

## *A Voice in the Nightmares*

Aylix ran. The darkness around him was complete, blinding. He couldn't feel anything except the cold water pouring down his back, and the incessant pounding of his feet on the ground. It beat along the same rhythm as his head, waves of pain rippling off each impact.

*Where am I?* His voice was distant, slurred, even in his own thoughts. He forced himself to stop running and look around. His vision outside of the woods was still blurry, indistinct, and the sheets of water falling down didn't help. Nothing was familiar, comforting. *What happened?*

*The ground was growing close. Closer. Closer. . . I was falling. Why?* He slipped and fell onto the ground, his legs giving out on him. *Everything's so loud, and. . . I'm so tired.*

Aylix's hand tightened around something in the mud next to him. He looked over at it, and recoiled. A sword sat next to him, dripping onto the dirt as rain slowly washed a red stain running down it. *Blood?* More questions echoed in his head, and he couldn't answer a single one.

*Darkness. Pain. I woke up, and everything. . . hurt. Hurts.* His thoughts were jumbled, fragmented, and he couldn't piece the puzzle together yet.

*"Black hand."* Something whispered in his head, amplifying his headache. *"I forgot how hard the process is on your minds. I knew better than to do this to someone so unprepared. We have to move. The nightmares won't wait for you to recover. Sorry for the intrusion."*

*Who?*

Suddenly, Aylix's body stood and almost ran into a tree of its own accord. Aylix couldn't move his legs, his arms, and his mind was too tired to fight against the takeover.

A low hanging branch whipped across his cheek as he dodged the tree, cutting a thin line along his jaw. His body ducked, feeling more scratch at his back, and slipped down into the wet

ground again. He felt dirt gritting between his teeth as he spat mud, wiping it off his chin with the back of his hand as the presence faded and Aylix resumed control.

*What the Void?*

*“Damn. I’m not connected enough to keep you moving now that you’re conscious. Keep trying to think. It will pass. You need to focus. You need to focus.”* The voice faintly spoke again.

Aylix stood up and leaned against a tree, catching his breath. Mud mixed with the water and blood running down his chest. He didn’t think most of it was his. But under it his arms were *glowing*? That couldn’t be right. He looked at it and forced himself to push past the clouds in his mind. *What happened? I have to know.* And like emerging from a lake, he pushed through it, and the world fell into focus.

*“There we go.”* The voice spoke up. *“Welcome back to the present.”*

Aylix started, sword swinging in front of him, making his head throb more. “Who?”

*“Calm down, your body will collapse if you push it to hard. I’m a friend.”*

Aylix lowered the sword, arm too tired to hold it up. He clenched his teeth as the numbness faded and his pain returned. “Great. Now I’m hearing things.”

*“You’re not hearing things. I’m what saved your life. Look at yourself.”*

His body throbbed, and he reached up to feel the large bloody mess behind his ear. *From the fall. I’m injured from the fall.* He looked over at his hand, and saw the scar traced along his forearm, touching it to ensure its existence. Then he looked down at his chest.

Pale lines and jagged rips had been etched into his light skin. Some were smooth and thin, others were ragged, savage things. And there were so many. *By the allpower of the One. . . I*

*shouldn't be alive.* He grew dizzy, and became aware of how much blood he had lost, mixed in with the sodden rags that had been his shirt. *It. . . It makes sense why I'm hearing things.*

*"You're not hearing things. Do none of you know what a Faeric Bond is anymore?"*

The voice in his head grew louder. *"You bloody believe in dungeons, and those aren't even natural."*

Aylix nodded. The headache hadn't faded with the confusion and dizziness. "That's right. It was a dungeon. . . the dungeon. Oh by the One, the dungeon. Jean, mom and dad, they have to know. I need to warn them."

The voice sighed. *"Here then. I don't have time to convince you and keep you alive."*

Aylix's breath was whisked away as energy flowed through him. Thin white lines traced along his veins, circulating towards his heart. His blood glowed faintly, and he felt it pulse with energy, revitalizing him. *The glowing light. I. . . didn't imagine it?*

*"That's the most truthful statement you've said today. Now move!"*

Aylix stopped asking questions and took off, cold rain soaking into his torn clothes. The trees around him grew more familiar as he charged up the dirt track he had known his whole life. He lept over a bush, and could see an orange light reflected on the clouds hanging low above the island. *Almost there.* More branches snapped across his face, and he ground his teeth.

His memories slowly pieced together now. Swords and axes shattering in his hands as he smashed them against armor and bone. The blood, welling up from between his fingers as he cried in the dark, unsteady light of the torches. The dungeons. Monster filled pits that appeared at random. But that in itself wasn't uncommon. The dungeons had been plaguing the kingdom for six hundred years. But this one wasn't normal. *Something else is happening.*

*“Truthful statement number two.”*

*Its not real. Its not real. You’re hallucinating. Ignore it.*

His house peeked through the trees in front of him. The door was shut, lights still burning on the inside. *Please let them be okay.* Aylix ran up to the door, placing his back against the seasoned wood. His left hand knocked on the wet surface, and his right hand hid the sword against his leg. “It’s me. Jean. Let me in!” He pounded on the wood, unable to hear any footsteps coming to answer as the rain streamed off the roof. “Hey! It’s Ay--”

The door opened behind him, and he pushed past his mother, who gasped. Aylix caught the edge of the door and slammed it shut. He looked around, keeping the sword tucked behind him. No one else seemed to be home. “Where is Jean and Dad?”

His mother, Tara, pulled herself together, taking a few deep breaths. “Jean and your father left for the village as soon as they could. The crash. . . what happened?” She looked at him, covered in mud and rain dripping down his hair. “Are you okay?”

Aylix grabbed a rain cloak and pulled it over the tattered remnants of his clothes, hoping she didn’t see the blood. “I’m fine. We need to leave. A dungeon’s over near the south side.”

His mother looked at him. “Aylix Lee Jaymson. Calm down, a dungeon can’t hurt anyone who stays away from it. The monsters can’t leave.”

Aylix spun around to face her, hand shaking. “No, mom the monsters *can* leave.”

That single statement made the room grow cold. It had never happened before. The dungeons had been as regular as clockwork, and never had deviated. The entire military was built around the fact that they didn’t have to worry about the population.

Now the entire island was on the brink of being massacred.

His mother looked at him, paleing. “Aylix, a dungeon can’t be here. There hasn’t been any signs. Are you sure you’re okay? You aren’t just seeing things?” She reached for him.

Aylix shook his head, backing away from her hand. “No, you don’t understand. I need you to grab your cloak now. The dungeon collapsed, its not containing the monsters. It let them all out.” *I have a voice in my head telling me what to do. I’m totally okay. I’m going crazy.*

*“That wouldn’t be my fault.”*

Aylix gritted his teeth and pulled away his cloak, revealing the scars crossing over his skin. His mother covered her mouth. He let it fall and pulled her close. “Mom, look at me. Look at me. We have to go to the village. I know that something not right. Please.” Aylix ran a hand through his hair as his mother fought back tears. *Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe I’m making that up too.*

*“You’re not making me up! I know, I was there when the dungeons were created. The binding broke. Someone broke it.”*

*What does that even mean?*

*“Oh by the Four Kings! Is it this hard to understand? They’re manmade, how did you all forget that! The dungeons are manmade and you won’t listen to me you absolute fool!”*

*You’re not real!*

After a deep breath, his mother looked back up, interrupting his thoughts. “If you say so. But what about your father and brother? What if they come back here?”

Aylix shook his head and winced as more memories overtook his mind. *Demons and bones grinned at him out of the night. Swords and arrows, spears, saws of iron. He shattered his*

*blade on armor, fragments spinning off into the dark, and buried the broken hilt in the shade's ghostly eye socket, screaming.*

He clenched his teeth. "I doubt that they will make it through the monsters to get here."

She quieted, noticing his wince. Her eyes were wet as she looked at him.

Aylix swallowed, hand trembling. "We're alone, and we need to go. It's only a matter of time until something finds u--" A shadow moved next to him, and time slowed as his skin glowed.

Aylix could feel a change. His shoulders flexing, knees bending, his tired body pushing away his fatigue. It wasn't his body though. Movements foreign to him flooded his nerves as the white lines brightened, and then felt *natural* as the glow spread across his body. And just like in the dungeon, he felt the weight of the sword in his hand become more comfortable than any other tool he had picked up. *What is this?*

*"My muscle memory. Its the only thing that has kept you alive. Use it."*

The voice forced Aylix forward to meet the attack in a fluid, fatal movement.

The dark steel intercepted the man as he jumped through the air, and the sharp point sunk into flesh. It speared through the man's spine; he could feel it scrape along bone. The attacker's momentum continued to drive himself down the length of the blade, and Aylix forced the sword point up, and the body slid to a stop against the crossguard. It held the body aloft as a red torrent flowed down and drenched his hands. He was almost thankful for the warmth on his cold fingers.

The man coughed, blood dripping from his mouth, and began to laugh. "You didn't see us coming. The dungeon's are failing." He giggled more, eyes fading. "It's only a matter of time now." The thing grew limp, and Aylix let out a slow breath.

Aylix felt his muscles grow tired as he expended more of that glowing energy, feeling the fatigue underneath as he looked over at his mother.. “We have to go. *Now.*”

His mother jumped as he let the body fall to the floor with a thump. “O . . . Oh . . . Okay.”

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Aylix opened the door, looking through the rain. The darkness under the trees was made more absolute by the downpour. Hearing anything was out of the question as well. *Not as it falls through the leaves.* He gritted his teeth at the loud patter. *Nothing about this is smart.*

He motioned for his mother to follow as he walked out into the small clearing in front of the house, checking the roof behind them. He breathed out again. *No threats.*

“*Visible threats.*” The voice spoke up. “*You’re an ambush waiting to happen.*”

Aylix’s hand tightened on the leather wrapped hilt. *Shut up. You. Are. Not. Real!*

“*Then what am I? Still think I’m fake after that? You almost got killed by a wraith.*”

*My imagination. Something I’m hearing because I hit my head. Something i’m hallucinating, making up. Stress. All of it together.* He flinched as a raindrop fell into his eye.

“*You’re not smart enough to create something like me. The only reason your head hurts is because the bonding process almost fried your blood. And what is this then?*” His body pulsed white again. “*You have no explanation for too many things.*”

Aylix ducked under a tree, working his jaw. *So lets say I do believe you. Explain what’s happening to me.*

“*Yes. I established a bond with you to save your life. Luckily for you, you are receptive to Fae. Its rare now that the old kingdom lost all Aetherics during the Ascension, but you are barely able to support the process. Barely. You were unconscious for most of the dungeon.*”

*Wait, you know about. . . you're a Fae?*

The voice huffed. A concentration of light built up on the back of his hand, and he made out the outline of a Fae underneath his skin. A small orb of white fire, like a willow-the-wisp, bearing an odd symbol flickering between the flames, unique to each one. They were common throughout the kingdom, used as autonomous servants, working for a little energy given to them by the family. But. . .

*You can talk!*

*"Of course we can talk. People today tend to listen less."* The Fae vanished from the back of his hand, and the white energy spread out across his body. "So--"

"Aylix." His mother interrupted his thoughts, pulling him into the present. He looked down at her, and she swallowed, face pale. "What. . . how did you get those scars? And the sw-sword?"

The voice quited.

Aylix throat tightened, and he remained silent for a while until responding. "I fell into the dungeon. The airship created a hole into it when we crashed. I woke up inside and had to fight my way out, and even the I was chased." *And some weird Fae is inside me and kept me alive.*

She was visibly shaking now, and that made him walk on the edge of breaking. His mother had always been the strong one. Always. You aren't supposed to see your mother afraid.

He pulled her along, trying to get her mind off it. "Have you seen anyone else today?"

His mother tightened her lips and shook her head. "No, no one's braved the storm tonight. But the Kyl's farm is just ahead. We should see if they are alright."



Aylix nodded, and the voice inside him was silent, but it mirrored his sense of doubt and fear as they continued down the main road. *Something bads going on. Really bad.*

The voice remained quiet, but its sense of fear was growing faster than his own.

They approached the last corner before the Kyl's house, and light flickered through the heavy rain and growing mist. He paused, arm draped around his mother, and listened.

To a dull roar, a cackle of burning wood.

Aylix's heart dropped, and his mother paled. He handed her the dark rain cloak. "Wait here. Just in case." He let her go and ran, turning the last corner, his face growing warm.

Blue, unnatural fire enveloped the Kyl house, creating a wave of steam as the rain boiled in its fruitless attempt to quench the blaze. He stepped forward and flinched as an explosion of heat rolled over him. When he looked back up, the barn had caught fire as well. And in front of the fire, a man stood, back to him.

Glowing wings spread out from his back, a small glowing harness connecting them to his body. The rain and steam glittered brilliantly in white light around him as it splattered off his armor, and a hood covered the man's head. Across his body, a long, thick, black jacket fell his knees, and black boots were strapped on his feet.

Aylix's jaw dropped. *That's a Wing Corp uniform. The Guilds are here. They're here!* He stood, hand outstretched, ready to call out. *The military can protect her.*

*"Wait you fool!"*

Aylix foot kicked something, and he looked down into the lifeless eyes of Mr. Kyl.

It was then he saw the bodies scattered across the yard.

Men, women, children. He recognized the rest of the Kyls, the Zernalns. Even the Redmers newborn, clutched in her mother's arms. Bile rose in his throat, and he stared in disbelief. He could see almost every family from the outlying farms dead on the cold ground, staining the dirt red.

*How? They still should've been able to fight back. This is slaughter.* No monsters were visible, living or dead. *It doesn't add up. The creatures couldn't have done this. Its too. . .*

One of the bodies moved, crying in pain. It was Ildred, a boy only a few years younger than Aylix. His body was covered in blood, and he could see more welling up between his fingers from a hole in his stomach. The man looked over to the boy, and walked over to him, and kneeled down, inspecting the wound.

Ildred looked up, crying as he tried to push himself away. "No. Please."

Everything pieced together in a moment, and Aylix's eyes filled with horror. *Too efficient.*

And in another second, a greatsword materialized in the man's hands with a bright flash, decapitating the wounded boy.

Aylix looked out at the man, clothed in a uniform. *He's causing all this. It has to be him. You did this.* His body glowed white, this time of Aylix's own will. Before he knew it, he was out from the shadows, sprinting across the gore-covered grass.

The man spun around, and Aylix didn't give him the time to react. Blow after blow rained down on the man, and he barely kept the greatsword parrying and deflecting Aylix attacks. The dark sword in Aylix's hands reflected the blue light of the flickering fire, and he spun around, moving from swing to thrust to counter. The man scrambled to defend himself, and

managed to keep Aylix's sword from any vital areas. However, Aylix's blade quickly became stained with blood, nicking the man in the chinks of his armor.

He forced the soldier back, and suddenly stepped to the side. The man's larger sword cut air, and stopped, repositioning quickly, but Aylix stepped again, meeting the blade as it came around. He pushed into the man's guard, too close to use such a large weapon. He heard the man's breath hitch, and Aylix's jaw tightened, preparing to slit the liars throat.

A glow erupted in the man's hand as he shouted at Aylix, words lost in the roar of the fire.

The voice in Aylix head erupted into a scream of anger and pain at the same time the light blinded him. "*Aetheric! YOU BETRAYED HIM! I'll kill you. I'LL KILL YOU!*"

And then the world around him vanished as he was pushed back through the air at incredible speed, smashing into a tree.

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Aylix felt his body being carried. His back screamed in agony, and he barely hung onto consciousness. Voices shouted around him, and he could here his mother telling someone what had happened. *The village. We made it to the village.* He took a deep breath, and more pain wracked his chest. He could tell that most of his ribs were bruised, if not broken. *The vial. Where's the vial?*

He lifted his hand slowly, and felt his fingers tap on wet glass. The bottle contained some of the last red liquid he had found in the dungeon. *It heals. That's right. I remember.* He opened it, and raised it to his lips. Internal wounds were the worst, as the potion couldn't be directly applied. But as it rolled down his throat, the pain faded, and he opened his eyes.

People surrounded him, peering out into the darkness. He wasn't in the village yet, but he could see it below as they crested the final hill. Lights flooded the small town, and he could see men on the walls, peering out into the darkness. He could see scratches and hack marks along the top of the walls from claws and blades. *But they held.*

Aylix breathed out, and the fatigue he had been fighting off for hours finally rolled over him. He sagged into the arms of those carrying him; some quiet voices comforted him as they helped him along, farther into the village.

But he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

He glanced over at the gatekeeper's house, where the old man had greeted him yesterday before he boarded the airship. The door had been ripped apart, and the cold, uncaring rain was dutifully washing away the red stain running down the wall.

He heard the voice, the Fae's voice, echoing in his head faintly. *"I'll kill you!"*

The other people in the group helped his mother down next to him and started back to the gate. Aylix looked over to the rest of them, inspecting their soggy clothes. A few carried bows, and dull arrowheads shined in the firelight, making him wince. He had pulled too many out of himself as he had fought his way through the dungeon.

*My sword.* "Where's my sword?" He looked around pushing those who tried to keep him sitting. A man walked up with it, and hesitated.

"Are you sure you need it lad? You don't look like you can do too much right now." He quieted as Aylix glared at him and took the blade.

"It stays with me."

The man walked away, hands up, "Fine by me kid."

*“Aetheric. Liar.”* The Fae whispered venomously.

*What do you mean Aetheric? Like a priest? The One and the heavenly Aether?*

*“No. . . murderer. . . all those years ago. . .”*

“Aylix! Tara!” A voice cut through the crowd, and a man pushed through to them.

Aylix’s heart fell as he recognized Grant, the smith, and a good friend of the family. Not Jean or his father.

Grant hugged Tara. “I’m glad to see you two okay. Its been hell. You are lucky to get here between their assaults. They withdrew a half hour ago. They’ll be back any time. Now I need you to get in the house, that’s where the women and children are. Mine are as well.” His eyes hid something. Something dangerous. “Tara, before you go I--”

“That sounds good, Grant. Thank you.” Aylix met his eyes and shook his head. *I’ll hear what you need to say.*

Grant swallowed and nodded. He motioned to a nearby house. It was boarded up, a ramshackle job, but he could see children peering through the wooden slats, their mothers and grandmothers pulling them back occasionally, only to sneak back a few seconds later, eyes curious.

His mother shook her head, but Aylix cut her off. “It would be better If you go, mom.”

She looked back at him and nodded. “Okay. Be safe.”

Aylix watched his mother as she nodded and walked over to the door. The people inside started to move furniture away from the door, un-barricading the entrance. She was still shaking, trying to keep a strong face, but he could see the truth in her eyes. *She’s afraid.* He looked around at all the adults, watching a young man throw up over the edge of the wall. *They’re all*

*afraid. This has never happened before.* He turned back to Grant, palming the sword hilt in his hands.

He eyed him, pulling out a small set of interconnected rings. “What do you need?”

Aylix looked back to the gate. “What happened?”

Grant fiddled with the metal, rubbing the rainwater along them, like they needed to be cleaned. “I’ll assume you’ve figured out that a dungeon appeared. What about it?”

“Why wasn’t there any warning? How come we didn’t figure it out until--”

“Until we watched the airship get torn apart by that invisible beast?” His left hand wrapped around the worn handle of his hammer. “No signs. Not the birds leaving, the Fae disappearing. . .” The Fae inside Aylix shifted at that statement. “. . . the jumpy wildlife, nothing. We tried to send a group to the crash site, and found that it had busted open the entrance. They returned with more bodies than people, and not even half of the outlying farms made it in, may Hearthhome bless their souls.” He paused, fear hidden behind his eyes. “And the phoenixes were found dead”

Aylix’s heartbeat increased. The phoenixes were their only communication. “All of them?”

Grant shook his head. “All six were accounted for. We are cut off from the other islands.”

Aylix ran a hand through his wet hair, mind racing. “What’s happened here so far?”

Grant squinted. “I just told--”

“The attack specifics. Please.”

The smith breathed out before speaking softly. “The walls have held off the smaller ones, but these were made against rabid animals, not these. . . things. I can’t even put a name to them,

beasts and bonemen, shadows. . .” He shivered. “We placed the women and children in the houses. I don’t know how long we’ll last without help. This isn’t supposed to happen.” His fist enveloped the metal rings, shaking. “I. . . I can’t do anything to protect them. We’re just waiting.”

*Waiting to die.* Aylix stood there, trying to process what he had heard. *Nothings going right. No warning, no help. The military--*

The voice in his head spoke quietly, painfully. “*Murderer. . .*”

Aylix’s hand shook, understanding the implication. “Grant, the military is already here.”

The smith’s hands twitched, dropping the rings. “Really? That’s incredible! Are you sure?”

Aylix grabbed the man’s shoulders. “Grant, they are the one’s making sure we didn’t figure out about the dungeon. I fought a man over the corpse’s of three farms over near Kyl’s. Full Guild uniform. Wing Core and all.”

Grant’s face fell. “That. . . can’t be right. Why would the military. . . he wasn’t-0”

“He was Grant, they are behind it, I know it. I fell into the dungeon, the barrier had been cut apart somehow. Its them. It has to be them. They set this all up.”

Grant grabbed his shirt and pulled it closer. “So what do you expect me to do, huh? What do I say to the rest of them? That the military is controlling the monster’s or something?”

The Fae snarled. “*Murderer. . . LIAR!*” His voice was jumbled, fragmented.

Aylix realized he wasn’t imagining the feeling of being watched. *Controlling the monsters.*

He stepped to his side, and an arrow whistled past his ear, burying its metal head into the smith's chest with a wet crunch. The man took a few short, shocked breaths, looking down at it, and then up into Aylix's eyes. A second arrow tore through his throat, and he fell, gurgling.

As the body fell, Aylix felt his head pulse and arms glow. He barely managed to dodge an arrow spinning towards his heart, and then jumped behind cover, feeling more arrows sink into the wood next to him. He looked out, and the entire hill overlooking the village was filled with blue-eyed skeletons, pulling back bowstrings. And in the middle of it all, he could see the man, hand raised up, and fall with a flash of lightning. *The military betrayed us.*

The Fae in his head screamed again, broken by the past.

The rain was replaced by arrows.

All around him he could hear screams erupt into existence, and then cut off, followed by the impact of a body on stone in an irregular beat to a fatal drum. His eyes looked through a window, and met a little girl's, Grant's little girl, crying, screaming. Aylix couldn't hear her voice, but he could read her lips.

*Daddy! Daddy please get up! Daddy please!*

In that silent scream, Aylix heard helplessness for the first time.

Something hit the gate, making the wood crack loudly, and all other sound vanished from the village, the last dying breath escaping bloody lips. He peered around the corner, trying to block out the little girl's haunting look. Another impact and the wooden doors shattered, letting a large shadow through. The shadow, horns gleaming in the sputtering torchlight, sniffed, inspecting the arrow-riddled bodies scattered around the gate.



Something moved right next to him, and Aylix almost took his mother's head off. She froze, eyeing the blade tickling the underside of her chin. Aylix's hand shook at what he almost had done, pulling it away. "Why aren't you inside the house?"

She looked at him, eyes full of pain, and he noticed the arrow sticking out of her right shoulder.

Aylix looked at it, and he finally felt scared. *What can I do? Against all of this? I'm a bloody farmer! I don't even know what to do. . .*

The voice in his head whispered. *"Save as many as you can. When you can. Try."*

Aylix's hand dug into the hilt of his sword. "We need to move."

He pulled his mother to his feet, carefully walking her over to the other side of the house as blood seeped into her dress. The movement was masked by the rain, but it had slowly started to stop, the highpoint of the storm finally past. It was growing quieter, and the minotaur behind him louder.

The beast roared, forcing Aylix into motion, pulling his mother behind him as he dashed across the street. Arrows fell around them, sparking off the stones in quick bursts of light, and he prayed to the One to protect them.

Aylix saw the arrow spinning towards him from the hill. Out of a foreign instinct, his arm raised up, sword swinging out to intercept it. But the steel sailed just behind the shaft, and the arrow cut across his collarbone, barely missing his left arm.

His mother was crying as they ran into cover, the arrow grinding against her shoulder blade. His hand reached out to grab it, slipping on the blood as he carefully gripped it right next

to her body. Aylix hesitated, then snapped it off, leaving the point inside. She cried out in agony and he ground his teeth, tears running down his face. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

Out of his pocket, he pulled the last vial of the red liquid he had found in the dungeon. It accelerated the healing process, but still left scars, as testified by his ravaged body. He poured the rest of the potion over the wound, and it flared up in a glowing red light. The skin and muscle reformed, and pushed the bloody arrowhead out to clatter along the ground.

Aylix dropped the empty glass to his side, looking down at the fresh cut along his chest. *Not deep, it should stop bleeding soon.* He glanced at the black sword laying next to him. *That was stupid. How could I ever block an arrow?* But he felt like he had done it before. *No, the Fae has.*

The demon rounded the corner where they had just been, sniffing at the bloody trail from his mother. Its blue eyes looked up and met Aylix's, not even a hundred feet away.

He stood up, blade back in his hand. "Mom, stay in cover, but get as close as you can to the edge of the island." She stood up slowly, testing her shoulder. "Move!"

She scrambled away as the beast charged. Aylix felt the clumsiness in his muscles disappear, but barely could see the glow across his arms. *It's getting quicker and more natural to transition to whatever this is, this bond.* He bent his knees, bracing for the beast. *And I don't care if I don't even know what I'm getting into.*

Aylix's mind rushed back into the present, feeling the rain run down his head. Every movement felt natural, the sword in his tired hands just another tool he had used for his entire life. And he met the demon, the minotaur, head on.

Its arms crashed down, but he had already moved, sliding past it on the wet stone. He hacked at its thick hide along its side, trying to stay behind it.

As its blood wet the blade, the inscription running the length of the fuller flared to life, glowing dark red. It pulsed, and he felt energy being sucked out of the monster, strengthening him. He almost fell over in surprise as the energy made his fatigue disappear.

The minotaur turned much quicker than its size suggested, a fist thundering towards him. Aylix planted his feet, one of his heels sliding back to wedge itself against the foundation of the house behind him, and his sword blurred as it deflected the blow, barely in time.

The beast's fist smashed into the wood next to him, sending cracks across the entire wall, making screams erupt inside. Aylix ground his teeth, pulling his sword back to drive it deep into its hand, severed tendons snapping back up in its arm, ripping the brown fur as their tension released. *Now, turn and--*

*“Jump!”*

Aylix didn't hesitate, forcing his body up off the ground just in time to dodge the minotaurs second hand as it came around to crush his legs.

The beast man bellowed as its attack failed. Aylix landed as it backed away from him, huffing and growling. The minotaur lowered its head, nostrils flaring, aiming to drive its horns deep into his ribs.

Aylix jammed his sword against the wooden beam behind his shoulder, bracing it.

And the minotaur charged, missing Aylix as he ducked, and drove itself onto the point of the blade so hard it shattered its skull, emerging from the back of its head covered in lifeblood.

The blade glowed again, and Aylix body felt like he had just woken up from days of rest, energy flooding his body.

He stood back up, wrenching the sword out from where it had been buried all the way to the crossguard, and the body fell over, blue eyes extinguished. *Now it's his turn.*

He was surprised when no arrows came down as he dashed across the street for the fourth time. He carefully peered back around the corner, looking up at the hill. Not a single pair of piercing blue stares met his nervous look, and he turned back to the houses.

Aylix crept along, gaining speed as he rounded corner after corner with no sight of his mother. "Mom. . . mom. . . mom!" He whispered as loudly as he dared, peering around as his heart rate picked up.

He almost missed her, crouching next to a house, looking at something. He walked up, reaching out to her. "Mom, I don't know where the archers went, we need to--" He choked when his eyes found what she was looking at.

A body, covered in a bloodred sheet. Out of it fell wet blond hair. *Jean's blond hair.*

The sinking suspicion Aylix had felt before talking to the smith fell back onto him, releasing a numbing cold across his mind. The rain stopped falling as hard, and the last of the torches flickered out as water drenched the world in a mist of tears.

The broken, bloody spear laying next to the body said it all. *He went with the rescue party. Of course he volunteered to look for me. His little brother.* Aylix looked down at the bloody sword in his hands. *Always needing saving.*

Aylix looked back at his older brother. *Idiot.*

Aylix found himself running through the streets, crying, looking around for the man, daring an arrow to come take him away. His fear and sadness turned to anger with each pounding step he took, each shaking breath, each wave of pain. He screamed into the dark. “Coward! Bastard!”

The faces of their mothers peered out, trying to be strong as the rain outside washed away hope like the blood running along the cobblestones, watching him scream into the night.

Suddenly, light blinded Aylix again, and he felt something huge smash into his chest.

The next thing he could see was the man hovering above him, as something disturbed the clouds around his shimmering, mystical wings. “Now you, boy, my dog remembers you. He smashed the ship you were on apart. Take pride in surviving him once. You won’t do it again.”

The large shape shifting in the clouds turned visible, and a large serpent looked at him, just like it had when he had looked out on the airship. Its mouth began to glow with blue fire.

“*Aetheric*. . .” The Fae’s voice hissed.

Aylix tried to stand up, but his leg had been broken again by whatever had hit him. He snarled at the man. “Fine then, take me and burn in the Void.”

The man shook his head and pointed at the center of the village. “No, I’ll deal with you personally. You were a good opponent. My dog can do the rest. And after today, the world will change. Just like it was supposed to do six hundred years ago. The dungeons will be used to their full potential. Take pride you get to see it the first use of their power.” The great serpent’s mouth opened and blue fire began to flicker between its teeth, and the wind was pulled towards its mouth.

Aylix's anger was replaced by fear. Thunder drummed across the clouds, and the world began to turn blue. "No. Wait!" Aylix reached out towards the rest of the village. "Mom!"