



THE  
SHADOW  
BINDER

VOLUME 2

DYLAN KING

The Shadow Binder  
*Season One, Volume Two*

Dylan King

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*For all the readers who read Volume One and enjoyed it enough to continue onto Volume Two. Thank you.*

*I hope you continue to find the same enjoyment in my stories!*

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## Preface

Welcome to the second Volume of the epic/progression fantasy series, The Shadow Binder.

As a reminder, this story is structured a little differently than your traditional novels/novellas. It's plotted to be 'episodic'. Each volume is a separate episode in a 'series', and the story as a whole is structured to mirror seasons in a TV or graphic novel/manga series.

What this means for you, the reader, is shorter but faster releases that begin and resolve story arcs, that each build to what I hope is a satisfying conclusion.

I really very much hope you enjoy this series as much as I've enjoyed writing it. If you do, a review or rating would be an incredible help towards making The Shadow Binder a success!

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## I.XIV

Kitto pressed his boot upon the chest of the Drau taking the shape of a twisted, blackened tawny owl—once a common sight in these woods—and yanked his blade free. It dissipated into black smoke and fled back off into the shadows to reconstitute itself.

He spat, and sheathed his weapon, pausing only to wipe the sweat from his brow before hurrying away in the opposite direction. There was no killing the Shadow, at least no way anybody had discovered. Killing the poor creature it had possessed delayed them, but they would come back.

They always came back.

Kitto had little choice but to run. Hunting had, once again, been a bust. The front line of the War was half a world away, but since they'd received word Riawa had fallen, everything had changed. Shadowspawn arrived on their island in drips and drabs from the sea, slinking into the forest and gorging themselves on the souls of its inhabitants.

Now, even people were not safe to travel alone. Kitto was lucky. His father had been a career soldier and had taught him and his little brother enough of the blade that he could defend himself—at least well enough to get away. Others living here didn't have the same privilege.

He darted between shadowed thickets of trees, making as little noise as possible. His eyes scanned the surrounding area constantly, each oddly shaped clump of shrubs or angled branch taking the appearance, at first glance, of another Shadowspawn.

The paranoia had become a constant figure in his life since his parents' passing. Always watching over his shoulder. Always tense and on guard. Then again, who wasn't now? Riawa had been the centre of human progress and strength—a beacon of light even as the Shadow rent holes in the sky itself, and descended from above, swarming the northern hemisphere of Feres.

As long as Riawa stood, there had been hope.

Now, there was no force left that could stand between humanity and the Shadow, no sanctuary for those that remained. Every day was now simply another inch of a slow, inescapable crawl to the end. What was worse was that everybody knew it. Armies collapsed as their soldiers fled to

spend their last days with families. Cities fell to madness as their citizens realised that with no future, there were also no consequences. Each story that came from the north made Kitto thankful they lived on a relatively small and remote island at Feres' southernmost point.

Finally, home came into view. A humble trapping cottage built beside a running stream that, in the warmer months, teemed with life. The soft babbling always sent a rush of warmth through him. Even a decade on, he could hear his and his brother's laughter carrying through spring air as they traipsed through its shallow waters, picking out handfuls of frogspawn and depositing it in buckets.

He swallowed as he traipsed across the gently winding path to their battered front door, the warmth in him fading. More and more, thoughts of his little brother soured his mood. The world was dying, and Kitto would die right alongside it. He had made peace with that. Accepted it.

But the thought of his brother sharing that fate? The thought sent ripples of impotent fury through him. It was his job to protect his younger brother—he was the only one left that could. He was going to fail, he knew, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Kitto raised a trembling hand to the door handle, taking a deep breath before relaxing his facial muscles, willing the anger and frustration out of his expression. A frigid chill ran across his spine the moment his hand touched cool metal, and he felt a bony hand fall upon his shoulder.

***“You know that’s not quite the truth, dearest Cristopher,”*** a rasping, paper thin voice whispered into his ear. Kitto went rigid at the familiar touch, and the use of a given name even his own mother never really used.

“I already gave you my answer!” he hissed, trying to keep his voice low enough that his brother would not hear him on the other side of the door. “Now leave me, before I—”

A cold, rasping chuckle cut him off. ***“Before you... what? You cannot harm me. And even if you could—would you? Even though you know that I alone can save your precious, baby brother?”***

Kitto ground his teeth. “I would never.”

***“For now. We shall see how long your resolve holds. Perhaps until this forest burns around you? Or perhaps you will hold out until his broken body lies at your feet, his final, mortal breath rattling free from his lungs. We shall see.”***



Kitto whirled around, fist barrelling through empty space, as a cold, rasping laugh reverberated through his head.

He screamed, and Casek's own scream joined with it, the two sounds merging into one piercing, discordant note.

Casek sat up, ram-rod straight, sweat coating his face and soaking through his shirt. Across from him, Raelynn crouched, prepping her side of the camp to leave. She peered at him, expression unreadable.

"Nightmares?" she asked. At his shaky nod, she returned her attention to her bag, before muttering a brisk, "me too."

Strangely, Casek appreciated the lack of further comment almost as much as he did her choosing to share that she also suffered from nightmares. The dream had been startlingly real, and almost visceral in its clarity. He didn't know how he would have even begun to explain it had she asked, nor how much of it was based in reality and how much of it was simply his brain trying desperately to fill the gaps in his knowledge with *something*.

**Riawa was a real place**, Tauph muttered, making Casek leap nearly halfway out of his bedroll.

*Tauph, you're talking again? What happened to you?*

**I...I'm sorry about that**, he said, voice weary. **I wasn't expecting that to happen. Truth be told, I don't really remember what happened.**

*I bound the Drau. I had to use some of the other power—but I managed it. After that, you were gone. Did having the Drau bound to you have some kind of effect on your ability to speak?*

**Not...exactly.**

Tauph's hesitation brought on a sickening sinking feeling in his gut. *I figured as much. That extra power—it's yours isn't it? I cycled it during that fight?*

**I...Yes. I suppose there really isn't any hiding that anymore. You knew I wasn't human already. That source of power you felt is mine.**

Casek's mind raced as the possibilities span round in his head. *Are you one of the Shadow*

**No. I'm... Something else.**

*But only the Shadow can use magic naturally, you said so yourself.*

**No, I said that only beings of the Other could access their magic naturally. For the record**, Tauph added, with more than a hint of attitude, **I also said pretty definitively that I wasn't one of the Shadow.**

*Yes, whilst hiding a secret well of power. Do you not think that might have come in handy? Or even that it might have helped me trust you, if you'd have told me?*

Casek could feel his fists clench and unclench rhythmically as he fought to keep his temper. He wanted to trust Tauph so badly—wanted to believe this voice was not that of some devious monster—but the secrets were making it almost impossible, let alone the fact he'd been given no real reason they needed to be kept besides 'his own good'.

Waking with no memories meant that besides the essentials of survival, information was his most vital commodity. He was perfectly capable of finding his own food and water, of building shelter, and even fighting when it came to that; but all this meant was that his own ignorance was the thing most likely to get him killed.

Tauph could help with that, but was choosing not to.

***Casek, I didn't even know for sure that you could access that power. We didn't exactly have the time to stop and start experimenting—not until we got trapped in that crystal. Look, you seem to think I'm hiding all of these big, earth-shattering secrets from you. I'm not. There are only a handful of things I will not talk about—mostly to keep a promise I made to you before you lost your memory.***

*How would telling me break a promise to me?*

***There are things you wanted to forget. When you found out what was being done to you would cause amnesia, you made me promise to let you.***

*And I'm supposed to just accept that?*

***We've been down this road already. You can stomp your feet like you did when you were a baby as much as you like—it won't change anything. You can't force me to do anything.***

Casek's breath caught in his throat as a soft forest breeze gently lifted the leaf litter on the forest floor around him and sent it drifting airily across the ground. *When I was a baby? How long have you known me, Tauph?*

For a moment, the only sound was the whisper-faint rustle of leaves, punctuated by Raelynn's distant rummaging. ***Since you were born,*** Tauph said, finally. ***I—***

"Are you getting up, or what?" Raelynn's impatient bark cut through Casek's mind like a war-hammer through ice. His mouth worked silently,

trying and failing to form a coherent response, and Raelynn rolled her eyes. “Move. We need to be moving fast if we’re going to make decent time before dark.”

She strode away to finish packing her last pieces of equipment, leaving Casek to scramble to do the same.

*How can you have known me since I was born when you’re not even from this reality? That’s one hell of a friend of the family!*

***I wasn’t exactly a friend. But what I always have been was your protector. Right from the day you were born to now, everything I have done has been for you. Everything. I need you to remember that, Casek. No matter what, it was always to protect you.***

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## I.XV

Walking through the early morning forest since had been an unsettling experience since his waking. An all-consuming silence covered the place, causing every sound he made to grate madly against his nerves. It was an excruciating quiet. Unnatural. He had no point of reference for what the forest should have sounded like at this time of the day, but Casek's subconscious seemed convinced that silence was its antithesis.

Fortunately, several hours into their sullen traipse amongst the trees, the birds began to flitter between branches once more, whistling out their first tunes of the day. Small mammals followed soon after. Squirrels skittered across the floor, and woodmice darted away through the underbrush as soon as they came close.

As life returned to the wood, Casek felt himself relax slightly, as though some kind of natural order had been resumed. Even Raelynn, who had studiously stayed a dozen paces ahead of him—no matter how fast he moved—seemed to lose some of the tension in her shoulders and face.

Perhaps that was what prompted him to once again try to strike up some kind of conversation with her.

“You know, if you're wanting me to help with your friends, you're probably going to have to tell me where we're actually going and what we're up against. Gods, even just knowing where we actually *are* would be a blessing at this point.”

Raelynn looked back, face tight, but still answered. “What do you mean ‘where we are’?”

“Well,” he said, shrugging. “I know we're in a forest. But beyond that? No idea. I have no idea what this place is called or what part of the world we're in—even whether we're near or far from other people.”

“We're on the southernmost landmass on Feres. As far as I know, it was once a rural country called Pyria. We know little about it anymore. It was the last place to fall to the Shadow, and the only country of the World That Was that recorded to have won a battle during The Fall.”

A smile threatened to spread across her face as she continued, eyes distant. “A ragtag militia of farmers, fishermen and hunters. Normal men

and women who stood against all the horrors the universe can muster, and won. At least, at first. It is from here that the foci came from originally.”

The words stirred something in Casek. No memory was forthcoming, but a heated pride stirred deep in his core. He knew this place.

***Of course***, came Tauph’s sombre voice. ***This is where we lived.***

Casek sucked in a breath. It was only a name, really. He still had no memories of ever being here, no recollection of the people or places he’d once known; but it was still strangely fulfilling to learn where you came from. If nothing else, it would explain why he was so at home in these woods, and why the skill of survival here was so firmly embedded in his subconscious.

“Is this where Oreia is, then? In the last place to fall?”

Raelynn shook her head. “No. Pyria was abandoned not long after. There are no more records after that. The scattered remnants of humanity fought on for many years after. Oreia was created centuries later.”

“I’m trying to imagine what kind of fortress that place must be to have held out for so long against the Shadow, but I can’t even begin to picture it. I bet it’s some sight.”

Raelynn stopped dead. She peered back at him, mouth slowly opening, eyes wide with shock. A disbelieving scoff escaped her mouth, before the smile finally slipped through her self-control.

“You really don’t know anything, do you?”

“I told you—”

Raelynn raised a hand, cutting him off. “I know you told me. It’s just this might be the first time I’ve truly believed you. Nobody in their right mind would call Oreia a fortress, nor would they believe such a thing could hold back the Shadow for as long as Oreia has.”

“Then how?”

“One thing alone keeps us alive after all this time,” Raelynn said, setting off again, but this time allowing him to match her pace. “It’s no impressive fortification or disguise. Simply the grim reality of humanity’s situation.”

Casek frowned. “What do you mean?”

“How does it serve the Shadow to put any effort into seeking out and destroying our last city?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but hesitated as he his mind connected the dots. “It...doesn’t?” Casek started, and at Raelynn’s

insistence, he pressed on. “For the Shadow, we’re a food source—as long as we are controllable, why would you eliminate a self-replenishing source of energy for good?”

“Exactly. The entirety of human civilisation is gone. What they left is no credible threat to them. So the Shadow puts very little effort into rooting out Oreia itself. Instead, they only pick off those who venture out, allowing our numbers inside the city walls to stay reasonably consistent. The reality is that Oreia belongs to them, in much the same way free-roaming sheep belong to their shepherd. The sheep might have the run of the mountainside, but in the end they’re still mutton. They know we don’t have the numbers to fight back, and that we have no way of acquiring them, either.”

She glanced at him then, with a startling intensity. “Well, until now, that is.”

The whole thing made a sick sense to Casek. Of all the things his mind had carried with it through the sleep, the memory of how coastal anglers selectively fished particular areas sprung to mind. They would intentionally steer clear of known breeding grounds, knowing that this would restock the fish supply for the following year.

For the Shadow, Oreia was that. The hunters giving their prey an amnesty in one place, so there would always be an ample supply of game.

He forced himself to smile. “Strangely, that hasn’t put me off. Just the idea of other humans makes the rest of it easier to bear. Besides, like you said: now we have a way to fight back. To free the people who have been trapped. Maybe even to restore a little part of what has been lost.”

Raelynn really did laugh this time, a soft and awkward sound, as though she were unused to the very idea of laughter. “That’s what I want, too. To restore what was lost. So much of our history and collective knowledge is gone—part of the reason I became a Binder in the first place was to try to recover some of it.”

“Is that what you were doing out here with your people? Looking for lost parts of history?”

The smile slipped from her face, but there was no trace of anger in her voice as she explained. “No. The Binders who operate outside of Oreia are mostly hunters and scavengers. We help feed the city and acquire the resources it needs to keep going. We were here searching ruins for foci. Too many of those have been lost in the centuries of fighting, too.”

“You can’t make more?”

“The artificers say the material that makes them work no longer exists. They can replicate all of it besides the bit that actually allows you to touch magic. We had a healthy supply, once, but every lost Binder is also a lost foci. Eventually, that adds up, and we need to find more.”

“I take it you ran into problems?”

Raelynn scoffed bitterly as she ducked under a low-hanging oak branch. “No part of this mission has been without them since we made land in Pyria. There are more powerful Shadowspawn active here than we could have possibly predicted. They picked us off one by one until I was all that remained. I survived because I was the weakest—the least appealing meal—until I was the only meal. A pair of Bel’gor attacked me at once whilst my power was spent, and you know the rest.”

Casek nodded, noting that the tree cover around them was thinning, allowing more and more of the crystalline sky to show through the canopy above.

“So,” he said. “Who are we rescuing first?”

“We’re heading to the southernmost tip of Pyria. The Shadow took the last of my team beside myself in a ruined town by the coast. Idris is a character, but we won’t get far with rescuing the others without him. He is an artificer.”

At Casek’s blank expression, she went on. “He can make things. Useful things.”

“What are we coming up against here?”

“We need to get there first. We’ll be out of the forest soon, and will have to cross a fair few miles of marshland before making it to the ruins. The marshes themselves are teeming with shades and Drau—but hopefully nothing more dangerous than that.”

Casek suppressed a grimace. To his mind, a single Drau was dangerous enough, let alone more. “What about in the town itself?”

“That’s where we run into our first major problem. A nest of Bel’gor, half a dozen strong at least, has gathered up all the townsfolk to feed. Had Idris been at full-strength when we stumbled into the middle of them, we would have both made it out, but...”

He swallowed, but brought his hand up and placed it reassuringly on her shoulder. “You will both make it out this time. Whatever it takes.”

Raelynn nodded, but didn't respond, and Casek tried not to let the panic show on his face. It would do no good now. He had his mission, and people relying on him to get it done. No matter the danger arrayed before him, it wouldn't be fear that brought him down.

For one thousand years, humanity had fought on, knowing full-well they were fighting a war they were doomed to lose. Today, that changed. He narrowed his eyes, taking a deep, steadying breath. If Casek wanted that second chance at life, it had to.

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## I.XVI

Soon, the trees reaching overhead shrank in stature. Clumps of silver birch and whip-like willow branches, thick with drooping leaves, replaced mature oak. So too did fern and leaf-litter give way to a thick, mossy floor that Casek's boot seemed all too happy to sink into. Moisture from the moss squeezed out with every step, soaking his boots and filling them with ice-cold water.

Eventually, the patches of forest pond grew ever more frequent, until they were weaving their way through a maze of shallow pools teeming with insect life. Vibrant blue and orange damselflies streaked from one reed-lined water-source to the next, picking off prey with precise, lightning-fast swoops.

All things considered, he should have been miserable slogging through the worsening marsh, every step dogged by the possibility of death leaping from the shadows at any point. But he wasn't. The buzz of life around him, the natural orchestra, burned away the tense silence of the deep forest and with it, the crushing anxiety it stirred in him.

This was good. It freed his mind to concentrate on other things. Casek glanced ahead of himself, planning his next few steps so he could take them without ending up shin-deep in muddy water, and then turned his attention inwards.

He searched for the sources of power in his subconscious. Besides his own, there were now two dark wells. One was infinitely larger than the other, a vast ocean of strength that sat serene and silent, a frozen lake of unfathomable depth. This was Tauph's power, and what he used to interact with the stasis crystals used by the Shadowspawn.

The second was a different matter entirely. Even focusing his attention on it turned his stomach, a nauseous twist so severe it made it difficult to maintain focus on it. The surface of it roiled violently, bubbling and popping like molten lava. An insidious hiss filled his mind when he concentrated on it, like water running off a cliff. But, when he really concentrated, he could almost hear faint whispers deep within the noise, sending a thrill of ice surging through his veins.

*You sure I just do the same thing, here Tauph?*

***It won't be as easy, but the general principle is exactly what you did with my power. Drag some out with your own magic. Sever. Absorb.***

Casek took a steadying breath, checking his footing in the forest before refocusing. Raelynn knew he was going to try to cycle the Drau he'd bound, so she was keeping watch for any threats whilst he was distracted.

*Raelynn said it would fight back. How the hell does that even work?*

***You know as much as I do. My power is similar, but not the same. It stands to reason, though. The Drau you bound isn't dead—it's just imprisoned within the foci and linked to you. Why would it just let you siphon away its power without at least a struggle?***

Casek was clear on the logic, of course. He just didn't enjoy fumbling around in the dark, trying to work these things out when his life was on the line. Raelynn had described the process as best she could. Warned him of the dangers. The Drau would try to fight back. To influence him. To take control. All he had to do was steal some power and resist.

If he didn't, he and Tauph would be dead, and his body would belong to the Shadow.

This was cycling. And he'd have to repeat the process over and over until he'd absorbed the entirety of the Drau's power and made it his own. Only once that last scrap was gone would the Shadowspawn truly be dead, and he would be free to lower his guard.

At least, until he bound the next creature and was forced to repeat the entire struggle over and over.

He found the cool, revitalising spring of his own power and guided its flow as he had before. Easing it towards the Drau's. Wielding his own strength had quickly become intuitive, like moving a limb he'd had since birth. It flowed around a healthy globule of the Drau's magic and grasped it.

Casek shivered as the nausea worsened, the oily hissing rising to a fever pitch in his mind. If there were words, he could not understand them. He could feel them, though. The hate. The twisting, roaring disgust. The hunger. He hated him. He should die—should kill him. He should kill—

***Casek!***

He started, palms sweating profusely. *Right.*

His power yanked at the Drau's, and Casek fought to keep the influence of the creature at bay. There was only a moment of hesitation before he swept a blade of his own power through it, and allowed the freed segment to be absorbed.

Suddenly, the deafening, unrelenting noise in his mind vanished, leaving him in an unnatural silence that rang around his head.

Only, it wasn't silence. Before, there had been, but now, there was a definite *something*. A noise he couldn't quite pin down. It was on the distant edge of his consciousness; at the tips of his fingertips.

Casek was surprised to realise he was grinding his teeth.

*Taugh...*

***Remember, the power doesn't become entirely yours until the Drau is gone completely. It will try to influence you in any way it can before then.***

*How long will it be like this?*

***A few days, if you cycle consistently. Raelynn said you get used to it. It becomes sort of instinctive.***

A hand on his shoulder tore him from his subconscious. Raelynn had pulled up beside him, regarding him with a wry smile. It was by far the friendliest expression he'd seen on her, and it, together with the strange buzzing in his mind, stole the words from the tip of his tongue.

"Here," she said, extending an arm towards him. "It helps, trust me."

She held a small jar out at him, filled with a thick amber liquid.

"What is it?" he said, taking it and peering inside.

"Black pine resin. Scoop some out with a finger and chew it. It doesn't exactly taste wonderful, but it's not so bad once you get used to it. It helps," she said, tapping her finger against her temple. "With the noise."

Apparently, he didn't cover his dubiousness well enough, because she snorted. "Just trust me. That bastard whispering is unbearable and only gets worse as you bind stronger things. The resin is sort of therapeutic. Gives your brain something else to focus on."

It was only then he noticed she was subtly chewing on her own piece. He relented, unscrewing the cap and dragging out a fingertip of resin.

"Thanks," he said, before sticking it into his mouth.

Immediately, his face screwed up as a rush of bitterness filled his mouth when his molars pressed down through the nugget of resin. This time Raelynn laughed fully.

"I warned you it wasn't good."

"That was vicious," Casek grouched as he chewed, the flavour already softening.

“It works though, doesn’t it?”

“Begrudgingly, I have to give you that—”

He paused as something reached around his ankle. For a moment, his heart skipped a beat as he thought he was tripping over a tree root. Then it gripped his ankle tight, dragging him off his feet through the slushy undergrowth.

Casek twisted his body around, fighting to reach an arm down to free his leg as he slid across the moist ground, but as soon as he did, a second black tentacle burst from the moss layer and coiled itself around his arm.

“Raelynn!” he spluttered, flying marsh water and flecks of dirt and foliage filling his mouth

***Casek, take a breath!***

He followed Tauph’s instructions without question, and had just enough time to take a deep gulp of air before he plunged headfirst into the frigid water of the marsh. The cold nearly made him gasp, and only supreme presence of mind stopped him from doing it and filling his lungs with the filthy water almost immediately.

Water resistance slowed the tendrils dragging him, and he forced his eyes open despite the water stinging at them. Something was dragging him, and if he wanted a chance at fighting it, he’d have to at least try to see it.

At first, all he could see was the debris-laced brown of the water, as he was pulled through the depths. Then, he raised his right arm to his face, scarcely able to make out the lights of the foci-jewels on his wrist. Four of them.

He grinned, sword flaring to life and flashing through the tendrils binding him, the pulsing magic powering it lighting up a swathe of the bog’s depths. As he raised his face, finally free, the smile faded.

Ahead of him, he saw it. Anchored to the bottom of the marsh, the creature stared up at him through bulbous yellow eyes. Its black tentacles were splayed out around it, suspended in the water like a widely cast, slowly drifting net.

*Shit.*

## I.XVII

The creature's eyes shone in the murky water like lamplight through mist, reflecting the luminescence of Casek's blade back at him. A dribble of bubbles streamed from the corners of its grotesque mouth, uneven, crooked fangs jutting out at odd angles past thin, fishlike lips.

For a moment, Casek couldn't think through the horror. Then, as though possessed, he started thrashing his legs madly, trying to propel himself back through the water and away from the monstrosity before him.

It lazily opened its mouth, baring row upon row of ferocious teeth, and suddenly a group of its strange tentacles arched through the water at him. He twisted, avoiding the first, and his sword diced the second as it got close, muscles burning to move his arm fast enough to do so.

The third, however, caught hold of his wrist, the rope-like appendage winding around his wrist tightly. With the contact, came a pull on his magic as it tried to drain away his strength. Casek severed it quickly, the removed segment dissolving into black and being absorbed by his sword, much the same as a shade would be.

Another wave of sinuous appendages darted at him, and Casek cut off his attempts to swim away in order to fight them off, slashing wildly through the water to keep them at bay. The thicker ones took considerably more effort to cut through, some requiring him to hack at the limbs two or three times to remove them.

*I don't have time for this!* His lungs burned, the wild movement expending what little oxygen he had left from his initial breath. *I'll drown if this keeps up for much longer.*

**Take more power.** Tauph's voice sounded strangely distant and garbled, as though he, too, were drowning. **Take more, or all of us will die.**

He cut away another pair of serpentine tentacles and focused his mind, searching out the sources of his power. He'd used Tauph's power before to give him a boost in strength to bind the Drau. There would certainly be enough—the well holding it seemed to be unfathomably deep.

However, the process had left Tauph out of action for an entire day, and he hadn't really been right since. Why do that to Tauph again, when he had a second source of strength to pull from right here? Of course, there

were risks to using the Drau's power, but at least he'd be taking that risk on himself, instead of forcing it on Tauph.

He focused on the Drau's well, ignoring the mumbled sounds of protest in his mind the Drau was trying to influence him with. This time, he dragged free the largest portion he could manage. Ignoring the screeched whispers it forced through his mind, he cut it loose, absorbing it into his own well all at once.

The rush of strength was immediate. Power flooded through him, pouring into his muscles and mind, making him stronger. His blade flickered and brightened, practically buzzing with power in his hand, and he grinned at the newfound strength.

But there was something else. A feeling nagging at the back of his mind, like a splinter just underneath the skin. His stomach fluttered with anxiety, even as his blade swept through half a dozen of the creature's reaching arms in one fell sweep, the sword moving through the water as easily as air.

The beast howled, seeing its prey strengthen before its eyes. It lifted from the lake-bed, stirring up a storm of silt, propelling itself at him like an octopus. Casek readied his blade, a grin on his face. He could sense this creature, feel its power. This was a Drau, one stronger than the one he'd bound before, admittedly, but then, he too was stronger than he had been then.

Casek concentrated on his power as it approached, focusing it into his body and blade, allowing it to fill him entirely. One strike was all it would take.

The Drau came within range, its rows of crooked, reticulated teeth bared, when an earth shattering screech cut through his mind, like metal grinding against metal. Casek's blade fell away to nothing, and his hands clutched at his hair and head so desperately it was as though he were trying to dig his way inside to remove the noise that way. The unearthly grinding persisted, even as the creature barrelled into him, Casek barely able to lurch out of the way of its fangs.

Then, something about the noise changed. Or was it that something was added over the top? A babbling, throaty mockery of Tauph's voice boomed through his mind.

***SHRED. WORTHLESS. KILL. PREY. DIE. FEED.***

The words echoing a baser instinct echoed and repeated, reverberating through themselves, creating layer after layer of unbearable noise. Casek gave up the pretense of holding his breath as a scream tore its way loose from his throat, a torrent of bubbles made up of his last precious scraps of oxygen erupting from his mouth in place of actual noise.

Languid arms wrapped their way around his limbs and chest, crushing and squeezing. Casek thought his head might explode. Or perhaps the beast would rip him apart. Or even tear strips from him with those sickeningly white teeth.

Anything, *anything*, besides the slow and agonising death that would come the second he took that last breath. He could no longer see or think. All that existed was the noise, and that voice, and the exquisite, excruciating pressure in his chest that told him he still hadn't taken that final breath.

A flash of blue light. A terrible cloud of oily black smoke. Freedom. That last thing comforted him. Freedom was good—relaxing, even. He breathed. A scraping, gasping breath, as though his lungs had arms that could reach out and tear oxygen right from the sky; and sweet, clean air filled him. He took another, and the blackness started to fade.

Above him, the cloudless sky stretched for miles around, unbroken by even a whisper of cloud, yet it still seemed to dance and swim before his oxygen starved mind. For a long while, Casek did nothing else but breath precious air.

By the water's edge, Raelynn stood shivering, wet travel clothes hanging heavy with marsh water, wringing out her loose, black hair.

*Taugh, what the fuck happened?*

***You drew from the Drau's power in the middle of a fight. It did exactly what Raelynn warned you it would—try to get you killed so it could take your body. Why didn't you listen to me when I warned you?***

Casek frowned, wiping the silt-laden water away from his eyes. *What do you mean, warn me? All I heard was you telling me to take power. I figured it would be better to take the Drau's than yours, because of what happened last time.*

There was a hesitation, then, and a pit of anxiety settled in Casek's stomach like lead. ***Casek, that wasn't me.***

Raelynn knelt down beside him before he could even process what Taugh had just told him.

“Are you okay?” she asked, eyebrows knitted in concern.

“Other than a little waterlogged, yeah. Thanks to you,” he said, a nervous laugh bubbling from his mouth.

“I’m sorry it took so long—the murky water made it difficult to actually see where you had been dragged to. Luckily the light of your foci gave me a rough idea before it gave out.”

Casek sat up, shrugging. “Its fine. I should have been able to, really, but the tentacles made it difficult. Then I started running out of air. I tried to draw on the Drau I’d bound to compensate, but—”

“It’s almost impossible to maintain a weapon whilst cycling,” she finished for him, a wry smile on her face. “You wouldn’t be the first to try. Only the most powerful binders are able, though.”

“Raelynn, it—*spoke* to me. Not anything coherent, but actual *words*.”

Her brows knitted. “It’s almost unheard of for Shadowspawn weaker than a Bel’gor to be able to do that. Even among that rank, it’s rare. Usually, the more powerful the Shadow entity, the closer to what we’d regard as human consciousness they come. Are you sure?”

He nodded, and Raelynn’s face twisted uncomfortably. “I’d have to speak to the archivists in Oreia to know if a Drau ever has, but I’ve certainly never heard of it. I suppose it must have been stronger than I guessed—close to metamorphosis into a Bel’gor. Either way, it’s dead now. We’d best get to making camp so we can dry off. It’s getting colder already.”

Casek hauled himself to his feet, and aided Raelynn in gathering firewood, but the knot of anxiety had only grown. Raelynn might have been willing to believe she had misjudged the Drau, but Casek was positive he’d been right. After all, he’d sensed the same.

*Taugh, what do you think?*

***If I had to guess, it probably had something to do with the additional being from the Other you have bound to you. Perhaps I make you more susceptible to being influenced? Either way, we’ll have to be careful. We’re lucky to be alive.***

Casek scoffed as he bent down to pick up a piece of dried, dead birch from the ground. Waking with no memories in a world where death lurked at every turn, where places he knew he’d once felt safe and at home



had been tainted by the presence of these creatures? Second chance or not, he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to call that lucky with a straight face.

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## I.XVIII

Even the following day, Casek's clothes still hadn't truly dried. His sodden boots, in particular, were a source of sharp misery. His buoyant mood had waned with the tree cover, with only sparse weeping willow left to break up the endless marshland, their dense, drooping branches reflecting his mindset.

He tried to focus on the rhythm of chewing the piece of stale resin swirling in his mouth, as within his subconscious, he cut free another piece of the Drau, despite its best efforts to sway him. Its well of power had been drained almost to completion, with only the dregs remaining, its surface now nearly as still and serene as Tauph's.

Unfortunately, this left his own mind at fever pitch, as the Drau's magic did everything it could to get his concentration to slip.

Its voice in his mind screamed and howled, and the pain in his temple had become so great, it felt as though someone were driving a stake directly through it by hand.

*That might be better*, he grouched, and caught a distinct flutter of sympathy from Tauph.

***Only a little longer, Casek, and it will be gone. Half a day, I'd say. Raelynn warned you this would be the worst of it—it's dying gasp.***

She had. That didn't make it any easier to bear, though. *Any chance you think I could speed it up a little?*

***Not a chance. Remember, that's what it's hoping for. You siphon off too much at once, and it has an opening.***

He sighed and stepped round an especially sloppy segment of thick mud. This, of course, was the other ever-present danger of their trek through the marshes. The bog sprawled out in every direction around them; large marshy lakes, lined with thick reed beds and rushes, lay placid between unbroken stretches of tacky mud.

Each step was just as likely to suck you in, knee deep, as it was to take your weight, and there was precious little way of telling for sure where was safe to tread. Oddly, he was managing better than Raelynn, and for the first time, he was leading them with her following close behind, tracing his steps exactly.

He swore as his left foot passed straight through what he thought was solid ground, leaving him knee deep in the mud. Raelynn helped haul him free, and they trudged on, the mud beneath each step clinging onto their boots just fiercely enough to be draining.

Miles passed before they saw a landmark to differentiate this part of the marsh from another. A small shack, made from rickety planks of aged wood, and built upon stilts raising it up above the moisture of the bog below. A small set of wooden stairs, rotting and crumbling, led up to a collapsed door. Casek frowned, as he peered at the surprisingly good condition of the place.

Unbidden, his mind summoned images of pine resin-curing timber for longevity in damp conditions. Still, even allowing that the curing process would have allowed the cabin to stand intended for centuries, the prickling familiarity of the place told Casek it was older than even that.

This place should not still be standing.

“What do you think?” he called back to Raelynn.

“I think we should be very careful. This seems far too inviting for it not to be on purpose.”

“Do we ignore it, then?”

Raelynn grimaced. “No. It’s a good trap for a reason—it’s too good of an opportunity to pass up. Food? Books, even? Gods, we have found foci in stranger places than this. It would be negligent for me to ignore this as a Binder.”

“We could come back,” he suggested. “With some of your companions, once we’ve freed them?”

“Something we find here might come in useful during the rescue. Besides, once we have Idris, we won’t be coming back this way.”

“Okay,” Casek muttered. “Headfirst into the potentially deadly trap it is. Is there any plan here—besides ‘hoping for the best?’”

Raelynn tilted her head, the corners of her mouth turning ever so slightly upward. “Huh. Never would have pegged you for a coward.”

“Common sense isn’t cowardice,” he said. “Stupid-brave is, in fact, usually just stupid.”

Raelynn chuckled, pulling level with him. “Point taken. Look, it’s a risk, and given the state of that place, the rewards aren’t likely to be great. But you’re walking through this marsh in crumbling, soaked through boots and rags. Even if it’s just an extra blanket or something, we’re hard-up

enough that it'll be worth our while. We've been lucky with the weather so far. That won't last."

He hadn't considered the potential of new clothing. Even now, he could feel the holes in his boots, and they had been growing daily. Attempts to keep his only shirt and trousers clean had also failed spectacularly, and he was increasingly conscious of the biting chill in the air come the afternoon. There was no telling how much travelling was left to do, or even what the weather would do next, and he was clad, essentially, in rags.

"Fine," he muttered, "but you're going in there first."

Raelynn smirked and quickened her pace to pull ahead of him as they approached the base of the stairs. Casek activated his weapon at the same time as her, and Raelynn raised a black boot and pressed it down on the first step, testing its structural integrity.

When nothing gave way beneath her, she climbed, testing each step carefully as she kept her eyes fixed on the doorway. Casek followed her movements, but also scanned their surroundings, in case something decided to try to take advantage of their distraction.

Only when they reached the top of the stairs did anything stir from inside. A rush of Shades swarmed from the musty interior of the shack, gibbering and frenzied, and each met their end at the tip of a sword. The pair dispatched the last of them with ritual ease, and Raelynn nodded to him before stepping inside the ruined doorway.

Casek followed, teeth grinding.

Inside had been homely once. Humble, but well-loved. A child's drawings lined the walls, the parchment they had been drawn on now yellowed and decrepit, looking as though it might crumble to the touch. At the sides of the room, various boxes and dressers lay, covered in a millennia of dust and cobwebs, but appearing on the surface, at least, to be as sturdy as the day they had been built.

That, too, should not have been possible.

Raelynn moved straight for these, pulling open drawers and beginning to unceremoniously rifle through what had once been somebody's life. Casek's hands began to tremble as his eyes wandered to the centre-right of the room, where a rusted kettle hung over a long-dead fire, ash and half-spent fuel still at the base. On a small table before it stood a table, slightly uneven, with two moth-eaten and ragged cushions just before it.

Lying on top and riddled with dust were the unclean wooden plates of the last meal the people that lived here ever ate.

Raelynn muttered away to herself, itemising the things she was finding and cataloguing their usefulness as Casek finally allowed his eyes to wander to the very back of the cabin. To the thing he had been trying to avoid looking at again since he'd stepped through the threshold.

At the very back, a pair of beds lay, just as time-ruined and crumbling as the rest of the place.

The first, the smaller of the two, lay still-made and empty, ragged blankets still neatly tucked beneath its straw blanket. Upon the other, larger bed, two figures lay unmistakably intertwined in a last embrace.

Casek's feet were moving against his will, pulling him towards the back of the shack, heart thundering in his ears.

***Oh, Gods. Casek...***

He barely registered Tauph's voice as he approached the bed, and the sight of the two skeletal figures filled his mind. An adult man, a father, had died, his arms wrapped around his dead or dying child. They had died together, these two, and the rusted knife in the man's hand told him exactly how.

His eyes drifted upward, to a scrawled carving on the shack's wall, a final message from a man a very long-time dead.

*They have us surrounded now. I can see them in the water, and behind the trees. At night, they even come right to the steps. They haven't the courage or numbers to climb them yet, but it's only a matter of time. We haven't heard from the wood-folk for months, nor any town. No help is coming. We have no food, no clean water. I Can't leave to get any without being taken.*

*I won't let them have Catelyn. I've seen what they do. I won't allow that to happen to my girl. Mixed henbane and bryony through the last of our food. She won't feel what I must do now.*

*Gods forgive me, for I never can.*

Casek shook, as hot tears stung at his eyes. *I knew these people, didn't I?*

***Yes.***

Raelynn stepped beside him then, eyes soft as she looked down at the figures on the bed.

“You see this, sometimes, outside of the city. People knew what was coming. Some ended things on their own terms. I won’t tell you it gets easier, but you do get desensitised to it. Come on, let’s move. I’ve gathered some supplies. We shouldn’t test our luck.”

Raelynn made for the door, and Casek’s teeth ground painfully, jaw muscles twitching at his cheeks.

“No.” He ground out, eyes never leaving the bodies.

“What?”

“I said no,” he insisted. “I won’t leave these people here like this.”

Raelynn blinked slowly, aghast. “You can’t be serious. Look, I get it, I really do—but we don’t have the time. What would you do, bury them out *there*? We’re too close to nightfall already, and we still haven’t made camp.”

Casek shook his head, instinct telling him that burying would have been wrong, even if it was dangerous. “We need to burn them.”

“That’s even worse!” Raelynn exclaimed, pitch rising ever so slightly. “Every Shadowspawn for miles around will see it. It’s an absurd risk.”

It was true, and he knew it. But he couldn’t let this go. These were not just strangers. He couldn’t picture their living faces, nor could he remember the sound of their voice, but every fibre of his being screamed at him that these people had known him. Had been friendly, even.

Allowing his heart to rule his mind was dangerous, and there was no room for sentimentality when there was a job to be done. He knew that. He just didn’t care.

“If you won’t help, you’ll have to go on without me. I’m doing this.”

Raelynn’s eyes narrowed, and the heady weight of her power filled the room. It seemed to shrink around them, making the shack feel far too small for the two of them to stand in it together.

“I won’t let you jeopardize the chances of saving lives for this, Casek. We leave. Now.”

“You’re free to drag me away from here—I couldn’t stop you,” he said, meeting her gaze with a steely look of his own. “But if you want your friends free, you need me alive and, crucially, *willing*.”

Her eyes widened, furious, and she stalked out of the shack without another word. Her power dissipated along with her presence, and Casek

sank to his knees as its weight disappeared from his shoulders.

***We'd best hurry***, Tauph muttered. ***As much as I can appreciate what you're trying to do, Raelynn wasn't wrong. We need to be going.***

Casek sighed. He'd dug himself a fine hole trying to do what felt right—now it was time to see if he could dig himself out again.

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## I.XIX

Burning the shack proved to be more difficult than even Casek could have predicted. The treated wood made it impossible to simply light the thing, and the lack of sufficient dried wood nearby made crafting a pyre inside, around the bodies, a brutal slog in the darkening marsh.

It was a task made even more difficult by the emergence of Shades as the sun disappeared, hoping to take advantage of Casek's visible exhaustion. Cutting them down was the only pause from the work he allowed himself besides wiping the sweat from his face, but eventually there was enough stacked wood and tinder to burn the entirety of the place.

Raelynn lit the wood with her flint and steel, her only contribution to blaze, and they watched together as the shack was slowly engulfed in flame, along with the two people Casek had once known, but could no longer remember.

Tauph had also been strangely silent, breaking it only halfway through the building to tell him a little about the two people in the shack. Then, as it did now, grief flooded across their bond, a hollow, all-consuming ache, carving a deep pit into his friend's heart.

The flames climbed ever higher as the moist wood of the shack caught fire, launching a vast plume of spiralling black smoke into the night sky. Casek's face pinched as the moisture in the wood tainted the smell of burning filling the surrounding air, turning it acrid and musty.

"Are we just going to stand here until this catches the attention of something worse than a Drau?" Raelynn bit out, her voice tearing through the silence like a blade.

Casek sighed and shook his head. "No. We can go now. It's done."

"How gracious of you," she said, bitterness staining the words. "We'll have to walk through the night to get enough distance from this place now you've rung the dinner bell—that is, of course, unless something's already—"

"Their names were Aodhán and Catelyn," he said, eyes never leaving the dancing flames bathing the marsh in amber. "I don't remember their faces, but I remember how it felt to talk to them. You can send as much scorn as you like my way, but if we were to tell me this was my last



night—that tomorrow I'd be torn to shreds by some Shadowspawn—I'd still not change a damned thing.”

Raelynn's eyes widened, and her mouth opened to reply, but Casek was already moving past her, the heat of the fire warming his back as he trudged onward through the swamp.

The sun was almost at its zenith before they spoke again. Their night-long trek through the marsh had been an exhausting march through the worst of the terrain, feet sinking deep with every step, and no way of telling in the dark where the deep pits of sludge lay.

Thankfully, they had to contend with nothing more dangerous than Shades. The gibbering creatures hounded them all through the night, flailing out of the darkness in number whenever any of them got stuck, or looked as though they might be flagging.

By the time the sun rose, and the frequency of attacks had faded to almost nothing, the pair of them were utterly spent. Casek's burning muscles dragged him on for a few hours longer until they finally gave out.

He dropped to the floor atop the driest piece of ground he could find beneath the drooping branches of a willow tree. The more exhausted he'd become, the louder and more pervasive the Drau's whispering in his mind had grown, and it was now a constant, near-deafening din. He clenched his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting to block out the pain.

Raelynn tapped his shoulder, extending the jar of pine resin out to him once more. He took it gladly, resuming the soothing chewing.

“Thanks.”

She shrugged. “The resin is also a mild pain reliever. It won't work any miracles, but it'll take the edge off.”

Casek and Raelynn chewed on the resin in silence for a while, the repetitive motion almost meditative, as clouds drifted by overhead. The sun travelled across the sky above them in fits and spurts, the only clue they had been drifting off to sleep intermittently in the willow's shade.

It was afternoon by the time the two hauled themselves up upon aching legs. Raelynn finally had the time to share what she had taken from the shack with him. She passed him a pair of white linen shirts; well-worn but sturdy black trousers, along with a pair of blankets and a properly sturdy travel pack to replace the one he'd made in the forest.

Lastly, she handed him a battered travel cloak, navy blue with red lining, and allowed him some privacy to change. He ditched the rags with

particularly savage relish and pulled on the relatively fresh clothing. They were the clothes of somebody who worked in the outdoors; visibly worn, but well-tended and hardy, made of solid material.

The warm gratitude filling him lasted until he was forced, sour-faced, to pull on his still-wet and freezing cold boots.

Regardless, it was a much warmer man that set off after Raelynn from the shade of the tree, and he couldn't resist mumbling a muted thanks to the man whose clothes he now wore.

***They were those kind of people,*** Tauph said, melancholy weighing down his words.

*We knew them well?*

***Reasonably. Your family hunted the woods we were in before for some time. The last time we saw him, we were leaving. We warned him to do the same.***

*He should have listened.*

***I doubt it would have made much difference,*** Tauph said, their conversation falling quite as Raelynn fell into line with him.

She stared at him for a moment, dark eyes unreadable but for the restrained anger held in the tight lines of her face.

“You knew those people.”

It wasn't a question.

“That's the strange thing,” he said. “I don't know. Not really. I feel as though I did. That shack, their names. It stirred *something* in me. I don't have any memories to prove it, but every instinct I have tells me I did.”

Raelynn sighed, rubbing her eyes heavily with her right palm. “Casek, the writing on that wall talked about implied Shadowspawn had only recently taken the towns and villages around them. That means that shack has been abandoned for more than a thousand years.”

She met his eyes again, and he returned the look, unyielding. “I know that.”

Raelynn's eyes darted, searching his face for any sign of deception or uncertainty. Anything to tell her that what Casek was saying was false. She would find nothing.

“Shit,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” he said. “I worked it out when I had just woken. There was a stash of old weapons—swords and spears and the like, proper steel—and realised I knew how to use them pretty much instinctively. I must have

known how...from *before*. The foci, though? No idea. I didn't even know for sure it was a weapon. I just guessed because it was with the others.

The lie slipped off his tongue with only a tinge of regret. He needed to get the balance of truth and lies just right to avoid questions he couldn't answer. He very much doubted Raelynn's trust would last long once she found out about Tauph's presence in his head.

***But Casek***, came Tauph's voice, more than a little smug. ***I thought you hated secrets, no matter the reason they were being kept.***

*And if I were living in her head, you might be halfway to a point.*

He ignored Tauph's laugh and fought to keep the irritation from his face as Raelynn responded.

"One thousand years," she muttered, eyes wide. "And you remember nothing?"

There was an unmistakable hope in her voice that vanished as he shook his head. She removed her hand from the leather-bound book strapped to her waist, a subconscious touch Casek had noted more than once, and let out a deep breath.

"Look, Casek—I get it. I've lost people I knew—people I loved—to the Shadow. Some are imprisoned, others just killed. If I had found any of them like that, I would have been devastated. But you have to understand: this is the world now. I can only think of a handful of people who've seen more than fifty winters. You can't afford that kind of useless sentimentality if you ever want to even get close to that milestone."

Casek opened his mouth to argue, but Raelynn rounded on him suddenly, a finger jabbing into his chest. "But even apart from risking both of *our* lives—you also put the lives of everyone we're trying to save at risk with your actions. If we had died because of it—and who knows, we still might—then my entire team stays imprisoned. Forever being feasted on, unable to escape. Unable to sleep, or even die.

"I don't think you've realised, yet, just how important what you can do is. You are the only person *ever* who can do what you can. With you, we can free everyone who's ever been taken. Maybe even start to take back our world. If you dare throw that chance away for all of us by getting killed doing something as pointless and selfish as that was, you'd better hope you're actually dead, because what I do to you will be far, far worse."

## I.XX

The pair pressed on through the marshes in uneasy quiet after their last conversation, Raelynn's words ringing through Casek's mind. The thought of all the good he could do had, of course, come to mind before, but he'd not stopped to consider things from Raelynn's perspective.

This fight, as far as he could remember at least, was new to him. He'd only been fighting for days. True enough, it had been difficult and awful in equal measure, but Raelynn had been fighting it all her life. Her mother and father had been fighting it before her, and her grandparents before them.

How many people had she lost? How many of her friends and family, her ancestors even, were out there somewhere, encased in crystal and suffering?

He couldn't imagine how it must feel for her—him even existing. How many people had she and her people given up for dead and grieved for, who could now be saved by his hand? Casek stood behind his actions, still firmly believed that he had done the right thing, if not the most pragmatic. But he had to acknowledge that Raelynn had every right to be angry at him—furious even—for jeopardising the amount of good he could do. The lives that could now be saved.

Least of all, of course, the comrades she had most recently lost. The whirlwind of emotions and states of mind she must have gone through at a remarkable speed must have been difficult to cope with. Losing her companions one after the other, grieving and mourning as she fought to get home alone. Realising she had failed. Only for the impossible to happen right before her eyes, and hope to arrive where there had been none for so long.

Truthfully, Casek didn't know how much of a difference he could actually make. He was one man, and not an especially strong one at that. But he could make a difference. And, as much as he stood by his choices, he understood that on some level, they had been selfish. That he'd been putting his beliefs and wants ahead of the lives of real people that could still be saved.

***It's not your responsibility to save the world, Casek. That's too much weight for any shoulders to bear, no matter how strong. You deserve to make your own choices about what you do with your life without having to consider the bloody planet first.***

*When you have power like I do, Tauph, only a weak man would take advantage of the benefits whilst attempting to shirk the responsibilities. It's not especially fair, but there it is. I have a duty to help as much as I can. Why do I deserve a second chance more than anyone else still imprisoned?*

He could feel Tauph's disgruntlement, and a strange sort of smile played at Casek's lips. It was odd, as a grown man, to have someone so unabashedly put his wellbeing ahead of everyone else's. He couldn't remember what it was like to have an older brother, but he imagined it was similar.

Still, as they crested a hill taking them out of the marshlands that overlooked a mercifully dry, grassy plain, Casek grimaced as the first genuine test of his commitment to that responsibility appeared on the horizon.

Across a vast chalk plain smothered in a patchwork quilt of vibrant wildflower meadow, the town they were aiming for loomed dark in the distance. From here it was an indistinct blend of stone and dark wood tones, and on its other side, the sparkling blue ocean vanished over the horizon.

Casek let out a deep breath, chewing at his lip even as the sight of the sea eased the fluttering in his stomach. It was larger than he expected—a sprawling mass of building that could hide almost anything within its depths. Not far to the east lay a second cluster of buildings, and this he recognised from the storage houses he could see on its outskirts as a mine. On the west, stood a dilapidated mill, its sails long since deteriorated and cast to the wind, leaving what was left of its spindly wooden arms crooked and visibly rotting away.

“Makavi,” Raelynn announced, eyes fixated on the town's centre. “The largest settlement we have record of in Pyria, including the capital. The last time I was here, it was crawling with Shades even outside of the walls, so stay sharp as we approach.”

“What's the plan?” He asked.

“It'll be hard to come up with anything concrete until we know what the Shadowspawn activity is like. We found there were three gates centrally, one to the west, and several on the mine's side. We got into the city just

fine, but it was a trap. Drau and Bel'gor surrounded us and cut off our escape routes. I lost Idris at the docks.”

Raelynn's face was taut, and her arms shook with the tightness of her clenched fists as she spoke, reliving the memory of losing the last of her team. “The west gate is closest geographically, so I suppose we start there. There's no real way to sneak in, but we'll keep it fast and quiet. Hopefully, we won't even need to tangle with Shadow creatures outside of Shades.”

They set off towards Makavi, grim determination written across their faces. The knowledge that there would certainly be a fight ahead focused Casek's mind. He used the time as effectively could, continuing to cycle slivers of his bound Drau's power. It was nearly spent, and the persistent whirring in his mind was reaching a fever pitch, pain lancing through his head no matter how much resin he chewed or how used to the constant headaches he got.

Every step closer to the town they took through the rolling fields of poppy and cornflower cranked the tension up a notch. Beneath his boots he occasionally felt ridges beneath his feet, and every so often had to step around heavily rusted lumps of worked iron—both evidence of farmland long since overgrown.

By the time the town walls were close enough to observe properly, Casek was grinding his teeth so much he thought he might wear them down to the gums. The walls were, of course, dilapidated and crumbling, with cracked and splintered timber framing weather-worn stonework.

Half of the stones were missing or broken, moss covered and scattered around the floor surrounding the town's border. They skirted westward around the three central gates, two of these destroyed entirely, toward the only partially standing west gate. The thick timber boards were worn and half-rotted, some having fallen away to the ground below.

Glancing at each other, they nodded, and ducked into the town through a space in the shattered gate. Casek followed Raelynn a handful of steps behind as she darted from building corner to corner, moving with far more ease than he over the cobbled streets.

Makavi had once been a beautiful and wealthy port town. Close to the walls were the remains of more basic wooden houses, charcoaled husks, all that had been left of them. But before long, they were replaced by larger houses, beautifully worked stone on their ground floor capped by the remains of top floors constructed from pine imported by boat.

The timber was resin-treated pine and spruce, just as the Aodhan's shack had been, and built to last far longer than most wooden structures. Even then, Casek was surprised by the quality of them. The bleached plaster facades that covered the stones on the ground floors, once painted an array of stunning colours to match the wildflowers surrounding the town, had crumbled and faded to dirty and dulled imitations of the colour they had once been.

The timber, whilst worn and damaged by whatever battle had taken place here when the shadows had come, was still in remarkably good condition, considering how long they'd been standing.

"Any sign of them yet?" Casek muttered as he pulled up next to Raelynn after hurrying through a back alley and paused at the corner of a building on the main street that led to the docks.

Raelynn shook her head, a sheen of sweat coating her forehead, fine strands of black hair sticking to her head. "It's bothering me we have seen none of them yet. Some shades at least should have been tempted into a fight by now."

Casek nodded and swallowed. Unbeknownst to Raelynn, he could feel Shades teeming all around them, so many they were barely indistinguishable from each other. Every so often, he caught a hint of other things. Stronger things.

Yet the streets were bare, and the buildings deserted. Despite what he could sense, there was nothing at all here.

"Well, remember how I told you I can sense them?" he asked, eyes darting from shadow to shadow, searching for any sign of movement.

Raelynn stopped dead and jerked her head towards him, eyes narrowed. "I hadn't remembered that, no. We were just about to fight, as I recall."

"Yeah. The thing is, I can feel them. Now. The place should be teeming with shades. Drau, too, unless I'm misreading what I can feel."

"And yet they're not here."

Casek shook his head, and Raelynn frowned. "Let's just keep our wits about us then. We're close to where I left Idris."

Raelynn led him on, past a large stone building on their right. The shattered glass remains that still partially filled the window caught his eye for their bright colours, and the hints of iconography. The tower on one half of the structure reached higher than any other building in the town.

Taugh was silent, and Casek knew the swirling abyss of profound loss in his head that was not his own well enough to not disturb his companion's peace.

Finally, they rushed down a wide, curved set of stairs and underneath a crumbling stone arch, and arrived at the docks. They had emerged onto a broad plaza, large tiles of granite lining the floor. Ahead of them, the ocean spread out in infinite splendour, its surface serene and glittering, but for the broken and rotted wooden poles protruding from its surface in rows, the only remains of the piers where trading ships once moored.

Raelynn saw none of it. Her eyes were fixated solely on a space in the centre of the plaza they were standing in, unblinking and wide with horror. Her mouth hung open, and hands opened and closed around imaginary blade hilts.

“Raelynn?”

“He's not there.” The words came out in a harsh, horrified whisper.

“What?”

“Idris. This was where he was trapped in the stasis crystal. I saw it happen. He's gone.” She turned to him, desperation raising her voice by an octave. “How can he be gone?”



## I.XXI

Casek watched the panic swell within Raelynn, her shoulders heaving as her breathing grew more and more erratic. She darted her head around the square, searching desperately, vainly, for any sign of the man they'd come to rescue. It hadn't occurred to Casek until now, but it was a strange thing that in the entire part of the town they'd walked through to get here, they'd seen no sign of any stasis crystals.

Of course, not all the town would have been imprisoned. Some would have escaped, and some would have been killed in the fighting. But for there to have been none? It was more than a little odd—it was downright impossible.

He peered around the plaza, searching for some sign of what could have happened.

“No,” Raelynn said, her repeated muttering of the word cutting across the gentle lapping of the ocean like a knife. “No. No, no, no—It can't—he can't be—”

“Raelynn.”

She jerked her head towards him, face twisted in confused grief, the pain of hope being mercilessly stripped away, writing its way down her face in tears. “He's gone,” she repeated.

“But not for good,” Casek said. “We know they won't kill if they can help it. He's alive. We just need to work out where. Look.”

Casek gestured toward the ground, close to where Raelynn was standing. Faint scrape marks streaked their way across it, broad gouges that led into the eastern part of the city. Had these been leading directly from the pier, Casek might have assumed they were from folk dragging cargo, but they had caught his eye precisely because they didn't. They began right here, directly in the centre of the plaza.

Raelynn frowned, her eyes following his pointing. She crouched and ran her hand across the drag marks. “The wind and rain have not smoothed these at all. They're fresh.”

“They lead eastward, toward the mine,” Casek said.

“The mine?” Raelynn said, standing and wiping the tear tracks from her sleeve and glancing toward the street that led to the eastern gate. A

moment passed, and then her eyes widened in realisation. “When I was first here with Idris, they ambushed us from the underground—Drau attacked from the cellar of a house we were searching for supplies in.” She grimaced. “The Drau possessed... *arachnid* bodies.”

“Spiders?”

Raelynn nodded, and Casek swallowed thickly. Deer and wolves were one thing. Horrifying in their own right, twisted abominations that were uncomfortable even to look at, but spiders had been that even before the Shadow had existed.

“How big?” He asked, wrapping his coat around himself a little tighter, as though it could shield against the chill, creeping dread growing inside him.

Raelynn blinked before a small smirk tugged at her lips. “The Drau were about the size of a large dog. The Bel’gor that followed us into the plaza, on the other hand...”

She laughed as an audible groan escaped Casek’s mouth.

“Come,” she said, smile lingering even as she turned eastward. “Let’s follow these marks to the mine and get Idris out of there.”

Casek’s stomach twisted at the thought of going underground, knowing what kind of enemy awaited them, but he nodded regardless and set off alongside her.

“And Casek?” Raelynn said, looking up at him from the corner of her eyes as they walked. “Thank you. I shouldn’t have fallen apart like that. I’ve lost people before—I should be able to—”

“It’s fine,” he said, waving away her thanks. “You thought you’d lost your friend for good after thinking you’d be able to save him. I get it. You don’t need to apologise for normal human emotions.”

“I should have kept my head far better than I did. If we’d have been in a fight—”

“But we weren’t. Besides, it’s been a wild couple of days for both of us. It would be weird if emotions *weren’t* fraught. Cut yourself some slack, Raelynn—if only because holding on to that kind of thinking will get in the way when the fighting starts.”

Raelynn looked at him shrewdly. “Those sound like words borne of experience.”

“I honestly couldn’t say,” he said, shrugging. “I think so, though. I remember the lesson learned, just not *how* I learned it. Same with my own

name, or even swordplay. The knowledge and experience is in me, but it's like the learning itself has been plucked right out."

Above them, the skies were darkening, and the buildings flanking them were casting ever larger shadows. Still, Casek could feel the shades swarming around them. Still, he saw no sign at all of them. The prospect of delving underground was causing an ever larger lump to form at the back of Casek's throat, especially as his mind connected the dots and drew the conclusion that the Shadowspawn he had been sensing were all, in fact, beneath them.

"It's odd, though," Raelynn continued, oblivious to Casek's growing discomfort. "I have no such memory loss. Admittedly, I was imprisoned for far less time than you, but I remember every single *excruciating* second of it."

"Well," Casek said, grimacing as he decided it was time to be a little more open with the woman. "I don't actually know if I was within a stasis crystal."

Raelynn stopped short, turning to him with knitted eyebrows. "What?"

"Yeah," he said, rubbing the back of his head. "My first memory is being awake in that Gods-forsaken building. If I was trapped in one of those things, there was no sign of it when I came to, and I have no memory of being trapped in one until I tried to escape."

"How can that be possible if not for a stasis crystal?"

Casek shrugged. "I'll let you know if I ever find out."

"If you ever get your memories back, it'll probably be one of the last things I ask about."

"Oh?" Casek said, quirking an eyebrow as the pair set off again towards the eastern gate.

"My grandfather collected books," she said, eyes locked on the ground. "He had a thing for preserving what little knowledge we'd been able to keep hold of after the war, and eventually became the Head Archivist of Oreia. The house was full of them. The historical ones are what really caught my attention. Stories of the world before the Shadow."

"Hopefully a vision for the future, as well as the past," he said.

"It was more the gaping holes that drew me in. The mystery of it. Thousands of years of human writing, reduced to a haphazard collection of

books and scrolls—full of gaps and inconsistencies. Puzzles for me to solve, answers for me to unravel.”

“Is that what the book is for?” Casek asked, nodding towards the leather-bound tome she wore at her waist before returning to scanning the rapidly swelling shadows.

“Yes, and no. Keeping a good record of now is just as important as finding those of the past,” she smiled softly, patting the book gently. “Besides, keeping records for future generations reminds me that, no matter how bad things get, I still hold hope there will *be* future generations. Hope that things will have gotten better enough that they can afford to spend their time reading books, rather than learning the sword.”

“That is a goal I can get behind.”

“Goal? It’s a pipe dream, really. Our people are on their last legs, Casek. We rely on the amnesty of our enemies to even have a chance at survival. Even with you being able to do what you can do—things are too far gone. All we can do now is delay the inevitable for as long as possible. There is no peaceful tomorrow. Not really.”

Casek had no response to that. He didn’t believe it, but this had only been his fight for as long as he’d been awake. He had no right to argue, and there was nothing he could say that would comfort the deep despair the laced Raelynn’s words.

Instead, they walked together in silence through the deathly silent town, waiting, muscles taut with fear, for any sign of the enemy.

Nothing came. They reached the entrance to the mine. It was a crumbling, pale stone building with an arched entry instead of a door. Inside, Casek could see a path lined with heavily rusted cart tracks that led gently down a slope into the pitch black depths within.

Casek swallowed thickly, and Raelynn moved to march into the darkness. Before he could stop himself, he reached out and caught her by the shoulder, stopping her in her tracks.

“In the dark with no preparation? Are we sure that’s the best plan?”

She quirked an eyebrow. “You have an alternative?”

“Waiting for daylight, for one,” he scoffed. “We make camp and get a proper night’s sleep, and crucially prep some torches, so we aren’t fumbling around in the dark. We won’t be able to rescue anyone if we step out over a pit and fall to our deaths.”

Raelynn sighed, but acquiesced to Casek's suggestion. They made camp a short distance from the entrance, opting not to make a fire to avoid any unwanted attention. Casek took first watch, allowing Raelynn to get some much-needed rest ahead of tomorrow's task.

He spent it gazing into the pitch black surrounding them, straining his eyes to distinguish potential threats moving in the dark, from the shifting of his eyes playing tricks on him. As he waited, he cycled the last of the Drau's power, stealing away the last scraps of strength from the well in his mind. It faded, leaving behind only Tauph's deathly still pool.

There was a whimper in his head, and suddenly the howling of the Drau was gone, leaving his ears ringing, but blessedly free of noise. Casek glanced at his wrist. Upon the foci, six gleaming jewels shone back at him in the darkness, with a seventh faintly shimmering beside them.

Strength he'd never felt before filled him as his increased magical reserves reinforced his body. He had done all he could with the time he had.

Casek just hoped it would be enough.

## I.XXII

They found themselves standing outside the mine entrance once more early the next morning. Casek held a makeshift torch in his hand, crafted from greenwood harvested on the outskirts of the town, one end soaked with the rest of Raelynn's pine resin. They'd had enough to make four, and Casek had a second hanging from a belt loop at his waist.

Even knowing he would have light, the darkness ahead of them loomed, overbearing. He could still feel the mass of Shadowspawn that filled the mines, a teeming swarm of hungry enemies that would surely descend upon them en masse as soon as they were discovered.

Worse was knowing the form the stronger Shadow creatures had taken. Drau in the shape of spiders was enough to turn Casek's stomach—Bel'gor that big made him want to run for the hills.

***Try to remember how much you've grown, Casek. The Drau we fought in the woods with Raelynn would fall to you now, far easier than it did back then. The Drau down here will do the same.***

*It's not really the Drau I'm worried about.*

***The Bel'gor are why we have Raelynn.***

*And if more than one comes at a time?*

Taugh hesitated. ***We'll cross that bridge if we come to it. Hopefully, we won't.***

And that was exactly Casek's problem with their task. Too much rode on their luck holding out. Raelynn was a capable fighter, and far stronger than he, but could she fight multiple Bel'gor? Two had been enough to defeat her before.

Of course, there was also the fact that these enemies were oversized spiders to add to the swirling pit of unease in his stomach. He would have to fight past his fear of arachnids.

One look at Raelynn told him that any pleas to delay their plans any further would fall on deaf ears. She stared into the darkness; her face the picture of stony determination, jaw clenched and a hardness to her expression that made her seem carved of stone.

Her eyes slid to him. "Are you ready for this?"

“Nope,” he answered, voice dripping with false-cheer, before the smile slid from his face, and he allowed some of his own determination to show through. “Let’s go rescue your friend.”

Raelynn nodded and lit her torch, striding into the darkness. Casek followed closely. He wouldn’t light his own torch until her first was spent, or it was clear they needed the light of both. No sense in wasting precious light when exploring a place like this, after all.

The first section of the mine was by far the broadest tunnel; with well-crafted wooden struts lining the way down and panelled timber covering the walls, keeping out the soil from collapsing in on the tunnel. Carts and strangely hooked picks lay abandoned intermittently along the track they followed downward, along with a variety of other knick knacks left behind when somewhere like this was abandoned in a hurry.

What really shocked Casek, though, was the condition of everything. The wooden structures here had held up to the degradation of time remarkably well, and even the rails here were coated far more thinly with rust. It was as though the place had been abandoned five hundred years later than it actually had.

They pressed on deeper and deeper, the frigid bite of the air growing more severe the further they travelled. Soon, the wood panelling grew more sparse, before eventually, it disappeared entirely, revealing tool-marked pink stone that glowed softly in the torchlight. There was a salty tang in the air that stung at his eyes and lips, drying them out.

The swarming mass of shades he’d sensed the previous day drew ever closer, their tainted presence growing stronger and fouler with every step, until Casek expected them to leap out of the darkness ahead at any moment.

Soon enough, they did.

Gibbering, gangly beasts tumbled from the mirk. In dribs and drabs at first, but soon they crashed against Casek and Raelynn in great waves of scything limbs and gnashing teeth. They poured out of the black, skittering along the walls and roof when there was no more room on the floor.

At this point, they were a minor inconvenience at best, blades cutting through them as easy as mist, but cleaving a path through them slowed progress down the mines to a crawl.

The dissipated smoke flooded back into their blades. Raelynn seemed not to notice, but strength pulsed through his veins, the rapid influx

of heady power setting his heart racing. He and Raelynn settled into an easy rhythm, dancing through the flood of enemies, a storm of flickering blades and acrid, black smoke.

The Shades continued to hurl themselves at them, even whilst their numbers thinned, until only handfuls of the frenzied creatures hurled themselves upon their blades.

“Back in the building I woke up in,” Casek grunted, running his sword across the gut of an especially bulbous Shade. “They got the message pretty quick when I started cutting them down.”

“Something is driving them on,” Raelynn replied, eyes narrowing as a pair of shades leaped at her, forcing her to lash out with the short blade in her offhand and bisecting both with a single clean strike. “The stronger shadowspawn below are trying to wear us down by throwing the chaff at us.”

The trickle of enemies soon faded to nothing, and once again the pair were left standing in the darkness, the sound of their heavy breathing the only indication there had been a fight at all. Raelynn relit her torch.

“I didn’t know they were that organised.”

“There’ are plenty of stories from the more experienced binders,” Raelynn said, crouching down in front of a shaft at the end of the tunnel they’d been walking down. “Bel’gor leading packs of Drau on hunts. Shades gathering close to more powerful shadows. Nothing confirmed beyond circumstantially, of course—people who try usually don’t end up coming back.”

With no small amount of trepidation, Casek joined Raelynn beside the shaft, staring down into the impenetrable black below.

“I have zero interest in climbing down into that hole,” Casek said bluntly, pointing towards the ladder-lined hole that would take them down to the next level of the mine. “So if you were to ask me where I thought Idris was, my money would be on down there.”

“Sadly, I think you’re right,” Raelynn answered.

She took a deep, steadying breath and without a moment’s further hesitation, she reached for the ladder and hauled herself down below. Casek swore softly, and hurried after her, fumbling his way down the rough iron steps and into the darkness. The salt tang on the air sharpened the further down the ladder they went, and each tremble and shake of the iron sent shivers of panic down Casek’s spine.



Raelynn pressed on, undeterred, and it left Casek to do his best to keep pace, forcing himself after her. Whatever waited for them below would have to face them both together. Thoughts of shadowspawn drew his eyes momentarily to his wrist. All seven gems gleamed in the dark, the last dimmer by only a barely perceptible amount. He was close now.

It was a blessed relief when Casek felt the kiss of stone beneath his boots, only made larger when Raelynn's torch lit the cavern they'd descended into. It was far broader than the entrance tunnel, the pale pink saltrock hacked and hewn to a far greater degree than above. Tool marks marked every inch of the floor, walls and ceiling, every available scrap of rock that could be mined out without collapsing the place taken.

Like above, wooden struts lined the walls, with support beams dug in above. But even seeing their relatively good condition did nothing to assuage the nagging ache in his belly that the roof could be moments from collapsing in on them.

They pushed forward, and quickly, Casek wished they hadn't. The floor became strangely sticky, holding onto their boots for just a moment as they tried to walk over it. He looked down, curious, and felt the colour drain from his face. A fine coating of pale white silk covered the floor, a whisper-thin matting that stretched out ahead of them into the darkness.

It spread up the walls, reaching across the corners in intricate threaded patterns. Dotted throughout the white were the desiccated bodies of the unfortunate cave creatures who tried to walk across the coating of what was undoubtedly spider silk.

"Raelynn," he said, voice a harsh whisper, trying to get her attention. She wasn't listening. Her attention had been stolen by something else up ahead. Casek followed her gaze, and his own eyes widened in awe as he saw what the flickering light of Raelynn's torch had unearthed.

The cavern ahead sparked pink and lilac as the firelight danced across the surface of a network of crystalline structures filling the entire width of the cavern. A gemstone web from floor to ceiling, that reached back as far as their light was able to travel.

But it was not even this that had stolen his breath from him. It was the dark black shapes dotted throughout the structure like flies in a web.

Humans. Hundreds and hundreds of people, a thousand years trapped by the shadowspawn that had ravaged their home. Casek stumbled

forward to the closest figure, a blond-haired man clad in simple earth-tone clothes, his eyes frozen wide in the terror of his final free moments.

Casek moved his hand up to press it against the crystal structure, and as he did, the man's pupils shrunk to adjust for the closeness of his hand.

"Gods," he whispered, as the true horrors of what had been done to the world since he'd begun his long sleep sunk in. He looked up at the vastness of the crystal web, the sheer number of people here, not quite alive, and forbidden from dying. How many times and in how many places was this scene repeated? Entire populations of people trapped and grazed upon like cattle for entire millennia.

The enormity of cruelty set the world spinning around him, and he dropped to his knees and reacted in the only way he could as the thought of being in this place, awake and aware, for a thousand years filled his mind.

He vomited.

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## I.XXIII

“Gods,” Casek whispered, unable to tear his eyes away from the man encased in crystal. “There are so many.”

“Try to avoid looking if you can—it’s easier to deal with, then.”

He glanced her way and saw that she was being true to her advice. She glared steadfastly ahead, out into the darkness beyond the tangled web of crystal.

“How many times have you seen something like this, Raelynn?”

She sighed. “I’ve only been an active duty Binder for a year or so—part of the ranger corps for half that. In that time, I’ve only been to two or three places outside of Oreia that were once particularly populated. At each one, there is something like this. Nobody has been spared, Casek. Every city—every town, village and hamlet—has been reduced to *this*. And we’re forced to meekly scavenge for scraps among the living corpses, functionally dead because we can do nothing to free them.”

“But *we* can do something. Right here and now.”

“The thought has crossed my mind,” Raelynn said, an edge to her tone that Casek didn’t understand.

“So...Shall I get started, or...?”

She rounded on him, eyes tight with barely restrained frustration.

“And then what, Casek? These people have been here for a thousand years. Awake. Seeing everything. Aware of everything. What kind of state do you think their minds are in? Even *if* they’re still sane—and that’s a big *if*—what are we supposed to do with them? Do you have the food and water to keep them alive for long enough to get back to Oreia? You and I are the only ones with foci: can you escort them back safely?”

She shook her head. “If we free these people now, we’re only consigning them to a short, brutal period of freedom before they’re picked off again.”

“At least they’ll have a chance.”

“No, they won’t. Look,” she said, placing a heavy hand upon her shoulder. “I’m not saying we won’t free them. But let’s do it right. We’ll get support from back home to keep them safe and fed. We can bring more

supplies, more Binders for security. We'll actually save a lot more of these people that way."

The idea of leaving these people here was abominable to him, but Raelynn was right. They couldn't ensure their safety. Those that didn't starve would likely be caught again, only this time, they'd be more difficult to find, scattered instead of all together.

***And yet, you have to wonder what they themselves would choose.***

*That's my problem with Raelynn's solution, Tauph. If it were me, I'd want to take my chances. Better than even another second trapped in there. One thousand years... I'm forever grateful I can't remember my sleep. C— Can you remember it all?*

***It's different for me. I'm a part of you. When you're not conscious, things are not the same as when you are. They're not as clear. As defined. Time moved differently when you slept.***

*I'm glad about that much, at least.*

"Come on," Raelynn said. "We need to move. I still see no sign of Idris, so there must be further chamber where people are being kept."

Casek clenched his eyes shut, the weight of leaving these people here making it nearly impossible to move his feet. He opened them again, forcing himself to meet the man's all-too aware eyes.

"I'm so sorry. We'll be back, and when we do, I'll free you all. I swear it."

He touched the crystal again, briefly, before tearing himself away and moving after Raelynn, further into the black.

They roamed through winding paths left in the crystal webs lined with the still-living townsfolk, who watched them pass with eyes that burned at Casek's back as he walked on. Deeper and deeper they went, the light of Raelynn's torch fading to a flicker, before it died.

The black swallowed them whole. Casek fumbled at his waist for his own torch, pulling it from the belt loop, and fumbling around for his firelights.

"Casek," Raelynn hissed. "What is *that*?"

He froze. Casek heard nothing at first. He strained to hear past his own breathing in the pitch darkness, eyes vainly scanning for movement that was not his own. Then he heard it. A subtle scratching of *something* on stone. The sound trickled around them like ice-water down the back of the

shirt, his muscles cringing as they tried to anticipate an attack before it came.

“Get that light on!”

His hands jerked back into motion, fingers searching out his flint and steel blindly. The clawing grew closer as he struck at the flint with increasing desperation. It seemed to echo all around him, the close crystal walls casting the sound at him from every direction.

Mercifully, the torch lit in a burst of amber light in moments, bathing the area in dancing light.

They both searched vainly for the source of the scratching, even as it grew in volume. Now, there was more than one source. Raelynn turned back towards him, and behind her, he saw it. Spindly black shapes, reaching lithely around the crystal at her back, two at first, then two more.

Attached, a grotesque black shape was pulled along behind the unsettlingly graceful limbs bearing it aloft. It was in two clear sections, a bulbous shape at the rear, streaked violently with orange and yellow, and a smaller segment at the front that wielded a pair of viciously hooked fangs.

Casek fought back the urge to vomit again. The entire world narrowed to exclude everything but that hideous shape advancing across the ceiling toward an unaware Raelynn. *Raelynn.*

His mouth worked soundlessly, terror pinning the words to the back of his throat. She frowned, realising something was wrong. Too late. Its two most forward limbs reared back. Raelynn’s mouth moved, asking him what was wrong, but he couldn’t form the words, terror stirring his mind into a storm.

*Shit.* Desperation spurred him to action, even whilst his words failed him. He dashed forward, blade flaring to life in his hand. The increased strength from the Drau flowed through him, legs working faster than he’d once thought humanly possible. Casek was a blur, salt-dried air stinging at his eyes, and he lashed out, cleaving the two front legs from their owner as they descended to strike.

The creature shrieked, its lost legs dissolving into mist and being taken in by Casek’s blade. Casek’s instincts kicked in, his battle experience outweighing the fear, and he pressed the advantage, regaining enough presence of mind to feel out the creature’s strength. It was a Drau, and not one of the stronger ones at that. He pushed forward in the face of reaching

limbs, and ran his blade through the spider creature without mercy, its power flowing into him.

A second followed the first, bundling into Casek before he could react and knocking him to the ground. He twisted beneath its writhing legs, avoiding a darting bite aimed at his throat, and responding with his own fang. He drove his sword into its gut, stealing its life away. The effort of killing this one was greater than the first, its more impressive strength more difficult to break through.

Casek climbed to his feet in time to witness the swarm of arachnid Drau rush into the room. A far larger spider followed too, the magic pouring from this one dwarfing the others. Fortunately, Raelynn had already sprung into action, her foci-spawned blades a whirlwind as she cleaved a path through the horde towards the most powerful opponent.

His role in the fight was clear—to keep the Drau from interfering in Raelynn’s battle, and he took to the task with a fierceness and spite that could only come from being deathly afraid of the enemy. He would not, *could* not, allow himself to fall to these creatures. Casek couldn’t imagine a more viscerally perfect hell for him than to be trapped here in a nest of arachnids, even if he could break himself out.

***Casek, behind!***

It was a good thing Tauph was paying attention. Casek threw himself to the side, avoiding a hulking shape’s lightning fast pounce from above. He whirled to face it and blanched, as a second Bel’gor loomed above him. Its spear-like front legs lashed out at him, meeting Casek’s raised blade so heavily he staggered back several steps. A second blow sent him sprawling, draining a frightening amount of his power as it made contact.

A quick glance at Raelynn drained the hope from him. A mass of Drau surrounded her as she fought her own Bel’gor in a torrent of black mist and shining incorporeal steel.

He scrambled back as his own opponent rushed at him, legs lancing out as if to skewer him on the ground. Casek found himself in full retreat, desperately doing all he could to avoid it’s too-fast legs. The creature’s size was a cruel trick, an illusion that disguised its unbelievable speed and flexibility.

*Tauph, I can’t beat this thing as I am—what the fuck do I do?*

***I'm sorry, I don't know. I—*** There was a pause as Casek weaved between a trio of rapid thrusts, avoiding the first two and deflecting the third with a deft twist of his sword, the manoeuvre costing him another portion of strength. ***Wait. You're right. You can't beat it as you are now—but what if you weren't?***

*Less cryptic, Tauph!* Casek hissed in his mind, teeth clenched tight.

***You need to focus on the Drau. Stay out of this thing's range and mop up as much of the others as you can.***

Casek swore, still not understanding, but Tauph had earned enough trust, and Casek had few enough other ideas, that he didn't question it again.

He span away from another vicious stabbing, and made a break for the mass of Drau swarming Raelynn. It shrieked, but Casek didn't slow, sweeping his blade through the first one he came across. It burst into mist, and Casek felt some of the strength he'd lost flow back into him, brightening the seventh gem on the foci on his wrist.

Suddenly, he smiled as Tauph's plan became clear, and set off at a sprint away from the rapidly approaching Bel'gor.

It was a slim chance, but that was all he needed.

## I.XIV

Casek threw himself at the mass of spindly legged arachnids swarming around Raelynn. She was frighteningly fast, moving like the wind between slicing limbs and cutting fangs, eviscerating Drau with her own precise strikes. The Bel'gor waded through it all, lashing out with wild swipes that carved through the weaker demons in its efforts to reach its real target.

She danced away, nimbly repositioning herself for an attack at the Bel'gor, opening a gaping wound in its thorax before dashing back out of its range.

Casek enacted his own vicious dance. He had to be careful—he was not so fast as Raelynn, and a good hit from one of the Drau would do far more harm to him than it would to her. He ran his blade through the first Drau, before whirling around to liberate another of its front legs as it prepared an attack.

The Bel'gor chasing him arrived just as he tore his blade through the core of the fallen Drau, and Casek leaped away, darting back from flailing legs. His heart raced as yet more energy seeped into him and he used every ounce of the strength gained to avoid the flurry of clawed arms that responded.

He sidestepped a stabbing limb, and stepped inside the shadowspawn's guard, using both hands to slash its torso. It grunted, stumbling back and turning away as Casek's blade bled away a touch of its strength. A back leg flashed, one second propping up the beast's swollen torso, the next stabbing at Casek's shoulder.

White hot pain shot through the wound, and for a moment, Casek's blade flickered as his concentration wavered. The Bel'gor took full advantage. It ran at him, reining down a storm of vicious attacks that had Casek scrambling away, desperate. He backtracked as quickly as he could manage, barely dodging, and ducked around the blows, until he felt his heels collide with the stone beneath his feet. He careened back, hitting the floor and knocking the breath from him.

Had Casek been even a second slower in reactivating his blade, he would be dead. The Bel'gor tried to stamp down on his chest with its two front legs, and he managed to get the sword between them and it. This time,



his weapon held. Casek propped up the flat edge of the blade with the palm of his off-hand, and the Bel'gor pressed the entirety of its weight down upon him, trying to shatter his blade.

Casek's arms burned and shook, the Bel'gor somehow managing to increase the pressure on him. His teeth clenched. He tried to focus all of his attention on the flow of power between him and his sword, the only thing between him and those sinuous legs plunging through his chest.

The well of his power sat within him, a flowing stream of strength that ran neatly along the path he'd created for it. It was deeper than it had ever been, with new, untapped potential. Something caught his attention. A smaller flow, a creek bleeding away from the lake. He followed it and realised with a growing horror it led to where the blade touched the Bel'gor.

*I thought I was matching its strength and stopping it from stealing mine!*

***So did I,*** Tauph said, anxiety radiating from him as he spoke. ***It's of the Other, though. A creature of magic. No matter how powerful we become, we have to assume these things can do things with magic we don't know about.***

*How fair.* Casek thought, his arms screaming and slowly giving ground to the Bel'gor, the sword creeping ever closer to his own face. *Tauph, what do you suppose happens if I channel strength to somewhere that's not our blade?*

***No idea, but is now the best time to be experimenting?***

*Any better ideas? This thing is stronger, Tauph!*

***A fair point. Let's find out.***

Casek tried to think past the slowly lowering blade and the eight, shining black eyes staring hungrily down at him, and concentrated on his reserve of strength. He'd gotten pretty adept at guiding power from his core and through the foci to create his weapon. It was almost an instinctual process at this point.

But he'd never channelled two flows at once before—and that was without thinking about whether channelling magic into the rest of his body would even work.

***If we're going to try this, Casek, you haven't got the space in here for self-doubt. There's barely enough room in here for a coherent thought as it is. It's a wonder you're able to function like a person at all...***

Casek had to hold back the snort of laughter that threatened to bubble forth from his mouth, worried the shake would send one of the Bel'gor's claws sliding free from the blade's edge and through his chest. Telling Tauph to go fuck himself also had to wait, even if the joke had its intended effect.

He reached for his well of power, delicately directing a second flow away from his core. It followed his guidance hesitantly, his grasp on it wavering significantly the longer he held onto it.

His concentration held.

The trickle of power spread through him, washing through his chest and arms like cool spring water. Refreshing. Revitalising. The burning in his arms receded, the crushing weight of the Bel'gor lessening considerably. He increased the flow like widening a dam, allowing a rush to follow the path he'd laid out.

This was different to channelling through the foci. That was steady and controlled. This was a sudden burst, a great wave that flooded through him, disappearing as quickly as it had come. His gut told him this would be the only time he could manage this in this fight—a desperate, last resort to get himself free of this enemy.

He forced his arms up, head light from the rush of new power, and twisted. The motion threw the Bel'gor off-balance, sending its legs to the side, and the creature staggering away, allowing Casek to roll free. He rose, and with the last of his boosted strength carved a savage wound in the Bel'gor's torso.

It writhed and screamed on the floor, but Casek could sense, even as his temporary power faded, it was far from dead. *Still not strong enough to kill the bastard thing.*

He dashed back to the now greatly reduced mass of Drau still trying to get at Raelynn, sweat pouring from his face, panting heavily. He glanced at his wrist, and saw two of his gems had been extinguished entirely, leaving him with five—a significant drop in stamina.

*Shit! I'll have to work fast.*

He threw himself headlong at the Drau, hacking and hewing the sheer black forms apart, absorbing as much of their strength and power as he could, trying desperately to recover what was lost. Between him and the still-fighting Raelynn, the number of Drau were falling away rapidly. And with them, the chaotic storm of noise and movement was subsiding.

It wouldn't be enough.

He forced himself on, cutting down enemy after enemy, but whilst his magical strength grew with each slain, his body weakened. Reaction times had started to slow, and breathing was growing ever more difficult as he pushed himself to keep moving—keep killing. The Drau were landing blows, however, and for every three killed, one would siphon away some more of his won strength.

Six gems were lit by the time he heard the Bel'gor approach once more, this time with learned caution. It simply hadn't been enough.

***There is another option,*** Tauph said, gravely.

*What?*

***Cycle my strength again.***

*Tauph, last time you were out of it for an entire day. I'd need to take far more this time! I know it hurt you far more than you were willing to let on—we can't do that gain.*

***Don't be such an obtuse moron, Casek. Yes, it will hurt. In case you hadn't noticed, Raelynn has been having trouble with her enemy—this Bel'gor is considerably younger and weaker. She can't spare the time. This'll hurt a lot less than dying to that thing.***

Casek ground his teeth in impotent frustration. The Bel'gor approached, its multitude of eyes staring at him, watching keenly for what he was going to do next. He had already surprised it once. It clearly wasn't keen on being surprised again by something so much weaker than it. Casek peered back, stomach twisting at the sight of it.

Shamefully, the nauseating grip of fear made it difficult to deny that Tauph was right.

*Fine,* he said. *But in return, you tell me what actually happens to you when I do this. It's hurting you, Tauph, and I want to know how much before we try this again.*

***We don't have time for this, you stupid, sentimental—You know what? I'll tell you. But not before. I'll tell you after, when you get us out of this place. Deal?***

The Bel'gor was nearly upon them, mandibles twitching eagerly, limbs raising to strike out at its prey. It knew it was stronger, that as long as it was careful, it would get its meal.

*Deal,* Casek said. He reached out for Tauph's power with his own, greedily drawing up as much of the serene pool's contents as he could

manage in one go, and preparing to sever it. He was forced to estimate how much he would need, but judging by how much strength he'd had to steal to fully light the sixth jewel on his foci, he had just enough.

The spider-like shadowspawn gleefully reared back, just as Casek cut the mass of Tauph's power free. There was a hauntingly agonised scream. The sound etched a scar into his memory that Casek knew would wake him up cold and sweating years from now, provided he lived long enough. Then, power exploded out of him. Blinding white light filled the cavern, surrounding Casek in a sphere of brilliant light.

Magic tore through him like ground glass shards, ripping him apart from the inside, rewriting him into something new. Something strong. Casek was loosely aware of the Bel'gor striking out at the sphere around him vainly, unable to penetrate the swirling ball of power before being blown back and tumbling across the cavern floor.

As suddenly as it had come, the light was gone, depositing Casek upright onto the cavern floor. The raging battle had frozen to watch things unfold, Raelynn staring at him slack-jawed with open eyes. He held up the leather greave created by his foci—only it wasn't leather anymore. At least, not entirely. It was now trimmed neatly with gleaming steel. The circle upon the inside of his forearm had grown too, and now a second faintly shining line loosely wrapped its way around the circle's edge like a rope.

*We did it*, he announced gleefully inside his own head, only to be met with deafening silence. He hadn't been expecting a reply—but he'd hoped, regardless.

Still, they *had* done it. He had advanced to the Second Circle. Now, at least, they had a chance.

## I.XXV

Casek took a steadying breath, his brain screaming at him over the wild, exuberant drumbeat of his heart to keep his composure. New power thrummed through him, and fortified muscles strained to flex their newfound strength. Casek knew better than to get caught up in the fervour. The Bel'gor he'd been fighting had been far stronger than he, and it wouldn't do to fall into the trap of believing it would suddenly make the fight easy.

Becoming the hunter was a very different game to escaping him, after all.

Ahead of him, the Bel'gor eyed him through its eight obsidian orbs, the newfound hesitation sending a shiver of satisfaction through Casek. Behind it, a profusely sweating Raelynn carved her way through a mass of Drau to get at the Bel'gor still trying to kill her, despite its several severed legs.

He concentrated, flowing power into his foci, and his blade shimmered into existence. It was not dissimilar to how it had been before, its gently curved blade gleaming darkly just as it had before. Now, though, the once-simple steel guard appeared oaken brown, with subtle detailing that gave it the appearance of wood grain. Atop its surface, delicate lines of gold weaved their way across, interweaving vines dotted with golden leaf. The plain leather wrappings around the hilt had also changed, now dyed crimson and tied in a way that created a neat diamond pattern up each side, revealing the bone-coloured hilt beneath.

Still simple. Even more beautiful to his eyes than before.

Casek met the Bel'gor's eyes, the silent roar left by Tauph's absence in his mind screaming despite the din of battle echoing around the caves. He still didn't know what or how much his companion was sacrificing by allowing him to do what he did, but Casek knew in his gut it was no small matter. There had been genuine fear in Tauph's voice, even as he volunteered.

He wanted to promise himself he would never cycle Tauph's power again, to swear an oath as binding as he could, but he knew it would be a sham. *If* they survived this fight, there would be others. New enemies that

outmatched them. What would he do then—allow those enemies to kill him and Tauph both to keep the oath?

Tauph's scream rang through his mind, a callous reminder of the pain he'd put his companion through, and wondered for a moment if that might be better.

The Bel'gor bristled, its confidence returning, and Casek forced himself to focus on the fight before him. Before anything else, he had to make Tauph's sacrifice count. If he didn't kill this thing, then thoughts of future oaths were utterly meaningless.

He took a ready stance, holding the blade with both hands, its point angled towards the ground, and his mind provided a name for the pose from somewhere deep within: *Amadán*. The beast scuttled forward, its speed inhuman as it had been before. Except now, Casek could track how it moved. Not only to flee by taking advantage of the agility of his smaller body, but to actually *react* to the threats it posed.

It reached him in moments, spearing a sharpened limb out at him at a speed that would have certainly skewered him before. Instead, Casek stepped into its guard, slipping past the strike at the last possible moment, and delivered a brutal strike to the offending leg, close to where it joined with the main body.

His sword made contact, and with it came the sickening, grinding pull as the edge ran across the creature's flesh. This time, however, instead of a battle of magic, his blade cut a deep fissure in the limb, dragging a shriek free from the Bel'gor's fanged mouth. Casek scowled and quickly altered his feet to bring his sword around again.

He had intended to take the leg with his first strike, but the second would have to do.

The creature's limb tumbled away before dissipating into black mist and being added to Casek's own strength. The Bel'gor stumbled back from him, not quite understanding how quickly the tables had been turned on it. It was still slightly stronger than him, true, but strength was not all there was to a fight. Now he was capable of doing proper damage to his enemy, Casek's experience and skill could come fully into play.

He refused to let up, darting into the midst of its tangled limbs, where it couldn't effectively strike at him, before the Bel'gor could regain its composure. He'd taken its front left leg with his first attack, and with

practised efficiency, he targeted the right, a trio of well-placed slashes removing it at the base.

This time, the creature's scream filled the cavern. It was a piercing howl that reverberated around the crystalline structures surrounding them. It edged back from him, opening up new distance between them, the forelegs it had been using as its primary weapons now gone. Another garbled hiss issued forth from its mouth. Casek frowned as a group of Drau skittered reluctantly around the beast and threw themselves at Casek.

To him, that was unmistakably the order of a superior telling their subordinate to fight for them. If that was the case, the Shadowspawn were far more sentient than he'd given them credit for.

The weaker Shadows spilled out around him, trying to attack him all at once to get at some kind of weakness. With his new strength, however, it was a useless gesture. His sword flashed faster than they could react, leaving only a black mist where once Drau had stood.

Casek saw the Bel'gor skirt around the melee, trying to take advantage of the distraction, in plenty of time to prepare himself. It waited until it was fully behind Casek as he dispatched its weaker kin, before launching itself forward using its powerful hind legs.

He whirled to face it. A mix of clear spittle and violet venom flew from the tips of its extended fangs as it leaped at him, and he lashed out with a diagonal strike from the bottom up as he sidestepped. Sticky, tar-like ichor sprayed from the wound across the Bel'gor's face, three of its eyes burst like cut blueberries.

The foci absorbed a shock of magic from the wounded Shadowspawn as it staggered away from him, and Casek used the opportunity to glance across to Raelynn's fight—just in time to see her run her longsword through its skull, finishing the beast for good.

He grinned, and strode over to his own Bel'gor as it struggled back to its feet, its movement a grotesquely large-scale mockery of a half-swatted spider. Casek picked out the leg supporting most of its weight and cut it away, sending it sprawling back to the floor. It flailed some more, globules of silk pulsing from its rear as it tried everything it could to escape him, and with a crisp cut, Casek removed another of its legs.

It squirmed and chittered pitifully, and Casek pressed his boot onto its torso, pinning it. The strength it once held had been stripped away by its wounds, and now, powerful as it was, it lay helpless beneath his boot. He

considered doing as Raelynn had and simply killing the creature. To do otherwise was certainly a risk—but hadn't he earned the right to take it? When would another opportunity like this present itself?

He activated the binding mechanism on his weapon and thrust it into the thorax of the Bel'gor. The titanic rush of power flooded into him again, a violent storm that threatened to entirely overwhelm him—but this time, he was prepared. He allowed the Bel'gor's magic to surge into him, carving its own deep lake of power within him.

Already there were vague whispers in his mind, filling the absence left behind by Tauph, but Casek had expected that, too. After a few moments, the binding was done, and the cavern fell into sharp silence.

Raelynn was the first to break it, clapping a hand onto his shoulder.

"Well-fought. I was worried when the second Bel'gor turned up, but you handled it well." Her brows knitted together. "I'm surprised you had enough strength held in your foci that you still managed to advance, though. You must have been right on the cusp before the fight."

"Nobody was more surprised than me," Casek lied, and Raelynn laughed.

"I bet. Now look at you—Second Circle, with a Bel'gor bound to prove it. That kind of thing normally takes months in the field. Years in practicality. Then again, nothing about this last week has exactly been *normal*."

"You're telling me," Casek said. "So, what's our next move?"

"There's only one thing we really can do—push on. There's still no sign of Idris inside any of these stasis crystals. We'll keep going deeper until we find him."

Casek nodded, and they set off again through the now-silent crystal tunnels, only looking at the figures encased within long enough to confirm the man they were searching for was not imprisoned inside.

Soon, they spotted a dark shape on the floor in front of them, which quickly revealed itself to be another laddered shaft downwards, leading to a brand new cavern beneath. Casek licked at dry lips as he felt the presences beneath—an admittedly depleted swarm of Shadowspawn, but a swarm nonetheless.

Beyond that, however, lurked something else. It was subtle, but there was something about that which felt intentional, as though its totality was being kept hidden from observers.



“Hey,” he murmured as they peered into its depths. “How common are Shadowspawn stronger than a Bel’gor?”

She shrugged. “Not especially on Pyria—they’re here, but few. You getting cold feet?”

“I’m just trying to be prepared,” he answered, not able to find it in himself to banter back. “What are the odds we could kill whatever comes after?”

“A Daemon?” Raelynn said, scoffing. “Zero. We’d be fucked.”

“Raelynn, when we were fighting back then, I saw the Bel’gor order a bunch of Drau forward to attack.”

“That kind of thing isn’t unheard of,” she answered. “Stronger shadow-entities have been known to command lesser ones who fear them. It’s pretty natural.”

“What if something bigger sent the Bel’gor to protect its supply of food?”

“It’s more likely they came to protect *their* supply of food—or add to it—than there be a Daemon *here*. They’re normally found in much larger population centres.”

“But it’s not impossible?” he pressed. Casek really couldn’t say for sure *what* he was sensing, but he had a suspicion. And there were too many things now telling him that suspicion was true.

“No, it isn’t,” she said, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. “Do you sense something?”

He nodded. “I’m not sure what, exactly. There’s something different about this. Something more...*aware*. It feels like it’s hiding how strong it actually is.”

Raelynn paled, then sighed. “I’ll be straight with you, Casek. If Idris is down there—I couldn’t care less if there was a bloody Archdaemon down there, I owe it to him to at least *try*.” Raelynn sighed, then looked at him. “Look, I can’t say that we’ve become any more than acquaintances in the short time we’ve been travelling, but you’ve proven yourself to be a man of honour. Decent. *Good*. I understand the gamble I’m making, and you’re not obligated to go down with me. If you want to stay, I’ll think nothing less of you for it. I’ll do what I can to clear the level below and make it safe for you to come and free Idris if I can find him. If I can’t? Well, you get yourself clear and get strong enough to come back and get me one day, eh? I’ve already risked you too much already.”

Casek opened his mouth to protest, but he recognised the stubborn set to her jaw, the steely resolution written in her dark eyes. She would not be persuaded to stay, even if she knew the danger for certain, which meant there was only really one option.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, moving to the ladder ahead of her and swinging his legs down onto the first rungs. “Let’s go get your friend.”

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## I.XXVI

When Casek's boots finally touched the ground below, it was far spongier than he'd expected beneath his boots. There was a moment of hurried fumbling as he moved away from the ladder to allow Raelynn to climb down and pawed at his pockets to retrieve his firefighting materials and torch.

Fortunately, the time it took Casek to light their final makeshift torch was blessedly short. Dim amber light filled the tunnel, and the fist of anxiety that'd been keeping his stomach in a vice-like grip since they'd first entered the mines twisted violently.

Thick silk cobwebs coated the rock floor and wall so thoroughly it was difficult to make out the pale pink salt-rock beneath. Dense enough it felt as though they were walking on a layer of heavy blankets.

Raelynn grimaced and gestured ahead of them. "What do you make of that?"

Casek followed her stare further down the tunnel and frowned as he, too, noticed what had her confused. Without thinking, naked curiosity had him walking forward to examine the floor ahead of them. Protruding from beneath the thick layer of webbing were precisely shaped slabs of what was unmistakably stasis crystal. They had been laid along the floor, following the path of the tunnel, and were positioned into neat, well-fitted rows, in imitation of man-made roads and paths.

"A path—have you ever seen anything like that?"

She eyed him, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. "No. We aren't so numerous and strong that we can afford to senselessly wander into the stolen places the Shadow calls home and see what they do there."

"Apart from now, of course," Casek said, unable to control his tongue before the quip escaped it. He expected a rebuke, but got a nervous snort of laughter in return.

"This is different—we've never had you before. Worst-case scenario, I throw you at whatever's at the end and use the distraction to escape."

"And here I thought that my ability was indispensable to the war effort."

Raelynn shrugged dramatically. “I’d consider sacrificing humanity’s continued survival a worthwhile trade at this point. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, Casek, but these are giant bloody spiders.”

Casek had to clap a hand across his mouth to stop an actual laugh from escaping him. It was good to see some of Raelynn’s walls come down and allow some of her personality to shine through, even if it had taken walking with her towards certain death at the hands of enormous spider demons to get there.

“Still though,” he muttered once he’d gotten composed enough. “An actual road. I have seen none of the Shadow do anything that would tell me they’d build actual pathways.”

“It’s pretty stunning how little we know about them, given how long we’ve been at war. The major population centres fell so quickly that there’s never really been a powerful resistance force against them. Penetrating deeply into their territory has always been too risky to try.”

Casek waited a moment, listening for any sound that would tell him Shadowspawn were approaching, before responding. “This feels pretty deep into their territory.”

“Pyria has been out of bounds for Binders for a long time. The last few years have been tricky, though. We’ve lost some of our more powerful binders. Our supply of foci is falling. The Shadow have started targeting food and water supplies around Oreia that have been safe for hundreds of years. Need is pushing Binders to try their luck in more dangerous hunting grounds.”

“Hence why your group was here.”

Raelynn nodded. “High risk, high reward was the idea. We were at least right about the risk.”

“There’s still time for the reward—once we get your group back together, of course. We’ve come all this way. At this point, it would be rude not to introduce ourselves to whatever built this thing.”

“You’re not wrong. Just...” she paused momentarily, as if having second thoughts about what she wanted to say. “Stay sharp, Casek. We might not know much about them, but we know for sure that the more powerful Shadowspawn grow, the more sentient they become. I know I said it was unlikely, but I think you were right about what you sensed. Something stronger than a Bel’gor made this.”

Casek nodded in understanding, but for him, it changed nothing. He could still feel its presence lurking on the edge of his awareness. Raelynn had said that the next stage of Shadowspawn was called Daemon, and they were both now certain that was what awaited them at the end of this path. Somehow, certainty about what lay ahead of them made it easier to keep moving forward.

“You sure you don’t want to go back? This is probably our last chance.”

Raelynn looked at him, features tense, the torchlight dancing in her eyes. “I can’t leave him here by himself, Casek. Not like them.”

Casek saw the horrified eyes encased in crystal in his own mind and tried to imagine what it would be like to be them. Hearing the scuttling of hundreds of black terrors, feeling them feed on you, climb across and over you...He shuddered. The sensible thing would be to go back, of course. There were slim odds of them walking away from this place still alive. Then he imagined being trapped here again, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to walk away.

However slim the chance, he felt the same as Raelynn. He had to *try*.

“Good,” he said. “Lets get to it, then.”

He strode forward purposefully, taking determined steps across the crystal path as the light from his torch shimmered amber against the white silk webs lining the walls. The tunnel wound its way deeper and deeper into the ground gradually, curving gently left and right in no clearly discernible pattern.

The lack of variation was dull at first. Every inch of their path was a carbon copy of the last: an everlasting repeated arrangement of pale, glittering crystal; well-preserved wooden support struts and thick layers of cobweb. But, before long, the monotony eased, and the lack of variance began to indicate a lack of eventfulness.

Strangely, it became a comfort more than a hindrance. It was as though as long as the tunnels never broke from their pattern, he and Raelynn could wander there forever, safe and uninterrupted by the Shadow.

Of course, Casek knew no comfort would last in the deep for too long. Further crystal structures eventually faded into view ahead of them, replacing the wooden support struts on either side of the tunnel. Both his and Raelynn’s weapons flickered to life without so much of a word between

them. They approached, expecting the mouth of hell itself to open around them at any moment, spilling out hordes of Shadowspawn to overwhelm them.

Instead, they drew close to the first set of structures completely unnoticed and unhindered. On either side of the tunnel, a hexagonal pillar of crystal rose out from the ground, seemingly carved to be perfectly even and symmetrical. Within each was a person, just as there was above, frozen expressions still displaying the grisly reality of their last moments of freedom.

The pair stared across at the other, each man a gruesome mirror reflecting the suffering of the other, and Casek forced himself to look ahead, so that he would not have to see the suffering he could not stop. He was not sure there ever would be an end to these people's pain. Not, at least, until death. Even if Casek could give them their freedom back, what sort of life would it be?

Even ignoring the seemingly futile struggle for survival, the amount of damage done to these people's minds must be devastating. Alive they may be, but they would never recover from what had been done to them.

There was no escaping them. Beyond the first matched pair of pillars, another came yards after, followed by one more after the other. Clearly ornamental structures decorated with the bodies of the townsfolk, lining the crystal path like lamps. On and on they went, passing by more and more people trapped in various poses—everything from in the middle of striking a blow in combat with some weapon or other, all the way to kneeling and begging for mercy, evidently not given.

“Did you notice?” Raelynn asked suddenly.

“Notice what?” He replied, glad for something to think about besides the swelling of nausea.

“These people. They're all soldiers. Fighters. Upstairs, it was all the regular folk.”

Casek blinked. She was right. Every man or woman they'd passed down here had been a warrior. Some were decked out in the local guard uniform: sturdy mail beneath a royal blue jerkin, and carried shields that bore the town's coat of arms, with the single-tusked walrus, upon its surface. Others, however, were clad in more simple warrior garb. Leather armours, and battle-worn but well-oiled swords. A small number wore the plainclothes of farmers, wielding straightforward weapons that bore the

ageing that things often did when they were kept locked away beneath beds and at the back of cupboards for a decade or two.

No matter the outfit, every one of them was a fighter. And, now that he came to think of it, he hadn't seen even one upstairs, either. These people had been organised—placed specifically into a hierarchy.

After a small while longer of walking whilst steadfastly avoiding eye contact with the trapped, the exit loomed in front of them. The crystal pillar had been directed and formed into an ornate, pale pink archway that led into a room beyond.

It was through this arch that Casek could feel the domineering presence he'd been feeling above, alongside several dozen far less powerful. He glanced back at Raelynn, who met his stare with a resolute nod, her two weapons flaring into life. He nodded back, allowing his sword to do the same, and stepped through the arch and into the darkness beyond.

Almost immediately, his eyes met those of the creature he'd been sensing. As he took in its predatory gaze, and the suffocating weight of its mere presence, Casek knew without a doubt that both he and Raelynn were going to die.

## I.XXVII

Torchlight filled the cavern past the crystal archway. It illuminated the entire section of cave, advertising their trespass to all the creatures within. This clearly had been the last area in the mine to be significantly worked by the miners who'd once earned their coin here.

It was a vast salt deposit whose core had long since been stripped away, leaving a rounded chamber of empty space deep beneath the surface. All around them were the soft pink tones of saltrock, a significant amount of the valuable mineral left in place to allow the room to keep its stability.

Even with that, the wall and ceiling were lined with massive timbers that had themselves been encased in stasis crystal by the Shadowspawn, all for preserving this one chamber at the base of the mine. The crystal path they had been following led directly into the centre of the room, where the creature that had so stolen Casek's attention sat.

It seemed drowsy, the movement of its head and limbs lethargic, as though it had just now woken and realised the presence of an intruder. The power Casek could feel intensified as it straightened and rose, before truly turning its attention onto them.

The moment those malevolent, crimson eyes found his, his knees buckled beneath the sheer weight behind its power when focused entirely on him. Beside him, Raelynn trembled with the effort of standing, but stand she did—a testament to her still greater strength.

This had been a mistake. The thought raced through Casek's mind over and over as the creature stood to its full height, revealing itself fully to them. The only thing keeping the strength this monster wielded in perspective was his memories of the Archdemon he'd seen with Tauph. Somehow, the knowledge that something existed more powerful than what he was seeing now was a comfort, if not a very useful one.

It was a being not dissimilar to the Bel'gor and Drau they'd encountered so far. A huge bulbous thorax borne aloft by eight spindly legs. A spider, but for the upper half of its body. This was that of a sickeningly wrinkled woman from the waist up, her ancient skin the colour of ash. Protruding from this part of her were a further three pairs of arms, each tipped with stubby, clawed hands.



Straggly white wisps of hair hung down over an elongated face, her disturbingly human mouth distorted and stretched by the pair of thick spider-fangs bulging from within.

Surrounding it was a nest of stasis crystal, with great spiked pillars protruding outwards in a tight pattern, creating an almost defensive structure around the bed of crystal this creature had turned into its home.

“Idris!”

Raelynn’s horrified gasp made Casek focus his attention upon the structure more closely, and his jaw slid open as he saw each spike holding its own human prisoner within. A man clad in full-steel plate stood suspended in the closest, and a woman that had a foci still strapped to her wrist was beside him in the next. The twisted human statues encircled the creature, creating a grotesque nest lined with its defeated victims.

However, in the centre of the nest rested a crystal separate from the others, not attached to any of the surrounding surfaces. Casek couldn’t clearly make out what the figure inside looked like past the translucent crystal, but it was this one that had caught Raelynn’s attention so starkly.

The creature, too, noticed Raelynn’s attention, and it reared up on its hind legs in front of the crystal, towering over them. It roared, a rasping, guttural howl that issued forth with such force it shook the air around them.

Casek glanced toward Raelynn, looking for some sign she had a plan, only for her to be gone. Her weapons blazed into life as she sprinted towards the Daemon—for that clearly was what this was—her teeth bared in an infuriated snarl.

He swore, and set off after her, only for the Daemon to halt them both with another booming sound that rattled around the cavern.

It was only then that the true reality of their situation settled in. Just on the periphery of his vision, the shadow-drenched roof began to move and shift where the light of their torch didn’t quite reach it. He and Raelynn both halted their charge and craned their neck upward.

The roof was moving.

Only it wasn’t the roof. It was a teeming mass of Shadowspawn, all dormant until called upon by the Daemon in the centre of the room. Like her, they woke slowly, but in moments the ceiling was a swirling black ocean of furious movement. And then they began to drop. Eight-legged, black shapes came tumbling from the ceiling like raindrops, landing around them and springing to their feet.

Drau came at first. These were easily dispatched by the two of them at a manageable rate, before another gurgling cry from the Daemon called a second wave down around them. Then a third. Gritting his teeth, Casek tore a path through the Shadowspawn to reach Raelynn's side, knowing from experience they'd be better off working as a pair.

Despite the countless slain, Casek barely noticed a change in the single flickering gem alight on his foci. Now that he was Second Circle, the number of lit gems had changed back to only one. This single gem was far more stable than any had been at First Circle, barely brightening for each Drau slain, and barely dimming when his stamina waned.

Throughout it, the Daemon watched them fight, weighing their strength, calculating. Every so often, the battle would be interrupted by another sound, and the assault of the Shadowspawn would change in pattern. Sometimes they grew more defensive, and other times they attacked only in waves, or became more aggressive. At one point, they even attacked each human from the front and back to exploit blind spots. Casek and Raelynn responded by fighting back to back, covering each other's weak points and lapses in concentration.

They fought in unison. A storm of thrusting and slashing blades cutting down the Drau standing in their way life chaff, edging ever close to where the Daemon waited. It only continued to watch them with infuriating complacency.

"It's not even a little concerned about us," he grunted, running his sword through yet another spider-like Drau.

"That's probably for a reason," she said. "We'll have to think of a plan for getting past it—we won't be able to beat that thing in a fight."

"Any ideas?"

Raelynn shook her head as she reduced a trio of Shadowspawn to dust in one smooth movement. "I'll have to distract it while you sneak around. Once we get Idris out, all bets are off."

"Will he really be enough to win against that thing?"

"He's Third Circle, so he's got a better chance than either of us. If not, then he's an artificer. He'll be able to think of something to help get us out."

Casek tried his best to ignore how full of holes that plan seemed to be. If Idris wasn't strong enough to beat this thing, escaping wouldn't be much easier, even assuming the man could think of something immediately

after being freed from weeks in stasis. Not to mention the fact both plans hinged on Idris being completely functional on breaking free. Raelynn had been fine, but that didn't mean that would be the same for Idris. Different people had vastly different tolerances...

He shook his head, cutting off the train of thought as completely as he could. There weren't any other options—he certainly didn't have any—and doubt would only make this one less likely to succeed. He had to focus.

The Daemon had other ideas. The creature howled again, an abrupt trio of violent noises different again from any it had made before. Almost immediately, larger shadows began to fall and clamber to their gangly feet, looming above the Drau. Four of them at first, but a glance upwards revealed more on the roof, ready to drop.

“Bel'gor!” Raelynn warned, as the first darted forward, straight at her. Casek barely had time to react before another came crashing toward him, forcing him away from Raelynn and back the way they had come with a flurry of vicious thrusts from spiked forelegs.

Both he and Raelynn were immediately on the back foot: ducking, rolling and diving away from the wave of unrelenting strikes sent their way. The Bel'gor had divided themselves equally, two chasing Raelynn, and two him, and none were allowing them even the slightest opening to go on the offensive.

Despite this, the Daemon had clearly decided enough was enough. It rose from its nest, movements languid and precise. Then, in a heartbeat, it was gone. His eyes failed entirely to track its position—right until it clasped tightly clawed hands around his throat, lifting him high into the air.

It brought him level with its blazing crimson eyes, and Casek felt the magic draining from him faster than it ever had as its grip tightened around his throat. His lungs burned with the effort of trying to drag in air through firmly closed airways, and his vision grew spotty.

He felt Raelynn's power flare. Saw her barrel past her Bel'gor and throw herself at the outstretched arm bearing him aloft. Her blade shattered against ashen skin, and a second arm struck her across her face, sending her skidding across the floor.

The beast grasping his throat tossed him aside, and Casek hit the stone, spluttering and choking on his first, desperate gulp of air. The Daemon had deposited him beside Raelynn, and she looked down at him with a strange mix of determination and despair. He caught sight of her foci,

her reserves down to two glowing gems. His only lit gem glimmered dimly. They were nearly spent.

“Casek,” she said, panting, eyes landing on the approaching Daemon, its suffocating power making it hard to even breathe in its presence.

“What?”

“Come back for us one day.”

“What the fuck are you—”

“I shouldn’t have brought you here. It was stupid—what you can do is too important. I have little left in me that can threaten it, but I think I can buy you the time to get out.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but she stood before he could form the words, turning away from him to face the Daemon stalking towards them.

“When you’re strong enough,” she said, without turning. “Come back for us. Don’t leave us here, not like *them*.”

There was the briefest hint of a quiver in her voice. Then, without warning, she was running full-blooded toward the mass of Shadowspawn between them and their goal. Her energy exploded from the foci at her wrists as she channelled more power than he’d ever seen into her blades until they burned a blue as crisp as the clear sky.

Casek had only moments to make his choice. Stay or run. He wanted so badly to believe that if he stayed, he and Raelynn would both have a chance, but he was not naïve enough to fall victim to that temptation. If he stayed, he would be captured and eventually forced to reveal he could escape the crystals. Then he would die.

“I’ll be back, I promise it.”

Casek activated his sword again and turned toward the exit, cleaving through the scattered Drau still guarding it. He ran beneath the arch and sprinted across the crystal pathway as fast as his burning legs would take him. It was odd that nothing gave chase, but the thought was obliterated as a very human scream echoed through the tunnel, assaulting his senses from every direction, and the blazing light of Raelynn’s power disappeared from his senses.

## I.XXVIII

Casek's legs burned with the effort of driving himself up each coarse, rusted ladder rung. He didn't slow his pace for a second, even when splinters of old, decaying iron cut into his palms as he dragged himself upwards. The dry, salt-tang of the air stung at his eyes, sending tears tracking down his face, cutting stark streaks through the accumulated grime on his skin.

Naturally, the streaks had nothing to do with the hot, twisting twin-dagger wounds of guilt and shame twisting in his belly, nor was it anything to do with his brain experiencing the moment Raelynn's energy had faded to nothing over and over again.

Logic told him there was nothing more he could have done. Leaving was the smart move—his abilities meant a flicker of hope for humanity they had presumed was long-since extinguished. Raelynn herself would have said it was a good trade. And even if he had stayed, he would have fallen just the same. It would have made no difference.

Gods, it wasn't even as though she were dead. He could get stronger. Come back and save her and her friend. He *would*. He'd promised as much.

Then he saw her face being swallowed by crystal, her eyes wide with horror as Shadowspawn swarmed round, thousands of burbling voices chittering and feeding, and the stabbing began anew.

"Fuck!" he half-hissed, half-yelled as he grabbed the next ladder-rung up and another splinter of metal slid into his hand.

Casek yanked his hand away, pulling it as close to his dark-adjusted eyes as he could. Through the dingy black he could just about make out the welling crimson liquid seeping down his hand, staining his sleeve and dripping into the black void below.

The void answered back. A rolling, hissing mass far below sounded in response to him. Hundreds of Shadowspawn seethed down the tunnels below, following him. Mostly shades, but a significant number of Drau and Bel'gor surged after him too, each eager to claim the prize of his energy.

Casek ground his teeth and forced himself to press on up the ladder, despite his aching muscles and the needle of rusted iron nestled beneath the

skin of his hand. The only small mercy was that the Daemon's magic still lurked at the deepest corner of the mine, the powerful creature leaving him to her weaker kin.

He couldn't help but wonder if that was no coincidence, even as he finally dragged himself back into the crystal tunnel where the bulk of the Shadow's prisoners were entombed. Had the Daemon actually ordered the others after him, or were they just chasing a free morsel of sustenance, sensing his vulnerability?

Something about that made little sense. The Shades and Drau he'd encountered before these mines had been utterly animalistic. They behaved almost entirely how he'd expect wild animals to, with Drau stronger than him hesitant to fight a battle they had even a slight chance of losing. He'd only ever been pursued and attacked when he was perceived to be vulnerable. Weak.

Sure, there was only one of him here, but he'd shown himself perfectly capable of slaughtering Drau in good numbers, and even fighting Bel'gor evenly—as the bound spirit keening away within him could attest. He had not begun to cycle the creature yet, but he could feel its whispering, even now.

He could understand several of the Bel'gor thinking they could bring him down, but this was as good as suicide for the weaker Shadowspawn. Why would they come in such numbers when they must be aware they would likely perish?

The simple answer: something scarier than him was forcing them.

Casek hurried through the crystal maze, fighting to ignore the roving eyes of the men and women imprisoned here. Why would they stay when it meant they could be ordered to their death by the Daemon that rules this place?

His desperate run slowed to a walk as he began to notice dark shapes skittering across the roof, and clambering over crystal structures. Shades darted from shadow to shadow around him, doing everything they could to stay out of his way, whilst not leaving the crystal structures.

He frowned, peering around him, even as he sensed the mass of Shadowspawn climbing the ladder-passage after him, drawing closer and closer. He knew he should run, but the puzzle pieces sliding into place in his mind were too momentous, the possibilities they presented too alluring to ignore.

The Shadow were not mindless monsters.

It sounded obvious when you isolated that thought, but it was a lot more difficult to justify when you were surrounded by grotesquely twisted, giant magical spiders that wanted to eat you. No, on second thought, it was not enough to simply say they were not mindless—that much was clear even to the most close-minded.

The realisation that had frozen him into place was far more than this. The Shadow were so much more than *not mindless*. They were sentient. Complex. Most important, was that they operated in a social structure not dissimilar to humans. It was well disguised, of course, by the veil of horror that *how* they lived created but, when you got down to it, their system was unmistakably *human*.

Simply put: the powerful entities hoarded resources—food—and in exchange for access, the weaker Shadowspawn obeyed the stronger.

The Daemon that ruled this place controlled all of the food the rest of the Shadowspawn needed, and so controlled the Shadowspawn themselves, using them to increase its own status and power. That was why the common folk were in a separate chamber, whilst the magically and physically powerful made up the Daemon's nest. That was why humans lined the path that led to her like ornaments in a palace.

This *was* a palace. A monument to the Daemon's power and influence.

He could hear the pursuing Shadowspawn behind him, now, flooding down the tunnels, closer and closer. Only a minute, and they would be upon him.

Casek rubbed a grimy, bloodied hand across his face, wiping away a layer of slime and sweat. His heart thundered in his chest, an idea clouding his mind like a storm. It was risky, but the moment the thought had arrived, it had driven its claws into his grey matter, stubbornly refusing to be shifted no matter the angle Casek tried.

It didn't help that he didn't *want* to shift it.

He grinned, decision made, and darted into a lilac side tunnel, pressing himself against the crystal and closing his eyes. They were close now. He had only moments.

Casek reached out with his magic, melding Tauph's silent pool of power with his own. Muttering a small prayer, he pressed his hands against the cool stone of the stasis crystal lining every inch of the tunnel on this

level. He pushed his own power towards the crystal, and it shattered as his power flowed through it, raining crystal shards around him.

He expanded the reach of his power, reaching for every inch of stasis crystal he could, destroying it. Casek kept on, walking through the tunnels, crystal turning to dust and filling the air. People fell out of the fading structures, collapsing to the floor like sacks of vegetables, boneless and weak.

He didn't stop. Shades began to scream and howl around him, horrified burbles ringing out around the cavern. Further back, even the Drau and Bel'gor had stopped, and watched aghast as their prisoners fell to the floor, free.

Casek reached further and further, freeing more people. They sunk to the floor around him, some slumped against rocks, others lying prone on the floor. Their eyes remained open wide, slow-blinking and unseeing.

Then Casek caught sight of the straw-haired man he'd first seen when he arrived. He stood, swaying slightly on his atrophied legs. Casek darted toward him, taking him by the shoulder and turning the man to face him. The man's eyes looked straight through him, a single line of drool seeping from the left corner of his mouth.

"Listen to me," Casek hissed, shaking the man by the shoulder. "Run! Can you hear me? You have to—"

The man sunk to his knees, bone-thin arms wrapping around his head, and a ghoulish moan seeping from his throat, pain and confusion and terror given sound.

The noise rippled through the cavern, like some kind of awful signal to the others. One woman on the floor screamed, a rasping, soul-wrenching howl that had fresh tears prickling at the corners of Casek's eyes. He had known some of these people would not be okay—would not be able to function—but he had not expected this. How could he have been?

Sobs joined the broken symphony as the freed broke down. Casek stumbled through them, begging desperately for some of them—any of them—to get up. To move. Run. *Anything* other than this.

"Ailidh!" A man's voice cut through the wails of the broken, panicked and wild.

He staggered through the mess of shattered men and women on the floor, head darting back and forth wildly, scanning the stone floor. Then he



froze, and made a spluttered choking noise as he stumbled forward, bending over to pick a child up from the floor.

The little girl howled, red-faced, and clung to her father for the first time in a thousand years. The man held on as though the feeling gave him life, tears streaming from tightly shut eyes.

“You need to run! Now!” Casek yelled.

The man’s eyes shot open and met Casek’s. He mouthed a broken thanks across the cavern at him. Then, without ever loosening his grip on his daughter, scurried toward the exit.

The Shadowspawn howled in response, a hundred furious shrieks that shook the cavern walls, full of hate and hunger for their fleeing prey. The effect of the sound was immediate. People stirred, horror-filled moans shifting to panicked screams. Folk dragged themselves to their feet, and stagger after the man and his daughter. Some moved for loved ones first, leaving at a clumsy jog, clutching at each other’s hands desperately.

Others, alone, simply ran.

A final, much louder sound shattered the rest, a viscerally loud, high-pitched shriek, tight with an incandescent rage. Casek breathed a sigh of relief. His suspicions had been right—she knew her prey was disappearing, and with it, her power and status.

Casek shrank back against the wall, a mere shadow in the black, as the townsfolk hurried towards the exit as fast as their weak bodies could take them. The Shadowspawn hurried after them, a great flood of spider-like beings scurrying across the stone. Watching it brought back the twisting stab of shame and guilt.

This, too, he’d suspected would happen. The slowest at the rear of the pack were already being run down, crystal blooming around them, the hope of freedom stripped away brutally quickly.

Then she came. The Daemon herself clattered through the tunnel, failing to notice him. Such was its fury and desperation to reclaim its prey. It disappeared into the darkness of the tunnels ahead, howling and baying. Casek gave it a moment before licking the dried salt away from his cracked lips, and activated his own blade in the dark. The straggling Drau hissed, and he cut through them without mercy.

He darted back the way he’d come, towards the ladder and the cavern where he’d left Raelynn to fight the Shadow alone.

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## I.XXIX

Casek's boots hit the stone floor and launched him straight into a run across the crystal path. He darted through the crystal-lined passage, his boots clacking against the translucent surface, the sound echoing through the now nearly deserted tunnel. Only the occasional straggling Shadowspawn lingered in the dark, Drau and Shades clever enough to stay out of harm's way now their Daemon master was absent.

They paid for their intelligence with their lives, Casek unwilling to allow any obstructions between his companions and the exit to be left behind.

There was a trade-off at play: how fast he could make it to his allies before the daemon returned, versus slowing down to make their path easier to traverse. He opted to concentrate on the latter, maintaining his pace but methodically clearing the tunnel of enemies.

Raelynn should be combat ready, provided she had not been hurt as part of her imprisonment, if a little weaker than usual. Idris was an unknown. He'd been imprisoned here for weeks, and Casek didn't know the condition his body was left in after the battle he was captured in. He didn't want to take the chance that Drau would cause problems if they had to carry him out.

Quickly, though, Casek ran into another dilemma. The prisoners he'd run past when he escaped—the ones lining the tunnel like twisted ornaments—remained, watching him pass, frozen in terror. He hesitated beside the first, worrying his bottom lip anxiously.

He could free them now, and perhaps some of them would make a good distraction for the Daemon if she returned early. It pained him to think of these people so callously, but considering the state of the others, he couldn't imagine them achieving anything else. Freeing them was difficult to think of as anything more than a useful cruelty, yet it was also difficult to walk past them, leaving them trapped. At least if he freed them, there was a chance, regardless of how slim it was.

The thought made Casek's decision for him. He couldn't countenance just leaving them, so instead, he darted from one crystal pillar to the next, shattering them with a pulse of his power. He didn't stop to

speak to the freed warriors and townsfolk, leaving them to their fate. The thought that the Daemon might be able to tell when her prisoners were being freed from a distance didn't come to him until he was halfway through the tunnel.

*What's done is done. Our course is set.*

Split-second decisions made in the heat of battle could decide the course of entire wars—he just had to hope this one would somehow decide things in his favour.

Casek burst into the main chamber, panting and dripping with sweat, but unobstructed. The few Shadowspawn left behind shrunk away, scuttling out of reach up the walls to the ceiling, babbling and hissing, unwilling to stand in his path without their master to force them.

He ignored them. Raelynn's entrapped form lay in the centre of the nest-structure in the centre of the chamber, and he made for it almost without conscious thought, running as fast as his exhausted legs could carry him. Casek reached it in moments, already reaching within for Tauph's power, shepherding it outwards using his own whilst ignoring the muted whispers of the bound Bel'gor.

The crystal shattered, and Raelynn emerged from the salmon-pink cloud of dust on her feet, blinking owlishly at him.

"You came back—how?"

Her eyes darted around the room, seeking the Daemon that had entrapped her, and to her bewilderment, finding nothing.

"I...Created a distraction. Are you injured? We won't have long."

Raelynn shook her head slowly. "Besides magical depletion, no." Her eyes widened then, and her head jerked toward the crystal pillar that had so caught her attention when they had first reached this place. "Idris?"

Casek threw her a pleased, albeit tired, grin. "It's why we came, isn't it?"

Her mouth worked silently, trying to find the words, until landed finally on a firm nod, her own grin mirroring his.

They turned to the crystal pillar that held Raelynn's companion, and Casek could see him clearly for the first time. He was a middle-aged man, a few years Casek's senior, with thick, shoulder-length dark hair, and weathered, deep bronze skin. Casek placed his right palm across the crystal and shattered it, sending Idris staggering forward as he dropped to the floor.

Raelynn stepped forward, steadying him with a hand on his shoulder. Idris swayed for a moment, on the verge of his knees giving out, then breathed deep through the nose and planted his black boots, visibly forcing himself to stay upright.

He looked between Casek and Raelynn for a moment, before curious dark eyes found Casek and stayed there, measuring him. Casek shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny, but held the older man's gaze. The image of a resolute warrior he was trying to convey was, however, shattered, when Idris' calloused hand shut out faster than he could track, taking his jaw between index finger and thumb with a surprisingly strong grip.

"Odd. Not Shadowspawn, that is beyond doubt—I'd have sensed it, even if Raelynn could not," he said, turning Casek's head as if he were some strange new creature. "But fully human? Less certain—not when you can interact with stasis matrices the way you do."

He let go, and Casek opened his mouth to respond, only to find Idris was no longer in front of him, but behind, peering at him from narrowed eyes, stroking his beard. Casek felt suddenly what it must be like to be the beetles trapped in jars and excruciatingly examined by fascinated children.

"Do it again," he demanded.

"Do what?" Casek asked, eyes darting from the intense newcomer—who somehow managed to look domineering as well as vaguely unsteady on their feet at the same time—to an immensely amused Raelynn.

"Free the rest of these people."

"We don't have a lot of time—the Daemon might—"

"Be coming back—yes, yes. I am correct in assuming you freed those above to create your distraction, yes?" Idris did not wait for Casek's answer. "The Daemon will be longer than you think. She is quite possessive, and her prey will be desperate. The human survival instinct is strong, no matter how damaged the human in question is. Quite apart from that, I must see this ability in person again. For trust. For the satisfaction of my curiosity."

He grinned, and adjusted his loose-fitting pale linen shirt. "Most importantly, however, I, like you, cannot countenance leaving here without giving these people a fair chance of escaping with us."

That, Casek could not bring himself to argue with. He did not know what fate awaited those he'd freed, nor what state they were in mentally, but

all he had to do to assuage his doubts now was think of that man and his little girl, and how she had clung to him as they ran. Some would be recaptured, and inevitably, some would be too broken by their imprisonment to cope. But at least they'd all been given a *chance*.

Casek set to work immediately, reducing the Daemon's nest to glimmering dust, and depositing her prisoners roughly to the floor. Most sat motionless, eyes staring into a distance only they could see. A man in full plate heaved himself weakly to his feet, his soft moaning muffled by his closed steel helm, and leaned heavily on the sword he'd been captured holding.

With him, the woman he'd seen wearing a foci also stood, eyes fixated on them.

"My thanks," she rasped through a thick accent, taking Casek's hand and shaking it vigorously. "Tell me, I know not how long I've been imprisoned for. Does Saoirdin still stand?"

Raelynn stepped forward. "I'm sorry, no."

The woman's face tightened, jaw muscles tensing wildly as she fought to suppress the emotions Casek could see warring behind her eyes. "How long has it been since it fell?"

"It's been at least fifty years since they overran it," Raelynn said.

The woman's head bowed, and she seemed to sink in on herself like a wilting flower. "I see."

Idris stepped forward, seeming more steady than he had even a few moments ago. "Those of you whole enough to hear me, the Daemon will return soon. If you are still here when it does, you will be imprisoned again, with little hope of escape again. If you can, you must leave with us."

Few of the men and women on the floor showed any sign of having heard him, but those that did started to drag themselves upright. There were a good dozen warriors, too many for them to help them all, even if they had enough time to carry folk out of here.

Idris' hand on his shoulder made him jump, but the man wore a serene smile as he looked down at him. "You have already done more than could be reasonably asked. The rest is up to them. It is time for us to leave, lest yours and Raelynn's efforts here be wasted."

Casek nodded, and re-summoned his blade, only slightly perturbed at the intensity of Idris' gaze at the sight of it. He ignored the fresh dryness

of his throat, and started for the exit, leading those that could follow toward the exit.

He only prayed they would make it before the Daemon returned.

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## I.XXX

The blazing light of the sun ahead of them was itself as much of a relief as the lack of any real opposition to their leaving when Casek saw it ahead of him. What few straggling Drau left behind in the tunnels had been dispatched handily between the warriors of their party. He and Raelynn, being the most battle-ready of their group, acted as the vanguard, leading the charge toward the exit, whilst the rest of their bedraggled party followed behind.

Impressively, the foci-bearing woman had joined in quickly, summoning a polearm and lancing Shadowspawn with an ease—despite her exhaustion and long captivity—that belied a lifetime of fighting experience. She had not given her name, but Casek couldn't help but admire her fortitude. The others that had been held with her shuffled behind them, barely responsive to the goings on around them. But, when the woman had joined the fight, their eyes had been drawn to her, and had scarcely left since, as though she had cast some sort of spell freeing them from the long sleep fighting desperately to keep a hold of them.

It was remarkable to Casek that any of them had gathered themselves enough to run. He could not imagine what they had been through—the things they'd seen and experienced. A week ago, Casek had been feeling hard done by waking with no memory of his life before.

Now, he wondered if he'd been afforded a phenomenal mercy.

What hadn't escaped his notice was how Idris had kept himself out of any combat, allowing the other three fighters to take care of any danger that came their way. Instead, he kept to the back of the pack, and his eyes had spent a considerable amount of time focused upon Casek. Even with his back turned, Casek felt the weight of his gaze; and any time he turned and found the older man to be looking at him, the sheer cold calculation behind the man's scrutiny sent shivers down his spine.

None of this stopped the wide grin that broke across his face as they broke into the light at last, and the warmth of the sun kissed his cheeks. He breathed deep the fresh, open air, savouring the first must and salt-free breath he'd taken in what felt like weeks.



“Casek!” Raelynn pulled up beside him, wearing a wide, albeit tired, smile. “We made it! I honestly thought I wouldn’t see the sky again in years. Without you, I wouldn’t have—neither would any of us. Thank you.”

Casek began to respond, but was abruptly cut off by Idris’ no nonsense monotone. “Thanks and celebrations are for people free of danger. Listen, Raelynn.”

The mine entrance was a ways outside of the city limits, backed by forests of oak and alder that reached far into the horizon. Casek concentrated on the sounds beyond the rustling of leaves and their own group. It was faint, but in the distance, the whispers of distant cries and struggle were on the wind among the trees—the sound of a deadly hunt through the woods.

“The people I freed must have fled into the woods,” Casek muttered.

“Indeed,” Idris said. “And the Shadowspawn have followed in force. As we have no clue whether the Daemon will return sooner, or later, I would suggest we make haste in the opposite direction.”

“That would leave us having to cover a lot of ground to loop back north for Pyry,” Raelynn said.

Idris’ brows raised. “You mean to recover Taran from the capital?”

“I meant to recover *everyone*,” Raelynn retorted, meeting Idris’s questioning stare head on. “I will finish that task.”

He held her gaze for a moment, then shook his head. “Now is no time to talk foolishness. We make for the docks at Makavi. We should be able to find a boat in acceptable enough condition that we can row along the coast far enough to avoid getting caught in this Daemon’s hunt.”

“Pyry’s harbour is along that route,” Raelynn said.

“And if we are sensible, we’ll sail past it until we reach Oreia.”

Raelynn narrowed her eyes, but turned away from Idris and instead addressed the woman they had freed, and the group of people gathered behind her. “I do not know your name, but you are welcome to join us—at least part of the way. If you can find a boat, we can lead you to Oreia. It is the only settlement of humans left, as far as any of us have been able to tell. We can’t promise much, but a bed, a modicum of safety and some hot food is better than anything you’ll find in the wilds.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I am going to stay.” She paused, glancing out toward the woods where they could still hear the sounds of the hunting Shadowspawn. “I have been imprisoned with these people for nearly one

hundred years. We do not know each other, and we have shared no words, but nonetheless, we are bound. I will not abandon them to be hunted—not when I might help. I do not speak for everyone here, of course.”

She glanced back at the group of people behind her, but if anything, they edged further toward her at the implication they might choose to leave. One man, a wiry twenty-something with straggly hair the colour of straw stepped forward, eyes focused on the woman.

“We, too, will stay. This is our home. We did not abandon it to the Shadow one thousand years ago. We will not now.”

Idris tutted loudly and muttered something Casek was certain was insulting. He ignored it, stepping forward and reaching out a hand to the woman.

“Good luck,” he said. “Hopefully we’ll meet again one day in better circumstances.”

The woman took his hand, grip firm, and shook it. “Thank you Casek. Without you, none of us would have felt the free air on our faces again. I am Íte. If I live to see your return, know I will do everything I can to repay the debt owed to you for what you have done here.”

Casek nodded, and watched for a moment as Íte and the others darted off into the forest to begin their new lives, as long or short as they might be. Then he hurried in the opposite direction, after Raelynn and Idris, who had already started back toward Makavi.

They reached the town’s gate again without incident. Somehow, scurrying through the cobbled streets felt even more uncomfortable than the first. Even with being able to sense there were few Shadowspawn close by, the still silence of what should have been a bustling hub of activity and noise was unsettling. His gut still held memories of what this place should have been like, and though he couldn’t picture it clearly, he could still *feel* the absence of what should be.

Instead, every open doorway, every shrouded window up high, was a place from which they could be watched by unfriendly eyes. Each drawn out second of silence cranked the tension up a notch higher, until Casek’s teeth ground in his mouth, and he flinched and started at every subtle change in the wind or imagined movement in the corner of his eye.

He was about ready to crack by the time they reached the docks once more and began searching the quay for a sea-worthy vessel.

“I can’t believe how well-preserved these boats are,” he wondered aloud whilst they checked the lifeboats of a trading vessel too large for them to sail unaided. “To be honest, I’m struggling to wrap my head around how well preserved most things are. The buildings are resin-cured, so I can understand that. But for there to be things like tools and rope—Gods, for there to be *any* boats left intact near the ocean—its ridiculous.”

Idris regarded him for a moment, a pair of oars in hand for the likely-looking rowboat he’d just removed the protective canvas covering from. After an uncomfortably long pause, he spoke. “It is a phenomenon poorly understood. We know it is something to do with the presence of the Shadow, though. It is said that in the once-resplendent cities in the North, where the Shadow resides in unfathomable numbers, things appear decades old, rather than centuries—or even millennia.”

He glanced over the rowboat—a decent sized, deep brown vessel with a small mast and sail and enough space for the three of them to be comfortable, but small enough to be rowed—and nodded in satisfaction. The three of them began using the still-intact pulleys to lower it over the side of the trading ship, into the sea below, whilst Idris continued.

“Some suggest—myself included—that it has something to do with the nature of the magic used to create the stasis crystals. They preserve living people almost perfectly, awake and alive, for an indefinite period. I believe there is a power bleed in places where many of these crystals exist in close proximity, and things nearby are preserved beyond their natural limit. Others have suggested it is something to do with the Shadow themselves. That they have consciously or accidentally altered the very fabric of our reality—changed fundamentally how the passage of time affects the world. This, I think, is a little harder to believe, but the reality is that we simply don’t have the answers to say with any certainty.”

In a matter of minutes, they were in their small vessel, preparing it and themselves for their journey, when a chill ran across Casek’s arms that had nothing to do with the fresh ocean breeze. With it, came a twist of nausea, and he jerked his head back towards the abandoned town.

“You sense something, Casek,” Idris said, regarding him with a dead-eyed stare.

Raelynn glanced up, words already threatening to spill out of her mouth, but Casek spoke first, eyes never leaving the buildings at the end of the pier. “It’s here. We need to set sail—now!”

As if in answer, a furious shriek burst forth from what had once been a warehouse, sending the assorted gulls bobbing daintily on the gently lapping ocean scattering into the air in a flurry of panicked squawks. Casek span, rushing to untie the fastenings holding back the tightly rolled sail, whilst Idris and Raelynn scrambled for their oars to put them to sea.

The Daemon herself exploded forth from the vast wooden double doors in the centre of the building, her howls filling the square, and penetrating right to Casek's bones, even as their boat drifted easily away from the pier thanks to the efforts of his two companions.

It thundered at them from the building at terrifying speeds, flanked by a retinue of slathering Bel'gor in spider form, reaching the pier unsettlingly quickly. For the barest of moments, Casek thought it might hurl itself into the sea and swim after them—or even leap the distance to the boat. Mercifully, it reared up on its back legs, frothing with impotent rage, and shrieked again.

Only, this time, amongst the piercing, alien rasp, Casek could hear a single word:

*“Tainted!”*

He shot glances at Raelynn and Idris, and their faces told him he had not imagined it. Again and again, the Daemon howled at them as they sailed away, with Casek taking up his own oar to hasten their speed. Again and again, he dragged the wooden paddle through the water, each stroke punctuated by another howl from the Daemon, gradually growing more and more distant until finally, he could hear it no more.

*“Tainted!”*

*“Tainted!”*

*“Tainted...”*

\* \* \*

***End of Volume 2***

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## Afterword

Thank you so much for reading Volume Two! If you've enjoyed, please remember to leave a rating or review. It means the world to us authors!

Volume Three is currently up for pre-order on the Amazon store, but if you don't wish to wait, you can read ahead by subscribing to my [Patreon](#).

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## About The Author

### **Dylan King**



Dylan King is an epic fantasy author currently writing from a cave in the mountains of Scotland. Kept company by his brilliant wife and a far too energetic dog, he spends his time sending finished manuscripts to editors by raven and drinking copious amounts of Dr Pepper delivered to him on the backs of peculiar, robed creatures.

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## Books By This Author

### **The Shadow Binder: Season One, Volume Three**

Casek's small group of Binders are faced with a critical choice: delve into the Shadow infested ruins of Pyry in search of their final lost comrade, or leave him behind in order to get Casek safely within the walls of Oreia. To do one is to leave family to a fate worse than death, to do the other is to put humanity's only chance of defeating the Shadow at risk.

What none of them know is that the game has changed. The Shadow has seen Casek wield the only power that might turn the tide of the War, and now they gather their forces to deliver the killing blow to what's left of humanity.

Humanity's existence lay balanced on a knife edge and for better or worse, the choices made by Casek and company here will irrevocably decide the fate of all humankind.

### **Duty and Other Stories**

Magic with a terrible price. Sky-pirates. Demons.

Inside Duty and Other Stories:

Duty

A standalone short story set in the world of The Slain God Saga, a forthcoming epic fantasy series.

Power of any kind has its price, and the power of life and death bears the

heaviest of all.

The women of the Dui, a secretive order of magical healers scattered across Doth Domhan, pay this price every single day to carry out their duty: to heal. Míanann has always done her duty, and each time she has paid the toll in full. Now there is nothing left of herself to sacrifice, no strength left with which to do her duty.

Nothing left, until a little girl comes through her door, dying in the arms of her terrified father, and Míanann feels the pull of her duty once more...

This short story was originally published in Bards and Sages Quarterly.

### Voyage of the Skyriders

A standalone short story set in the world of a forthcoming epic fantasy series, The Slain God Saga.

The Mountain Swallow hides a dark secret.

Still reeling from a recent defeat, Ingtar must rally his crew for a treacherous passage to Catharleas to replace their ship's failing engines. But there is weakness in him that has never been present before, and no place in the world punishes a weak heart harder than the skies above the Sundered Plains...

Voyage of the Skyriders is a short fantasy story (approx. 6000 words).

### The Shadow Binder

An excerpt from my episodic progression fantasy series, 'The Shadow Binder'.

The stars are going out.

This is the only certainty, besides his own name, that Casek wakes with, strapped to a table among the ruins of a faintly familiar building. Armed with only a strange voice in his head and what few, fragmented memories



survived his age-long sleep, he must escape his prison and survive long enough to build a new life of peace and happiness for himself. Unfortunately, the world outside is one ravaged by the Shadow: parasitic, demonic entities that sustain themselves with the energy of other living beings.

World by world they have stripped the stars bare of life, and now the final dying embers of a once-great human civilisation fight a losing battle against an inexhaustible enemy. The Last Human City, Oreia, remains hidden from the enemy, and its force of Shadow Binders continue to stand firm, a final, formidable bulwark against the encroaching dark.

However, their numbers dwindle by the day, and the Shadow prepares its forces to overwhelm the last of humanity's resistance. If Casek is to survive for long, he must find the city before it falls, and somehow discover a way to turn the tide against impossible odds before it's too late.

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