

Library

Fantasy Fiction

Argent Hellion

ATHARON

– Providence –

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Argent Hellion

ATHARON: PROVIDENCE

3rd book in the ATHARON series

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I dedicate this book to everyone struggling on their life's journey, regardless if they merely stumbled or consider themselves fallen.

No matter how bleak or hopeless things might seem to be, giving up without a fight should never be an option.

Not all that glitters is gold and not all who wander are truly lost, but only those who truly suffered through life can appreciate genuine happiness when they finally get to experience it.

Had I ever given up through-out the struggles I still endure, this very series would not exist.

Atharon - Providence
Argent Hellion

Prologue

The tedious rain kept on drizzling ever since the first rays of dawn made their way over the mountains. Her fully soaked cloak weighed twice as much now, her over-sized hood obstructing the view just beyond her own feet, yet still she couldn't and wouldn't take either of them off due to the ever-present, freezing north-western wind. While it still wasn't strong enough to sweep her off the road, or her feet, it was more than persistent enough to cause serious frostbites beneath every single gap in her clothing it managed to breach. Her solitude was becoming unbearable; she hadn't encountered a single soul or creature for the whole day of walking, nor the night before. The absence of tracks in the frozen, shallow sludge mixed with fallen leaves meant the road ahead hasn't been used for quite some time.

Besides the ominous whistling of wind and the occasional rustling of leaves, only her tiresome stomping and her exhausted puffing occasionally broke the silence. Shriveled within her outfit while tucking her head underneath her hood, she wrapped her scarf to tightly cover her face, leaving only her eyes and nose exposed. She stubbornly kept on going as the eternal outcast she was, carrying everything she had on her person; a large backpack strapped on her back, another across her chest and two smaller ones hanging down her flanks. Two swords of varied lengths hung over her shoulder, the very tools of her trade, along with two shortswords and two daggers strapped on her belt.

An onset of crackling beneath her feet brought her to a sudden stop. She cast her hood slightly aside for a better look and found herself within a thick layer of fog. The usual sludge

vanished beneath the deep, winter snow, while the tenuous evergreen forest slightly opened up with a winding path ahead. Standing on a clear-cut line between the chilling fall and the freezing winter, she leaned forward and moved onward, stubbornly pushing one foot in front of the other.

The rain turned to sleet as the wind picked up speed, violently shifting directions. Thin clouds of frozen ice kept swiping at her from all sides, forcing her stance as lowly as possible. The fact her tracks were being brushed out of existence not long after she left them behind wasn't even given an afterthought. She was exhausted, famished, but no less determined to reach her destination; it couldn't have been much further ahead. She went down this road before more than half a lifetime ago, in the comfort of a carriage. She tried counting her steps to keep track of her progress, but lost count soon thereafter. Regardless, she kept trailing the line between the layers of snow, what she perceived to be the edge of the road itself. The sleet eventually became less blinding as the wind finally relented, dusk was soon upon her and with it yet another restless, sleepless night on the move. Possibly her last.

A wooden obstacle appeared in front of her so abruptly, she nearly slammed head-first into it. After taking a few steps back and slightly raising her head, she realized it for a palisade gate, or what was left of it anyways. Half the gate was still standing upright, while the other half barely held onto its hinges with what little of it remained, broken apart by something akin a mighty blow blasting it from within.

The shroud of night had not yet completely enveloped the land, but it seemed the town itself had already fallen to slumber. She slowly walked through the gate, coming to a brief stop on the first intersection, quickly figuring out she had to take the middle road onward. The houses near the gate barely made their appearance known through the fog. She kept to the right of the



street just wide enough to allow room for two passing carriages, all the while pondering the absence of life all around. She was quick to notice all the shutters being sealed, some of them even bound by rope or locked by chain, barely allowing the wood even to creak, let alone rattle in the wind. Several windows on the upper floors seemed to have been left forgotten, indicating the direction of the wind.

There was no one in sight, nor any sign of light. Other than the shutters rattling and her feet dredging their way through the snow, there was no other sound at all.

After quite a long walk, she laid eyes on clear traces of blood, smeared over one of the walls. A body was pinned up against it not too long ago and dragged along half its length. She closely followed the vicious swipe to a point where it slipped downward, ending in a thick layer of frozen blood. Not far from it, spread across the wall of the adjacent house, she found four parallel stretchmarks, no doubt left by the claws of a vicious apparition. Just below the scrapes, stomped into the frozen mud and snow, she found its shallow footmarks as well. Its feet were twice the size of hers and its stride varied greatly, suggesting the apparition had moved slowly at first, then turned to running on a whim before leaping higher.

She picked up her pace while trying not to run outright, doing her best not to make too much noise. Her destination lay on the farther end of the street, she was certain of it now, but also well aware she'd be the only viable target the entire way. Soon enough indeed, distant steps began shadowing her. She took a deep breath and kept her pace, trying her best to pay closer attention to her surroundings. Unknown steps were gradually getting louder from behind, she frightfully kept throwing her gaze from one side of the street to the other, looking for a spot to crawl into, thinking it better to barge into any sort of shelter

and let the apparition move on, rather than trying to outrun it on its own domain.

She finally dropped her hood and turned to sprinting. By that point, the fog turned so thick, making it impossible to see further than three houses ahead, its freezing grasp solidifying on her cheeks. She could have punched a nail into it for leverage.

Her stalker kept up with her pace and seemed to be gradually getting closer. There was no other choice left; she had to get out of its way, right then and there. Finally taking the proactive approach, she lunged at the closest door to her right, raised her right foot and struck just below the doorknob with full force, hoping to tear the latch apart. Her pounce struck hard but immediately got knocked back, a sudden spike of throbbing pain shooting up her leg and causing several muffled noises from within. She struck the door twice more in desperation, but the stubborn, wooden obstacle refused to budge.

After the third attempt, everything went quiet. Fearing the worst, she turned to face the way she came, laying eyes on a silhouette at the very edge of the fog, its shrouded height and width being nearly twice the size of hers. The apparition seemed to be hunched over... or lacking a head on its shoulders.

- What are you? - she muttered in Drakon, spreading her cloak apart and carefully leaning her hands on her shortswords.

The silhouette remained where it stood, slowly beginning to moan and gradually raising its volume, seemingly coming to life with every passing moment. Trying her best not to provoke it, she decided to retreat and took her first, tiny step backward, dragging her left leg through the snow and pulling her right afterwards soon thereafter. Slowly, carefully, she made another step back, then another, patiently increasing the distance until the silhouette vanished from her sight entirely.

Then, its frightening shriek gave away its intentions.

She turned on the spot and took to panicked sprinting, summoning her enhancements the instant she picked up speed. By forcing a tremendous burst of energy into her legs first and foremost, she instantly improved her stride, then bolstered her conditioning to make the effort less exhausting, finally ending the process by imprinting a conditional reflex into her legs to leap away from any sort of interception. She brazenly darted her way down the street, constantly shaking her head to disperse the chills off her face and out of her eyes. Even though she hadn't bothered looking back, the sustained echoes of trampling feet trailing behind meant the apparition was in pursuit. Whether or not it was struggling to keep pace, she couldn't tell, but since its distorted shrieking wasn't getting any weaker, it became rather evident she wasn't going to outrun it any time soon.

The fog kept on getting even thicker, or maybe her blistering speed made it appear that way. The blurs on both sides of the street kept getting all the more tightly packed, indicating an intersection ahead. Thinking on her feet, she replaced her conditional reflex: intending to jump behind the first corner and take up a fighting stance, hopefully surprising the apparition with just enough room for a swift counter-attack. As soon as a contrasting outline revealed the glimpse of a clearing, her left leg responded and struck out on its own, but its heel slipped on the frozen pavement hidden beneath the snow. She lost her footing and fell on her right flank, losing none of her momentum. With her backpacks and cloak all too scuffed to provide any sort of traction, she slid her way across the upcoming intersection in its entirety, slamming against an iron gate as it came into existence seemingly out of nowhere.

The intense impact came to her with such a shock, her left leg and her left arm spontaneously invoked the previous reflex again, bouncing her off the gate with a violent clang of stone, metal and chain. She instantly took a kneeling, defensive stance

and reached for her shortswords, but only managed to pull her right blade out, as the other shattered within its sheath.

The frightening, ceaseless shrieking hinted at the apparition in the immediate vicinity, just out of sight, somewhere within the intersection she just slid her way through. Fortunately for her, they were no longer alone, an onset of distant howling suddenly turned to vicious barking, rapidly approaching from within the yard. The gate violently rattled again and she impulsively turned to face the new threat, suddenly finding herself staring down four Schafer hounds stumbling over themselves, repeatedly jumping against the gate in an effort to reach her, barking their lungs out.

When she instinctively turned towards the hounds, she briefly lost focus on her initial pursuer. As soon as she became aware of that fact, she quickly turned to face the intersection again, only to realize the shrieking had completely stopped. The apparition was gone. Did it run off, or was it merely lying in wait? She couldn't tell.

- I'm on my way, dammit! - a male voice boomed from afar, summoning a pale, barely visible orange glow in the distance. Hearing their master, the hounds immediately tempered their aggression and muffled their barking, turning their savagery to snarling and squealing instead.

- Uncle Wailin?! - she spoke up in a trembling voice, refusing to avert both her gaze and her stance away from the intersection.

- Finally came to your senses, did ya? - the man groaned as he approached the gate, clearly not picking up on her words. He leaned his sword next to the gate and reached for his keys to unlock it.

- It's me... Celine... - she briefly turned to face him, as soon as she heard the chains rattling again and the cumbersome lock snapping open. She laid eyes on him pushing the gate with one

hand while waving his lantern to stave off his hounds with the other.

- I... I don't believe it! - he gasped in utter shock. - Get in the yard, get in quick, you fool! - he whispered and hurriedly ushered her in, slamming the gate shut behind her.

- What was th... - she muttered back, but instantly got silenced by his whistling screech, along with his intense gesturing to keep her voice down.

Chapter 01

- Vision -

She found herself calmly strolling through the marketplace, keeping pace with the moderate crowd. The sun was brightly glowing quite high in the sky, pouring its heat upon the typical Drakonian town. It was some time around noon. She took a glance down, at her supplies at hand, merely a couple carrots, several potatoes and a single strand of garlic in her basket. She couldn't exactly tell what was missing, so she made her way onward, glancing the stands and observing the traders as they stubbornly advertised to the crowd, focusing their attention on anyone daring to approach close enough.

- I've got fresh applies of all the world's colors, darling! - an elderly woman, wearing a blue topcoat and a red apron, raised her voice at her the moment she came within earshot.

- I only care about the flavor. - she responded courteously, trying her best to hide the fact she had no idea how she got there in the first place, let alone what she might be looking for.

- Oh darling, the brighter the color, the sweeter the bite! - the woman grinned at her and reached for the closest crate, quickly sliding one of her apples through the apron before passing it on. - I'll give you a whole crate for half the price, should you find any fault.

- Fine. - she uttered in mild annoyance and reached for the apple, just to please her. - But if the taste isn't right, I won't be buying any at all.

- Nonsense, darling, - the woman cackled, revealing her crooked teeth while raising her voice in a well-rehearsed manner, - an apple never goes to waste! You could eat it fresh today or use it for a pie tomorrow, maybe some marmalade the day after or even some compost even later. Anything you'd like!

She pulled the apple closer, breathing in its sweet scent before taking a large bite. Sealing her lips, she tried to chew quickly, but the intense flavor overwhelmed her. Tears welled in her eyes as she choked for air, coughing out a few pieces before catching her breath.

- This one... isn't for me. - she tried faking composure as their eyes met, breaking her serious expression and quickly forcing her to cough quite profusely.

- You almost had it. - the woman grinned, victorious. - Let's round it down to two Schrills. So your effort doesn't end up wasted.

- The price, on the crate, says twenty seven. - she barely coughed her way through her own words, dropping her basket on the ground and shoving her left hand into her pocket, pulling most of her coins out. - Take, twenty seven. No point in rewarding failure.

- If you say so, darling. - the woman nodded and quickly began sifting through her palm. - But I could let you pick the crate!

Her eyes flew over the whole stand while the woman picked her coins one at a time. Once the payment was settled, she dropped her hand back into her pocket without counting the change, calmly pointing at the crate on the very edge of the top row. Simply put, it was the courteous thing to do, requiring minimal engagement. She gave the saleswoman a humble smile and got rewarded in kind, took hold of the crate using her left hand and picked up her basket with her right, slowly slipping

into the crowd again. After a brief stroll, she reached a particular vendor and felt a sudden urge to leave the marketplace, by acting she upon it she quickly found herself walking down what appeared to be the main street. A similar urge soon pulled her aside again, into one of the shorter, dead-end alleyways towards a familiar appearance, seated in front of a humble stone house.

- Mommy's got the om-nom! - the man cheered, roughly her age and bearing a well-known face.

He lifted the child upright on his lap, standing it up on its tiny legs and turning it her way. It began cheerfully jabbering and twiddling its tiny arms the moment it spotted her. Clearly, both of them were impatiently waiting for her. She approached them with a humble smile, carefully lowering her basket to the ground and taking hold of the first apple she could easily reach for, slowly passing it on.

- What kind of om-nom would you like? - she winked as the child took to playing with the apple, slowly making her way into the house to drop the crate on the nearest table. Realizing she left the basket outside, she turned back to pick it up again, only to find him standing in the doorway, passing it on with one hand while still holding their child in the other.

- As long as it doesn't end up all over me again, anything is fine. - he rolled his eyes sarcastically.

- Maybe you shouldn't be tossing him about so much, then. How about some cake? - she grinned and carefully approached the child, intending to snatch the apple back.

- No cake out of this one, apparently. - her partner giggled as the child did its level best to keep her at bay, clutching its toy while barking a number of mumbles and grumbles which could have been easily interpreted as hostile snarling, almost as if that particular apple would be the very last thing it would ever get to grasp.

A loud blast echoed from afar; quickly followed by the town bell raising the alarm. It kept on banging all the louder with every subsequent hit, quickly shifting the appeal of the blissful family reunion to sinister danger. The clear skies quickly turned grey, as ominous clouds took ever firmer hold. The calm paradise turned to sudden chaos, screams rumbling in the distance as booming thunder rattled her entire world, but without any flashes of lightning anywhere.

- Duty calls! - she suddenly raised her voice and snatched the child from his grasp, even though she had no idea what was actually happening, prompting him to quickly stretch out his hand towards the house. Out of their humble abode, flying swiftly as a dagger thrown with intent, a simple Mage's wand spun its way through the air and got firmly caught in his grasp. He quickly secured it on his belt, taking another swipe at the darkness within the house, summoning an additional wand in a similar fashion for a spare.

- Be careful, both of you. - he leaned into a quick kiss, then ran towards the main street.

Instead of fear, she felt a strange onset of confusion, which led her to briefly follow his footsteps, watching him vanish behind the corner. A hard-fought battle quickly developed somewhere in the distance, not too close, but also not too far away either. Thinking it best to shelter and secure the child, she quickly ran back to the house, entered the bedroom and leaned over the cradle, but as she lowered the child onto the wool bedding, her hands suddenly went completely numb. For some reason, she couldn't let go, even though she very much wanted to, so she brought the child back up and held it close. A strange impulse, unlike anything she had ever experienced, followed by a sudden onset of fear, pulled her into the open again, running to the main street with her child in hand while leaving the house wide open.

As she came upon the intersection, she slammed her back against the wall, just short of being pulled into the way of the rabble running past. The situation turned beyond dire as the crowd was feverishly stampeding its way down the main street. Anyone not fast enough to keep pace or strong enough to stand their ground ended up stumbling and falling, quickly getting trampled by the desperate mob trying to escape the imminent danger. A beastly roar from high afar indicated a dragon in the area, an assumption which was quickly confirmed by a sudden red glow bursting upwards, a flame thrown just out of sight. The monstrous roar was briefly interrupted by a sudden thud, followed by echoing words of a language unknown.

The beast responded by unleashing a particularly vicious scream, forcing a blast of wind down the main street, throwing everything and everyone it came across to the ground. Partly caught in its wake, she fell on her side, bruising her shoulder as the child immediately took to screaming in her arms, crying ever louder as she crawled on her back to tuck them both further behind the corner, away from subsequent blasts. Instead of running away, she hunkered next to the wall and snuggled her child on the spot, managing to calm its cries just as she picked up on the muffled shouting in the background.

- You're gonna hit him, moron! - a deep, male voice echoed just behind the corner.

- He's getting himself killed anyways! - another responded in kind.

- Whatever he's doing, it seems to be working! - the first voice yelled back, just as she peaked out to see what was happening. City guards, standing tall and staring high, observing something she couldn't see from her own point of view. Both of them were wearing scuffed leather tabards and cheap metal armor, as well as similarly shaped metal helmets. Even though they were similar, they differed in armament; one of them was

helplessly wielding a spear, while the other was pulling his bow back, preparing a shot upwards.

- Where's the dragon heading?! - she spoke up and broke cover, but the guard with the spear quickly waved her back into her corner.

- Get off the street! - he screamed at her just before a sudden, horrific roar made its way directly above them. The onslaught of vibrations reverberating through the air sent chills down her spine and briefly stunned her entire body, almost causing her to drop the child. The very instant she felt it slipping from her grip, she instinctively tightened it as much as she could.

Her child did remain within her grasp, but took to crying again.

- Get down! - the Archer dropped his bow and threw himself at his partner, both of them slamming on the paved ground seemingly not a moment too soon. Several meters above their heads, well enough out of the way, a vast red smudge swiped its way through the air and struck one of the nearby houses. A brief hail of shattered glass, clay and stone ensued, showering the entire area, bringing a sudden wave of desperate cries and painful groans.

It couldn't have been anything other than the dragon's tail, which became quite obvious when the dust finally settled. It demolished its way through the impacted house, tearing through the upper floor and half the roof like a giant sledgehammer. Sure enough, as she walked further up the street and finally looked up, she spotted the red creature high in the sky, throwing its weight around deep within the shifting clouds, casting its breath all over the place. It seemed to have gone completely insane, sporadically roaring and shrieking, twisting and turning, up until two sudden, violent flashes sent it spiraling out of control, plunging into freefall.

She heard the dragon's harrowing roar one last time, just before it struck the ground and shook her entire world for the very last time. The brief moment of silence was quickly replaced with bewildered screams, this time with joy instead of horror. She ran towards the noise, quickly catching up with the crowd within the crash area. The two of the highest tightly packed houses that cushioned the dragon's fall now bore the main cause for celebrations. The mob took to screaming even louder, turning to cheering as one of the guards climbed his way to the upper floor and pulled the dragon's head into the open, for everyone to see, then turning to ovations as he reached for his sword.

- Cut it, cut it, cut it! - the crowd kept on chanting as he kept on swinging. It took him ten decisive blows to cut the dragon's head off and just as much exhaustive effort to push it off the side, rolling it down to street level. The senseless mob quickly piled around the mystical object, closing in for a better look at the miracle at hand.

As the commotion was slowly shifting towards the chaotic side again, she thought it for the best to leave the rabble behind and head the other way. She walked past the wounded guards being tended to and past her intersection, closely following yet another urge that kept pulling her onward.

She froze in horror the moment she laid eyes on the market, realizing it was the focal point of the dragon encounter. The devastation was damn near absolute here, with dozens of corpses littered all across the mangled rubble. Those in decent condition were brought to the nearest clearing, laid on their backs with their arms crossed over their chest, while the vast majority, mutilated beyond recognition, were merely covered with any sort of cloth at hand wherever they fell. An onset of desperation soon befell her, as she paid close attention to any and all of their faces, unable to spot his particular one anywhere.

- He's not here. - an ominous whisper reached her from behind, instantly causing her to spin on her heels and face the street she just came from, only to witness the encroaching darkness gradually approaching from the distance, devouring her reality.

- You lost him. - another whisper quickly followed, much closer and louder. Someone was standing right next to her.

- Where are you?! - she cried out, failing to spot anyone around her after several sharp spins. The more she tried to find the source of those echoes, the more her world crawled to a stop, every turn of her head and every blink of her eyes slightly distorting her surroundings. In sheer panic, she turned her attention towards the closest of corpses, wanting to pay closer attention to their faces, but as she tried to make out any details they quickly melted out of shape, like paint being smeared across a well-soaked canvas.

- He died a hero, just so you might survive, a coward! - a wretched, disgusted voice began laughing at her, as the onset of slight vibrations suddenly drew closer attention to her child.

She nervously looked down and caught sight of her son staring up at her, without ever blinking. His innocent eyes turned to a vicious, piercing, animalistic gaze as his tiny smile grew ever wider, his mouth unnaturally stretching from one ear to the other, revealing his sharp, beastly teeth. At the same time, the corpses all around began rattling in place and ominous growls began echoing behind her back. For the very last time, she mustered the courage to take a closer look at one of them, nearly dying of fright as the mangled shape of a skinned Schafer hound savagely lunged from beyond the sheet, knocking her to the ground.



The onslaught of shallow pain in her abdomen finally forced her awake. She came to her senses remarkably fast, staring through the thick glass without bothering to raise her head off the pillow. Muddled silhouettes moved between the static outlines of the occasional tree, the muffled chatter of children overlapping with the playful barking of hounds. She took a deep breath, slowly stretched and carefully sat upright in her bed, quickly taking note of the first significant change in the room. All of the gear she brought with her and left next to the fireplace was gone. Instead of her worn out backpacks and her weathered outfit, an elegant black-and-red winter dress with a matching coat now stood in their place, along with a pair of winter boots laced with silver engraving so extravagant, it clearly wasn't made for commoners.

While staring at her new clothes, she couldn't help but wonder how did Wailin manage to bring it all in and not wake her in the process. More to the point, how did he manage to take everything else out so subtly and light up the fireplace as well? Celine had always been an exceptionally light sleeper; any sort of noise was more than enough to wake her at any given moment. She lost count of how many times she caught her supposed allies on the verge looting her, whenever they figured she was sound asleep, or how many times she had the privilege of snoozing her way through sentry duty. To be fair, she just went through two whole days and three whole nights without any sort of rest, so a wholesome and rather deep slumber was more than sorely needed.

Another thought lingered on her mind for far longer; it was the nightmare itself. Even as a child, she could remember most of her dreams quite vividly, favorably helping her recognize the face of her partner again and again. She knew that face all too

well, more than enough to instantly recognize him regardless of the circumstances... It could not have been a coincidence!

She vividly remembered Markus' face as well, even though she last saw him more than eight years ago, on the day of her seventeenth birthday. Her lasting partner seemed similar in appearance to him, but they were definitely NOT one and the same. Their facial features were quite similar, but not identical. Both of them had similar black eyes and short, black hair, so much so they could have easily been mistaken for relatives, brothers even. Still, Markus was twice her age the last time they parted ways, while her partner appeared roughly her own age whenever they crossed paths.

Their stature was the exact opposite. Markus had the appearance of a highlander, two meters of height and a hundred forty kilos of sheer muscle, a brute of a man. Meanwhile, her partner was always just slightly taller, slender and more agile than her, roughly half the weight of Markus and way more subtle, his prowess far more pronounced in the mental aspect than the physical.

Markus was always the distinctive, sore thumb of every single crowd he took part of, the loudest and the most dominant participant in any conversation, while her partner blended into the background and stuck to the shadows, barely existing until he'd utter a word. Their voices were nowhere near the same either, while Markus roared like an old-fashioned, rural Drakonian, her partner seemed far more sophisticated, his voice always bringing a mellow, soothing, Rhean tone. While Markus abbreviated his words and relied on crooked speech to speed up his banter, her partner clearly pronounced every single word with particular care. One of them fumbled his own tongue to get his point across as quickly as possible, while the other seemed to have had a rehearsed speech for every occasion.

Finally, the main reason why her partner and her half-brother Markus couldn't have been the same individual was their polarizing behavior. Markus seemed to always prioritize spontaneously asserting himself onto every situation, gradually shifting its focus and adapting its arguments for his own favor, while her partner never bothered questioning anything anyone else bothered to say. Markus always took to the role of the dedicated leader, along with the responsibility and the burden of resolving any issue at hand, while her partner always took to the role of an observer, an assistant, a passive consultant, a true follower.

Why was his face so intimately familiar? Were all of the peculiar dreams just as relevant? Was his face merely the expression of her subconsciousness, trying to tell her something? Was it all perhaps a repeated glimmer of destiny?

If Markus was to be believed, destiny is quite a precarious thing to handle, a dreadful concept to quantify, and a horrifying entity to oppose. The way he phrased it, people tend to put their faith in destiny when there's nothing else sensible left to turn to. Attributing any sort of phenomenon to the whims of destiny means objectifying the lack of its understanding, or completely disregarding its absurdity while blatantly accepting it at face value. Every single event that gets labeled as an act of destiny, no matter how profound or shallow, represents nothing more than the latest link in the ever-expanding chain of blind faith, anchoring the previous link while providing foundation for the subsequent. The larger the chain, the farther its reach and the larger its influence, but should even a single link shatter, the whole chain inevitably crumbles, along with everything attached.

Chapter 02

- Gift -

She slowly slipped into her new dress, pleasantly surprised how well it fitted her once the straps got tightened. Stepping into her fancy new boots, she stomped her heels several times to nestle them properly, reached for her coat and threw it over her back. Despite the lack of thickness, the prestigious clothing provided decent insulation. With nothing else left to distract her, she reached for the door and carefully pulled it back, immediately causing the hinges to unleash that stereotypical, rusty creaking, sending unnerving echoes through the hallway on the other side.

- Good morning, mistress. - an elderly woman leaned forward in her chair opposite the door, covered in several layers of mismatched rags, bending over to take hold of her matches and light her lantern. - The lord is expecting you in the study.

Celine had no objection to her guidance, after a brief stretch and a shallow yawn she slammed the door shut, enduring the crawling pace down the long hallway in silence. The chilling air quickly forced her to drop her knees and tuck her shoulders, covering any and all exposed skin. She observed the absence of lanterns, candelabras and pretty much any decorations on the sterile walls, giving the impression of dire predicament within the establishment as a whole.

A burst of daylight briefly disoriented her as they made their way into the hall, rushing through the skylight above. Her guide put the lantern out to save on oil, shuffling aside and allowing Celine to pass her by. She leaned on the wooden fence

to observe the glamorous hall beneath... only to realize there was no such thing down there.

The huge chamber would have been outlined with numerous tables, loaded with prestigious cutlery under normal circumstances, leaving plenty of room for entertainment in the middle, but now it served merely as a sheltered dumping ground. One of the furthest corners appeared to have been designated as the makeshift armory, filled to the brim with tools and improvised weapons. In the midst of it all stood a wide table stacked with swords in such a pathetic state of disrepair, even the most novice of apprentices would be ashamed to show. A pile of jumbled clothing was gathered not too far away; two elderly men were dropping off several coats on it while an elderly woman kept sifting through it. On the opposite side of the hall stood an anvil, currently occupied by an elderly blacksmith hammering at a piece of metal not unlike a snow shovel, surrounded with numerous broken tools he hasn't gotten around to fixing yet. The largest pile, however, stood in the very center of the hall, consisting of random wooden furniture and scaffolding the inhabitants managed to get their hands on. Two women were clumsily standing on that pile, using a crude hacksaw to cut a thick, broken doorframe apart, while a boy and a girl carefully dragged smaller bits and pieces aside, sorting them for firewood.

The hall itself didn't fare much better than the junk being hoarded within. The heavily stained skylight hasn't been cleaned in ages and it was pretty much the same deal with all of the windows that hadn't been shattered and boarded shut. Portraits and wood carvings, candelabras and lanterns, along with pretty much anything else that would have been hanging on the walls, was gone. The only decorations giving away the former prestige of this chamber were the antiquated stone carvings on the furthest wall, just above the spot where the lord and his family would be seated.

- What kind of a dump is this?! - Celine finally uttered in sheer disbelief, turning to her guide and immediately backing away from the fence, surprised by the intense echo bouncing of the barren walls.

- We are trying to survive. - came the apathetic answer.

- But... why here?! - Celine asked bluntly, refusing to turn from her guide. - This is the most prestigious chamber in your whole town, not a communal barn! - the entire hall went silent as everyone briefly raised their heads, trying to figure out where those shouts were coming from.

- Nowhere else is safe. - the elderly guide shrugged her shoulders and turned around, unaffected by Celine's disgruntled tone.

- While we're on the subject, what kind of a freak did I stumble upon last night?! - Celine kept pestering her, refusing to follow in her step as the guide kept shuffling away.

- The lord will explain everything. - the woman responded with the same, disinterested tone, not bothering to turn back or even alter her pace, leaving Celine with no other choice but to come to terms with the situation and follow along.

The guide patiently led her across the inner terraces to the upper rooms, knocking several times on a particular door before slowly stepping inside. The muffled chatter within came to an abrupt end, as several pairs of eyes focused their full attention upon the newcomer. One of them was lord Wailin.

- The sooner you start, the more you can bring before nightfall. - the lord dropped his final statement and stood up from his chair, forcing the rest of his entourage to instantly bow their heads in unison and leave the room in an orderly fashion.

- Have you had breakfast? - the guide uttered a polite question only after the door was shut again and the three of them were left alone.

- Didn't have the time, and I have a lot to discuss with the young lady. - his mouth spread into as wide of a yawn as possible. He obviously didn't get any sleep last night.

- In that case, I'll send a plate for each. - the guide replied and shuffled her way out of the room, slamming the door behind her as if never intending to open it ever again.

Celine remained where she stood, patiently waiting for the lord to speak first, but he just kept on pulling one sigh after another. He did try to speak, but couldn't muster the strength to do so, averting his gaze in a clear lack of composure. Were it not for the clattering busywork within the hall, the room would have fallen dead silent.

- You were not expecting me. - she boldly spoke up, when it became apparent the lord couldn't break the ice himself.

- You... - he squealed, nearly choking. - You are such an idiot, you know that! - his groan turned to laughter as he spread his arms apart. Celine quickly took that as a clear sign to run around the desk for a hug and the elder took hold of her with all his strength, which wasn't a lot, but meant the world to her nonetheless.

- It runs in the family. - she burst into laughter along with him.

- I barely... ugh... recognized you. - he managed to squeal his message through.

- They couldn't have improved my looks that much? - she quickly threw another joke his way, even though his words did bring some unintended harm.

- Oh no, my child! - he took a deep sigh and managed to pull himself together, letting go of her and pointing towards one of the chairs, seating her next to his own spot at the desk. - You are not, the only one to have such serious, messed up and grave,

problems to contend with. - He forced his words in-between the sighs.

- Sounds interesting, when you phrase it that way. - she politely nodded.

After a brief knock on the door, one of the younger maids delivered breakfast. The scorching heat billowed its way into the room, bringing forth the scent of beans, pork and leek. She stood at the ready in front of the desk, waiting for the lord to clear just enough room to place it all down; two deep bowls and a single rag containing a square piece of bread, along with two wooden spoons.

- Don't look at me like that, that forsaken cunt took all of my silverware! - he spat with disgust as soon as the door got slammed shut again. He took hold of the bread and slowly broke it in half, taking the smaller part for himself. - She even stripped the lighting off my walls! - He bit into his bread and sunk the spoon into the bowl.

- I only know of one who fits that description. - Celine looked down, shuffling the bit of pork through the brown sludge. Two tiny pieces of meat were barely worth noting, merely there to slightly flavor the boiled water, along with whatever beans and leek could have been spared. Still, it was all the encouragement her empty stomach needed to start rumbling so loudly, even the workers in the hall might have heard it.

- Exactly. - the lord nodded, his mouth being full at that moment, haphazardly explaining his predicament while still chewing. - Sonya and her spoiled brat. Stumbled through here, about two-three months ago. Practically bled us dry. Brought along a whole damn army. Took whatever they could carry. Snatched anyone fit to serve.

- Spoiled brat?! - she moved the spoon away from her mouth, at least for the moment. All of a sudden, her hunger didn't seem that significant to distract from the conversation.

- You know, the one who... - roared the lord, slamming his spoon into his bowl and splashing half his meal across the desk, some of it landing on his papers. - ...well, it's a long story.

* * *

I remember that day when Markus showed up at my gate, telling me how brutally your father had disowned you. That was around fifteen years ago, if I recall, right? The instant he jumped off his horse, he begged me to take you into my custody, nearly broke into tears too. I'm sure you're well aware I couldn't have accepted, even though I genuinely wanted to. In order for anyone to take you in without suffering dire consequences further down the line, they had to be of serious renown and high esteem, but still not revered well enough to directly collaborate with your father. Walter was the one best fitting all of those criteria, which is exactly why I sent Markus his way. I hadn't even bothered counting the gold I had given him for the journey, I just brought him the first sack I got my hands on and gave him my sturdiest horse. He took off without delay.

Couple of months later, he made his way back to me, profusely thanking me for saving both your lives. He told me you were adopted by the Kaschpars without an issue and he also revealed his intentions to counter his father's politics. I don't know if he told you any of this, but since that day he took to actively undermining your family's interests, in favor of cutting down the bloodshed. According to him, he had to betray the people of Dominion in order to save them.

He occasionally came along to handle the supplies for the war effort, smuggling some of our young men back from the frontlines in the process. Every single time we talked for hours and always, without fail, he'd point out how proud he was with your progress. He seemed quite happy, especially when heading your way, I quickly realized it was an annual tradition of

his... but I'm sure you're well aware of that. You also shouldn't be surprised to know most of the gifts he brought came from us.

About nine, maybe ten years ago, his story got even better. Occasionally he'd start talking about a certain Kaledonian woman he was working with and was getting to know quite intimately. I was later made aware she was his key informant, maybe even his foreign handler. I never saw her and Markus never bothered describing her in particular detail, probably out of habit rather than distrust. But what little he did reveal painted a solid picture, he had a lot of mighty fine words for that particular woman, just about the same words I used to grace my own wife with, back when she was still around... oh-bo ho...

I really hate to say this, but all good things must come to an eventual end. Several years ago, things took a sudden turn for the worst, as a crucial Manser was captured near Alva. He turned out to be a key player in the Kaledonian schemes and, once Sonya managed to crack him, both Markus and his lady were exposed. She wasted no time in taking action, I assume you're aware of the stories surrounding his disappearance, claiming he got caught in a nasty ambush during his diplomatic mission to the west. His killers allegedly tore him apart and spread him far and wide, his skull supposedly ended up on someone's mantle. Nothing but lies! Nonsense! Markus never bothered with the Western Front, let alone ever taking a single step within Federation territory!

I have no idea whether she caught his woman or not, though. Sonya only mentioned her once and I never dared asking about her again.

That was just about the time when Sonya got hold of that spoiled brat... her protege. Hella was a fiendish little thing, obnoxious and feisty but incredibly talented. She got smuggled along with a pack of slaves into Reptilian captivity. Please excuse my lack of knowledge regarding that subject, I'm only aware that your mangy grandfather, may his crooked corpse still roll in its grave while the maggots crap on his rotting bones and his dipshit of a son hopefully gets... Ehm, yep... sorry about that...

Apparently, your grandfather stumbled onto a lost civilization of lizardy looking folk, somewhere within the ruins of the Holy Guard. Sonya became obsessed with them almost overnight, as well as with Aynur and the Holy Guard. As far as I could tell, they weren't just another savage bunch; their flesh and blood seemed to be useful for bolstering one's mental abilities beyond known limits. Anyway, Hella not only managed to infiltrate their ranks as a slave, but also managed to bring their entire society down and haul a lot of them in chains back to the Dominion. More surprisingly, during the ordeal she somehow managed to surpass her mortal limitations and awaken her full might. I'm tellin' ya, she's the second worst thing I ever had to suffer through, right after Sonya, and there was nothing I could do to stop any of 'em from ordering us around.

When Hella returned from Aynur with the first batch of Reptilians in town, Sonya immediately took to expand her insane project from Lakrimar to our town, of all places. Naturally, we had no say in any of this.

Ever heard of the Avalons? Ever had the misfortune of encountering those hideous giants? Poor bastards got their legs and hands torn off, replaced with ones harvested from Reptilians, along with several internal organs implanted as well... Ugh... Makes me sick just thinking about it! To make matters worse, for every single Avalon who survived the horrific alteration, dozens have died within Sonya's wretched laboratories. She used an endless supply of convicts, refugees and traitors to refine the process, holding a special place for Markus. Yes, she spared him the mercy of a quick death just to invent new ways of torture, specifically for him. Had you seen him, you wouldn't have been able to recognize him. You wouldn't want to! It cannot be placed in words, the disgust I felt when she dragged his living carcass from Lakrimar. Every time I had to look at him, I felt a part of me dying. But I had to do what I was told; a single wrong move or foul word could have been more than enough cause for her to end us all.

We endured under her tyranny, up until this summer.

You remember what happened in Lakrimar not that long ago? A sudden sinkhole devoured an entire suburb there. Well, that particular suburb stood just above the spot where Sonya hid the Avalon project. One

of her Mansers must have alerted her and she immediately headed back to assess the damage. That same night, mere hours after her departure and with no Hella in sight, a sinkhole opened up beneath us. It was no accident! It couldn't have been! The whole damn castle shook so violently, I thought we were hit by an earthquake, so I ran outside. Sadly, by the time I realized the event was centered on the underground facilities, it was far too late. The entire complex was buried and it collapsed the eastern wing of my castle as well. My sons died in their sleep, along with their families.

One good thing about it is... well... Markus could finally rest in peace...

I'm sorry... but life goes on... Not much point in lamenting about it, especially now that we need every bit of strength and sanity we can muster.

The apparitions you witnessed on your way here had set their sights on us not long after the Avalon Project settled here. Andiamas were, undoubtedly, drawn by the misery and suffering of the unfortunate souls within those damned laboratories. As far as I'm aware, they themselves are brought into this world by those very same perils they spread. As long as you're horrified of them, they will haunt you relentlessly, until they finally corner you and plunge you into madness. Just like most apparitions, they keep to the dark and cannot be encountered during the day, unless you reach for the deepest of shadows. Hella actually went on to hunt them; apparently even the blood of Andiamas can be useful for that forsaken project of theirs. Wretched, deformed female bodies, slender yet remarkably muscular, their fingertips filed down to the bone for claws, their worn out feet scraping the ground as they stumble their way onward. Utter freaks, yet Hella seemed to enjoy hunting and feeding on them, until that disastrous sinkhole put an end to that as well.

At first, we were immensely relieved when the project was abandoned, but then we realized the Andiamas weren't going away. To make matters worse, Sonya came back not long afterwards, bringing a whole damn army along. They tried digging through the rubble to salvage the project, but quickly gave up on it again. For some freakin' reason, she decided the disaster was our own doing and decided to punish the whole town. Her soldiers broke their way into every home, every workshop and every cellar;

they looted anything they could carry and dragged away anyone able to serve the war effort, leaving only the sick, the elderly and the children behind.

They left us entirely at the mercy of the Andiamas and never bothered looking back. Maybe that's why the fog became far more severe since. It can't be a coincidence! It thickens whenever night rolls around and spreads itself thin with every morning, but it never dissipates. It lingers and fluctuates, yet never vanishes. We thought the palisade would keep us safe, but seems that was never an obstacle for them at all. Every single night, the Andiamas roam the streets like they own the place. Daylight is pretty much the only thing keeping them at bay. I begged the people to join me within the castle walls, this is the only fortified building in the whole town after all, but as you can see, only a handful have decided seeking shelter here. Can't really blame them, we're stubborn and selfish, we are Drakonians after all! We keep to our principles and our hearthstones, even if we have to die for them.

What value does a hearthstone have, when the last ember turns to ash?

We cannot tell if there is anyone left alive in any of the homes further away from the castle, we do not dare roam that far out. These walls are our last haven. We have to endure this winter, somehow. We have to keep the few children we have safe and sound. Tearing down the nearest homes seem to be working for now, we'll strip them down to their very foundation if it means keeping ourselves warm. We have to outlast this winter, endure the cold, and after that...

Troubled times are upon us, my child. If Sonya's words are to be believed, once she assembles enough of her Avalons the Western Front will be breached, your wicked father will reach the western shores and his armies will turn to the east again. The mere thought of the ancient kingdom being reformed makes my skin crawl! Leave this damned continent, run as far as you can, there is no life for you to be had here anymore. Should you make your way to Techna, you'll have the whole world to choose from.

You have a renowned bloodline, the fact that your father disowned you could prove more of an asset than you realize. Your adoptive family isn't any less relevant either. If I were you, I would make my way to Envy and attempt reaching the Empire. I'm sure you heard a fair share of stories

about them and I also think you're well aware most of them are mere propaganda. On the other hand, you could seek out the Order in Techna, they are the prime suspect when it comes to disrupting the Avalon Project. Considering your heritage, they should be more than willing to hear you out.

My experience taught me that every story has more than a single fair point of view, every question has more than a single sensible answer and every problem has more than a single viable solution. But now I'm rambling...

Come with me.

* * *

Nearly a third of the castle ended up being destroyed; the eastern wing had completely collapsed while the northern wing was severely damaged, but still mostly standing. The outer walls that managed to endure the tremors were severely cracked and barely able to bear their own weight, leaving more than enough clearing for anything even remotely slender to squeeze its way inside. To solve this issue, the lord decided abandoning all of the compromised rooms, having them cleared and salvaged before sealing them from within. For extra precaution, all of the now outward doors within the castle were covered with rubble from the outside as well.

One of those now abandoned rooms was an isolated study belonging to Wailin's younger son. It stood on the third floor and, having a severely fractured outer wall, it became yet another weakpoint on the northern wing. With its door nailed shut from within, the only remaining way of reaching it was from the outside with ladders. The room had been stripped of all of its furniture, except for the stone bookshelf carved into the entirety of its eastern wall. As soon as they climbed up, the lord stepped over the rubble in front of the obstructed door and leaned on the second to last supporting pillar of the shelves, pushing his

way onward. After a small creak, the shelf opened inward with surprising ease, revealing a concealed chamber barely larger than a prison cell.

In front of the only window, just under the thick curtain, lay a humble bed across the entire width of the chamber, its sheet left just as it was spread long ago, undisturbed. Above the bed and halfway to the ceiling, on both the side-walls, two hanging shelves held several pieces of neatly folded clothing. One step closer to her, on the wall that doubled as the stone bookshelf from the outside, was a solemn candleholder with an abundance of cobweb woven around it and finally, on the opposite wall, hung the very reason Celine was brought here.

- It's about time I... clear... this room, as well. - the lord muttered through his trembling whispers while Celine stood in front of the best set of Splinter armor she had ever seen. The edges on its breastplate, shoulders and greaves engraved with precise, shallow cuts, the belts held in place using polished buckles, all of it wrapped up with the finest of leather. Just above the suit was the helmet, bearing the shape of the dragon as its main feature, while a pair of black, heavy, military boots stood on the ground not far beneath. - You seem to be about his size. - the lord nodded.

Once again, his remark brought a bit of unintended harm. As she stared at the armor, she brought her left arm to her stomach and gradually dragged it upward, across her flat chest. His words were on point, her disfigured body could easily fit into male armor. She shook the winter chill off, casting her coat aside while loosening the strings on her dress, disrobing on the spot. She revealed her mutilated rear to him, doing her best not to expose her front. She was covered in bruises and partially healed cuts from head to toe, along with numerous brands and scars only a scorching piece of iron could leave in its wake. She approached the bed and quickly took hold of the long piece of



underwear from the left shelf, jumped into it and reached for the Splinter trousers, leaning them against her body. They seemed to match her size indeed, so she smiled and sat on the bed, pushing her legs into it with glee.

Chapter 03

- Contact -

She kept rolling in her bed seemingly for hours on end, slamming her cheeks one after the other on same spot on the pillow. Every once in a while, she laid on her back, aimlessly staring at the narrow tent ceiling, straining her eyes in hopes of exhausting herself, but even that didn't help. It seemed time itself slowed to a crawl whenever she closed her eyes, this particular night stretching on even longer than the one before. She grumbled for the very last time and decided to finally get up from her hay mattress, jumping into her boots and throwing her coat over her gown, pushing her way through the tent flap and heading outside. She stepped on the crumbled cobblestone, not far from the very spot she had awakened her might on.

This is my tenth day here, with no progress at all. If these idiots couldn't achieve anything in two years, how am I supposed to change that all of a sudden? Why am I even here? I've had enough of the forsaken, damned Holy Guard! Empire and Reptilians too! The Western Front is turning into a meat-grinder and the Eastern Front is about to burst back into action, and what am I doing here?! Sitting around, digging myself into these filthy ruins, instead of fighting on the frontlines!

Let us not forget, the Holy Guard once stood as the sworn enemy of the Empire, its nemesis. Such blind, absolute hatred could end only one way: their absolute destruction.

They must have left something behind. They couldn't have wiped it all out, not entirely. Some hidden sanctuary, any sort of cache or blindspot, something must have been left behind. Anything! - she kept throwing her head about, conflicting her own mind while barging her way

between the tents, ignoring the soldiers and the workers saluting her, either seated or standing as she went past. After a while, she reached the Aynur steps and began her frustrating climb.

They stole everything worth taking, destroying the rest. Had they left anything behind, it would have been recovered already.

No, I refuse to go back empty-handed! - she fought her own thoughts with every subsequent step, tightening her jaw and scraping her teeth to prevent herself from screaming aloud in rage. - *I cannot return without tangible results!*

Digging any further is futile. The only way to achieve progress would be to think outside the normal parameters.

What is that supposed to mean?! - she came to an abrupt halt, roughly half-way up the steps, uttering an incoherent mumble into her own chin while lowering her gaze, observing the expeditionary camp concealed within the Aynur ruins. Dawn was yet to come, the pale glow of the crescent Moon encouraged the glittering luster of countless stars spread across the clear sky, but she couldn't be bothered with such wondrous views even the slightest. Her life has been anything but wondrous for a while now.

If there is any progress to be made, the use of superior abilities is required.

I'm not doing that! Absolutely not! The Empire is way too close and might become aware of my presence! - her internal argument shifted her attention southward to painstakingly scour the horizon, leaving her standing perfectly still until her heels felt sore.

Why do you still doubt your ability?

- What was that?! - she impulsively spat out an answer to the question suddenly surfacing on top of her mind, the instant she turned to raise her leg to a higher step. Sneering in rage as she became aware of a foreign influence, she slammed her jaw shut and clenched her teeth so hard, she nearly cracked

them. Her face turned red as her mind lashed out in fury - *Who are you to dare reaching out to me?!* - her disciplined rage was quickly followed by a surge of energy gathering within her chest, she straightened her back and improved her posture, instinctively trying to show off her might.

Your desperate need of guidance brought me here.

I don't have time for your games! - she grumbled as the screaming thought fanned her fury, hatred and pride, all in an effort to combat the rising fear of finally encountering someone she couldn't tackle. She took another step higher, shifting her posture and turning her body northward, gazing at the depths of the vast, savage wilderness of the Central Swamps. - *Show yourself, coward!*

You will have to have to reach the top to find me.

TOP OF THE WORLD?! - an utterly childish thought suddenly burst its way through her discipline, instantly pulling her gaze westward, towards the top of the stairs she was still climbing and, appropriately, the Eternal Mountains towering above. Unsurprisingly, the very next thought quickly brought her back to reality.

Top of the stairs... Seriously...

We already went through the royal chambers. There's nothing left there! You're wasting my time! - her entire body began shaking from the immense tension, her discipline desperately doing its best to reinforce her rage as more and more fear kept seeping in, undermining her composure. She raised her heartbeat by taking deeper, louder and stronger breaths, forcing the fearful shaking out of her legs by slamming her heels increasingly harder, clenching most of her muscles to stop her body from twitching. She applied every single known technique to retain control, yet she could not relinquish the creeping sensation someone remarkably powerful was toying with her.

Step inside.

She briefly came to a stop when both her feet landed on the highest step, staring at the square outline of darkness held open by a single archway, stuck between two narrow slits for windows. She wondered how could have anyone reached this place without being seen, then took a deep breath and made her first step forward. She slowed her pace to a crawl, buying more time to summon whatever courage she had left in her. It helped, by the time she reached the archway her aggression had reasserted itself, she took another deep breath and summoned her *Aura Vision* in hopes of finding her target, but the cold depths of the royal chambers revealed no source of energy.

If you intend to kill me, you're in for a rough fight! - she imposed a clear threat within her mind, forming a fist with her left hand while channeling a significant amount of energy through it. With sudden intent and a quick flick of her fingers, she summoned a flaming ball the size of her eye, her very own lightsource.

If I wanted you dead, I would not have bothered reaching out.

- Enough with the games! Speak up! - she screamed at the darkness as soon as she made her first step inside. The roaring echo proved helpful for her composure, surfacing a soothing thought that she might not appear weak to her opponent. The fact he's trying to undermine her composure before engaging her could have meant she's a genuine threat.

This is the only way I can communicate.

- Show yourself and let's get this over with! - she focused a considerable amount of raw energy into her throat and released a bolstered scream, in the hopes of shattering her anxiety. As her echo violently spread through the hall, she dropped into a defensive stance, pulling some of her energy to prepare her *Blink* in order to evade the first incoming attack, lining up her offensive abilities to retaliate in rapid succession. It took a while

for the other side to respond, definitely not in a way she had anticipated.

Raise your head and look upon the throne.

That brief, unphased, pointless instruction instantly threw her into a meltdown, shattering her discipline as her unbridled rage tore through what little restraints she had left. Both her *Aura Vision* and her lightsource disintegrated as she threw caution to the wind. All of her fears scampered out of her mind even faster than they wormed their way within. Like an infuriated beast prodded with hot pokers, she unleashed a shrieking howl and turned to screaming as loud as her voice could carry, flailing her hands towards the darkness and sending everything she had downrange.

Her *Fireballs* illuminated the chamber as they screamed their way towards the furthest wall. Her *Lightning Strikes* went for any sort of shadow she interpreted as suspicious movement. Her *Wind Blasts* and *Wind Waves* sliced their way all over the place so haphazardly, they lifted piles of dust into random spurs she mistakenly took for obstacles, so she kept on throwing her attacks their way as well just in case. Her bloodlust knew no bounds; the only intent left in her mind was the instinctive desire to end this fight as quickly as possible, denying the enemy even the slightest opening to retaliate. If it came down to bringing down the entire mountain on their heads, she would have done it. She tore the walls apart as she shattered more rubble to throw downrange, she broke the pillars to deny her enemy any sort of cover, she screamed her lungs out with as much energy as she could force through her throat without tearing it apart. She kept up her assault even when she completely lost sight of her surroundings, vehemently barraging the chamber to annihilate anything and everything around her.

She finally managed to return to her senses not due to discipline, but thanks to a piece of rubble striking her over the head. When her instincts finally kicked back in, she looked up and saw the ceiling crumbling down on her, spontaneously lunging towards the archway and relying on her *Blink* to immediately displace to safety.

After repeatedly wheezing and snarling to purge her nostrils, she slowly caught her breath, allowing the dust to settle. All of a sudden, her head sharply swung southward, then just as sharply eastward as she triggered her *Aura Vision* again, finally catching a glimpse of another source in the vicinity. She approached the stairs and dropped her gaze down, comically snarking when she laid her eyes on the tiny specs of energy her subordinates were giving away in the distance. Worthless rabble!

She carefully scoured the horizon again, waiting for any sort of response. There was nothing, even after she came full circle, back to staring down the stairs again. Her victorious smirk turned to a grin, but it didn't last long. As soon as she made her first step down the stairs, a seed of doubt pulled her attention back to the royal chamber again, an urge to be absolutely sure there was nothing left there. Once again, she summoned her lightsource, enhancing it to radiate twice the glow before heading through the archway, waving her other hand to swipe the rubble that nearly crushed her aside. The sight of the wreckage brought a smile to her face again.

The ancient architecture proved more resilient than she gave it credit, even though she inflicted severe damage and knocked down most of the supporting pillars, the ceiling was still mostly standing and the royal chamber was still navigable. On its furthest end, behind the throne of the Holy Guard that still stood partly intact, roughly halfway up the wall, stood an outline of a dove. She saw the creature at the exact spot where the intrusive thoughts told her to look, its pale contour perfectly



blending with the background etching. It was nearly invisible, until it flapped its wings and drew her attention. It must have flown in after her merciless barrage, during her respite, otherwise it would have turned into a red smudge on the wall.

- Damn vermin! - she smirked and swung her right hand at the bird, focusing a burst of raw energy at it. The dove was supposed to burst into a puff of red-and-white smoke, leaving nothing but a mist white-and-reddish feathers in its place, but the instant Hella released her attack, the whistling sound of her energy fell silent. The lightsource above her left palm fizzled out and her *Aura Vision* dispersed just as quickly, leaving her standing on the edge of the moonlight, surrounded by complete darkness.

What is with all that anger?

- WHA... - she swung for another attack, but both her movement and her scream came to a complete stop after the very first syllable. A broad, invisible noose wrapped itself around her neck into a firm, choking grip, instantly cutting her breath off. Her head turned severely sore, held within a powerful, invisible chokehold, slowly pressed all the tighter. In mere moments, her fingertips fell entirely numb, killing off any sensation and draining her energy as an onset of frightening chill climbed its way up her hands. When the invasive purge reached her shoulders and spread to her chest, her lungs collapsed, barely managing to release the last bit of solid breath she still held onto. She lost her footing as both of her knees bent their separate ways, falling on her rear and slamming on her left shoulder, severely bruising it and narrowly avoiding cracking her head against the floor.

YOU TAUNTING ME! PETULANT CHILD!
SPOILED BRAT! INCOMPETENT FOOL!

Her own scream resonated within her own mind with such unrelenting force, her eyes and ears seemed to be bursting. She desperately tried drawing another breath, but her compacted lungs couldn't pull anything through the chokehold. She couldn't move, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't even speak or scream or whine as her executioner tightened his relentless grip. Her entire body was caving in, the splitting headache becoming so extreme it quickly rendered her unconscious.

All of that Drakonian pride and privilege, Manser talent and discipline, awakened might and potential... it was all in vain. Other than suffering the excruciating pain, her final moments were filled with desperate panic and hopeless, ceaseless dread. She deluded herself in believing to be larger than life, only to end up dying a flea.

It was still the dead of night when she regained some of her consciousness. The agonizing pain had diminished to soreness, her body felt beyond broken and barely able to respond, without actually being injured. She was drenched in cold sweat, as well as no small amount blood pouring out of every orifice. Her lungs barely grasped for air, drawing shallow breaths along even shallower releases. Her throat still felt clenched, just loose enough to avoid choking. Her heart maintained a remarkably slow, barely palpable yet stable beat. Utterly overpowered, humiliated, defeated and broken, laying on the cold stone, she took her time mustering just enough strength to bother raising her head. She could barely see as her lower eye, her right eye, was still mostly covered with blood.

She didn't know what to think. For the very first time, her mind was wiped entirely clean. A blank slate, freed of every passing thought, liberated of any lasting concern, released of all distress. Stuck staring into the unknown, without any instinct or desire or intent whatsoever, for that brief, fleeting moment, she

felt abandoned and worthless, yet entirely at peace... and found it strangely invigorating.

Your next tantrum will be your last.

A brief thought had gently made its way into her blank mind, followed by a sudden breeze upon her elevated, left cheek. The dove flew just above her head, out of the chamber and through the archway, landing within her sight, allowing the moonlight to reveal its true form. Hella kept straining her left eye, eventually realizing it wasn't a dove, but a white hawk.

What are you? - She managed to form her first, personal thought and tried speaking, but didn't have the strength to move her lips, or catch enough breath. It had to remain a thought alone.

All in due time. Stay where you are, for now.

Its wings sent another gust of wind her way as it took to the air, leaving her to rest. With nothing else left to do, she helplessly observed the sky and scoured the stars, forming and reforming the mystical shapes without a concern in the world, until the rumbling of footsteps and the muttering of distant voices began approaching.

She shut her eyes both in horror and shame, just as the first soldier peaked up the stairs, bringing the glow of the torchlight along. She had no intention of interacting with any of them, thinking it best to remain perfectly still. Ignorant of her condition, they immediately tried grabbing her by the shoulders and pulling her up, her painful groan immediately forcing them away. Her throbbing ears barely managed to register their conversation; she couldn't understand anything they said. More to the point, she couldn't spare the energy to give it a try, as her exhaustion finally took hold and pulled her to sleep.

Fearing they might harm her or, even worse, infuriate her by trying to move her again, her subordinates left her on the exact spot they found her. They carefully managed to pull the thickest blanket underneath her back, delicately placing her head on a pillow and raising a small tent around her, providing shelter.