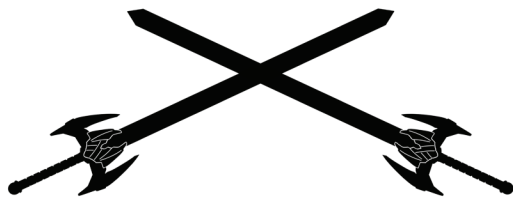


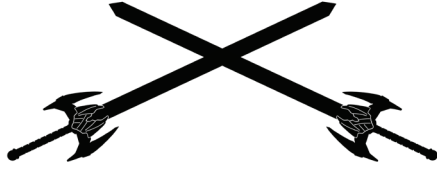
# TEMPEST BLADES

## THE CURSED TITANS

By

Ricardo Victoria





## Chapter 1

### Unwell

You are not alone.

Sixteen years ago. Albarran Point, on the western edge of the Straits. A few days after the first incursion registered in more than a century.

† † †

“How long has he been awake and running?” Sid asked himself under his breath. His grip tight around the handle of his small axe. He was surprised by the struggle to keep pace with his current target. Sid was fast, but this kid was surprisingly speedy for someone on the chubby side. “At this pace he is gonna collapse.”

The rainforest was thick with vegetation, allowing Sid’s samoharo features to blend in. As an Áak samoharo Sid more closely resembled an iguana mixed with a turtle. Between his physical features and the olive green cargo pants and old canvas jacket he easily blended in.

He paused, peering through the foliage, watching the kid, only his mohawk sticking above the leaves. The humidity of the jungle was at the limits of what was tolerable for a “hooman”. For Sid, it felt like home.

Sid’s mind strayed, thinking of his home. He shook his head. *I’m not home, I’m here in the Straits on this boring mission. Alone.* “Fraking punishment,” he whispered. “It was still the wrong order. It deserved to be disobeyed.” However, his punishment had given him time to work on his secret personal project away from prying eyes: rebuilding a pile of junk

that used to be an ancient samoharo mining spaceship. He still had to name it, but that would have to wait. Sid was busy tracking the hooman kid.

Sid had been following the kid for days, watching over him until Sid could find a way to get him and the others out of the deadly, beast-infested place. This whole situation was messed up. Sid had been working at his camp when the Stalkers, the cloaking beasts of prey from the Infinity Pits, had mysteriously shown up. By the time Sid had noticed what was happening, the Stalkers had killed all the adults and most of the kids. The samoharo had then taken it upon himself to hunt down the incursions. While doing that, he'd found the small group of survivors that had taken refuge in a warehouse and befriended them. They were barely in their teens—by hooman standards at least, for a samoharo they were babies—and probably would be dead if it weren't for the kid and the girl with the unsettling blue eyes. Her name was Gaby and he could tell that she had combat training by the way she had coordinated the group's meager defenses. But her cold demeanor made Sid uncomfortable. It was that of a trained assassin, and he was all too familiar with that kind of behaviour. That was a life Sid was trying to leave behind.

However, unlike others in the business, the girl seemed to be a decent person, only concerned with keeping everyone alive. Exceptionally strong and fast and armed with twin blades that glowed red and blue, she had killed two Stalkers on her own. With her, the survivors would have a decent chance. And she had a hidden bone die up her sleeve, one that was proving to be unstoppable when taking down the Stalkers: the kid.

The kid was different. And it wasn't only for the way the irises of his eyes glowed with a golden hued light. He was about fifteen or sixteen hooman years old. According to Gaby his name was Alex, and he shouldn't be alive. From what the girl had told him, Alex would have been the first victim of the Stalkers. He still had the fresh, pink scars from one of their barbed limbs. That sort of wound should have mauled the kid's liver and right lung. An injury that would leave an

adult hooman bleeding to death in minutes. Yet Alex was not only uninjured, he was running around the rainforest, taking down the elusive eldritch abominations with relative ease despite lacking combat training. And not any creature, but ones that had the ability to cloak themselves. Samoharo underwent special training to gain the experience necessary to attack such cloaked creatures with any hope of success. But this kid already displayed the experience of a combat veteran as he took on the Stalkers. And then there was the sword. The kid was wielding a strange sword, with a hand guard that resembled three pairs of open wings. Sid had heard about a sword with that description, but right now, with everything going on, he wasn't in the right frame of mind to recall what he'd heard about it.

The truth was that by any other standard, Alex should have been dead. Sid could relate to that. He had been left for dead once, and had survived, after a fashion. The kid needed to know he was not alone, that he had friends to watch his back, even if he could now break a boulder barehanded.

Then there was the other issue, the one that concerned Sid the most: the voices. It was clear that Alex was hearing voices. He talked to himself, but the conversation wasn't a collection of random lines like you might hear from a person when the lost mind sickness struck them. At first Sid thought Alex had fallen prey to that ailment. But after a couple of days of listening to him, Sid had determined that Alex was talking with someone... or something. The other kids found that odd, even scary, but they kept Alex with them when they moved from one shelter to another. When Sid had brought up the issue with Gaby, the only one of the hoomans unfazed by the chatter, she had dismissed it, saying, "That's normal for someone who's gone through what Alex has. He'll be okay in a few weeks."

"How do you know that for sure?" Sid had asked.

"I know. Not my first tournament with that," Gaby had replied cryptically, her eyes glowing with a faint blue hue.

Now that he thought about it, the girl had a similar demeanor as Alex, but in a more nuanced way. She had more control on whatever was happening to them. Sid had a hunch.

Sid had heard rumors and folktales about people like Gaby and Alex. Mortals who had been at death's door but had miraculously survived, waking up with unnatural abilities: the Gift. The last sighting of one of them had been about a century ago. Sid was sure that Alex and Gaby had the Gift.

And that was a problem. Because if the Hegemony leadership found out that he hadn't eliminated them to 'keep the balance' as the insidious rules said, the chances of Sid being able to appeal his banishment became worse than zero. The only way home was killing this kid now, Gaby later. But he had promised himself that he was done with those rules, with that life. They were kids for the Prophet's sake! They could be taught to use their skills, become allies. However, the Hegemony was fearful that leaving them alone would cause new Titans to rise.

*I can't blame them, Sid thought. The Titans wrecked the planet and our lands once in the past. Although from what I've heard, Gifted are nothing like the Titans. They deserve a chance to prove that.* Sid had to make a decision.

*I guess this is my proverbial 'crossing the Slender Sea' moment, Sid thought.* He would not go back on his word, the possibility for him to return home be damned. If he put them under his protection, it would take every remaining favor he could ask, or dueling his own cousin, to get away with this decision.

"You're wrong, the tracks are to the left," Alex muttered cryptically as he suddenly stopped. He shook his head. "The energy flow goes and comes through that direction. But we can't go that far, the others need our help."

There it was again. Alex was debating with himself. Or the voice. Sid had to do something.

"Hey kid. You have done enough for today and the sun is setting. Let's go back to your friends. You need to sleep. Let me take care of keeping you safe for a few hours, okay?"

Alex turned to look at Sid perched in a tree. The irises of the hooman were glowing with a golden hue and if he squinted, Sid could see faint electric currents running across Alex's arms. Whatever had happened to him, Sid wondered if he could still be called "hooman".

“You are half right,” Alex replied. “Rest would be good.”

“But?” Sid asked. At least it seemed that the kid was still capable of coherent speech with someone not inside his head.

“I’m alone. I don’t have friends anymore. I’m different.”

Sid’s hearts broke with sadness. He sighed as he knew that what he was about to do would change his life irreversibly. He jumped off the tree and landed in front of Alex. He offered his hand.

“I don’t care if you are different. You have me. Let’s go.”

† † †

Thunder shook the air. Another night of taking refuge for most of the group meant another night of silent torture for Alex.

He was sitting in the corner, his arms around the sword, rocking himself, trying to sleep, to no avail. When his eyes were open, he could see faint auras around everyone and everything. When he closed them, he saw the thin threads of energy lines connecting it all together. The sound of thunder scared him. Every time an electric discharge took place, he could feel the energy expanding in every cell in his body as the lightning displaced the air on its way to the ground. For a moment, as the lightning travelled across the air, he could even sense the flux of electrons. It was weird. The world felt more real now, more detailed, more complex. He was having a hard time trying to make sense of the new and intense sensory inputs. It made him jumpy, twitchy even, always looking over his shoulder.

And then there was the voice. Correction, voices, inside his head. One, a dark one always whispering his failings, his fears, his doubts. The other only appeared to advise him what to do during critical moments. Their presence made Alex’s ability to focus difficult at best.

He was well aware that all these new quirks made the others nervous. Under other circumstances, he would be a liability to the group’s survival opportunities. And yet they kept him updated on how Elijah, who had been injured by the creatures, was doing. They made sure Alex ate—food

now tasted weird—and checked up on him, taking turns during their watches to see how he was doing, but keeping their distance too, not knowing what was going on with him. Given the circumstances, Alex was thankful for that. That's why he made a point of killing as many creatures as he could, to keep them protected. Under his watch, he would try to keep Andrea, Birm, Quentin and Elijah alive. No matter what. Protecting them felt like his mission, something that he was meant to do, even though he had no idea why. And although he was barely aware of it, he had help: he had the other girl and the samoharo.

The girl and the samoharo treated him differently. The girl, Gaby, had kept to herself during the student tournament, but when all hell broke loose, she took charge of the survivors. At nights, she whispered to him when everyone else was sleeping. She told him how she knew what was going on with him, embracing him to keep him focused amidst all the sensory overload and the voices. Her aura was tinged with a blue light and felt warm to him. If his brain was working correctly—and he couldn't be sure because he could feel his synopsis firing at increased speed—he suspected that whatever happened to him, had happened to her, and not that long ago. How she managed to remain so composed was something Alex envied, but at least she was trying to show him how to do it.

The samoharo, Sid, was weird. There was a feeling of sadness around him, but he tried to mask it under a reassuring smile and the occasional joke to break the tension. Alex was thankful he had taken samoharo as an elective at school, as he could understand the basics of what Sid was telling him. Like Gaby, he was trying to help Alex rein in his senses, but most importantly, on filtering what the voices were saying. But what Alex was most thankful for was that when the voices told him to go and hunt the creatures, Sid always went with him, and made a point of telling Alex that he wasn't alone. Sid taught him how to use the bow they'd found to hunt the creatures and the right way to kill them.

***Those creatures are all around you. You really think you can beat them? You are a useless kid. You have no***

*business trying to be the hero*, the dark voice whispered.

The creatures dominated his world at the moment. Even when he was asleep, he could see them, *sense* them outside in the rainforest, prowling. The first time he had encountered them, it had been only for a second or two, as he and two of his classmates were exploring a cave with ancient paintings from the akeleth. The creature came from nowhere, killing his companions and stabbing Alex with its barbed extremities. How he had survived, Alex had no idea. He had woken up hours later, his injuries already healing. Beneath him had been a pool of blood: his blood. The strangest thing—that is until he started hearing the voices—was that the family sword was lying next to him. He hadn't brought it on the trip, and he was positive he hadn't carried a sword while they explored the cave. Last time he had seen it was at his grandparent's old cabin outside Xelahú, firmly secured against the wall. No one had paid much attention to the sword, its peculiar hilt suggested it was an ornamental weapon rather than an actual, useful blade. He had been shocked to see it in the cave, but with the chaotic state his mind was in, he couldn't come up with an explanation. But now that it was in his hands, he used it to provide the group with safety as his mind devolved into further chaos.

Alex continued to rock himself as he sat in his corner, the strange, guttural noise that the creatures made echoing in his head.

*Kakkakkakkak.*

The noise was the only way to find them, given that they were invisible to the naked eye most of time. The only other sure method to detect them was by the foul odor they emitted, but by the time you smelled them, they were too close and the only thing you could do was die.

*Kakkakkakkak.*

The noise echoed in Alex's head, its obnoxious rhythm upsetting his heart.

*Kakkakkakkak.*

It made it difficult for him to breath. The noise, mixed with the thunder, with the odd sensations reaching his skin, the lines of energy...



*Kakkakkakkak...*

Alex rocked himself faster, banging his head against the wall, until he felt a warm trickle of blood from his scalp. The only thing he wanted was to finally sleep and never wake up.

“Are you okay kiddo?” Sid whispered, taking a seat next to him, pouring some weird paste from a flask tucked in his belt pouch into his hand. “That must hurt.” He reached for Alex, and Alex recoiled as the pungent smell of medicine hit him. “Relax, it smells bad for your nose, but it will heal your head.”

Alex barely opened his eyes as Sid applied the paste over the wound with gentle pressure. His head stopped throbbing, as the coolness of the menthol in the paste seeped over his scalp. He picked out other smells of course, the peculiar odor that samoharo had, similar to wet soil mixed with seawater. He couldn’t make out an aura for the samoharo, but that was not his biggest concern right now. The voice was back, whispering things in a language he didn’t know. But the meaning was clear: danger.

“What’s wrong with me?” Alex asked. “Why can’t I make it stop.”

“I wish I could answer that kiddo,” Sid replied, patting Alex on the arm. “But if we can’t stop it, why don’t you try to use it?”

“I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“Of being crazy,” Alex replied, his eyes welling up, his lower lip quivering. His head was a cacophony of voices from inside, noises from the exterior and blurred images.

“Let me tell you a secret,” Sid said, smiling. “In my experience, we are all crazy. The only difference is that there are those that accept it and those that delude themselves into thinking they are sane.”

Gaby approached them slowly, trying to keep quiet as some of the other kids were already sleep, exhaustion hitting them hard. And yet she appeared perfectly normal. If she was like him, then why was she fine? Why wasn’t she the mess he was? Alex didn’t understand and that only increased the sensation of freefalling into a void.

“How is he doing?” Gaby asked.

“Can’t tell for sure. But he could use some of your expertise on the topic.”

“How do you...”

“You said it wasn’t your first tournament. I’m not dumb. Look, you can tell me your story later if you want. Or not. But right now that’s not important. He needs help. He needs to know that he is not alone.”

“Why are you helping us?” Gaby interrupted him.

Sid’s shoulders slumped. “I have seen my share of death. I want to make sure that for once, someone lives on my watch.” Sid’s voice had a forlorn tone. “I’m going to the roof. The kid says that he can hear a few of those things prowling outside. Can you take care of him, please?”

Alex resented the implication that he was something to be taken care of, like a child, while his friend Elijah was the one who was injured. He saw Sid climbing the wall of the building with alacrity. Gaby smelled nice and fresh, like scented sea flowers. How was it possible when they had been on the run for days?

“Is this seat taken?”

“Only by my imaginary friend,” Alex replied, pointing to his head.

“Well, tell them to move aside,” Gaby said, sitting next to him. “Sid tells me you are not feeling too well. Is the voice annoying you?”

“Always.”

“I know the feeling. Mine tends to be chatty as well in moments like this.”

“How do you make it stop?”

“I haven’t found out. But what I do is focus on things that make me happy. Do you have one? Something back home?”

“Not really,” Alex replied. He couldn’t recall a happy memory. He knew he must have one, but they weren’t coming to him. His brain was scrambled. A tear rolled down his cheek. “You?”

“I like to sing.” Gaby looked off into space with a crooked smile. She then turned to him and caressed his head, avoiding the injury. “Do you want me to sing you something? Maybe it

could help you catch some sleep. How long have you been awake?"

"If the dark circles under my eyes is not enough of a hint, I think since the archery semifinal." Alex pointed to his face.

"That was several days ago!" Gaby said. The she looked around to make sure he hadn't woken up anyone. "That's quite a long time. You need to rest."

"I can't protect them if I rest," Alex replied, as he tried to get up. For him, it made perfect sense. But maybe not for Gaby, as she pushed him down with force. Alex didn't argue with her.

"Let Sid take care of that for a couple of hours. You can't push yourself this hard all the time. If you do, you won't be able to protect anyone. Let me share with you the song that my nana used to sing me when I couldn't sleep."

And while Gaby sang to him softly, Alex finally fell asleep, amidst a cacophony of her beautiful voice, thunder, annoying *Kakkakkakkak* noises, and the voice inside his head telling him in a subdued tone that danger was close and not only from the creatures, but from someone else, active deep in the rainforest.

† † †

Sid was knackered. The night had been long, with heavy rain and constant attacks by Stalkers. At some point he was overwhelmed and thought he would die, but Alex and Gaby had come to his rescue, killing several of the creatures. Alex, who looked rested, had come on like a storm, using brute force for his kills. Gaby had been more surgical with her strikes, as she wielded her twin blades with the faint red and blue glow. Together they had managed to keep the creatures a bay. He had to admit that those two hooman kids, acting in concert, were both amazing and terrifying. The level of destruction they brought to the Stalkers was something he had only seen in veteran samoharo hunting units with far more members. His train of thought sent a shiver down his spine. By the time the sun started to rise, the place was full of Stalker bodies turning to dust.

*Luckily, we didn't lose anyone else tonight,* Sid thought.

Although the hooman called Elijah wasn't improving. Sid had kept his thought about Elijah's injuries to himself, but the kid would be lucky to survive with that kind of spinal injury. He had seen many with that kind of injury. Heck, he had inflicted that kind of injury. And that made him feel even more remorse.

*Shake it, you need to keep focus*, Sid berated himself. He had sent the hoomans to get something to eat so he could be alone for what he was going to do. He hadn't practiced this particular kind of wayfinding in years, so he wasn't sure it would work now. But at this point he was willing to try anything.

He unsheathed the obsidian dagger he carried and took a deep breath. He looked at the stars that remained in the sky, one shining brighter than the rest. It was the star that the samoharo called 'The Heartstone' and formed part of a constellation they knew as 'The Flying Rattlesnake', the guide towards a safe haven. Right now, he was mentally aiming to reach his hiding place, the location where he had stashed the rusty ship. It wasn't completed yet, but it would be functional enough to fly and take all of them out of this place. He would need to time things just right to send the distress call and get the hoomans away before the samoharo 'cleaning' squad arrived to deal with the incursion.

*If everything goes according to plan*, he thought. Sid didn't have any illusion about that. Things rarely went according to plan, especially when said plan had many movable parts like hoomans that are scared and one that was undergoing... something. Sid didn't know if Alex was crazy, or he was transforming into something else. Whatever the folktales said, none of them explained in detail what he was witnessing with Alex, and the mental and physical changes he was suffering. He hated not knowing all the variables.

"Sigh," Sid said to himself. "Here goes nothing."

He mumbled a halfhearted prayer in his native tongue and pricked himself in the thumb of his left hand, spilling blood in the air. The blood fell but it didn't hit the ground, instead it separated into six individual drops, each floating in the air, in a formation that imitated the stars of the Flying

Rattlesnake constellation. Sid whispered a second prayer in hushed voice.

“Blood of the ancestors that runs through my veins, lead me to the correct path, keep me from going astray.”

Sid blew the droplets away. Each droplet floated in a different direction, tracing through the air an image of the six different paths across the rainforest that he could take. The second to the center left glowed with a green-blue hue, while the one to the right took a sinister red-purple hue.

*Great! Go left into the thick of the forest, because the baddies are to the right where the path seems clearer. Of course, it had to be that way, me and my luck,* Sid thought. He was trying to plot how to move the injured across the more difficult, but safer path, when he felt a presence behind him. Instinctively, Sid reached for his small axe, while in his other hand he was still holding the dagger.

“What are you doing? Or better said, how are you doing it?” a sweet, female voice came from behind. Sid turned around and saw Gaby staring at the blood paths. For the first time Sid noticed how tall she was, probably three or four heads taller than him. He wasn’t a tall samoharo by any means, but she was tall by hooman standards. Her crooked smile made her look friendlier than usual. In the glow of the morning, she looked like an akeleth.

“Ah!” Sid said, and relaxed. “It’s you, for a second I thought...”

“That I was a monster or one of the cultists Alex was mumbling about hours ago?”

“Yes, can’t blame me.”

“No, I can’t. But what were you doing?”

“That?” Sid pointed to the blood trails that were evaporating. “It’s an ancient wayfinding technique we use to find safe routes for our missions.”

“Wayfinding?”

“It’s... how do I explain it? In hooman terms it would be our religious beliefs, probably you have heard of them as ‘Paths of the Stargazers’ combined with magic. It helps us to find our way home, to find a safe spot. It’s used a lot by explorers. Wayfinding, or if you like, Pathfinding.”

“And does wayfinding imply using blood magic?” Gaby pointed at the nearly evaporated blood trails, and then to Sid’s injured hand.

“Not really,” Sid replied. He really didn’t want to elaborate any further. Hoomans were not keen on blood magic. It wasn’t as if he was using the Smoking Mirror Path, only one of their techniques. And the least bloody one. “I usually use the Windstar or the Ghoststar Paths to trace a way to move around. But since we are time pressed and the only stars in the sky are the Flying Rattlesnake, I had to use a bit of blood-letting to get a faster result. It’s pretty common.”

Gaby gave him a look that told him she was onto him and his peculiar version of the truth.

“So, where are you going?” she asked.

“Not me. We. All of us.”

“So, where are we going?”

“You don’t want to know why I’m suggesting leaving our place of safety?”

“After last night I doubt anyone thinks this place will be safe anymore. I was about to suggest we leave.”

“You are weird. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“What I’m going to tell you is a secret, one you and your friends must keep. I’m counting on you because they seem to follow your lead and I will be busy keeping Alex in check. You need to know the plan in full: beyond the rainforest, there is an ancient samoharo machine, an airship.”

“Airship? You mean a dirigible?”

“No, a proper airship...” Sid was thinking on an appropriate parallel. It was frustrating that hoomans had decided that hyper speed trains were better than actual flight. Maybe if they had developed more of those flying dreadnoughts, they would have put more pressure into the samoharo to recover the old tech. Then he realized what he had just thought. “Remember those dreadnoughts from your history books about the Great War in Ionis? Just like those, but smaller and prettier.”

“Oh!” Gaby opened her eyes wide. “That sounds awesome! Does it work?”

“Let’s just say that it will work well enough to get us out of here. I haven’t had time to finish it, but it should work for now. My plan is to take you to the ship, launch a distress signal to the closest samoharo or hooman outpost and while they get here, we fly away.”

“I get the first part of the plan, but why fly away if help will be coming here?” Gaby asked, confusion clear in her face.

“C’mon kiddo, you know why,” Sid replied, with an edge in his voice. Time was running and besides, he didn’t want to say something offensive about the hoomans of the Straits. “How are you gonna explain to the government of the Straits what happened here? We are their neighbors; they are famous for covering the truth and for midlevel corruption. If anything, they will put the blame on you and Alex, because of what you can do. Plus, they must be on their way here anyways. I’m more worried about the other ones.”

“The samoharo? Aren’t they noble warriors?” Gaby asked, with a certain innocence in her voice.

“As if...” Sid avoided her gaze and looked back to the paths. “Let’s just say that there is a samoharo policy of taking down anyone that develops power above titanfighters or demonhunters, especially without armor or any other kind of aid. You and Alex fit that description. From what I’ve seen, your powers will only increase. I would hate to see you targeted by the person I’m pretty sure they will send to clean up this incursion mess.”

“You sound like you know for a certainty what will happen.” Gaby stared at him. Sid felt as if the girl was examining his very soul. When she grows up, she would be downright scary. Sid let out a sigh.

“I know because I used to do that job. I hunted people with powers, like you and Alex. Until one day I refused to do it anymore and got punished.”

“Why?”

“I was too good at my job, and it sickened me. And I don’t hurt children.” Sid said with conviction. He wanted to change topics back to the matter at hand. There was a lump in his throat, and he coughed. He didn’t want to bring back those memories. “So that’s the plan. What do you think?”

“Let’s move everyone,” Gaby replied. She seemed to understand. Which made Sid wonder what the Pits had happened to her to make her so understanding of the implications of what he hinted at.

*It takes one to know another,* he thought. He knew he had blood on his hands. Sid wasn’t sure he wanted to find out what had happened to her.

They returned to the ground floor where Birm and Quentin were helping Elijah move, while Andrea grabbed arrows and a bow.

“We need to move,” Andrea said. “Elijah is not getting any better.”

“We know,” Gaby replied. “We have a plan.”

“That’s great, can’t wait to leave this place,” Birm added.

Sid looked around. Someone was missing. He cursed the stars that were failing him now.

“Where is Alex?” Sid asked.

“He was here a minute ago. Then he went that way,” Quentin replied.

*Great, into the wrong path,* Sid thought. Time was running out. He needed to take these hoomans to safety, but he couldn’t leave Alex on his own. He would never forgive himself if something happened to the kid. He looked at Gaby, who was unsheathing her swords. She was planning to do the same thing he was considering doing. But unlike him, Gaby hadn’t seen all the paths. He had to trust her.

“Gaby, follow the plan, take them to the ship,” Sid said. He gave her a long, bronze key. “Use this to turn the engines, should work similar to one of your hooman cars, and launch the distress signal. I will meet you there. Keep them safe.”

“What about you?”

“I will go after Alex.”

“But... I don’t know how to fly a ship.”

“I’m not asking you to fly it, just keep it warm and ready to take off, till I get there with Alex. Right now, we need to work as a team, and you are the only one that can keep the others safe.”

“How do I know you will return to find us?”

“How do I know you won’t take off without me and Alex?”



After all we have been through these days, these doubts are counterproductive. There is one option.”

“Which one.”

“Trust each other,” Sid replied with a smile, as Gaby stared at him. Both shared a moment of silence, sizing each other up. He knew he was asking a lot of her, but then again, the current situation demanded it. Gaby returned the smile.

“Time to go, kiddo,” Sid said. Gaby nodded and both went in opposite directions.

Sid ran towards the right path. He jumped into the trees and moved by leaping between branches. With the thickness of the rainforest, it would be faster for him, not unlike the races back in the Hegemony. He was focused on reaching Alex as soon as possible. He didn't know if it was out of fear for what would happen to the hooman, or fear of what a hooman undergoing that kind of change could do. Sid tried to keep those memories from resurfacing, which left him blindsided. Something tackled him and he fell to the ground, several meters below. The hit had taken most of the air out of his lungs. The only reason he wasn't suffering from a broken back or a punctured lung was the hard plates covering his back.

*These are the moments when I love being a samoharo.*

The creature was atop of him, one of the Stalkers. It was injured and one of its limbs had been cut, damaging its cloaking ability.

*It seems that it wasn't hunting but running away. Focus Sid, focus.*

The weight of the creature was making it hard for him to breathe. The bared fangs were too close for comfort, the gaping maw drooling its stinking saliva.

“Have you considered using mouthwash?” Sid asked the creature. He reached for his dagger with his right hand and the small ax with his left. As the creature's maw opened wide to take a bite out of Sid's head, he thrust the dagger deep into what would be the heart of the creature. As the Stalker moved back, reeling from the lethal attack, Sid traced an arc with the ax, cutting its head off in one swing. The creature's head hit the ground as its body twitched. Sid pushed it away from him and took several deep breaths, trying to regain his

calm. The moss from the ground felt nice on the back of his head and for a second, he considered taking a couple of minutes to rest.

But the sound of thunder breaking the otherwise clear sky brought him out of his reverie.

“Right, the kid.”

† † †

Alex was perched on a thick branch of a kapok tree. He didn't recall how he got there. Weeks ago, he wouldn't have been able to climb a regular tree, let alone one as massive as the kapok. The tree was at the edge of the rainforest, where a man-made clearing was located. From his vantage point, Alex could see a few of the creatures that had been hounding him. He also saw the cultists, the people that had summoned the creatures through some unknown means. The cultists were working on a giant metallic ring that stood in the center of the clearing. It was five meters in diameter, covered in weird symbols. The ring glowed with a purple energy and the light pulsated slowly like a beating heart. Each pulse let out a faint buzzing sound.

A part of him wondered who could be capable of unleashing such horrors upon innocent people. It made him burn with anger. He saw one of the creatures eating human remains and he hoped that it wasn't one of his classmates. As much as he didn't get along with them, he didn't wish them anything bad.

***You are going to end like him, and no one will notice,*** the dark voice said inside his head.

“Shut up,” Alex mumbled. The dark voice had become an insistent presence, one that appeared when he was feeling at his lowest.

The crunching noises of the bones being broken and the slurping sound of the marrow being sucked by that maw churned his stomach and brought forth the memories of what happened to him in the cave. Exploring the cave, finding faded engravings on its walls, depicting a familiar sword. Then, the pain. The last memory he'd had was a piercing pain on his right side, blood filled his mouth and, as he started to

black out, a bright light filled the cave. The next clear memory he had after he woke up was of wandering through the rainforest, feeling weird, hearing voices in his head and holding the sword. It was then that Gaby had found him and took him to the other survivors. Then Sid arrived to help them.

He shook his head to clear it. And yet the memories seemed a better place to be right now, instead of witnessing the spectacle in front of him.

"I'm afraid," Alex said in a whisper, hoping to not be heard as he tightened his grip on the sword's handle.

"*I know, I'm here with you remember?*" the other voice replied. Not the dark one. Rather, it was the same voice that he'd heard after waking up in the cave. The same voice that told him where the danger was and how to fight the creatures. The one that told him how to use his new abilities. And now it was telling him that to keep the others safe, he had to face the creatures in their spawning site, regardless of how scary the prospect was. Alex felt like he was in one of those horror videogames, a character helplessly controlled by a mysterious player.

"Who are you?" Alex asked in low voice. It was silly to have a conversation with himself in his head this way, but it was the only way he could make sense of it without going crazier than he already was.

"*I don't recall anymore. We are already becoming one,*" the voice replied, with a hint of sadness. Alex knew it was sadness because he felt the same heavy weight in his heart.

"But what if I don't want to?"

"*I'm sorry. It can't be stopped, this is permanent.*" Now there was regret.

"I'm gonna stop being me?" Alex felt a knot in his stomach. What the voice was saying sounded like his mind was going to disappear, his body controlled by someone else. His hyperactive imagination conjured dreadful images of his soul dissipating. It made him feel even worse.

"*No, you, what makes you, will reassert itself in a few weeks,*" the voice reassured him. "*I will become part of that. A voice and a power deep inside you.*"

"Why me?"

*“Happenstance? Coincidence? Destiny? Many options we will have time to ponder when we get out of this.”*

***Get out of this? We will die because we are losers.*** The dark voice joined the conversation. It sounded like Alex, but with an edge, a tinge of sadness and defeat. Perhaps even anger.

“Go away!” Alex replied. He felt his eyes watering. “Stop saying bad things.”

***It’s the truth. You know it. I’m you after all.***

“Enough!” Alex replied, defiant. His head was throbbing, as if it were about to explode.

*“I will deal with it, but right now we need to deal with those creatures. The others are in danger,”* the other voice said.

“I don’t know how. And I’m alone. I can’t do it on my own.”

*“I’m here with you. We are one, we are a team. If you give me the control this time, I swear I will get us out of this one.”*

***No, he won’t.***

*“And I promise, I will keep that other guy in check.”* The other voice said, clearly feeling annoyed, as Alex felt that way too. *“But we need to do this.”*

“Okay, but don’t get us killed,” Alex replied, wiping the tears from his cheeks with his arm.

*“I won’t. Now, let’s use all those emotions inside you to power this,”* the voice replied. Alex could feel the energy running through his body, a sequence of electric shocks. His fingertips released sparks and his eyes hurt. The irises glowed with a soft golden hue. His heart thumped hard inside his chest. The world changed around him, it felt less physical, but with more vivid colors. The smells were stronger, both from the rainforest and from the creatures, a stark contrast between the sweet smell of land after it rained and the pungent smell of the rotten flesh of the creatures. Alex could now see the ebbs and flows of energy around him and his heart thumped even harder. To his ears, it sounded like thunder.

“What is that?”

*“A storm.”*

Alex's irises glowed more intensely than the previous occasions. He jumped from the branch with such strength that he broke it. He felt bad for the tree, but even the tree seemed to be cheering him on. Apparently even nature didn't like what was going on in the clearing. The strongest flow of energy came from the ring, as well as the worst of the odors. The jump launched him far into the clearing, in the middle of the creatures. Alex landed with force, the impact to the ground making a booming sound like that of thunder breaking the air. The cultists turned around, astonished by what was happening. Alex looked at his left hand; electrical currents were running along his fingers and across his palm. In his right, the ancestral family sword felt lighter than before and the electrical currents ran through the blade. Alex smiled, a feeling of anticipation and excitement surging through him like the electricity running over his body. This would be fun.

The Stalkers jumped at Alex, trying to overwhelm him. He replied in kind, punching, kicking, and slashing them. One punch hit a Stalker directly in the head, making it explode. With a slash of the sword, he caught another Stalker in the mouth, cutting the jaw and the top of the head with it. The battle became a constant sequence of attacks and defensive moves. Alex wasn't fighting like Gaby, who fought with the precision of a ballerina executing a complicated dance. Nor was he fighting like Sid, the samoharo, who attacked with a force and a precision that betrayed his small frame. No, Alex fought like a beast, unleashing all of his accumulated anger in his attacks, ripping limbs, cutting heads, punching hearts out, breaking necks. It was a violent, visceral affair.

"AHHHHHHHHH," Alex yelled with rage.

It was a thunderstorm.

A cultist tried to stab him in the back, but Alex stopped him with a well-placed elbow strike. The cracking noise let him know that he had broken the nose of the cultist. Without a pause, Alex grabbed him by the robe and threw him towards the ring. The man seemed to hit an invisible wall inside the ring, and his body disintegrated in a purple fire.

"That's a portal!" Alex muttered. "The creatures must come from it."

*"Yes, we need to destroy it to stop the arrival of more creatures. Your sword can do the trick. Its edge will be able to cut that thing into pieces."*

"Let's go for it!"

**You will fail**, the dark voice said out of the blue.

"Shut up," said the other voice.

"Shut up!" Alex yelled as he cut his way through creatures and cultists alike. He leaped towards the ring; sword held over his head. Putting all his weight and force into the slashing movement, Alex struck the ring and cut it in half. He landed in front of the portal as both halves started to fall apart. Then he noticed the change in the flow of energy.

"Aww crap, that thing is going to explode," Alex said, covering his eyes with his free arm.

Alex had to plant his feet and lean forward to prevent himself from being blown back, as the explosion swept over him, and this gave the Stalkers time to regroup and surge toward him. For a second Alex thought he would die, as the sad voice had told him. But at the last second, he rolled to his right, avoiding the attacks. With a somersault he got to his feet and punched the air, unleashing an explosion of electromagnetic energy that pushed the creatures back and electrocuted the cultists.

*"I know that you will forget all of these moves, all of these techniques,"* the voice said defiantly. *"I know that I will soon disappear and be a part of you. But I'm happy it is you whom I was destined to join. You are a good person. I will always be with you and in time, you will rediscover all of this. I want you to always remember this, the feeling you are having right now, the one that will keep you going against all odds, remember how good it feels to discover what you are meant to do: to protect others. To be a hero."*

**You know it won't last.** The dark voice added.

"No!" the other voice yelled to the dark voice. *"I'm taking you with me. Alex, you will be in charge soon, take care of us. Of you."*

**We will die! Hehehehe! Sooner or later we will!** The sad voice said as it faded away.

Alex's head was filled with a cacophony of voices. His

head was throbbing with pain and his chest filled with anger. The only thing Alex wanted to do was to inflict the pain he was feeling, and unleash the anger boiling inside him. And he was surrounded by the perfect targets for that.

He smiled. He might be a good person, but that didn't mean he had to be nice.

† † †

By the time Sid reached the clearing, the sound of thunder had subsided, replaced only by the sound of birds flapping frantically to fly away. The image would haunt Sid for years to come.

Alex knelt in the center of the clearing, surrounded by the remains of Stalkers and cultists. There was no one left alive. The ground was littered with metallic debris. Alex was bleeding from his right shoulder. He was clutching his sword, and he was crying. Sid approached him, dagger and ax out, waiting to strike, but it wasn't needed. When he reached the teenager, Sid touched Alex on his good shoulder. He felt an electric discharge that numbed his fingers. Alex turned to him. His eyes were red from crying.

"I just wanted all of this to end," Alex said with a creaking voice. His breathing was labored, as if he had run a marathon. His irises slowly returned to their normal hazel coloration, the glow fading away. Sid felt as if a heavy bag of rocks were hanging from his body. Watching the kid like this made him feel emotionally drained. Sid would have to deal with those feelings later, right now, he needed to get Alex out of here. Sid offered a hand to help Alex get up, despite the clear height difference. For the first time he noticed that Alex was also taller than him.

*Great, I'm the short one,* Sid thought. He looked into Alex's eyes and smiled at him, sharp teeth and all.

"I know Alex. I think it's over now."

"I..." Alex looked around. He seemed to be in shock. "I don't know what I did. Is everyone safe?"

"Yes, you saved them all. You stopped the bad guys. Help is on the way. Now I need to take you with me. You will be safe, too," Sid reassured Alex. In a way it was good that the

kid couldn't remember all the details. Doing so brought forth nightmares and regret. Maybe it was for the best.

"You think?"

"I know."

"How?"

"Because." Sid took a deep breath. He offered his hand to Alex, who awkwardly shook it with his left hand. "I swear by my ancestral blood that I will always have your back. And a samoharo never breaks a promise sworn by his ancestral blood."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because we are friends," Sid winked at Alex, who smiled. "You are not alone."

An eerie silence had fallen over the land and was broken by the roar of an engine. Gaby had done as he'd asked her. Help of one kind or another would be coming. But time was running out and Sid needed to keep Alex safe and find a way to help him. He knew the Samoharo would be coming, soon. His people had their 'cleaning' policy for this very reason. Someone with Alex's power and out of control was a danger for all. But Sid knew this kid was different. He could feel it. Like Gaby, he wasn't acting out of malice. Alex needed help to learn to control his new power. Not be punished for it.

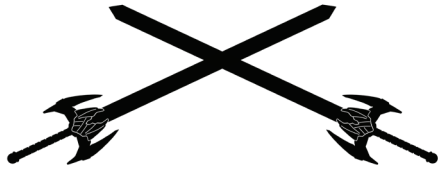
Sid had left his old life behind because he believed there was a better way to do things. He would prove wrong those who hadn't listened to him. Sid was sure it would cost him dearly, probably everything he had. But Sid kept his word. No matter how much he complained, he always did.

"Everything will be okay," Sid said aloud, more to himself than to Alex. "I promise."

Sid recalled all what he had heard of the people who obtained the Gift, and looked around once more to see the destruction surrounding them. The scene sent shivers down his spine.

*Folktales*, he thought, *even they have their share of horror.*





## Chapter 2

### The Past Catches Up

Harland was starting to develop an aversion to taking any calls that his assistant said was “an important matter of utmost urgency.” The last time he had ended up in a crazy adventure, which had begun as a search for a missing researcher from the Foundation and had then evolved into a race to stop a madman and a flying monster that wanted to destroy the Alliance. Harland had manned the guns of a jury-rigged airship, his small contribution—in his opinion—to the brave deeds of his best friend Fionn and his daughter Sam, aided by the newest members to their eclectic ‘family’: Gaby, Alex and Sid the samoharo. It had been a stressful, dangerous and hectic week. And yet, given the choice, he would have preferred to repeat that adventure and deal with a madman or a monster, then being here.

Here was the private conference room of the First Thane of the Emerald Island. It was a grand and pompous title since the First Thane was the main councilor to the Crown, the right-hand man. He was the person responsible for advising on policy, economy, intelligence and the myriad businesses that the Queen couldn’t oversee on her own all the time. The First Thane was not only the ruler of the Emerald Island but also managed the broader interests of the Free Alliance. He oversaw the finer, and sometimes shadier, sides of the political wheeling and dealing that was always necessary. And while the current holder of the office had been a faithful servant for the Queen in particular, and to the Alliance in general, Harland was not fond of the man, for myriad reasons.

Harland sat alone in the large room, fidgeting in his seat, adjusting the table header he'd taken off the long, red oak table, so he could see better. He felt as if he was back in the principal's office when he'd been a young student.

And considering who would join him in this meeting, that wouldn't be too far off.

The first person to enter, walking decisively and cradling a cup of warm tea was Lady Sarah—tall, slender, with delicate features and shoulder-length dark brown hair. Her long-sleeved, floor-length dress reflected the orange hues of autumn, with gold embroidery in the shape of leaves and vines completing the design. She gave Harland a friendly smile as she walked across the room. As a member of the royal house, Lady Sarah was the permanent ambassador before the Council for the Queen. She was also Harland's friend from school.

Lady Sarah placed her cup on the table, kissed Harland on the cheek and took a seat.

"Sometimes your smile frightens me," Harland said. "I don't know if the cat just ate the canary or is nervous about having been found out." He smiled. "You look well, Sarah."

"You look well? That's all? You have an adventure worthy of a fiction book and a movie deal and that's all you have to say to one of your oldest friends? How rude of you to hide things from me."

"I have the feeling that this meeting is related to said event," Harland replied with a smile. "So, I'm keeping this spoiler free for the time being. Besides, I wasn't planning to bring up hidden things... like the new tattoo you just got on one of your wrists. I assume it was the left one."

"How did you..." Lady Sarah opened her mouth, only to then cover it with her left hand. She was trying to stifle a laugh.

"You rarely wear long-sleeved dresses, even at formal events. That means that you are hiding something. And you often mentioned you wanted a tattoo on your wrists. Now, knowing who we will be meeting here, and his opinion on tattoos, or any kind of self-expression, really, no wonder you want to hide it from him," Harland explained with a shrug.

“The man does hate anything fun. If he were any stiffer, he would break in two from breathing.”

“Always the smart ass in the room,” Lady Sarah replied. The door opened, startling them both.

“I hope you are not talking about me. I’m not that stiff. Only a bit sore,” said the tall man with close-cut, dirty blonde hair who was entering the room. He was wearing a casual suit that still showed off his fit physique. He had the square chin—with a tiny scar on it—the vivacious eyes, and the dashing presence one would associate with the knights from folktales. One could even argue that this man had all the looks befitting of a king. Which was appropriate because this man, who it was said was the spitting image of his great-grandfather, was Crown Prince Arthur. And his ancestor had been King Castlemartell himself.

Harland recalled what Fionn had once told him about Arthur, *he takes after the King in many aspects, that’s true, sans the scars or the beard, of course. And I hope he in time takes after him in character. I already have had enough with the other members of his family.*

From that conversation years ago, Harland had learned that Fionn had a complicated view on the royal family that he had been a comrade in arms with once. Fionn had held only the King and Queen Brenda Sophia in esteem. On the other hand, Fionn wasn’t a fan of the Queen’s other siblings... and after fighting the Bestial last year and defeating Byron, the less they talked about him the better. But Fionn had never explained why his relationship with Prince Arthur was so complicated. As far as Harland knew, Fionn—after being ‘revived’—had met with the Prince a few times, at the request of the Queen herself, but never elaborated on those meetings.

And after what happened a year ago, he couldn’t blame him.

“Don’t tell me you spent yesterday at a party,” Lady Sarah said to the Prince, who was pouring himself a glass of water, of all things.

“I would love to say that, but no. I’m taking my responsibilities seriously.”

“That would be a first,” Harland said.

“Believe it or not. I have been training with THE armor for the past few months.”

The emphasis on the word ‘the’ made Harland realize to which armor Arthur was referring. It also hinted at what this meeting might be about.

“So, you are finally dusting off the original armor of the Castlemartells instead of the exhibition piece from the museum,” Harland said, as his mind pondered on the only possibility behind the Prince’s interest in training with the armor. He decided to change topics as he knew that talking about the Queen’s health would be a delicate issue. “Am I the only one wondering why I feel like we are back at school, waiting in the principal’s office to get scolded?”

“No, I feel the same,” Lady Sarah replied, fidgeting in her seat, clearly uncomfortable.

“Usually because we enacted one of your complicated pranks,” Arthur said. “Who thought of the stink bomb in the headmaster’s quarters?”

“Yeah, yeah, always blaming me, Arthur. As if you and Sarah weren’t willing participants,” Harland replied. With the hindsight that comes from years of growing up and facing some harsh truths, Harland thought that as amusing as that prank would have been as a kid, in reality it had been a sign of disrespect for the person who worked hard to give a good education to young pupils.

“Arthur? What happened to ‘His Majesty’? Or Lady Sarah?” Arthur smiled. But the smile made Harland feel uncomfortable.

That’s when it dawned on Harland. What Alex had been telling him about ‘privilege’. The fact that he had studied with members of the royal household and was on a first name basis with powerful people had made Harland forget sometimes what powerful people could do on a bad day. Fionn had experienced that before. And Harland had seen it in real time last year. He grew more uncomfortable, as if his seat was made of thousands of pins.

As he pondered leaving the meeting under a false pretense, the door swung open, making Harland jump. A tall

man in a business suit, with neatly cropped black hair and moustache, entered the room, holding a leather binder in his left hand. Harland noticed the tightness of the man's grip around the binder. The knuckles were white.

And now Harland wished he had actually left earlier.

Peter Doncelles, Lord of Severnford and the current holder of the office of First Thain of the Emerald Island. If the Queen was the heart, the Thain was the brain. And what a powerful brain had been Lord Doncelles in the past decades. Always a step or two ahead his rivals, his diplomacy skills were unrivalled as he always knew what the opposite side wanted and lacked. And he wasn't above the shadowy aspects of ruling, especially when it came to protecting the status and reputation of the Queen in particular, and the Castlemartell family in general. Harland had to give it to the man, even if he wasn't a fan of him—due to a long-standing feud over the independent status of the Foundation, a status that Harland's father had fought long and hard to obtain—as his loyalty to the Queen was undisputed. Harland knew Doncelles well, as he had been Harland's mentor once upon a time, but now the Thain was not happy with recent developments. And when Lord Doncelles wasn't happy, he demanded answers.

Which was why Harland guessed he was there, to give answers. He braced for what was sure to be a tense reunion.

The Thain took a seat and looked to everyone around the table, holding their gaze. Arthur's smile faded and Sarah tried to straighten up in her seat, fidgeting with her sleeves to cover her tattoo. Harland found that amusing. Because after facing the mind-numbing horror that was the underbelly of the floating monstrosity that was the Bestial, even the anger of the Thain was daunting. Harland smiled. Doncelles frowned.

"I will cut to the point," the Thain said. His tone was firm, measured, and cold. "After the events of the past year and the revelation of Prince Byron's true form, the city state members of the Alliance feel cheated and are asking for diplomatic talks to reevaluate the status and future of the Alliance. Robbet Dewart is proving to be particularly difficult

to deal with in regard to this, even more since he has found an ally in Girolamo Bardi from Portis.”

“The southern regions want to separate, again,” Sarah added. It seemed that whatever was happening, Sarah and probably Arthur, were already informed. Which meant that the meeting was more about what he and the Foundation could offer than to inform the royal household. He felt cheated. But Harland gathered his bearings.

“They have always been looking for an excuse to ask for a restructure of the Alliance in their favor,” Harland said, feigning to have bitten the bait. “What’s new?”

He knew what was new.

“Now they have a perfect excuse, thanks to the escapades of the Greywolf and his other friends, and the mayhem resulting from that *adventure*.” The Thain raised his voice. “Decades of hard work, collapsing because of the ill-thought shenanigans of a few entitled.”

“Ill-thought? Shenanigans?” Harland replied, letting his annoyance show. “If it weren’t for those *entitled*, you wouldn’t be here speaking in that way. In fact, I could guess your head would be far removed from your body and decorating the top of a spike. So, you might wish to measure your next words if you want my help. Because that’s the only reason you sent for me.”

The Thain tightened his lips and only let out a hiss. His eyes betrayed the seething fury inside him. A part of Harland understood the anger Doncelles was holding back for the sake of appearances. The Thain was right in the sense that the delicate balance of the Alliance had always been at risk, more noticeable in recent years with the NLP party, the tensions with the Freefolk, and the quest to get the Kuni to join. The Samoharo had declined emphatically after the Great War, and the Straits were... a peculiar case. What Byron had done was to throw a wrench into the machinery the Queen and the Thain had been working so hard to create. It had been almost as effective had Byron succeeded in his plan. But to put the blame on Fionn, Gaby, Alex, Sam, Sid and even himself, who basically had cleaned up a mess hidden under the rug for a century, was unfair.

“Moving on to the next item of this reunion,” the Thain said closing his binder. “The Kuni have graciously offered to host the Triannual Diplomatic Talks of the Free Alliance and friendly powers in their capital, on the condition they get to also host the Chivalry Games and enter a team of champions to the competition. While they will remain a neutral party to offer advice, this might be an opportunity for them to finally join the Alliance. Which would help to reestablish the balance. However...”

“I sense that something went wrong with your carefully laid plans,” Harland said. The Thain stared daggers at him. Harland’s smile grew.

“The Kuni and the Samoharo...”

“The Samoharo are attending too?” Arthur interrupted. It seemed that this was news to him as well.

“Yes,” the Thain replied curtly. The way his lips twitched and his nostrils flared, let Harland know that he was trying to contain his anger under a façade of politeness. Doncelles had never liked having conditions imposed on him by anyone but the Queen. “The Samoharo will attend and participate in the Games too. And along with the Kuni, they demand for the Freefolk to attend as an independent nation.”

Harland was delighted at the news, even if he couldn’t show it. While the Freefolk were nominally members of the Alliance, there were issues that were a sore point for them, such as their ancestral lands being under the control of other city states, or their lack of an actual voice on the decisions of the Alliance. Fionn—not exactly the most orthodox freefolk—had been pushing for solving those issues to give his people a voice and reclaim their lands. But even a legendary hero faced an uphill battle when it came to politicians. So, the fact that the Kuni and the Samoharo were asking for the Freefolk to be granted independent status to negotiate at the table was excellent news. Fionn would be delighted.

“They also asked that the Foundation participate, as an independent, neutral entity with voice and vote,” the Thain said with frustration in his voice. The declaration took Harland by surprise. “I assume you knew nothing of this.”

“I’m as surprised as you,” Harland replied. That was an

unexpected development. One for which Harland didn't feel prepared for.

"I would give you the benefit of the doubt," the Thain said. "But the purpose of this meeting was not to inform you of this, but rather to ask you for insight on your friend the Greywolf."

"Technically," Sarah interjected, "he is Lord Estel."

"Or Lord Greywolf if you like," Arthur added with a grin. Harland recalled that like Alex, Arthur had been somewhat of a fan of Fionn while growing up. It seemed that he hadn't changed much.

"Be that as it may," the Thain continued, the frown in his forehead growing by the minute. "The fact remains that he is a freefolk. And not just any freefolk, but their representative in their talks. I have tried to reach him to talk, but it seems he has been traveling around, having his *little adventures*."

Harland wasn't sure which delighted him more: the fact that Fionn would be representing his people—which meant that after the Gathering they attended a few months ago, he rose in the ranks—or the way Lord Doncelles had enunciated 'little adventures,' with a mixture of annoyance and jealousy. Maybe he wasn't as stiff as Harland had thought. Or maybe it was because he couldn't be sure what Fionn would do.

*And thus, the reason for my presence here is revealed,* Harland thought.

"So, you want insight on Lord Greywolf's thoughts, huh?" Harland asked, knowing the answer. And he also knew what Fionn would ask for. So many years of being close friends had given him that insight. "Well, knowing Fionn, he will support the Alliance, he bled for it. And for its founder. But don't confuse that with total cooperation with your agenda. And the Queen must know that. He will have requests."

"What requests?" Sarah asked. She seemed confused. For her and her family, Fionn had always been a staunch, loyal friend. To the point that the King Castlemartell had given him a Lordship back in the day and the Queen had reinstated it after he returned to the land of the living. That he might have an agenda that was different from that of the Alliance or the Queen was unthinkable to her.



“Requests? Or demands?” the Thain asked. He wasn’t confused, rather, he was annoyed.

“You know?” Harland replied, relishing what he was going to say, even if it wasn’t the smartest thing to do, “for someone as savvy for politics as you all are, you are also clueless on what your potential allies might want. Or you are feigning to be clueless. Either way, my answer will be the same.”

“I don’t appreciate you talking to me that way,” the Thain said. “You are a citizen of this island, and if I recall correctly, a couple of those new ‘friends’ of yours are not. Their visas can expire any day. The visa of one of them is actually up for review this year if I recall correctly.”

“I don’t like you asking me to sell out my friend, nor threatening me or them,” Harland replied. “I find it insulting, really. After all this time, you should know me better than that.”

Harland stood up and walked towards the entrance. If it wouldn’t worsen the situation, he would have punched the man in the face. He stopped, turned around and faced them. “But I will give you this for free. Fionn might be a founder of the Alliance. A lord too, even if he doesn’t use the title nor rank. But before that, he is freefolk and for his support he will ask for what his people have always wanted since the Great War: their territories and sacred lands. Or at least a buffer zone around the Scar. And that includes Sandtown.”

“That island?” Sarah asked.

“That island is where the Freefolk Nation was founded,” Harland explained with a smile. “That they allowed the Alliance Charter to be signed there was because they wanted to cooperate. It doesn’t mean that it belongs to you. It’s sacred land for them.”

“I don’t think that neither the Crown nor the Alliance will accept those terms,” Sarah replied, unsure of what else to say.

“Then let me give you some advice,” Harland said. He wasn’t planning on relenting on the issue. He owed Fionn that much and more. If they wanted the Foundation to be a neutral party to help negotiations, he should start now. “You

better think about how to convince them of this. Because otherwise you will lose the Freefolk, especially after how the politicians have smeared them in the media. And without them, the Alliance is dead. Don't forget that they are way more powerful than any of us. And if they go, I doubt that the Samoharo and the Kuni will join us. So, if you will excuse me, I have to go back to work. Some of us actually have jobs."

The room felt silent. The Thain's face was red with anger. Sarah was taken aback by Harland's directness. If any of them thought for a second that they could manipulate him or count on him as an extension of their own interests, they were wrong.

Harland was aware of the consequences of his actions. But this was one of the reasons his father had started the Foundation, not just for research, but to become a major player to help the Alliance avoid the destiny of the Old Kingdoms from before the Great War.

"Any other advice, old friend?" Arthur asked, with a calm voice. He was the only one trying to conciliate. In that regard, he was following the guidelines of his family. Most of them in any case. Harland had to give him points for trying to ease the tension of the room.

"You better practice more, because if for some reason you decide to challenge Fionn or the guy that will represent the Foundation, you are in for a world of pain," Harland said. Arthur might be his friend, a fine fighter trained by the leader of the Solarian Knights, the Queen's personal guard and some of the best titanfighters of the Core regions of Theia. But even then, that couldn't compare to the full power of a trained Gifted.

"Is that a threat?" Sarah asked in disbelief.

"Not at all. I swear," Harland explained, "I'm telling you the truth so you can be prepared. I will see you at the conference."

Harland left the room and walked as fast as possible to get out of the castle. Outside, as he recovered his breath, he hailed a cab and gave the driver an address. He couldn't decide if he was hungry, thirsty, or worried. Probably a mix of all three. Aside from the fact that he had to prepare him-

self for a diplomatic conference, he had to solve a peculiar problem: he had to find three champions to represent the Foundation. And he had a feeling of who would be his only available option.

*I hope he doesn't narrate the fights aloud,* Harland thought.