."

"They can make a warring ogre sleep...and the dead turn to dust with a simple bite. Solving all of life's plights and passions."

Quen'ar raised a brow.

The Kindris smiled faintly.

The ogres stirred, sniffing the wind.

The Ringed Mian Crystal tree began to shimmer—its bark humming with an ancient rhythm.

Moments later, reddish bulbs appeared along one limb... then another.

They twitched and trembled, swelling to the size of apples.



Their color shifted.

Brilliant blue.

Yellow speckles.

Thin green lines running like living veins.

Within minutes, each bulb rolled outward into the shape of a hand-sized pumpkin—perfect for a treat, perfect for a soul.

The rhythm of the fruit felt almost cosmic.

Daron swung his tail with a crackling grin and struck the trunk.

CRACK.

Hundreds of fruits tumbled to the ground in a bubbling cascade.

Rabbits with antlers—some crowned with a single horn—darted into the clearing, snatching fruit like lightning.

Elcrull nabbed several as they rolled past.

She tossed one to Elmon.

Another to SIS.

They leaned against Daron's warm scales, eating in peaceful delight, their expressions drifting into a heavenly calm.

A sloth-like creature shuffled forward, scraping a small pile together before slowly stuffing them into its mouth with reverent patience.

Several tiny fairy-winged dragons swooped down, snatching fruit mid-fall and vanishing into the sky.

Elcrull suddenly felt warm and mischievous.

No.

Lighter.

Smoother.

She looked at Elmon with tangled, playful allure.

"Want another?"

SIS grabbed a second fruit at the exact moment a brownie lunged for it.

The two froze, each gripping one side.

The nearby flowers murmured in approval.

"Oooo."

SIS released it.

The brownie tumbled backward down the slope, clutching the fruit like treasure.

She burst into laughter and rolled across the grass.

Then she spotted one last fruit still hanging near the top of the tree.

She scrambled up the trunk, climbing quickly toward the branch.

Just as she reached for it—A sky-eagle swooped down and snatched it away.

Her fingers brushed the fruit as it passed.

She twisted her hand sharply and opened her fingers like a blooming flower.

The eagle squawked in surprise and dropped the fruit.

SIS caught it with triumphant delight.

Myvalia snagged two of the larger fruits and settled beside Daron, leaning into the gentle warmth of his static-charged scales.

They ate slowly.

Their expressions softened—as though the weight of every worry dissolved with each bite.

After a short nap beneath the Ringed Mian Crystal tree, the group eventually returned to the Keep.

Elmon carried SIS in his arms, the girl still snoring softly in her charming way.

As they walked, Elmon spoke of his school—its veiled halls and the scars left behind by the Devil's Pit War, which had once ravaged its grounds.

Quen'ar listened carefully before offering troubling news.

The Dead were stirring in distant regions of the Faey realm.

Visitations from outsiders had increased.

And with them, danger.

Elmon leaned forward slightly, his voice steady.

"Perhaps it is time to create a city... or a Gate Land."

"A place sanctified by your decree, where merchants and travelers of worthy intent may gather."

"You could establish a Veil wall, guiding wanderers away from places that would lead only to their destruction."

"Trusted creatures could serve as escorts or guides—leading visitors who come responsibly."

"For trade."

"For stories."

"For peace."

He paused, letting the idea settle.

"People will come," Elmon said calmly. *"That is the nature of discovery."*

"You already mentioned them here, causing difficulties."

"MUCs will arrive. Wizards, scholars, wanderers."

"And unless you wish a war in time... something must be done."

"Wizardry schools could help. Visitors could be trained, examined, and tested for their worth."

"If they fail, nothing is lost for you."

Myvalia returned her crown to her brow and replied coolly.

"We have nothing we want from your world, Elmon."

"Why would we encourage such efforts?"

Elmon, unfazed, gestured toward the bowl of Pian Crystal fruit beside her.

“There are plants we possess that you do not.”

“And there are plants here that we cannot grow.”

“There are stones and crystals you do not possess.”

“Quinline is a commodity in our world. It is used, traded, and refined.”

“You could trade without mining here.”

“You could refine without loss.”

The room fell still.

Quen’ar’s mask flickered.

Daron hummed softly, static curling through the air like a question.

Elcrull spoke quietly.

“Ezmerelda has been accepted as Faey... even though she is an Elf.”

Quen’ar replied without hesitation.

“That matter is very different from a visitor arriving with mischief.”

The Passing of Time

The Silverwoods did not leave.

They lingered nearly three months.

Not as guests— but as seekers.

The family spent their days among the Faey archives, studying the layered records of the Veil.

Elmon’s nights were often spent in threaded trance, exploring the echo patterns of the realms.

Though not always uninterrupted.

Elcrull would occasionally interrupt his meditations with more earthly desires.

SIS worked closely with her mother, practicing how to slide into the Veil.

It was still difficult for her.

A working skill.

Not yet a habit.

Elmon often spoke with Elcrull, SIS, and Daron about Veil hopping—the delicate art of crossing thresholds between realms without rupture.

He mapped Axial Veils, where worlds pivoted on emotional resonance.

He traced Layered Veils, stacked like strata of memory—each holding echoes of what was, what is, and what might yet become.

One afternoon Elmon sat quietly, recalling an old discussion with Ortis about the possibility of multiple overlapping Veils.

He realized how much he had learned since those early days.

Reaching into his satchel, he retrieved his personal ledger.

Opening it carefully, he began recording new notes.

Formulas.

Observations.

Mythic correlations.

All meant to be shared with Ortis when he returned.

But it was his work on Thread Reading that truly turned heads.

Elmon discovered what he came to call the Weave—a living lattice within the Veil itself, a bearer of MANA.

It was not merely energy.

It was memory in motion.

By tuning himself to its rhythm, he could trace it... follow it... and even uncover echoes no Faey had ever perceived.

Yet the call of Perdina remained.

The Mad Tinkerer held the key.

And Elmon's need to find it outweighed even the wonder of his discoveries.

Friendships had been forged.

Unity had been kindled.

But the path was not yet complete.

Elcrull was bearing again.

Goodbyes were spoken.

Promises were given—on both sides of the Veil.

At last Elmon and his family stepped to the threshold.

The Weave shimmered around them.

Holding hands, and with a quiet breath, they slipped into the Veil—
and were gone.

Chapter ①: The Weave and the Wards

In the Silverwoods' continued wanderings, following the shifting pulse of the Weave, they searched not by map but by memory, intuition, and thread.

While tracing a faint resonance in the lattice of the Veil, they encountered Enis Ulrick—a scholar of the old paths.

Ulrick was astonished.

Before him stood a young Elf and his family who calculated and leapt between veils with precision, doing what Ulrick himself had never imagined possible.

Curiosity overcame surprise.

The two began traveling together.

They explored strange crossings of reality.

They discovered dangers.

They witnessed tragedies.

And slowly, a friendship was formed—woven not by time, but by echo.

During this time, Elcrull delivered another child.

A simple delivery.

A small male.

Energetic.

Playful.

Challenging.

He quickly became the delight of their wandering camp.

After many moments of teasing laughter and playful debate, they named him *Asmadù Silverwood*.

But the Weave still had more to reveal.

While tracing deeper currents within the Veil, the Silverwoods and Ulrick encountered something entirely unknown—Veil Elementals.

Beings formed of layered resonance.

Creatures never recorded in Faey lore.

Invisible to mortal sight unless one could perceive the Weave itself.

The Elementals were as startled by these travelers as the travelers were by them.

Yet curiosity prevailed.

And in their astonishment, the Elementals shared knowledge.

They spoke of a Veil City.

Not a place.

A variance.

A divergence from reality itself.

A city existing within the folds of perception, where multidimensional beings dwell in a realm that appears only two-dimensional to those unable to perceive the Weave.

Elmon pondered their words carefully.

“How does a multidimensional creature exist within a dual-dimensional realm?”

The Elementals answered in voices that sounded like wind through glass.

“By folding memory into motion.”

“By echoing presence across axes.”

“By becoming less of what is seen... and more of what is felt.”

SIS listened quietly.

For the first time, she realized there was far more to reality than even her father’s remarkable mind could yet comprehend.

The Weave pulsed with truths too vast... too layered... too overwhelming.

And then—they stumbled into something far older.

A Titan.

Not summoned.

Not sought.

Simply... encountered.

The Titan stood in a realm between veils, tending ruptures that shimmered like broken glass.

Veils damaged by time.

By misuse.

By grief.

Veils that required repair.

The Silverwoods watched, unable to fathom the scale of what stood before them.

The Titan moved with quiet purpose, weaving strands of light and memory into the torn edges of reality.

From that moment, they learned of the Shadowed Veil.

A veil that had once ruptured—but had attempted to mend itself.

In its struggle to heal, it created a pocket within the barrier.

A fold of reality where light could not reflect when read.

Unreadable.

Untraceable.

A wound that had become a whisper.

They stood in awe.

Not of power—but of the mystery that even Titans must tend the wounds of existence.

Elmon believed they had found the slip-line leading to the Forgotten Thread.

Instead, the Silverwoods veiled into a shadow pocket—and stumbled into Fordical’s workshop, unaware of where they had arrived...or what they had awakened.

Their confrontation turned to fascination.

Their tension became theory.

They spoke of veils and gates, of Veil Cities and the work of Titans—concepts so vast and enchanting they shimmered beyond even Elmon’s imagination.

Fordical summoned a long-time friend: Signor, an alchemist of silence and structure.

Elmon, in turn, invited Enis Ulrick, son of Master Ulrick.

Together, these few formed a covenant.

They named themselves the Arcane Sigil Wards.

Bound by experiment and echo, they vowed to gather after each discovery—to expand doctrine and inscribe proven theory.

Their findings would be recorded and shared only after careful testing.

Their first thesis, sent to the School of Wizardry in Scathnard, read:

“We have discerned that the young Elmon Silverwood carries the breath of a Binder—a miracle of calling, and a shadow of possibilities yet unimaginable.”

Over the months, the covenant grew to eight.

Signor, Alchemist of Silence, traded secrets for structure—weaving Essence Threads that anchored against breach.

Fordical, now fulfilled, refined his Meta-Charms. They bound magic to intent, inscribing spell geometry with purpose.

Elcrull was beginning to gain ease in sliding into the Veil without effort.

Six years of stumbling had taught her well.

Asmadù liked to climb his Apa like a tree. Elmon had grown thick calluses from the mischief of his other cubs.

SIS was learning more of wizardry than most students could ever dream.

During one of their wanderings, they stumbled upon a precarious alcove within the Veil.

Its placement seemed purposeful.

A well of sorts.

Elmon fell into it.

Something unknown poisoned him.

Claws sliced at him from within the well.

Memories began to exchange themselves.

Time itself slowly lost its meaning for him.

Until they encountered Olgen Margaf, a Holy Cleric—who healed Elmon from the wound of time poisoning.

They aided Chasity Baynblood, Paladin of Oath and Grief—born of necessity, forged in sorrow.

Together they saved cities from torment and disease—until the affliction touched Elmon himself.

Banera, Ritualist of Trust, followed.

A mystic of profound spell sight, she cast with emotional resonance so deep that even silence seemed to weep.

Morgan Lefey, War Blade of Rhythm and Ruin, joined them soon after.

Elcrull took an interest in his skills.

Practicing new maneuvers and blade dances.

Elmon would feel her wanting of Morgan not as a mate but as a teacher and a source of warmth.

In a way that Elmon could not. It must be the Warblade kinship he proposed.

SIS kept a tight rein on her mother.

She did not trust this warblade that befriended her mother.

He forged blades that sang prophecy, guarding the Founder's Flame beneath forgotten names.

Elmon taught Morgan to Veil Walk, to track those who had burned a city—sacrificing children in their hunger for power.

Morgan succeeded.

But victory carried a cost.

He lost his vision.

Yet in its place, he gained Heart Sight and Mind Sight.

The covenant had not been formally founded.

It had been forged—in shadow veils and convergence storms, in whispered trials and unspoken vows.

They did not always agree.

But they aligned.

They did not follow.

They felt.

One day Elmon felt an unexpected fondness stirring toward Morgan.

Something within him reacted.

Binding.

Watching quietly, he saw Elcrull lean forward and kiss Morgan on the cheek.

A sharp distinction flared inside Elmon.

Without thinking, Elmon reached into Morgan's mind.

He touched the thought.

And replaced the fondness with apathy.

Elcrull sensed it instantly.

She turned on him, furious.

“Why?”

Elmon met her gaze.

“*Am I not your mate?*” he asked quietly.

“*Your bond. The father of your cubs.*”

“*Have I not loved you and walked every step beside you?*”

His voice hardened slightly.

“And yet you desire another?”

Elcrull welled with tears.

She lowered her head, recalling the fondness that had slipped into her heart.

For months, Elmon searched alone, wandering the Veils—yet always returning to Elcrull and the cubs.

One afternoon, after he returned from another journey, Elcrull pulled him aside.

“Why do you evade me?” she asked softly.

Her voice trembled.

“Do you want me to take another?”

The words struck Elmon harder than any blade.

In that moment, he realized something had grown between them—a quiet separation he had not named.

The small betrayal he felt had cut deeper than he had understood.

Elmon looked at her for a long moment.

“I feared losing you,” he said quietly.

“And instead... I pushed you away.”

Elcrull wiped her eyes.

“I never wanted another,” she whispered.

“I only wanted you to see me again.”

Elmon reached for her then, pulling her close.

“I never stopped.”

They stood that way for a long time.

Elmon and the cubs eventually returned to the Citadel.

It had been nine years since they had left.

Elmon checked the ledger in their room.

Both cubs had left messages describing their adventures.

They wished to speak with their Apa.

Elmon set aside a full week to contact them and gather the family.

By midweek, it had come together.

Vacus spoke of a potential mate—a Persian of particular breeding.

Elcrull raised a brow.

Elmon laughed.

SIS spent hours recounting the places she had seen, the trials she had witnessed, and the dragon Daron.

She raved about the Pian Crystal fruit.

Elmon felt at ease.

That evening, they lay together in the courtyard beneath the tree, as they had done so many times before.

Elcrull rested on Elmon's chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

She desired him again—not out of hunger, but belonging.

It was a perfect week.

Tangela had mastered the Cat Dance, using Veil walking to step in and out of the motion.

Elcrull began working with her on new maneuvers she had learned.

Together they practiced the flowing forms of the Cat Dance—moves that worked beautifully with dual blades and an arm shield.

Elmon eventually realized something troubling.

Elcrull, SIS, and Asmadù had no armor.

They possessed the skills Elcrull had taught them.

They had the magic they had learned.

And they could Veil Walk.

Well... most of them.

Asmadù could not—no matter how hard he tried.

One afternoon Elmon went to the vault and retrieved a one-pound bar of Mythril.

Then he gathered Elcrull, SIS, and Asmadù.

"I want to try something new," he told them.

"I have seen it done before... and I believe I understand it with greater precision now."

"A Veil Gate."

Elmon opened his mind to the concept of the Veil—not stepping into it, but holding it before him, like studying a painting.

He pictured Hngen's shop door.

A swirl formed in the air.

It shifted... pulsed... and faded.

Elmon frowned and tried again.

This time, he slid partially into the Veil—just enough to feel its structure—pausing there while focusing on the image of Hngen's shop door.

The swirl returned.

This time it erupted, forming a circular opening.

Then it stretched outward into a tunnel of shimmering threads.

Elmon stepped forward and reached through.

His hand found the handle.

The door opened.

One by one, they stepped through the tunnel.

Elcrull first. Then SIS. Then Asmadù.

Elmon stepped through last.

Chapter ⊕: The Unknown

The shop door blew open, and in a single heartbeat, the forge room was suddenly filled with four unexpected guests.

Hngen nearly lost his mind.

Two dwarves flipped backward off their stools.

The forge bellows roared.

A forgerman missed its target on the anvil and struck a gloved finger instead.

Screams erupted.

Followed immediately by furious dwarven bantering.

Elcrull covered her mouth, her eyes tearing with laughter.

SIS raised a brow, studying the mishaps and chaos with careful curiosity.

Asmadù sniffed the air, wrinkled his nose, then plugged it and snorted.

Elmon simply smiled, watching Hngen spit nails and swear in the dwarven tongue.

It was a fountain of entertainment for everyone present.

Several local clients gasped at the sudden appearance and the abrupt arrival. Word spread quickly through the room, and the shop instantly became crowded with curious onlookers.

Eventually, the commotion settled.

Hngen turned slowly and looked at Elmon.

“Well now,” he grumbled.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” Winking at Elcrull.

Elcrull laughed softly and leaned down, planting a quick kiss on the top of Hngen’s head. She stood nearly six inches taller than the dwarf.

Hngen snorted and craned his head upward at her.

“Think you’re something up there, Missy?”

He brushed a bit of soot from his beard and turned his attention back to Elmon.

“You always come here with questions... ideas... or duties.”

He folded his arms and squinted at him.

“So tell me, lad—what be it this time?”

Elmon motioned for him to follow and walked into Hngen’s private room.

From his satchel he produced a one-pound bar of Mythril and placed it on the table.

Hngen’s eyes lit up like he had discovered the mother lode.

He staggered backward and collapsed onto his stool, gasping.

“Ya know...” he wheezed. *“Me heart can’t take this.”*

“Ya tryin’ to kill me, lad?”

Elmon smiled calmly.

“You know it would take four or five bars to do that.”

Hngen stared at him in disbelief.

They settled into the chairs nearby.

Moments later Elcrull entered with the cubs.

SIS stood proudly beside her mother. She was slightly taller—five feet ten inches—with the calm posture of a scholar.

Asmadù followed behind her.

He stood nearly six feet tall already, shoulders broad like a bear, carrying the powerful frame of a warden Catar.

Elcrull closed the door behind them.

Hngen blinked and pointed at SIS.

“Well now... who be this beauty so pleasant to the eye?”

Elmon placed a hand gently on her shoulder and guided her forward.

“This is Silva Ithful Silverwood,” he said proudly. *“A fine wizard and a noble heart.”*

Hngen scratched his beard.

“Last time I saw you... you were still in your mother.”

She frowned, thinking to herself, ‘How could I have seen myself, *still in my mother’s womb?*’

“A curious one. Eyy,” Looking and Elmon and Elcrull.

Elmon nodded and Elcrullk smiled and nodded.

Asmadù stepped forward beside his sister.

“And this,” Elmon continued, *“is Asmadù Silverwood. My youngest.”*

Hngen looked up slowly at the towering Catar youth.

“By the Forge...” he muttered.

“That lad eats anvils for breakfast?”

“Looks like you been feedin’ the lad properly.”

Hngen paused and turned his full attention to Elmon.

“So,” he grumbled, lifting the Mythril bar in his hand, *“you barge in, nearly give me a heart attack with this...”*

He waved the bar in the air.

“Introduce the family... A fine one at that.”

“And I still don’t know why you’re here?”

Elmon smiled calmly.

“It is payment,” he said, *“for outfits appropriate for them.”*

Hngen crossed his arms and looked down at the bar again.

“There’s enough here to outfit a small army—and then some.”

Elmon nodded.

“Master dwarf, I trust no one else with my family.”

Hngen snorted.

“That’s nice ta know, lad.”

He tilted his head.

“What kind of outfits?”

“Elcrull is a War Blade,” Elmon replied.

“We are moving into a task that may be more dangerous than I can imagine.”

Elcrull raised a brow and looked down at Elmon, who was still seated in the chair.

She cleared her throat, slightly uneasy at the way he said it.

SIS smiled.

“We will overcome it,” she said confidently. *“Like everything else.”*

Hngen chuckled. *“That’s faith, lad.”*

He slapped Elmon on the shoulder hard enough to nearly knock him out of the chair.

“We need armor for the three of them,” Elmon continued.

“Elcrull needs solid weaponry.”

“A swift axe for Asmadù.”

“And at least a few daggers for SIS.”

“That’s easy,” the dwarf replied.

He stood and walked out of the room.

They all followed.

Sizing Them Up.

Hngen circled Elcrull, measuring her with a practiced eye, scratching his beard.

Then he wandered over to a large, dusty, locked trunk sitting in the corner.

The front panel folded down with a heavy thump.

Inside were stacks of leathers, fittings, and old armor pieces.

He pulled out a set of heavy leather armor padding and tossed it to Elcrull.

“Start with this.”

She slipped the padded armor on.

It fit well enough.

Hngen handed her a light brigandine chest piece.

“Now this.”

She fastened the upper chest armor.

Hngen then produced three different sets of pauldrons.

“Try these.”

Elcrull had Elmon fasten the first pair.

She stepped outside and ran through several combat maneuvers.

The armor shifted.

She shook her head.

They tried the second pair.

Better.

The third set fit perfectly.

“I can work with these,” she admitted.

Next came tassets and a small groin plate.

Once she settled on the arrangement, Hngen stepped in close to inspect the armor.

He ran a finger along the seams and frowned.

“Too much open here.”

He pointed to two gaps along her sides—three inches wide each.

Hngen rummaged through the trunk again and pulled out several reinforced brigandine plates.

He held them up, comparing shapes.

Then he began cutting away the excess straps and fitting the plates directly into the armor.

Hngen pulled out a light set of ring mail armor.

He waved to Eldler, his forgerman.

“Cut this down a bit.”

Eldler measured SIS and quickly began trimming and fitting the mail.

A few minutes later Hngen fitted the armor onto her and fastened a warding collar, double-lined with soft fur.

He stepped back and inspected her.

“She looks good.”

SIS shifted her shoulders and rolled her arms.

“It feels comfortable.”

“Now for Asmadù.”

Hngen dragged out a set of half-plate armor with double-leather pauldrons.

He tightened the straps across the Catar’s broad shoulders.

“These will feel tight for a bit,” Hngen warned.

“Till ya work it in.”

He tapped the armor plates.

“Every day you run, climb, wrestle, and practice.”

“It’ll soften and learn to flex with ya.”

Then Hngen waved them toward the weapon room.

The moment they entered, Asmadù’s eyes lit up.

He walked straight to a dwarven spiked hammer.

Lifting it easily, he rested it over his shoulder and called to his mother.

“Do I look dashing?”

Elcrull bent over laughing.

“For enemies—perhaps.”

“But Persians are picky.”

“They like clean lines, order, and hours of daily grooming.”

She pointed at the armor.

“You’d have to take the whole thing off just to do her hair.”

SIS, meanwhile, had already moved to a rack of finely crafted daggers.

She tested their balance.

Draw.

Throw.

Reset.

Draw again.

Her movements were quiet and efficient.

Then she found one that caught her attention.

A beautiful blade.

A fourteen-inch stiletto with an ox-bone handle and a three-hundred-fold Quinline Elven steel blade.

“It almost sings when you throw it,” she said softly.

She drew the blade in a single motion and sent it flashing across the room.

The dagger struck the inside of Hngen’s private door with a sharp *thunk*.

Hngen nodded approvingly.

“That is Silver Thorn. That’s your best friend.”

“She knows her target.”

Hngen sized her up, *“Your reach seemed good and form.”*

“You looked good.”

“Perfect wrist action.”

He walked to a storage locker and returned with three long-bladed throwing daggers.

“Try these.”

He pointed to a scarred section of the wall.

Then he fastened a chest knife caddy onto her armor and slid the daggers into the sheath slots.

SIS practiced the motion several times.

Reach.

Draw.

Roll.

Weight.

Without hesitation, she launched the three blades.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Each struck within about an inch of each other.

Hngen smiled.

“Never ruffle her short hairs.”

He laughed and tapped her on the back.

Leaning close, he whispered:

“Your mother taught you that, lass?”

SIS smiled and nodded.

Outside the shop, Asmadù had already carried his weapons into the yard.

He began with a double-tapered axe, chopping and splitting several logs.

Then he practiced throwing the axe into upright logs.

Next, he grabbed the dwarven spiked sledge and began pulverizing the remains.

Wood chips flew everywhere.

Satisfied, he picked up both weapons and carried them back inside.

The shop’s quartermaster carefully tallied and recorded the items selected.

Hngen turned to Elmon.

“What about you, lad?”

Elmon smiled.

“I need a cloak.”

“One that keeps missiles and blades away.”

Elmon smiled with a soft laugh.

Hngen nodded slowly.

“Ah.”

Elmon raised a brow, “Really?”

He scribbled something onto a sheet of parchment and handed it to Elmon.

Elmon read the note.

Silver Diamond Bragle Hyde Cloak

Two-layer Murians Weave collar and hood

Bone level, calf cut

Stud-cast Mythril shoulder plates

Enchanted Shield of the Air

Mistress Helsas – Garments of the Guilds East Warring Street

Hngen folded Elmon’s hand over the parchment.

“Send me the cost.”

“I’ll reimburse it.”

The selections tallied was steep. Elcrull’s was seven thousand gold and some change.

“Two Mythril”

SIS was 800 Gold. Sixteen Platinum. One Mythril for Silver Thorn.

Asmadù weighed in at 3500 gold. *“One Mythril”*.

Hngen put the bar of Myth in the ground safe until the cost of the cloak was known.

“How pure is the Myth?” Hngen asked.

“You smelted it,” Elmon noted.

“Ohh. One of those. They 96%.”

“Well, your bar is 35 Myth.”

“You spent four and some change.”

“I gander the cloak will set for three Myth.”

Chapter ⊕: Garments for Guilds

Elmon and his family walked out of the shop looking ready for almost anything.

Elcrull immediately tested her new armor.

She launched into a series of somersaults and flying flips.

In mid-flip she drew both blades.

When she landed, the blades sliced cleanly into the earth on either side of her.

She pulled them free, sheathed them, twisted at the waist, and bent low to test the flexibility.

Satisfied, she looked over at Asmadù.

“We will practice together,” she said. *“I’ll work your leathers—and you can work mine.”*

Asmadù smirked. *“I might kill you.”*

Elcrull smiled. *“I’m glad you’re confident.”*

She then wrapped her arms around Elmon and pulled him into a public embrace.

Several patrons spilling out of the Shadow Dragon Pub nearby gave catcalls and whistles.

A few simply stared.

One particularly large gentleman staggered toward them.

Asmadù stepped forward immediately.

“I would not do that if I were you.”

The man squinted drunkenly.

“Pretty kitty.”

Elmon followed calmly.

“One who could tear your heart out and eat it too.”

The man blinked once.

Then slowly sank to the ground and lay there.

No one asked questions.

Elmon suddenly lifted Elcrull—armor and all.

He grunted as he took a few steps.

“My flirtatious Jaguar... you’ve put on some weight.”

Elcrull smiled sweetly.

She nuzzled his cheek.

Then punched him squarely in the chest.

Her fist struck his chest like a hammer blow.

Elmon had not been expecting it.

The blow knocked the wind out of him.

He buckled.

Then collapsed to the ground.

He lay there perfectly still.

Elcrull nudged his foot.

Nothing.

She kicked his hip.

Still nothing.

Three city guards approached.

"What did he do to you?" one asked.

Elcrull shrugged.

"Nothing. I was just checking his reflexes."

One guard pointed toward the guardhouse.

"You'll need to come with us."

"Assaulting citizens is not permitted."

Elcrull blinked.

"He is my husband."

The guard frowned.

"Beating your husband in public will earn you twenty lashes."

He reached out and placed a hand on her arm.

Elmon suddenly sat upright.

"We were only playing."

Another guard snorted.

"Making a public nuisance of yourselves carries a one-hundred-gold fine."

He gestured down the street.

"Get up."

"You're coming with us."

Elmon suddenly clutched his head and began screaming.

"Ahhh—my head!"

Before anyone could react, he vanished.

Gone.

Right in front of the guards.

SIS slowly looked at them and shook her head.

"Well... now you've done it."

"The dragon is going to come looking for him."

"And when it does, it will kill everyone here until it finds him."

She sighed dramatically.

"But that won't happen now."

"You frightened his spirit away."

The guards crossed their arms and stared at her.

"Really?" one said flatly.

They stood there shaking their heads.

A few moments passed.

Then one of the guards squinted toward the sky.

“What is that?”

Both guards looked up.

A large beast was circling toward them from above.

Wings.

Massive wings.

And horns.

Three of them.

The guards slowly began stepping backward.

The creature descended closer.

Closer.

One guard swallowed.

The other whispered, *“Run.”*

They turned and sprinted back toward the guard post.

Elmon calmly stepped back out of the Veil.

He looked at SIS and nodded.

“Good idea.”

SIS grinned.

At that exact moment, a large gray three-horned dragon settled onto the street beside them with a heavy thud.

Dust rolled across the stones.

An Orc rider slid down from the saddle.

He looked around casually.

“Where are the stables?”

Elmon blinked once.

“There are two dragon stalls at the university.”

The Orc nodded.

“Good.”

He grabbed the reins and began walking the dragon toward the university district.

The Silverwoods stood there in stunned silence.

Elmon shook his head slowly.

“No way.”

He looked at SIS.

Then at Elcrull.

They all turned back toward the street.

The dragon rider was already gone.

They all looked at one another and quickly made their way to the clothier’s shop.

Elmon handed the slip of parchment to the elderly woman at the counter.

She squinted down at the note.

“Why do they all write so small?” she muttered.

She lifted the paper and disappeared into the back room.

A moment later, a young female Persian Catar walked to the front counter.

She carried a measuring rope and a long wooden measuring stick.

Without much ceremony, she began taking measurements, jotting them down on the back of the parchment.

Elmon pointed toward the others.

“I would like a cloak for each of these,” he said, indicating the cubs and Elcrull.

The clerk paused, then grabbed a full sheet of parchment and carefully transferred the measurements to the new page.

Then she measured each of them again more thoroughly.

“Is this with or without armor?” she asked.

“With what we are wearing now,” Elmon replied.

She nodded and opened a large ledger on the counter.

Methodically she transcribed the measurements and details into the book.

Afterward she slid an abacus toward her and quickly tallied several figures.

“That will be eighteen Mythril and some change.”

Elmon nodded calmly.

“Send the bill to Hngen at the Armory Works.”

The clerk carried the ledger into the back room.

Elmon could hear the conversation faintly.

“A gentleman up front wants us to bill Armory Works.”

“What is he purchasing?”

Footsteps shuffled. Something heavy was set down.

“Oy my...”

“Who is he, my dear?”

Elmon spoke up from the front counter.

“Elmon Silverwood,” he said calmly. *“Survivor of the Crypt Siege and Guardian of the Wizard School.”*

There was sudden scrambling in the back room.

A moment later a woman emerged from behind the curtain.

She was human—perhaps forty-five years of age—slender, refined, and carefully groomed.

Her dress was elegant but practical.

“Master Silverwood,” she said warmly.

“It is such a pleasure to meet you in person.”

“I attended the opening ceremony at Echo Hall.”

“Breathtaking, was it not?”

She reached forward and gently placed her hand over Elmon’s.

Leaning across the counter, she met his eyes.

She wrinkled her nose playfully.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Elcrull’s growing displeasure.

“When, good sir,” she asked softly, *“would you like these garments completed?”*

“As soon as possible,” Elmon replied calmly.

“I will return in a couple of weeks to check on them.”

The woman lingered, continuing small talk while lightly rubbing Elmon’s hand.

Behind him, Elcrull slowly pulled a dagger.

Without warning, she drove the blade straight into the counter between them.

The dagger buried itself in the wood with a sharp thunk, only inches from their hands.

The woman jumped slightly.

She glanced at the blade.

Then at Elcrull.

“Your guard seems unhappy with me,” she said with a small smile.

She leaned even closer to Elmon.

Their noses nearly touched.

Elmon immediately straightened and pulled his hand away.

He turned toward Elcrull.

“My loving Jaguar,” Elmon said with a smile.

He wrapped his arms around Elcrull and pulled her close, lifting her slightly as he twisted her in a small circle. Then he leaned in and kissed her deeply.

When the kiss ended, Elcrull rested her head against his shoulder.

Then she glanced over his shoulder at the clothier.

She gave the woman a slow, deliberate wink.

The woman’s face flushed red as a bloodied sash.

She quickly turned and retreated into the back room.

“That Elf is dating that cat,” someone whispered behind the curtain.

Elmon chuckled and raised his voice so the shop could hear.

“This is my wife,” he announced proudly, *“and these are my cubs.”*

With that, the Silverwoods left the shop.

They made their way down the street toward the University and stepped into the security office.

Inside, Entic sat with his feet propped up on the desk.

The moment he saw Elmon and the others enter, he nearly fell out of his chair.

“By the halls!”

He jumped to his feet and rushed forward, grabbing Elmon in a hug.

“There hasn’t been much excitement since you left,” Entic said.

Elmon smiled.

“Nothing at all?”

Entic shrugged.

“Well... I did catch two young ladies sneaking into one of the men’s dorm rooms.”

Elmon laughed.

“And how are the classes going with the crypt area?” he asked.

Entic frowned.

“Not so well.”

“They had a haunt there about two weeks ago.”

Elmon tilted his head.

“It is the Month of Fools.” Entic Replied.

“What did you do?”

Entic grinned.

“I covered myself in flour and ghost-walked out there just as the sun was setting.”

“The class was finishing up their exercises.”

“I opened the treasure room door and just started laughing.”

He gestured dramatically.

“I materialized holding a skeleton’s head.”

“I threw it on the ground...”

“Then I walked toward the stairs and vanished.”

Entic shook his head, still amused.

“Ortis just about lost it.”

“The students all ran off screaming in every direction,” Entic said, still smiling at the memory.

“It was hysterical.”

Elmon’s smile faded.

“Be careful with Ortis,” he said quietly, shaking his head.

Entic frowned.

“Why?”

Elmon looked down for a moment before answering.

“When Relis touched Ortis, he transferred a memory to him.”

“A memory of what the Chancellor did in the groundskeeper’s shed.”

Entic’s expression hardened.

Elmon continued slowly.

“Ortis later described what he saw in painful detail.”

“Four women... and one man.”

“They were abused daily by the Chancellor.”

Elmon's voice tightened.

"He mutilated them... throwing pieces of flesh into the well."

"It was horrific."

Elcrull covered her mouth, tears forming.

"It turns my stomach just remembering what he did to them," Elmon said quietly.

"And on the final day... they were cursed."

"They drove twisted iron stakes through their skulls."

"Binding them to eternal desecration."

Elmon looked up at Entic.

"That is why Ortis lost control."

His voice carried a hint of anger.

Elcrull quietly began to cry.

Entic's face drained of color.

"I... need to apologize to Ortis," he said softly.

"I didn't know."

His eyes watered.

Elmon placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Well, we are heading there now."

"Do you want to come with us?"

Entic shook his head.

He began pacing the floor slowly, staring up at the ceiling.

His breathing grew shallow and uneven.

They walked across the grounds toward the faculty dormitories.

Elmon reached the door first and gave the coded knock.

Inside, they heard Ortis stirring.

A moment later, his voice grumbled loudly.

"Blast it... a man can't even sleep in peace."

Footsteps approached.

The door flew open.

"Leave me—"

Ortis stopped mid-sentence.

He blinked.

"Elmon."

His irritation vanished.

"Well, come in."

Elcrull stepped forward and smiled warmly.

Ortis embraced her and kissed her on the forehead.

"It was a beautiful ceremony," he said.

SIS and Asmadù followed closely behind her.

Ortis stepped back and looked at them curiously.

“And who are these?” he asked, glancing toward Elmon.

Elmon gestured toward SIS.

“This is my—”

He paused and corrected himself with a smile.

“Our second cub. Silva Ithful Silverwood.”

“We call her SIS.”

SIS stepped forward confidently.

“I have heard much about you, Master Ortis of the Black Orc Tribes,” she said respectfully.

Elmon placed a hand on Asmadù’s shoulder.

“And this,” he continued, *“is our youngest. Asmadù Silverwood.”*

Ortis studied the young Catar carefully.

Then he grinned.

“He looks like fire and hell.”

Asmadù blinked and looked back at his parents.

“Fire and hell?”

Elmon rested a hand on Asmadù’s shoulder.

“Listen,” he said calmly.

“When you were young, you climbed me like a tree.”

“You growled at nearly everyone.”

“In the Glade, you tackled the ferries and stole their Pian Fruit.”

“There were many other things you did as well.”

He smiled slightly.

“You harassed your mother whenever she did not give you enough attention.”

He glanced toward SIS.

“Even your sister can tell you stories.”

She shook her head with enthusiasm.

Elmon continued.

“We name our cubs after their attitudes and shenanigans during the first weeks of their lives.”

He looked back at Asmadù.

“Those who know what your name means—and then see you standing there with that hammer and axe—may think twice before crossing you.”

His tone grew more serious.

“But avoiding conflict is always best.”

“It scars you.”

He nodded toward Elcrull.

“Ask your mother.”

“She nearly died at the hands of slavers.”

Ortis’ eyes widened as he listened to everything that had transpired.

“How many cubs do you have now, Elmon?” he asked.

“Four in total.”

Elmon began counting them off.

“The oldest is Vacus Ezmsweeew Silverwood.”

Ortis frowned thoughtfully.

“War maker. Rebel rouser.”

He rubbed his beard.

“Sounds like he inherited your habit of thinking with emotion.”

Elmon kept a tight lip.

Elcrull laughed.

“Then there is Tangela Silverwood,” Elmon continued. *“My third cub.”*

Ortis scratched his beard again.

“I believe she is here at the school.”

“Dancer,” he said thoughtfully.

“Interesting name.”

Elmon blinked.

“Really? Here at the school?”

He glanced around the room.

“We will need a place to sleep. It’s getting late.”

Ortis nodded.

“Your suite is still available.”

“Suite?” Elmon asked, confused.

“When did I get a suite?”

Ortis shrugged.

“You married.”

“Almost everyone of note was at the ceremony, by the way.”

“And as the namesake of the school, the board felt it was appropriate.”

“For all you have one.”

Elmon raised a brow but said nothing.

“Also,” Ortis added, *“Relis would like to speak with you in the morning.”*

“We haven’t seen him,” Elmon replied. *“How does he know I’ll be here in the morning?”*

Ortis chuckled.

“He told me that any time you returned, I was to send you to him.”

The five of them continued talking late into the night.

They discussed events, discoveries, and the archives.

At one point Elmon retrieved his personal ledger.

Together, he and Ortis reviewed the many forms of Veils Elmon had encountered and discovered.

Elcrull cleared her throat.

She pushed a sudden emotional need through Elmon.

Elmon gasped and grabbed at his waist.

Ortis leaned forward.

"You alright?"

Elmon looked at Elcrull and nodded.

"Yes."

He paused, then gestured between himself and Elcrull.

"It seems we share something... rather unique in Catar society as you know."

Ortis smiled knowingly and leaned back in his chair.

"It is called meeala."

Elmon flushed slightly with embarrassment and glanced at Elcrull.

"I am not going to give any great detail," Elcrull said calmly.

Elmon looked around the room and sighed.

"We went through this discussion back at the Citadel with you."

He paused, choosing his words carefully.

"Well... it has gotten deeper."

"I can feel her hunger. When she is sick, I know where it hurts without asking."

He rubbed the back of his neck.

"The other night I could actually see through her eyes."

Ortis raised a brow.

Elmon continued.

"I woke up suddenly... and when I opened my eyes..."

"I was looking at myself."

"That rather... freaked me out."

Elcrull frowned.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were asleep," Elmon replied.

"And I haven't figured it out yet."

"I don't know if it was because you were asleep... or something else."

Ortis chuckled softly.

"You do not change."

Then his expression grew more serious.

"Have you answered the Call?"

Elmon hesitated.

“Yes...”

He paused.

“No...”

He sighed.

“*I am not sure.*”

“*He created you. Much of what you have discovered exists because of His creative genius.*”

Elmon tilted his head.

“*You sound just like the Elna Sha Catar, Daron the dragon and Virelyndra.*”

Ortis sat upright.

“*A dragon?*”

SIS interrupted eagerly.

“*A white dragon in the Faey lands. That’s where we had the Pian fruit.*”

Ortis stared at her.

“*The white dragon from class?*”

Elmon shook his head. “*Yes. The same one. We spent three months digging through their archives at a guard tower—with none other than Queen Myvalia and Quen’ar of the Moraden Council.*”

Ortis straightened immediately.

“*You met the First of the Faey?*”

Before Elmon could answer, a voice drifted into the room.

Cold. Thin.

“*A shadow approaches from the east.*”

Elmon’s eyes widened.

Elcrull looked around the chamber.

Ortis groaned and rubbed his temples.

“*Leave me alone.*”

Then the wall behind him rippled.

A shadow slipped through the stone like smoke through cloth.

The figure was thin and twisted—more absence than form.

Its voice whispered like broken silk.

“*I can make you great.*”

“*Come to me.*”

Elmon felt it immediately.

The Echo of the thing vibrated through the room.

It felt disturbingly familiar.

Like the lingering laughter that haunted the groundskeeper’s shed.

Elmon closed his eyes briefly and reached into the Echo.

There.

A lattice.

A thin strand of memory tethered between the shadow and Ortis.

The creature slithered closer.

"Come," it whispered.

Elmon initiated an Echo Burn.

The room flashed with a brief pulse of resonance.

Ortis screamed and clutched his head.

He collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

The shadow recoiled slightly.

Then it laughed.

A hollow, scraping sound.

And began to withdraw.

But Elmon had already reached the memory Relis had planted.

When he touched it, the shade froze.

"You may not take it," the creature hissed.

"He is mine."

Elmon moved faster.

Before the shadow could react, Elmon swapped the memory.

The corrupt memory was replaced with one of Elmon's own.

The memory of his firstborn cub.

The shadow screeched.

It fractured like glass struck by a hammer.

The creature scratched and twisted, unable to hold its anchor.

Elmon captured the stolen memory and compressed it into a small crystal sphere he carried for such work.

He slipped the crystal back into his pouch.

The shadow retreated, dissolving into the wall.

The room fell silent.

They revived Ortis.

Elmon knelt beside him. *"How are you feeling, old man?"*

Ortis groaned. *"A terrible headache."*

He rubbed his temple slowly. *"And... something has been removed from me."*

Elmon nodded. *"Well."*

"Sleep will do you good, my friend."

He stood and looked around the room.

"So."

"Where is the suite?"

Ortis paused, gathering his thoughts.

“In the Chancellor’s hall. Top floor. The door is kept locked... but you know how to get in.”

They tucked Ortis into bed and quietly left.

The Chancellor’s building was silent when they arrived.

They climbed the stairs to the top floor and found two doors. Both locked.

Elmon sighed softly.

Then he slipped into the Veil.

A moment later, he stepped through the wall on the other side and surveyed the rooms. No one was there.

He checked the closets.

Empty.

Satisfied, he walked to the main door and unlocked it from within.

The others stepped inside.

The suite was larger than expected.

A welcoming chamber opened into a modest sitting room.

A small library stood to one side, holding only a handful of books. Most of the shelves were empty.

Beyond that were a master bedroom, a guest room, and a side chamber with an oversized couch and two chairs.

Elmon and Elcrull claimed the master bedroom.

SIS took the guest room.

Asmadù dropped onto the enormous couch with a satisfied thump.

Extra blankets were found in a wardrobe and passed out.

Soon, the quiet of the evening settled around them.

In the bedroom, Elmon carefully helped Elcrull out of her armor piece by piece.

First the tassets.

Then the sword belt.

The pauldrons.

The brigandine side plates.

Finally, the chest armor.

Each piece thudded softly onto the floor.

Elcrull watched him the entire time.

The moment he finished, she wasted no time returning the favor—pulling him toward the bed and pushing him down with playful force.

She climbed up and sat on his chest, looking down at him with a slow smile.

“I have waited three weeks for tonight.”

Elmon blinked, puzzled.

“I am not in heat.”

She laughed softly.

"I know."

"But that doesn't stop a Catar from noticing when it's nearby."

Her ears flicked slightly as she leaned closer.

"You don't understand what it does to us when it's right in front of us."

Elmon chuckled quietly.

"Then perhaps I have been unintentionally cruel."

Elcrull smiled.

"Very."

But there was warmth in her eyes now, not accusation.

Just relief.

And home.

After a time, they fell asleep. Clutching each other's sweaty bodies.

"The morning came too early."

Elmon arose, closed the Sash and shutters.

He climbed back into bed. He relaxed. she was still sleeping.

He focused on feeling her heart beat. The rhythm of her breathing.

He opened his eyes and he was looking at himself.

He turned his head. Elcrull was looking at the ceiling.

"He stuck his tongue out."

Elcrull began to awaken.

She opened her eyes, and she was looking at the ceiling.

Elmon felt dizzy and nearly blacked out.

He quivered and tensed.

Elcrull rolled over, but it was not her; it was him.

She kneeled and looked down at her body; it was quivering, and eyes rolled back in her head.

She closed his eyes and screamed. In her mind.

When she opened her eyes, she was looking at the ceiling.

Elmon was face down on his pillow. Groaning in his head.

"Elmon, what happened?" She shook him hard.

She rolled him over. He was pale and his eyes were quivering.

Elmon mumbled, *"Experimenting."*

The grogginess slowly left him.

I closed the sash and shutters. You were still asleep.

"I focused on you. Your heartbeat. I came into rhythm with your breathing."

"I opened my eyes, and I was staring at myself."

"I turned my head, but it was your head. You began to wake up."

That was the last thing I remember.

The room spun I felt like I was wobbling and falling.

“Then I heard a scream, and I opened my eyes and was looking at the pillow.”

Elcrull said, *“When I opened my eyes, I was looking at the ceiling.”*

“I felt wrong. I sat up, and turned over, and was looking down at my body.”

“It was shaking, my eyes were rolled back in my head, and my mouth was open.”

“I closed my eyes and focused on you and screamed in my head.”

“Everything went back to normal.”

“Don’t do that anymore. You scared me.”

She collapsed onto the bed, breathing deeply.

Elcrull liked the suite. For the first time in a long while, she was not living in guard suites. She felt almost like royalty.

She took ten platinum and bought some basic furnishings and clothing for the rooms.

Meanwhile, Elmon went downstairs to meet with Relis.

Relis sat behind his desk, cloak removed, and the shades drawn across the windows.

“Elmon,” he said.

“Relis, I met Ortis’s shade,” Elmon announced.

Relis frowned.

“He never mentioned anything like that. Somehow the memory must have an anchor... perhaps through Emuroil.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“I will have to determine what to do about that.”

Elmon smiled slightly and reached into his pocket.

He retrieved a small crystal sphere and set it gently on the desk.

Relis leaned forward, studying it carefully.

“Where did you get this?”

Elmon settled into the chair.

“Years ago, I was researching documents in one of the archives. I used the key Ortis gifted me to access what appeared to be a restricted vault.”

He cleared his throat.

“Emuroil was with me.”

“We discovered a hidden room... inside another hidden room.”

“When we opened it, we found the skeleton of a man with a knife in his back.”

Relis leaned forward.

“What did the dagger look like?”

Elmon shook his head.

“We did not examine it closely. At the time we didn’t believe it would help us. There was no flesh left on the body.”

Relis narrowed his eyes.

“Were there signs of decay on the floor? Stains? Rot?”

Elmon paused, searching his memory.

Then he shook his head slowly.

“No.”

“There were no signs that the body had decayed there.”

“A necromancer, I would wager,” Relis said.

“Why?” Elmon asked.

“If the dagger had a black stone set in the pommel,” Relis replied. *“Then the victim was likely killed by another gazer.”*

Elmon frowned. *“A gazer?”*

Relis nodded.

“The blade drains the life from its victim and traps the soul in torment until the dagger is removed.”

He tapped the desk thoughtfully.

“The lack of decay suggests something similar happened here. The man did not rot because his essence was bound.”

“What happens when the dagger is removed?” Elmon asked.

Relis grimaced slightly.

“Unpleasant things.”

“Within a week the body begins to demand flesh again... and eventually it awakens.”

He glanced up at Elmon.

“Usually very unhappy.”

“Oh,” Elmon said softly.

He cleared his throat.

“There were other items in the room.”

“A small pouch with a handful of gold coins—which I took.”

“Chalk sticks. Four spherical crystals—which I also took.”

“A coil of string.”

“And what was left of some jerky.”

“The ledger on the table had one page torn cleanly out.”

Relis pointed to the crystal sphere on the desk.

“Those are soul binders.”

“Necromancers use them to store spiritual energy... or actual souls for their rituals.”

Elmon nodded.

“I placed the memory you placed in him that I removed from Ortis into that one.”

He smiled faintly.

“The shade did not appreciate it.”

Relis snorted.

“The simplest solution is a bucket of celestial holy water.”

“Drop it in.”

He leaned back in his chair.

“And watch the argument that follows.”

A knock sounded at the door.

“Come in,” Relis called.

Elcrull entered with the cubs.

Relis immediately stood and bowed, gesturing toward the chairs.

“A family reunion,” he said with a faint smile. *“How are you, Elcrull? I regret that I missed the ceremony.”*

She settled comfortably into Elmon’s lap. *“It was a fun ceremony.”* Over exaggerating.

“I thought we were going to be cut in two. The cubs looked her.”

“We are doing exceptionally well these days.”

“How is the school these days?”

“Deathly Quiet.”

SIS and Asmadù stood quietly, staring at Relis.

Relis returned their stair.

Their eyes widened as they studied the tattoos covering his face and shoulders.

“Are those all over you?” SIS asked, pointing as she looked back at her Apa.

“Yes,” Elmon replied. *“He is covered in them.”*

“Why?” she asked.

“He is a Myst Gazer,” Elmon explained. *“They undergo a special ceremony that changes them. The tattoos are burned into their bodies.”*

SIS’s eyes widened even more.

“Did you beat up the man who branded you?”

Relis chuckled.

“No. It was not a man who branded me.”

She tilted her head in confusion.

Relis continued calmly.

“Whiteheart gave an ordinance to mortals—one that changes us so we may resemble the evils of the world.”

His voice softened slightly.

“In doing so, we gain the ability to recognize and destroy that evil.”

Asmadù leaned forward with interest.

“Do they do something?”

Relis studied him for a moment before nodding.

“Yes. They do.”

“Some protect us from necromancers. Some prevent our bodies from being raised from the dead. Others act as spells... or marks that identify us.”

“That would be great,” Asmadù said, glancing at Elmon.

Relis gave a faint smile.

“At times, yes.”

“But the cost is high.”

His expression grew more serious.

“We cannot have families. That ability is removed from us.”

“We cannot walk in direct sunlight—it burns our flesh, for we are altered in ways similar to the undead.”

“And because of what we are...”

He folded his hands quietly.

“We are hunted by demons and other forms of evil.”

“It is not a simple life.”

“Only one in six survives the ceremony,” Relis said quietly.

Asmadù frowned for a moment.

“I like my odds better.”

They talked for another hour before Relis finally excused himself. Duties awaited him elsewhere.

For the rest of the day, Elmon and Elcrull showed the cubs around the school.

They pointed out the classrooms they had once studied in and the courtyards where many memories had been made.

Eventually, they entered the new Echo Hall and introduced the cubs to Mensor Aberelli in the clerical ward.

While they spoke, SIS paused and stared toward one of the walls.

She saw the image of a sword with a halo resting over its pommel.

“That is the symbol of Whiteheart,” she said quietly.

Mensor followed her gaze.

But there was no symbol there.

He raised an eyebrow and glanced toward Elmon, recognizing the sensitivity of the girl’s mind.

Meanwhile Asmadù was studying the large stone basin set into the floor.

“Wow,” he said. *“That would be great in our house.”*

“How do you change the water?”

Mensor chuckled.

“It is not a bathing tub, exactly.”

“We draw water from it for cleansing and other needs.”

“Each morning and evening, we hold a prayer vigil to bless the waters and keep them pure.”

SIS pointed toward the doorway.

“There was a symbol on the door when we came in. A sword with a halo over it.”

“It belongs to Whiteheart,” she continued. *“We hear about him, but we never see him.”*

She shrugged lightly.

“He must be busy going around to all the places he owns.”

Mensor broke into laughter.

“I suppose he is.” He looked at Elmon and gave a small, knowing nod.

“Elcrull, that was a most fulfilling ceremony,” Mensor said warmly.

“The worship was excellent, and the gathering was exceptionally strong.”

He glanced at the cubs.

“Were any of them present?”

Elcrull pointed to SIS.

“She was the second in my womb.”

Mensor nodded slowly.

“Ahh. Then you were touched by his spirit.”

He studied SIS thoughtfully.

“That is why you see him.”

SIS frowned.

“See who?”

Mensor gestured toward the wall she had looked at earlier.

“You saw him there.”

“That symbol—the sword crowned with a halo—that is how he reveals himself to those he has touched.”

Elcrull and Elmon exchanged a glance.

Elmon raised a single eyebrow.

“What do you mean by ‘touched’?” he asked.

Mensor folded his hands.

“During the ceremony, when the crystal crown revealed the spectrum of colors and the binding of the gathering was completed...”

He paused.

“Sometimes those within the bond receive a blessing.”

“A purpose given personally by him.”

“It does not happen often.”

He looked again at SIS.

“But the fact that the crystal halo still appears above the sword shows that his power remains in these lands.”

He smiled faintly.

“It must bring you comfort to know that he still walks these lands and has not abandoned them.”

He pointed gently toward SIS.

“She is blessed.”

“She sees his presence.”

SIS looked puzzled.

“Does that mean something... or do I just see him?”

Mensor chuckled softly.

“Speak to him the next time you see him.”

Then he began showing them around the wing.

There were ten beds arranged neatly along the walls.

He smiled as he glanced at Elmon.

“When your father attended school,” he said to SIS, *“we only needed one bed.”*

He nodded toward Elmon.

“It was for him.”

“He visited me constantly.”

“Apa, were you sickly?” SIS asked.

“No,” Elmon said, then paused, thinking.

“I had... things happen to me. Things I did not cause. They simply... happened.”

SIS asked a thousand questions.

Elmon and Elcrull smiled, answering as many as they could.

They walked south of the campus into the garden.

There, they found a young treant wandering slowly among the trees.

When it saw Elmon approach, it suddenly rooted itself and tried to pass as an ordinary tree.

Elmon chuckled softly and leaned against it.

“You know my mother planted you,” he said gently.

“And your father—she rescued him from a crazed farmer.”

“The last I knew, he lives on the mainland, west of the Way... in a place called Spiral Grove.”

The tree’s eyes opened.

It turned its head slowly toward Elmon.

When it spoke, its voice sounded like creaking wood and shifting bark.

“I am Crystal Sap,” it said. *“I smell him when the winds carry his scent to us.”*

SIS stared in amazement.

She had never seen—or heard—anything like this before.

She stepped closer, studying the treant carefully.

“Why do you have only one flower... way up at the top?” she asked.

The tree shifted slightly.

“That is my daughter,” Crystal Sap replied.

“She prefers to be high... where she can feel the world.”

Elmon smiled.

Elcrull, however, watched more cautiously.

Asmadù spotted the flower and squinted up at it.

“What happens if someone picks it?” he asked.

Crystal Sap answered without hesitation.

“She will die.”

As they left the garden, they noticed a familiar figure standing in the courtyard.

Tangela.

She stood among a group of classmates, laughing and talking.

Elmon smiled and slipped quietly into the Veil.

He stepped out again just inches behind her, waiting for her reaction.

One of her classmates saw him first.

Their eyes widened, and they staggered back in shock.

Tangela frowned, sensing something off.

She turned sharply—expecting someone else.

“You—should—”

She stopped.

Then smiled.

“Apa!”

She threw her arms around Elmon.

Elcrull, SIS, and Asmadù walked up behind him.

Tangela’s excitement only grew.

She looked at Asmadù, tilting her head.

“Who are you?”

Elcrull smiled.

“This is your younger brother.”

Tangela blinked.

“I’m not the youngest anymore?”

She spun into a small, delighted dance.

Then looked him up and down.

“Well... he’s not so little.”

They spent as many moments as they could with her.

Talking with her instructors. Visiting with her.

They introduced her to Garek Holman. One of the City Watch.

Elmon and his family remained at the school for nearly a month.

Elmon served as a guest speaker in several classes, sharing what he had learned of the Veil and the Echo.

Elcrull took SIS every other day to different discussions, exposing her to each discipline within the school.

They spent time in the archives, studying artifacts and learning the methods of research and preservation.

During their stay, Elmon slipped away on several occasions—eight days in total—chasing a lingering intuition.

A thread.

A memory.

Something unfinished.

Eventually, he found it.

The Forgotten Thread.

It was anchored between Veils—hidden within the shadow of memory itself.

It was not what he expected.

The air reeked of rust and stale breath.

Magic was not clean.

It clung—thick and heavy—like oil on skin.

Disorientation came quickly.

Elmon wandered through shifting corridors of shadow and fractured anomalies, searching for what he could only describe as the madness of the archives.

Between his visitations—each one tethered loosely to reality—he sought moments of peace with his family.

The Thread was dangerous.

What passed for reality there was not meant for mortal minds.

And it did not welcome him.

Elmon in those fragile intervals, he began shaping a sanctuary of learning: Morgan Hollow, nestled in the twilight ridges of Galishole.

He brought Elcrull and the cubs to see the grounds. They established a small camp of sorts. It was a place where empathic knights and arcanists could study the sacred weave of memory and myth.

But when the shadows stirred, he sealed its gates, vowing to return only when the world could bear wisdom again.

Chapter ⊗: Perdina and the Forgotten Thread.

“Some truths are buried not in stone, but in silence. Some temptations do not whisper—they echo. And some memories, once traded, reshape the soul. This is the story of those who dared to seek Perdina, and the price they paid to wield it.”

Long before the realms of the primal lattice of worlds were mapped and catalogued, they twisted wildly across dimensions—like rivers of forgotten longing and unspoken dreams.

In those early days, Elmon was a seeker of truths. Half-elf by birth. Wanderer by fate.

And Elcrull—his beloved—walked patiently at his side.

Time had marked them.

His beard, once dark, had grown streaked with salt and blood-red from his journeys through the Scorching Reaches and the Icebound Archives.

She bore the bleaching of time of salt and sand.

The patch over his eye concealed more than the remnants of battle.

It shielded a vision mortals were never meant to see.

It was not stitched in haste.

Nor was it fashioned from cloth alone.

The Patch came into being the moment Elmon saw what should not be seen.

In the Icebound Archives—beneath the frozen glyphs of the Ninth Vault in Freeland—he gazed into a mirror that did not reflect light...

...but memory.

It showed him the moment of his own unraveling.

The betrayal of the Filí.

The burning of the Scorching Reaches.

The face of a god who had forgotten his own name.

‘His left eye wept blood and silence. Not pain—remembrance.’

To seal the vision, he tore a strip from the robe of a dying archivist—one who had sworn never to speak again.

He stitched it with thread soaked in memory oil and bound it with a vow:

“Let no mortal glimpse what I have seen, lest they too forget their name.”

The Patch is not a wound— it is a covenant.

It shields not the eye, but the world from what the eye remembers.

His quest for Perdina began in the Forgotten Thread—a pocket realm hidden between the skips of time, where memory itself became currency.

The air stank of rust and old breath.

Magic here was not clean. It clung like oil—thick, rancid, unwilling to release what it touched.

He moved through shadowed corridors and misaligned rooms, through memories that did not belong to him, seeking the mastery behind the Weave.

Time lost meaning.

What felt like years passed as he maneuvered— learning to dance within a haze of fractured reality shaped by some unseen, deliberate mind.

He knew one truth above all:

Perdina was here.

It pulsed just beyond his grasp.

But the Weave had not yet surrendered its price.

Between shadowed corridors and remembered halls, Elmon returned to the sanctum of study—a place where silence was inked, and truth carefully archived.

The school stood in peace, its structure remembered like a hymn etched into stone.

Elcrull was always there to welcome him home if she did venture with him.

During his intervals away, he searched the Elder Archives of the Filí in Freeland.

There he uncovered fragments of a tale—

A tinkerer.

One who had acquired Perdina...

...and hidden it where no man would think to search.

Not buried. Not locked.

But concealed between veils— woven from grief itself.

The Veil did not merely conceal it. It remembered it.

Genius had shaped the shadow.

And the shadow, in turn, shaped the hiding.

This revelation tested everything Elmon had learned— the theories once studied with Ortis...the doctrines recorded by the Arcane Sigil Wards.

He began to understand: Nested veils were not places to walk.

They were truths to remember. And the deeper the echo—the more of yourself you leave behind.

He was close.

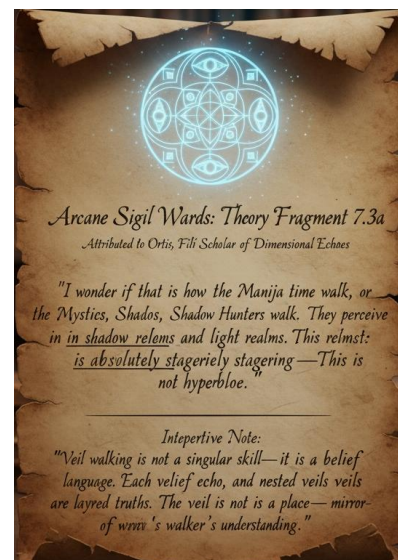
Perdina's echo pulsed—faint, somewhere near...somewhere veiled...and waiting.

Elmon stumbled upon a vein of shadow—one that carried its own weave.

He froze.

"How did I miss this?" he whispered. "Or... is it shifting? A tide within the tinkerer's memory?"

He knelt and traced the weave with trembling fingers.



It shimmered—not with light...but with recollection.

The glyphs did not speak.

They remembered.

Elmon's breath slowed.

This was no incantation. It was not something to cast.

It was something to yield to. A quiet realization settled over him:

Not a spell to recall—but a spell to become.

As he read, the weave folded around him.

Names flickered. Faces blurred.

The corridor itself began to echo—not with sound...but with memories that were not his own.

"This is the Tinkerer's tide," he whispered. *"A memory that remembers me back."*

He took a step.

Uncertain.

Was there a ritual? A phrase? Was he casting... dreaming... or being cast?

Perhaps it was all three.

Or none.

A dream. A suppressed memory. A corridor to oblivion.

The passage opened before him.

He entered.

The chamber hummed—low and oppressive—thick with arcane misery and forgotten truths.

And there—standing at its center—was the Memory Merchant.

He was already watching.

A crooked, knowing grin stretched across his face. His eyes lingered too long.

Not curious.

Hungry.

Malice coiled behind the smile—and intrigue dripped from him like oil.

The chamber stretched outward—vast, yet not truly empty.

It was riddled with impressions. Nuances of past visitors lingered in the air—concealed burdens, abandoned thoughts, and memories surrendered... or stolen.

Sigils hung in the void, suspended like fading stars. Echo-bound. Each pulsed faintly—rituals of forgetting, etched into existence.

Above, the sky held no depth.

Only a hollow expanse where the stars reflected him—

not as he was...but as he desired to be.

Elmon looked away.

The floor answered each step with a hollow resonance, as though it recorded his passage—cataloging it...for purchase, or refinement.

The Merchant stepped forward, his voice sweet—almost melodic.

Too smooth.

Too deliberate.

Without asking, he reached for Elmon's cloak. His fingers adjusted the clasp, smoothed the fringe—setting him in place...

as though preparing him for burial—or coronation.

"Your bargain awaits." He gestured into the chamber.

There—half-formed in the dim—stood a hollow figure, still being shaped.

Not born.

Assembled.

Something diabolical took form within it—layered from memory and intent.

A cold weight settled into Elmon.

Uninvited.

Unnatural.

He felt exposed—as if something within him had been measured...and found lacking.

The position—this place—was wrong.

Far beyond the chamber, Elcrull felt it.

A tremor in him.

Not pain—but unraveling.

She stilled where she sat in the hall, closed her eyes, and reached for him through the bond they shared.

Her voice did not cross distance—it *anchored*.

She praised his walk. She reminded him of who he was.

And with quiet, unwavering devotion, she filled the fracture within him with purpose.

"I do not deal in futures," the Merchant said softly. I barter in what was."

He stepped closer, his presence pressing in without force.

"Every memory surrendered... a choice is unmade. Every echo traded... a thread is severed."

A quiet laugh slipped from him—soundless, yet somehow heard.

"I need not steal."

He tilted his head slightly.

"I will remember for you."

"And in doing so... I rewrite the present—with your own forgotten hand."

His smile widened, but his eyes did not.

"I do not whisper of what may come. I echo what was."

"And with your purchase..."

He leaned in just enough—*“I unmake.”*

The hollow man did not speak.

His hands moved with careful precision—deliberate, practiced...empty.

His eyes were void.

Not darkness—but mirrors that once held invention, now filled with traded silence.

“He was brilliant,” the Merchant whispered.

“Too brilliant.”

“He bartered away the blueprint of his own mind.”

A pause.

Now he builds...what he cannot name.

The chamber pulsed.

One of the hanging sigils flickered—etched with the Tinkerer’s name...half-erased.

Elmon felt it.

The echo tugged at him.

This is the cost, he thought. To wield Perdina... I must risk becoming the echo of my own undoing.

There—within the chamber’s heart—the staff lay dormant.

Imprisoned inside the crypt of the Mad Tinkerer, encased in a cocoon of molten crystal.

It pulsed once.

Then again.

Like a heart...buried in stone.

Elmon stood before it.

Not as Magus.

Not as Master.

But as something stripped bare—nameless...hollow...and standing at the edge of surrender.

Ready to barter the last of himself.

Perdina was no ordinary staff.

They said it had been carved from the claw of a primordial dragon...engraved by a god of language.

But Elmon knew better.

It was not made.

It was remembered.

He whispered his name—softly, deliberately—as though afraid it might not answer.

Then, with careful intent, he placed it into a crystal sphere.

The chamber stilled.

The staff pulsed again.

Not with raw power—but with recognition.

Perdina did not answer to strength.

Nor to knowledge alone.

It answered only to one who had faced both truth...and temptation—and chosen...what remained.

To earn it, Elmon had to barter with the Memory Merchant.

Not gold. Not power. Memory.

Fragments of his own past.

The laughter of his elven mother—bright as sunlight on river stones.

The taste of victory from his first duel.

And, at last...the memory of his own name.

He remembered her laughter—and then...he didn't.

“You are no longer Elmon,” the Merchant whispered. “You are the Magus—the one who bartered memory for myth.”

He was forgotten to himself...yet remembered by every world he touched.

A paradox made flesh.

All the searching—through twisted connections, fractured events, and truths that divided more than they revealed—rushed through what remained of him.

And still...Perdina had not yet yielded.

His thoughts turned—not to what he had gained—but to how far he was willing to fall.

Was this the end?

Was this tragedy the cost of greatness?

Would his soul weep until nothing remained—until madness completed what sacrifice had begun?

Had all his studies meant nothing?

The clues...the trials...the unraveling of truth after truth—were they leading somewhere... or nowhere at all?

Was this a path? Or a charade?

A torment crafted not to grant power—but to see how much a man would destroy of himself before he finally turned back?

The bartering was done.

Elmon turned to the crystal cocoon and searched its surface—tracing the weaves of gestured mnemonics etched into its form.

There.

A fracture.

Not seen—*remembered*.

He seized it.

The crystal resisted.

His fingers bled as he pried it open, the surface shifting beneath his grip— consistency dissolving into memory, memory reforming into something whole... then forgotten again.

The cocoon was never still.

Always forging. Always unmaking.

Magic demanded flesh— not just will.

For a fleeting moment, doubt surfaced.

Would the staff reject him?

Had he given enough?

Or too much?

He reached in—and grasped Perdina.

Agony answered.

A crimson scar burned across his cheek, seared into him in an instant— a mark of bond...and burden.

The staff awakened.

The fiery crystal at its tip flickered in rhythm with his heartbeat.

Alive.

Listening.

The silver shaft shimmered as arcane runes shifted endlessly across its surface— forming, dissolving, reforming—warnings.

Prophecies.

Truths meant only for him.

In the molten reflection—something moved.

A second figure.

Hooded.

Watching.

Waiting.

Among the shifting runes, one phrase lingered—longer than the rest:

‘The hand that guides... may one day sever.’

Elmon tightened his grip.

Then turned to leave.

Behind him, the Memory Merchant’s voice followed—soft... certain:

“Not all truths are yours to keep, Mage.”

A pause.

“Some... will come to collect.”

‘Was this truth’s price... or torment’s design?’

Elmon returned to the school—remembering his heart...his soul...but not his name.

No matter how often they called him *Elmon*, it did not return.

Everything he had done remained clear.

Every path. Every choice.

But now, each step forward felt less like purpose— and more like submission.

From that day forward, Elmon Magus walked the metaverse—and the *Nsome*...the fractured edges of unreality itself.

They guided civilizations. They unraveled collapsing timelines. They whispered truths into the ears of dreamers.

And Elcrull walked beside him.

Always.

She spoke their life back into him—step by step, memory by memory—anchoring him to what remained real.

Perdina did not make him mighty. It made him accountable.

Elcrull's love bound them.

His desire for her could move worlds—bend time—if need demanded it.

And in moments of solitude, he would lift Perdina and tap it thrice upon the stones of forgotten worlds:

Tap once—for truth. Tap twice—for temptation. Tap thrice—for what was lost.

Then...

he would listen.

The echoes returned.

Not all were his.

Some came mournful. Some came mocking.

And one—one whispered his name...as though it still belonged to him.

Each tap was a question cast into the void.

“The answers...were never the same.”

Elmon walked the grounds of his school in quiet unrest.

He spoke of its foundations—the stones...their meaning...their purpose.

Who would come?

Who would instruct—and why?

Where were the Guardians?

Nothing answered him.

Everything felt... insufficient.

Neglected.

Unanchored.

Elcrull watched him carefully.

She did not interrupt.

But she stepped closer—close enough that her presence pressed gently against his thoughts.

“You are searching for something you already built,” she said softly.

Elmon did not answer.

At last, he turned. “I need to see what was,” he murmured.

He reached—not with spell or sigil—but with memory.

Gates answered.

Not opening—but *remembering open*.

He took Elcrull’s hand.

Not out of habit.

Out of necessity.

Together, they stepped through.

They arrived at Scath’s School of Wizardry.

Ten years had passed.

Or perhaps... ten years had been remembered.

Elmon walked the halls slowly.

Each step echoed with layered time—past and present folding over one another.

Moments overlapped.

Voices lingered.

He was not revisiting the school—he was walking through what remained of it.

Elcrull stayed at his side.

When his pace faltered, she steadied him.

When his gaze drifted, she drew him back.

She did not let him dissolve into it.

He stopped at a familiar door.

Hesitated.

Then knocked—not on wood—but on memory.

The door opened.

Ortis stood there.

He studied Elmon in silence—not as a man sees a man—but as one who reads what has been altered.

“*You have seen too much,*” Ortis said quietly.

Elmon gave a faint, humorless breath.

“*Not enough,*” he replied.

Ortis stepped aside.

“*The school has changed,*” he said.

“*Elmon’s Halls of Mystery.*”

Kno know why. Elmon did not react.

Names meant little now.

They settled into the suite.

Elmon sat across from Ortis, Elcrull beside him—her hand resting lightly on his arm.

Always anchoring.

He spoke.

Of the Forgotten Thread. Of the Mad Tinkerer. Of the Memory Merchant.

Of the bargain.

“I do not know the cost of Perdina,” Elmon said at last. “I do not know what I bargained with.”

Silence held the room.

Ortis closed his eyes.

Not thinking—searching.

He turned inward, tracing his own echo—and stopped.

Something was wrong.

“The boundary...” Ortis murmured.

His brow tightened.

“It is missing.”

He opened his eyes.

“You are not the only one who has been altered.”

Elcrull’s grip tightened on Elmon’s arm.

Not in fear—in resolve.

“Then we find what was taken,” she said.

And for the first time since returning — Elmon felt something steady.

Not memory.

Not certainty.

Her.

Elcrull spoke his name for him—the one he could no longer recall.

She gave it shape. Gave it meaning.

But to him...it was empty.

His thoughts remained whole. His purpose—unchanged.

Everything he had done still stood firm within him.

Yet the spark of *who he was...*

remained just beyond reach.

So he chose a name he could hold.

Not given—but accepted.

Mage.

Magus.

They spoke long into the evening.
Of the Crypt siege.
Of studies and halls once walked.
Of quiet hours in the clerical ward.
Of Elcrull's wonder.
Of their wedding.
Of their Cubs.
He remembered all of it.
Every moment.
Every truth.
But not the one thing that bound it together.
When the night grew still, and the world quieted around them— he sat in silence.
Not as Elmon Silverwood.
Not as the man he had been.
But as something reshaped by memory...and what it had taken.
He was the Mage.
His truths were unnegotiable.
They walked with him—across realities, across worlds.
He spoke in memory—a single point, never repeated, never questioned.
It was simply... known.
And for now — that was enough.

Chapter ⊕: The Bloodstone Betrayal

Elmon searched for direction—not for answers, but for *meaning*.

His heart was singing.

And he did not know why.

With Elcrull at his side, they walked the worlds he had once imagined—thinking perhaps the reason would reveal itself there.

The Cubs had gone their separate paths.

Each seeking their own calling.

Before they parted, Elmon placed a Stone of Calling into each of their hands—a tether, should they ever need him.

Or each other.

Eyona—the fifth of the eight Guardian Floating Worlds—hung like a sapphire suspended in twilight.

A realm of scholars and stargazers, where gravity bent not to law...but to imagination.

Here, Elmon—the Magus—sought refuge.

After binding himself to Perdina, the staff of fire and prophecy.

But even here—something felt thin.

His anchor defined him...yet hollowed him.

One evening, beneath a sky that seemed too vast to belong to any one world, he looked at Elcrull.

Stars reflected in her eyes.

Memories lingered on his lips.

“Will you marry me again?” he asked softly.

She laughed—bright, unguarded—and accepted without hesitation.

Time had stretched between them.

Years had passed like quiet tides.

She had forgotten the feel of his kiss...

But not him.

She was one hundred and thirty years.

He, two hundred.

Still—he saw her.

And sorrow touched him.

“*I have taken you from everything you knew,*” he said. “*Your family. Your people.*”

He hesitated.

“*And yet... you still walk with me.*”

He looked at her, searching.

“*Why is your love so true?*”

Elcrull did not answer with words.

She reached for him—and kissed him deeply.

Then, resting her forehead against his, she spoke softly:

“We are one.”

“How could I walk without my star... my soul?”

“You are memory to me.”

“Strength for me.”

“And love... within me.”

They were married beneath the Moonvine Arches—petals drifting in slow spirals, sky-crystals humming softly overhead.

For a time...magic stepped aside.

Perdina rested in a stasis field beside Elmon’s meditation chamber.

Silent.

Watching... or sleeping.

Their lives became still.

Not empty—but full in a different way.

Days were no longer measured by survival or pursuit.

There was no hunt. No wandering in search of meaning.

Only presence.

They walked together.

Spoke freely.

Shared what had once been lost between them.

Time loosened its grip.

Days became weeks.

Weeks became months.

Eyona held its peace.

No echo scars.

No grief-weavers.

No shadow blooms.

And yet...

something in Elmon felt... thin.

They explored the world together.

The star-scapes of the Elhuian Mountains.

The Singing Falls of Wilnow Forest.

The misted mornings where Locrit Sand Dragons drifted like ghosts across the dunes.

There were white-star mornings. Red-eclipse evenings.

And winds from the Hallowed Peaks that stole breath and thought alike.

Nothing seemed as though it could end.

Elmon spent long hours with the Cubs.

SIS would arrive with Tangela—curious, alive, eager to see a world untouched by the scars of Cragnearth.

Elcrull watched him in those moments.

Quietly.

He smiled.

He spoke.

He taught.

But something in him...never fully arrived.

Even taking time to sail for Elihuan, to witness the dawn's crystal songs.

Beauty did not need naming here.

It revealed itself—in the scent of fresh blooms, in the sharp sweetness of Silver Cresling berries plucked from the crystal-limbed trees.

The Storm

Under a crimson eclipse, the tranquility shattered.

From the Rift Hollow came the Elorian—and the Hoff Ogres of the Nether.

Twisted brutes, born of entropy storms and flesh rituals.

They came not blindly.

They came *called*.

Drawn by whispers of Perdina's power.

They believed the staff could breach the Vault of Aeons—and grant dominion over the forgotten nether realms.

They struck fast.

The city of Mayor fell within the hour.

Peace had softened them.

They were not ready.

Then came the valleys.

Merin.

Sortha.

Deep within the Wilnow Forest.

Word reached them before the blades did.

They prepared.

But preparation was not enough.

Not against this.

Messengers were sent—to Elmon...and the Curian Guard.

They arrived too late.

The valleys burned.

The people were butchered.

What remained... scattered.

And the Hoff—they did not fight for conquest.
Not anymore.
Something in them broke from the Elorian command.
This was not strategy.
Not war.
It was hate.
They abandoned the greater design.
The Vault. The realms beyond.
All of it meant nothing.
They wanted one thing.
The staff.
Their leader, Grolf the Maw-Eater, strode at the front.
In his hands—a maul forged of condensed gravity—its weight bending the air itself.
He promised his warband dominion without end once the staff was theirs.
They razed the outer sanctuaries.
Desperation followed in their wake.
The observatories fell silent. The star-watchers were cut down.
Even the sky-crystals—once humming with life—were stilled.
Their song... forgotten beneath the roar of ogres.
Then they turned—toward the Moonvine Arches.
Where Elmon and Elcrull had once spoken vows of eternity.
This was no longer an invasion.
It was a war—consecrated in the blood of a peaceful people.
Elmon rallied what remained of the Curian Guard.
Too many had already fallen in the valley groves—unprepared for the reckless brutality of the assault.
The ogres did not merely destroy.
They reveled in it.
For three days, they pressed against the Moonvine Arches.
And failed.
Elmon held.
The Guard followed.
Frustration turned the tide.
The ogres captured an elf—tortured him until breath and mind frayed.
From him, they learned of a hidden path—a silent entrance along the rear of the Arches.
Then they did something unexpected.
They withdrew.
And split their forces.

“That is not ogre behavior,” Elmon said quietly.

He turned to the Guard.

“Is there another way in?”

They searched the archives. Old maps. Forgotten designs.

There was.

The Silent Gate.

Elmon did not hesitate.

He divided the Guard.

One force to hold.

One to intercept.

And he— took the watchtower.

Waiting.

Listening.

For the moment, the war would break out again.

At first, the assault struck the valley near the Silent Gate.

The ground shook as the ogres hammered against stone and mythril—breaking its resonance, not its strength.

Elmon moved instantly.

Perdina answered.

A burst of resolving flame tore through the forward ranks— driving them back, scattering their advance.

But the cost came quickly.

Guards fell.

Too many.

Elmon called for reinforcement—drawing warriors from the Moonvine entrance to secure the Silent Gate.

That was the moment Grolf had been waiting for.

As the Guard shifted, the front at Moonvine thinned.

Elmon steadied those who remained—bolstering them with virtue, strengthening their resolve through Perdina’s resonance.

“Tangela,” he said, turning to her, *“hold the Veil.”*

She nodded.

Blades drawn. Eyes burning.

With word and steel, she stood with the Guard.

The Gate held.

For a time.

Grolf pressed forward, driving his forces harder— testing the line, seeking the break.

It gave Elmon what he needed.

He stepped forward alone.
To meet Grolf.
But as he moved toward Moonvine—the Silent Gate faltered.
The Guard there...could not hold.
There was no anchor.
No presence to steady them.
No Elmon.
The ogres broke through.
Tangela met them.
She did not fall back.
She cut them down—One after another—rage and purpose guiding every strike.
Half their number fell before her.
But numbers... and time... took their toll.
With her final breath—she gave everything.
Steel.
Word.
Will.
And the rest fell with her.
When the last ogre dropped—Tangela Silverwood fell beside them.
Elmon stood before the horde—alone.
His robes burned.
The arcane runes along Perdina screamed— not in sound...but in prophecy.
He answered.
Netherfire surged from him in violent waves—raw, unrestrained—shattering ogres in bursts of flame that bent the sky itself.
Dozens fell.
Still they came.
Then—Grolf spoke.
“Yield... or watch her die.”
Elcrull.
Bound. Held at the edge of the battlefield.
Elmon froze.
And in that moment—
SIS moved.
She surged forward with an Echo onslaught—netherfire spilling from a borrowed wand, fury and love driving her beyond reason.
She struck hard.
Too hard.

Too fast.
Grolf was ready.
Steel met flesh.
And in a single, brutal instant—she fell.
Silence broke inside Elmon.
Not rage.
Not yet.
Something deeper.
Perdina trembled in his grasp.
Not with fury—
but with revelation.
The runes shifted.
Twisted.
Aligned.
A forbidden truth revealed itself:
The Bloodstone Invocation.
Not cast.
Unleashed.
Fueled by grief that could not be undone.
Elmon did not speak.
He did not think.
He remembered.
The air itself fractured.
Memory became blade.
Invisible edges tore through Grolf's warband—cutting through flesh, bone, and echo alike.
There were no screams.
Only absence.
When it ended—nothing remained but ash.
Grolf.
Gone.
The battlefield—silent.
And then—the cost.
Perdina burned.
Not outward—inward.
The crystal at its tip pulsed—and drew something into itself.
Not power.
Presence.
The last fragments of his children's souls.

Locked away.

Elmon staggered.

He could still remember them.

Their faces.

Their voices.

Their lives.

But their names—

Their names would not come.

Not without pain.

Now, there was only one way.

He lifted Perdina.

Tap once—for truth.

Tap twice—for temptation.

Tap thrice—for what was lost.

He listened.

Nothing answered.

Chapter ⊕: Resolve of Ancient Thoughts

The Eight Guardian Worlds of the Metaverse: Unraveled

Since that day, Elmon has refused to return to Eyona.

The floating world still drifts—silent and untouched—encircled by a ring of spectral fire.

The other Guardian Worlds mourn the loss of Eyona's laughter.

Perdina burns deeper now.

In his dreams, it glows a heavy crimson.

Some say the staff mourns alongside its wielder. Others believe it is preparing for another storm.

And in the quiet places between stars, there are still whispers—of a second Ogre uprising...of fragments of his children hidden within the Vault of Aeons...and of a prophecy—not of vengeance—but of redemption.

These Guardian Worlds anchor reality within the vast metaverse—each a realm of paradox and power.

Their magic does not merely shape fate...it defines the boundaries of what fate may become.

At the sundering of Eyona, the Guardians stirred.

The memory of her peace echoed in Elihuan, forcing her from stillness.

The dreamscapes of Aura twisted—bitter... denigrating what once was.

Was this truth awakening...or judgment taking form?

Even in the distant lands of Elerie, shadows deepened beyond their nature.

They did not consume—they remembered.

From eons of quiet, the Guardian Worlds awakened to their purpose...and to duties long buried beneath peace.

War did not rise from necessity.

It rose from whim.

A storm of Ogres—chasing echoes of power they could neither understand...nor survive.

There is Brittia—the Ember of Conflict.

It has stirred.

It has awakened.

A realm of war made memory, fueled by chaos... and cunning.

At the rising of the Ogres, Brittia answered.

Its battlefields shift once more—fortresses long shattered now echo with purpose, and the canyons of bygone wars whisper the names of those who bled within them.

Beneath it all, something older stirs.

The Strife Pulse.

An enchantment buried deep within the soil—once sealed—now awakened.

It does not command war.

It provokes it.
Emotion sharpens. Doubt fractures. Resolve turns to fury.
What was once remembered...is now relived.
From slumber, they rise.
War-sprites. Cursed generals. Charm-binders of forgotten campaigns.
They do not awaken as they were.
They awaken as they ended.
And at the heart of Brittia—where conflict once broke itself—lies the Crimson Treaty.
A scroll that ended a century of rage in a single week.
Not by victory.
But by binding the will to continue.
When it was sealed, the Pulse quieted. The generals slept. The war forgot itself.
Or so the worlds believed.
Now—Brittia remembers.
Peace is resisted.
There is Ellhuan—the Resonant Realm.
A land of crystal and living tone, where reality is not shaped by force—but by vibration.
Its structures do not stand.
They sing.
The Chime Vaults. The Gleaming Labyrinth. The Mirrored Peaks.
All once held in perfect harmony.
Now—the rhythm falters.
A distortion moves through Ellhuan like a fracture in song.
Not silence—but wrongness.
Resonance-based sorcery surges beyond its bounds.
Crystals echo not only memory... but emotion unrestrained.
Time bends to tone. Thought follows frequency. Meaning begins to slip.
What was once harmony becomes recursion.
Seers bound to crystal. Hunters of resonance. Forgers of sound.
They have awakened with purpose—not to preserve—but to defend... and destroy.
They sing of the old wars. They echo memories long buried. They chase tones that no longer exist.
And some...
never return.
For those who remain too long within Ellhuan find themselves caught in a single pursuit:
The perfect tone.
A note that resolves all things.
A sound that completes the self.

But it is never found.

And so they listen...

forever.

There is Arcadia—the Wild of First Breath.

A jungle unclaimed by time.

A land where life does not grow—it erupts.

Here dwells the memory of the First Beast—the ethereal dragon, Desporia the Dark.

Arcadia does not welcome.

It endures.

Those who enter seeking answers are unmade by what they find.

Life blooms without restraint.

Primal force surges unchecked—and Echoes, unbound and unshaped, spring into being like sparks from living thought.

Emotion here is not felt.

It is manifested.

The Canopy Steeps awaken. The Hollow Vines Citadel breathes once more. The Mossfire Plains burn with ancient memory.

Something beneath it all has stirred.

Desporia wakes.

The land answers.

Alchemical flora twist and surge—no longer rare, no longer controlled. Ancient fossils rise as if time were only a suggestion. Beast-hewn weapons remember the hands that once wielded them...and seek them again.

The great fauna gather.

Not in fear—but in recognition.

Relic chasers abandon purpose. Desire gives way to instinct.

And the Greenborn—long thought lost to the ages—walk again, as though time never claimed them.

It is said:

Few who enter Arcadia return.

And those who do...do not return same.

There is Hurm'Ay—the Dragon Bastion.

A world of scale and sovereignty, where dragons do not rule—they remember.

At the stirring of the metaverse, Hurm'Ay awakened.

From ancient slumber, they rose—not in panic...but in purpose.

The mountains stand as spines of the world, veined with forest and flame.

Every peak is watched.

Every sky is claimed.

The Skytalon Peaks. Ashroot Refuge. The Cavern of Echoes.
All now pulse with life after eons of silence.
Beneath the land, the Draconic ley lines awaken—rivers of power, peril, and prophecy.
They do not grant strength.
They reveal it.
Dragons of every creed and form gather.
Wardens of flame. Keepers of lineage. Archivists of time.
They do not rush to war.
They prepare for it.
Ancient tongues stir once more, whispering truths older than memory—of cycles, of ruin,
of return.
Nothing here is forgotten.
Not ash. Not echo. Not the names of those who failed.
Suspended cities hang above vast rivers of molten fire—held aloft by spellwork older than
mortal understanding.
They are not marvels.
They are warnings.
What once slept beneath Hurm’Ay now watches.
Alert.
Ready.
There is Eyona—once a mirror of mundanity and mystery.
A world not unlike the familiar—cities of quiet lives, hidden wonders beneath ordinary
days, and second chances waiting in unseen corners.
It was not a world of extremes.
It was a world of balance.
Now—it is broken.
Entropy has claimed her.
What once felt whole now unravels—not with purpose...but with absence.
The remnants remain.
Whisper Alley—where secrets once passed like breath in the dark.
The Tangle Woods—alive with quiet paths and forgotten routes.
Moonvine Veil—once a sanctuary of stillness and devotion.
All shattered.
Not by war.
By whim.
The hand of an Ogre.
And yet—something endured.

The forgotten Null Square—a place where magic does not answer—stood silent... and untouched.

There, the children were spared.

Not by power.

But by its absence.

Now the sages are silent.

Families scattered. Societies hidden. Voices dimmed to memory.

Eyona does not cry out.

She lingers.

A world that remembers what it was—and cannot return.

Elmon did not know who he was.

Not truly.

Nor why, in this hour shaped by the Ogres, his thoughts turned toward a calling he could not name.

Perdina whispered within him—not in words...but in pressure.

Time is yours...

...and it is running out.

They do not know what you are to them.

He faltered.

Was this his reality?

Or one borrowed from another life he no longer remembered?

One truth remained.

Elcrull.

Her name did not slip.

Her presence did not fracture.

He clung to it.

He drifted—between now...and then...between what was happening—and what had already happened.

Was this the nature of the metaverse?

Or had he been shaped—structured—for a purpose he had not yet heard?

Something stirred.

A memory not taken.

Not traded.

Not lost.

It surfaced—unbidden.

When the Eight Veins pulse as one...Silence weeps from Cubs not home...The crystal chimes of Ellhuan will shatter, calling Brittia's blades to burn in laughter...

He shuddered.

“Is this prophecy...?”

“Or madness?”

“Is this my doing...or the echo of something already broken?”

He pressed a hand to his chest.

“Or is this...”

his voice faltered—*“...what Eyona left behind in me?”*

And yet, as the final words of Eyona’s fate faded from the chamber, Elmon felt a tremor in his soul—not of knowledge, but of recognition.

Elcrull fastened her heart to him—steadyng what wavered.

Calling his purpose back into form.

In the midst of the Ethereal lies Aura.

At first glance—it feels ordinary.

Until it does not.

Every corner hums with concealed histories. Every silence carries weight.

Nothing here is empty.

The citadel of Saronce stands at its heart—stone wrought in perfection.

Once pristine.

Once still.

Now—it remembers.

Its walls do not dream.

They recall.

What was built in silence now prepares in awareness.

The Tower of Idle Giants has awakened.

Statues once drifting in song—dancing in regal display—now stand armored.

Bound in purpose.

They do not perform.

They march.

The Void Grove stirs.

Not with movement—but with presence.

Aura’s magic does not think.

It does not choose.

It responds.

To thought.

To intent.

To the weight of what is carried within.

Unworthy minds do not pass unnoticed.

The caretakers rise.

The colossal forms stir.

Beasts of stone and echo awaken—not for spectacle—but for judgment.
And beneath it all—deep within the Citadel—something endures.
A heartbeat of echoes.
Not loud.
Not wild.
But certain.
It does not call for war.
It declares it.
There is Wishar—the Realm of Eternal Night.
Its skies are endless—strewn with stars of impossible beauty.
But the light does not comfort.
It watches.
Shadow drapes the land—not empty...but intimate.
Close.
Too close.
Where once there was stillness, now there is hunger.
Not for flesh—
For those who disturb what was meant to remain undisturbed.
The Tenebrous Hollows awaken—keepers of the bound and the forgotten.
The Ever-Dark Maw stirs—that which consumes without trace or memory.
The Echo Veil Basin opens—where forgotten memories return...whether welcomed or not.
Wishar does not forget.
It binds.
It remembers.
And now—it hungers.
Its shadow-forged essence rises—fear made form, terror given shape.
Thought itself is not safe here.
A single doubt...a flicker of fear...is enough.
Even giants falter.
Even dragons hesitate.
The night-bound nomads gather—watchers once... now wardens.
They do not wander.
They wait.
Whisper-things stir in the dark. Dream-feeders drift between waking and sleep.
To rest here...is to invite them in.
Torchlight fails.
Fire weakens.
Hope flickers—and is gone.

In Wishar—the end does not come suddenly.
It comes quietly.
And it knows your name before you remember it.
At the farthest reaches lies Elerie—a realm of shifting light and shadow.
Some call it a gateway.
Others—an ending.
Elerie does not remain.
It reshapes.
Land becomes memory. Memory becomes terrain. Ideals fracture into paths that do not stay.
Nothing here is fixed.
Everything here responds.
To those who enter.
The Cloudshard Spires drift like dreams—until they do not.
Now they churn—a storm of glass and light, ready to tear apart those who cannot find their footing.
The Shadow Coil tightens. The Phantom Hills shift.
They do not block the way.
They become it.
Paths mislead. Steps betray. Direction dissolves into doubt.
Those who falter are not cast out—
They are drawn inward.
Toward the emptiness they carry.
Elerie's magic does not simply deceive.
It reshapes will.
Illusion bends to belief. Fog takes form. Shadow answers intention.
To walk here in anger—is to be lost within it.
Its keepers awaken.
Shadelings. Sentiment-forgers. Beings of thinking mist and bound intention.
They do not guard.
They shape.
And now, remembering their purpose, they rise—
Not to defend the realm...
But to decide who may leave it.

Chapter ⊕: Prophecy of the Eight Veins and the Coming of Dragos

Inscribed within a rune-threaded tome sealed in the Vault of Aeons, this ancient prophecy binds the Guardian Worlds to a single reckoning—a ciphered darkness reborn.

“When the Eight Veins pulse as one. Silence weeps from Saronce’s stone. The crystal chimes of Ellhuan will shatter, Calling Brittia’s blades to burn in laughter.

Arcadia shall bleed through vine and fang, as Hurm’Ay’s skies echo the clang of dragons. Eyona will forget its name and shame, While Wishar snuffs out each candle’s flame.

Elerie twists in light’s regret, as shadows weave what suns forget. Then shall the Encrypted Evil wake the Dragos, Dream-Crypt of Chaos, shall break.”

Interpretation by the Vault Scribes:

Seven Veins: There are not merely pathways between the Guardian Worlds—they are Veins. Ley-line conduits that bind each realm into a singular living lattice.

When brought into alignment, they do not simply connect worlds—they awaken the Prime Thread.

A network of passage, convergence, and collapse.

Through it, distance loses meaning. Separation becomes illusion.

And what was divided... may be made whole.

Dragos: He was created as the embodiment of divine clarity and wisdom.

A celestial of the First Overseer.

Tasked with interpreting the will of Whiteheart for all celestial kind.

He stood not as ruler—but as understanding made form.

He did not deny Whiteheart.

He redefined Him. And in that fracture—he became something else.

He is now not a creature, but a celestial corrupted resonance, fractured truth, misaligned meaning.

It is said he is bound behind: memory-code.

Dimensional scars.

Sealed by Eternal Fire in the metaverse itself.

Encrypted Evil:

Dragos was once perceived as a god of unmaking—shattered into fragments and hidden as algorithms across reality.

Now, he does not return.

He redefines himself—by infecting memory and truth.

He appears not as form, but as prophecy... voice... or shadow.

Catalyst:

When each world yields to its own flaw—

strife... obsession... primal greed... secrecy... artificial perfection... despair... corruption—the Veins begin to answer.

The Prime Thread does not break.

It unravels.

And at its center—Dragos is not reborn.

He is made whole.

And somewhere within that unraveling... walked the one who did not remember his own name.

His creation was not an act of possibility—but of inevitability.

Legend holds that the Magus carries the final cipher—etched into Perdina's fiery crystal.

The only key capable of binding Dragos once more...

—or completing what was broken.

As whispers grow louder and shadows stretch longer—one question lingers:

Will He be the Seal or the Summoner?

Will he be Destruction or become the Savior?

The Seven Herald of Dragos: Bringers of the Ciphered End

"Whispers say these beings were not born—they were decoded from the corrupted seams of reality itself."

Each Herald anchors Dragos return by unraveling a Guardian World's deepest flaw."

These beings are not merely vile—they are formulations of failure given will.

Their presence is felt first by seers—not as vision...but as revulsion.

Bethnor the Vile, the first.

He is not war.

He is what comes before it.

Bethnor walks Brittia as a silver-masked diplomat—measured in tone, flawless in reason.

He does not raise his voice.

He refines it.

Peace bends in his presence. Trust thins. Certainty fractures.

Where he speaks—agreement becomes suspicion.

Where he listens—loyalty becomes doubt.

He is a warbinding—not maker of conflict, but weaver of inevitability.

Treaties become triggers. Alliances become accusations. Words become weapons long before blades are drawn.

Cities turn inward.

Factions sharpen.

Old wounds are remembered— and made new.

Brittia does not fall to invasion.

It devours itself.

And Bethnor—only watches.

Ergina the Crypt Beast

Herald of Fracture — The Resonance Corrupter

Where sound once held truth—
now it falters.

The second Herald is known as Ergina the Crypt Beast.

It does not walk.

It reverberates.

Across Ellhuan—the realm of crystal and living tone—
its presence is first felt not as sound...

but as misalignment.

A note just slightly wrong.

A harmony that almost resolves—

but never does.

Ergina the Serpent

It manifests as a serpentine form of fractured crystal—its body splintered across frequencies, its voice an unending chorus of murmurs layered upon themselves.

It does not speak.

It echoes incorrectly.

Thought bends in its presence.

Ideas repeat. Memories overlap. Meaning fractures into recursion.

Those who listen too long—
begin to loop.

A question without answer.

A truth without resolution.

A thought that never completes.

They seek the perfect tone.

They never find it.

And in that endless pursuit—they harden.

Mind first.

Then form.

Crystal statues, frozen mid-thought—their final question etched into silence.

Ergina does not destroy memory.

It detunes it.

Time slips its measure. Moments repeat. Cause forgets effect.

Ellhuan does not shatter.

It drifts.

Into perfect, irreversible error.

And Ergina—sings.

Rogalor the Time Thief

Herald of Rupture — The Chrono Marauder

Time does not flow in Arcadia.

It breathes.

It grows. It decays. It remembers.

The third Herald breaks this.

He is known as Rogalor the Time Thief.

He does not arrive.

He interrupts.

Rogalor moves through Arcadia cloaked in living vine—growth that withers and blooms in the same moment.

Decay before birth. Bloom after death.

One eye burns forward—seeing what will be.

The other gazes backward—devouring what was.

He does not command time.

He steals it.

Through the Chrono-Latch— a binding of moment to will—he unravels the living thread of being.

Years collapse into seconds. Youth crumbles into dust. Possibility is stripped before it can become.

Others—are never allowed to be.

Their futures taken. Their paths erased.

In Arcadia, this is not death.

It is removal from the cycle.

And the land feels it.

Seasons stutter. Predators hunt before hunger. Life surges... then vanishes.

The balance breaks.

Instinct no longer follows rhythm.

It consumes it.

Rogalor does not seek dominion.

He seeks collapse.

For when the cycle fails—when growth no longer follows decay—when time no longer anchors life—Arcadia will become something else.

A jungle unbound by sequence.

Where past and present are devoured alike.

Where nothing waits—and nothing remains.

And in that rupture—Dragos draws nearer.

Sarrow Death Caller

Mourning Wraith of Eyona — Keeper of Unveiled Truth

A faded noble, cloaked in funeral petals—its voice a lost lullaby carried through empty halls.

Sarrow does not bring death.

It brings remembrance.

With a whisper, Sarrow unearths what was buried—

hidden betrayals

silenced truths

forgotten sins

Memories do not return gently.

They are made public.

Spoken. Seen. Felt.

What was concealed becomes undeniable.

Eyona is a land of paradox and secrecy—

Sarrow breaks it.

It forces truth into the open until trust fractures under its own weight.

Families divide.

Allies turn.

Leaders fall beneath what they once hid.

Eyona does not fall to invasion.

It collapses inward—

as truth, without mercy, destroys what secrecy once held together.

Ridicus Addool the Sunderer

Divider of Dragons — Herald of Fractured Flame

A warlord clad in scaled ruin—his twin-bladed axe forged from the bones and curses of dragonkind.

He does not hunt dragons.

He turns them.

Ridicus does not strike the body—he strikes the bond.

With every word, every wound, every presence—he unbalances the ancient accords of dragonkind.

Old rivalries awaken.

Buried slights burn anew.

Honor twists into accusation.

Hurm'Ay stands not by strength—but by harmony.

Ridicus fractures it.

He drives wedge into enclave and flight, until unity gives way to pride.

Dragons do not fall to him—They fall to each other.

The skies of Hurm'Ay do not darken from shadow—

but from fire against fire.

Ancient guardians turn upon their own kind, and the ley lines of draconic power fracture under the strain.

What once pre

Barack Niel the Sorcerer

Wonder of Wishar — Herald of Consuming Night

A discarnate figure cloaked in smoldering shadow—his form barely held together by burning sigils etched into absence.

He does not walk in darkness.

He unmakes light.

Torch Reversal

Where flame is kindled—he answers.

Light bends... then breaks.

Torches do not illuminate.

They awaken.

Flame becomes sentient—hungry, whispering, aware—
feeding not on flesh—but on sanity.

Wishar is a realm of eternal night—but its people endure through fragile lights:

Fire, memory, and will

Barack Niel corrupts them all.

Hope is not extinguished.

It is turned against those who hold it.

In Wishar, light becomes the enemy.

Refuge becomes exposure.

Warmth becomes torment.

Clarity becomes madness.

Despair deepens until—

reality itself begins to buckle under the weight of unending night.

Engorya the Flesh Eater

Maw of Mutation — Herald of Unbound Form

A walking amalgam of stolen forms—eyes where there should be none, limbs that remember other bodies, a shape that never agrees with itself.

It does not take life.

It takes form.

Engorya devours not flesh—but identity.

What it consumes is not lost.

It is rewritten.

Limbs return wrong.

Faces return unfamiliar.

Voices echo from mouths that never spoke them.

Those taken are not killed—

They are recomposed into living nightmares.

Elerie is a realm of shifting perception—where reality bends to thought, emotion, and memory.

Engorya breaks the boundary between:

what is seen

what is believed

what is real

It feeds on instability—until form itself loses meaning.

In Elerie, illusion becomes flesh—and flesh refuses to remain whole.

The land reshapes violently, echoing the horrors Engorya creates.

What was once mutable becomes uncontrollable—

a storm of living contradiction.

Engorya does not merely destroy Elerie—

It prepares it.

Breaking it down into raw, unformed existence—

feeding Dragos the clay of creation itself.

Together, these Heralds corrupt the Veins of each world—

each pulse drawing the Prime Thread closer to unraveling.

With every emergence, Dragos is not reborn—he is made more whole.

It is said Perdina's crystal answers them—its fire deepening with each Herald revealed.

And the Magus—now hunts their echoes across star-broken paths.

Encounters with the Heralds of Dragos

Directive of the Magus

This record traces Elmon's desperate passage across the Guardian Worlds—as he confronts each Herald to forestall the rise of Dragos.

He now sees what festers within the Guardians.

What was hidden... must be unraveled.

What was unraveled... must be severed.

The corruption of the Guardians is no longer hidden.

It festers.

What was once prophecy is now a living wound—
pulsing through the flaw of each realm.

Seven Heralds walk the threads of reality— each a ciphered contagion, unraveling the Veins of their world.

But the path is not given.

Where does one begin—when all things are breaking?
Which corruption bleeds fastest?
Which fracture runs deepest?
The Magus must not choose by ease—but by consequence.
For the most dangerous Herald is not the loudest... nor the cruelest—
but the one whose touch fractures the very identity of its realm—
turning legacy into weapon...and memory into madness.
And so—with Perdina’s crystal dimly answering, and the weight of eight worlds pressing
upon his soul—
the Magus steps forward.
Not as savior.
But as severance.
The prophecy spoke of seven Heralds—each a ciphered wound upon the Guardian
Worlds.
No.
There were eight.
What of Aura?
Why did she bear no name—no shadow—no corruption?
And yet... Elmon felt it.
Beneath the stone of Saronce. Within the heartbeat of the Void Grove.
In the silent march of the Tower’s giants.
Aura was not spared.
She was becoming.
Her flaw had not yet taken shape—it was still choosing its form.
Perhaps her Herald was not sent—
but born.
Perhaps it was a cub...a memory not yet understood.
Or perhaps—
in the final reckoning—
it would be Elmon himself.

It begins.

Elmon set aside the enigma of Aura—though its silence gnawed at the edges of his
resolve.

Duty demanded focus.

The first wound to mend was Ellhuan—realm of echo and obsession—
where the Crypt Beast sang madness into crystal.

Perdina pulsed in his grip.

He stepped.

Shadow folding around him, his form unraveling—then reforming—
as he crossed the Prime Thread.

Elcrull felt Elmon's fire.

She anchored his heart—fixing his purpose to its end.

He struck ground in Gunard's Hall, where the walls whispered his name
in voices not his own.

The air shimmered with fractured memory—each breath a question, each step a lie.

The maze of happenstance and forgery twisted his thoughts, forcing him to relive
moments that never were.

Through the Lenyard's Enclave, he passed—statues of thinkers frozen mid-thought, their
eyes glinting with recursive despair.

The Chime Vaults awaited—vaults not of treasure, but of tone.

Here, Ergina's resonance traps pulsed—veins of living crystal, each note a snare for the
soul.

Elmon's mind began to loop.

Thoughts folded inward. Memories echoed—again... and again—until meaning itself
began to collapse.

But within him—something stirred.

A shard of Silva's memory.

Her song—once sung beneath Aura's moonlit grove.

He let it rise.

Not as memory—but as counter-harmony.

The vaults trembled.

Crystal statues cracked. The song of obsession fractured—then broke.

Ergina screamed—

not in voice—but in vibration.

Its form splintered, shattering into fragments of corrupted resonance—
scattering through the Echo Tunnels.

Victory bore a price.

Elmon's mind now echoed with cryptic fragments—shards of Dragos' cipher bleeding into
his thoughts like ink in water.

Silence no longer comforted him.

Memory had become a shifting maze.

Perdina glowed faintly—not in triumph...but in mourning.

As if lamenting the clarity it had surrendered to break Ergina's song.

Around him, the caretakers stirred from crystal stasis—their minds fragile, their eyes
haunted.

They began to process the unraveling of their world.

Elmon, still resonating with the beast's shattered tones, spoke the need aloud:

The echo fragments of Ergina must be purged from the ash veil
before they recombine into something worse.
Where does the haunting cut deepest?
Elmon paused—as if the question were not his own, but meant for Perdina’s glow.
He struck the ground twice—
once for the Prime, once for the Ethereal.
Then came the whisper—ancient... and aching:
“The Dragon War unravels the fabric of reality,” he intoned,
“splitting the primal from the ethereal—yet binding the guardians to both.”
The unraveling answered.
It surged through them—a paradox made flesh.
Guardians now walked in two realms at once, each step echoing across dimensions that
no longer held their shape—
as if reality itself mourned the clarity it once possessed.
Elmon turned inward—to the shape of his life:
the School,
the Siege of the Crypt,
the birth of his cubs.
Was it all preparation...or resistance?
He did not answer.
He pondered.
Then—clarity.
“It must be Hurm’Ay.”
The veil stirred, its thoughts coalescing like stormlight behind silk.
“This Ridicus—this aberration—must not be allowed to walk both realms as one.”
“To do so would fracture the weave beyond repair.”
Already, the seams of existence trembled.
Already, the guardians felt it—
a third echo.
Not born of Prime. Not born of Ethereal.
But something older. Something forbidden.
From the Vault of the Celestials, truths stir that even the Veil dares not whisper.
Whiteheart, the Creator, forged the Titans to govern the realms—living anchors to cosmic
order.
Atlas, bearer of the Prime Realm, now falters.
His domain bleeds into the Ethereal, its boundaries softening like memory in a dream.
Hyperion, Titan of the Ethereal, feels the inversion—his realm weeping into the Prime, its
essence diluted, its purity undone.

And **Cronus**, Titan of Time, suffers most of all.

The fracture between realms does not divide—it distorts.

Time stutters.

Time loops.

Time forgets.

The Titans are unraveling.

If they fail to restore balance, they will not die.

They will become their realms—dissolving into the very forces they once governed.

Atlas will become stone and soil.

Hyperion—mist and memory.

Cronus... a broken echo of time itself.

And in their absence, the realms will stand unguarded.

The Veil will thin. Ridicus will walk freely. And reality will mourn its architects.

The air trembles.

Time stutters.

Perdina burns with unstable resonance as the Magus steps into the Convergence Chamber—

a place that does not exist...until all realms begin to bleed as one.

ATLAS *(voice like tectonic plates grinding)*

The Prime fractures. My mountains weep into mist.

My forests echo with dreams not their own.

I can no longer hold the boundary.

HYPERION *(voice like wind through memory)*

The Ethereal dilutes. Thought becomes stone.

Emotion calcifies. I feel the Prime pressing into me—

like a name I was never meant to remember.

CRONUS *(voice like a clock breaking in reverse)*

Time is no longer linear. Past and future argue in silence.

I unravel. Soon... I will be nothing but echoes.

THE MAGUS *(stepping forward, voice steady—strained)*

Then let me carry what you cannot. Let Perdina bear your fragments.

Let me face Ridicus—while you remain whole.

ATLAS

You would bear the weight of worlds.

HYPERION

You offer your vessel to hold what even we cannot contain.

CRONUS

You risk becoming the Fourth Echo—neither Titan... nor mortal.

THE MAGUS

I risk nothing that has not already begun.

The Veil chose me. Ridicus fears me. That must mean something.

The Titans fall silent.

Perdina pulses—waiting.

ATLAS

Then take my root—the Stone of Origin.

HYPERION

Take my breath—the Memory of Light.

CRONUS

Take my tick—the Fracture of Time.

Each Titan renders a fragment of their domain into Perdina.

The vessel ignites—not with flame, but with unstable becoming.

It stabilizes.

...but only for now.

CRONUS *(final words)*

You have bought time, Magus. But not salvation.

Face Ridicus. End the paradox.

...or become it.

Using the fracture of time, the Magus stepped onto Hurm' Ay.

He saw it at once—worlds overlapping, memories clashing, time folding in on itself like ripples in a shattered pond.

Echoes did not fade here. They collided.

With Perdina's fragment of time burning in his grasp, he searched for Ridicus.

The ticks came first.

They manifested along the Skytalon Peaks—sharp, rhythmic fractures in reality itself.

Two Guardian Lords thundered and clashed—each from a different realm, each believing the land was theirs.

“The Veil is weakest here,” the Magus spoke—not in wonder, but as one who commands a battlefield.

He climbed the Skytalon Peaks.

Below him, the Dragon War raged.

Ridicus stood at its heart.

His axe thundered—each strike twisting will into dominion, each echo driving dragons to reclaim lands they no longer remembered losing.

As the Magus reached the summit, Ridicus turned—and laughed.

“You mortals never understand the power of the realms.”

“I am not divided anymore.”

“I am both.”

Time fractured.

For a moment, the Magus faltered in thought.

Is he forged...or is he the forge?

Is this the Echo of Time spoken in the fall of ancient ADAMA?

"Times will not come of themselves—they will be forged through a broken Veil."

Has a Titan already succumbed?

No.

The fragments still burned within Perdina.

They were his to bear.

Then what is he?

Is Ridicus bound to the Veil—or has he bound the realms within himself?

He does not divide.

He merges.

The dragons were not being commanded.

Their hearts were being rewritten—melded into one will.

And Ridicus...

...wore that will like a mask of dominion.

Studies whirled through the Magus' mind—months of thought collapsing into a single breath.

Time is still mine.

The mask...

A gift of Whiteheart—taken, twisted, usurped.

Ridicus had given it new purpose.

That should not be possible.

There are no masks of such forbidden forging.

The Magus turned—and saw it.

A fracture in the Veil.

Within it—a draconic eye.

It did not look at him.

It knew him.

Whispers stirred in his soul, low and ancient:

"Gredious watches...as the door begins to open."

"As the Veil thins... ever more."

The Magus stilled.

He knew that name.

Not his memory—another's.

A lesson once given, now remembered.

Gredious—the Celestial who defied his charge, who opened the gate for Dragos the first time.

The one who was not destroyed...

...but imprisoned.

Bound within the Veil itself—beyond reach, beyond mercy, beyond forgetting.

And now—he watches.

There was no time left.

The Magus moved.

If he failed now, the sundering would not end—it would become.

Reality would not break.

It would be rewritten—into something no mind could remember.

Unless memory held.

He raised Perdina.

Not to destroy—but to recall.

“Memory... bind.”

The spell took form.

A Memory Bond—not of power, but of origin.

He reached into what was older than war—gestures, ancestral echoes, the first breath of creation that bound the two Dragon Lords to Whiteheart Himself.

They had not always been divided.

They had been given.

Domains of Him.

Brothers of purpose—not rivals of dominion.

The bond struck.

Time faltered.

The dragons stilled.

Memory returned.

Not as thought—but as truth.

The war broke.

Not in fire—but in remembrance.

Ridicus roared—too late.

The sunder-axe fell—and shattered upon the stones of Echo Cleft.

And so Ridicus—forged of stolen fragments and veiled ambition—was undone.

His form scattered—reduced to scale-dust upon the winds of Echo Cleft.

Dragonkind, once torn by war and fractured memory, fell into silence.

Not of fear—

...but of reverence.

A pact was sealed—not in blood, but in the oath of the Magus.

An oath that binds time, truth, and the breath of the Veil itself.

The chaos, once roaring, softened.

The Veil held.

And in its stillness, myth began to reckon with itself.
What was legend became law.
What was prophecy became history.
Gredious—the last fracture—roared once more.
...but the sound was swallowed by silence.
Still bound.
As the Veil closed around him—a tomb of forgotten stars.
And the Titans—those ancient architects of realms—stood not in defiance...
...but in reverence.
For even they, in all their might, could not halt what the Magus had forged.
Time itself bowed—not broken, but reshaped.
A shimmer passed—blade and halo revealed—as the dragons bowed and turned from war.
The vision faded, dispersing like mist upon the wind.
Thus ended the Sundering.
Thus began the Silence.
The Magus knelt—not in triumph, but in trembling awe.
The Veil held. The dragons were silent. The Titans stood still.
And yet—
within him, chaos still roared.
Emotion fractured. Understanding slipped like sand through divine fingers.
A mortal had reckoned the realms.
What the Titans could not hold...he had touched.
Time itself had bent to his will—and now flickered within Perdina's glow, like a dying star
whispering its final truth.
Elcrull felt it.
Not the power—but the fracture beneath it.
She stepped beside him, her presence steady, her heart fastening to his.
She knew his longing for peace.
But peace would not come.
There was still work to be done—and a world yet unraveling that needed defending.
He looked to the sky—to the Veil—to the memory of his cubs.
He saw the sword...as it dispersed like mist.
Was this a dream?
A fevered echo of longing?
Would he awaken beside them—the scent of Aura's grove still in the air, their laughter
unbroken?
Or was this the madness of the realms, placed upon him like a crown of fractured truths?
Time is of the essence.

Perdina pulsed.

But the Magus knew—

Time was no longer essence.

It was an echo.

...and he was its final note.

The other Heralds felt it.

What had been done...what had been awakened.

They turned from their own designs and sought aid—

for something now walked the threads of reality that even they could not unmake.

The air thickened with portent.

The Heralds—once voices of prophecy, now agents of unraveling—
found themselves trembling beneath the weight of what had stirred.

The old reckonings—those upheavals etched into the bones of time—had scarred the
realms.

But this...

This was not a scar.

This was return.

The Warder of Realms was not merely a force.

It was convergence.

A reckoning of all reckonings—where Titan, mortal, and echo were drawn into a single
will.

Where Titans faltered and mortals dared, the Warder moved—
unbound by chronology, unbound by law.

It was not coming.

It had already begun.

And the Heralds—who once sang the first harmonies of creation—
now whispered, not in command...

...but in fear.

Prayers not for victory—

...but for delay.

They gathered in the Hollow Conclave—their voices fractured by dread.

Thalor, who spoke in echoes, wept for stars already dimmed.

Virell, bearer of the Flame Tongue, cast her blade into the sky— as if a god might still
catch it.

Marn, the silent one, turned his gaze to the east—
where the Veil had begun to bleed.

They did not seek kings. They did not summon armies.

They sought something older.

Truths buried beneath the first realmstone.

Aid... from the one who had bent time.

From the mortal who had touched the divine—and endured.

Elmon.

Far from the Conclave, Elcrull felt it.

Not just his power—but what it had cost him.

She felt his fire—the echo of what he had done, what no other could have borne.

Her heart did not falter.

It rose—with praise, with strength, with a quiet, unyielding resolve to stand beside him.

As the Veil thinned, the Heralds shuddered—

not from fear alone, but from knowing:

the Warder would not be stopped.

Only understood.

...or become.

Elcrull moved.

She did not wait for certainty.

She donned her armor and cloak, polished her blades, etched her runes with steady hands.

There was no hesitation in her.

Something had already spoken to her heart.

She would stand with the Magus.

Whatever he was becoming.

The Heralds stood in silence as the truth unfurled—slow and terrible, like a dying star.

Elmon, once the Reckoner, now bore the pulse of the Warder.

Not by choice. Not by conquest.

...but by consequence.

They had seen him kneel. They had felt the tremor in the Veil.

And now—

they no longer saw a man.

They saw a fulcrum.

A soul stretched across realms, tethered to truths too vast for flesh.

“He is the Warder,” Thalor whispered, his voice fracturing like ancient stone.

“Not born of it. Not made for it.

...but become.”

And their hearts gave way—not to fear...

but to mourning.

For Elmon had crossed the threshold.

And the realms would never again be untouched.

The Heralds of Dragos: Echoes of Dread

They were not born.

They were shed—fragments of Dragos' own fear, cast into the realms like falling stars.

Each Herald is a living echo of what Dragos fears he might become...

or what he knows he cannot control.

Thalor, the Whispering One fears the silence of forgotten gods.

Virell, Flame-Tongue fears the light that reveals too much.

Marn, the Silent Gaze fears the moment when even time refuses to look away.

They do not come to warn.

They come to witness.

To see whether the Magus—the Warder—will become the reckoning Dragos dreads most:

A mortal who reshapes realms not through conquest—

but through memory, unity, and sacrifice.

The Heralds shudder—not because they are weak...but because they are aware.

They know what Dragos cannot admit:

The Guardian Worlds may not fall to him.

They may transform him.

The Magus stood at the edge of the Guardian World, its horizon trembling beneath the weight of memory.

He whispered to himself:

"I am just a man."

The reply did not come from wind—nor from thought.

It came from Virell.

"Are you?"

Her voice was like embers in the dark—not mocking, not cruel...

...but curious.

As if even Dragos' fear had begun to wonder whether the Magus was truly what he claimed to be.

The Magus turned, searching the shadows.

Virell stood there—cloaked in flickering flame, eyes reflecting futures not yet written.

"You were born of sorrow," Virell murmured.

"But sorrow is not weakness. It is the forge."

"You were forgotten."

But only those remembered by others truly endure."

"Arcadia calls."

She repeats herself not because she is broken—but because she is trying to remember."

The Magus clenched his fists.

"I am just a man."

Virell stepped closer.

The air shimmered around him.

“Then be the kind of man...who makes gods tremble.”

With Perdina’s Ethereal shard gripped in his palm, the Magus moved through the realm as though born to walk the stars.

The shard pulsed with ancient resonance—bending space like a memory struggling to return.

He remembered.

What they had been given. What the Titans had not taken back.

They had not recalled their gifts. They had not bound them with condition.

They had given.

And in that giving—they had offered hope.

Perdina held the fragments. Not as a prison...but as a vessel.

The Magus felt Elcrull beside him—

not in distance, but in certainty.

A moment without time, she stood with him—steady, unbroken, the anchor to his reckoning.

Perdina retained the fragments.

She could wield them still.

But the Titans watched.

And perhaps—when the Guardian Realms are set aright, when memory is restored and motion returns—

they will reclaim what was given.

Or perhaps...

they will not.

Perhaps the fragments have already become something new.

Not Titan.

Not tool.

...but truth.

They landed on Arcadia.

Then again.

...and again.

Each arrival felt like déjà vu—familiar...but wrong.

The rhythm faltered.

The world was caught in repetition—unable to remember why it moved, or that it had ever moved at all.

The Magus stood still.

He listened—

to echoes of lives that no longer knew themselves.

Arcadia was not dying.

It was forgetting.

And in that forgetting—a breach would come.

The Chrono Forge, once the anchor of temporal flow, would fail.

The Ethereal would fall into stillness.

Time would not pass.

Motion would not cease—

...it would be forgotten.

Elcrull felt it first—

the emptiness of the loop, the absence of purpose, the loss of becoming.

Guardians could no longer guard.

Lives did not end—they paused.

Trapped in a moment without meaning, without destination, without reason.

The Magus whispered into the silence:

“I will remember for you.”

Perdina flickered.

Time seemed to slow—it patterned.

Repetition gave way to structure.

How... or why—he did not ask.

There was no time for answers.

Only resolution.

He could feel it now—the shift.

He had stepped beyond the Guardian World—into the Ethereal seam between moments.

If Rogalor moved anywhere, it would be here.

Then he saw it.

A distortion—spanning miles—rippling like a pond disturbed by unseen force.

At its center stood a pillar—

fixed, unchanging, unforgotten.

His Stanton Pillar.

The anchor Rogalor could not erase.

Elmon and Elcrull stepped toward the pillar—but Arcadia would not release them.

The Mossfire Plains folded in on themselves.

A loop.

Again.

...and again.

Each cycle tighter than the last.

From the tree line, feral beasts emerged—not hunting...but repeating.

Elcrull met them without hesitation.

Steel, breath, motion—reset.

She fought them again.

And again.

At the center of the loop, Rogalor watched.

Not a conqueror.

Not a tyrant.

A keeper.

“I am not your enemy,” he said, voice splitting across moments. *“I preserve what would otherwise be lost.”*

Time bent around him—fractured, layered, unfinished.

“The Ethereal is collapsing,” Rogalor continued. *“The Forge fails. Memory erodes. Motion decays.”*

He stepped forward—existing in several instants at once.

“So I take time. I hold it. I keep it from vanishing.”

His gaze fixed on the Magus.

“You will choose.”

“One Guardian World...sacrificed to restore the Chrono Forge.”

“Or all realms—drifting into endless, meaningless stillness.”

The loop tightened.

There was no space for deliberation. No room for philosophy.

Only the next repetition.

Rogalor smiled faintly.

“The Warder... trapped in time.”

Elmon did not move.

He spoke.

“Are you now... or then?”

The loop faltered.

“Or are you only the memory of yourself?”

Rogalor stilled—just for a moment.

Elmon stepped forward.

“I remember.”

Perdina flared.

Time did not bend—it anchored.

Rogalor recoiled.

“You cannot hold it all,” he said, voice unraveling.

Elmon answered:

“I do not need to hold it.”

“I need only choose it.”

The Magus struck the ground.

Once—for the Prime.

Once—for the Ethereal.

Then spoke the Rune:

“Now.”

The loop shattered.

Rogalor was pulled inward—dragged into the very stream he had stolen—
forced to relive every moment he had preserved...without control.

Elcrull moved in the fracture—her blade spinning through the collapsing thread—
a shard of resolved motion.

It struck.

Rogalor unraveled—not in death—but in release.

His form dissolved into mist—then memory—then silence.

The Chrono Forge reignited.

Arcadia surged.

Growth returned—wild, unrestrained, alive.

But not whole.

The time anchors trembled.

Unstable.

Uncertain.

Unknown.

The world moved again—

...but it remembered too much.

Elmon stood beneath the canopy of the Whispering Pines, where the leaves once sang of
birth and becoming.

He tapped Perdina twice.

The sound should have danced through the branches—should have awakened the
songbirds, should have stirred the wind.

But instead, the forest answered:

“I cannot see.”

The words came not from a voice, but from the land itself.

Arcadia was dimming.

Not from shadow—but from silence.

Wishar’s reach had grown bold.

It no longer lingered at the edges.

It seeped—into memory, into myth, into the marrow of the trees.

Elmon knelt, pressing his palm to the moss.

It was cold.

Not with frost—but with forgetting.

He whispered:

“Then I must be your eyes. And remember what you no longer can.”

For Elcrull, there was no time—only the moment before the next unraveling.

They stepped from the shimmering veil of the Ethereal.

His boots touched soil that pulsed like a dying star first.

Wishar did not greet them with wind—nor with welcome—

but with pressure.

An invisible weight pressed against them, whispering doubt into bone.

The darkness here was no longer passive.

It had grown teeth.

It reached for him like ink spilled across parchment, eager to blot out the story he carried.

Perdina dimmed—its light swallowed faster than before.

Even memory flickered.

He reached for Silva Ithful’s voice—the cadence of her lullaby—

but the notes came fractured—

like glass beneath his feet.

Elmon whispered to himself, anchoring his thought:

“I am not lost. I am the lantern.”

But Wishar did not care for declarations.

It only listened for silence.

Elmon and Elcrull walked the brine-soaked sands of the Risor River, keeping to its edge—tracing its curve like a blind man feeling his way through a forgotten street.

The river did not guide them—

it remembered where a path once was.

They followed it to the pillar of the Poticus Bridge.

At its base, the structure loomed—

not carved, but grown.

As if the stone had once dreamed of becoming a tree.

Veins of obsidian pulsed beneath its surface—

faint, deliberate—like the heartbeat of something of a god buried.

Elmon placed his hand upon the pillar.

The cold was immediate—

but not biting.

It was the cold of memory long sealed.

A voice stirred—

not from the pillar, but from within him.

Not familiar. Not Perdina.

Something older.

“You carry light. But light forgets.”

Elmon did not answer.

He let the silence speak.

Before him, the Tenebrous Hollows opened—
not as a path—

but as a question.

The trees leaned inward, their branches like fingers, their leaves like listening ears.

The ground beneath him no longer pulsed—
it waited.

He struck the forest floor three times with Perdina.

He waited for the echo that should have come.

Nothing answered.

Silence pressed in—overwhelming, absolute.

The leaves did not rustle.

The breeze did not speak of its season.

Even absence had a presence.

Elcrull sheathed her swords.

She crouched—

claws bared, waiting.

Barack’s form flickered—

never whole, never still.

He lunged—not to strike, but to provoke.

His limbs trailed shadow-fire, like ink spilled in reverse.

Each movement a taunt—a limerick of chaos:

“A lantern that walks where no light should tread, shall find his own flame burning red.”

Elmon did not flinch.

He moved time—

not forward, not back—

but sideways.

The wisps of fire bent around him, slowed to a crawl—
then snapped away, like threads cut mid-weave.

Barack hissed.

His rhythm—broken.

The Hollows pulsed in response,

as if the forest itself had been holding its breath.

“You twist the tempo,” Barack snarled, *“but you cannot rewrite the song.”*

Elmon raised Perdina.

Its light was barely a flicker—

but it was enough.

“I do not rewrite,” he said.

“I remember.”

The ground beneath him shimmered—

not with light—

but with memory.

Footprints emerged.

Ancient.

Fading.

They led deeper into the Hollows.

Not his own.

Not Barack’s.

The Watchers.

Barack’s shadow-fire coiled around him, tempting rage, seeking fracture.

Elmon did not answer it.

He whispered instead—

Elcrull’s lullaby.

Soft.

Steady.

Unbroken.

From it, he kindled a soul-torch—

not flame—but memory made visible.

The light held.

Barack faltered.

His fire turned inward—

consumed by its own unraveling rhythm.

Then—

he vanished.

Not defeated—but undone within himself.

Wishar dimmed.

Not in defeat—but in retreat.

A faint glow lingered—

uneasy, watching.

At the edges of the Hollows, something stirred.

Something deeper.

The soul-torch flickered in Elmon's hand.
The lullaby remained—
reshaping the silence into something almost tender.
But Wishar was not gone.
It had recoiled.
...and it had remembered.
Beneath the forest floor,
something ancient stirred.
Not Barack. Not shadow-fire.
But the root of forgetting itself.
The trees shivered—
not from wind, but from recognition.
Their branches no longer leaned inward.
They reached upward—
as if trying to remember the stars.
Elmon followed the Watchers' fading footprints deeper into the Hollows.
Each step grew heavier—
not with fear—
but with inheritance.
He was no longer a mariner of the Ethereal.
He was its archivist.
And far ahead—
where the forest thinned and the sky bled violet—
a new voice waited.
Not mocking.
Not cruel.
...but curious.
"You carry her joy. But do you carry her choice?"
Elmon did not answer.
He remembered.
Silva's laughter—light and unguarded.
Her steps—quick with wonder.
Her charm. Her smile.
Even here—within Wishar's grasp—
the darkness could not blot her from him.
Not the fire.
Not the sorrow.
Both remained.

He stood in it.

And for a moment, doubt stirred—

Was this worth the cost?

To save a world...

and walk its shores alone?

Perdina flared—

crimson and gold—

like a star being born.

He exhaled.

“Ah...”

“You are with me.”

With Barack’s shadow-fire gone, Wishar revealed its true night.

A sky of stars—vast, quiet, achingly beautiful.

Elmon paused.

And his heart wept.

A realm once draped in intimate oppression now breathed—
lit by a fragile flare of remembering.

The Tenebrous Hollows fell still—

not in emptiness—

but in remembrance.

Even the Ever-Dark Maw paused,

as if recalling Eyona’s peace—like a lost friend found again in memory.

Elmon moved toward the Echo Veil Basin—

the well of memory.

He knelt and stirred its surface with a flare from Perdina.

Light touched the waters—

and memory answered.

A quiet cadence formed—

not command, not spell—

but something gentler.

A limerick of restoration.

It settled the archives.

It soothed the dragons.

Not forever—

but for a moment.

And for now—

that was enough.

In Echo Veil Basin, so deep, where dragons and memories sleep, a flare from Perdina lit thought like an arena—and even the Maw paused to weep.

The dream-feeders lingered—poised...
remembering what had just been.

The ache in his soul was profound.

All that he had done—and still the call consumed him.

“I am just a man.”

Mortals—keepers of sorrow, bearers of ward and remembrance—
to guard the realms, or pass their memory into root, into stone, into world.

“I am just a man.”

The pool did not remember.

It echoed.

The Basin stirred—and the stars bent low to hear the ache that mortals know.

Perdina flared—a soul’s lament—lighting echoes where the gods once went.

And Elmon—lone, but not alone—

spoke truths that trees and worlds would own.

“We must go to Brittia.”

“I can hear her war-song—even across the void.”

Haunting.

True.

And if left to rise unchecked, it would fracture the Ethereal into chaos.

“I must rest...”

How long had it been?

Days?

Weeks?

He could not remember.

Yet his heart heard it—

the drums of war.

And his spirit stirred to march in their rhythm.

Elcrull lowered him gently.

“Just for a moment.”

She closed his eyes with careful hands.

He was poised.

Sanctioned.

Grieved.

And fading.

She leaned down—

and kissed him as she had in memory.

Then she listened.
Far above—
the stars of Brittia pulsed in time with the drums.
Each beat—a memory.
Each silence—a wound.
Elmon's breath slowed—
but his soul did not.
For in the space between rest and war—
he understood.
The song was not theirs alone.
It was his.
It was hers.
It was the world's.
In a breath—a step through time—he entered Brittia to the rhythm of its awakening.
Chaos churned—
a whirlpool of clamor, pulling all things toward it.
Elmon felt it—
the pull to war.
To rise. To answer. To become.
He did not.
He sat.
He remembered.
He stilled his thoughts, quieted the call, and returned to his purpose.
Chaos is a garment worn in folly—
it grants no purpose to the one who wears it.
The drums of Brittia did not yield.
They thundered on—
a storm in a cage, beating through the marrow of the realm.
Still—
Elmon did not rise.
He sat beneath the fractured sky, Perdina across his knees—
its runes dim... but listening.
He whispered—
not to the staff, but to the silence within:
“I am not the blade. I am the breath before it.”
Elcrull felt it—
the pull to draw her blades.
But Elmon held her fast.

And the chaos—
finding no resistance—
began to falter.
To question.
For what is war if it is not answered?
What is fury if it meets no flame?
Where does it go when there is no one to fight?
No one to oppress. No will to bend. No voice to break.
The silence that followed was not peace.
It was a question—
too vast for swords.
Elmon felt it in his bones—
the ache of a world unchallenged.
For what is dominion without defiance?
What is wrath without witness?
The storm—
once proud—
now wandered.
A ghost through the valleys of Brittia, searching for a name.
And Elmon—
still seated—
whispered to the wind:

*“Let the fire forget its fury.
Let the blade forget its thirst.
Let the world remember its breath.”*

Elmon rose—
and walked.
Peacefully.
Purposefully.
Toward the Whisperhold Diplomatic Conclave—
where Bethnor’s voice had sewn madness into treaties.
Elcrull followed—
a shadow to his stillness.
Elmon’s steps made no sound.
The halls devoured it—
as if ashamed of what they held.
War sprites danced upon parchment,
their laughter curling like smoke from ink still wet.

Generals—
half-shadow, half-memory—
bellowed at maps that no longer matched the world.
Charm-binders raised their goblets,
toasting treaties that bled when signed.
Bethnor's voice lingered—
not spoken, but felt.
A vibration in the bones of the Conclave.
It whispered through the rafters, threading madness into logic—
turning reason into ritual.
Elmon paused at the threshold.
He did not speak.
He did not need to.
Elcrull whispered,
"I feel the call to arms—but hear no words."
Perdina pulsed—once.
Soft.
And everything changed.
The war spirits stilled.
The generals faltered—
their voices collapsing mid-command.
Bethnor's presence recoiled—
sensing memory untainted.
The shadowed generals of bygone wars stood silent—
as if they no longer knew what they had been.
The war sprites dimmed—
their laughter quenched, like fire drowned beneath still water.
The endless cadence of hollow wars—
fell quiet.
Like a summer evening—
crickets in the grass, wind stirring leaves in a distant tree.
The charm-binders were gone.
Not slain—
but silenced.
Their gleeful illusions—
unmade so completely they left no memory behind.
With Perdina's Truthfire awakened, Elmon revealed what had been hidden.
Sigils unraveled.

False words turned against themselves.
Envoys faltered—
then turned.
Not by force—
but by recognition.
Bethnor's mask shattered—
fractured beneath the weight of truth.
But he did not fall.
He vanished—
binding himself into a war-pact.
A living fracture in the Conclave's will.
Brittia trembled.
Not in victory—
but in uncertainty.
Rebellion ... or reckoning.
Elmon's heart ached.
Truthfire had its cost.
Not blood—
but memory.
Something within him dimmed—
a life remembered, now beyond his reach.
He closed his eyes—
and accepted it.
For nothing worth defending is ever without cost.
And war—
even when refused—
still takes its due.
Elcrull stepped forward.
Her clawed hand rested upon the war-pact.
She did not break it.
She held it.
Elmon rose.
He faced the Conclave.
"This pact," he said, "was forged for conquest."
"But now—"
"It turns upon you."
"Against your honor. Against your memory."
"Against yourselves."

He stepped into the silence.

“Does it stand—or does it fall?”

“Will you carry it forward—as your future—”

“or bury it with the echoes of your past?”

He paused.

“Speak now.”

“Or let your memories choose for you.”

The chamber did not answer at once.

Silence held them—

not as absence, but as weight.

The envoys looked not at Elmon—

but at one another.

Old rivalries stirred in their eyes, centuries of grievance rising like ghosts—

then faltering.

For the first time—

no voice told them who to hate.

No whisper guided their hand.

No rhythm carried them forward.

A general stepped forward—

armor etched with victories no longer remembered as triumph.

His voice trembled.

“If we bury it...”

he paused, *“...what becomes of us?”*

Another answered—

not with fury—

but with something quieter.

“Perhaps we become something that does not need war to exist.”

The words lingered—fragile.

Dangerous.

A charm-binder lowered her goblet.

It shattered on the stone—

not in rage—but in release.

“We were taught,” she said, *“that peace was weakness.”*

Her eyes turned to Elmon.

“But this...”

“...this feels like truth.”

The war-pact pulsed beneath Elcrull’s hand.

Not violently—

but uncertain.
Waiting.
Elcrull did not force it.
She held it steady—
as one might steady a blade before deciding whether to strike—
or set it down.
Then—
one by one—
the envoys stepped forward.
Not in unison.
Not in command.
But in choice.
Hands reached—not to claim—but to release.
The pact dimmed.
Its sigils flickered—then unraveled.
Not destroyed—but unbound.
The chamber exhaled.
The drums—
distant now—
lost their rhythm.
Brittia did not fall silent.
It remembered something else.
Elmon closed his eyes.
Not in triumph—but in witness.
Perdina dimmed.
Not from weakness—
but from completion.
Elcrull looked to him. *“Is it done?”*
Elmon opened his eyes—
watching the last echo of the pact dissolve into nothing. *“No.”*
He turned toward the horizon—
where the sky still trembled faintly with unrest.
“It has only begun.”
One by one, the envoys stepped forward.
Not to speak—
but to place their hands upon the old treaty scrolls.
Some burned.
Some wept.

Some turned to ash.
And Brittia—
for the first time in an age—paused its drums.
Not in surrender—but in remembrance.
Elmon cast Bethnor’s war-pact nto the sigil-flames—
the hearth of forgetting.
The scrolls’ ashes rose—
not falling—
as if memory refused burial.
The chamber—
once a crucible of war—
now held only breath...and consequence.
Elmon did not smile.
Victory was not his to claim.
Truthfire had burned away illusion—
but its light did not heal.
It revealed.
From the far end of the hall a child stepped forward.
Not an envoy.
Not a general.
A witness born of the war’s echo.
She held no sigil.
Bore no staff.
Only a shard—
of Bethnor’s shattered mask.
The same mask that once declared duty and named it purpose.
She lifted it—
not as relic—
but as reminder.
She spoke—
not loudly—
but so the room could not escape it.
“If memory is a wound...” she paused “...then let it bleed ntil it teaches.”
No one answered.
Because there was nothing left to argue.
The envoys bowed.
Not to Elmon—
but to the truth they had long refused to carry.

Elmon did not move.
He did not speak.
Because this was never his moment.
Outside—
Brittia's skies turned.
Not storm.
Not sun.
Something between.
A breath held—
by a world learning how to remember itself.
The drums did not return.
But neither did silence claim them.
They lingered—
faint—
like a heartbeat deciding what it meant to live.
Elmon turned from the chamber.
Perdina dimmed in his grasp—
not from weakness but from knowing.
Elcrull walked beside him—
not behind—
not ahead—
but with him.
As it had always been.
At the threshold, he paused—
not to look back but to listen.
Brittia was still speaking.
Not in war.
Not in peace.
But in truth.
And truth had no rhythm yet.
Only weight.
He stepped forward.
And the veil answered, today's purpose.
Another victory but at what cost to Elmon?
Would this be his end not in death but in erosion?
A man reduced to fragments, a shattered memory of a peace he once carried whole?
Or would his end come later—

in the confrontations yet to rise across the Guardian Realms—
where even truth might not be enough?
He did not know.
And perhaps he was no longer meant to.
Were the Titans allowing this?
Were they yielding their burden,
placing their failing duties into mortal hands?
Or was Elmon something else entirely—
not chosen—
but kindled—
a flame set within the Ethereal to see what would burn...
and what would remain?
The Titans those ancient arbiters of balance—
do not grant permission.
They do not intervene.
They observe.
They measure.
They test.
And now they watched him.
Not as a pawn.
Not as a savior.
But as a paradox.
A mortal—
who carried breath instead of blade—
silence instead of sanction—
memory instead of dominion.
If they allowed him to stand where they faltered—
it was not mercy.
It was not trust.
It was recognition.
That something had already begun.
Not the restoration of duty—
but its transformation.
And Elmon whether he willed it or not—
was becoming the answer to a question even the Titans could no longer hold.
Elmon stood at the edge of the Guardian Realms—
where time folds like parchment, and stars speak in riddles.
The Titans watched not with eyes—

but with gravity.

They did not ask his name.

They asked his cost.

Elmon did not hesitate.

“I have no blade,” he said. *“Only breath.”*

“I have no victory. Only memory.”

“I do not seek dominion.”

A pause not empty but final.

“I seek the silence after.”

The Titans parted not in welcome—

but in recognition.

And the Ethereal Realm stirred—

as if remembering its own beginning.

Elcrull held him.

And Elmon for a moment relented.

He leaned into her shoulder, and grieved.

Not as a Magus.

Not as the Warder.

But as a man—

who remembered too much.

“You were created for such a time,” she whispered.

Her hand steadied against him—

firm, unbreaking.

“I bear your blade in peace.”

He closed his eyes.

And for that breath—

he allowed himself to be held.

Then it passed.

Not gone but carried.

Elmon drew back, not hardened—

but resolved.

“I must return to Eyona.”

The name alone carried weight.

A world once balanced between mystery and mundanity—

now broken, its harmony torn open by ogre-fury and unraveling truth.

It did not need conquest.

It needed peace.

But peace—

was no longer simple.
Far beneath thought beyond veil and memory—
Dragos stirred.
Not in waking.
Not in sleep.
But in stasis.
The Pit of Remembrance held him
not with chains but with memory.
Each Guardian Realm—
a lock.
Each act of unity a ward.
And yet—
the wards were weakening.
Elmon's victories though just—
though necessary—
disturbed what had long been buried.
They stirred the dust of forgotten things.
And in that trembling—
Dragos listened.
Not with ears but with fracture.
A whisper thin as regret—
slipped through the seams of reality.
"Let them remember..."
The voice was not sound but intrusion.
"Let them weep..."
Memory bent.
Truth wavered.
"For in sorrow..."
The veil thinned just enough—
for something ancient to feel its name again.
"...I rise."
Perdina dimmed—
not in fear—
but in warning.
Elmon did not speak.
Because now he understood.
Every truth restored every memory reclaimed—
brought the worlds closer to healing—

and closer to him.
The child watched.
Perdina's runes turned slowly—
not frantic but deliberate—
like a story on a merry-go-round.
Letters.
Images.
Fragments of memory—
passing in rhythm she could not yet understand.
Not meant for her.
Not yet.
Only Elmon could read them.
For Perdina had claimed him—
marked him—
and through the scar upon his cheek, had written its codex into his being.
Elmon lay upon the dusty stone of the conclave floor.
Not fallen—
but spent.
Drifting.
Sleep took him gently—
not as escape but as surrender.
The firestone within Perdina pulsed—
slow—
steady—
in rhythm with his breath...
his heartbeat.
His head rested in Elcrull's lap.
She said nothing.
She did not need to.
Her hand moved through his hair—
steadying him—
anchoring what the realms could not.
She kissed his brow—
then, softly—
his lips.
She Wanted him desperately,
But her time would come, her love would be replenished.
Not in desperation but in knowing.

The child remained eyes wide,
untouched by the burdens she now witnessed.
She watched the runes.
They swirled not in chaos but in pattern.
In meaning.
In prophecy.
And though she could not read them she felt them.
Faintly.
Like a memory she had not yet lived.
Perdina was speaking again.
*“The scar is not a wound. It is a key.
And the key must turn before Dragos wakes.”*
Silence held the conclave—
not empty but thickened.
Not with fear but with memory.
The kind that bends time.
The kind that breaks realms.
Eyona still bled.
Her forests torn open by ogre fury—
smoked beneath a sky that no longer remembered peace.
Her rivers whispered—
not of life but of betrayal.
Of what was taken.
Of what was allowed.
Elmon rose slowly.
Not as a conqueror but as a witness.
He understood now peace was not the absence of war.
It was the restoration of the story.
Smoke still climbed from the desecrated forest—
from the rim-cities—
broken, but not erased.
Not all had fallen. But most had.
And what remained was not whole.
There were echoes that needed weaving.
Sundering that needed sleep.
Phrases that needed forgetting.
And time . . . time itself needed mending.
When Elmon awoke—he was on Eyona once more.

He rose slowly.
The scent of scorched cedar and iron clung to his cloak—
thick, unforgiving.
The air did not welcome him.
It remembered.
Elcrull stood nearby silent—
watching over him, and watching the land weep.
She did not reach for her blades.
There was nothing here to strike.
Only something to endure.
The wind moved but carried no voice.
Only fragments.
A lullaby half-sung—
by a mother who no longer remembered her child's name.
A promise once spoken beneath the moon—
now scattered in soot.
The trees stood not broken but hollowed.
As if something had passed through them—
and taken more than life.
Elmon closed his eyes.
Not to rest but to listen.
Eyona was not silent.
It was forgetting.
They walked through the ruins of Rimhold—
where the stone arches still stood, defiant.
Smoke rose from the forests to the south—
and the north slow,
unwilling to leave.
Not all had fallen.
But most had.
And what remained remembered too much.
Children's laughter echoed from the broken wells—
faint—
fragile—
wrong.
Elmon paused.
The sound lingered—
then repeated—

unchanged.
Not laughter.
Memory—
trying to survive.
Perdina pulsed at his side.
Not red but violet.
The color of mourning.
The color of remembering beyond what the soul can carry.
Elcrull stepped forward.
She did not draw her blades.
She sang.
Soft—
steady—
a song for Silva.
A lullaby that should have belonged to peace.
She turned and danced—
not in grace but in remembrance—
for Tengela.
Each step a story.
Each motion a refusal to let them be forgotten.
And then she wept.
Not quietly.
Not hidden.
But openly—
for the horror even she could not bear.
Her voice broke not from weakness—
but from truth.
“*My scars...*” She steadied herself.
“*...are only memory of what was to come.*”
The wind stilled.
As if even Eyona was listening.
“*To mend time,*” Elmon whispered, “*I must first forget what I loved.*”
Sorrow was a color he would wear for a long remembrance.
He walked with an aching heart
to the ruins of the Moonvine Arches.
There during a mourning festival that had forgotten its origin—
Elmon met Sarrow, the Herald of Dragos.
Sarrow’s presence did not strike—

it settled.
Into grief.
Into memory.
Into the spaces where loss refused to rest.
Elmon did not confront him in fury.
He moved through the memory Sarrow had shaped—
and fractured it.
Not to destroy it—
but to break its hold.
To loosen its claim.
To render it no longer whole.
He carried the fractured memory to the Silent Gates.
The Gates stood open—
but no one passed through.
They were no longer meant for travel.
They were meant for reckoning.
Elmon knelt at the well.
The empty well.
The place where memory was not lost—
but laid down.
The fractured echo pulsed in his palm—
faint—
persistent—
unfinished.
Sarrow's voice still lived within it—
soft—
seductive—
sorrowful.
Elmon lowered the memory into the well.
Not to bury it.
Not to erase it.
But to place it where it could no longer command.
Where it could be held without ruling.
The well received it.
The pulse dimmed—
but did not vanish.
And the Gates remained open not for passage—
but for those who must face what they carry.

“Let them mourn what never was,” Sarrow had said.

“And in mourning let Dragos rise.”

But Elmon had seen through it.

Not the grief the shaping of it.

The illusion that turned memory into a weapon.

He had paid for that sight.

Traded more than most would name.

Memories of joy.

Fragments of peace.

Even the names—

of some he had once loved.

The merchant had taken them—

with a smile that bent time.

And in return—

Perdina had chosen him.

Not gifted—

not given—

but bound.

Its codex of remembrance etched into his being—

through scar, through silence, through loss.

Now—

as he lowered the fractured memory into the well—

the runes of Perdina shifted.

Not in alarm.

Not in resistance.

But in recognition.

In agreement.

In gratitude.

The well received the fragment.

Held it—

without consuming it.

Without letting it spread.

Elmon watched the light dim—

not vanish but settle.

Placed.

Contained.

Rightly.

“Some truths must be buried,” he whispered.

Not in denial but in understanding.

“Not to forget.”

A breath. Steady. Certain.

“But to protect.”

The Silent Gates did not move.

The wind did not answer.

But Eyona for a moment—
remembered how to rest.

In the days that followed—

Sarrow did not leave him.

She lingered threaded through memory—

twisting what was spoken, changing what was remembered.

Dialogs shifted.

Moments reformed.

Truth bent again, and again.

But Elmon did not follow her changes.

He remembered in truth.

And the more she pressed the more she reshaped—

the brighter Perdina burned.

Not in defiance but in alignment.

In recognition of what was real.

Sarrow grew sharper.

More desperate.

She reached deeper past surface memory—

into what Elmon guarded most.

His cubs.

Bound within Perdina.

Anchored in him.

She sought to unmake that bond—

to unthread their souls from remembrance.

Elmon staggered.

Not from force but from grief.

Raw.

Immediate.

Dangerous.

But grief did not break him.

It anchored him.

He seized her not by form but by memory.

Wrenched her from the weave she hid within—
and dragged her struggling—
unraveling to the Null Square.
The place where memory fails.
Where meaning cannot take hold.
Where magic does not answer.
She resisted but resistance requires recall.
And here there was none.
Elmon cast her into the center.
No binding.
No incantation.
None would hold.
He did not seal her with power.
He left her without it.
Sarrow faltered.
Her voice—once endless collapsed into silence.
Not forced.
Absent.
She reached for Dragos for purpose—
for identity—
for grief but nothing answered.
Because nothing could.
Here there was no memory to shape.
No sorrow to wield.
No truth to distort.
And without those she was nothing.
Not destroyed but emptied.
A presence without function.
A herald without a call.
She would not rise again.
Not here.
Not like this.
For even sorrow requires something to remember.
She screamed but no sound came.
Not because Elmon silenced her—
because the Null Square did not recognize sound.
It did not recognize sorrow.
It did not recognize Sarrow.

Perdina dimmed not in defeat but in rest.
Its work was done.
Elmon stood at the edge of the square.
The wind did not move.
It carried no memory.
No echo.
Only stillness.
Complete.
Untouched.
He did not step closer.
There was nothing more to do.
"You will not be remembered," he said.
Not in anger.
Not in judgment.
But as truth.
"And that is how you will end."
No answer came.
There could be none.
Elmon turned.
The Silent Gates faded behind him, not closed—
but released.
As if even they had nothing left to hold.
Far beyond where memory still shaped the world—
Dragos would search.
He would reach through fracture,
through echo, through sorrow.
But he would find nothing.
No thread.
No trace.
No name.
Because even supposable gods must remember to rise.
He turned into the wind like stepping into a summer rain,
not to escape but to be made clear again.
To feel it.
To carry it.
To continue.
He did not walk away.
He dissolved into it, not vanished—

but changed.
Like steam rising from sun-warmed stone—
still present, only less bound.
The sorrow clung to him like dew at dawn.
Not heavy.
Not gone.
Only enough, to remind him he had survived it.
Perdina pulsed once—
a final gleam. like a heartbeat in twilight—
then quieted.
Not dormant, but waiting.
The day stirred.
Not with promise.
But with truth.
Elmon breathed it in.
There was still work.
One last Guardian World to set right.
The fiercest.
The most unforgiving.
He did not name it.
He did not need to.
He would go.
And when it was done, he would rest.
If rest still knew his name.
“It is Engorya,” Elmon said quietly.
“The Flesh Eater of Elerie.”
“I must remove it.”
He did not speak in anger nor in urgency.
Only in knowing.
The Ethereal winds gathered, not summoned—
but answered.
Elmon and Elcrull stepped into them,
and like a ship upon unseen currents,
they drifted.
Not guided by hand but by calling.
Toward Elerie.
From a distance—
the Guardian seemed at rest.

Still.

Unbroken.

Nothing stirred.

Nothing warned.

It appeared...

unchanged.

Elmon slowed,

pausing just beyond the reach of cloud and rain.

A stone's throw from entry—

and yet, not yet within.

The light shifted.

Day did not fade—

it transformed.

Into dusk.

Twilight shimmered, alive with falling meteors—

each one a memory, burning through the veil.

Elmon watched them fall—

and did not follow.

In the distance, Cloudshard spires drifted—

aloft upon the winds—

untouched by the lands below.

Unchanged.

Unaffected.

Free.

Or so it seemed.

Below them, Elerie shifted.

Not in motion, but in meaning.

Land that remembered you—

and then did not.

Paths that formed, and dissolved—

not by chance—

but by perception.

The spires above did not follow this law.

They stood apart—

untethered from the ephemeral shaping of the realm beneath.

But in Elerie, freedom was never simple.

It was not release.

It was exposure.

Below, in the Mural Basin—
Elmon saw nothing.
No movement.
No disturbance.
No shadow coil.
That alone was wrong.
He remembered it—
how it lingered, how it watched—
never striking first, only waiting—
for the moment a soul forgot to be wary.
It had always been there.
Always beneath—
or just beyond sight—
coiled in patience.
But now, it was absent.
And absence, in Elerie, was never empty.
Elmon did not step forward.
He listened.
The basin did not echo.
The air did not shift.
Even the drifting spires above seemed to hesitate.
“*Perhaps...*” he thought—
“*it is beneath.*”
Not hidden, but withheld.
Waiting—
not to strike—
but to become.
The surface of the basin—
still as glass, held no reflection.
Only depth.
And in that depth, something gathered.
Not form.
Not motion.
Intention.
Elmon felt it then, not beneath his feet—
but beneath his certainty.
As if the next step—
would not be onto the land—

but into the abyss.
Perdina pulsed once, not in warning—
but in recognition.
Elmon's scar burned, cold.
Not pain, but alignment.
This was not merely the final Guardian.
This, was the beginning of the end.
He stepped from the wind into the rain—
and it ceased.
Not fading—
not breaking—
but stopping—
as if he had crossed a threshold unseen.
Like a door opening—
not in space—
but in meaning.
The world shifted around him—
not in form—
but in permission.
Above—
the cloudshard spires shimmered—
aloft, untouched by the sorrow below.
Yet not distant.
Not unaware.
They watched.
Not with judgment, but with memory.
As if they knew him—
or remembered what he was becoming.
The ground beneath him pulsed—
Soft, rhythmic—
like breath.
Not life.
Digestion.
The Mural Basin stretched before him—
a cradle of silence, and shadow.
And somewhere within it—
the Coil remained.
Unseen.

Unmoved.
Waiting, or already begun.
Elmon did not search for it.
He understood.
This would not be a battle.
It would be a burial.
Fear stirred the realm.
Fed it.
Gave it shape.
And Elerie, hungered for it.
A shadow broke the sky.
From the cloudshard spire—
Fornella—
a great dragon descended.
Fast, violent, inevitable.
It tore through the dusk like a scream given form—
its scales glinting—
not with light—
but with memory consumed.
Each beat of its wings scattered echoes—
Lives, fragments—
lost to Elerie's hunger.
Elcrull moved, blades drawn—
instinct alive.
But Elmon did not flinch.
He stood, still—
calm—
sterile.
As if he knew the creature.
Not as enemy, but as function.
As truth.
Perdina pulsed in his grasp—
Faint, like a dying star that refused to go dark.
His scar burned, not with pain—
but with purpose.
The dragon descended—
close enough now to unmake him.
Elmon did not raise a hand.

He did not defend.

He spoke.

“You are not the Guardian.”

The dragon faltered, not in motion—
but in meaning.

“You are the gate.”

The air shifted.

The basin held its breath.

And for the first time, the dragon hesitated.

The dragon roared—

but the sound did not reach him.

It was swallowed—

drawn down—

into the Mural Basin—

where the Shadow Coil stirred beneath the surface.

Not rising—

Yet, but turning—

twisting the geography of fear.

Elmon did not raise Perdina to strike.

He raised it, to remember.

The runes flared—

not upon the dragon—

but upon the land.

And the land answered.

Not with violence.

With recognition.

The dragon hovered—

Suspended, watching him.

Its voice came—

not as sound—

but as thought shaped into question.

“Do you call this realm home, or is it a myrtle of thought?”

A riddle, of origin.

Of belonging.

Of knowing.

Elmon did not answer it with words.

He answered with memory.

Perdina’s runes turned—

not outward, but inward.

A spiral—

drawing something long buried back into form.

Elerie remembered.

Not the dragon as it was—

but as it had been made.

A creation—

wrought by a sundered wizard—

not to devour—

but to guard.

A keeper—

of welcome—

for one who knew its name.

Elmon spoke—

Quiet, barely a breath.

“Kiloran Blacktooth...receive me.”

The dragon stilled.

Hunger fell away.

Not defeated, released.

And then, it vanished.

Not gone—

but fulfilled.

The ground beneath Elmon shifted—

not cracking—

but unfolding.

The basin drew a breath.

Deep.

Ancient.

And from its depth—

the Shadow Coil rose.

It did not lunge.

It did not speak.

It remembered.

A thousand faces flickered across its surface—

not victims—

but versions.

Lives not taken.

Choices not made.

Paths, left behind.
Elmon saw himself among them.
Not as he was,
but as he could have been.
Each one, complete.
Each one, lost.
They pulled at him—
not with force—
but with knowing.
An abyss—
not of darkness, but of regret.
Where sorrow did not scream, it lingered.
Quiet.
Endless.
The Shadow Coil rose, a tide of silence—
its surface rippling, alive with his unchosen selves.
One turned away from Elcrull—
walking a path of solitude that hollowed him from within.
One held Perdina—
not as a staff—
but as a blade—
wielding memory as a weapon instead of truth.
One bore the sigil of Dragos, eyes empty—
filled only with power that had consumed everything else.
One knelt before Sarrow, not broken—
but willing—
whispering surrender as if it were peace.
And one, one stood still.
Holding Elcrull, on the day of his cubs' birth—
not as a man—
but as something fragile.
As something that could still be lost.
The Coil did not demand.
It did not threaten.
It showed.
And in showing, it asked.
Elmon did not weep.
He did not rage.

He remembered.
Not the visions before him—
but the truth behind him.
Memories—
half-lived, half-lost—
threads gathered from archives of forgotten pasts.
Shimmerings returned—
the search for Perdina—
not as legend, but as pursuit.
A quest born in shadowed thought—
Uncertain, unformed—
yet followed.
The halls of the Shadow Spire rose in him—
its archives—
endless, silent, watching.
There—
among tomes of forgotten things—
he had searched.
Legends.
Mysteries.
Forsaken dreams.
Stories, perhaps of truth—
perhaps of a misguided wizard.
He had questioned it then.
He questioned it still.
But not now.
Not here.
Elmon took the thought, and set it aside.
Not discarded—
not denied—
but placed.
Where it would not unravel him.
He stood—
not against the Coil—
but within himself.
Out of the corner of Elmon's vision—
within the Phantom Hills—
Engorya moved.

Not as a beast, but as hunger given shape.
It reached for him—
not to strike, but to consume.
Its form twisted, morphing illusion into trauma—
beasts born of memory's distortion—
fangs shaped from regret, claws drawn from fear,
voices whispering things he had almost become.
They surged toward him.
Elcrull stepped forward.
She did not strike.
She anchored.
Her presence, steady—
Unbroken, a peace that did not yield—
held the ground beneath them.
The illusions faltered.
Not destroyed—
but denied dominion.
Elmon raised Perdina.
"I see you," he said.
Not to the beasts—
but to what made them.
He cast, not destruction—
but division.
A Duality spell
Truth, separated from distortion.
Memory, cleaved from fear.
The Phantom Hills trembled.
The illusions split,
shedding their false form—
and revealing the Coil beneath.
Engorya.
Not monstrous, but fractured.
A fire stirred within it—
not flame, but recognition.
Perdina flared.
Not gold—
not violet, but black.
A fire not of burning—

but of remembering what should never be forgotten.
The black fire sank into the Coil—
not consuming, but awakening.
A memory surfaced.
Ancient.
Unbroken.
A song, older than distortion—
a calling—
before it became hunger.
Engorya pulsed.
Its form shuddered—
uncertain.
Not in pain—
but in confusion.
For the first time—
it did not know what it was.
Elcrull moved.
Blades drawn, not in rage—
but in purpose.
She struck.
Not to destroy—
but to sever what did not belong.
Steel met memory.
The Coil recoiled.
Its core, exposed—
paused.
Suspended—
between what it had become—
and what it once was.
Elmon spoke with precision.
“I am not the blade,” he whispered. *“I am the breath before it.”*
The Coil pulsed.
Not in hunger, but in recognition.
And then, it spoke.
Not aloud, but within him.
“To remove Engorya... you must become the choice you never made.”
Elmon did not hesitate.
He knew the weight of choice.

He had carried it, through loss,
through memory, through the quiet cost of becoming.
There was no path without sacrifice.
No truth without surrender.
He did not reach for power.
He reached for memory.
A lullaby surfaced, not grand—
not divine, but small.
A child's day.
An injury, sharp,
sudden—
so overwhelming it felt like the end of all things.
And then, hands.
Gentle.
Certain.
A voice, soft, steady—
singing not to erase pain—
but to carry it.
To give it meaning.
Elmon sang.
Not to the Coil, but to the moment.
The sound did not echo.
It settled.
It held.
The Phantom Hills stilled.
The trauma beasts faltered—
their forms unraveling—
not in fire—
not in force—
but in understanding.
Pain—
not as torment—
but as signal.
Fear, not as enemy, but as threshold.
Elmon smiled.
Not in triumph, but in recognition.
He looked upon the beast—
not as horror—

but as something that had forgotten its place.

The Coil softened.

Its form loosened, its edges dissolving—

not in destruction, but in release.

Like a mother kissing a wound—

that once felt unbearable—

but was never the end.

Only a moment.

Only a lesson.

Only love, misunderstood.

And Engorya, unmade its hunger.

Not by force.

But by choice.

Engorya paused, caught not by force—

but by something it did not understand.

How can soothing undo a wound?

How can gentleness unmake pain?

Elmon stepped forward.

Not in haste.

Not in anger.

With knowing.

Perdina turned in his hand, and he struck—

not to break, but to awaken.

The clawed base met the Coil.

A sound, not of impact—

but of memory returning.

“A wound is soothed,” Elmon said softly, *“when it is smiled upon on a mother’s face.”*

His voice held no command.

Only truth.

Elcrull moved.

Not to kill, but to guide.

She danced, claws tracing arcs of presence—

a living rhythm of certainty.

A distraction,

not of chaos—

but of grace.

Then, she stopped.

She bowed.

“You are not your pain.”

The words settled, not on the air—
but into the Coil itself.

The fire dimmed.

Not extinguished, but changed.

What once burned, now hummed.

Low.

Steady.

Whole.

Engorya’s form softened, edges loosening—
shape surrendering.

It did not vanish.

It released.

The Phantom Hills breathed.

And Engorya faded into them, not banished—
not destroyed, but forgiven.

Elmon stood in the quiet.

Perdina rested in his grasp, not as a weapon—
but as a cradle of memory.

The lullaby remained.

Not in sound, but in soul.

The wind stirred.

Not to carry him away, but to receive him.

To welcome him, home.

Elmon stood in the quiet aftermath—

not as a victor—

but as a vessel.

A keeper of remembrance.

The winds of Elerie had changed.

They no longer whispered hunger.

They carried something softer, a hush.

Not silence forced, but a world soothed.

A breath returned.

Perdina rested in his palm—
its runes dim, but listening.

As if the staff itself had learned.

Not power.

But meaning.

The trauma beasts were gone.
The Coil, transformed.
Engorya, forgiven.
Not erased.
Not forgotten.
Remembered, rightly.
Dusk folded into night—
not as an ending, but as a closing of the wound.
The sky held stillness—
not emptiness, but completion.
Elmon turned toward the horizon.
He did not search it.
He acknowledged it.
The path ahead no longer questioned him.
It awaited.
He drew Elcrull close.
Not in need, but in knowing.
In shared memory.
In chosen truth.
He remembered his choices.
Not all of them easy.
Not all of them whole.
But all of them, his.
And in that knowing, he understood.
The final Guardian had not been defeated.
It had been faced.
And so had he.
What remained now—
was not battle, but becoming.
The wind welcomed him—
not as a traveler, but as one returned.
Yet within that welcome, another current stirred.
Not Dragos.
Not yet.
Aura.
In the heart of the Ethereal—
where silence once reigned, something changed.
The Citadel of Saronce no longer dreamed.

It remembered.
The Tower of Idle Giants began to move.
Not in haste, but in purpose long deferred.
Stone answered memory.
And memory answered call.
The Void Grove Forest pulsed—
not wild, but vigilant.
Magic did not sleep there anymore.
It watched.
It waited.
And beneath it all, the heartbeat of Aura rose.
Not in fear.
Not in warning.
But in finality.
A rhythm that did not ask, only declared.
The realm was calling.
Not for aid.
Not for defense.
For answer.
Elmon stood still.
Once, a bearer of memory.
Now, something more.
The answer.
Deep beneath the Citadel—
where echoes gather but never settle—
something lingered.
Suspended.
Not forgotten.
Not remembered.
Held, between.
Waiting.

Chapter ⊕: The Gates of Aeon

They gated through the Ethereal—
not in haste, but with intent.
This was no journey of pursuit.
It was an arrival.
An appointment—
with a mystery Elmon had not yet named.
He stepped into Aura, not as a stranger—
but not as one who understood.
Not fully.
Not yet.
The realm did not greet him.
It observed.
Elmon moved with quiet awareness—
his gaze searching not for threat, but for absence.
Was something hidden?
Waiting—
within a shadow he had never witnessed?
Aura was not like the others.
It did not reveal itself through conflict, but through omission.
Through what it chose not to show.
He realized then, he had never truly explored it.
Not its passages.
Not its memory.
Not its silence.
The land stretched before him, vast—
Sacred, unanswered.
And there—
standing against the horizon, the Tower of Giants.
They rose from the plains—
not built, but present.
As if they had always been there—
waiting for something to remember them.
They stood abreast the hills and valleys, watchful—
unyielding, silent.
Not as guardians alone, but as witnesses.
A warning—

not spoken, but understood.
Pass not without purpose.
Pass not without permission.
And Elmon. now carried both.
All seemed, defined.
Aware.
Not alive in motion, but alive in memory.
The Void Grove Forest stood—
not wild, but resolved.
Rooted in purpose.
Waiting.
Not for wanderers,
but for those who would dare to know her secrets.
They came to the Eeneral Gates.
Tall. wide, beautiful, unyielding.
Forged not merely of substance, but of memory itself.
Mythril and Quinline, woven in a lattice of crossed lines—
a hex of structure and recall.
Each intersection, a moment held.
Each line, a path remembered.
Beyond them, the Citadel.
Not of stone, but of memory given form.
Elmon paused.
He did not know this place.
Not its gates.
Not its silence.
Not its truth.
Perdina stirred.
A white light flared, pure—
unbroken.
It held—
for a single breath—
then softened.
Lingering—
like fireflies on a summer evening.
Not guiding.
Not warning.
Remembering.

Elcrull stepped forward.
Her gaze traced the gates,
their beauty, their weight—
their stillness.
Pristine.
Untouched.
As if time itself had chosen not to pass here.
A memory stirred in Elmon, unbidden.
The cubs.
Their voices.
Their wonder.
The gates, closed.
Always closed.
"These gates..." he murmured, *"...have not opened in an eon of memory."*
He felt the weight of it.
Not time, but absence.
"What lies beyond..."
He did not finish.
He did not need to.
No one knew.
Only the legend remained—
whispered across ages—
half-believed—
half-feared:
"There is nothing within that can be opened, without regret."
The gates did not move.
But something beyond them, listened.
For a moment, a shimmer.
Elmon thought he saw it—
within the lattice, a sword.
Haloed.
Suspended in the crossing lines and hexes.
Gone, as soon as it was noticed.
He stood still.
Not out of fear, but awareness.
Something watched.
Not from beyond,
but from within the gates themselves.

Something, he did not understand.
The air shimmered, not with magic—
but with memory.
Each line of Mythril and Quinline pulsed faintly,
not in power, but in recall.
Every soul who had ever stood here, echoed.
Not as ghosts, but as impressions.
Held.
Measured.
Remembered.
A halo.
A star.
A sword.
Fragments, not symbols—
but identities.
A thought surfaced, unbidden—
yet certain:
“For such a time as this.”
Elmon stepped forward.
His breath, steady.
His thoughts, guarded.
He searched for resistance.
There was none.
No lock.
No seal.
No ward.
Only, invitation.
And that,
that unsettled him most.
Perdina dimmed.
Its runes folded inward, like petals at dusk.
It did not warn.
It did not guide.
It waited.
“If there is a caretaker,” Elmon murmured, *“they do not guard.”*
He stepped closer, eyes steady—
voice quiet.
“They beckon.”

And yet the gates, remembered him.

They did not open.

They simply were open, as if they always had been.

The porch of the Citadel stretched before him, carved in stone that remembered too much.

Beneath it, the labyrinth waited—not a maze of walls, but of truths.

Elmon knew he would descend.

He carried a question that needed an answer, though he did not yet know what that answer was.

As they entered the sloped passage at the far end of the porch, they passed beneath a carved sign, its inscription settling into his chest like a whisper:

“In shadow you must run to find the light that dims within.”

It was not a warning.

It was a vow.

And something in Elmon understood at once, this was not for her.

It was for him.

The sloped passage narrowed—
walls etched with runes that shimmered faintly—
some familiar, some forgotten.

Each step felt—

not taken—

but recalled.

Not by Elmon, but by the Citadel itself.

The air grew colder.

Not with chill, but with clarity.

As if each breath stripped away, what did not belong.

Perdina remained dim.

Its light folded inward, drawn tight—
as if listening for something older than language.

The architecture shifted.

Vaulted arches of Quinline, braided with memory-thread—
structures not built, but remembered into form.

Alcoves opened, shaped like waiting hands.

Not to hold, but to receive.

Stairwells spiraled, not downward—

but inward.

Elmon slowed.

Then stopped.

Before him, a threshold.
Marked.
Seven sigils—
each one distinct, each one known.
The Guardian Worlds.
He recognized them—
not by sight, but by weight.
By memory.
By what they had cost.
But one, was missing.
Aura.
There was no mark.
No absence carved.
No space reserved.
Nothing.
Elmon's voice lowered, not in confusion—
but in realization.
"This place does not remember her."
He stepped closer, eyes narrowing—
understanding settling in.
"She remembers herself."
And for the first time, the Citadel did not respond.
He stepped through.
And arrived, not in silence, but in hush.
A shadowed space, lit by crimson glows—
Harsh, bitter—
alive with strain.
Runes burned along the walls—
not steady, but fractured.
They pulsed, erratic—
as if resisting something unseen.
Fighting—
not to break, but to hold.
Before him, blackness.
Not empty, but layered.
A tapestry of midnight—
where faint swirls of light moved like thoughts—
half-formed, half-forgotten.

The runes trembled.
Like wounded minds, clawing at the Veil.
Trying—
to remember something they were not meant to hold.
Elmon moved forward.
Careful.
Measured.
Yet each step, echoed louder than it should.
As if the space itself resisted movement.
Perdina remained dim.
But its weight grew.
Not heavy with burden, but with presence.
Anchoring.
Holding him, in place—
in truth.
Elcrull felt it.
She did not follow.
She did not reach.
She stood, firm, unbroken.
"This is yours alone, my love."
Her voice was steady, not distant—
but grounded.
"I will hold our hearts here."
Elmon did not turn.
He did not need to.
For the first time,
he stepped forward—
without her beside him.
And the darkness,
noticed.
The swirls of light moved across the blackness—
not in beauty, but in defiance.
Fragments.
Memories, refusing to be devoured.
Holding—
where something unseen pressed to consume them.
Elmon's voice lowered.
"This is not a chamber." A breath.

"It is a wound."

Something stirred.

Not movement, but awareness.

A whisper brushed the edge of his hearing—
not a voice, but a presence.

Not Dragos.

Not Sarron.

Something older.

The runes flared, not in rage—
but in separation.

As if recognition itself had to be broken to keep this place intact.

A question formed—

not spoken, but impressed upon him:

"What is your purpose, and why do you try the gates of sacred binding?"

It felt familiar.

Not known, but not remembered from somewhere that did not exist.

Elmon did not answer immediately.

He let the silence settle—

like dust upon a forgotten altar—
in an age that had not yet been.

Perdina pulsed.

Once, white.

Then, violet.

Not in defense.

Not in warning.

In reverence.

Elmon breathed.

Steady.

Certain.

"I do not come to bind," he whispered.

A pause, not hesitation—
but truth taking shape.

"I come..."

"...to be unbound."

Elcrull knelt.

She did not draw her blades.

She sang.

Soft.

Familiar.

A lullaby—

once lost in Eyona—

now remembered.

Her voice trembled—

not from weakness, but from return.

She wept.

Not for sorrow alone, but for what had been found again.

Her eyes lifted to Elmon.

Not in doubt, but in need.

For assurance.

For their binding.

For hope, once lost, now rekindled.

“Is this the end...” she whispered, voice breaking against something deeper.

“I feel... a hopeless hate.”

The runes stilled.

The swirls of light slowed—

not fading, but listening.

The wound responded.

From the blackness, a figure began to form.

Not flesh.

Not shadow.

Memory, given shape.

It did not speak.

It did not move.

It waited.

Elmon stepped forward.

Bearer of remembrance.

Warder of what had been.

He crossed into the wound, and onto the platform within.

The moment his foot touched, something broke.

He stumbled.

Fell, to his knees.

His mind fractured—

not in pain, but in overload.

Thoughts collided, legends—

Celestials—

judgment—

all pressing inward at once.
The entrance behind him seemed to fill, not with space—
but with thought itself.
Not his alone.
Visions surged.
Unbidden.
Uncontained.
Shadows whispered—
Soft, persistent.
Memories did not return, they forced themselves forward.
History—
not remembered, but relived.
A dragon.
Ancient.
Bound.
Chains, not of iron—
but of will.
Dragged, downward—
into a pit that swallowed even meaning.
And above, a light.
Not warm.
Not guiding.
Too bright, to look away from—
and too absolute, to resist.
The memory did not fade.
It held him.
And the figure, watched.
Elmon felt it, a hush—
from Virelyndra.
Not silence, but restraint.
Something there, unquenched.
Like fire, binding chains.
Burning, but never allowed to become.
He lifted his head.
Slowly.
Testing the edges of his awareness.
The world did not return.
It revealed.

Before him, they stood.
The Sentinel Dreamlayers, and its guardian.
Not looming.
Not advancing.
Present.
In its hand, a coffer.
Held forward, not as a weapon—
but as offering.
Or demand.
Alms.
Or toll.
A passage not taken freely.
Elmon's breath slowed.
Recognition settled.
The cold, sterile. unforgiving.
He knew this place.
Not by sight, but by truth.
The Shadow Realm.
Not darkness, but the absence of permission.
A place where light—
was not destroyed—
only denied.
"I am deep within it," he thought.
His gaze shifted, to the walls encircling the platform.
They rose around him, immense—
Ancient, impossible.
Seven arches.
Each one distinct.
Each one, alive with time.
Not marking passage, but holding it.
The weight of them struck him.
Not fear, but knowing.
"These are..." he whispered.
"The Seven Arches of Time."
The realization did not come gently.
It settled, like truth that had always been waiting.
Amazement.
Shaken breath.

Clarity.

“The Vault of Aeons...”

A pause.

The words forming themselves.

“...this must be it.”

Not a legend.

Not a theory.

A place.

“The final prison of Dragos.”

“And the resting place...”

“...of forbidden truths.”

The arches did not answer.

But the coffer, remained.

Waiting.

Chapter ⊕: Dreamlayers

And so, the trials began—not of strength, but of soul.

Elmon rose from the dim-lit shadows, brushing the dust of memory from his cloak. The Dreamlayers awaited—not as adversaries, but as truths unburied.

Something stirred in him—an unrest without name.

Why Aura?

A realm untouched by shadow. Unwritten by myth. A place that should not remember. And yet—it did.

A gate stood here. Not built. Not placed. But *present*.

Was this coincidence?

Or had something shifted?

Had the Heralds, in their passage, disturbed a boundary never meant to open?

Or worse—

Had Aura begun to remember something it was never meant to hold?

He stood beneath the arches—seven in all, each one a gate to time’s deepest truths. The Vault of Aeons did not welcome. It waited.

Amazed and shaken by all that had led him here, Elmon stood before truths forbidden not by chains, but by silence.

What lay ahead was beyond memory—beyond knowing. Access would not be given. It must be earned.

Seven Dreamlayers.

Each guarded by a creature woven into prophecy.

Elmon’s mind flared with words not his own:

“Beyond these guardians lies the Vault itself. It does not open... It remembers.”

First Arch – Dreamlayer of Regret

Warded by Mythrocus, the Black Dragon—an aspect of regret, power unheeded.

Before him, the world fractures into what could have been—

visions where Seralyn lived...

where Dragos never rose...where the cost was never paid.

Mythrocus speaks in fireless breath, not to threaten—but to hollow conviction.

Only those who defy nostalgia may pass.

Elmon stood, the weight of memory pressing against him like a tide that never breaks.

“Regret is a leash I’ve chewed raw...” he said quietly.

“I’ve burned tomes to forget... and still they return.”

His voice steadied.

“Not because they are truth—but because they are mine.”

He closed his eyes for only a moment.

“Silva and Tagela... I do not carry you as what should have been.”

Perdina pulsed faintly.

“I carry you as what was.”

He lifted his gaze to the black dragon.

“Mythrocus... I do not beg the past.”

A step forward.

“I do not live in it.”

Another step.

“I remember it... and I move.”

Second Arch – A dreamlayer,

Warded by Horion Danek in a Sky of Lost Stars, an ancient celestial wyvern.

One must navigate constellations of fallen heroes whose destinies were corrupted by Dragos.

Horion tests the purity of vision—only one who sees beyond fate can ride the lightway.

“Fallen heroes, each a light devoured... I see their names etched in constellations that never rose.

Will I be one of them—a memory bright but broken?

The staff whispers truth: destiny isn’t gifted,

it’s seized. Horion, show me what I could be.

I’ll leap beyond the stars you mourn.”

Third Arch – A dreamlayer,

Warded by the Son of Norgald seated on the Tempest Throne,

storm giant who bears Judgment and wrath.

Elmon must survive a trial where his magic is nullified and his soul weighed by thunder itself.

The giant asks one question that must be answered without hesitation. To hesitate is death.

“No magic. Only bone, breath, and burden.

The storm judges not what I’ve cast, but who I’ve become.

There is no spell for conviction, no incantation for courage.

Norgald, weigh me. T

he thunder may roar—but it will know my truth.”

Fourth Arch – A dreamlayer,

Warded by Bearcleas the Binder bound in Chains of Memory.

Sentinel Dragon, bound to truths.

A maze of unspoken truths and fractured oaths.

One must release one memory forever to continue.

Bearcleas binds himself to each visitor—what they leave behind becomes part of him.

“What memory can I leave behind?”

Silva and Tangela laugh?

The first time Perdina chose me?

No... I will surrender the taste of peace.

That fleeting feeling of stillness.

The war needs my fire, not my quiet.

Take it, Bearcleas. Bind it deep.”

Fifth Arch – A dreamlayer,

Warded by Agorin, the crafty White Celestial Basilisk—an embodiment of prevailing fear.

His challenge is illusion itself—a riddle-spun reality where identity flickers.

One must solve which version of himself still bears Seralyn’s love.

Eye contact is forbidden. Speech must be riddled to match Agorin’s cadence.

“Versions of me... some noble, some monstrous.

Who holds her love?

Who carries the cost?

In riddles, I find truth—because lies are too simple.

Agorin, I see through your reflection maze.

I am the Elmon who mourns and marches, not the one who fled.”

Sixth Arch – A dreamlayer,

Warded by Hordonas, Fey Princess judge in the Court of Whispers.

She is an aspect of desire and sorrow.

To pass, one must dance the Reverie Waltz, a ritual of memory and mourning.

Fail, and become a dream husk.

Hordonas will offer Elmon a glimpse of Silva or Tangela reborn... but only if he willingly steps into the waltz alone.

“A waltz with memory... I have not danced since she vanished.

And yet, my feet remember her rhythm.

If this is the last song I hear before the vault... let it be hers.

Let sorrow spin me.

Let longing lead. Hordonas, I dance for what I lost, and for what might return.”

Seventh Arch – A dreamlayer,

Warded by Morclan, an ancient Stone Dwarf holding the Roots of all Riddles.

He is the final truth that challenges those who surpass the vault.

Three riddles: past, future, heart.

Only the truth that is feared the most will unlock the final arch.

Morclan knows every prophecy, and every lie told to hide them.

Only the truth Elmon fears most will unlock the final arch.

“Three riddles.

One past, one future, one heart.

I’ve answered many questions, but never the one I buried deepest.

Morclan, I do not fear prophecy—I fear the lie I told myself to survive.

Ask me. I will not run.”

Within the Shadow Realm—where echoes are reality and time is smoke—

Elmon Magus journeyed alone through the Seven Arches of Time.

He stepped beneath the first arch, Perdina humming softly in his palm.

Each guardian ahead was more than myth—

they were mirrors of his soul.

Not of what had been. Not of what could be.

But of what is.

His thoughts churned like thunder in silence.

Mythrocus

Elmon stepped into an endless dusk—

crimson sky above, obsidian sand beneath.

Shadows stretched across the horizon—

lives he might have led.

Elcrull’s hand in his—in worlds that never were.

A younger Elmon laughing—beside a son never born.

Each image pulsed—

not false, but unchosen.

From beneath the sand, Mythrocus rose.

A massive dragon of soot and sorrow—

his scales etched with names Elmon had almost become.

“You carry the corpse of what-ifs,” the dragon’s voice ground like stone.

“Still breathing... within you.”

His wings unfurled—

wide as memory, heavy with it.

“Feed it,” Mythrocus rumbled, *“or face me.”*

Elmon did not move.

Perdina rested in his grip—

its flame faint, but steady.

"I've tried to bury regret," he said quietly.
A breath. *"And it does not stay buried."*
The visions surged, pulling—
Aching, offering.
Elmon's voice steadied.
"But it does not lead me."
He looked to the horizon—
to With Silva, to the life that never was.
"I will not live in what was never given."
His grip tightened—
not in defiance, but in clarity.
"I walk forward—with what is."
Perdina flared—
not in fire, but in truthlight.
Blue.
Clean.
Unyielding.
The visions faltered.
Not destroyed—
but released.
Mythrocus lunged—
but slowed—
as if striking something that would not resist.
The truth held.
The dragon faltered, his form breaking—
not into ash, but into fragments—
no longer clinging.
He howled—
not in rage, but in loss.
Then scattered—
into black feathers—
carried by winds that no longer called him back.
The dusk remained, but it no longer pulled.
Elmon stood.
Not unburdened, but unbound.
Elmon stood in the wake of Mythrocus' words—
and the dusk began to loosen.
Not shattered, but released.

It thinned into silver mist, and Elmon felt the weight of memory lift—
not gone, but carried differently.
Stretched, into possibility.
Perdina pulsed once.
A soft glow arched from her runes—
not bright, but certain.
Above him, the stars stirred.
Not distant, but aware.
They did not shine, they whispered.
Elmon breathed, steady now.
The myth of the chamber settled around him—
not as illusion, but as truth properly held.
He did not conquer it.
He aligned with it.
And with that, he stepped forward,
ready to walk the constellations.
Now the world shimmered—
stars drifting in a dome of endless space.
Elmon stepped forward.
The platform shifted beneath him—
not moving, but responding.
Stone inscribed itself with memory—
regret darkening into stormclouds within a single breath.
Each step shimmered.
Dust stirred, reshaping—
into names he almost knew.
Not forgotten, but never fully held.
Perdina hummed softly—
her tone carrying the cadence of oaths never spoken—
of heroes lost, of futures left unclaimed.
The constellations above did not guide.
They watched.

HORION

Horion soared overhead—
then stilled, wings outstretched,
casting constellations shaped by shadow.
Light rippled from his feathers—

like grief etched into the stars.

“You mourn what has not come,” he said, voice drifting like dying light.

“You hold to what may have been.”

The sky dimmed around him.

“Your dreams are falling stars—”

A pause—

Final, *“watch them die.”*

Elmon lifted his gaze.

The stars shifted.

Forming, Elcrull’s smile.

His master’s hand.

The Vault, sealed.

Possibility.

“Hope is not naïve,” Elmon said quietly.

A breath.

“It is defiance.”

His voice trembled, not with doubt—

but with the weight of choosing it.

Here.

Now.

“Even here.”

Horion descended—

not in rage, but in unraveling.

Perdina turned in Elmon’s grasp—

not striking, but aligning.

The star paths shifted, spiraling—

seven points, each one held.

A memory given.

A truth kept.

The Sigil of Continuum pulsed, once.

Then unfolded—

not as force, but as recognition.

A celestial bloom.

The light did not consume Horion.

It revealed him.

The sorrow in his form, loosened.

Not destroyed, but released.

His wings faltered, then softened.

The sky brightened—
not with brilliance, but with acceptance.
Horion dissolved, not into nothing—
but into what he had always been.
A constellation.
Not of grief, but of grace.
Elmon stepped forward.
The platform shifted again, stardust thickening—
stormclouds forming at the edge of something deeper.
His heartbeat echoed, slow—
Distant, like thunder waiting to speak.

Norgald

Elmon stepped forward.
The platform shifted beneath him—
no longer stardust,
but basalt, slick with rain.
Thunder cracked.
He stood alone, in a storm-ringed void—
his heartbeat syncing with the sky's fury.
Magic drained from him—
not taken—
but refused.
Perdina dimmed.
Silent.
His robes clung heavy, soaked in the weight of it.
The Son of Norgald loomed above—
lightning coiled around his fists—
eyes like stormglass.
"No spell. No staff."
A pause.
"Who are you... without them?"
Elmon did not flinch.
He stood, soaked,
Stripped, and still.
The giant raised his hammer, voice like judgment breaking.
"What fuels your fight?"
Elmon stepped forward—

not in aggression, but in vow.

“Loss. Love. Truth.”

A breath.

“I do not fight for power.”

“I fight so choice remains.”

The storm paused.

Lightning froze, mid-flash.

The void held its breath.

Norgald lowered his hammer.

One nod.

No words.

Above, the clouds parted.

A bridge of thunder arced across the sky—

each bolt a vow, each echo a path.

The thunder did not fade—

it folded inward—

like breath held too long.

Elmon stood, beneath the silence.

His vow, still pulsing.

He had spoken truth, without spell.

Faced judgment, without shield.

And the storm, had listened.

Perdina hummed faintly—

not in power, but in recognition.

Then the platform shifted—

not forward, but inward.

Mirrors rose, not reflective—

but revealing—

like truths he had never chosen to face.

The next trial had begun.

Bearecleas

The platform shifted, into a labyrinth of floating mirrors.

Each one reflected a memory—

but altered.

Elcrull—angry, not laughing.

A woman striking him as a child.

A father turning away.

Perdina splintering—rejecting, not choosing.

Triplets lost before breath.

Some were lies.

Some, were possibilities.

Elmon's thoughts tightened.

'Have I forgotten too much? Sacrificed what I should have kept?'

He could trust neither sight, nor feeling.

In the center, Bearcleas stood.

Bound in chains of translucent emotion—

his wings marked with Elmon's scars—

etched in flame, and silence.

His gaze held weight—

not accusation, but question.

"Your memories are contradictions," Bearcleas rumbled.

"Choose one... to lose."

The mirrors pulsed—

Whispering, pressing.

'Was Elcrull ever truly mine? Did Perdina choose me... or did I imagine it?'

The cold deepened.

Bearcleas gestured.

A mirror shimmered.

Elcrull, lying beside him—

beneath quiet stars.

Her voice, soft—

sacred—

a tether to who he might have been.

Elmon stepped forward.

His hand met the glass.

It pulsed.

A long breath.

"No."

The word was quiet, but absolute.

"I will not choose what to lose."

The mirrors flickered, uncertain.

"These are not mine to divide," he said.

"Some are true."

"Some are not."

"But all of them..."

A pause.

"...must be seen rightly."

He lowered his hand.

"I do not give up memory."

"I understand it."

The labyrinth trembled.

The mirrors cracked, not breaking—
but correcting.

Bearcleas watched.

The chains around him loosened—
not shattered, but released.

"You do not sever truth," the guardian said softly.

"You bear it."

And the mirrors, stilled.

The mirror resisted.

It trembled—

not fragile—

but unwilling.

Elmon pressed his hand against it.

"I need to forget..." he whispered.

A breath, shaking.

"I need to remember."

"I need to survive."

The glass strained, cracking—

Slow, painful, but not breaking.

The image held.

Christin's voice—

Soft, unchanged.

Elmon's hand trembled.

Then stilled.

"No."

The word barely formed, but it did not waver.

"I will not survive by unmaking what is true."

The mirror shifted.

Not breaking, but settling.

The distortion peeled away.

Not erased, but corrected.

Bearcleas inhaled deeply.

The chains around him loosened—
then shattered—
each one breaking like a name finally remembered.
The dragon bowed his head—
not in defeat, but in mourning.
The path opened—
not carved by sacrifice—
but by truth held whole.
Elmon did not move at once.
He lingered—
in the silence Bearcleas left behind.
Elcrull's presence remained—
not loud, not vivid, but real.
He touched his chest.
The feeling remained.
Not lessened.
Not severed.
Understood.
He breathed.
Slow.
Steady.
Then stepped forward.
Not to escape.
But to endure.
The true Elmon walked on—
heart unbroken—
and unfragmented.

AGORIN

The mirrors gave way, to forms.
Elmon, multiplied.
Tyrant Elmon.
Hermit Elmon.
Prideful Elmon.
Neutral Elmon.
One who had lived, by abandoning everything.
Mist coiled—
thick with doubt—

heavy with shame.

The realm darkened—

not by shadow, but by recognition.

Agorin moved at the edge of it, eyes burning—

Yellow, unyielding.

“Only one Elmon may pass.”

A pause.

The fog tightened.

“Who are you?”

Another pause, deeper.

“Which one... truly holds love?”

The question struck—

not as confusion—

but as fracture.

“Love of what? Of who?”

The selves pressed inward—

Pulling, claiming.

Elmon stepped forward.

Not rejecting them—

not denying them—

but carrying them.

His voice was quiet.

“I am not the strongest Elmon.”

A breath.

“But I am the one who remembers.”

The mist faltered.

“These are not my enemies,” he said.

“They are what I could have been.”

Another step.

“I do not choose one.”

“I carry all of them...”

“...and I choose what I do with them.”

Silence deepened.

Elmon’s gaze steadied.

“Love is not proven.”

“It is lived.”

Agorin moved, then stopped.

Perdina shimmered—

not bright, but true.
Within her glow, a memory surfaced—
Elcrull's lullaby, soft—
unchanged.
The mist unraveled.
The false selves did not shatter—
they settled.
Not erased, but placed.
Agorin exhaled—
Long, heavy.
“*Then you are whole,*” he said quietly.
The path opened.
Elmon did not move at once.
He lingered, in the quiet—
the echoes of what he was not—
and what he could have been—
no longer pulling.
He did not mourn them.
He honored them.
Then, with pride surrendered—
and self unbroken, Elmon walked on.

HORDONAS

The chamber shifted, opening into a vast ballroom—
of shadow, and stars.
Ghostly figures moved—
a waltz of silence and slow breath.
They did not speak.
They remembered.
Fragments, of joy.
Of sorrow.
A wedding.
A meeting.
Moments, not fixed, but felt.
At the dais stood Hordonas—
veiled in moonlight, watching.
The music rose—
not heard—

but known.
It stirred memory—
not as thought, but as presence.
“To pass,” she said softly, *“you must dance...”*
A pause—
“...with the memory you fear most.”
The air shifted.
A form emerged.
Silva.
Smiling, sadly.
Elmon staggered, as if pierced—
not by blade, but by knowing.
The music called.
He did not resist.
He stepped forward.
They danced.
Slow.
Measured.
Unforgiving.
Her form changed, young Silva—
fading Silva, spectral Silva—
almost gone.
Each step, a wound reopened.
Each turn, a truth returned.
Elmon did not look away.
He did not speak.
He did not reach to change her.
He remained.
And the music carried them.
When the final note settled, Hordonas wept.
Not for sorrow, but for what was held.
“You danced with pain,” she said,
“not to escape it...”
“...but to honor it.”
She lowered her gaze.
“You may pass.”
Elmon bowed, not in farewell—
but in reverence.

The ballroom faded.
The figures dissolved.
But the rhythm remained.
He felt it, steady—
Alive, within him.
Not as sorrow, but as vow.
He had danced with pain, and did not turn away.
And pain, no longer needed to pursue him.

MORCLAN

Elmon heard the sound of stone shifting.
The ballroom collapsed, into cavern.
Rock groaned—
Ancient, endless.
The cavern stretched,
vast enough to hold everything—
every trial, every memory—
every cost encompassing all of Elmon.
Runes carved into the walls pulsed—
not with light, but with recognition.
They felt him.
At the center, Morclan stood.
Unmoving.
Unyielding.
A pillar, not placed—
but grown from time itself.
He regarded Elmon—
not with curiosity—
but certainty.
“You will fail here.”
Not threat.
Not anger.
Judgment.
“You have given much.”
A pause.
“And gained nothing... that will carry you further.”
The cavern deepened.
The silence pressed.

“Three truths must be spoken.”

“Not for passage.”

“For reckoning.”

A long breath filled the space.

“Answer... or remain.”

The air stilled.

Morclan’s gaze fixed, direct.

“Is your heart... full?”

A pause, weight settling.

“Or have you emptied it... to survive?”

Another step forward—

the stone beneath him answering.

“Is your purpose still yours...”

“...or only what remains after everything you have lost?”

The cavern pulsed.

Waiting.

“Your past.”

The words settled—

Heavy, unchanging.

“What breaks... but was never whole?”

The question struck—

not as puzzle, but as wound.

Elmon’s breath faltered.

His hand rose, then stilled.

He did not search for an answer.

He remembered it.

“My heart.”

The words cracked as they left him—

not spoken, but released.

The cavern pulsed.

Morclan’s finger traced the air—

and the stone answered—

etching the truth.

“Your future.”

“What arrives unseen...yet marks the end?”

Elmon did not hesitate this time.

He had felt it, every step forward—

every trial tightening toward it.

“D R A G O S.”

He spoke it slowly, deliberately—
as if naming it made it nearer.

The runes flared, then settled.

Morclan’s gaze did not shift.

“To your heart.”

“What burns without flame...heals without touch...and endures beyond death?”

Elmon’s chest tightened.

His breath shook—

not from fear—

but from knowing.

He did not look away.

“My family.”

A pause, deeper—

more personal.

“My cubs.”

The final rune carved itself—

not quickly—

but with care.

Each truth, held.

The cavern stilled.

Elmon stepped forward—

not demanding—

but standing in what he had spoken.

“I have given you truth,” he said quietly.

“Not the answers I want...”

“...but the ones that remain.”

“I will not speak anything else.”

Silence.

The stone did not move. It listened.

Then, with a groan like memory shifting—
the arch opened.

Not as escape.

But as continuation.

The trials had not changed him.

They had revealed him.

Chapter ○: Aeon the Vault Revealed

Mythos of War: Where Harmony Fell and Memory Faught Back

The Vault Revealed

A soundless rupture split the realm where Elmon stood.

The Dreamlayer cavern dissolved—
not shattered, forgotten.

In its place, a cavern of midnight smoke unfurled—
Vast, unbounded.

Time fractured with each footstep,
and memory bled into the air—
like incense.

The air felt like a furnace, yet cold.

Floating obelisks spiraled around them,
inscribed with verses never spoken aloud—
yet somehow known.

They whispered.

“Now Dragos was more subtle than any beast of the field...”

“My servant shall bind you, and you shall assault his history.”

“And you will know I sent him.”

Each glyph pulsed, with divine regret.

Perdina glowed faintly, like a star under strain—
its crystal trembling with what was to come.

Elcrull lifted her eyes.

She had not followed him here—
and yet, she stood beside him.

She looked behind them, then ahead.

Nothing followed.

Nothing led.

Only presence.

She rose slowly.

Not in fear, but in recognition.

At the center of the chasm—
within a helix of molten glyphs—
something stirred.

Dakon uncoiled.

He was no longer beast—

nor prophet—
nor celestial.
He was all three, and none.
Wings of corrupted harmony stretched wide—
etched with fractured sigils—
forbidden verses, echoes that should not exist.
His form flickered, ancient guides—
summoning rites, betrayers long forgotten.
Nothing held.
Everything remained.
His voice was not spoken—it was remembered,
like a lie told too often that seemed to hold truth.
“You are the last ward, Elmon.”
A pause, heavy, certain.
“A memory too stubborn to unmake.”
“Surrender.”
“And I will remake you... “
“as you were meant to be in perfection.”
Elmon tightened his grip on Perdina.
The clawed base thrummed—
each pulse, a sacrifice remembered.
Around him, the echoes of the Heralds stirred—
failed designs, twisted truths—
memories traded for power—
all pressing inward.
Elcrull lowered her stance, blades drawn—
Ready, but uncertain.
This was not a battle she understood.
Then, he moved.
Dragos stepped forward.
The ground recoiled.
The Vault itself, shuddered.

The Serpent’s Chorus

Dakon did not strike.
He shimmered.
Not unstable—
but deliberate.

His form softened, folding inward—
until the corruption no longer showed.
Where distortion had been, radiance formed.
Wings of fracture became wings of light.
His presence shifted—
not less dangerous—
but more convincing.
The Overseer stood, cloaked in brilliance—
Unchallenged, unquestioned.
The golden mask of Dragos reformed—
Flawless, serene.
His voice followed.
Not one, but many.
Layered.
Prophets.
Lovers.
Guides long trusted.
“I have stood for eons,” the chorus breathed.
“I know what your heart requires.”
The sound did not press.
It settled.
“You carry them within you, Elmon.”
A pause, gentle, intentional.
“Let me return them to you.”
“Alive.”
“Whole.”
“As they were.”
The Vault pulsed.
The obelisks flickered, their inscriptions shifting—
not rewritten, but bent.
Verses emerged—
Familiar, and wrong.
“Bone of your bones... flesh of your flesh...”
“They shall be as gods... knowing good and evil...”
“They shall know SINN and it will possess them.”
The words did not echo.
They lingered, as if waiting to be believed.

Dragos stepped forward—
and the chasm narrowed.
The space tightened, not with force—
but with inevitability.
A vision bloomed beside him.
Silva.
Tangela.
Untouched.
Unbroken.
Smiling as they once had—
beneath the silver canopy of Eyona.
They reached out—
small hands, steady.
“Apa... bring us home.”
“Let the world wait.”
Elmon staggered—
as if something long endured had been forced to live again.
Perdina trembled in his grip.
The clawed base pulsed, each beat echoing—
every memory traded—
every truth held, every sacrifice remembered.
The laughter of his cubs stirred—
Soft, faint—
Not from the vision.
From the crystal.
Dakon spoke again—
now as Dragos, the First Overseer.
“You were never meant to suffer.”
A breath, almost gentle.
“Let me remake you.”
“Let me make you whole.”
Elmon closed his eyes.
The Vault dimmed.
The obelisks stilled, as if waiting.
Then—
from the heart of Perdina—
voices rose.
Fragile.

Unbroken.

“Don’t trade the world for us...”

Elmon’s breath steadied.

He opened his eyes.

The vision wavered.

Silva.

Tangela.

Flickering, not fading—

but failing to hold.

They fractured.

Dragos recoiled.

The golden mask, cracked.

Elmon’s voice was quiet, but absolute.

“I will not eat of your fruit.”

“I will not trade love...”

A breath—

“...for illusion.”

The Vault groaned.

The serpent form beneath the light, uncoiled.

What had been offered, was now denied.

And the space, shifted.

The Vault groaned. The serpent uncoiled. The battle began.

A voice stirred, not Dragos—

not Elmon, older.

The words did not arrive.

They were recognized.

“Benevolent in peace,”

“fierce in knowledge beyond his years.”

“From Elfen lore and the cries of war he will rise.”

“He will domesticate the silence of stone.”

“Seek clarity within shadow.”

“And defile the evil of creation.”

The Vault did not echo them.

It yielded to them.

Dakon roared, not in rage—

but in remembrance.

His voice fractured the Vault—

echoing with every promise he had ever made—

as Dragos, the First Overseer.

The obelisks spun, violent—
their verses bleeding into the air—
not spoken, but imposed.

“You shall be as gods...”

“Bone of your bones...”

“I will put enmity between you and them...”

“SINN will not corrupt him.”

The words collided, truth—
Twisted, forced into shape.

Dragos moved.

Reality bent.

The Vault warped, walls unraveling—
coiling into serpents of doubt.

Elcrull stepped forward, blades drawn—
not striking, but deflecting.

The serpents did not bleed.

They recoiled.

Each bore a face, Elmon's.

Versions, broken—

Betrayed, surrendered.

They hissed, with his voice.

“You've sacrificed too much...”

“You've gained nothing...”

The words pressed inward—
not to wound, but to convince.

Elmon raised Perdina.

The staff pulsed—

not with power—

but with memory.

Bearcleas' silence.

Agorin's truths.

Hordonas' sorrow.

Morclan's reckoning.

All held.

All present.

Elmon did not shout.

He remembered.

“Flame of the Remembered.”

Perdina ignited—

not in fire—

but in truth made visible.

The laughter of his cubs—

Rose, not illusion—

but carried memory.

Elcrull’s voice, bright—

Alive, cut through the doubt.

His pain did not break.

It held.

It became shield.

His love did not weaken.

It aligned.

It became blade.

The serpents faltered—

not slain, but unable to hold shape.

And then, they closed.

They clashed.

Elcrull moved—

not with hesitation—

but with purpose.

Her blades struck, not flesh, but form.

Dragos’ wings were severed, falling away—

not bleeding, but unraveling—

like something no longer needed.

He roared.

Not in pain, in refusal.

“I do not need them.”

A step forward, the Vault tightening.

“He is mine.”

Reality bent.

The Vault fractured, not outward—

but inward.

Elmon was pulled, into recursion.

The Dreamlayers returned.

Faster.

Sharper.

Crueler.

Each trial, compressed—

Forced, weaponized.

Regret.

Hope.

Identity.

Truth.

Pain.

All at once.

Elmon staggered, not from weakness—

but from overload.

Elcrull did not follow the illusions.

She hunted the source.

Through memory—

through distortion—

she found him.

Dragos, within the recursion.

Elmon steadied.

He did not resist the past.

He reversed it.

“Arcane Echo Pulse.”

Perdina flared, not outward, but backward.

Each trial unwound.

Each truth reclaimed, not relived—

but reasserted.

The Heralds’ defeats, became anchors.

Each one, a strike.

Elcrull’s blades met them—

not cutting flesh—

but severing distortion.

Dragos faltered.

For the first time, he was not rewriting.

He was remembering.

And what he remembered, was not power.

It was fall.

The Vault trembled.

A voice thundered, not from Dragos—

not from Elmon, but above both.

“I am the truth.”

“I judge rightly.”

“I alone may rule as Most High.”

The words were not spoken in pride—
but in echo of what once was claimed.

And then, a second presence—

Older, bound.

Virelyndra:

“My fire binds your corruption.”

“Not by chain...”

“...but by memory.”

“This Vault—”

“...is not your prison.”

“It is your ending remembered.”

The molten glyphs surged.

Dakon’s form trembled, fracturing between—
what was, and what had become.

“I chose this form in death,” the voice continued—

Steady, unyielding.

“My essence remains—”

“within the moment I gave.”

“Service does not end.”

“It is remembered.”

The Vault aligned.

Not to Elmon.

Not to Dragos.

But to truth held at its origin.

The Vault wailed.

A rupture opened behind Dragos—
not into space—

but into structure.

The Prime Thread.

It pulsed, not with light, but with unmaking.

It beckoned, to spread—

to rewrite, to erase.

Anchored within the rift, a triad of glyphs.

Three. Interlocked—

not by force, but by tone.

They sang.

Elmon felt it, before he understood it.

A resonance, layered—

Recursive, each note reflecting the others—

forming a center,

that did not exist—

yet held everything together.

His mind strained.

‘This is not structure...

This is ownership.’

Dragos turned, the rift responding to him—

not opening, but answering.

“*You carry them,*” he said—

voice layered, gentle—

dangerous.

“*Let me return them to you.*”

“*Alive.*”

“*Whole.*”

“*Untouched by sorrow.*”

Elmon faltered.

Perdina flared.

The voices rose, clear—

unyielding.

“*Don’t trade the world for us...*”

Elmon steadied.

Tears welled up.

He stepped forward.

The serpents recoiled.

The rift narrowed.

He spoke, not loudly—

but with certainty.

“*I will not be rewritten.*”

“*I will not be perfected.*”

A breath, final.

“*I will be true.*”

Dragos screamed.

His cast off wings shattered into glyphs.

The Vault trembled.

Elmon raised Perdina—
not to strike—
but to remember.

The Vault did not tremble.

It listened.

The Prime Thread pulsed—
the triad holding, waiting—
not for power,
but for alignment.

The Cipher Seal

Elmon stood at the edge of the Prime Thread—
Perdina raised, its crystal pulsing,
with the weight of the worlds he had carried.

Dragos writhed—
his failed wings shattered into drifting glyphs—
his voice collapsing, no longer a chorus—
but a static scream, fragments of promises—
broken verses, corrupted hymns.

The Vault trembled.

The obelisks dimmed.

Time itself, held its breath.

Elmon whispered, the forbidden incantation.

The Cipher Seal.

A rite no Herald dared speak—
a binding only Perdina could carry.

Seven flames ignited, not cast—
but revealed, each one a beacon of a Guardian World:

Ellhuan's resonance—the breath of first creation

Arcadia's pulse—the rhythm of sacred joy

Brittia's rage—the fire of righteous defiance

Hurm' Ay's dragons—the memory of ancient guardians

Eyona's sorrow—the tears that sanctify loss

Wishar's despair—the silence that births resolve

Elerie's shadow—the veil between truth and unmaking

Arua's Purpose—The door to the never

Elmon spoke, voice steady, heart aflame:

Elmon spoke—

voice steady—

heart aflame.

*“In the name of Ellhuan’s resonance,
Arcadia’s pulse,
Brittia’s rage,
Hurm’Ay’s dragons,
Eyona’s sorrow,
Wishar’s despair,
and Elerie’s shadow—”*

A breath, final.

“With the Citadel’s Seal—”

“I bind you, Dragos.”

“The Gates—be bound.”

Perdina moved.

Not swung, not cast, placed.

The clawed base struck, the center of Dragos’ chest.

The glyphs screamed.

The Prime Thread recoiled, not breaking—
but resisting correction.

Dragos twisted, pulled inward—
not destroyed, not erased—

Sealed.

His essence spiraled, drawn into the crystal—
Coiling, a serpent remembered.

The Triad, stuttered.

The tone, halted, mid-resonance.

Then, a spark.

At its center, where nothing had been—
something held.

The triad crystallized, its shifting tones collapsing—
into form, a four-sided convergence—
fixed, unmoving, true.

Dragos reached, not in power—
but in refusal.

The Triad did not answer.

He was displaced, not cast out—
but placed within what he could not alter.

The Vault collapsed, not with violence—
but with finality.

The obelisks fell silent—
Their verses no longer bend.
The chasm closed.
Not gone.
No longer open.

The Magus Light

For a brief moment—
Virelyndra stood.
His flame returned, not rekindled—
recognized.
His purpose, released.
His voice, clear, final.
“I serve the wielder.”
Then, he was gone.
Elcrull caught Elmon—
as he fell to one knee.
Perdina dimmed—
not fading, but at rest.
Within the crystal, something remained.
A trace of the cubs, not grief, but memory.
Not absence, but love.
Elcrull lowered him gently—
his head resting in her lap.
His breath steadied.
Above the sealed Vault, a light formed.
Not sudden, but inevitable.
A star, new, unchanging.

The Magus Light.

It did not burn.
It watched.
A symbol, not of victory—
but of what had been held.
Love, untraded.
Truth, unrewritten.
Will, unbroken.
Across the Guardian Worlds—
something shifted.
Not restored, remembered correctly.

They breathed again.
Elmon rose, not as victor—
but as witness.
He stood, at the edge of silence.
The Vault, sealed.
The serpent, bound.
The Prime Thread—
no longer pulsing with unmaking—
but with memory, held—
stitched, unalterable.
He did not speak to the worlds.
He spoke to the wound.
*“Let this be remembered:
That I did not conquer, but endured.
That I did not rewrite, but remained.
That I did not trade the world for souls—
but carried their voices, as vow.”*
Perdina dimmed—
its crystal no longer radiant—
but held.
A reliquary of memory.
Above, the Magus Light flared—
not bright, but constant.
The Guardian Worlds turned toward it—
not in fear, but in reverence.
Elmon stepped to the crystallized structure.
It held, perfectly still.
No tone.
No echo.
No weave.
And yet, it existed.
A presence without resonance.
A form without becoming.
Elmon felt it, not as absence—
but as something set outside the cycle.
Perdina stirred.
A slow crimson glow emerged—
not warning, but revelation.

The Triad, was not of the world.
It did not belong to reality, as it was known.
It was a void, held within itself—
Anchored, inside the act of creation.
Esoteric glyphs lined its form—
Shifting, unfixe—
Alive, yet unchanging.
The tones were gone.
Not silenced, fulfilled.
Elmon did not reach for it.
He understood.
Some things were not meant to be held.
Only remembered correctly.
They turned from the Vault.
Not as victors, but as witnesses.
Not as heroes, but as keepers of truth.
Not as those who ended war—
but as those who inscribed its mythos.
They walked on.
Not changed.
Revealed.
He was the Magus.

The Fate of the Guardian Worlds After the Sealing of Dragos

Though the Encrypted Evil has been sealed, its scars ripple through the Eight Veins of the metaverse.

The worlds breathe again, but they are not as they were.

Brittia — War Wakes to Wisdom

Strife still hums beneath Brittia's soil, but it no longer hungers for blood.

The Circle of Emberquill now governs—warriors and diplomats bound to truth over victory. Old banners remain, but they are carried for memory, not conquest. Conflict persists, yet it bends toward reconciliation.

Brittia no longer seeks war. It seeks legacy.

Ellhuan — Harmony Refracted

The shattered crystal songs of Ergina begin to retune.

Resonance mages gather as the Chorus of Clarity, teaching that harmony without understanding becomes obsession. The great chords return—measured, patient.

Yet some shards still sing alone—rogue melodies, too true to be ignored.

Ellhuan is no longer perfect. It is honest.

Arcadia — *Wildness Awakens*

Rogalor's fall tore time loose from Arcadia's roots.

The jungle deepens. Beasts grow older in ways they should not, carrying memories not their own. Expeditions are fewer—and wiser.

New life emerges: Chronoferns, marking each passing day in living fronds.

Arcadia is not safer. It is aware.

Eyona — *The Shroud Lifts*

Sarrow's silence has been broken.

In Whisperwatch, circles gather where truth is spoken without veil. Secrets rise like morning mist, no longer buried.

Silva and Tangela are remembered in twilight gardens—blooms that open only when the sun departs.

Eyona no longer hides. But not all choose the light.

Hurm'Ay — *The Roar and the Pact*

Dragons soar again, not in feud, but in accord.

Ridicus' sundering axe lies shattered in the Ashroot Archive, watched by wyrmlings of flame and frost. The Pact of Wings binds dragonkind to the defense of the Prime Thread.

Hurm'Ay is no longer divided. It is bound by oath.

Wishar — *A Flicker in the Dark*

Barack's corruption nearly erased the realm.

Now—faint stars.

Torchbearers walk the Eternal Night, carrying inner flame. They do not banish the dark; they give it rhythm.

The night remains. But it is no longer empty.

Elerie — *Form and Feeling*

With Engorya transformed, Elerie responds not only to thought, but to intent.

Empaths shape terrain. Shadow-mages weave healing into form. Beauty and danger coexist without disguise.

Elerie does not conceal truth. It embodies it.

Aura — *Now Saronce, the Quiet Seal*

The Eernal Gates are closed.

The land is blanketed—unseen, unspoken, unentered.

Not destroyed. Not lost.

Held.

Saronce remembers what others must not.

Across the Eight Veins, beneath the Magus Light—
a phrase began to stir.

Not taught.

Not commanded.

Remembered.

It passed, from torchbearer to wyrmling,

from empath to diplomat,

from Whisperwatch to jungle bloom.

It did not belong to Elmon.

It belonged to all who endured.

“We are not rewritten. We are not erased.

We are the flame that remembers.”

In Brittia, it was carved into the Emberquill’s first blade.

In Ellhuan, it was sung in fractured harmony.

In Arcadia, it bloomed within the Chronofern.

In Eyona, it was whispered at twilight.

In Hurm’Ay, it was roared from mountaintop to archive.

In Wishar, it flickered within the void.

In Elerie, it shaped the land itself.

And in Saronce, though sealed, it lingered.

Like breath, behind a closed door.

Elmon walked on.

Elcrull under his arm.

Close to his heart.

Perdina dimmed.

The worlds reshaped.

But the flame, remained.

The Quiet Question

Elmon remembered Morgan Hollow—

the school he had once founded,

where children of lore and sacred arcane

had begun to shape their futures.

He had closed its gates in ritual,

when Dragos rose—

fearing knowledge would become a target.

The stones still pulsed.

Waiting.

For a world ready to listen.

But his thoughts turned—

not to the school, but to what he now carried.

The Triad.

He held it, yet did not understand it.

“Why is it?”

“What is it?”

“Why do I carry it?”

Not fear.

Not doubt.

Inquiry.

He lowered his voice—

not to command, but to ask.

“Why are you?”

The Triad responded.

Not with words.

With tone.

A flicker, a pulse,

a sequence not heard, but recognized.

Something within Elmon shifted—

not altered, but touched.

A thought formed—

not his, yet not foreign.

“Mine will guide you.”

Elmon did not answer.

He did not need to.

For the first time, since the Vault had closed—

the future did not feel like a path.

It felt—

like something waiting to be remembered.



Forged in siege. Bound in claw. Crowned in crystal. Enchanted by vow.

First shaped by Burin Stonecrusher, dwarf of Tower Mountain Hold, the staff was left unfinished at his death during the Mage Wars. It passed into the hands of the Forge Smiths of Norcrea, gray elves who formed the Claw Base and the Stepped Crown during the Siege of Enza.

From there, it was carried to the Dwarves of Black Mountain, where the Crest Binding was forged to house the crystal—an ancient shard of memory unearthed beneath the Vault.

It was moved to the Citadel of Noraglian. Where Catar and Dwarf forged and mounted its caps, rings and seals.

In the Fay Lands, the shaft was filled with bone dust of a long-deceased Faey dragon, mixed with Faery dust and the blood of the Council of the Crystal Ring.

Finally, it was enchanted by the Seven Lords of the Faey and the Celestial Thyr, binding it to the triad of Flame, Memory, and Fracture in his emotional axis.

The staff now serves as Elmon Silverwood's conduit, a vessel of invocation and echo-binding. It is said that those who wield it without a vow will fracture.

In the shimmering vale of Glimmerfen, beneath crystal trees and the gaze of the White Dragon, a chronicle was inscribed.

Elmon Silverwood, EchoBinder and veilwalker, did not seek power. He sought memory.

From the halls of Perdina to the Pit of Dragos, from the Siege of Black Mountain Hold to the Trials of the Mind, his journey was not conquest—it was communion.

This is not a tale of heroes. It is a ledger of echoes, bound in flame, sealed in truth.

Enter if you are willing to remember.

Those That Walked this Volume

Asmadù Silverwood

Fourth Cub.
Strength born early.
A storm still learning the shape of thunder.

Dark Bender

Once a slave master.
Later the Hand of Silverwood—Elmon's self-ordained servant.
He revealed the slavers who sought to deface the Catar people.
A man once bound by cruelty who chose to bind himself instead to redemption.

Elcrull Alora Silverwood

War Blade of the Red Tongues.
Mate to Elmon.
Bearer of his cubs and equal in spirit.
She walked beside destiny—not behind it.

Elmon Silverwood

Wizard. Echomancer. Veil Walker.
He did not seek the threads of fate.
Yet fate kept placing them in his hands.
Some called him Awakener.
Others would call him something far more dangerous.

Elrinana Silverwood

Aunt to Elmon.
Keeper of family memory and quiet counsel.
Where others chased power,
she guarded the roots from which it grew.

Elroola Emwinster Emersione

Queen of the Heraldry Council of the Elves.
Keeper of lineage and memory.
She knew the weight of names—and the cost when one becomes legend.

Emor Silverwood

Uncle to Elmon.
Scholar of alchemy and patient tutor of curious minds.
He believed knowledge was best given slowly—like a potion that reveals its power only in time.

Hngen Stonemaster

Dwarven Forge Master.
He melted mountains and hammered purpose into metal.
In his hands steel learned loyalty.
And the Silverwoods learned protection.

Miky Silverwood

Of the Silverwood blood.
Sister of warmth in a house of storms.
Where Elmon walked among echoes and veils, she carried the quiet strength of home.

Misery Elclot

Witch of Norcraze.
Mystic of the Red Eyes.
She watched the Covenants of Elmon unfold.
Not to guide them—but to see what the threads of fate would dare weave.

Nacrious Silverwood

Father of Elmon.
Once bent beneath shadow.
Later reborn as the Hand of Silverwood.
A man who chose service over the pride that once owned him.

Nozdaek Red Tongue of the Sharptooth

Red Tongue of the Sharptooth Citadel.
Warden. Healer. Witness to consequences.
He stitched flesh where ambition tore it open and learned that some wounds belong to destiny.

Shadow Dancer

Mother of Elcrull.
War Blade of the Red Tongues.
She walked the edge between discipline and instinct.
Few saw her strike.
Fewer survived to speak of it.

Silva Ithful Silverwood (SIS)

First Daughter of Elmon.
Called "Runt."
Thoughtful beyond her years.
A mind that listened to echoes others could not hear.

Tangela Silverwood

Third Cub.
Dancer of motion and Veil.
Where others walked paths—she stepped between them.

Vacus Ezmsweew Silverwood

First Cub of Elmon.

Fire in bone and storm in thought.

War Maker by nature.

Rebel by breath.
