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A Darker Shade of Sorcery

The Realmers- Book One

By William Collins

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PART ONE

Magic Rising

To whichever race you belong, orc, elf, human or other:

You are now a Venator.

Welcome to Veneseron Fortress, school for Demon Hunters.

Your job is to travel through the many realms on missions we

assign you.

Your tasks may range from preventing goblin abductions,

capturing wild dog-dragons and calming down drunken yetis, to

the more serious threats of shadow-drinkers, noble gliders and any Moonlight races gone rogue. Of course, your most important purpose will be battling demons and the Dark-Venators.

Here at Veneseron we will train you to use enchanted weaponry, from Spellzookas to elemental grenades. And wield whatever form of sorcery you possess, from Curse Breaking to Creature Summoning. All so you may save countless lives against the eternal evil.

Enjoy your stay.

(P.S. Please specify at the front desk whether you're arriving by Airship, Alien craft, Bubble-sphere or other means.)

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Veneseron Fortress welcome note

-Written by Padrake Poniferous, Master of Illusion.

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Chapter 1- Imagined Worlds

You should never have let her die.

Evan Umbra tried to ignore his thoughts as he walked back from school.

Water bled from a bruised sky, soaking the streets as gusts of wind shoved him with cold hands. Cars groaned along the roads and a church bell pealed, but the heavy rainfall smothered most of the city sounds. It beat down mercilessly, turning his brown hair black as the strands stuck to his face like leeches.

Evan looked behind him on instinct. Paranoia had been a constant ghost at his shoulder since the first attack. He didn’t see them, but they could be near. Evan tensed, ready to run at the first sign.

You should never have let her die.

Stop it! You couldn't have done anything. It was always going to happen one day, but why so soon?

Last night had been bad. He’d distracted himself all day with school, but now the nightmare wouldn't stop replaying in his head. Maggots had taken up residence in one of her eye sockets. The other eye stared at Evan in accusation.

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In the dream he was back in the front room, staring at Gran in her beloved armchair. The cloying stench of death made him gag.

“Why,” his grandmother had croaked. “Why did you let me die, Evander?”

“Gran,” he'd cried. “Gran, I'm so sorry.”

The carcass cackled, its black tongue lolling. “You were never good enough, boy.

I'm glad I'm free of you now. You're pathetic, worthless. Even your own parents didn’t want you.”

“Please Gran, I…”

She’d risen to her feet, stretching out one rotting hand.

Evan had screamed as talons clawed out chunks of his chest, and he woke up trembling.

He wished he could seize the recurring nightmares and rip them into pieces. If he'd just been there, he could've called an ambulance. He could've…

She’d died five months ago and he still missed Gran terribly. She was the only person he'd ever loved and the only person who'd ever loved him.

Evan took a deep breath and composed himself as he crossed the road, leaving one grey street and entering another. He missed the countryside, but being dumped in some obscure part of London was the least of his problems.

His nightmares had gotten worse since the murder. *Death follows me like a hunter*, he mused, *picking off everyone around me until I'm the only one left.*

The children's home was still reeling from Pete's murder one week ago. No body had been found, but there'd been a huge amount of blood in Pete's bedroom. Pete's room was also right next to Evan's.

The orphanage staff refused to tell the kids anything. They'd surmised that Pete was killed and his body deposited somewhere. Police were still looking for a missing

person, but everyone said there'd been too much blood for someone to survive. No one was allowed in the room, of course. But two days ago, Evan glimpsed through a gap in the door what looked like claw marks on the wall.

He hadn't known Pete well, he didn't really know any of the kids he shared the orphanage with, but it was still horrific. It didn't feel real that someone could be murdered. Evan was terrified; he'd hardly slept since, fearing he'd be killed in his bed too. He didn't know who or why anyone would murder Pete, and paranoia made him think he'd be next.

Was one of the other kids the killer? One of the staff? Evan couldn't stop the horrible thoughts boiling in his head.

Stranger still was his dream that night. But he dismissed it for the hundredth time.

You're way too old to be dreaming of monsters, Evan.

Cruel laughter cut through the air.

He recognised it straight away. His body went cold. He rounded the corner and saw them. Ollie and his mates had a small boy cornered. As Ollie shoved his victim against the wall, Evan saw it was Tommy.

Evan barely knew him, but Tommy was much smaller than him, and right now he was crying in fear.

Ollie and his gang had beaten Evan up weekly since he'd moved here. He didn't know they had a more vulnerable target too. He couldn't stand here and watch them do it.

Ollie hadn't seen him yet. He could turn back round and run. Part of him wanted to. But Evan knew his conscience would never forgive him. He had to help, or at least try. Anger surged through him, burning out the fear. "Oi!"

Ollie and his two mates turned as Evan shouted. He needed to lure them away

from Tommy, even if that meant getting his own ass kicked. "C'mon then Ollie, you fat pig, I'm right here."

No one had ever spoken to the bully like that before, but Ollie's surprise quickly turned to rage. "Get 'im," he roared.

As soon as he saw Tommy escape, Evan sprinted the other way, hounded by the laughter of his pursuers. He veered into the nearest alley, hoping to lose them. He soon realised his mistake.

Alone. Cornered. *Trapped*.

At the alley's end loomed a metal fence, blocking his escape. Evan knew his chance was slim, but he threw himself at the gate anyway. He scrambled up like a monkey. He was almost there. He was going to make i—

Hands seized him.

One moment Evan clung to the cold metal, the next he was yanked down, and thrown back against the unforgiving steel. *Just let it be over quick.* His body trembled, and he tasted bile in his throat. The thugs laughed in his face.

"What's the rush, Ev?" Ollie snarled.

Evan opened his mouth to speak. Ollie slapped it hard.

“What you gonna do, mate?”

Before Evan could reply, the wind rushed out of him as Ollie’s fist slammed into his stomach. He fell to his knees, gasping for air. They were double his size. Evan knew fighting back would make the beating worse. He just hoped that after him, they wouldn’t feel the need to hurt anyone else.

He closed his eyes and braced himself. It would be over quickly. Maybe the pain could distract him from thinking about Gran for a while.

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His head snapped back as Ollie’s fist smashed into his jaw and he slumped to the ground.

All three bullies shouted incoherently. Evan was silent.

Ollie stamped on his hand, a sharp flash of pain. Another punch. Evan saw a faint trail of black smoke snake across the ground. The mist appeared to be coming from Evan’s fingertips. *This happened once before,* he thought. The punches in his last beating had made him see mist too.

He thought he saw the mist morph into a clawed hand that crawled across the ground, but just as it looked ready to seize Ollie's ankle, the mist dissipated.

Finally Evan's torture came to an end.

“Try that again and we'll kill you. That’s a promise.”

Ollie punctuated his threat with a last kick to the stomach.

Evan covered his face, gritting his teeth and trying not to cry out at the pain.

Their laughter haunted him as they sauntered out of the alley, leaving him curled up in a ball against the cold metal fence.

*

The sleet worsened, turning to hailstones that bounced off the ground like a gang of tiny white frogs. Evan stumbled home, hunched over, face pulled tight in a

grimace. The downpour beat against his aching body and the wind crawled across his skin, cold as a corpse’s caress.

He walked through the gates of Helken Place and up the winding path to the drab children's home, stomping up the stairs to his room. He wanted to cry as he closed the bedroom door, but it wouldn’t help. Nothing would.

11

He stripped off his school clothes and slumped on to his bed. *Just one more year, one more year and I’ll be done with school, free of Ollie. Free of everyone.* Evan had to tell himself that, to keep himself sane.

He looked in the mirror to check the bruises. As usual his pale face was marred by ugly abrasions. His left cheek had swollen to near double its usual size. He lifted up his shirt and winced at the discolouration there. Evan told the staff he just kept falling over. They asked questions, but he pushed them away. It would only make things worse.

He would've liked to call himself tall, dark and handsome. Really, he wasn’t much taller than average, his hair was a dull brown, and he wasn’t handsome. At least, no one had ever told him he was. Dark grey eyes, made darker by pale skin, stared back at him miserably. Oddly, tiny red scratches adorned each iris, like the grey was a stone that’d been cracked and was now bleeding. It was the only interesting thing about him.

Evan pulled up the chair by his desk and sat down to write. Writing was his favourite, well only, hobby.

Pages and pages of his scrawling littered the untidy desk, reflecting the rest of the room. He picked one at random and began reading.

This one was about his hero Alwar. Alwar was the exact opposite of himself.

Strong, courageous, amazing in every way, he was the stuff of legend. Evan loved writing about his many adventures.

With the warrior Alwar he could lose himself, forget Grandma’s death and his miserable life. He could escape. Alwar conquered terrible opponents and the most ferocious of beasts. Evan couldn’t even escape Ollie and his thugs.

12

He peered out of his small window. The hail had morphed into heavy clumps of snow that splattered onto the ground, lighting the garden with a ghostly sheen.

Evan forced everything else out of his head as he wrote long into the night, immersing himself in imagined worlds and allowing reality to slip away.

*

Winter descended upon London, its cold touch bathing the streets. Snow fell heavily, carpeting roads and walkways. Not a street lamp glowed as silence ruled the midnight hour.

In a dark alleyway, the shadowy veils of night shattered as light filtered through a gap in space and time. The beam of light flashed scarlet as it expanded into a swirling mass.

Out of the portal stepped a monstrosity not meant to touch this world.

Quickly, he distorted his features. The abomination transformed to what could pass for a man, providing no human looked closely.

He took in a deep breath, inhaling the air of Earth. Inhaling the air of men.

It appeared he’d come to the right place.

The demon’s lips hooked up. He would take great delight in killing the boy, regardless of his master’s orders.

*

Evan trudged through oceans of snow on his way to school. His body shivered and his hands grew numb as the frost bit deep.

13

His grandmother's face haunted his thoughts. He’d accidentally knocked her photo over this morning. The glass had shattered. She was smiling in that photo, her face kind and warm. Her face had been cold and slack when he'd found her.

Her body was there, but she wasn't. She was gone, she…

Evan forced the memory away. He wouldn't think about that, he couldn't.

She wasn't his real grandmother; he'd been abandoned by whoever his parents were, just like he'd been abandoned in London now.

He rounded the corner and Elfort School came into view. It was a typical English school, a mass of brown buildings, usually cluttered with litter as much as it was pupils.

But Evan was late and there was no one else around.

Except one.

A large figure stood by the school gates. He was as wide as he was tall, but hidden by a long trench coat and low-hanging hat. As Evan drew closer the feeling of dread engulfed him. For some reason, he was horrified by whatever waited at the gates. He didn't know why. Everything just felt *wrong.*

He froze, not wanting to get any closer to the stranger.

With agonising slowness, the stranger's face, half obscured by a scarf and hat, turned to look at him. Evan gazed in horror at the repulsive figure. He wanted to run away as fast as he could, but he was rooted to the spot.

Terror clutched at Evan's mind, squeezing his stomach and constricting his chest.

He had the innate feeling this stranger meant him grievous harm.

A double-decker bus, filled with raucous students, abruptly turned into the street and glided towards the school.

14

The stranger turned away fast and walked in the opposite direction. Soon he'd disappeared from view, swathed by the screeching wind and swirling snow.

The bus pulled up by the gates and the pupils filed out, complaining how the snow had made them late.

Evan breathed heavily, trying to stuff down the panic and bile crawling up his throat. He had no idea who the stranger was. He'd always had an active imagination, and right now his mind was telling him the eerie figure could've had something to do with Pete's death. *No, you're being stupid. It was probably just some homeless man.*

Trying to shake it from his thoughts, he headed to class.

Throughout the rest of the day, Evan couldn't stop thinking about the stranger and the sense of dread that'd overwhelmed him.

He was so distracted that he paid less attention in class than usual. He was terrified when it came to the end of the day, not of Ollie and his friends, but that the stranger might be back. That *thing* frightened Evan more than Ollie ever had.

He walked out of his English class with great trepidation, trying to fight the urge to run all the way to the orphanage. He was almost relieved to see only Ollie and his friends at the gates.

Evan attempted to walk past them unseen, trying to blend in with the other students, but as always Ollie spotted him. Since Evan had first arrived and answered one too many questions in his English lesson, the thug had made his life hell.

The smoke of Ollie's cigarette lingered about his nostrils, furthering his resemblance to an angry bull.

"Oi, Umbra!"

Ollie had four friends with him today and all five of them chased Evan as he broke into a sprint.

15

Adrenaline coursed through Evan's veins as he darted between pedestrians and cars, cutting across the road in a desperate attempt to shake them.

The streets retreated and a park came into view. He was nearly at the orphanage.

He'd never made it home before they'd got him though.

Evan leaped over the park fence, only to fall face-first in the snow on the other side. Regaining his balance using the merry-go-round, he pushed off and continued to run. Vaulting the fence had cost him. Ollie and his thugs made the jump easily and Ollie managed to snatch the back of Evan's coat and swing him round with ruthless force. Evan's head whiplashed and he veered sideways, tripping over and crashing to the ground.

A cruel chorus of laughter broke out amongst Ollie's friends, but the leader himself wasn't smiling. Perhaps he felt especially vicious today.

Before Evan could stand, Ollie booted him back down.

"Why do you always run, eh?" he snarled.

Ollie aimed a kick, but Evan rolled to his feet.

"C'mon!" Ollie shoved him. "Do sumin'."

This time he landed a punch to the jaw. Evan crumpled under the blow.

"Get up!" Ollie bellowed.

Evan's anger rose to a crescendo within him, but he lacked the courage to let it loose. Ollie seized his coat and hauled him to his feet.

"Look at you. You're nothing," he spat, his nose almost touching Evan's.

The other boys screamed abuse, threatening to beat Evan to within an inch of his life.

I don't deserve this. He felt tears at the back of his eyes.

"Aww, you gonna cry again, mate?"

Ollie's gang shrieked their mirth.

"Don't see him mouthing off today, do we, boys?" Ollie looked to his peers for encouragement.

“You really are pathetic, aren’t you, Evan? Tell me, is it true you're not even an orphan; you just live in that place because your parents abandoned you? I can see why they would.”

Evan’s anger blazed to within an inch of the surface. It felt like the blood in his head was banging against his skull, trying to leak out of his ears.

“Do sumin, Evan, I dare ya.” Ollie’s fat lips spread into a wicked smile. “You know how they always say, if you stand up to bullies they’ll leave you alone? Well, with me… it makes things much worse.” Ollie said the last two words slowly, savouring each one.

“What should we do to ‘im, boys? Beat ‘im bloody, or rip all his clothes off and send him back to the orphanage naked? That’ll be a laugh. Maybe we should stub our cigarettes out on him. Or maybe we should bury him next to his dear dead granny.”

Evan snapped.

His fist smashed into Ollie’s mouth. The bully’s head jerked back as his laughter cut off. Evan launched a second blow to the jaw, then another at his throat. Choking, Ollie staggered backwards. Evan hurled himself at him, his vision distorted red. Again and again he wreaked his vengeance on the bully who’d tortured him for months.

Abruptly hands clutched at his arms and hurled him to the ground. Evan landed a short way off. His head hit the ice hard. He tried to get up, but Ollie’s gang bundled him to the ground. Evan’s breath was crushed out of him as they kicked his stomach, back, and chest. Dizzy and disorientated, his vision no longer a vivid red but a dull

blur, he was dragged back to his feet. Ollie struggled to stand in front of him, blood streaming down his face.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he rasped through mashed lips.

Evan stared back at him in defiance, his fear of these savage bullies erased. He wouldn’t be their victim today. He had finally fought back, and he’d keep

fighting back every time they came for him. Eventually they'd learn to leave him alone. *They had too*.

Ollie's grin was feral as his hand slipped into his pocket. His cohorts egged him on. One word screamed through Evan's mind— *knife!*

He'd seen Ollie showing one to his mates last week, chortling as he slashed it through the air. Sure enough, he produced a flick-knife from his pocket.

"I'm gonna give you some scars to remember me by."

As Ollie advanced his eyes suddenly widened in fear as he saw something over Evan's shoulder.

Evan fell to the ground yet again as Ollie's friends let go of him with stricken shrieks and ran as fast as they could, terror hounding their steps.

Blood trickled from Evan's nose to stain the snow; blood so dark it was almost black.

A large shadow loomed over him.

Evan's shakes turned to violent trembles as he guessed what had horrified the others. Ollie's gang had vanished, leaving their leader to stare frozen at the thing behind Evan.

Something long, black and sharp careened into Ollie's forehead with a squelch.

Ollie's mouth gaped open for a second before the black spike arced up, taking Ollie's head with it. Blood vomited from Ollie's torso as it fell convulsing to the ground.

18

Evan turned and came face to face with a creature from a madman's nightmare.

Terror ripped through Evan's mind, consuming all thought and setting his blood afire. Horror clenched his stomach and gripped his heart. It was the stranger he'd seen before, only now it'd ripped off its garments, revealing monstrosity in its true form.

The hideous contortion of mangled limbs crouched. Its yellow slavering fangs were inches from Evan’s throat and the glare of its five green eyes was bloodcurdling.

The black spike-which had Ollie's head speared on the end like a grisly cocktail stick- was only one of eight legs. The monster was some amalgamation of giant spider and grotesque troll.

The creature pounced, one of its spikes inches from Evan's shoulder as it pinned his coat to the ground.

As Evan stared into those gigantic green eyes he saw only horror.

“You're weak, childling,” the monstrosity hissed.

Evan didn’t know how, he didn’t know why. His mind should have collapsed in madness. He should’ve been paralysed with mind numbing fear, but somehow, something erupted within him.

He felt a force, a rising tidal wave of energy that burst out of him. Faced with such absolute evil and the threat of imminent death, his power awoke. Bright emerald flames shot forth from Evan’s outstretched hands.

The creature roared as the fire blasted into him, throwing him back to land in a sprawl of spidery limbs. The stench of roasting flesh filled Evan’s nose as he staggered to his feet, staring at his unblemished hands in disbelief.

His hands had vibrated and pulsed when the flames shot out, but Evan hadn’t felt any heat.

The fear was there, undeniably, but so was the power surging through him. Evan didn’t understand. Nothing like this had ever happened before, it was impossible.

Before Evan had time to work out exactly how he’d caused fire to burst from his fingertips, the monster charged.

All eight of its arms wrapped around him, thrusting Evan into its hairy, slime-ridden chest. The monster clutched tight, as if intending to crush Evan to pulp.

As Evan kicked wildly, he accidentally punted Ollie’s disembodied head. It sailed off the monster’s leg and landed on the park’s slide.

He was spun round in its arms as the creature used one of its limbs to pull out an object that’d been sheathed inside its very skin. The object glowed scarlet, transforming into a portal that swirled and crackled like lightning.

None of this could be real; Ollie's death, a giant spider monster, flames bursting from his hands. Evan would've tried to pinch himself and awake from this nightmare if he wasn't so horrified by everything around him.

The monster stepped into the portal, taking Evan with it.

The portal took hold and Evan was hurled into the whirling mass. The world disappeared in an instant, only to be replaced by another.

The great beast landed on solid ground, holding Evan in its two lower arms.

Screaming and thrashing, Evan tried to escape, but the creature had him locked in an iron embrace.

“I didn't realise how powerful you are,” his captor mused. “I was going to feast on you myself, but you have great sorcery. I will gift you to my queen instead. Yes,” he muttered rapidly. “Yes, yes, my lovely queen will surely forgive me if I present her with a gift meant for Lord Kurrlan.”

20

They stood on a narrow cliff face that jutted out above a sea of lava. Beyond the narrow ridge stood volcanic mountains and a ruined red landscape swathed in a mist of ash. Many of the volcanoes were tinged green or blue. One volcano floated high above the sea of fire, as if by magic. The sky was strewn with stars of black fire and painted a vicious magma to rival the sea below.

This wasn't Earth. This wasn't anywhere that should be, or could be, real.

Evan continued to struggle feverishly against his captor, but the demon only laughed. Roaring in pain, fury and fear, Evan aimed a punch at the beast’s head. To his astonishment a green blaze lurched from his hand again.

The demon's laugh curdled to a yell of agony and Evan fell from his grasp to the ground.

As the monster staggered, Evan crawled across the ruined red earth, making for the edge of the cliff. He'd rather throw himself into the volcanic sea than be eaten alive.

He scrambled to his feet, but before he could take another step the demon plunged a black spike into Evan's stomach.

21

Chapter 2- Blood Eyes

Although Arantay loathed his monstrous side, he knew it was useful when battling demons.

He moved with the inhuman speed he'd been cursed with, uncorking the monster's beak from its body amidst a welter of ichors. Blood splattered over his unnaturally pale face and scarlet hair.

After many missions in a plethora of peculiar realms, he’d managed to keep the fear of monsters locked away, but his own evil terrified him more than any demon.

Snow fell hard. Bodies fell harder.

The snow was blue here, a shade lighter than the crystalline trees surrounding them. They were in the ice jungle of Eltika, where the undergrowth was littered with countless shards of ice and the trees emitted vapour cold enough to cause frostbite.

Arantay took time to survey the battle before his next opponent. His fellow demon hunters Lok and Tyrell fought on either side of him.

Lok looked like an angel, with his bright blond hair and kind face, whilst Tyrell resembled the devil, darkly handsome and hair black as night. Ironically Lok was the most devilish of the three.

“So,” said Lok as he hewed another demon in half. “We're missing out on the

mission with those sexy alien girls, for this?”

22

Arantay dodged a yeti-demon's claws and hacked off its head with his enchanted blade. The monster's head was promptly lost in a whirlwind of snow. “We've also got a recruitment mission next,” Arantay replied.

“Damn it.” Lok took his anger out on a centipede-like monster, causing its innards to spill out like spaghetti. “That mission sounded awesome. Why do we get stuck with a boring one? We can go to Earth anytime.”

Beside him Tyrell used fire magic to burn another fiend to smoking embers.

“They’ve already given me extra sorcery training this month, like I need it,” Lok continued, proving his statement by shooting a bolt of lightning at the next demon in his path.

Demons pressed in all around, but Arantay moved like a phantom reaper, claiming his harvest of blood and brains.

“Who do we have to collect then?” Lok said, ducking as a demon swiped for his head, merely cutting off a strand of his hair instead.

Arantay shrugged. “Some American girl.”

“I thought there was a British boy too?”

“Tarensen said the boy is too important for us to collect,” replied Arantay.

Lok snorted. “Sure he is. They told me I was important when they found me too.”

Lok ducked the pincer of his foe again, before transforming his fingers to daggers and punching out the demon's eyeballs.

“Don't worry, there should be some good missions coming up soon,” said Tyrell, his vibrant blue eyes blazing and copper skin streaked with demonic remains.

“Orc armies are amassing in several worlds and more and more Dark-Venators

are letting demons into peaceful realms.”

“When don't they?” Lok replied sarcastically, shearing off an ant-demon’s antenna.

23

Arantay listened to his companions talk as he darted left and right, dismantling monsters to mangled ruin. He leaped to the side as an elephant-headed monster charged at him, horns encrusted with green gore.

Tyrell conjured a ball of acid and threw it at the beast. The acid magic drenched the demon and burned the skin from its bones. Arantay grimaced as the flesh sloughed off and the monster crumpled.

“We just learned that spell in Extended Sorcery class,” Lok chuckled. “You nerd.”

Arantay finished off the last demon by stamping the fiend's head to pulp.

As the battle ended, Arantay took a deep breath. It had taken almost a century to control his other side and he still needed a moment to get himself under control.

“Always good to have a little clean up,” said Lok. “Let's go tell the snow-elves we've sorted their problem.”

“Any others in the area?” Arantay asked.

“Hold on.” Tyrell's body went slack and Arantay knew he had astral projected into one of the pterodactyls flying above them, temporarily borrowing its eyes.

A moment later Tyrell returned to his body. “One left, he's escaping.”

“No he isn't.” Lok sprinted up one of the sapphire snowdrifts.

Arantay followed in time to see a demon with a wolf's head and a gorilla’s body, conjuring a portal and jumping through it.

Arantay and his companions raced after the demon, leaping through the gateway half a second before it closed.

They emerged on a world with a sky smudged by purple-stained clouds and lime-coloured lightning that struck the orange marshland around them.

“There,” Arantay shouted.

24

The lupine monster was cunning, unlike most lesser demons. It was already flitting through a second portal as they arrived.

They threw themselves into the next gateway, Lok swearing in annoyance.

Arantay blinked as the colours were sucked from his surroundings. This new realm was sepia toned, making Arantay and his companions appear as if they were in a black and white movie. The demon was already on the move again, however.

This time the hunters were not only flung into a new realm, but into the middle of a battlefield.

An army of Iserhian aliens were being slaughtered by a horde of rocket launcher-wielding ogres. As they landed on the battlefield, a particularly grotesque ogre focused his firearm on them.

“Holy crap,” Lok yelled as they leaped out of the way of the blast.

“Get that damn demon,” Tyrell roared.

Arantay spotted their target amidst the chaos and raced after.

He dove headfirst through the newest portal, seizing the fiend as they soared through the realms.

Arantay landed on top of the monster as they fell onto a tiny spit of island amidst a transparent sea.

Blue fangs blossomed in the monster's maw and it attempted to clamp down on his arm. Arantay moved faster, shoving his hand down its gullet and yanking out its entrails.

“Finally,” Lok panted. “The Masters better give us extra credit for all this realm hopping.”

“You reckon he was the leader?” Tyrell asked, staring at the corpse.

Arantay nodded. “Had to be, probably trying to find his Dread Lord.”

25

“You two can break the good news to the elves,” Lok said. “I'll meet you on Earth.”

Arantay tore his eyes away from a kraken floating in the sea to Lok, who'd already taken out his pipe. He exhaled purple smoke as their eyes met.

“What's the rush?”

Lok shrugged, before turning to summon a new portal.

“Gonna scout the area, check no one else is after the same girl we are. Finish up quick. I wanna get back in time to see my goblin soap opera.” Lok winked and disappeared through the portal.

Arantay just hoped they could find the girl before demons, or somebody worse, got their hands on her.

*

“Who’s there?”

Brooke's voice rang unanswered.

Someone, or something, was watching her.

She was alone, but Brooke couldn’t shake the feeling of unease. A creeping shiver whispered across her skin and lifted the hairs on the back of her neck.

“Johnny, is that you?”

Silence.

Cold sweat trickled down her back, tickling her spine.

“Seriously, Johnny, if you’re doing some sort of prank again, I’ll kick you in the balls so hard…”

She jumped out of her skin when her phone beeped.

26

You’re such an idiot, Brooke. She opened her phone and saw a text from Kate.

You’re being paranoid, she told herself.

Usually she left school with a group of friends, but after a two-hour detention (which was seriously unfair), she had to walk home alone today.

Brooke would've never thought walking home alone would have scared her, especially with the sun shining in a cerulean sky.

But still, the feeling of unseen eyes plagued her.

She was alone on the sidewalk, which was weird for California. If she squinted, she could see a few figures on the beach far to her right, but that was it. Other than the warm winds rifling through her chestnut hair, everything was still.

As she turned the corner, her heart jolted as someone stepped out onto the opposite path. The road was wide and she couldn’t make him out clearly, but Brooke could've sworn she saw him exhale *purple* smoke.

He was a young guy, around her age, and he was looking right at her. All she could make out was that he was blond, slim, and held a curious object from which the purple smoke rose. They made eye contact and a brilliant smile unfurled across his face. Brooke felt herself flush as he winked at her.

The stranger took a step toward her, but then something barrelled into Brooke from behind. She screamed instinctively.

“What the hell!”

Her best friend was the culprit, giggling that famous laugh of hers, reminiscent

of an over-excited piglet.

“I got you so good, B.”

Brooke glared at Kate before turning back to look for the boy. He was gone, but a thin trail of purple smoke still hung in the air where he’d stood.

27

“What you looking at?”

Kate peered over her shoulder, smiling like a moron.

“I just saw a hot guy. I think he was smiling at me.”

“Oooh! And now he’s run away?” Kate laughed.

“Yeah, he probably saw *you* coming.”

Kate shoved her playfully. “A good thing too, guys are all jerks.”

“Yeah, you won't be saying that next week, bimbo.” Brooke shoved her back as they walked.

“Says you. Johnny was drooling over your ‘luxurious golden legs’ again and fantasising about your ‘voluptuous lips’”

“He actually said that?” Brooke snorted.

“Yeah, he had a thesaurus for his English work. I doubt Johnny knew the word voluptuous beforehand. He mentioned your ‘colossal’ amber eyes as well. Anyway, I didn’t find you to talk about boys, for once.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Party. Tonight. Be there,” Kate ordered.

“Could you be a little more specific?”

“There’s this epic warehouse rave, not far from here. Like, everyone's going. It’s going to be amazing,” said Kate as they stopped outside Brooke’s house.

“How’re we going to get in?”

Kate looked at her slyly. “Dress sexy. It shouldn’t be too hard with your wardrobe.”

“Oi, you usually tell me I dress like a boy.”

“Just pick something cute,” said Kate. “Don’t waste time playing those stupid games instead.”

28

“Shoot-‘em up games aren’t stupid,” Brooke argued.

“Whatever, I’ll text you tonight’s details when I know more.”

“See ya’.” Brooke grinned.

As usual, nobody noticed her enter the house.

Her dad was in front of the TV, beer in hand, like she knew there would be. She passed her sisters on the way to her bedroom but neither of them said a word. Brooke was used to it.

While she might be popular at school, she was a loner at home. She would've given anything for things to be the other way around. Her two older sisters had the run of the house, as her mom was always working abroad. Her mother was Puerto Rican and spent most of her time there. Mary only had time for her boyfriend and had barely acknowledged Brooke in weeks. Dana didn’t speak to Brooke at all, just shouted at their father.

While her mom was a workaholic and barely ever in the house, her dad was a borderline alcoholic who spent all his time in front of the TV.

Brooke was eternally grateful for the escape school and her friends offered. *Things would be different if Adam was around.*

Brooke ignored the voice in the back of her mind. Yes, things would've been different if Adam was still here, but they would've been worse too. Her brother hadn’t ignored Brooke the way the rest of her family did, but everyone was

forbidden to speak about Adam now, as if he'd never existed at all.

She entered her room, glancing at the walls filled with pictures and souvenirs of the past sixteen years of her life. She glimpsed the portrait Johnny had drawn of her last year. Although he'd missed out her big ears and the scar Adam had given her which made her forever look like she had a split lip.

29

A smile broke across Brooke's face when she glanced at the collage of her friends.

But it soured when she heard dad and Dana yelling at each other downstairs.

She slunk down on her bed and checked her cell; a message and four missed calls from her ex, Ryan, accompanied by two texts from Johnny. She ignored them both.

Ryan was too possessive when they were together, whilst Johnny had cheated on his past two girlfriends and she didn't fancy being the third.

Contemplating the stupidity of boys, Brooke threw her cell back on the bed and turned to her computer, quickly checking her emails. Half an hour later, a message window popped up with Kate's name on it: **Hey B. Get over to mine, now xxx.**

Smiling, Brooke got dressed, applied a little make-up, made sure her hair covered her ears, and was ready to go.

She passed Mary again on the stairs, but her sister was on the phone and didn't even look at her. Brooke popped into the living room to tell her dad where she was going.

He only grunted, muttering unintelligibly.

"Okay dad, don't stay up," she called as she opened the door.

He grunted once again. Sighing, Brooke set off into the night. The feeling of unseen watchers and the mysterious blond boy, was far from her mind.

*

The three hunters stood silent and sentinel, watching from the shadows for the one they sought. The writhing mass of humanity jostled one another in their hurry to enter the warehouse.

30

“Her,” Lok said, pointing at a provocatively dressed girl as he exhaled purple smoke.

Arantay smiled and replied, his voice velvet soft, “No, Lok. As much as you would want it to be, no.”

“Perhaps she’s already inside?” Tyrell said.

“Let us find out,” Arantay rasped, his eyes flashing crimson.

*

The deafening music pumped in time to the rhythm of her heart. Green, red, yellow and blue lights shone and flashed all around, illuminating people one moment, throwing them into darkness the next.

Brooke danced wildly to the techno music booming through the warehouse. Her friends were beside her, but she could barely see them through the press of bodies.

Brooke was oblivious to everything as she moved with the flow of the crowd. The bright lights blurred as she spun her head from side to side. Her vision swam, the room was spinning. Maybe she'd drunk too much earlier.

She'd never felt better. She felt alive.

The music pulsed, the crowd writhed, and Brooke danced.

*

The three men entered the warehouse.

The other patrons couldn’t help but notice the newcomers, and all who saw them

couldn’t help but stare, particularly at their leader.

31

The three separated, filing through the sweat-filmed dancers as they attempted to find the one they sought. Arantay wrinkled his nose, using heightened senses to find her. As expected it was mainly humans inside, however some moonlight races secretly moved amongst them. The whiff of werewolf lingered in the air, kitsune too.

Finally, Arantay laid eyes on their target.

*

The music increased in volume and tempo, drowning out everything else. The tide of pumped-up partygoers took Brooke in their current. The multicoloured floor was alive with flailing limbs, sweat drenched hair, and wild cries of delight and laughter that could scarcely be heard through the thunderous music.

Brooke whirled, no longer knowing nor caring where her friends had gone. She recognised none of the faces screaming and shouting around her. The chaotic spinning stopped and one face came into focus, standing out in sharp contrast.

He was the most exquisite creature Brooke had ever seen. He barely resembled a human at all. He was beauty incarnate, yet not beauty as she had ever seen it before.

Hair the shade of blood cascaded to his shoulders, framing a striking, ceramic face.

A thin shirt clung to a body made of porcelain, accentuating his tall and slim figure.

He appeared both masculine and feminine, both incredibly youthful and terribly ancient.

He was looking for something, she was sure. He stood still, but his eyes darted from place to place. His head snapped around and Brooke realised with a jolt he was staring right at her.

A thrill shot through her body as she met his inhuman gaze and she reeled back, whether from the alcohol or the sheer ferocity of his stare she didn't know.

When Brooke managed to regain her composure, he was gone. She stared hard at the spot where he'd stood, but he was nowhere in sight.

She didn't know whether it was beer goggles that made the strange boy look so attractive, or the whole thing was a figment of her imagination. She laughed at her own stupid thoughts.

Brooke looked around in anxiously, aware of her own desperate want to see the boy again. *What made his skin so pale? Those eyes! He must've been wearing contact lenses.*

She realised she was hurrying, craning her neck over the crowd, trying to get another glimpse of the scarlet-haired stranger.

Miraculously, she spotted him again. He was leaning against the far wall, staring at her. Brooke felt a surge of delight. *What was going on?* When had a boy ever had this effect on her? She felt compelled, an irrepressible need to go after him. As she started to walk, he smiled at her brilliantly. Crimson lips parted to reveal bright white teeth, too sharp for a human mouth.

She walked faster.

Still smiling, the stranger opened a side door and disappeared into the night.

Without a thought Brooke followed, unaware of the strangers who stalked out after her.

A terrible feeling enveloped her when she thought she'd lost him, but then she spotted him again at the end of the street, beckoning her to follow.

How had he moved to the end of the street so fast?

She hurried after him, running now.

The ferocious booming from inside the warehouse faded to a dull pounding as Brooke and the enigmatic stranger moved further and further away.

The street lamps flickered and then dimmed, like dying fireflies, and the streets surrendered to darkness.

He turned into a small alleyway then froze, apparently waiting for her to catch up.

An uncontrollable urge propelled Brooke to follow.

She wanted to meet this beautiful stranger, to hear the sound of his voice, to see if his eyes were really that red.

He stood, immersed in the shadows like a startling phantom, a ghost with glowing embers for eyes.

A wave of panic washed over her and she felt the icy hand of fear clutch at her heart. The need to see him had gone, she'd come to her senses, and all of them screamed at her to run and never look back. She turned to do exactly that, when she saw two more guys blocking her way.

Trap, was the only thought clawing at her brain.

Brooke screamed as loud as possible and bolted, crashing straight into the strangers. The bigger of the two wrapped his arms around her as she lunged, catching her around the waist and pulling her close. She continued to scream, but he clapped his hand over her mouth.

I need to get away. I don't want to die!

She bit him savagely and he took his hand away with a yelp, almost losing his grip around her. Brooke tried to escape his iron clasp feverishly, kicking and screaming, her long nails scraping at his hands and gouging his arms.

He held on tight, but she refused to give up, sure someone should have heard her screaming by now. *Someone will come to save me?*

She heard laughter and thought it was the pale skinned leader until she saw him glaring at the blond boy. The blond stopped laughing and shrugged. “Sorry, Arantay.”

Arantay ignored him and placed a hand on Brooke's shoulder. At his delicate, icy touch she felt calm wash over her.

The sense of danger had left and instead of flailing in her captor’s grasp, she hung limp and exhausted.

“Sssh,” Arantay crooned, “we won’t hurt you.”

His tone was so reassuring Brooke felt convinced he was telling the truth. Though at the back of her mind she had a niggling sensation she was being tricked, that her emotions weren’t her own, Arantay was influencing them somehow.

Now she’d stopped fighting, her burly captor lifted her up and carried her deeper into the alley.

“Why do they always act like that? I swear I didn’t,” the blond remarked. Neither of the other two replied. Brooke recognised the blond from somewhere.

Her kidnapper set her down gently, propping her up so she was sitting against the wall. Emotion flooded back as she realised her predicament, but when she tried to stand Arantay touched her again.

As Arantay knelt before her, Brooke noticed his pupils were vertically slit and his irises were just *too* red, like clotted blood.

It had to be the alcohol in her system making him so strikingly attractive. Up close, she saw he wasn’t really feminine at all. His slender limbs were corded tight with sculpted muscle. His facial features appeared at once sharp and prominent, but also soft and delicate. His ears were pointed at the top.

He smiled at her again, and this time she knew it was to lull her into a false sense of security. Brooke couldn’t ignore the gnawing sensation of danger at the back of her mind.

“It’s okay, we’re not going to hurt you,” he repeated in his velvety voice. She felt her fears melt away and once again became fascinated with the creature kneeling before her.

“Ah, if only I had Arantay’s seduction voodoo,” she heard the blond say. “The possibilities…”

“Who-who are you?” She managed to get out.

“My name is Arantay.”

“We gotta hurry, Tay,” the burly one said. “It won’t be long before her friends notice she’s gone.”

Alarm threatened to take over again.

“Wha-what are you doing?” Brooke mumbled, oddly overcome with weariness.

Why was she outside surrounded by strangers? How did she get here?

The blond sniggered again.

Arantay shot a murderous look at him.

“Shut up, Lok,” said the biggest of the three.

Lok grunted and strode back to the mouth of the alley to make sure no one else was in sight.

“Tyrell,” Arantay urged.

Brooke couldn’t understand. She felt so strange, something was terribly wrong.

The burly boy, Tyrell, nodded and took out a curious object from his belt. As Tyrell raised the object, Lok hissed from the end of the alley.

“Wait! There’s someone coming.”

The other two retreated to the back of the alley, where Brooke sat and Arantay

crouched.

What the hell is going on?

Arantay placed a hand over her mouth. His hand was so cold it should've hurt, but all she felt was a slight tingle.

Brooke vaguely noticed they had swords sheathed at their sides. Arantay's looked like it was carved out of crystal as red as his hair, whilst Lok's sword was golden and Tyrell's blue.

Raucous shouting stabbed into the night. Brooke turned to see a group of teenagers pass by the mouth of the alley. They laughed loudly and most of them ambled about drunk, their feet going one direction, their mind the other. Her thoughts were screaming at her to call for help, but all that came out was a timid shout, stifled by Arantay's hand.

Her captors waited in silence until the sounds of the teenage mob dwindled away.

She was panting uncontrollably, panic threatening to engulf her. Faintly, Brooke's mind told her to focus on what her captors looked like. She'd need to inform the police of their descriptions.

Tyrell, the most imposing of the three, looked like he'd just stepped away from a modelling shoot. He was typically tall, dark and handsome. Brown, olive-tinted skin hinted at an Italian heritage. He had a strong square jaw and knife-sharp cheekbones, with long eyelashes that emphasized the azure of his eyes.

Lok, the one who'd laughed at her struggles, was the smallest of them and the complete opposite of Tyrell. His boyish, heart shaped face appeared innocent and his chocolate brown eyes looked like they always sparkled with amusement. He had a nose ring and what looked like a tongue piercing too. His ash-blond hair came down

to his eyes, and he was currently staring at Brooke appreciatively through the unruly strands.

Unlike Arantay, the other two wore red jackets with black cuffs, collars and buttons. It reminded Brooke of something someone might wear in medieval times.

“Too many civilians around here,” Lok said as a second swarm of partygoers left the warehouse. “We'll have to move her to a more secure place before we portal.”

Portal! These lunatics must've escaped the asylum.

“There's an abandoned scrapyard nearby,” Lok continued. “I saw it when scouting the area for Dark-Realmers. We won't be seen there.”

“No time like the present.” Arantay slung Brooke across his shoulder without preamble, before jumping inhumanly high in the air. Brooke's scream was muffled by Arantay's hand as they landed on a rooftop, swiftly followed by Tyrell and Lok.

Brooke opened her mouth to shout at them, or maybe scream for her life, but before she could they were racing across the rooftops.

Draped over Arantay's shoulders, Brooke saw only blurred buildings. Seconds later Arantay was leaping through the air again. This time he didn't bother to cover Brooke's scream as they landed in the deserted scrapyard.

“As promised.” She saw Lok smile as Arantay laid her at his feet.

Fear was nipping at her again, but Arantay placed his slender hand once more on her shoulder.

“She’s strong,” he commended.

“And fit,” Lok agreed with a smirk. “We're lucky the Dark-Venators didn't snap her up first. She may turn out to be quite the demon hunter.”

Demon Hunter! These guys really are batcrap crazy.

38

Tyrell must've noticed her eyes widen, as he said, “Lok, stop frightening her.

You're doing it on purpose.”

Lok grinned like the devil. “As if I would.”

“We need to get to Veneseron, now.” Arantay took command once again.

As the three of them assembled, a terrific roar reverberated through the air.

Arantay and Tyrell froze and Lok's face flushed with excitement. Arantay moved to stand over Brooke as figures emerged from the gloom.

Standing on top of the broken shell of a truck crouched five youths, glaring at Brooke with glowing eyes.

Simultaneously, the five leaped from the truck to land in front of them.

“I thought I smelt the stench of Venator,” the closest newcomer growled. “And the reek of something…” he glared at Arantay, “rotten.”

Brooke stared, noticing their hands weren't hands at all, but *claws.*

“Good evening,” the closest boy addressed her directly. “I am Merak, and I will be taking you from here.”

Merak’s lips skinned back into a snarl, fangs bursting from his gums and forked tongue flickering.

“Leave,” Arantay spoke quietly, “and we'll forget all about it.”

The strangers laughed like a pack of hyenas.

“Hand over the girl,” Merak replied, “and we promise only to maim, not kill you.”

“Uh, crap,” Lok sighed. “Just what we needed; blood lusting Were-Beasts.”

Chapter 3- Lair Of The Demon Queen

Evan stared down in confusion and agony as blood spurted from his body.

There was so much of it, spitting out of his stomach in streams. The spider demon wrenched its spiked leg back out of him and Evan fel to his knees, trying desperately to clamp his hands over the hole.

As his hands turned crimson, he saw black mist trailing along the ground.

Stranger stil , the mist appeared to emanate from his body.

Evan staggered to his feet, looking around stupidly, as if expecting to see the hospital he desperately needed. He tried to walk, but fell flat on his face, blood pooling around him as he lost consciousness.

*

Perhaps the severe heat woke him. Perhaps his body wanted to be conscious in its final moments before death. All Evan knew was that he was flying through a tunnel which leaked lava. He realised a second later, he wasn't flying but trapped in the demon's grotesque embrace.

40

He'd no idea how much time had passed since he blacked out. *Minutes?*

Hours? Evan had hoped this was all some elaborate nightmare.

His stomach felt bizarrely hollow. He looked down to see his white school shirt splashed liberally with red. *Is blood supposed to be that dark?*

Fragments of memory flashed back, images of the demon taking him into the yawning maw of a floating volcano. He must've been flitting in and out of consciousness for a while. The odour of sulphur and ash was overpowering. He tried furiously to escape the monster’s grasp, but he couldn’t move his body an inch.

Amidst the panic that consumed him, Evan vaguely realised they'd left the tunnels behind and emerged into a gargantuan cavern. The cave was splattered with blue pools of magma and draped in crimson cobwebs. Like lattices of red silk, the cobwebs threaded every inch of the wal s. With rising horror, Evan saw shadowed shapes encased in these webs.

“My Queen,” Evan's captor boomed. “My Queen, I have returned to you.”

Evan was beginning to piece things together. The cavern, the webs; he must be in the lair of whoever this Queen was. But his most vivid nightmares couldn't have prepared him for the creature that appeared.

He heard the ear-splitting chittering first, then the hideous scuttle of multiple legs. She emerged from the top of the cavern, descending from the gloom on a line of thick red web.

Evan screamed as the abomination landed feet away. She made the demon holding him look no more threatening than a kitten.

She was big as a truck and as scarlet as the cobwebs she produced. She resembled a giant spider, but with a dozen legs and four heads, each bejewelled by six glowing green eyes. Her disgusting body secreted the blue

lava that coated the cavern, and a scorpion-like stinger swayed above her body with a mind of its own.

“Sel atur,” the Queen spoke in a sibilant hiss, “you were long since banished. I hear you serve Kurrlan now.”

“I seek to make amends, my beautiful queen,” Sellatur crooned. “I present to you a most unusual creature, a creature Kurrlan desperately craves. My former master told me this boy was of great importance. Instead I offer him to you. He has sorcery, Your Grace. His flesh will be blissful y sumptuous, his blood intoxicatingly wonderful. I offer this one to you, my Queen, and beg your forgiveness.”

As Evan listened, he realised death by severe blood loss had to be better than the alternative. *Please, let me die now! I can't be eaten alive!*

The Queen cooed, “Ah yessss, I can smel the magic on him, but… this is not the sorcery of a hunter. He smells… different.”

The fact she sounded like a normal woman unnerved Evan to his core. He was useless to fight back or escape, he was weaker than a babe. The blood loss had

reduced him to nothing.

“A rare treat then,” Sel atur urged, “a tender morsel you’ve never tasted before.”

“Hmmm, yessss.”

This was it, his final moments on Earth- except he wasn't even on Earth, but in some horrible demon dimension.

He couldn't help it. When Sellatur raised him up high, Evan screamed in terror. The Queen giggled like a little girl, opening the mandibles on all of her heads.

42

A metal blur careened into view, striking the two legs holding Evan up and cutting them clean off. Evan toppled to the ground, drenched in the black demon ichors that spewed forth.

Sellatur screeched as the remaining halves of his legs vomited blood.

They all turned to see a man standing at the entrance of the cavern, a man with a brutal face and long silver hair.

The blur span back into view, soaring into the newcomer's waiting hand.

Evan realised the boomerang-shaped item was a weapon, with a hilt in the middle and curved blades either side.

Sellatur roared in agony, his maw gaping wide.

The warrior hurled his bizarre weapon again. The blade cartwheeled through the air and hacked into Sel atur's flesh like it was cloth, shearing through his body with a squelch before flying back to the warrior's grasp.

Sel atur croaked as both halves of his body collapsed on top of one another to the ground.

Evan used the last vestige of strength he had to drag himself away from the battle, the Queen's hisses of fury in his ears.

This time silver-hair spun round and threw his weapon back-hand at the Queen.

The blade hacked off one of her many legs before the warrior caught it again. Evan was about to call out to him when unbelievably, impossibly, the Queen's leg *melded* itself back to her body.

“You cannot kill me, Realmer fool,” the Queen tittered. “I'll only regenerate.”

Silver-hair crouched, frantically scrawling a symbol on the ground with a second peculiar tool. The symbol shone bright and two creatures materialised either side of him.

43

The creatures looked like winged snakes spliced with mermaids. Seconds later Evan recognised them as beings he’d only seen in myth.

Harpies! He made an indistinct sound of shock. *Are they harpies?*

The screeching harpies flew towards the demon Queen, distracting two of her heads as the warrior advanced with a snarl. He produced yet more weapons, but these Evan could identify as normal short swords. The queen scuttled forwards, but silver-hair jumped high, plunging his sword through the top of her head as he landed.

Unfortunately, the Queen had three more heads to spare. All of them snapped at silver-hair, trying to sink her many fangs deep, whilst her stinger jabbed viciously at the harpies who dive-bombed her.

Suddenly the stinger squirted out a blob of blue lava, but silver-hair rolled away and beneath her enormous body, slashing at her abdomen with rapid precision. The Queen hissed hideously as he chopped off several of her legs, causing her body to sag to the floor. As the legs grew themselves back, the warrior sliced off one of her abhorrent heads instead.

To Evan's amazement, the warrior tucked one of his blades away to conjure a bal of crackling energy from his hand instead. Before she could regenerate, he threw the bal of magic straight through the hole where her head should be. A second later the giant demon exploded from the inside out, showering the cavern in gobbets of sticky flesh.

Silver-hair inspected the monster’s remains, making sure she was truly dead

before hurrying over to Evan.

He demanded in a rough voice, “Are you hurt? Boy, can you hear me?”

Evan felt numb.

What have I just seen? Huge terrifying monsters. Green fire bursting from his fingertips. Ol ie's decapitated head. Strange warriors with magical weapons.

His teeth chattered, his body shook, and he couldn’t take his eyes off the smouldering corpse of the dead *thing* that would’ve eaten him.

“How could they have got to you first?” He heard silver-hair scolding himself. “If we hadn’t located you in time…” His words trailed into silence.

The warrior sheathed the other sword at his back. “I'm Tarensen, a Master at Veneseron Fortress. You are Evander Umbra?”

“Y-yes, but Gran was the only one who ever cal ed me Evander.”

It struck Evan how odd it was to be talking about his name when he had a minor hole in his stomach. As if reading his thoughts, Tarensen placed his hands over Evan's wound.

Evan felt an icy sensation wash over him and then a curious itching. He looked down at his stomach and gasped. Where the bloody hole had been was his normal, unblemished stomach.

“How…how did you? I was dying and...”

The demon slayer spoke over Evan in his brusque manner. “C’mon lad, we need to leave this realm. There could be more around here.”

He grabbed Evan by the shoulders and propped him on his feet.

“*More* monsters?”

Tarensen looked at their surroundings. “Bound to be hundreds of demons in a realm like this. The Queen probably had many subjects.”

“Where? Did you say *demon*?” Evan cried.

He knew he'd just seen two, but to hear someone else actually cal them demons almost convinced Evan this wasn’t just his imagination.

“Yes, Evander. Luckily your kidnapper was a lesser demon and his Queen only a minor Dread Lord. I still can’t believe they got to you first. They must be getting better…” He trailed off again, lost in his own thoughts.

Lucky! Lesser demon!

“You mean there are worse things than that?” Evan asked, pointing shakily at the bloated cadaver of the Queen.

“Far worse. Which is why we need to get you out of here,” Tarensen confirmed.

He turned away to rub out the symbol he’d drawn earlier and the harpies disintegrated instantly.

“What was that?” Evan asked.

“Just summoning magic.” Tarensen shrugged, procuring a new instrument from his belt.

“Why?” Evan voiced the thoughts that kept tearing at his mind. “Why is any of this happening?”

“No time,” Tarensen muttered.

An eerie glow burgeoned at the end of the strange instrument. The glow grew brighter and expanded, forming into another swirling portal.

“Let’s go,” Tarensen commanded.

Evan had no choice; no way was he staying here on this volcanic wasteland of a world, or near the body of those horrible *things.* Evan didn’t know if he could trust Tarensen, but at least he’d saved his life.

With one last look at the smouldering carcasses of Sellatur and the queen, Evan

stepped into the portal.

46

*

“So shifters are nothing more than bounty hunters now?” Tyrell asked.

“With the rewards the Dark-Venators are offering, we are,” Merak said. “Our pack needs the money, and maybe the Dark-Venators will give us some of their demon pets for free. The vamps have hacked us off for the last time. With Dark-Realmer help, this city will be the shifters’ domain once again.”

It was like they were speaking a different language to Brooke. Had she been caught in the middle of a war between two criminal gangs, where they all talked in code?

She looked around for an escape. Unfortunately, the scrapyard was surrounded on all sides by broken cars and twisted metal.

“Do you realise what you're doing?” Tyrell asked. “Dark-Venators are in league with the demons. All they want is chaos, death and destruction. We're the ones protecting the realms.”

“Save your speeches.” Merak grinned.

An untamed savageness lurked in Merak’s snake-like eyes. The rest of his pack appeared agitated, unable to stand still.

“Looks like they're juiced up on faerie drugs,” Lok whispered to Arantay. “They won't stop until they have her, and they'll probably kill her for sport before they hand her over to the Dark-Realmers.”

47

“Enough,” said Merak. “Just give us the girl and we won't rip you to pieces.”

“What makes you think you can?” Lok taunted. “We have more power at our disposal than you could dream of.”

“Stop it,” Arantay hissed.

“Why? They're begging for a scrap, I say we give it to 'em.”

“I'll enjoy clawing your face off,” Merak growled.

Brooke clapped a hand to her mouth in astonishment when the five thugs began transforming.

They grew seven feet tall, their chests and shoulders widening as they ripped their shirts off, revealing scales or fur sprouting over their skin. However, the change to their faces was the most appalling.

Two of their faces shifted to that of a black panther, one to a leopard, whilst another grew horns as his face morphed into a bull. Merak grew the tallest, his visage shifting to that of a lizard.

Arantay was a blur, shooting forwards and kicking Merak in the chest before the Shifter could attack.

Tyrell gestured and a rush of air took hold of the wereleopard, seizing his body and launching it backwards with amazing force. The wereleopard flew into a nearby car, his body smacking into the hood and his head smashing through the windshield.

Lok laughed like a lunatic, balls of purple fire appearing in his hands.

Brooke hid behind a pile of used tyres, peering round the edge to make sure none of them followed.

She watched Lok taunt the werebull, throwing fire at his feet. Arantay and Merak fought furiously whilst Tyrell fell under the onslaught of both werepanthers.

They pinned him to the ground and one of the panthers raised his clawed paw, about to plunge it into Tyrell's face. Luckily Lok got there first, one hand gripping the panther's chin as the other shoved his purple pipe right in the shifter’s eye.

As the panther yowled, Lok span him round to face the charging bull.

He waited until the werebull was too close to change direction before leaping out of the way, throwing the panther forward instead.

The bull's horns impaled his pack mate and they both fell to the ground in a heap.

Tyrell flipped to his feet, throwing an exploding ball of ice at the remaining werepanther, knocking him out cold, literally.

Only Arantay and Merak remained, fighting each other so fast their movements were too hard to follow.

Abruptly the werelizard got through Arantay's defence, his claws raking across his chest, causing a fine arterial spray.

Brooke saw Merak flicker out of existence in a blur of motion, and then he was right behind her.

His scaly hand clamped down and snatched a handful of her hair. Screaming in both pain and anger, Brooke balled her fist and punched the werelizard as hard as she could.

Merak's reptilian head recoiled and he let go of her, but her hand was in searing agony, as if the bones had been smashed to fragments.

Arantay's red eyes blazed brighter than ever as he reappeared, seized Merak by the throat and threw him through the air with unparalleled strength.

“To us,” Tyrell called out.

As she and Arantay retreated, Lok and Tyrell appeared to be working their sorcery together as a truck rose into the air with a huge groan.

49

The wounded shifters fled from the scrapyard as the truck crashed to the ground, where they’d stood mere seconds before.

Brooke gasped, spotting the deep gouges across Arantay's chest knit together as he moved towards her.

“Well, they won’t be coming back for round two.” Lok grinned maniacally. “Did you see this girl's punch? She's got some balls. Metaphorically, I mean.”

It took a second for Brooke to realise Lok was talking about her.

“Can't you get through one mission without a fight?” Tyrell berated him.

“Hey, this one wasn't my fault; you saw.”

Tyrell sighed, checking what looked to be a broken nose with his hand. “Maybe we should've worn armour after all,” he said. “Padrake did describe this mission as low-risk, right?”

“He didn't count on the shifters,” Arantay said. “We’ll have to tell him a pack has allied with Dark-Venators.”

“Let's go then,” Tyrell agreed. “Hopefully we can still land in the forest; the Masters are sealing off portal access soon.”

The strange instrument Tyrell produced in his hand lit up with an eerie blue light.

Brooke opened her mouth to scream for help, hoping someone would rescue her from these madmen, but Arantay took hold of her face with both hands and looked into her eyes.

“It’s okay.”

Brooke trembled beneath his grasp, shivering with fear.

“We’re not the bad guys,” Arantay whispered.

“C’MON,” Lok shouted, his voice distorted for some reason.

50

As Arantay stood and helped her up, she saw the blue light had changed into a portal that crackled and sparked, like contained fire and lightning.

Brooke noticed Tyrell and Lok had vanished. Lok’s voice must've distorted when he jumped into that…thing.

And Arantay intended her to be next.

Without a word he hurled Brooke before him, throwing her head-first into the swirling tempest.

Chapter 4- Realm Of The Demon Hunters

It felt like her body was being wrenched apart in every direction. A roaring inferno whirled around her; thousands of vivid colours blinded her. She fell to the floor with a thud.

As she hit the ground, Brooke heard raucous laughter. She looked up at Lok, trying to cover his mouth as he chuckled.

They had landed in a dark forest with distorted and twisted trees, leering over Brooke like deformed giants.

She opened her mouth to scream again when a noise at her side made her jump out of her skin. Arantay emerged from the now closing portal, landing gracefully beside her.

Where am I? What was that…thing? She needed to get back. She wanted to go home.

Brooke felt tears on her cheeks and her breathing became choked.

“Sssh.” Arantay tried to place a hand on her shoulder again.

“No!” She screeched, crawling away from him. Brooke noticed his nails were obsidian black, and she didn’t think it was nail varnish.

“Get away from me,” she cried. “What are you?”

“Death,” Lok answered menacingly.

Brooke looked at him in horror.

“Haha, just kidding.”

“Don’t make it worse, Lok,” said Tyrell.

Brooke shook her head violently, refusing to believe any of this could be happening. *Was the fight with those animal people real? What are they going to do to me?*

“Can we hurry things up? I’m hungry,” said Lok.

Arantay growled under his breath, making Brooke scrabble further away from him.

Lok also reacted to the growl, showing something akin to fear and taking a step back. “Sorry, Tay.”

52

“Please don’t hurt me,” she moaned.

Arantay cocked his head to the side quizzically. “I told you we weren’t going to hurt you.”

“Seems your powers don’t work on her too well,” said Lok.

“Her ability to resist is outstanding,” Arantay agreed.

What the hell are they talking about?

“So are we gonna carry her kicking and screaming then?” Lok asked, trying to hide a smirk.

“I don’t want to hurt her,” said Arantay.

“It’s me or Tyrell she’ll hurt. Look what she did to his arms,” Lok said.

As Tyrell stood with his arms crossed, Brooke noticed the shallow cuts she’d made with her nails when he'd restrained her earlier.

“Oh.” Tyrell had apparently forgotten.

Brooke watched in shock as Tyrell temporarily held a hand over each arm. When he finished, his arms were unfathomably unblemished, the cuts vanished. Tyrell repeated the procedure on his face, healing his broken nose.

“Well, that's my magic depleted for the day,” he said, exhaustion thick in his tone.

“I barely had any left after the Shifters.”

“This isn’t real,” she mumbled breathlessly.

Brooke tried to get up and run, but Arantay was there to catch her, moving faster than the eye could follow. One hand cupped her chin, his touch gentle as a whisper.

“Maybe we should wait until they’re sober to take them,” Lok said.

“Nearly all new recruits react like this, no matter the circumstances,” said Tyrell.

“I didn’t,” Lok said proudly. “Well, not as badly anyway.”

53

“I was terrified,” Tyrell admitted. “I broke Henry’s jaw when he tried to take me.

He and Luka had to use magic to make me stop fighting.”

“We’re lucky she’s not a badass like you then, aren’t we?” Lok replied sarcastically.

“Let’s get her to the Fortress,” Arantay interjected. “The sooner she knows the better.”

Know what? What the hell are they talking about?

Before she could do or say anything else, Arantay had picked her up. Brooke clung to his neck instinctively but was about to make a break for it again when she met the full force of his gaze. His eyes bored into her like two scarlet stars.

Slowly, her fears ebbed away.

“Good thing we didn’t have to deal with any Dark-Venators this time,” Tyrell said.

“If they’ve forged an alliance with the Shifters, they might recruit some of the wolf clans too.”

“Who cares?” said Lok. “I’ll fight ‘em all.”

Arantay held Brooke tight. His chest was cold and hard as stone.

“Haha, imagine if we’d taken the wrong one, that would really mess her up,” Lok said.

“We’ve got the right one. Can’t you sense how strong her aura is?” Tyrell said.

“Yeah, I’m just saying it’d be funny if we transported a normal human by accident…”

“You have a sick sense of humour,” Tyrell interrupted.

Lok chuckled. “It would be funny though.”

Normal human? The thought broke into her calm for a second, but vanished when Arantay readjusted her position.

54

The hold Arantay had over her must’ve been powerful, as she was barely surprised by the three moons in the sky. The middle moon was a dark shade of blue, with an emerald and a lilac brother on either side, and multi-coloured stars flecked all around.

The trees were also different. Many were a vibrant green, but more were silver and violet. Brooke saw a cluster of bright orange trees to her left and a smattering of bone-white trees in the distance. Moments later, she realised giant mushrooms stood high above too and that many of the mushroom spots and tree leaves were glowing in the dark.

Lok and Tyrell chatted casually; or rather Lok talked whilst Tyrell added the occasional remark, but Arantay remained silent. After an age, the labyrinth of

giant trees began to thin, and the light from the moons softened the dark. In her dreamy state Brooke didn’t realise they had left the forest until it was far behind and they were walking across fields upon fields of multicoloured long grass instead.

“Do you reckon we’ll get a decent mission next time?” Lok asked.

“Bringing in recruits is one of the missions Vanderain values most,” said Tyrell.

“The masters have to really trust you to assign them.”

“Yeah, but they’re boring, mate. To be honest, we’re better equipped to be hacking apart demons anyway. Especially Tay, what with his… abilities.” Lok sniggered, shooting a glance Arantay’s way.

“Still, it’s nice to return to Earth once in a while,” Tyrell said, walking through a patch of pink grass that reached his chest.

“No it isn’t,” Lok said. “Earth sucks. On my last mission, me and Lyella took on orc vampires who rode clockwork manticores. The one before that I battled slug dragons. Now, they’re missions worth my time.”

“Enough,” said Arantay. Brooke was stirring at Lok’s words.

She saw where they were heading and gasped.

Out of the darkness loomed a Fortress of marvellous spectacle and immense size.

Brooke couldn’t believe buildings so huge and yet so beautiful could've been built.

The tops of the glimmering spires were so high they appeared to pierce the star strewn sky above.

There were *five* castles, connected by a vast spider web of bridges from all sides.

Each mesmerizing castle was different, but all were white as snow.

“Wh-what is that?” she murmured.

“Veneseron,” Arantay whispered, smiling as he looked upon it.

“I bet that bloody gnome hasn’t saved us any food,” Lok grumbled, apparently oblivious to the beautiful Fortress.

“Sniglog will rustle us up something,” said Tyrell, looking delighted to see the Fortress again too.

Brooke had no idea what time it was, other than the dead of night. Her companions were the only people outside the Fortress as they approached, although countless castle windows burned a myriad of bright colours.

The grass on the fields had turned purple as they neared the first castle. Tyrell and Lok hurried up a set of stone steps excitedly, with Arantay trailing behind, carrying Brooke with ease.

She noticed the steps were flanked by marble monsters, statues of things with weird, ugly faces. Some were winged, some horned, and some she didn’t recognise as anything she’d ever seen before.

The steps led towards two thirty-foot-high golden doors, with a gargoyle perched either side.

56

“Happy hunting, boys?” said a shrill voice, accompanied by the sound of grating stone.

“Yeah, we got her,” Lok replied. Brooke had the distinct impression he’d addressed one of the gargoyles- and the gargoyle was the one who spoke first!

Arantay turned away before she could get a look, however.

“Oh, another female, eh,” the unnaturally high voice continued.

“Yeah and she’s an exotic beauty too.” Lok chuckled.

As Arantay entered the castle, a gargoyle grinned up at her and the eyelids on his

craggy face blinked.

They entered a cavernous chamber bedecked by luxurious carpets and embellished with paintings, tapestries and decorations of all kinds. The walls themselves were of many colours and design, from lurid gold and violet to vivid green. The many stairways leading off in every direction appeared to be made of solid silver and gold.

Brooke noticed the entrance chamber held an army of statues, each wall lined by dozens, all clasping swords or other weapons. Many of these statues resembled the orcs and elves she'd seen in movies.

Everything was alien to her, but it was all captivating.

Without a word Arantay proceeded up the nearest staircase, leaving her little time to take in the strange surroundings. Brooke lost count of how many staircases and different floors they travelled, (although it was impossible not to notice the glow-in-the-dark escalator) until she was carried into a small, plush room with a king-size bed.

"You'll be safe here," he reassured her one last time.

As he set her down on the bed she noticed Tyrell and Lok had departed.

Arantay looked at her once more, holding her large amber eyes with his own, then he turned and left the room in silence.

57

For some strange reason she felt lonely without him, even though she was frightened of him and everything happening to her.

As soon as Arantay left, she ran to the door and tried to yank it open. They couldn't keep her here against her will. If she could just get to a phone she could contact the police, or home.

The door was locked.

She sagged against it, her breath coming in short sharp gasps.

Her emotions trickled back now Arantay was gone. She tried desperately to open the door, again and again, but it didn’t work.

Brooke sank to her knees. Tears ran down her face once again, this time in defeat.

*

“Hello dear.” A cheery voice startled her.

Brooke raised her head from where it had been resting on the carpet; she must've dozed off sometime in the night. She was curled up in a ball on the floor, her eyes bleary and a dull ache at the back of her head. *Last night.*

She remembered everything in an instant, letting out a scream as she saw the tall man standing over her. He looked like a badly made scarecrow. He was very thin, and possessed bright emerald eyes and the most elaborate jacket she’d ever seen. The left half was green, whilst the right was blue. The jacket was adorned with pink fluffy shoulder pads and its zip was humming softly, the metal teeth wriggling. His earring was a red feather, and he wore purple mascara.

He chuckled at her reaction, hands behind his back as he rocked on the balls of his feet. His smile was warm and framed by a ridiculous French moustache.

“Good morning,” he said. “Sleep well? Although it does appear you missed the bed.”

“W-who are you?”

“Padrake Poniferous, Master of Illusion and famous Rockstar, at your disposal.

Who might you be?”

“Brooke Carn,” she said, trying not to meet his gaze.

“Well, Brooke, welcome to Veneseron.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Ah,” he said, unclasping his hands to stroke either end of his moustache. “How much did the boys tell you?”

“Nothing,” Brooke cried. “What do you want from me? You can’t do this!”

His smile retreated. “I am truly sorry, but it was necessary, for your own safety as well as those you hold dear.”

“What do you mean?”

Padrake sighed, running a hand through black hair that fell to his shoulders. A few strands of his bangs were streaked bright green too.

“Perhaps you should sit down.”

“I’ll stand,” she refused, both angry and scared; she didn’t know which she felt more.

“Very well.” Padrake bowed his head. “I think it’s best to just come out with it.

You see, Brooke… you’re special.”

“Are you patronising me?” she said, anger drowning out her fear now.

“Not at all. Sorry, that was a rubbish way to start. Um, well basically, Brooke, you are what we call a Venator, a demon hunter if you will, a…”

“Are you mad? This is a sick joke.”

Padrake grimaced. “I know it sounds ludicrous, but…”

“No! You’re messing with me.”

“Perhaps it would help if I showed you.” Padrake wiggled his fingers. Brooke shrank away from him, shielding her face with her arms as she felt a subtle change in the air.

Padrake chortled, raising his hand slightly. Brooke felt herself rising off the ground and into the air.

“Stop it,” she yelled. “Put me down.”

Padrake waved his hand again and Brooke dropped to her feet.

“How did you-- what kind of trick was that?”

“It was no trick.” He grinned. “That’s what we call magic.”

“Magic… isn’t real,” she blurted out.

“Who says so? Sorcery is all around us. The only trick is knowing how to use it.”

Brooke shook her head violently.

“Haven’t you seen anything bizarre that no else saw? Sometimes a potential Venator will use sorcery accidentally. Second-sight is the most common power that’s triggered fleetingly.”

Brooke remembered the glowing purple worms she’d seen wriggling in the garden one night, or the man she’d seen in the supermarket whose tattoos had winked at her.

“Well…maybe, but--”

“I know it will take some time adjusting to and I’m sorry it had to be this way. If only we had gotten to you at a younger age…”

“Why did you *get* me?”

“Because you are one of us,” he answered. “A Venator.”

“What?” She didn’t know what else to say. She couldn’t digest a single thing. It was madness.

“Hmmm, how to explain? You could say a Venator is a mix of sorcerer and warrior. A Venator is someone who has the power to combat demons and other dark creatures. In addition to hunting monsters, Venators protect all humans and other races in need. We neutralize problems between creatures all over the many

worlds.

We…”

“I don’t understand a single thing you’re saying,” Brooke interrupted. “You’re saying I’m one of them, a… a Venateer.”

“It’s pronounced *Ver-nay-ter,* dear, and yes you are,” he said, as if awarding her a medal. “Of course, many in the other worlds refer to us colloquially as Realmers, because a Realmer means someone who travels between the worlds…”

“Wait, what? Why is this happening? Why am I a Venator?”

“Who knows why? The powers that be maybe, the gods, or perhaps sorcery itself chooses you.”

“So you’re telling me…I can do sorcery? Like a witch or something?”

“Wizard, druid or shaman, they each have different forms of magic, but we Venators have our own brand of sorcery, which we use primarily to destroy demons.

This Fortress acts as a school for demon hunters, and you’re our newest recruit, Brooke.”

Brooke decided this Padrake guy was certifiably insane.

“You’re lucky our Arch-Realmers found you when they did,” he continued.

“You’re quite powerful. You could've become a danger to yourself or others if we hadn’t located you.”

Padrake’s smile melted. “And there are others besides us who might’ve found you.”

Brooke struggled to process everything.

“Arch-Realmers?” She picked out one of the stranger terms Padrake had used.

“Indeed. We sent three of our best after you. They're high-rank Venators. Well, Arantay is a tad more than that, but let’s take things one step at a time, eh?”

“Arantay,” she whispered, thinking back to the scarlet haired youth with eyes like rubies.

“Yes, we often send him on recruitment missions. His calming powers come in handy, as you can guess…” He cut off when he noticed Brooke staring at him blankly.

“My dear,” Padrake boomed, throwing his arms wide, “you’re in Veneseron.

Outside these very walls lies the greatest city in all the realms.”

He strolled over to the window and pulled back the curtain.

The window overlooked an immense valley where a vast, glistening city sprawled.

It was the most ludicrous and at the same time most wonderful city she'd ever seen.

Scintillations of colour splashed beautiful buildings of all variety. Towers and cathedrals, forty-storey inns and brilliant mansions; all kinds of alien and amazing architecture gleamed with a proud pulchritude.

The lower buildings clustered and leaned against their gigantic brethren, and wide roads sliced through it all, heaving with an unimaginable population.

Brooke saw a multitude of strange flying things weaving amongst the clouds.

Creatures of legend, and some she'd never even heard legends about, filled the city to bursting. The many creatures caused the panorama to surge and ripple, moving along like thousands of tiny ants in a multi-coloured kingdom.

“That,” Padrake beamed, “is Veneseron city, city of multiplicity, city of sorcery.”

“Multiplicity?”

“Why, yes. Veneseron city is the only metropolis in all the realms that welcomes every race in existence. It’s a safe haven from the countless wars. And a fantastic site for shopping too.

“Of course, the city is predominantly orcish with some Djinn architecture, but it’s all beautiful, don’t you think?”

He turned back from the startling view, smiling at her.

“Where is this...Veneseron? How do I get home?”

He raised one dark eyebrow. “Don’t you understand, dear? Veneseron is far from your old home.”

“How far?”

“Why, it’s another world. Didn’t you guess that when you went through the portal?”

“No, I didn’t guess that,” she snapped. “I didn’t know what that thing was. I thought I was going mad, seeing things-- I still think I am.”

“Oh, those feelings will pass, don’t you worry. Many newcomers feel that way when they arrive. I assure you, you're not going mad, this is real.”

“This is happening,” she rasped. “This is really happening.”

“If it wasn’t, it would be quite an elaborate prank, don’t you think?” He chortled.

“So-- I’m a Venator, or whatever? I can do magic, but…” Something dawned on her through all the confusion. “Demons, you said demons, what do you mean?”

“Ah, yes. Well, there are other beings who can use magic, and some are bad, very bad.” The lanky man frowned.

“But not to worry.” He smiled again. “Veneseron is guarded against all evil and you won’t have to worry about demons until you're fully prepared to face them.”

“Face them!” Brooke repeated.

Padrake waved the statement away. “Let's not dwell on the future.”

“But what happens to me now?” Brooke urged. So many thoughts and questions swirled in her mind.

“We at Veneseron will train you. Make sure you don’t accidentally hurt yourself or your allies. That’s the most significant thing first of all.”

She asked the most important question burning inside her. “What about my home, my family?”

“Well, that depends on your choice. Probably the most imperative choice you'll make in your life. After a week at Veneseron, you may decide whether you want to stay and learn how to harness your magic, one day battling demons and saving countless innocents from a myriad of evil forces. Or, whether you want to return home, everything back the way it was.”

“Will I be able to see my family again?”

“Yes, one month a year we arrange for Venators to visit their home realms, or holiday on others. I like to visit Oonari realm, the beaches are just… oh, sorry.”

Padrake appeared to remember himself. “If you choose to stay, one of our Masters will visit your family and alter their memories so they believe you’ve gone off to a boarding academy. If you choose to leave, we will alter your memory so all this never happened and inject a chip into your arm to nullify your sorcery.”

“What,” she stammered, “you can take it away?”

“There’s no way to take your sorcery away, but a few centuries ago our allies in a neighbouring realm created a computer chip which will dull your magic, also making sure demons or Dark-Venators can’t sense you either.

“Many believe sorcery chooses them for a reason, that it’s their destiny to destroy the evils that threaten the realms. But we won’t force you. Your life could be in danger on the missions you’ll embark upon. Becoming a Venator is a risk, but our stronghold will train you in all areas so you’re equipped to deal with

it all, from liaising with the fae-folk, hunting fire-goblins, or slaying rabid Minotaurs.

“Oh, and one more thing. On your visits home you can tell them nothing of magic, demons or other worlds. You’d be putting them in danger if they knew, but you can help them; you can help all humans. You may not think it now, but all of us at Veneseron will be your family.”

Her family might’ve never felt like a proper family and Brooke had never been close to any of them, but knowing she might only see them for a month a year was hard. Not that she ever wanted to see Adam again anyway, not after what he’d done.

“I’ll give you some space. You’ve got a lot to take in.” Padrake said quietly, departing the room.

She felt numb. Slowly but surely it was dawning on her. Everything she'd ever known was gone. Replaced with this…she didn’t know what *this* was.

Brooke gazed out of the window, at the vast city gleaming at her in the distance.

What else is there to find out?

She walked to the other window and pulled back the curtain. It was early morning as she gazed upon the same fields she'd been carried across last night, now wrapped in a thin veil of mist. Further on, she could make out the trees of the sinister forest from last night, except now the forest appeared inviting and beautiful instead.

Then she noticed the *two* suns in the sky. The twin balls of fire were rising above the forest, their light staining the treetops. They looked like Earth’s sun, just doubled.

As she stared in amazement, a shadow fell over the window. Before her a gargantuan reptilian shape soared, its serrated wings spread wide. She keeled backwards, almost falling over.

The dragon flew through the sky, landing on the outskirts of the forest and

bowing its great head. A red and white blur raced out of the trees and mounted the behemoth.

The monster rose again and took off into the sky, soaring towards the Fortress. The dragon was metres away before it arced up and away, over the castle towers.

It was Arantay. She'd just seen Arantay riding on the back of a *dragon!*

As Arantay and his mount faded from view, Brooke fainted.

*

Evan sat back in the chair, his face in his hands, peering over the top of his fingers at Tarensen, who stared stoically back.

“You know everything you just told me, I wouldn’t have believed a word of it if I hadn’t just seen it for myself.” Evan shook his head.

He was struggling with all Tarensen had said, but a rising excitement was building within him. Evan couldn’t deny he'd secretly wished for something similar to this. Not demons, that was worse than the mind-numbing boredom of his life, worse than bullies. But sorcery, fantastical creatures, whole different realms. He knew an intrinsic part of himself yearned to be a part of this ever since he could remember.

If the images of those terrible demons weren’t burnt into Evan’s mind, he might’ve struggled more with all he’d seen in this world. *Two* suns, moving statues, and people wielding bizarre objects, whilst riding stranger beasts.

The Fortress itself was enough to make him gasp in wonderment, but before he could process it all Tarensen had led him directly into the middle castle.

If Evan thought the stronghold looked impressive from the outside, he'd been astounded when he saw the inside. Walls of gleaming stone, shimmering each and every colour, wide sweeping staircases, ceilings so high he couldn’t make them out.

Everything tingled with this (there was no other word to explain it), *magical*

energy.

Tarensen had led Evan all the way to the castle’s top floor and his quarters. Evan started to realise that everything in this place was huge, as if built for giants.

Tarensen's chamber was littered with intriguing objects, ranging from a miniature city contained in a glass jar where the inhabitants were microscopic, to another jar filled with a murky liquid and a slumbering creature that resembled a tiny octopus crossed with a bat.

Tarensen had demanded Evan tell him everything about the demon attack before he told Evan about the world of Veneseron. From the different ranks of training to what Evan was eventually expected to do. Go to different worlds and *hunt demons*!

Tarensen told Evan it was their job to protect the humans on Earth and other races on other worlds, to stop the dark forces gaining power. Evan couldn’t absorb any of it; little over an hour ago all he had to worry about was Ollie and his gang.

Evan took his hands slowly away from his face, staring at them intently. *Did I really conjure fire from these things?*

The thought had reverberated through his mind throughout the explanations Tarensen had given.

Evan noticed Tarensen observing him curiously.

He was normal compared to the others Evan had seen in this new world, but he still didn’t look ordinary. Abnormally pale blue eyes stared out of a brutal face. Evan had first mistaken Tarensen as elderly because of his hair, but up close he realised the hair was an unnatural silver, not the grey of old age. His skin was dark brown and toughened like old leather, swelling with hard cords of muscle. He had incredibly broad shoulders and wore a sleeveless tunic that emphasised his muscled arms. His face was deeply scarred, as if an infant had been given a pen and put it to paper for the first time.

“You are strange, Evan.”

He's calling me strange? After everything Tarensen had said about demons and Venators, about *magic.*

"You told me you worked the fire element when the demon attacked you, yet you hardly have an aura at all."

Evan was at a loss for words in how to respond. *It's strange to me too, dude. It's flipping bonkers.*

"Tell me, have you ever used sorcery before?"

"No, never," Evan replied, staring transfixed at his hands. "Where did it come from?"

"There are countless theories on the origins of magic," said Tarensen. "Personally, I prescribe to the notion that sorcery comes from inside the very being of we few that are blessed with it."

"I don't think I can face another one of those…monsters."

Tarensen stared at him long and hard. Evan quailed under the intense gaze.

"You will," he promised. "When we're done with you, you'll be ready."

Evan didn't believe it. "What could I possibly do against one of… *them*?"

"According to you, you've already performed a powerful spell."

"But it didn't kill the demon, just stopped it killing *me* for a second. If you hadn't come I'd be dead by now," Evan disagreed.

"By the time you achieve the rank of Mid-Realmer and are ready for missions, I suspect the fire blast you used will be ten times as powerful. You would obliterate a lesser demon," Tarensen said.

"But- but what if I can't?"

"You can," Tarensen snapped, "what more proof do you need, boy? No other Novice here can conjure such a fire spell."

Evan fell silent. There was so much he wanted to ask, but was scared he'd anger Tarensen further.

“I expect you’ve seen bizarre things lately, yes?”

Evan nodded. Months ago he’d been sure he’d seen an old man step *inside* a tree and disappear. Only weeks ago he’d seen leopard spotted bats roosting in his school gym. One bat had been smoking a cigar. None of his classmates could see the bats though and Evan had dismissed both instances as his eyes playing tricks.

“Hmm, so you’ve triggered second sight too. That just makes your weak aura stranger. Stand up,” Tarensen commanded, leaping to his feet himself.

Evan stood anxiously, as Tarensen walked round the desk to face him. He then commenced studying him; lifting up both his arms, testing his reflexes and placing two fingers at the crown of his head. Evan felt an ice cold sensation run through him at Tarensen’s touch. He realised it must’ve been some form of magic. Tarensen took his hand away, scrutinising Evan as if he were a bizarre creature.

“Very strange,” he said again, shaking his head in bewilderment. “Why can’t I sense a single grain of magic in you?”

Evan shrugged helplessly, wishing he had an answer.

“You’re in inexcusable condition,” Tarensen observed. “We’ll put you in physical training first. Perhaps in time your aura will grow stronger.”

Evan blinked rapidly.

“Unless you can perform magic now?”

“I-I don’t think so, sir.”

“Try.”

Evan looked around the room, wondering what he could possibly do that was magical.

Tarensen pointed to one of the flaming torches on the wall.

“Extinguish that flame,” he commanded.

“Er-how?”

“Envision the flame dying out in your mind. Feel the flow of sorcery inside you, use it. You can command the elements. Command the element of fire.”

Evan stared hard at the flickering flame, his eyes squinting as he focused. Nothing happened.

After two minutes Tarensen bid him stop and Evan relaxed, not knowing whether to feel ashamed or relieved.

Do I want to use magic? Do I want any of this?

“What happens now?”

“You begin physical training,” Tarensen stated briskly, “most begin with sorcery training first, but you clearly aren’t ready yet.”

“I mean, forever, what happens to me?”

“You’ll be allocated a room in Castle-Coterie. Gettelung will look after you there.

Veneseron is your home now, at least for the next week.”

“Does that mean I have to go back?” Evan asked.

“Perhaps. After a week you will choose whether to stay here or go back to Earth, never remembering your week here,” Tarensen said, unfurling one of the many scrolls on his desk.

So that was it? His last moment on Earth was leaving it in the arms of a hideous demon. But after all, what was he really leaving behind? He had no family, no friends.

The children's home would just assume he'd run away. *Who would care that I'd gone?*

Tarensen looked up suddenly, as if he'd forgotten Evan was still there.

"Castle-Coterie is on the left, overlooking Veneseron city," he said. "If you get lost, ask a Master or a fellow Venator."

Evan stood, scared and in shock. His only solace was that this new life had to be better than his old.

"Tarensen, I've already made my choice. I want to stay here."

Tarensen nodded, the trace of a smile on his lips.

Evan was going to leave Earth behind. He'd never belonged there anyway. Maybe he'd have better luck here.

*

Kurrlan threw the body of the Dark-Venator to the ground. The man's face, a moment before etched with evil insanity, now looked young and scared. In his final

moments the Dark-Realmer must've realised what Akirandon would do to him once she learned of his failure. Death was probably preferable.

Kurrlan felt no qualms killing him; he'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

That was all.

Molten blue lava rolled down ruined rock, trickling into rivers of magma that writhed all over the cavernous nest.

The Dread Lord looked down at the pieces of his fallen servant, then at the remnant of the spider queen, now only a dried, smouldering husk. Rage built within him. Sellatur had betrayed him.

After his first minion had failed, Kurrlan thought he’d use a more intelligent servant to retrieve the boy. Turned out Sellatur was too intelligent. Oh, how Kurrlan wished he could’ve killed Sellatur himself for this treachery.

Kurrlan’s secret, the secret not even Akirandon knew, was now perilously close to being discovered.

His lieutenant spoke, “Do you think the Dark-Realmers know about the boy?”

“No, the trace of his sorcery would have brought them here. But if Akirandon had an inkling another of them lived she'd already have him.

“Remove the bodies,” Kurrlan ordered.

The Dark-Venators were sure to send more of their kind, to seek the one Kurrlan had killed, but Kurrlan could not risk discovery.

His fury would not abate. He'd been mere hours from finally having one of them in his hands. He’d needed that boy. The boy meant everything and now he was in the clasp of those Veneseron fools. They would train him, care for him, they could learn what only Kurrlan knew. He couldn’t let that happen. Kurrlan would wage war on Veneseron to have him in his grasp.

He summoned another portal and prepared to return to his own realm.

“Send another; our friends in Veneseron will aid you. I must have the child, before it’s too late.”

Chapter 5- Of Venators and Veneseron

When Brooke regained consciousness, she was on the bed in her room. Someone must’ve found her on the floor and put her there. *But who*?

Padrake, the tall lanky man with the silly moustache? Arantay, who she'd seen jump on the back of a *dragon* and take to the sky? None of this could be real, least of all the boy with eyes like blood.

She noticed a tray by the door, heaped with unrecognisable food. A kind of meat,

not from any animal she recognised, coupled with food resembling bright-blue peas and green potatoes. Next to the tray stood a metal cylinder filled with black liquid.

The meat was tender and succulent and the liquid was surprisingly sweet.

Sunlight streamed in through the window. Brooke realised it must be mid-afternoon already. She got up and walked cautiously over, hoping she didn’t see another dragon.

She saw a sea of teenagers running about on the fields, or else sprawled on the grass in groups, chatting amiably. Obviously, there were other teenagers here, she realised. Arantay, Lok and Tyrell had only been a year or two older than her.

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Padrake had said Brooke was lucky the Venators had found her before the others had. She shuddered to think of who else, or what else, might’ve been looking for her.

She wished no one had come looking at all.

The people outside looked happy. Most wore a blue uniform, whilst some dressed in white. Others wore green or purple. Only a few wore red like Tyrell and Lok had last night.

Last night? Was it only yesterday? It felt like a lifetime ago she'd been at the party with her friends.

My friends, what must they be thinking? *What will my family be going through*?

She was gone; they'd all be going out of their minds with worry. Well, her family pretended she didn’t exist most of the time. But no, she was sure they would still worry if she disappeared. That’s what families did, no matter how dysfunctional they were. Wasn’t it?

But Padrake said the Masters could alter their memories. They would believe she'd won a place at some boarding academy. If she chose to stay here, that was.

The people outside looked normal enough, she decided. *What was I expecting,*

for them to look like Arantay? No, he was different.

They were all around her age or younger, some of them older by a year or three.

They sat chatting, or running around laughing, like normal teens.

Part of her wanted to meet them. Another part was too scared. Brooke decided to try her door again. Fortunately, it wasn't locked this time.

Outside was a colossal corridor. The walls and floor were made of a dark green stone. Red carpets ran the length of the corridor and elaborate statues and ornaments adorned the walls. It was hard to believe magic didn't exist when the place tingled with it.

Suddenly, a boy dressed in blue turned into the hallway from another passage.

Brooke considered darting back into her room, but he'd already spotted her. The boy looked at her in surprise as he approached.

"Hello," he said.

"Hi," Brooke said uncertainly.

"You're new, right?" He took in her clothes. She was wearing the same jeans and black vest top she'd worn to the warehouse party.

"Err-" She struggled, feeling incredibly out of place.

The boy had stopped in front of her, bemused. He looked around her age. His eyes were a bright tawny, contrasting with his dark skin and the braids pulled back to the nape of his neck, embellished at the ends by multicoloured beads.

"You're a Novice Venator," he stated.

"Um, I'm Brooke."

"No, Novice is your rank," he laughed.

"Oh," Brooke said, feeling her cheeks flush red.

“I’m Elijah Gold, Apprentice Venator.” His accent was British, but flavoured with Ghanaian.

“Why am I a Novice?” Brooke asked.

Elijah blinked. “How long have you been here?”

“Um…since today.”

“Now it makes sense. Hasn’t anyone told you about the training ranks?”

“No.”

“Have you spoken to anyone?”

“Er, this guy called Padrake.”

“Trust Master Padrake to leave out information,” Elijah smiled. “He likes to talk, but rarely does he say anything useful. Novice, Apprentice, Mid-Realmer, High-Realmer and Arch-Realmer are the ranks.”

“God, everything is so odd here,” Brooke vented. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Yeah, it’s hard at the start, but you wait, you’ll love it here.”

“I doubt that.”

“How about I show you around a bit?” Elijah beamed. “I was heading to Ethanc’s anyway. You’ll need someone to show you where everything is. There are about two hundred chambers in the Fortress you need to watch out for.”

She stared at him with raised eyebrows.

“Oh you know,” he waved a hand airily, “rooms that transport you to other worlds, rooms that are living and breathing, or ones that trap you there until the Masters set you free.”

He walked on, beckoning her to follow.

Brooke faltered, unsure.

“C’mon,” Elijah urged.

She exhaled heavily, then shut her door and followed him.

*

“Phew.” Elijah wiped his head in-between explanations as they walked. “I’ll almost be glad when summer’s over.”

“Why isn’t it?” Brooke asked. It had been autumn at home.

“Oh, our seasons last nine months here.”

Elijah laughed at her expression.

“Anyway, as I was saying, Veneseron Fortress is like a cross between a school and a training facility. I’ve been here years myself. All my family are Venators. For ages I thought I’d never be one. I had a weak aura and couldn’t do *anything* magical. Then a year ago I set Xavier’s hair on fire by accident. It was the happiest day of my life.”

“But why is this happening to me now?” Brooke asked, partly distracted by the beautiful tapestries and paintings on the walls, depicting landscapes where the sky was green and the grass black, or cities floating in the sky or underwater. Something Padrake had said about other worlds made Brooke uneasy.

“Didn’t Lanky Larry tell you anything?” Elijah said, exasperated. “Sorcery is dormant though, until you hit puberty. It’s rare for it to be triggered when you’re really young or an adult.”

Brooke observed Elijah as they walked, looking for some bizarre quality to his appearance like Arantay or Padrake had. Part of herself still told her this was all a mistake, she was a normal person, yet Elijah looked normal too. He wasn’t different to anyone else she’d met, apart from the fact he lived in another world full of sorcery, and that he could use magic of course.

Elijah carried on speaking. “Don’t worry if you haven’t actually performed sorcery yet. That’s why the Masters are here, they’ll teach you everything you need to know.”

“What if I don’t want to know?”

“Are you saying you don’t want to learn magic?” he asked in disbelief.

“Well, I guess…” she trailed off, shrugging.

Elijah blinked at her, nonplussed, his eyes like two golden coins. He shook his head and continued down the corridor. As they turned into another passageway Brooke was surprised to see it was flooded with teenagers, all of them chatting loudly

as they made their way to and fro. Elijah took it in his stride, engaging many of them in conversation:

“Tristan, long time no see.”

“Hey Hazim, nice to see you got rid of that Orc acne.”

“Shakara, you're back. How was your mission? I heard you and Byron were helping the fae in their war with the harpies.”

The other teens greeted Elijah in turn, many of them staring at Brooke curiously.

“This is going to be worse than being the new girl at school, isn’t it?”

“Naa. We get new recruits all the time, more than ever recently. You’re the fifth this month. Besides, at school they don't teach you how to behead demons and ride dragons.”

Brooke watched as a large cluster of boys moved down the corridor, passing a larger group of girls as they turned the corner. “Just how many kids are there?”

“Oooh, quite a few,” Elijah said. “I believe there's seven hundred Novices right now. I’d guess a thousand Apprentices for sure, almost eight hundred Mid-

Realmers, five hundred High-Realmers and three hundred Arch-Realmers."

"How do you fit them all in?" she asked, amazed.

Elijah chuckled. "Well each of our castles has ten floors, if you hadn't noticed already. Most people are Apprentices as it's really hard to pass the trials and become a Mid-Realmer. You'll rarely see Arch-Realmers as they're always on missions.

They're the real experienced warriors."

"Tyrell, Lok and Arantay must've been Arch-Realmers," Brooke thought aloud.

"Oh, did they recruit you then?"

"Kidnapped, more like," said Brooke, remembering how scared she'd been.

"Yeah, they don't waste time do they?" Elijah said. "So you've already seen Arantay? Bit strange looking isn't he?"

"You could say that."

"Most people here are scared of him," Elijah continued. "Well, most of the girls are fascinated by him. He gives me the creeps though."

Arantay had looked strange, but he definitely hadn't given *her* the creeps.

Elijah continued to lead her through the vast castle, down staircases that changed drastically from one another. One staircase was bronze, whilst another was carved from fluffy green dough and one staircase appeared to have a different substance for each step.

Through corridors they went, some lit by flickering torches; others by fluorescent balls of light within the walls themselves. Some passageways had levitating balls of electricity that lit the area from up high.

They passed a Victorian gas lamp in the corridor. Opposite the lamp stood a statue of Anubis, a Norman crown placed atop his head.

Elijah noticed her looking. “Earth is Veneseron's closest neighbour realm. Many chambers here are inspired by Earth's historical periods. Our bathrooms are neo-classical Greek and Roman. Some rooms reflect realms you'd never have heard of before. Master Padrake's training chamber resembles his home world. Valkyries built our towers and the Xulian race (the guys whose eye colour changes depending on their mood), helped--”

“Okay, stop.” Brooke laughed weakly. “Too much information at once, dude. I'm a bit of a dumbass anyway. I won't recognise many historical periods.”

They made their way through so many different doors, archways and cloisters that Brooke wondered how anyone could find their way around the place.

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All the while Elijah talked, apparently not pausing for breath. “There are ten types of missions we can be selected to do.”

“Ten!”

“Yeah, there are: detective, exploration or battle missions, also rescue, recruitment and peacekeeping, then hunting, undercover, guard and artefact-finding missions.”

Brooke blinked rapidly, trying to take everything in.

At last they emerged outside onto a black and white tiled courtyard, like an enormous chess board, which was a flurry of activity. An older boy clad in scarlet uniform was *juggling* balls of fire. A girl was extending her fingernails to ten times their natural size, then shrinking them back again. Two boys threw a leather ball in the air, as one cast ice from his fingertips to turn the ball into a solid block, the other cast flames to melt it again. Most shocking was a boy *riding* a giant lizard. He was unfazed as his lizard-steed scuttled across the courtyard onto the fields beyond.

Elijah grinned at her reaction. “Takes some getting used to. C’mon, I’ll take you to Ethanc’s. You’ll love it.”

Elijah led her up a steep slope to a bridge which joined two of the castles together.

Lucky I'm not scared of heights, she reflected as they walked across the narrow bridge.

In the courtyard below two Venators in armour wielded scintillating swords, duelling ferociously. One of them was Tyrell, he and his opponent fighting like their lives depended on it. Their swords were a blur of motion, sparks flying sporadically as the two weapons choreographed a deadly dance.

She pointed this out to Elijah, worried about Tyrell, but he just laughed. "They're only training."

Brooke watched the furious swordplay ensue as she crossed the bridge. It was amazing how skilled they were.

She thought Elijah was taking her to one of the other castles, but then he turned down a narrower bridge that led towards a single tower.

"This," Elijah said as he pulled back the glass door, "is Ethanc's."

The tower's interior was mesmerising. Everything in the oval-shaped room was made out of glass, in all shades of blue. Even the bar was glass, and one wall was a huge aquarium, filled with bizarre creatures she'd never seen before. Another wall had a plasma television screen set in the middle, with what looked like a gnome news reporter speaking to the camera. "Are vampires choosing to feed on people with high cholesterol? Could eating your greens now save you from a vampire attack? Find out after the break."

A chubby child with curly ginger hair stood behind the crystalline bar, sliding mugs to waiting Venators.

"It's one of the places for us to chill out," Elijah explained as he sat at a bench.

"Ethanc's is just one of our bars."

The window beside her gave a fantastic view of Veneseron. The huge forest sat in the north, the tops of its trees like a patchwork quilt from this high up, with an array of colours from silver to purple. Barely discernible, the forest appeared to evolve into a jungle further north, but it was too far away to see properly.

The city sprawled to the west, towers gleaming proudly as its streets writhed with activity. She was shocked to see a beach to the east, its shoreline just visible beyond the many fields surrounding the Fortress. More shocking still, the beach appeared to have emerald green sand and the sea itself was violet.

“The usual?” the chubby child asked Elijah.

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Brooke was confused by Ethanc’s scraggly ginger beard; he looked like an eight-year-old.

“Yep. Cheers, Ethanc. And one for my friend.” He then whispered to her, “Don’t stare.”

“Why’s he got a beard?” Brooke whispered back.

“He’s two hundred years old.” Elijah looked at her in bewilderment. “Oh, he’s a Halfling,” he chuckled. “I keep forgetting how much you don’t know about this place.”

They were joined by two Novices who’d detached themselves from another group.

Elijah introduced the newcomers: Emillia, a bubbly girl with blonde ringlets and Xavier, a short and skinny boy with spiky black hair.

As Elijah went to the bar to collect their drinks, the Novices stared at Brooke with interest.

“So,” Emillia said excitedly, “what’s your story?”

“Er-I don’t know. Last night everything was normal and now I’m here in this…

place, filled with who knows what and in an entirely different *world*. And I’m being told I can do magic but I’ve never done anything magical before in my life. I don’t know why they took me.” Brooke thought she'd blurted out too much, but the Venators didn’t look alarmed.

“Loads of us feel that way when we first arrive,” Xavier explained. “I didn’t do

anything magical before I was taken, but the Masters taught me. I thought I was going crazy at first. But now, now it just feels right."

Brooke thought she understood, but until she performed sorcery herself she couldn't truly believe it. She couldn't deny everyone else around here could do it though.

82

Elijah returned with drinks similar to the one that'd been in her room earlier.

"What is this?"

"Mavla. It's an energy drink," said Elijah. "It's useful for some of the longer training sessions."

"Too right," added Xavier, arching his back in pain. "Urkzal had us on an obstacle course today. He made everyone complete it twice and wouldn't stop until we'd all finished."

"How come you're not training now?" Emillia asked Elijah.

"I haven't got any lessons until this evening." He grinned, his teeth astonishingly white.

"When do you start?" Xavier asked Brooke.

"I- I don't know," she said, a little embarrassed.

"As there are so many Venators, we wait until there's around a dozen new Novices ready for training before we chuck them in," Elijah said. "It saves the Instructors explaining their particular form of sorcery to every single newbie. I reckon there are enough new Novices now, you'll probably start tomorrow."

That soon! Brooke's stomach fluttered.

"I've got to say, I'm glad my Novice days are over," Elijah added. "Veneseron is amazing and everything, but I hated cleaning, it's a girl's job." Elijah smirked at Emillia and Brooke as they threw him dirty looks. "Just kidding."

“What’s so bad about being a Novice?” Brooke asked.

Xavier answered, “As Novices, we're expected to help Sniglog with the cooking and the droids with the cleaning. You also have to help lay the tables in the Banquet chamber sometimes.”

Brooke must’ve made a face at that, because Elijah said, “It’s how we work with one another. Novices serve all the other ranks whilst the higher ranks, especially Arch-Realmers, help the Masters with the training.” He leaned back, smiling blissfully. “In my opinion Apprentice is the best rank. You no longer have to clean, but neither do you have to help train anyone else. You’ve only got to worry about your own training.”

“You’re lucky though,” Xavier told her. “Your aura is strong for a newcomer, you could move up to Apprentice in no time.”

Brooke snorted. “That’ll be hard for someone who’s never done sorcery.”

“You will,” Emillia promised.

*

Elijah walked her back to her room in what she'd discovered was Castle-Coterie.

As they reached Brooke’s door a beaming Padrake bounced into view.

“There you are. I was worried you might’ve run away,” he proclaimed. Brooke tried to keep a straight face, noticing how Padrake gesticulated dramatically whenever he spoke.

“I see Mr Gold has been looking after you. Did you enjoy the grand tour?”

“I guess so.” Veneseron was truly breathtaking, but everything was just so bizarre.

“Ah, as I thought,” Padrake continued, she didn’t think he’d even heard what she said.

“Right,” he said brightly, clapping his hands together. “You begin training first thing tomorrow. You’ll find your Novice uniform in your wardrobe. I’ve spoken with

Gettelung, you’ll be doing strictly magical training for a while, just to see what you’ve got. Then we’ll draw up a proper schedule, depending on your talents.”

Brooke nodded wordlessly.

“Well if that’s all, I’ll be off,” he declared, already strolling away.

Brooke turned to Elijah, who’d been sniggering as Padrake spoke. “What did he mean by schedule?”

“Well they’ll test you first, then decide what kinds of sorcery you’re best at, and combine your magic learning with the physical training we do.”

“There’s physical training as well?”

Elijah nodded as he walked her to her bedroom. “Yep, they randomly assign Novices to either magical or physical first as it would be too much at once. Training takes up most of our days, but we do get time to chill out too. Maybe we can hang out once you’re free tomorrow?”

“Sure.” She smiled, waving goodbye as she stepped into her room.

As Padrake promised, there was a Novice uniform in the wardrobe.

Her jacket, which Brooke thought resembled a pirate jacket, was white, but with red collar, cuffs and buttons. Similar to how Arantay’s jacket had been red but with black collar and buttons and Elijah’s had been blue with gold buttons. Brooke guessed the colours signified each rank here.

She noticed her jacket also bore what had to be Veneseron’s symbol sewn into the bottom left-hand side. The symbol had a golden background and was three-inches-tall. It depicted an armoured Venator, the right hand clung to a sword, whilst the other held a fireball.

From shirts, trousers and skirts to breeches and tunics, (all a pristine white) her uniform consisted of clothing styles from medieval to modern. Instructions on her

door said Venators could wear boots and cloak of any colour they wanted. They could have accessories and customize their uniform too.

Brooke thought she’d mix and match medieval with modern; there wasn’t much colour to work with after all.

She looked out her window, still not used to the two suns now sinking. Her first full day at Veneseron had been intriguing, weird and frightening all at once.

She gazed at the magnificent view outside for a long while, lost in her own thoughts and not knowing what to expect next.

*

Brooke pulled on the uniform after her shower. She'd realised she hadn’t washed since arriving and had asked one of the other Novices where the bathroom was.

Apparently every corridor that quartered Venators had a huge bathroom. They resembled Roman bath houses she'd seen in history books, but with added shower stalls and scarlet-steam hot tubs. Brooke was relieved to find the water was normal.

She'd been beginning to believe everything was different in this world.

It was dark as she left the bathroom. She'd left her shoes in her room and the floor was ice cold. The nagging feeling of being watched enveloped her as she walked. Her skin prickled and her spine tingled.

She glanced behind her, but no one was there.

Brooke walked faster now, her heart hammering against her chest.

Was that a footstep?

She whirled again.

Nothing.

86

The only light in the hallway came from the few magical spheres embedded in the walls and the glow-in-the-dark moss growing on some of the stones. Their luminosity caused eerie slivers of shadow, igniting her unease.

She'd never been afraid of the dark, but who knew what lurked in the shadows here. Brooke had the innate feeling someone or *something* was following her.

She listened intently for any sign of noise.

Was that someone breathing?

She wheeled round to look behind her for the third time. All she saw was empty shadows.

As she turned back a soft chuckle made her scream and jump violently.

Lok stood before her, smiling crookedly. His nose ring, a brilliant blue, glinted in the half light.

"What were you doing? You scared me half to death." She was sure he'd done it on purpose.

"You shouldn't be wandering the Fortress so late," he replied, lifting a strange pipe-like object to his lips and inhaling. "The statues here come alive after dark."

"Seriously!"

Lok chuckled, "Only some of them, and they're not dangerous, mostly."

Brooke watched, enthralled, as he exhaled and purple smoke billowed out.

It jogged something in her memory and she blurted out. "Hey, I saw you on the way back from school, didn't I? Before Tay found me in the warehouse. You were smoking that pipe."

Lok’s smile might have slipped an inch, but it was gone so quick Brooke must’ve imagined it.

87

“Ah yes, sorry. I couldn’t help but catch a little glimpse of you. I was scouting the area. Once I saw how beautiful you were, I had to get a closer look.”

Brooke felt the blood rush to her cheeks and became very self-conscious.

“Better not tell Arantay and Tyrell you saw me first. I might get into trouble for not following specific orders, you know.”

She nodded.

“So,” Lok said, changing the subject smoothly, “you look different now you’re not so hysterical.”

She noticed the blatant way he was staring at her, his eyes wandering.

“I like the wet look.” He smiled, touching a strand of her hair and pulling it away from her face. She looked at him curiously; his eyes were filled with lust.

“Well what did you expect? You didn’t exactly explain anything when you took me. I thought you might kill me.”

He laughed quietly, plumes of purple smoke skating about his face.

“Yeah, sorry about that, babe. We’re told to do it quick, in case any demons or Dark-Venators show up.”

“Dark-Venators?”

“There’s more than just us roaming the realms you know. Don’t worry, you’re safe now.” He winked.

Brooke decided he was being far too friendly for someone she barely knew.

“Well, thanks- I guess.”

“My pleasure. What do you think of the place, now you’re not whimpering like a

baby that is?”

Anger surged inside her, but she refused to let him tease her.

88

“It’s amazing, it really is. I don’t like it when people creep up on me in the dark though,” she added.

“So, you’re ready to leave your old life behind?”

“I-It will be hard, especially not seeing my family too much. But I haven’t decided what I'm going to do yet.”

“Family, huh?” Lok’s smile vanished. “Luckily my old man snuffed it before Veneseron found me.”

“Lucky?” she asked, perplexed.

Lok looked at her through strands of his white-blond hair. “He wasn’t a nice man,”

was all the elaboration she was going to get.

He took another drag on his pipe and then offered it to her, but she declined, not knowing what it would do.

“What’re you doing walking the castle so late?”

“Just been assigned a mission,” Lok said.

Brooke was intrigued. After all, didn’t the people here expect her to go on missions one day? “To do what?”

Lok smiled again, but this time it was unsettling. “Kill demons.”

Brooke gasped. “You’re really about to go off hunting demons?”

“Yep,” he said, nonchalant.

“Do you have to… you know… travel to a different realm?”

“Uh huh, loads of fiends are terrorising some world full of Gorgons. Apparently, an orc pack supplied these demons with some nasty plasma weapons. Our mission group will probably have to deal with them too.” Brooke noticed a feral glint in Lok's eyes. “You wouldn’t believe how fun missions are.”

“I find that hard to believe,” she said.

89

“Well, peace-keeping missions are lame, but ripping apart demons is the most fun I’ve ever had…whilst fully dressed. I’m sure you’ll love it too.”

“Lok, c'mon!”

They both turned at the yell. A tall, haughtily beautiful girl stood at the end of the passageway. Her perfectly straight hair was both silver and gold and her eyes were a fierce blue-green.

“Alright, Lyella. Calm down.”

After another wink and a cheeky smile, Lok proceeded down the corridor to the impatient girl.

Lyella gave Brooke such a look of pure loathing it startled her.

She tossed her glorious mane of hair back as she linked her arm in Lok's and they departed.

Only Brooke’s brother had ever given her such a look of pure hatred before, and that had ended horrifically.

*

Tarensen looked up from the intricate, archaic scrolls cluttering his desk as Padrake materialised into view before him.

“Your cheap tricks don’t fool me.”

Padrake smiled. “How long did it take you to see through my invisibility?”

“Not long at all,” said Tarensen, returning to his rune deciphering.

“We have two new arrivals,” Padrake said.

“Very astute.”

“The girl is strong.” Padrake continued, “I have every faith she will do well.”

“Good,” Tarensen grunted.

“And the boy?”

“Evan is…somewhat of a conundrum,” said Tarensen, “and it irks me.”

“Don’t you think he looks like Coridian?”

“Coridian?” Tarensen frowned. “The High-Realmer we exiled twenty years ago?”

“Indeed, he was slain by the Rakarn in the end,” Padrake said sadly. “He was a coward, yes, but he didn’t deserve that. He may have fathered this Evan though, there’s a resemblance.”

Tarensen shook his head. “The boy’s aura would be stronger if his father was a Venator. Before I saved him, he conjured fire magic. From what he described it was a spell some of our Mid-Realmers would struggle to invoke. But he had only the barest trace of an aura.”

Padrake’s smile was chased off by a frown.

“How can that be?”

“I don’t know, but I will find out. His sorcery isn’t strong enough for demons to sense, they must be after Evander for another reason. Maybe it was merely coincidence, but we both know coincidence is a rare thing.”

“Indeed,” Padrake agreed. “When can we expect Vanderain to return?”

Tarensen sighed, “I know not. Last I heard he was in some distant world, quelling a monstrous army that had arisen. Besides, I don’t think Evander is worth our

‘esteemed’ Master’s attention.”

“But he used powerful magic when under attack. What if he accidentally unleashes a spell on one of our Venators? Their safety comes first,” Padrake countered.

“You’ll be one of the Masters training him I expect, once Evander conjures sorcery again. Keep a close eye on him. He might be too strong for his own good.”

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“You know,” Padrake ventured slowly, “he could be one of the children Vanderain told us about all those years ago, he…”

“A myth,” Tarensen cut in. “Vanderain is full of legends and prophecies that never come to pass. What he told us to expect many years ago is simply not possible. We heard Akirandon attempted it, but she failed.”

“What about the latest rumours?” Padrake asked, moving on to a more sinister subject.

“If you’re referring to Akirandon’s Dark-Venators then I am not worried,”

Tarensen replied. “There are always whispers, they remain a considerable threat as ever, but at the moment not a dire one. If that moment were to arise I’m sure Vanderain would return to warn us. He always seems to know when he’s needed.”

Padrake nodded gravely. “Indeed. I’ve never doubted Vanderain’s abilities and decisions, but I must say I’m worried by the latest reports. For the children’s sake, not ours.”

“The children will always be safe at Veneseron, with or without Vanderain. I rule in his absence and I will do everything in my power to see no harm comes to our Venators.”

A smile, albeit a faltering one, again spread upon Padrake’s face. “Of course, Tarensen. You know me, always worrying.”

“Indeed,” Tarensen said succinctly, gesturing to the door and the exit.

As Padrake left Tarensen called after him, “Remember, keep an eye on the boy.”

Tarensen put away his rune scroll and turned to read the latest report on Queen Akirandon and her Dark-Venators. For the first time in a long time, fear clutched his heart.

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Chapter 6- An Orc, A Dwarf and an

Australian walk into a Bar

Evan jerked awake as three booming knocks reverberated through his room. Last night he'd been directed to a vacant Novice room, exhausted. He'd quickly fallen asleep. Now his slumber was interrupted as the booming continued.

He wrenched back the silken quilt and stumbled out of bed towards the door.

As he opened it and saw who was knocking his mouth dropped open.

A dwarf with a bushy beard and matted red hair stood glaring at him. He wore a pointed leather hat, the point only reaching to Evan’s chin, who himself was just under six foot. Despite his shortness the dwarf was stacked with hard muscle. The leather armour he wore bulged with his gargantuan girth. A huge axe and what might’ve been a laser-rifle were slung across his back, and one of his arms was mechanical. He saw Evan staring.

“Real arm got ripped off by a biomech werewolf in the Space-shifter wars,” he grunted, only serving to confuse Evan more.

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In his other hand he was holding a bundle of clothes. He pulled one set apart and thrust them in Evan's face.

“Greetings, Mashok. I’m Arnvar.”

“Uh, wh…Mashok?” Evan stumbled over his words.

“It's an old Venator word, roughly means friend. Here’s your uniform, put it on,”

Arnvar said briskly, before turning to bang on the door opposite.

As he dressed, Evan observed his bedroom in daylight for the first time. His window overlooked purple grass fields, full of Venators already in training. The room was fairly bare, Evan guessed it was his job to customize it. Two of the only furnishings were the paintings above his bed. Judging by the plaques beneath, one portrait was of a past Venator. The other painting (a pink sea with a whale so large it had a city on its back) was the view of another world.

The Venator’s plaque read: **Kyla Stray- who single-handedly held back the demon invasion of Venice in 1801, slaying the monsters one by one as they emerged from their portal.**

Evan noticed the portrait images faded every so often, being replaced by other paintings of former Venators and worlds, similar to the digital picture frames he’d seen in shop displays.

Evan knew he’d never live up to the deeds of any of the Venators in the ever-shifting portrait. The deeds every one of them had performed were mind-boggling.

Once he’d dressed and stepped into the hallway six other Novices were outside chatting. They, unlike Evan, probably hadn’t arrived yesterday and were used to this ritual.

A girl emerged from the room next to Evan’s. She had dark gold skin, long legs and big brown eyes. Evan had the intense feeling that he knew her, yet he was sure he’d never seen her before in his life. He couldn’t explain it.

Strangely, she appeared to recognise Evan too, as she asked. “Have we met?”

Before Evan could reply, a very rotund man who, bizarrely, had cat-whiskers, swept into the corridor.

“Oh no, Arnvar, Brooke’s for magical training first,” the man interrupted.

Arnvar grunted again before signalling for Evan and the others to follow him.

Sunlight bled into the hallway from the various windows as they set off. Evan peered outside and saw it was the crack of dawn.

Out of Castle-Coterie they went, travelling across a wide cloister and over a bridge that led to another castle.

“Go on to the courtyard,” Arnvar said to the others. “Umbra, with me.”

Arnvar led Evan to a separate dome-shaped tower adjoining the castle. Curiously the door was a jelly-like substance.

“For security,” Arnvar grunted.

As Arnvar passed through the viscous entrance, the transparent jelly disintegrated.

“If one of you children tried sneaking in here without a master, you’d stick to the door until we freed you. So don’t get any ideas.”

As Evan entered the tower he found himself trying to look at everything at once, his head darting from side to side.

A literal labyrinth of weapon racks filled the interior, with pathways between them stretching for miles. Evan couldn’t take his eyes off the magnificent armoury.

“You’ll find anything here,” said Arnvar, “from magical grenades, to plasma daggers or steam-blaster pistols. You can choose something to augment your own

sorcery, like a gauntlet of power or a staff. Or you can select a weapon enchanted with its own power. I’d recommend something like our ice-bomb launcher or machine-bow if you like ranged combat, but you may prefer close combat.”

Evan nodded. “I get to take one? How do I decide?”

“Venators must rely on their instincts. Whichever weapon you feel you should have is the right choice. This doesn’t mean you can’t use other weapons on missions, but the one you choose now will be yours to keep.”

This is so cool. Excitement bubbled through Evan’s body, *but there are so many to choose from.*

Luckily the weapons had labels underneath. Evan examined a spear enchanted with a paralysis spell as well as an axe that could split into two smaller axes. A mace that shot its own spikes at the enemy before growing them back again, to a sword which was invisible to everyone except the holder, so the enemy didn’t stand a chance.

But it was the section of weapons that appeared to be carved out of crystal which caught his eye.

“As some demons have flesh tougher than steel, we use enchanted weapons or ones crafted from the sorcerous crystal Eldalye.” Arnvar said. “As you’re only a novice the enchantment strength on the weapons will be limited for now.”

Evan found himself mesmerized by one crystalline weapon in particular, a long-sword carved out of emerald Eldalye, with markings that looked like black lightning down the side. The label said the blade was named Ruaden and was crafted by star elves.

Evan noticed a tiny dial on the hilt too. “What’s that?”

“Ah, this is one of our weapons with a transmutation switch. The long-sword you see now will shrink in size the more you turn the dial, so you can keep it sheathed as a dagger if you want, or use it as a short-sword instead.”

“Amazing!”

“Now, every one of our weapons has a built-in enchantment to cut spells,” said Arnvar.

“Cut spells?”

“When you find yourself battling a Dark-Venator or a monster who can cast magic, our weapons themselves can disrupt an enemy spell. For example, if someone threw a fireball your way you could slash it out of the air. If it’s weak magic, the fireball would disintegrate. If it’s a stronger spell you would cut the fireball in half instead.

Now, are you sure that’s the weapon you want?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a good feeling about this one.” Evan picked Ruaden up.

At once a rush of power and confidence surged through him. Being bullied and depressed for most of his life, he’d never felt those two emotions before. With this sword he actually felt for the first time that he could do this. Right now demons weren’t something to be scared of, he could do it, he could fight them, destroy them.

Arnvar smiled, revealing a false tooth carved out of ruby. “You chose well.”

He handed Evan a leather scabbard.

“You may keep your weapon in your room or sheathed at your belt but never use it, until we deem you ready. It’ll be a test of willpower. If we catch you wielding that sword before you’re trained it shall be taken from you for a long time. Understand?”

Evan nodded, sheathing his new sword and clipping it to his side. He’d felt so nervous about Veneseron before, but the weapon had given him a boost of confidence.

“C’mon then, let’s get you to training.”

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Arnvar led him to the biggest courtyard yet, as large as three football fields put together. Many Mid-Realmers were sparring competitively with a startling array of magical weapons. Evan’s gaze fell on the massive form in the middle of the courtyard. He jabbered incoherently, pointing at the huge monster, sure it was another demon.

Arnvar hastily informed him to, “Sssh and stop pointing. He’s just an orc.”

Just an orc!

The colossal brute was beyond intimidating, with muscles which made Tarensen's arms look like twigs. He had yellow eyes and brutal, smashed features composed mainly of a low-hanging brow. His skin was a mottled green-grey and covered in piercings. There was a gold ring in his nose, another in his eyebrow and three in each pointed ear that stuck out above his bald head.

A chunk of his left ear appeared to have been ripped out, and most frightening of all, two large tusks poked out of his bottom lip.

The orc stood facing the Venators in training. On the wall behind him hung an assortment of weapons.

Arnvar led him directly towards the huge warrior, Evan struggling with the urge to run the other way. He was relieved to see the other Novices looked nervous too, if not downright terrified like he was.

They joined another three dozen Novices already waiting. Arnvar left Evan in a line and went to stand beside the green skinned giant, looking tiny up against eight feet of raw strength.

"Novices," the orc began, in a voice like grinding stone. "I am Urkzal, Master of Weaponry here at Veneseron. These are my lieutenants, Arnvar and Casselle."

The second lieutenant came out of the mass of Venators training to join the orc.

She was tall and lithe, her body tight with hard muscle. She was some sort of tribal warrior, her aureate skin covered in vivid tattoos as dark as her ebony hair.

"Some of you have met me recently, others," his gaze flickered to Evan and he felt his heart stop, "are new under my instruction. Let me remind you all of the arts of a Venator."

He stood back and gestured to the many weapons on the wall behind him. "I teach no magic here, the only sorcery used is that which is already imbued in the weapon itself. Of course, the day is far away before any of you will be accomplished enough to wield a weapon of that power."

Evan noticed Urkzal himself had a gargantuan hammer strapped on his back which pulsed with electrical current.

“Many of you may think magic is all a Venator needs to know,” his hard gaze swept over each of them in turn. “You are wrong. A Venator must be in outstanding physical condition before entering the other realms. You might need to run from a pack of demons. If you are not fit enough, you will die. A Venator must be exceptionally skilled in long distance combat. If you cannot strike an enemy before it gets to you, you will die. A Venator must strive to be unparalleled in close combat.

You might need to fight when your magic is depleted, an enchanted blade can kill anything as easily as sorcery. If you cannot defend yourself when a demon is bearing down on you, you will die. We will teach you all of these things, without them you will fail on your first mission… and die. Understood!”

All of the Novices nodded emphatically, Evan included.

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“First off, fitness and strength, without these two qualities you will not survive as a Venator, it’s simple. We push you to your limits and beyond here. You may not like it, you will probably loathe it, but it *will* save your life.”

Evan was growing nervous, he wasn’t especially fit and he certainly wasn’t strong.

“Arnvar. Casselle. Take half of this group each and begin their sessions,” Urkzal ordered. “I don’t want to see any of you again until you are better. I do not train weaklings.”

*

Brooke stepped out of bed blearily, pulling on her Novice clothes and approaching her door uneasily. It could just be Elijah who’d knocked. Then again, it could be any manner of the strange beings she'd seen since she arrived.

It was the latter, a gruff ginger dwarf.

Several Novices were already in the corridor outside. Brooke’s gaze fell at once

on the boy whose room neighboured hers. She recognised him, or, she thought she did.

He was a stranger, yet it felt like she'd known him for a long time.

"Have we met?"

The words were barely out of her mouth when a preposterously plump man, with custard-yellow hair and a hairline that'd started running away from him, bustled into the corridor. He had round spectacles and clear as glass cat-whiskers where a moustache should be.

After he'd spoken with the dwarf, and the dwarf left with the other Novices, he turned to her.

"Brooke Carn is it?" he asked in a musical voice.

"Yes," she answered.

"I'm Gettelung, Master of the Archives. I'm here to guide you on your first day of magical training."

"Oh, right." She remembered Padrake mentioning him.

"Now, have you been informed on the basics of sorcery yet?"

"Um, no, sorry."

"No matter," Gettelung beamed. "Magic is mainly willpower and gestures. Think of your hands as conductors. Raising your hands whilst visualising fireballs shooting from them will cause your sorcery to create it. Obviously, it's a little more complex than that. You'll need training to attune your mind to sorcery and even then you'll be lucky to produce anything other than smoke at first. But you'll grow stronger in time, and soon be able to produce fireballs with a flick of the wrist."

Brooke nodded mutely, understanding his words but still doubtful sorcery could exist.

“Come along then,” Gettelung said without further ado, leading her through the castle.

It was scarcely past dawn. Brooke supposed the other Venators had the luxury of lying in bed for a couple more hours. Gettelung led her deep into the castle, descending many flights of steps and colourful escalators, until she was sure they must be underground.

Gettelung left her by a huge set of purple doors, saying he would be popping in and out all day to see how she was getting on.

Brooke stepped through the doors on his instruction and found herself in the biggest kitchen she'd ever seen. It must’ve run the length of the entire castle.

She'd been wrong about other Venators getting extra sleep. At least three dozen Novices scurried around, pots and pans in their hands. Some were stirring large vats, a

few others chopped food, and more were washing dishes or taking orders from a team of chefs.

An unbelievably high voice was shouting amongst the din, and Brooke received a surprise when the owner of the voice waddled into view.

The gnome was no taller than her waist. He had a baby face and was rather portly, but it was his yellow skin and shock of electric-blue hair that stunned her. A large chefs hat perched lopsided on his round head. Brooke would have found it comical if she wasn’t so bewildered by his appearance.

“I’m Sniglog, Head Chef at Veneseron,” he introduced himself, speaking very fast.

Sniglog directed her round the kitchen, explaining all the various equipment and the basics of cooking here, before having her deliver plate after plate of strange food across the corridor into the gigantic Banquet chamber.

An hour later Gettelung returned and as he led her out of the kitchen he explained that Novices were expected to clean as well; without using sorcery, to

build character.

As Gettelung led her through a plethora of peculiar corridors he explained the various abilities a Venator could potentially wield. Brooke was nonplussed by the time he'd finished his list.

They could control the elements: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. Other abilities were performing illusion, using magical forces of pure energy, healing, transmutation, enchantment and various other spells too numerous to mention. Brooke counted twenty different types of sorcery training, but some powers, like Astral Embodiment and Dreamwielding, were only available to the higher ranks, Gettelung said.

He continued to explain that Venators trained based on their different talents. Some could control every element, but not be able to read minds or perform illusion at all.

“Every Venator is different. One Venator might be able to heal from a fatal wound while another wouldn’t be able to heal a scratch.”

Brooke knew she couldn’t do any of the things Gettelung was rattling on about, they were just too stupendous. Manipulating the Earth, changing your arm into a sword, or seeing through the eyes of an eagle, it was all unbelievable.

The first day of her magical training proved to be the most terrifying and downright surreal of her life.

The few trainers she met were awe-inspiring, like Master Salamand, who threw fireballs the size of boulders across his training chamber. The Master of mind reading, who greeted Brooke by speaking to her inside her head. Then Padrake, who gave her the illusion she was falling from a cliff as a greeting, scaring her silly. All in the name of a joke, he insisted.

Afterwards, Gettelung took her through brief tours of the Alchemy and Anatomy training rooms, and a quick look at the weaponry courtyard.

The training chambers themselves were incredible. When Gettelung led her through two normal doors she was amazed that they were suddenly outside,

standing on the edge of a rushing waterfall and long snaking stream, which the Mistress of water controlled, making the current flow the wrong way.

All the things she saw, all the things the Masters were able to do, blew her mind.

“Of course, today is just a taste of what’s to come,” Gettelung said towards the end of the trip. “We don’t expect you to be controlling the elements on your first day, we’ll guide you in slowly.”

Brooke was thankful for this; and that none of the instructors had asked her to do anything magical. That was, until they entered the healing chamber.

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The Healing Mistress had butter-blonde hair flecked generously with silver, and eyes of a pale blue. Brooke couldn’t make out her age as she appeared at once both young and old.

Many Apprentices were training when Brooke entered, but the Healing Mistress greeted her warmly, introducing herself as Taretta.

Taretta briefly explained the art of healing before asking Gettelung, “And what are her talents?”

Gettelung shrugged his flabby arms. “It’s only her first day, we don’t know yet.”

Taretta peered at her intently. “Have you performed sorcery before?”

Brooke shook her head. All the instructors had asked her this today.

“Hmmm,” Taretta pursed her lips, “I have a feeling.”

Taretta took her hand and before Brooke could move she felt a light pressure on her palm. She looked down to see Taretta had caused a tiny cut with her nail. The thin line of laceration bled a single drop.

Before Brooke could say a word, Taretta said, “Look at the cut and picture it healed in your mind’s eye as hard as you can.”

Dazed, Brooke stared at her palm and imagined the cut knitting itself back to

normal. Nothing happened.

“Don't just imagine, really believe it will happen,” Taretta encouraged.

Brooke focused as hard as she could, wishing the cut would just go away. So slowly that at first she thought it was a trick, the wound reversed itself. The drop of blood sank back into her palm and the flesh sealed itself, leaving no trace of the scratch at all.

Brooke was stunned.

“Bravo,” Gettelung clapped.

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Taretta beamed at her. “It seems healing will be one of your talents.”

“But how come nothing like this ever happened to me before?” Brooke gulped down oxygen in shock, her brain attempting to tell her this was impossible.

“Have you ever tried to heal yourself by simply believing it will happen, hmm?

Few Venators use magic before we find them and even then don’t realise what they’re doing. Luckily most are unaware and have not caused any harm to themselves, or others.”

Brooke couldn’t believe it. All the way back through the castle she stared at her palm in amazement. She could do *magic,* it was real, this was real. She'd been taken for a reason. She didn’t feel as scared anymore. Instead, she wanted to learn more.

*

Evan stood hunched over, gasping for breath. His chest heaved and sweat poured down his hair to sting his eyes. The other Novices were in similar condition. One of them had nearly keeled over from exhaustion.

It had taken them two hours to run around the whole of Veneseron Fortress, climbing over steep hills and struggling through long grass. Apparently dwarves had far better endurance than humans and could run for days without stopping.

Arnvar wasn’t even out of breath.

“Humans your age should never be this unfit. Taking two hours…” Arnvar trailed off, grumbling.

It might’ve only been one lap, but one lap around Veneseron Fortress was no easy feat. Acres and acres of grassland surrounded the five castles, ending at the city on one side and the forest at the other.

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“You’re unfit to even think of the trials a Venator must face in the demon realms.

You shall all repeat this lap daily until you can make it in one hour, then half an hour.

Then you shall do two laps, and so on. Your endurance should be almost as good as mine before we put a weapon in your hands.”

Evan moaned feebly, dreading the prospect of another lap tomorrow.

“That’s half the training for today,” said Arnvar.

Half, Evan was incredulous.

“Next will be a test of strength.”

After designating each Novice a job in Veneseron that required strength, Arnvar addressed Evan last.

“Over there,” Arnvar pointed to a gigantic black wall in the distance. “Help Jed, he’ll tell you what to do.”

Wondering what he'd done to deserve such punishment, Evan ambled over towards the huge wall. As he arrived, he saw a pile of rocks sitting atop a hill. Seconds later, Evan realised the rocks were actually dark-green pods filled with liquid.

“What the hell?”

Another pile, three times bigger, lay at the bottom of the hill. One boy was

already there, grumbling under his breath. He smiled however when he noticed Evan.

“Hey dude, how’s it going?”

“Umm, okay,” Evan replied.

The boy scowled at the pods he had to shift, then back to Evan. “What did *you* do wrong then?”

“Nothing- I think.”

The boy laughed merrily.

He looked about fifteen like Evan, but he was shorter and stockier.

He had blond hair, a small button nose and chubby cheeks, his jovial face accentuated by lime-green eyes. He spoke with a slight Australian accent and looked it too, with a golden tan.

Evan traipsed down the steep slope and the boy thrust out a dirty hand. “Name’s Jed, Jed Jagger.” He smiled warmly.

“I’m Evan. Arnvar said I was to help you.”

Jed’s face darkened. “The old dwarf’s had me up since the crack of dawn lugging these things up the hill.”

“Why?”

“No reason, except to build up my strength. Oh and maybe because I took a shortcut in the Fortress lap yesterday, he wasn’t happy I can tell you,” Jed smirked. “Man, why did we get stuck with that grumpy ass? I’d rather have the tribal woman, she’s well hot. She could train me in *everything* physical.”

Evan’s smile quickly vanished as he glanced down at the many pods they had to carry. They looked too heavy to carry up the hill.

“What are these things?”

“Vessels from the Iserhian aliens,” Jed grimaced, “full of Mavla. Arnvar said they’ve already been carried to this spot by other Novices, and when we’ve put them at the top of the hill they’ll be picked up by the pixie peddlers and delivered to the city inns.”

“Why go through all that?”

“Just so we can use the exercise to build our strength. It's Glarqing slave labour,”

said Jed, picking up a pod.

“Glarqing?” Evan asked.

“Goblin swear word, I've heard a few Mid-Realmers use it.” Jed continued, “And it’s way too hot. The weather here is messed up. This one dude told me the seasons are crazy long.”

Evan stared up at the twin suns, undecided whether longer seasons was a good thing. He definitely wasn’t looking forward to longer winters. *Mind you*, he reflected, *I probably won’t last that long.*

“Oh awesome,” Jed said, noticing Evan’s sword.

“I picked this carnelian axe named Murga, crafted by trolls, obviously. Sucks that we can’t use ‘em yet though, it’s driving me nuts.”

Evan agreed as they got to work, picking the few smaller pods first, but even they took a titanic effort.

As they talked Evan revealed that he’d just arrived.

“Been here two months myself,” Jed said, “but all they’ve made me do is physical training. They say I’m not very magical, that I’ll learn in time. I keep telling them I can do it, but they want proof.”

Evan was intrigued. After all, hadn’t he himself performed magic last night?

“I was living in Australia when they found me. My dad’s Australian and I'd been living with him in the outback. One day there was this great big tarantula in my room.

As I stared at it, petrified, it just exploded,” Jed chuckled.

“It had to be sorcery. Best thing is me dad knew already, took me straight here afterwards. Told me he was a Venator too, been on an undercover mission on Earth for years. It explained why he always worked away for months at a time. Can you believe it? I thought he was a flaming accountant. I can’t do magic when the Masters ask me though, it just happens randomly, you know.”

Evan understood perfectly. He explained to Jed how he’d used sorcery for the first time, but hadn’t been able to do it again since.

Jed’s mouth was hanging open by the end of his story. “Ushk. So you actually fought demons, and you’ve been to a demon realm? That’s amazing.”

Evan thought it was more terrifying than anything. “Ushk?”

“It means unicorn dung.” Jed grinned. “So how did it feel, using magic?”

Evan thought back. “When the flames shot out of my palms, it was kinda’ like a release of pressure. I took an archery class once and it felt similar, like shooting an arrow from a bow, only stronger.”

“So cool,” said Jed excitedly.

Evan soon learned that Jed was a troublemaker. Ever since coming to Veneseron he'd been shirking his responsibilities and had already landed himself in trouble several times.

“If it’s one thing I hate the most,” Jed proclaimed, lugging a particularly large pod up the slope, “it’s hard work.”

Evan found himself instantly liking the Australian.

After two hours of backbreaking work, as evening was blissfully beginning to descend, Arnvar returned. Evan and Jed sank to the ground, painted with sweat and dirt.

“You’ll continue this every day after your run, until all the pods are up here,”

Arnvar commanded. “You may go now, but I expect you back first thing tomorrow.”

“Bearded wombat,” said Jed under his breath.

“What was that?” Arnvar asked.

“Nothing, nothing,” said Jed, hiding his smirk.

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Evan settled into a routine by the end of his first week at Veneseron. A routine consisting of running until he thought his heart would burst and lugging pods up the hill with Jed. They were instructed to cook and clean too. Gettelung had said something about character building.

Evan was up at the same time as the suns for his run. The rest of the day he was

building his strength, then his evenings were spent in the kitchen being bossed about by a gnome named Sniglog.

Despite all the physical activity Evan had to admit it was becoming easier. He was making the run in marginally better time and the pods were getting easier to lift.

While Jed complained how he'd been doing this for two months now, Evan was still mesmerised by everything he saw. He couldn’t help but enjoy the spectacles the other Venators were performing around them.

Evan even enjoyed working in the kitchens, where an armada of wonderful aromas perpetually wafted. Today it was a mix of cooked fruit and something that smelled like bacon, but better. Likely emanating from the creature, which resembled a mini minotaur, that Evan spied roasting in a giant oven.

Evan and Jed soon discovered they were appalling chefs however and Sniglog told them so. It wasn’t until Jed knocked the gnome into a vat of hot, sticky liquid, (which Jed swore was an accident) that Sniglog finally told them to get out of his kitchen and never come back.

By the end of their second week he and Jed managed to get the last and largest pod to the top of the hill. They celebrated loudly, before promptly collapsing.

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Arnvar arrived shortly after. He looked pleased, but to their horror he announced.

“Good job, boys. Now do it all over again.”

Evan couldn’t find words whilst Jed let out a stream of profanities at the dwarf’s retreating back.

Jed was the only friend Evan had made. With everything he was assigned to do, Evan didn’t have time to talk to anyone else. During the daily run he was always too out of breath to make conversation, and at the end of the day he was too tired to do anything other than fall asleep. Jed had mentioned a bar where Novices could go in their free time, but they hadn’t yet made the trip.

By the next week, he and Jed had managed to carry all the pods up the hill once again. Evan could now make the lap around the Fortress in an hour and a half instead of two and was pleased with his progress. He guessed all the running away from Ollie and his gang had given him an edge on the other Novices.

Evan found he didn't miss Earth at all. He'd had nothing there after Grandma passed away. Here at least he had one friend. He'd never had a best friend before and didn't know how much fun it could be.

Jed's grumbling was actually light-hearted and he happily cracked jokes which made Evan ache with laughter. Jed told him everything he knew about Veneseron, which he admitted was little.

"Veneseron's Grand Master is a dude named Vanderain and he created this realm.

He's an Eternal apparently, been alive for millennia."

Jed also warned Evan about another Venator named Sintian. "Everyone says he's mad. Sintian's been here all his life, but has always been a loner." Jed leaned in to mutter. "Apparently the Masters have stopped Sintian from doing dark sorcery loads of times. There's a rumour he killed another Venator by accident!"

"No way," said Evan, almost dropping his pod.

"Yep, he's been forced to wear Uqari bands four times too."

"Uqari?"

"It's a metal that disables magic temporarily," said Jed. "It's the biggest punishment for Venators who seriously misbehave."

Jed also told Evan about the Fortress castles.

Castle-Coterie was named for the infamous coterie who hid in its underground depths long ago, using it as a smuggling den. Dragonrock Keep was named for the huge stone dragon perched atop its battlements, and for its main entrance door which was in the shape of a dragon's maw. "The dragon was once real,"

said Jed.

“Vanderain defeated it in battle for being evil or sumin’. Vanderain thought the dragon was beautiful, so he froze it in stone.”

Titantower was named for the Mandon giants who built it and Swordstone castle because it housed the biggest weapon-training courtyard and held the most gargoyles.

“Lastly, there’s the Master’s Citadel,” said Jed. “Where the Masters live, obviously.”

Evan enjoyed hanging out with Jed and hoped the other Venators were as cool. At the end of his third week however, Evan encountered Sintian.

As they returned to the hilltop, Evan spotted a young man sprawled in the grass.

He'd been watching them over the top of his leather-bound book as they struggled with the pods.

He looked a little older than them. His hair was dark as night and curled at the tips, framing a malicious face. He might’ve been handsome, but thin lips hooked into a vicious smile and eyes glittering with malevolence ruined the façade.

“So, Jed found himself a friend,” Sintian observed.

His body was long and slim, like a sharp knife. He rose to his feet as they approached, his smile widening. He was much taller than them. His skin was a deep shade of bronze that only emphasized his obsidian eyes. His long fingers were bedecked with black and silver rings whilst his earrings resembled small black talons, encrusted with crystals.

“Haven’t you got better things to do?” said Jed.

He walked until he stood face to face with Evan, ignoring Jed entirely. “I don’t believe we've met. I’m Sintian Stray.”

“Say that with a lisp,” Jed chuckled.

Sintian looked Jed over lazily.

“Quiet boy, before you wet yourself again.”

“You just used water magic to make it look like I had,” Jed bristled. “Then he paralysed me with air magic and left me there until a passing Mid-Realmer released me,” Jed told Evan. “And he did it for no reason. The rumours are true, he’s a psycho.”

Jed then muttered so only Evan heard. “I’ll get him back though, if they ever decide to teach me magic.”

“You should be honoured,” Sintian sneered, “one of the most powerful Venators of all time stands before you. You must’ve heard of me?”

Evan shrugged.

Jed snorted, “How arrogant can you be?”

“But you must've heard of my brother Sypher?”

“The guy's scum apparently,” said Jed.

Fires flickered in Sintian’s eyes. “You dare impugn our honour,” he spat.

Jed stared back, unperturbed.

“My brother and I could destroy you with little effort,” said Sintian. “You’re lucky he’s on a mission right now.”

He turned back to Evan, “Who are you?” It was more a command than a question.

“Evan Umbra.”

“I've not heard that name,” Sintian said, dismissing Evan as unimportant.

“Of course you haven’t, Evan just got here,” said Jed.

“Ah, an Earthling. Tell me, what’s it like living amongst so many non-magical, powerless beings?”

Evan could see they were like two aliens compared to one another, raised and educated in completely different worlds.

“Well, I didn’t know magic existed until recently.”

Amusement outshone cruelty in Sintian’s eyes. “*Can* you perform sorcery? Or are you like your friend here?” He shot a venomous look at Jed, “a useless imbecile, good for nothing except cleaning the floors I walk.”

Jed’s jaw clenched.

“I conjured fire once,” said Evan, already hating the arrogant Apprentice.

“Once,” Sintian repeated, disgusted. “I can manipulate fire at will. I’m the most skilled Apprentice in Veneseron, and my brother is one of the top Arch-Realmers here. I…”

“Good for you,” Evan cut him short.

He’d had just about enough of bullies.

Sintian’s eyes flashed again, and his smile retreated.

“Do not rise above yourself, Novice,” he snarled, inching closer. “I can have you serve my meals for a week if I wanted, you’re nothing but a child here.”

“You’re only one rank above us. We can do anything you can,” said Jed.

“Prove it. I’m heading beyond the gate right now, to test my skills against real monsters.” Sintian tossed his book to the ground, “this book was insulting my intelligence anyway.”

“Novices aren’t allowed in the Badlands, idiot,” Jed said.

Sintian bared his teeth in a grin. “Aww, that’s sweet, little Jeddy’s scared.”

“What are the Badlands?” Evan asked.

“The wasteland where the Masters keep creatures we need for training,” said Sintian condescendingly. “The gate is a magical barrier which monsters can’t pass, but we can.”

“He’s lying,” Jed said. “He won’t really go in.”

“Just watch.”

Sintian turned and strode towards the huge black wall Evan first saw the day he met Jed. They followed cautiously. As they walked they passed a group of High-Realmers who pointed at Sintian and sniggered.

“No wonder he’s a weirdo,” Evan heard one of them say.

Sintian’s body tensed, but otherwise he ignored them.

Sintian didn’t stop until they were outside a large steel door set into the gate. A sign read:

DO NOT ENTER UNLESS ACCOMPANIED BY A MASTER. FATAL

DANGER!

“This is a bad idea.” Evan’s hand went instinctively to his sword, Ruaden.

Sintian laughed derisively. “I knew you’d be too scared.”

“Go on then,” Jed dared.

Sintian put his hand on the door’s padlock.

“There’s an enchanted lock on here, but *I’ve* figured out how to break it.”

Sintian continued to look smug as his hand glowed bright. The lock gave a click and dropped to the floor. He pulled back the door and stood aside.

“Coming ladies?”

Evan hesitated.

“Let’s just have a look,” Jed reassured him. “It’s just like a zoo.”

“In a normal zoo, there isn’t a high chance of us getting mauled to death,” Evan replied.

“I don’t know. I’ve known some pretty vicious otters,” said Jed, leading the way as they stepped through the gate.

Golden sands stretched for miles upon miles, only ending when they reached multi-coloured mountains far in the distance. The desert looked like it had been struck by a hundred small meteors. Countless lumps of rock were spread around the area, growing larger in size the closer they got to the humongous mountain range.

The scrape of steel cut through the air as Sintian unsheathed his sword behind them.

“I thought we were only looking around?” Fear crept into Jed’s voice for the first time.

“Don’t worry, you two can just watch in awe as I slay everything in sight.”

In the distance was a sleeping reptilian monster.

“That’s a Psyking,” Sintian said, again speaking to them like they were small children.

The Psyking had bone-white scales, enormous teeth and wicked claws. Although it possessed an alligator’s head and tail, its body was vaguely humanoid.

“Oh, and it can breathe frost fire, so be careful.” Sintian grinned.

Further away was another dozing beast. Evan thought this one looked similar to an ape, only it had red fur and a spiked tail.

“That’s a Guraah,” said Sintian, “and those,” he pointed to a cave a stone throw’s

away, “are Onlekks.”

He was referring to a group of four orc-like creatures the size of dwarves. They had muddy brown skin, pig snouts and an extra set of eyes where their ears should’ve been.

“Which should I kill first?” Sintian asked. “Guraah are notoriously heavy sleepers, I could sneak up and kill that one easy. The Psyking will be the hardest, but I fancy a challenge.”

Jed murmured as he gazed at the Guraah, “They all look nasty. Good thing they’re not close.”

As soon as Jed’s words were spoken several pebbles bounced off the nearest boulder. Evan snapped his head round to where the Psyking had been. There was nothing there.

“RUN.”

But as they turned they found the Psyking blocking their path, its ghastly head rearing back.

Evan guessed what the monster was going to do a second before it happened. He seized Jed’s collar and pulled him down as the Psyking spewed forth a torrent of icy vapour.

The frost fire stuck the rock behind them, turning it into an icicle.

The Psyking charged forwards, its ear-splitting hissing filling the air. Before Evan and Jed could scramble back to their feet the monster was upon them, yellow claws slashing.

One of the claws was an inch from Evan’s nose when Sintian hacked off the Psyking’s hand. Instead of losing his nose, Evan got a face full of blue blood.

The Psyking’s hiss turned into a screech. It stalked after Sintian who backed away, clasping his sword in one hand.

Evan knew they weren't allowed to use their weapons yet, but if they didn't they'd die. He and Jed unsheathed their weapons at the same time, giving each other a 'we have to,' look.

"Damn," Jed moved forwards, "we should stab the Psyking in the back whilst Sintian… oh crap."

Evan followed Jed's line of sight and recoiled as he saw the group of Onlekks charging at them, alerted by the noise of the Psyking. The four Onlekks snorted incoherently to one another. They brandished rusty iron weapons and looked ready to use them.

Two made for Evan, whilst the other two circled Jed.

An axe wielding Onlekk struck first, but Evan found himself moving automatically, ducking fast before the axe took his head off. Although he had his sword, he instinctively kicked his enemy instead. His foot connected with a hairy abdomen. Surprisingly, the beast fell to the ground.

The other Onlekk made a grab for his arm, but Evan dodged away, stabbing the hand with an awkward jerking motion. The Onlekk howled and gazed at his bleeding palm stupidly, dropping the mace he'd been waving about.

Evan stumbled as he swung his sword blindly, but he managed to slice off the top of the creature's head all the same. Bits of brain exploded over his shirt but Evan had little time to be disgusted, considering the first Onlekk had got back to his feet and was now barrelling into him.

His weapon fell out of his hand as the Onlekk wrapped Evan in a bear-hug and they both tripped to the ground. The grotesque beast snorted uncontrollably, picking up Ruaden and preparing to slit Evan's throat.

He felt his hands go white hot. He recognised the sensation and willed fire to burst out. He wasn't going to make it though, the sword was coming down.

Abruptly, the Onlekk's eyeball popped with a sick squelch as Jed drove his axe into it. The beast was silent as it keeled to the ground. One of Jed's Onlekks however leaped on him from behind as Jed stood over Evan.

Evan leaped to his feet, scooping up the fallen mace and swinging with all his might as the last Onlekk attempted to claw Jed's face off. The iron spikes obliterated the monster's head and he fell too, squirting brackish blood.

Evan and Jed turned only to see a second group of Onlekks had arrived and set on Sintian as he fought the Psyking.

Sintian fought like a madman, leaping left and right, hacking off limbs and carving a visceral tableau with their blood. He used his free hand for sorcery, lifting a small boulder with air magic and using it to cave in an Onlekk's skull. He then used Earth element, making sand rise up and hold an Onlekk in place.

As they watched, Sintian sliced upwards at the remaining beast, a split-second later both halves of its face sagged to the ground.

The Psyking spat out another round of frost fire but he rolled underneath the torrent, rising to his feet only to behead the Psyking with expert precision.

Sintian swaggered over to them, his smile shining beneath the blood splattered across his face as he surveyed the corpses around them.

"Not bad boys. Although, I killed *three* Onlekks by myself when I was only twelve."

"I'll kill you in a minute you little sh-"

Evan's shout interrupted Jed's words. "We need to get out of here. Now!"

Sintian and Jed turned and saw the newest beasts too.

"Yeah, the stench of all this blood will draw a load of monsters," Sintian said casually.

Evan struggled to take his eyes away. The black spots grew bigger and bigger as they continued to fly towards them. Evan couldn't make the monsters out clearly, but as they grew closer a terrible buzzing filled his ears.

"Scarada," Sintian said, "three or four I could take, but… there has to be over a

dozen.”

Sintian sprinted towards the gate.

“Time to leave,” Jed yelled as they followed.

It was only a short run back to the gate and Sintian was past the threshold when they still had a few metres to go.

But to Evan’s horror, Sintian slammed the gate shut behind him.

Chapter 7- Sorcery Unfurling

Evan and Jed collided with the steel, trying to force it open desperately.

“Let us out, this isn’t funny,” Jed roared.

Evan looked back. The swarm of Scarada were close enough to see in detail now, which made it ten times worse. They resembled giant ants, only if those ants had long red horns and leathery bat wings.

The ape-like Guraah, who’d slept throughout their battle, was oblivious as the swarm passed over him.

Evan’s breakfast threatened to shoot back up his throat as he saw the Scarada place their feelers on the Guraah’s body. As big as he was, the gargantuan Guraah was reduced to an empty husk in seconds as the Scarada sucked out his innards.

“LET US OUT,” Evan and Jed shouted in unison, banging their fists so hard on the gate Evan was sure he’d broken both of his.

The swarm left the Guraah and flew straight at them, buzzing with appalling excitement. Suddenly the door was wrenched open and they fell through and onto the Veneseron fields beyond. As he rolled to his feet, Evan saw Sintian slam the door closed again as the Scarada shot towards it.

They had been so close, Evan saw the leading Scarada leech his suckers onto the

door as it shut.

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They could still hear the horrible buzzing, but thanks to the magical barriers the Scarada couldn’t get at them now.

As Sintian relocked the gate he laughed merrily.

Evan realised he was panting rapidly. It felt like his heart was spinning round in his chest.

“Why the hell didn’t you let us through?” Jed yelled.

“It amused me, you screamed like a couple of little girls,” Sintian continued to snigger.

Evan had to give Sintian credit for stopping him getting his nose cut off by the Psyking. But his prank with the gate hadn’t been funny, it was sick. They could’ve died.

“I knew you weren’t at my level, if the Masters gave you a mission right now you wouldn’t last two minutes.”

“Well yeah, we just started training, dumbass,” Evan yelled.

The adrenaline that had fuelled his fear galvanised into fury.

“Watch your mouth,” Sintian’s smile curdled. “I didn’t have to let you back through. I just didn’t fancy scraping what was left of you off the ground. I-”

“Oh whatever,” Evan cut him off, preparing to walk away.

Sintian called after him. “I bet your own family are glad you're in Veneseron now.

They probably hated a talentless maggot, a little worm like you who…”

Evan cut him off again, this time with a punch to the face. Sintian reeled, his head snapping back as he fell to the ground.

All three boys were shocked, but none as much as Evan himself.

With a cry of outrage, Sintian threw out his hand and Evan felt invisible ropes wrap around him and squeeze tight.

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Sintian advanced towards him, hands gesturing wildly. Before he could cast more magic, Evan felt himself free to move again as a voice rang out.

“Enough!”

Sintian glowered as Arnvar strode over, coming between them.

Blood leaked from Sintian’s nose. With a murderous glance at Evan he healed himself with a wave of his hand and got to his feet.

“Wow Evan, you snapped big time,” Jed said, impressed.

Evan was still in shock, but he was resolute. He'd been bullied all his life, and the one thing he was proud of in his former life was the fact he'd finally stood up to Ollie and his gang. He wasn’t about to let himself get bullied here. This was a new life for him, and he refused to let anyone torment him like that again.

“Sorry, Master,” he apologised.

Arnvar noticed their blood-stained clothes. “Tell me you didn’t venture into the Badlands?”

“I was trying to stop them,” said Sintian. “I saw them sneak in and…”

“Liar!” Jed shouted.

Arnvar quelled them both with a look.

“You should know better, Sintian. All your life you’ve been told not to go into the Badlands, they’re for the high ranks only. You especially shouldn’t have taken two rookies with you.”

“I told you, they were the ones who snuck in. I…”

“How did they get in?” Arnvar glared at Sintian. “You’ve learned how to disable the spell on the lock, haven’t you? Severe punishment is due. Ten additional laps around the Fortress every day for a fortnight, and I’ll have you scrubbing the city aquarium clean too.”

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Sintian swore under his breath and strode away, whipping his cloak behind him violently.

Arnvar turned to them next. “As for you two-”

God, I’ve barely arrived and I’m already in serious trouble.

“As you used your weapons for good reason I won’t confiscate them, but one more rule break and I’ll make you wish you were back in the Badlands. You idiots need to learn not to be led by others so easily. Now, did you manage to slay anything?”

“Uh, two Onlekks each,” said Evan, taken aback.

Arnvar looked them over and grunted, “Good, you’re both ready for weapon training.”

*

He and Jed had expected to use their magical weapons and couldn’t wait to get started. However, it was two wooden swords that Arnvar passed to them.

When Jed voiced his opinion, Arnvar just bellowed with laughter.

They were in the biggest courtyard outside Swordstone castle, surrounded by Arch-Realmers wielding scintillating blades in a whirl of motion, too fast and bright to follow.

Neither he nor Jed had held a sword before and their sparring was slow and sloppy.

“Tyrell, Domnican,” Arnvar yelled at the practicing crowd.

Two Arch-Realmers detached themselves from the fray and came over. Arnvar replaced their magical weapons with wooden swords too. “Show them the basics.”

Tyrell paired with Evan whilst Domnican, a pale boy with long white-blond hair, trained with Jed.

Evan soon learned Tyrell was way out of his league, even if he was taking it easy on him.

Domnican however was having great fun, whacking Jed whenever he left himself open, judging by Jed’s loud yelps. “Ow! Oi! Stop that!”

Evan increased his efforts, swinging wildly, but again Tyrell parried every blow.

“Attack hard, but don’t be careless,” said Tyrell, batting Evan’s sword away as it swung for his head.

Evan changed his tactics yet again. As the minutes flew to hours, he thought he might've gotten fractionally better.

Arnvar returned from overseeing a group of Apprentices nearby.

“How they doing?”

“He needs a lot of work,” Tyrell admitted, “but he has determination.”

Evan nodded gratefully.

“This one gets irritated easily,” Domnican drawled, gesturing at the red-faced Jed.

“How would you like it if someone hit you repeatedly for hours?” Jed demanded.

“We didn’t like it at all,” Tyrell replied. “We all have to start off the same you know.”

Jed grumbled, rubbing his head and grimacing.

“From now on you have a new schedule,” said Arnvar. “You’ll continue your daily run, but instead of a strength exercise you shall train in weaponry throughout the day.

You may go.”

Evan and Jed hobbled away, bruised but ready to do it all again tomorrow. Well, at least Evan was.

The next day Jed and Evan served other Venators their food for the first time. Jed complained heartily, but Evan was just glad Sintian hadn't been there to gloat.

125

Weaponry training was great, five days in and Evan was already improving with the sword and getting fitter with the daily run, but he was envious of the other Venators. He yearned to be one of the many he saw around the Fortress performing magic.

Late in his room one night he sat on his bed, palm outstretched as he concentrated on trying to make fire appear in his hands again.

No matter how hard he tried, nothing happened.

*

By the next week Evan got his first glimpse of Venators in action. Monday morning a group of Arch-Realmers came hurtling down the corridor, almost bowling Evan over as they shouted commands to each other. Rumours around the Fortress was that they’d been called in on an emergency mission to Earth as a hiking group were perilously close to a wyvern nest. An Apprentice girl told Jed at lunch the Arch-Realmers managed to save the hikers and capture the wyverns, before taking the beasts back to their own realm.

Then on Thursday, Fortress gossip was that there’d been another emergency mission, where Mid-Realmers raced out of the castles to put out an enchanted fire, started by mischievous goblin teens in Paris.

As no sorcery was coming to him, Evan decided to focus tenfold on weaponry.

After a long day of training, he and Tyrell were just finishing up. Evening had settled and it was growing dark as they battled. Evan’s arms were aching and blood was pounding in his ears. He was running solely on adrenaline as he fought Tyrell with everything he had.

Luckily, he'd discovered he had a gift for evasion. That night, for the first time, he managed to break through Tyrell’s guard and press his sword against Tyrell’s stomach. He couldn’t believe it.

“I have taught you well, my son,” Tyrell joked.

Evan looked round at the sound of loud clapping, shocked to see it had come from Urkzal. The orc moved out of the shadows to loom over him.

“Well done, Novice. Perhaps you should give it a try with your own blade.” Urkzal gestured to Ruaden on Evan’s belt.

Evan was speechless as he unsheathed his enchanted sword. A thrill shot through him as soon as he touched the hilt. It felt so light, so wonderful in his grasp. He could feel the magic coursing through it.

Urkzal’s craggy face broke into a smile. “Arnvar, test the boy.”

Arnvar came forward, unsheathing his huge axe as he did so. Evan gulped.

Fortunately, Arnvar put his magically shimmering axe on the ground and pulled a steel sword off the wall instead.

“Sparring only, Umbra,” Urkzal commanded. “Your weapon can cut through flesh like a knife through kobold-butter.”

Evan knew his enchanted blade was stronger and Arnvar was using steel to even the odds, but he still didn’t stand a chance. The dwarf’s skill far outstripped his own, he'd be crushed. Worse, a crowd of Venators had stopped to watch.

“I’ll go easy on you.” Arnvar grinned.

Evan couldn’t find it in himself to smile back. His expression probably

resembled one of constipation.

Arnvar lunged. Evan ducked just in time, feeling the displaced air whoosh over him, inches from where his head had been.

Urkzal said to spar, he thought angrily. If he hadn't ducked, his head would be sailing through the air right about now. Arnvar attacked again, and again. Evan veered this way and that. He spun, he jumped, and at one point he performed a bizarre twirl that saved his ear from being chopped off. *What the hell is Arnvar doing?*

He leapt back again, but the point of Arnvar's sword scraped the front of his tunic, ripping a gash in the fabric and almost disembowelling him.

"Are you crazy? You're gonna kill 'im," Jed cried.

Evan parried one of Arnvar's ferocious blows, but the strength of the hit was so powerful his whole body jarred and he struggled to keep hold of his sword. If Ruaden wasn't enchanted, Evan suspected it would've shattered.

The second time Evan parried, the force drove him to the floor. He scrambled to his feet furiously. The crowd was silent except for Jed, who was being held back by Domnican. Evan saw Sintian in the audience too, smiling spitefully.

He couldn't keep this up much longer. Since the fight started he'd been solely on the defensive. He tried desperately to attack, but Arnvar didn't leave a single opening.

Frustration and exhaustion were building within him, culminating to a dull throb in his head. No matter how hard he tried, he was beaten to the floor again and again. He kept getting back up, angrier and more determined than the last time. The strength and speed of his enchanted blade was incredible, but it wasn't enough.

Finally, as Evan crashed to the ground yet again, the throbbing inside him erupted.

This time when he leapt back to his feet it was his free arm he flung out. A

tremendous force of air smashed into Arnvar, flinging him across the courtyard to land with a thud.

Evan froze, stunned at what he'd done. Everyone was silent. Then, for the second time that night, Urkzal applauded him.

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“You show promise,” he said. “Arnvar is skilled enough to control his blade before it struck, but believing you were in danger brought out the best in you.”

Evan stared back at him, nonplussed. A cheer went up from the crowd.

“That was awesome, dude,” Jed exclaimed.

“Have you begun sorcery training yet?” said Urkzal.

“No, Master.” Evan managed to find his breath.

“I think you better start.”

*

The first day of Evan’s magical training began with a hailstorm. The incessant tapping on his window woke him. When he peered out the window, he saw an army of ice balls bouncing off the castle walls and fields below. He hoped it wasn’t an omen for the day ahead.

He gasped as a giant scroll materialised above his cabinet. As he watched, big black lettering squiggled across the scroll: **TODAY’S TRAINING SCHEDULE FOR EVAN UMBRA**

BREAKFAST

SESSION ONE: ILLUSION

SESSION TWO: ANATOMY

SESSION THREE: EARTH ELEMENT

LUNCH

SESSION FOUR: AIR ELEMENT

SESSION FIVE: HEALING

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SESSION SIX: WEAPONRY

AFTER YOUR DAY'S TRAINING FEEL FREE TO DO AS YOU WISH

BUT DO NOT!

1. ENTER VENESERON CITY BEFORE FIRST NOTIFYING AN

INSTRUCTOR

2. PERFORM PAINFUL MAGIC OR VIOLENCE ON ANOTHER

VENATOR

3. PLAY JEWELBALL, TWINSPHERE, ARENA-BATTLE OR ANY

OTHER DANGEROUS GAME IN A CONFINED SPACE

IT PROBABLY WON'T END WELL

Evan read the scroll over multiple times before it hit him. *Just how many forms of sorcery are there?*

The scroll alerted him to the cabinet he hadn't yet opened. When he did it was only to find that a winged mouse had made it a home. The thing hissed at him before flying out the window.

"Holy crap," Evan shook his head.

His cabinet contained a parchment map of the Fortress, money he didn't recognise, and several books such as **Riding the Waves of Watermancy** and **Finding the Fifteen-Thousand Realms, Volume 35.**

The money was a collection of coins differing in shape and colour. The green coins were triangular, whilst the purple ones were pentagons.

After he brushed his teeth, with bright orange toothpaste he was relieved still tasted of mint, Evan set off to learn magic.

130

The day turned out to be a wondrous but chaotic affair, which left him in constant awe. His first session was illusion with Padrake Poniferous.

Evan found the correct corridor okay, but not the chamber entrance. A door-sized portrait hung on the wall, which depicted Padrake instructing a group of Venators.

Evan was confused until he saw two other Venators pass by him and walk right through the portrait. After they disappeared before him, they reappeared as painted figures in the picture itself.

Evan copied them and suddenly the portrait was behind him, showing the image of the corridor outside.

This is so weird!

Statues of clockwork golems stood either side of the portrait-door whilst Victorian gas lamps were in each corner of the room, metallic beetles buzzing around their light.

A grandfather clock on the wall puffed blue steam and Evan whistled when he saw the Airship hovering in place just below the ceiling.

Even the suit Padrake wore was clockwork, with cogs for cufflinks and two clocks on his shoes, the laces serving as clock hands. Why he needed two clocks, Evan didn’t know.

As the training commenced, Padrake thought up a theory for why Evan couldn’t perform magic unless being attacked.

“If both times you've used sorcery you've been angry or scared, then you need a powerful emotion to trigger your magic,” Padrake proposed.

“Maybe,” Evan said uncertainly.

“Let’s see, shall we?”

Before Evan could speak, Padrake waved his hands.

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The room vanished and Evan was plunged into a dark tunnel. Out of the gloom a scarlet reptilian monster loomed into view, swaying from side to side eerily, its abhorrent eyes burning a hole into Evan’s own.

Stricken, Evan found flames shooting from his fingertips. The illusion vanished and he was back in the training chamber. Scorch marks covered the wall beside him, mere inches from a wide-eyed Xavier whose spiky hair was smoking slightly.

“Yes, this is quite common.” Padrake giggled. “Rookie magic-users usually need a strong emotion to harness their power, fear, anger, love, or even jealousy. Eventually you’ll be able to harness your abilities whenever you need them.”

Evan’s next class was Anatomy. This chamber was in the style of ancient Egypt, with hieroglyphics scrawled on sandstone walls and statues of ancient pharaohs lining the walls. A giant sphinx statue sat at the back of the room, its eerily human eyes appearing to watch Evan's every movement.

Master Greller introduced himself by transforming his arm into a broadsword and lopping off his other arm, before promptly growing it back. Several Novices screamed.

After testing, it was determined Evan had neither control over Earth element or healing sorcery. To his shock, Evan passed in everything else. He thought he'd been hopeless, especially in the Alchemy and Water element classes.

In weaponry, however, Evan surprisingly excelled. He'd begun training with his enchanted sword and could wear the enchanted armour Venators wore on missions.

The blood-red leather suit moulded to his body, skin-tight without feeling like it at all.

Venators could wear the armour for protection under clothing if they had to

blend in somewhere like on Earth. Now, instead of worrying he would accidentally chop someone’s arm off, Evan could train as hard as he could.

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He was shown the basics in axe, spear, and bow and also learned about the different enchantments Venators used. One of the bows was equipped with poison arrows so strong it could kill an elephant within seconds, whilst a dagger had been imbued with a spell powerful enough to disintegrate armour. Evan still preferred Ruaden over the other weapons though.

Each of his training sessions had a large class of Venators, so Evan hadn't learned the names of everyone. He did get to know a few though, like the ditzy Emillia Lantley, who Evan almost beheaded in weaponry. There was also the sports-mad Tristan Chase and the cousins Blake and Arianna Silcorn, who were from a huge family of Venators. Finally, was Xavier Ichles, who appeared to be inseparable with Izekiel Irk.

Where Xavier was short and skinny, Izekiel was over six-foot, with a shaved head and biceps bigger than most people's thighs. As a Yurod alien, Izekiel’s appearance was particularly extraordinary. He resembled a human, but with tough grey skin and three small silver nodules above each eyebrow. He was very quiet, but kind.

There were a few trainees who weren’t entirely human, like Jimmy Revlin, a Halfling who called himself the quaterling. Jimmy came up to Brandon-Big Foot's belly-button. Brandon himself was over seven-feet tall, due to his grandfather being a Mandon giant.

As the second day rolled around, a new scroll materialised in Evan’s room with a fresh schedule:

TODAY’S TRAINING SCHEDULE FOR EVAN UMBRA

BREAKFAST

SESSION ONE: FIRE ELEMENT

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SESSION TWO: CURSE BREAKING

SESSION THREE: ALCHEMY AND ENCHANTMENT

LUNCH

SESSION FOUR: AIR ELEMENT

SESSION FIVE: ENERGY CONTROL

SESSION SIX: EXTENDED SORCERY

Evan took a deep breath when he realised today’s magic instruction was almost completely different to yesterdays. Evan reckoned most lessons would be struck off his schedule once they realised he couldn’t do much.

Each castle had a giant spiral escalator that stretched from the bottom floor all the way to the top, with stops on each floor to quickly jump off. But Evan still found navigating around the enormous Fortress tricky. Luckily, other Venators showed him the way if he got lost, which he did several times.

He bumped into Tyrell the morning he was late for his first fire training session, something he'd been looking forward too. He followed the Fortress map, but whether it was the many bridges he had to cross, or the hundreds of passageways, he’d ended up at Dragonrock Keep instead of Titantower.

Tyrell kindly gave Evan fresh directions, leading him to a cavern in the castle’s underground tunnels.

The Fortress was filled with a variety of creatures who’d wandered up from the city. Fortunately, a few of them also came to Evan's aid. When he got lost looking for his Anatomy session, one of the living statues gave him directions from his perch atop a cloister. Then, when Evan was late for water element training, he asked aloud,

“Where is it?” whilst simultaneously stumbling into a two-headed giant who roared,

“Other way!”

As Evan scarpered back down the passage the giant's much smaller head squeaked,

“No idiot, turn left.”

It didn’t help that the training chambers were in the oddest of places. Earth element was held inside a giant hill and Energy Control took place inside a starship stationed on the battlements of Swordstone castle.

Strangest of all was when Evan took a wrong turning in Dragonrock Keep. He found himself in a hallway filled with dozens of doors either side. He pushed one open to find a room furnished solely by a gravy boat on a pedestal.

As Evan entered, the gravy boat began to smoke and a bizarre being coalesced. He was huge, with silver skin wrought by mossy green tattoos and a spiked tail. Atop his head were golden horns and his eyes were white film. His body was translucent and a trail of mist linked him to the gravy boat.

“Be you lost, hunter?” his inhumanly deep voice echoed around the chamber.

“Um, yeah. I don't suppose you know where Air element takes place, do you?”

The genie's laughter boomed. “I will always help those of Veneseron who lose their way. Padrake named me Grand Graham the Guide. Take a left off this corridor and you shall discover your destination.”

“Er, okay. Thanks Graham.”

The rest of his first week sorcery training went fairly well. Evan found he had quite a talent with the fire element. The only blip was in Illusion training where he was thrust into a cave with a zombie trying to scoop out his brains. Evan managed to fitfully conjure the water element and freeze the walking corpse where it stood. When

the illusion was lifted, however, Evan discovered he'd in fact frozen Xavier, who resembled a human icicle.

By week’s end he also managed to wield magic in an area other than the elements and without feeling a strong emotion. It was in Anatomy where a delighted Greller had beamed at him after Evan managed to turn his little finger into a pencil. It wasn’t strong magic, but Evan was thrilled all the same.

He often thought of Gran during the hard days training. He wished she could see him now. Now he was doing something worthwhile, preparing to one day save lives.

All he’d ever wanted was for her to be proud.

Jed vowed to Evan that he'd begin magical training too, and sure enough by the end of the week he found Jed in his Fire element class.

“What’re you doing here?” he exclaimed.

“Getting my ass whipped by Domnican got on my nerves so much that when I jumped up and down in frustration I caused a mini earthquake.”

“You’ll still get your ass whipped, even now you’re learning magic.” Evan grinned.

“Yeah I know,” Jed sighed. “But hopefully I can pull off your trick and send them flying through the air. Once I learn how.”

They celebrated Jed’s magical breakthrough by going to Ethanc’s, but it wasn’t long until Jed noticed the dark elf waitress and his eyes lit up.

“Here Evan, as my good friend you’ll need to know how to charm the fairer sex.

So, sit back and learn how to flirt from the master.”

Jed gave Evan a wink before swaggering over to the bar and leaning towards the pretty waitress.

“Oi, wench, be a good girl and give me your finest mug of…”

Jed cut off as she promptly dumped a mug of Mavla in his face.

“See,” Jed spluttered as he ambled back over, “works every time.”

*

Once Brooke had performed sorcery, she knew she wanted to stay at Veneseron.

When Padrake asked her to make the choice there’d been little hesitation.

She'd miss her family and friends, but she couldn't return to Earth knowing she could one day save lives using her talents. Besides, this place looked amazing and she'd still get to see her family a month of every year.

The first thing to do now she’d chosen to be a Venator was to choose a weapon.

After an age of marvelling over the incredible weapons, from a bow that shot arrows carved out of sunlight to a gun that fired off swarms of bees, Brooke chose a beautiful amethyst short-sword.

By month’s end, her magic could heal small cuts, transform her fingers into needles and even produce a mild shock of lightning with her hands. However, she couldn’t perform Earth or fire magic at all.

Brooke was even getting accustomed to the magical creatures everywhere. That was, until she saw *him*, again.

She was with Elijah and Emillia, walking through the chessboard courtyard as Elijah rambled on. Emillia had her hand stuffed in a bag of jellies which glowed brilliantly as she popped them into her mouth.

“Durshe Jelly,” she replied to Brooke's confused expression. “They come from the djinn. Eating them keeps you cool in hot weather. There's other jellies that warm you up in winter. Although, if you eat too much it'll make you colour blind.”

“In the city, there’s like a thousand shops that sell stuff like this,” said Elijah.

“There’s soap that'll keep you clean for a week after you use it and liquorice which makes you invisible.”

As Elijah continued speaking, Brooke froze. Leaning against the wall was none other than Arantay.

She'd forgotten how astonishing he looked. His blood-red mane was pulled into a ponytail by a leather cord, showing his angelic face in sharper contrast. His eyes gleamed like precious rubies, but he wasn't looking at her.

He was masked in the shadow of the looming castle and too far away for Brooke to make him out in fine detail, but she would've known if he was staring at her. A knot of girls squawked around him like a flock of hungry pigeons.

A pang of jealousy shot through her. *Wait, why am I jealous? He's just the guy who brought me here, nothing else.*

Emillia stopped walking too and with another pang Brooke saw Emi staring at Arantay just like the group of other girls were.

"… and drinking troll blood makes you unbelievably strong, but it causes anger issues and…" Elijah cut off, annoyed when he noticed what had distracted them.

"Yeah, yeah, Arantay's cool, sexy, mysterious and everything, but do you have to completely forget to function whenever you see him?"

Brooke snapped out of it. "No, I, er, it was a shock seeing him again that's all. He took me here, remember."

"I was only looking to see what Brooke was staring at," Emillia mumbled, although a smile tugged her lips.

"Well, get over it," Elijah chuckled.

As they walked on Brooke asked, "How come I never see Arantay around the Fortress? That's only the second time in a month?"

"It's a big place," Elijah replied dryly.

"He doesn't live in any of the castles," Emillia said. "He lives in the forest, and he's almost always away on missions. I've heard he's the best Arch-Realmer

there is.”

Brooke couldn’t help glancing back at Arantay as she left. Although he stood in shadow, his skin was so pale it seemed to glow.

Since she'd arrived at Veneseron, Brooke often found Tay bursting into her thoughts. Everything about him was just so intriguing. She could still remember vividly how he'd climbed atop a dragon and took to the skies.

Her last training session of the day drove Arantay out of her mind, however. At the start of the lesson Padrake addressed them all.

“Many of the missions you will one day embark upon will lead you to fantastic and terrible realms. A big part of illusion training is preparing you for these realms. Please try not to lose your heads. Remember, this is only an illusion.”

Suddenly the training chamber evaporated, replaced by a barren wasteland of rotting earth.

For a moment no one moved, no one even breathed, and then huge twisted shapes burst through the earth. Demons of all shape and size, many indescribably grotesque, others terrifyingly bearing animal or human features, raced towards them.

Brooke screamed in horror, not summoning magic fast enough before two of the creatures were on her.

“Dear oh dear,” Padrake sighed.

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They were back in the training chamber. Padrake was the only one standing, everyone else was on the floor shuddering. “This is going to take some work.”

*

“I don’t think I’ll be able to face proper demons,” Brooke told Elijah across the table in Ethanc’s bar, “just the illusion of them terrifies me.”

“Yeah, me too,” Emillia added, shivering despite the tower’s warmth.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds,” said Elijah, “by the time you’re ready for missions you’ll be way more powerful. Besides, everyone’s first mission is always with an Arch-Realmer companion, mainly to make sure you don’t get yourself killed.”

“So we go on missions in pairs?” she asked, feeling a jolt of relief.

“Groups usually, pairs if it’s a small mission,” said Xavier, sitting beside Emillia.

“Oh, that’s better. I thought we had to go out by ourselves. Even with all the Masters training us, there’s still so much to learn,” Emillia said.

“So we’re always put with an Arch-Realmer our first time?” Brooke asked.

“Yep,” Elijah replied after a swig of his Mavla.

“Oooh, I hope I get put with Arantay.” Emillia giggled.

Brooke felt another inexplicable twinge of jealousy. *I’ve only met the boy once, for god sake.*

“I mean, they say he’s the best don’t they? I wouldn’t feel in danger at all if he was protecting me,” Emillia continued.

“He can’t be the best,” Elijah argued. “I heard he doesn’t actually have magic.”

Emillia spoke in hushed tones and leaned towards them, “I’ve heard he isn’t human.”

Elijah snorted, “Well that’s a bit obvious isn’t it, Emi? How many other guys do you know with natural blood-red eyes and hair?”

“I mean, well I’ve heard…” Emillia looked around the room secretively, “…he can change into a dragon,” she said half scared, half in awe.

Elijah almost spat out his Mavla. “Rubbish!”

“It’s true,” Emi insisted.

“No, he rides a dragon,” said Brooke.

“Changing into a dragon.” Elijah shook his head at Emillia in disbelief,

“honestly.”

“I heard he was an elf. He lives with them in the forest, doesn’t he?” Xavier piped up.

“Listen,” Elijah said. “I’ve been here for years and well, there've been rumours, whispers. I’ve heard things. I’ve heard he’s some sort of ancient vampire.”

Brooke’s mouth opened in a silent gasp.

After a long moment, Emillia disagreed. “But I’ve seen him in daylight. Vampires don’t like the sun.”

“Not if he's got one of those enchanted pendants,” said Xavier.

“What do you mean?” Brooke asked.

“Well, anyone can be a Venator,” Elijah said. “What we call the Moonlight races are in our ranks too. Most of us are normal teenagers, but there are werewolves, shifters and vamps here too.”

“Most use magic to control their… conditions,” Xavier put in.

“You might know a few of them,” said Elijah. “Alessia Simone and Saraya Silcorn are both vamps. David and Elizabeth too, they’re the married zombie couple who were bitten back in Victorian times.”

“You what? Did you say zombies?” Brooke was sure Elijah was joking.

“Oh don’t worry,” Xavier replied casually. “They’re harmless, as long as they eat animal brains every day.”

“That’s whay I’m saying,” Elijah continued. “The Venators who are shifters or vamps blend in, but Arantay certainly doesn't. That’s why I think he's some super old vampire. There's loads of different types.”

“Or he's a demon,” said Xavier.

“He’s too beautiful to be a demon,” Brooke whispered, not realising she'd spoken her thoughts out loud.

Elijah suddenly looked very miffed.

“A kind, sexy demon.” Emi grinned.

“There’s *something* wrong with him,” Elijah stressed.

*

Veneseron was alive as ever. As Brooke walked to Healing training, she saw everything from a box of glowing green worms someone had left on a windowsill, to High-Realmers training with hi-tech pulse pistols.

As she turned a corner, a figure stepped into her path.

Lyella glared at Brooke in disgust as three more girls arrived to stand behind her.

“What do you want?” Brooke asked.

“I saw you eyeing up my Lok. If you don’t want your hair being ripped out, I suggest you back off.”

She was shocked by Lyella's belligerence. *And I thought I had a jealous streak.*

“*I* suggest you don't talk to me like that,” Brooke returned. She'd encountered girls like Lyella in her old school.

“Look, honey,” Lyella smiled viciously, “I'm Lyella Lantley, the most popular girl in this Fortress. I hear your friends with my pathetic idiot of a sister, so I'll be nice and give you a warning. But get on my bad side and I'll make sure nobody ever talks to you again.”

Lyella's friends smiled at Brooke, baring their teeth.

“Emi’s your sister?” Brook guessed. “How can you be so horrible about her?”

“Don't talk about things you haven't got a clue about,” Lyella snarled.

“Whatever. Look, I don't have any interest in *your* Lok okay. Insecure much?”

Lyella's face blanched. “Think we're clever, do we? Don't worry, I’m secure. My Lok would never go for such an ugly bitch anyway.”

Lyella’s three minions giggled. Brooke's temper flared and she stepped forwards, her nose inches from Lyella's. “Call me a bitch again.”

“You b…”

“Girls!”

Mistress Taretta appeared at the end of the cloister, eyebrows raised. The Fortress resounded with a thunderous horn blast, which signalled the start of each training session.

“I don't know what's going on and I don't want to,” Taretta demanded, “just get to your next class, Lyella. Brooke, you should be in the Healing chamber already, you both heard the horn.”

Lyella stepped from Brooke begrudgingly, her lip curled. “Of course, Mistress, Brooke and I were just having a chat.” Lyella flashed a saccharine-sweet smile before stomping away, followed by her fan club.

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Brooke unclenched her fists.

*

Evan tried not to laugh as he held a gasping and spluttering Jed. “You shouldn’t be so overconfident,” he advised, helping Jed to his feet.

The Water chamber might’ve been the oddest training room, complete with a river surrounded by a glistening ice jungle. The tangled tropical plants were a crystalline blue and strangely smelled of mint. Mistress Aqenna had told them ice jungles were native to her homeland.

The Venators were attempting to stand on the river’s surface using magic, but Jed had gotten over excited and tried to walk on the water proclaiming he was

Jesus.

“I was fine until…”

Evan answered for him, “Until you realised you were drowning.”

“I wasn’t drowning, I was just…”

“Splashing around underwater like an idiot?”

“Okay, that’s enough for today,” said Aqenna.

“I should try and get myself some private lessons with Aqenna,” Jed whispered as he regained his composure, gazing at their trainer. Aqenna was incredibly beautiful, even if her skin shimmered like fish scales.

“You wouldn’t stand a chance,” Evan whispered back, smirking.

They exited the chamber, into a passageway whose walls dripped with rivulets of green droplets. The corridor possessed various living statues of water creatures, such as Nixies and Nagas. As they passed the statue of a Naga, it hissed at Evan, whilst the

pretty Nixie statue leaned forward and blew a kiss Jed's way. Jed's grin lasted the rest of the day.

The entryways to other chambers were similarly enchanted to reflect the training they led to. The corridor walls to the fire element cavern were constantly alight with fake fire, and the walls leading to the Archives were lined with books that flew and nested like birds, quoting passages of their text instead of bird calls.

Mistress Aqenna's appearance didn't rank high on the odd scale either, not compared to their other Masters. The Extended Sorcery Master was an Orc, but unlike Urkzal he was old and wizened, with flowing white hair and beard that stretched down to his shins.

Then there was the Master of Curse Breaking, who was actually quite irritating. As they'd sat down for their first session, Master Elorian proceeded to patronise

them all whilst boasting about his own exploits.

“Now today, children, we're going to disarm the curse placed on this armour. I myself wore this armour when battling the demon army of Ke'ra'lu, where I slew countless minions single-handedly. You, of course, could never hope to achieve such a feat. But still, I shall help you anyway I can.”

Annoyingly, Elorian could back up his arrogance as he showed them all how to break curses very effectively.

Elorian was half fae, his silky black hair imbued with a greenish tinge and his eyelashes white as snow. Evan guessed over half the Masters weren't human here.

Next, it was time for Evan’s first Creature-Study session. This chamber resembled a mini-zoo with cages and water tanks either side of the room, filled with an assortment of bizarre beings. To Evan’s amazement, the Master was an android named D-7.

D-7 wore a top-hat, mechanical glasses and his eyes were like car lights. He had synthetic blond hair underneath his top-hat and wore a black trench coat. It was very peculiar.

“Creature-Study comprises of everything, from dissecting dead creatures to studying them in their natural habitats, to drawing them.” D-7 spoke in a preposterously-posh British accent. “You will learn about all creatures and types of demon here. We will start with: Minotaurs, snake-men, clones…”

The list went on and on. Barely a minute into it everyone stared at D-7, open-mouthed. All the creatures he mentioned just couldn’t be real. Some Evan recognised from myths and legend. Others he'd never heard of.

“Weird man, freaking weird,” Jed muttered as they left an hour later.

Their last session of the day was Archives. The class named after the room it took place in. The Archives were perhaps the biggest chamber in the Fortress. Rows upon rows of ancient books filled the room like a labyrinth.

The cat-whiskered Gettelung was the instructor. After greeting them all affectionately, he settled down at one of the tables and gestured for them to do the same.

Jed and Evan sat at a table with Xavier Ichles and Izekiel Irk. As everyone took their seats, pens and notebooks materialised before them. The books were encased in red vellum, with their individual names etched on the front in gold lettering.

“Cool,” Xavier said, flicking through the pages.

“Welcome to your first of many sessions dealing with Realming.” Gettelung said.

“First things first, a brief explanation on sorcery itself is in order.”

Evan leaned forward eagerly.

“Sorcery for us Realmers is like a cell-phone, it needs recharging. Magic cannot be used continuously, it eventually depletes, and you’ll be powerless whilst you wait for it to come back. You will be able to tell when your sorcery is fading by the immense fatigue that overcomes you. When a Venator is completely drained, they sometimes faint, or in very rare cases, die. But as you grow stronger, you’ll be able to use more sorcery and it will replenish itself quicker. With training and practice, your magic will grow stronger naturally.”

“Aww, we have to train loads to get stronger,” groaned Jed.

“What were you expecting?” Evan asked.

“To wake up one day and discover I have the power to crush mountains. Oh, and make girls fall in love with me,” said Jed.

“The main reason we use weapons and armour on missions,” said Gettelung, “is in case we run out of magic. Of course, it differs for each Venator. How long it takes you to burn out and then recharge depends on your individual power.”

“I bet I could recharge my sorcery quicker than anyone else in history,” Jed

whispered with a grin.

“Now,” said Gettelung. “Soon, you'll be assigned missions throughout the multiple worlds. Please begin noting down my words in your books, for future reference.”

Evan complied, grabbing his pen.

Gettelung continued, “It’s my job to teach you how to survive in the many realms.

I shall instruct you on the other demon hunter establishments and-”

“Our Fortress isn’t the only one?” Emillia asked.

“Certainly not,” said Gettelung. “There are several Realmer strongholds, and they’re all a tad different to one another. Veneseron realm is the closest to Earth, that's why most of you are human. On other worlds, the Realmers are quite unlike what we

have here. We're the only ones who call ourselves Venators, the other hunters are collectively known as Realmers.”

“Will we visit the other strongholds?” asked Nena.

“Some of them,” Gettelung replied mysteriously. “I’m proud to say Veneseron is the largest stronghold and was the first one created, founded by our Grand Master Vanderain five thousand years ago. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. As I was saying, I’ll also instruct you on how to travel between the worlds.”

Gettelung procured an instrument Evan recognised as the tool Tarensen had used to create the portal to Veneseron.

“This is a Rambrace. Once activated, it will summon a portal.”

Evan stared, fascinated by the seemingly unremarkable object that resembled a long piece of red metal.

“Of course,” Gettelung proceeded, “Rambraces aren’t the only means of travel, like the chamber right here full of thousands of portals used for missions. We also have the chamber of globes, which we use to find you. The globes track down those that have used magic, or have it inside of them, with a red dot flashing in their location. A person's magic is usually triggered as they go through puberty.”

“What, so you tracked me down because a red dot appeared in New York?” Tristan asked.

“Yes,” said Gettelung. “But the globe would've tracked you to within a one-mile radius, so we know exactly where to send Venators to fetch you. Right, then,”

Gettelung clapped his hands. “On to the present. Let’s start with basics. Who knows about the different classes of sorcery?”

“There’s three,” Xavier said proudly. “Caustic, Serene and Phantom.”

“Just so.” Gettelung nodded. “Caustic Venators are those strongest in fire, shock, energy or earth sorcery.”

“That’s me,” Evan said aloud.

“Me too,” Jed cried, “…I think.”

“Indeed,” said Gettelung, “Now, the Serene are those strongest in healing, water element, summoning and anatomy.”

“I’m a Serene Venator then,” said a girl from across the room. Evan thought her name might’ve been Brooke or something.

“Lastly,” said Gettelung, “are Phantom type, those most skilled in Illusion, curse-breaking, air and anatomy magic. Certain magic types are best suited for certain missions. We need Caustic Realmers for an attack force in battle missions, for example. Whereas Serenes are best suited for healing, reinforcement and interrogation missions. Finally, Phantoms are best for undercover missions, or when we need to rescue a prisoner or steal an item that’s landed in the wrong hands.”

“Aww, I can’t wait until I learn how to turn invisible.” Xavier whooped.

Gettelung continued, “There’s no correlation as to why Venators are a certain class. Gender has no bearing. An aggressive personality doesn’t mean you’ll be Caustic, and a calm one doesn’t mean you’re a Serene. No Venator is bound by their class. You may be able to heal as well as use fire magic for example, or vice versa.

And every Realmer has types of sorcery they cannot do.”

“Yeah,” Jed whispered. “I’d be a terrible Serene, dude.”

After Gettelung’s lecture it was time for dinner.

There were various places to get food around the Fortress, but the Banquet chamber in Castle-coterie was the biggest.

Like many rooms in Veneseron, the chamber reflected a historical period of Earth.

It resembled a Viking mead hall, with Venator improvements. Mammoth fur rugs and garish demon skins lined the floor and a total of four roaring fires danced in their hearths, each a different coloured inferno. The walls themselves were embellished with trophies and weapons. White stone benches filled the hall, whilst longer stone tables sat around the outskirts, laden with piles of food, placed there by Novices and Sniglog’s team of chefs.

There were mountains of sandwiches and platters of roast meats glazed with honey or sprinkled with fruit, alongside pitchers of liquids in all colours and mounds of pastries, cakes, and more chocolate than he'd ever seen.

Evan saw food and drink he couldn’t fathom, like orc oranges, which were dark green and tasted of orange, lime and something he couldn't identify. There were roast kraken tentacles, pixie pies, glasses of valkyrie venom, (which apparently was delicious and not poisonous to humans,) and a Banshee banana which shrieked when Jed picked it up and wouldn’t stop until he peeled off its silver skin.

He and Jed filled their plates, before settling at a bench in the corner of the chamber. Too late, Evan noticed Sintian on a bench nearby. Sintian stared at them murderously. He obviously hadn't forgotten their first meeting. Abruptly, he strode from the room, his blue cloak billowing behind him.

“He’s got problems, that boy,” Jed remarked casually, before stuffing his face.

As they left the banquet, Jed proposed they head to a recreational room he'd heard about. There were so many places inside the castles, let alone the city, they hadn’t explored.

“Apparently someone of any rank can hang out in this place, and it’s supposed to have real comfy sofas too. A Mid-Realmer told me there’s a dozen rec rooms in every castle,” Jed said.

They walked out onto a courtyard situated behind Titantower, but stopped when they realised who was waiting for them.

Sintian leaned against the archway, blocking their exit, arms crossed and smiling at their approach. High above him two gruesome statues leered. There were many gargoyles around Veneseron, but only a few could talk. The last gargoyle Evan met had called him a loser. Fortunately, the gargoyle above Sintian was silent. His neighbour was a mechanical golem with a rifle built into its left arm and what looked like a bazooka on the right. Evan recognised the gun from weaponry training, a Spellzooka.

Jed’s temper flared. “What are you doing? Get out of our way.”

Sintian ignored him, his eyes glittering with malice.

“Do you know what I love about this place?” He gestured all around him, “it’s so vast, so many secret places, that the Masters can't always catch you getting up to no good.”

Sintian smirked and disappeared through the archway.

“Empty words,” Jed muttered, but as he turned back to Evan they distinctly heard Sintian's soft laugh.

They stood still, silent, tense. Just when Evan thought Sintian hadn’t done anything after all, he heard a huge grating of stone.

They looked up; astounded to see the two statues come to life. The gargoyle and the golem leaped from their perches and charged.

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PART TWO

DEMON HUNT

“What you Venators do is the truly hopeless endeavour. Demons are

the most common being in all the realms. You cannot stop them, just

like you cannot stop war, disease, suffering, hate and most of all,

death.”

-Quote from Mar Farla, a Master of Velkarath.

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Chapter 8- Girls and Gargoyles

“Aaaaaah!” Jed cried as they both leapt to either side.

Evan threw out his hands as he landed on the floor, his breath coming sharp as he pushed himself back to his feet.

He whirled to see the gargoyle make a beeline for Jed, whilst the golem staggered towards him, its mechanical mouth gaping.

Fire burst from Evan’s hands, consuming the monster. A few seconds later the fire flickered out and the golem still stood, scorched, but otherwise unhurt. His fire spell wasn’t strong enough to melt metal, Evan realised with a pang of horror.

The golem slugged at his head, but Evan ducked at the last second, feeling the displaced air where the golem almost smashed his brain to goo.

The monster’s arm slogged downwards next, forcing Evan to roll frantically. The robotic hand smashed into the courtyard, denting the paving slab amidst a shower of shards.

Evan seized one of the clumps of stone and threw it at the golem’s square head.

The rock bounced off harmlessly. Filled with panic, he ripped Ruaden free from his belt.

“C’mon then, steel face,” he said stupidly.

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The golem appeared to laugh at him, raising its arms again. This time the robot made a loud clicking noise and its hands whirred electronically. The golem had activated its guns.

The rifle fired off a green laser-bolt that snaked across the ground and would’ve vaporised Evan’s feet if he hadn’t flung himself to the side.

The Spellzooka arm roared and what looked like a blue cannonball of magic shot forwards, smashing into the ground a metre from Evan’s head. The bang deafened him as he stumbled to his feet, only to face a second cannonball.

Evan swung wildly, shocked when his sword cut the ball clean in half. He surged forwards again; narrowly avoiding another laser blast that singed his hair.

The golem charged again but Evan evaded, slashing the robot’s nose clean off as he danced away. He tried to behead the golem next, but his sword snagged in the monster’s metallic neck.

Evan wrenched his weapon free, but the golem took aim and let loose. The cannonball hit his stomach with incredible impact, driving the oxygen out of him and sending him skidding across the ground.

Evan gasped for air, simultaneously recoiling from the electric shock the cannonball emitted.

The golem came on, firing yet again. Rage, fear and desperation filled Evan and he found himself rapidly weaving air magic. He stopped the newest cannonball

mid-flight and sent it zooming back to the source.

The golem reeled back and Evan used this chance to lurch forwards and slash at the other side of the golem's neck, this time cutting the head loose. As the head toppled off, the golem's body froze, returning to just a statue.

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Gasping for breath, Evan had no time to rest as Jed was still fighting the gargoyle.

Jed crawled backwards as the giant bore down on him, preparing to crush him to paste.

Evan lumbered over, swinging his sword like a baseball bat. Ruaden scraped across the gargoyle's back, gouging a line through the stone.

The gargoyle turned faster than Evan expected, its fist clunking against his temple.

Black spots consumed his vision and he found himself back on the ground without realising he'd fallen.

A moment before the gargoyle crushed Evan into a red stain, its fists froze an inch from his face.

Just in time, Sintian had used water magic to freeze the statue into a rather large, ugly icicle.

He'd reappeared, sitting on the ledge of a castle window, watching the whole thing. "You see, if I wanted to seriously wound or even kill you, it would be that easy."

Sintian flashed one last smirk before disappearing back into the castle.

Evan scrambled back to his feet, staring incredulously.

"Is he mad? I'm gonna kill him," Jed swore.

Evan was in shock. *Did Sintian do all this just because I hit him?* It occurred to

Evan then, demons and sorcery weren't the only things he had to get used too, it was other Venators as well.

"We should tell someone," Evan found his voice at last. "Gettelung, or Tarensen?"

"No, we should get the idiot ourselves," Jed shook with rage.

*

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An opportunity to get back at Sintian proved hard to find.

The next time they spotted him it was in the Archives a day later. To Evan's surprise, Sintian sat alone, stacks of books piled up in front of him as he pored over an ancient scroll.

Master Gettelung was nearby, so they couldn't do anything. Sintian looked up from his scrolls to stare at them for a moment. He didn't smirk, or say anything. He merely gazed at each of them before returning to his work, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Evan was finding him increasingly weird. Sintian didn't act like he'd enchanted statues to attack them at all.

Something happened in the next few days however, which drove Sintian from his mind. He saw *her* for the first time.

He and Izekiel were sparring in weapon training when he caught his first glimpse of Cera over Zeke's shoulder.

She was exquisite, with glossy black hair; dark brown skin, and startling sea-green eyes. As he watched, unable to tear his gaze away, she looked in his direction. They made eye contact and she smiled shyly. Evan's stomach lurched and his cheeks grew hot.

"Who's that?" Evan asked Izekiel, nodding in her direction.

Zeke spared her a cursory glance. "Her name's Cera, Cera Sangel."

Throughout the rest of the day Evan found himself thinking about Cera, whether

he meant to or not. He just couldn't get her out of his mind.

Evan was enthralled.

*

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Brooke was enamoured.

Arantay stood before her in the middle of a dark glade. His blood-red eyes pierced her own, agleam with a curious fire. Brooke’s breath came out in gasps and she couldn’t move an inch. She was utterly paralysed, as if under a spell.

He was topless; his lithe torso resembled the snowy white stone of Veneseron Fortress. He was like a grand artist’s statue, expertly sculpted from marble, each slender muscle carved with the utmost precision and skill, with lips, eyes and hair painted a luxurious red.

The angel with the scarlet mane approached her, extending a hand. His fingertips brushed tenderly against her cheek, a pleasant tingling sensation followed. Brooke’s breathing ceased as he bowed his head towards her, his glistening lips brushing hers…

pain, utter agony.

Two holes were gouged into the flesh of her neck and she realised Arantay was *biting* her. She struggled futilely, her fists beating against his naked chest and shoulders. He bore her to the ground, mouth clamped tightly at her throat and sucking her blood into his mouth.

She screamed again and again…

… She burst awake still screaming.

Brooke lurched upright in bed, panting hard. It was only a dream, it didn’t mean anything, she kept telling herself as she attempted, and failed to get back to sleep.

Had it meant anything?

*

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Evan jerked awake, fear nipping at his spine.

What had awoken him? He looked around feverishly.

He'd awoken from the recurring nightmare he'd had ever since he could remember.

There was always a shadow leering over him, terrible to behold, with purple fires for eyes. Somehow, Evan knew it was a woman staring down at him. He instinctively knew the woman was at once the most beautiful and yet most frightening thing he'd ever seen. In every nightmare, the only clear feature was the glowing violet eyes.

Stranger still was that something inside of Evan always told him that these weren’t dreams, they were memories.

But he was awake now. His room was pitch-black; the middle of the night.

As Evan peered into the gloom, two yellow lamps flickered into being. A second later he realised they weren’t lamps at all.

A hideous squelching filled his room, and then a fast scuttling as the thing hurtled towards him.

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Chapter 9- There's A Demon In My Bedroom

Evan cried out desperately, throwing himself off his bed just as the creature landed on it. Ruaden lay at the other end of the room, he wouldn’t reach it in time.

Barely thinking, Evan used what he'd been taught in Anatomy training, using sorcery to transform his own arm into a sword. He stabbed at the repugnant creature frantically, causing an eruption of viscous black fluid.

The monster screamed and wheeled around. Evan glimpsed bug-like eyes, two antennae and a foul sucker that passed for a mouth, before crashing to the floor as an antenna thrashed at him like a whip.

He yelled as the demon's sucker leeched onto his leg. Evan kicked wildly, his other leg smashing into the minion's head, but to no effect. Crying out in agony, he tried slashing at it with his sword-arm again. This time the creature let go and Evan scrambled to his feet, limping towards his door and escape.

The demon rushed him just as he turned the handle. Both of them bounced off the door before colliding into his desk with sickening impact. The wood splintered and snapped beneath their weight as Evan heard the demon's diabolical squelching in his ear.

Desperate rage consumed him and he felt his whole body burn as the demon grabbed him. Suddenly the monster screeched, scorched by Evan's skin.

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Evan scrambled to his feet and leapt for the door. His normal hand closed around the handle and this time wrenched it open. As he stepped into the corridor beyond, the monster pounced on him again. All the wind rushed out of him and his head bounced against the stone floor. Evan's skin ceased burning, his arm changed back to its original state and all the magic left him. The last thing he saw before spiralling into unconsciousness was a strange black mist slithering across the floor.

*

Brooke's thoughts were wrenched from her nightmare as terrified screaming rang out from the room next door. Brooke didn't know the identity of her neighbour, but she knew he was in terrible danger.

As she scrambled out of bed there was a deafening bang and the crack of wood breaking. She ran to her door and as she yanked it open, two forms flew into the corridor beside her.

She froze, paralysed with fear by the creature before her. It was an abomination no sane mind could imagine, a cross between a gigantic bug and some other monstrous amalgamation. Padrake's training illusions training couldn't prepare

her for this. *This was a real demon*! A dark green monster pinning her unconscious neighbour to the ground with two sharp pincers. Brooke watched horrified as the pincers sank deep into his back and the disgusting creature leered over his head. Its sucker of a mouth hovered over the boy, ready to feast.

Abruptly the fear that froze her shattered, the demon was going to *kill* him.

Before she knew exactly how she'd done it, a lightning bolt stormed from her hands. It hit the monster with a crack that sent it rolling down the corridor.

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Before Brooke could reach her neighbour, the demon returned, rearing up on six legs. Screaming, she sent another bolt at the beast. The demon was flung backwards, hitting the wall at the end of the hallway before sliding to the floor.

Brooke hurried over to the unconscious boy, sure he was dead. She placed her hands on his back, wracking her brain for all Taretta had told her.

In her mind’s eye she pictured the inside of his body, became one with it. She set to healing the dreadful wound in his back and found a festering one on his leg. She felt her sorcery draining rapidly as she worked. Her hands trembled from the effort and, bizarrely, the veins in her left forearm turned black.

Finally, his wounds were healed and Brooke slumped over, exhausted.

He burst awake, gulping as if he’d been underwater.

“Hey, I’m Brooke. Are you okay?” That was a stupid question, of course he wasn’t.

He stared at her for a second, “Uh, I’m Evan,” he rasped. He continued to look at her incredulously until his head snapped back to the demon, which was rising yet again.

Evan leapt to his feet even as the demon screeched and hurtled towards them.

Brooke’s magic was depleted, she’d used it all healing. They were going to die, they were…

Green fire burst from Evan’s hands, a torrent so powerful it filled the corridor and consumed the demon. Within moments, the monster was nothing more than ash.

Brooke looked at Evan in disbelief. His power over the fire element was astonishing.

He met her stare, looking stunned himself at what he'd done.

“Nice to meet you,” he stammered.

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*

Several loud bangs erupted around them as other Novices, awoken by the uproar, came streaming from their rooms.

“What the hell happened?” Jed asked in panic.

“Ushk, was it a demon?” Blake yelled.

Before Evan could answer, Tarensen burst into view, accompanied by a wheezing Gettelung.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Gettelung gasped. “We thought we sensed a demon’s aura.”

“There *was* a demon here you fool.” Tarensen took one look at the ashes by their feet Evan and Brooke’s feet, before ordering, “with me, now.”

He and Brooke hurried after the master, leaving the other stunned Novices by their doors as Gettelung attempted to calm them down. A lump of nausea had formed in Evan’s throat and anxiety bubbled in his stomach.

So this is my neighbour. He couldn’t help staring at the girl who’d saved his life.

She looked more athletic than he was, with big amber eyes that stared at him curiously. She looked half Hispanic, her dark gold skin contrasting with his own pasty complexion.

He managed to form a timid smile which probably closer resembled a grimace.

He’d always been intensely nervous around girls, plus he was shivering violently, no doubt a side-effect of his fire spell.

Tarensen didn’t speak until they entered his quarters, where he asked them both,

“Are you hurt? Do you need to go to our Infirmary?”

Evan looked down at himself. Through all the confusion he hadn’t realised he’d been healed.

“Evan was, but I healed him, sir,” said Brooke hesitantly.

Tarensen glanced at her, then double-took as Brooke sat down. “Gods, in this light you're almost the spitting image of Luis Herak.”

“Who?”

“A legendary Realmer long ago, but it's irrelevant, my apologies.” Tarensen moved on. “Back to the demon, what happened to it?”

“I-I…” Evan gasped. He turned to Brooke, remembering how serious his wounds had been.

“You- you saved me. Thank you.”

Brooke nodded, blushing. “You saved me too. You’re the one who killed…”

“You killed the demon, by yourself?” Tarensen cut in.

“Yeah. After I healed Evan, he cast the most powerful fire spell I’ve seen.”

Evan still couldn’t believe what he’d done himself.

“It seems you have an aptitude for fire magic, Umbra,” said Tarensen. Evan thought he almost sounded impressed.

Tarensen turned to Brooke, “And you for healing. No Novice has been able to

heal a demon wound before."

Brooke blushed a shade deeper.

"Explain," Tarensen's tone turned brisk again. "Veneseron is enchanted against demons entering this realm. Where did it come from?"

"It…it was in my room."

Tarensen's eyes flashed murderously. "Why," he whispered to himself, "why would they send a demon just to kill you?"

"They?" Evan asked. *Someone wanted me dead!* Cold dread enveloped him.

"It could have been a rogue, but I think not," Tarensen continued, then he stared hard at Evan. "Both Dark-Venators and demon Dread Lords recruit lesser demons to serve them, but I don't know why either force would send a minion after you."

Evan just looked at Tarensen in confusion.

"I saved you from another demon when we first met, remember?"

As if I could forget something like that!

"At the time I thought it was a servant of Velkarath hoping to recruit you.

Velkarath was created in parody of Veneseron, home to the Dark-Venators. But they shouldn't be a worry to you this early in your training. Of course, you're not the first person Velkarath has attempted to capture. Many Dark-Venators were children like you, before being discovered and corrupted. But this is the first case a demon has entered Veneseron to kill or capture one of our own…"

Brooke asked, "So, instead of Veneseron finding us, these other people could have?"

"Yes, and if that had happened you'd either be dead, or one of them," said Tarensen grimly.

Evan shuddered. He thought back to the first demon he'd seen. He was sure Sellatur had meant to kill him. He couldn't begin to imagine these Dark-Venators and their Velkarath.

"Why would they single you out?" Tarensen asked aloud, peering at Evan, as if he could provide an answer.

"Perhaps it was a mistake," he suggested weakly.

"How did the monster get in?" Tarensen resumed talking to himself. "Unless it serves a terribly powerful Dread Lord, or the Masters of Velkarath have finally found

a way… No! I suspect it had help from the inside, which is the only way our enchantments could've been broken. Someone within Veneseron is to blame."

Both Evan and Brooke paled at this.

"I must contact Vanderain," Tarensen muttered.

"Who's Vanderain?" Brooke whispered to him.

"The master of all Veneseron. He created this world, and he's lived forever or something," Evan whispered back.

Brooke's eyes widened. "How can you live forever?"

Tarensen ceased his muttering and looked at the two of them again.

"I suspect you both drained yourselves of magic, you'll awake tomorrow feeling lethargic and weak. It'll probably last all day. As you continue to train this ailment will affect you less. But as you grow more powerful so will the spells you wield. Your body will let you know if you're using too much. Sometimes it's unavoidable. Three Arch-Realmers recently had the flu for a week after wielding copious amounts of magic to defeat a Dread Lord."

"Great," Brooke muttered. "I can't wait to feel like death tomorrow, I already feel dizzy from my healing spell."

“As I mentioned,” said Tarensen, “no Novice has been able to cure a demon wound.” He turned to Evan. “Nor has a Novice ever been able to kill a demon before.”

He looked at them both appreciatively. “You may go.”

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Chapter 10- Screaming Blue Murder

The sky was a blanket of darkness, stitched with stars and swaddling the moons.

The azure, emerald and magenta orbs sat serenely amongst their starry fellows, regarding the two newest Venators as they walked through the stronghold.

Evan hadn’t been outside the castles at night before. Not only were several statues walking around with torches in their hands, the bright green river that snaked through the fields was luminous.

“A glow-in-the-dark river. Magic is insane,” Brooke murmured.

His head was filled with horrible images of the demon. Worry gnawed at him as he mulled over what Tarensen said. *Dark-Venators! Dread Lords! And either, or both, could be hunting me!*

“Thanks again,” he mumbled.

“I think I’m still in shock, it just doesn’t seem possible does it?”

Her question may have been rhetorical, but Evan answered anyway. “Nothing has since I saw my first demon. But I guess anything is possible here.”

“What if it happens again, what if more demons manage to get inside Veneseron?”

Evan stared up at the sky, thinking of an answer. At night, the sky was invaded by ever-changing constellations. Scarlet and sapphire stars had formed into an axe wielding warrior beheading a cyclops, the one yellow star as the monster’s eye, three red stars as drops of blood.

He shrugged. “Hopefully this one just got lucky. The Masters will be on the lookout now.” Evan realised his words were to convince himself more than Brooke.

He was the one they, whoever *they* were, wanted after all.

What did I do?

Is it something to do with my past, my parents? He didn’t know anything about them, and nor did he want too. When he was younger he’d been curious. When Gran had finally given into his pestering and told him the truth however, he realized he was better off without them.

Evan remembered the day vividly. He'd just been beaten up by the group of bullies who’d haunted him when he lived in the countryside with Gran. As the group had lain into him that particular day, Evan had wished so hard for a big brother to come to his rescue, or better still a father who would’ve always been there to look out for him.

He'd staggered home and pleaded with Gran to tell him the truth, but discovered it wasn’t one he wanted to hear. Gran told him she’d found Evan not far from her home.

She’d been walking in the New Forest when she spotted a baby underneath an oak tree. Gran said there wasn’t even a blanket. He was just a newborn, she couldn’t believe it. Another few hours and he would've died.

He pushed the memory away. Gran had been his one and only parent, and he wanted nothing to do with the ‘parents’ that had abandoned him in a forest.

Silence hung between them on the rest of their walk, until they reached the corridor to their rooms and Elijah and Jed hurried forwards.

“Are you hurt?” Elijah yelled at Brooke as Jed simultaneously shouted, “Crikey mate, what *was* that?”

“Settle down now, settle down.” Gettelung addressed the Venators clamouring in the corridor.

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Izekiel and Xavier were milling around one of the windows, apprehensively watching for more demons. Tristan and Arianna were on edge too, as if expecting another attack. Blake and Nena were looking into their own rooms, perhaps thinking there'd be demons lurking for *them.* Everyone appeared badly spooked by the night's events.

"I can't believe this. You should stay in my room tonight Brooke," Elijah proposed, grabbing her arm.

"The demon climbed into Evan's room, not mine," Brooke said.

"Back to your rooms all of you," Gettelung commanded. This time the Venators complied, although Elijah looked reluctant.

Elijah looked at Brooke for a long moment. "Well, if you're sure you're okay?"

She nodded, putting on a brave face.

"Well done mate." Jed smiled as he left, but it didn't quite touch his eyes. Evan suspected Jed was as scared as the others, but he was keeping up his cheerful façade to make Evan feel better.

As Evan reached his room, he turned back to Brooke, "Thanks again, for, well you know." He smiled shakily.

"Yeah, you too." She smiled back.

As Evan entered his room he was shocked to see it looked exactly the same as it did before the demon attacked.

"I thought I'd tidy things up for you," Gettelung explained as he followed him.

"Now don't worry, all of us are on guard. I assure you this won't happen again." The whiskered Master was the most serious Evan had seen him.

He nodded silently before closing the door and climbing back into bed.

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Even the deliciously comfortable, cockatrice-feather bed couldn’t relax him. He’d taken to leaving his window ajar at night. He liked to listen to the array of Fortress sounds as he drifted to sleep. He could often hear Sniglog yelling comically in his kitchen, the ridiculous chatter of the gargoyles, or the whirr of mechanical insects as they buzzed around gas lamps. Other times he heard the tinkling laughter of fairies flying under his window, the gossip between Realmers, or the clatter of swords when Venators chose to train into the night. He realised with a terrible awfulness that leaving his window open must’ve been how the demon got in.

He ran to the window and slammed it shut.

Evan didn’t sleep. He couldn’t help thinking a dirty great demon would come if he closed his eyes.

*

Tarensen was correct. Evan felt weak as a newborn babe that morning, but he forced himself to the Archives. He stood on one of the bridges which connected rows upon rows of books above, below and all around him. The Archives stretched so high that many bookcases had stairs built round the side, with bridges at the top to reach the highest shelves.

He looked desperately for books about demons, particularly for one named Kurrlan. It was a name he remembered Sellatur mentioning. Evan remembered every detail of Sellatur’s attack, considering he’d thought it was his last moments alive.

He soon realised it’d been a terrible plan. He wasn't sure if Kurrlan was a demon anyway. Even if he was, the Archives had over a million tomes on its shelves.

Evan walked past a couple of Apprentices, who were watching a holographic comic

about a trio of orc heroes. The characters stood atop the pages in miniature form, the images changing whenever the Apprentices turned a page.

He had to try something. Whoever had sent Sellatur had now sent another

minion, and if that someone was named Kurrlan, Evan had to find out anything he could.

Since sunrise he'd searched, browsing through book sections varying from books about magically whitening your teeth to how to magic yourself thin.

At one point, he must’ve put a book back in the wrong category because it ruffled its pages furiously at him before gliding back to its correct perch.

The Archives were busy as ever, but Evan had now managed to find himself a quieter area. Apart from an unnaturally pale man with faded pink eyes and an elderly orc engrossed in a poetry book, he was alone.

He bent down to heave another tome off its shelf, this one was very old, but the title looked promising.

The Hierarchy of Demons: From Gods to Minions.

He opened it up and scanned the pages, stopping to look closer when he came across the passage:

The famed and terrible demon god raised his most loyal Dread Lords, known as the Demon Disciples, to demi-gods with his power.

Akirandon is the most notable Demon Disciple today and the location, or existence, of the other disciples are now unknown. Seven demi-gods were raised in total, such as Adena, who was believed to be Akirandon's fiercest rival. The two of them reportedly competed to be the god's favourite demon for millennia.

Evan tore his gaze away from the page, jumping as someone shouted,

“There you are!”

He looked up to see Brooke appear around a bookcase and run across the bridge,

“Oh, hey.”

Although they’d saved each other's lives last night, Evan didn't know how to act around her. Were they friends now? He hoped so, but at the same time he'd never had a female friend before. Actually, he'd never had any friend’s before Jed.

As if conjured by Evan's thoughts, Jed too appeared from behind a bookcase, gasping for air.

“Crickey, you're faster than you look,” he said to Brooke as she grinned.

“What're you two doing here?” Evan asked.

“We've been looking all over for you,” Brooke said. “Have you been in here all day?”

“Yeah.” Evan shrugged. “I love books.”

He felt bad about lying to them, but he wasn't sure how they’d react if he confessed there might be a horrific monster hell-bent on capturing him. He hadn't found out much anyway.

“Huh, I never got on well with books,” said Brooke, “probably why I was failing half my classes at school. Either that or the fact I’d rather play video games than do homework.”

“Me too. Except I was failing classes because I'd skip them to hang out with Lana Lacey, man she was hot,” Jed reminisced. “I did love poetry books though.”

Brooke exclaimed disbelievingly, “*You,* like poetry?”

“Hey, I can have hidden depths.” Jed chuckled. “I’d have never thought *you* would be a gamer.”

“Definitely,” said Brooke, “shooting zombies is a lot better than Maths.”

“Here, here,” Evan agreed.

“Anyway, Elijah's arranged a 'meeting'.” Brooke used her hands for air quotes.

“And he wants us three there.”

Jed just shrugged when Evan frowned at him.

Brooke led them from the Archives and out onto the purple field beyond. Groups of Venators were spread all around, lazing in the afternoon suns. The Fortress was buzzing about last night’s events and the three of them earned stares and whispers as they walked past. A large group of Chinese girls stopped talking abruptly as Evan passed, probably gossiping about him seconds before. The same thing happened as they passed a troupe of European Apprentices.

Elijah and his companions sat underneath a tree-sized blue mushroom, on a hill that overlooked Veneseron River. Atop the hill was a picnic table long enough to seat two-dozen Venators.

“Aha, you've arrived.” Elijah jumped to his feet.

“What's this about then?” Jed asked.

“I thought after the horrific assault last night that a thank you was in order. Also, it’s high time my closest friends and I welcomed you three with open arms.”

Evan, Jed and Brooke all glanced at each other in confusion.

“C'mon,” Elijah continued, “meet the gang. Well, I know you've already seen them around, but I think it's time we got to know each other officially.”

He introduced each Venator around him with a flourish.

“This is Xavier, he's the dorky one.”

“You know we're not all defined by one characteristic, you injudicious fool,”

Xavier replied.

Elijah smiled, ignoring him. “This is Emillia, she's the stupid one.”

“Glarq off, you Glarqing Glarger.” Emillia scowled.

“One too many Glarq’s there dear,” said Xavier.

“Then there's Zeke, he's the strong, silent one.”

Izekiel just nodded at them.

“Yeah, we've met them all before, Elijah.” Brooke chuckled.

Elijah however, appeared to enjoy being the group’s spokesperson.

“Oh and then there's me.” Elijah grinned. “I'm the dashingly handsome, perfect in every way one.”

“You wish,” Emillia sniggered.

“If you're dashing, then Emi is Einstein,” said Xavier.

“Shut up, you geeky dork,” Emillia rounded on him.

“That's just two words that mean the same thing.” Xavier shook his head.

“Welcome to our circle of friendship.” Elijah beckoned them to sit.

“Yippee, going from a group of five to eight,” Xavier said, “we'll be the popular gang around Veneseron by next year.”

“Five?” Brooke asked.

“We're a girl down at the moment,” said Elijah. “Joelle, our resident Mid-Realmer, is on a mission, she should be back in a month or so.”

“Yeah, it was annoying being the only girl around.” Emillia smiled at Brooke.

“None of this lot want to go clothes shopping with me.”

“Hey, I've been known to don a dress or two from time to time,” Xavier chipped in.

Evan felt overwhelmed as he sat between Izekiel and Jed. Being amongst so

many people his own age who didn't pick on him, or downright ignore him felt strange. But it also felt good, really good.

“Oh, wow, so we have the privilege of joining your esteemed gang?” Brooke asked Elijah sarcastically.

“For now.” Elijah puffed out his chest importantly. “I have a feeling I'm too cool to hang out with the likes of you though.” He chortled as Brooke threw a clump of grass at him.

“So, are you guys okay after last night?” Emillia asked.

“Yeah, just a bit shaken up,” Evan said.

“Rueda, I'd be well scared if that happened to me,” said Xavier.

Jed shook his head in confusion. “Uh, his name's Evan not Rueda.”

“No.” Xavier laughed. “Rueda was the first-ever Realmer. He's like a deity to us.

Well, at least we take his name in vain a lot.”

“For Rueda's sake, there's so much to learn in this realm.” Jed chuckled.

For an age it seemed they talked, laughing and joking as they chatted about training and other Venators.

“I wish your skin was golden like the female Yurod aliens,” Xavier remarked to Izekiel at one point. “Grey is so blah.”

Zeke muttered something in the Yurod-ie language.

“Did you just insult me or…” Xavier cut off as Zeke grinned.

Evan was glad to get the chance to talk in depth with Brooke too. After comparing notes on how weak they’d felt this morning, due to the sorcery of last night, they discussed Veneseron and realised they had arrived on the same day.

Evan was intrigued when talk turned to their holidays.

“Veneseron has a one month break per year, where the Fortress is practically shut down,” Elijah said. “There are specialised Realmer resorts for those who have no families or don't want to visit them.”

“Awesome, like what?” asked Brooke.

“There's a mansion lodge in the Himalayas,” Xavier said, “a hotel for magic-users in Vegas and a resort in the Carpathians, to name a few.”

“Of course, we can stay here if we find accommodation in the city inns and hotels,” Elijah added. “Oh, and Captain Rugadolf allows Venators aboard his Airship for a cruise through multiple worlds, whilst Commander Agalala offers a star-sea sojourn on her space ship too.”

“So freaking weird,” Jed chuckled, shaking his head.

Several over-excited screams carried across the fields. Evan turned to see a group of hysterical girls surrounding a smiling Arch-Realmer boy.

“He’s returned, he’s returned,” one girl screeched at the top of her lungs.

“What’s the fuss?” Evan asked.

“It’s Eric Adara,” said Elijah. “The chosen one.”

“Chosen one,” Jed scoffed, “that’s pretty lame mate.”

“It’s what everyone calls him,” said Elijah, “he did save Earth when he was only five years-old, although by accident. But since becoming a Realmer he’s saved four more realms from destruction, so I guess he really is the chosen one.”

Evan looked at Adara’s crowd of fan-girls, trying to get autographs, or just trying to hug him.

“After Adara defeated the legendary Dread Lord Zelphur, people said he’s the one destined to wipe out demonkind entirely,” said Emillia.

“That’s good then.” Jed smirked. “We won’t have to do anything.”

A dozen badges were pinned upon Adara's tunic, in the shape of orc's or dragon's heads."

"And the badges?" Evan asked.

"Given to Venators after certain missions," said Elijah. "For example, a dragon badge is for ten successful missions."

"It isn't necessary to wear them," Xavier said, "only if you want to show off."

They overheard Adara as he and his entourage passed by.

"Yeah," Adara held up a hand lazily, "it wasn't hard, just killed a couple hundred Onlekks, standard fare. I had to save my companions lives several times. But you can't blame them, they weren't born with the incredible talent I was."

"Sounds like an arrogant idiot to me," said Brooke.

"That's an understatement." Xavier grinned.

"But he is gorgeous though," said Emillia, watching Adara walk by.

Eventually, the conversation returned back to the demon from last night.

"Whoa! So Tarensen reckons someone on the inside let that thing in?" Jed asked after Evan filled him in.

"No, they can't have, none of the Masters would do that. I wouldn't think any Venators would even know how," Elijah said.

Evan quickly deduced that Elijah was very knowledgeable about all the goings-on in Veneseron, especially the gossip.

"But who would betray Veneseron?" Brooke asked.

"It's one of the Masters or Arch-Realmers," said Emillia, "maybe someone in the city?"

"No way," Elijah objected. "We were told in my Archives session that Dark-Venators have pretended to be part of Veneseron as double agents. Twenty years ago,

a couple of Mid-Realmers turned out to be loyal to Velkarath. They stole loads of our mission plans and everything. Have there been any new recruits lately that look shifty? One of them could be letting the demons in. Velkarath could be behind all of this."

"Brooke's a new recruit," Xavier chuckled, "she looks shifty. Maybe it's her.

Evan's new as well, maybe he's setting demons on himself, it's the new way to self-harm."

"Or pick up babes." Jed's eyes lit up as the idea occurred to him, "they love danger."

"Why would Dark-Venators want Evan?" Emi asked.

"Why would Dread Lords?" Elijah shrugged. "I've heard Dark-Realmers sometimes capture Venators when they're on missions and force us to join them, maybe that's why."

"I don't think it's anyone we know," Evan broke in. "Who'd want to set a demon on me anyway."

Jed muttered, "If Sintian can set gargoyles on us, who says he wouldn't set demons as well?"

"No way. I admit he's pretty warped, but not that far," Evan said.

Surely Sintian wouldn't go against everything Veneseron stood for and ally himself with demons. Besides, the name Kurrlan kept reverberating through his mind.

But could Sintian secretly serve this Kurrlan?

"Who's Sintian?"

Brooke's question went unanswered as the boy himself appeared, sauntering across the field towards one of the castles.

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“Speak of the devil,” Jed grunted, jumping to his feet and bristling. “OI! Yeah you, you ugly lout.” Jed strode down the hill towards him. “Was once not enough for you, eh?”

“Jed,” Evan warned, following behind.

“What're you talking about?” Sintian’s tone dripped with contempt.

“Don’t play the idiot, you may look like one with all that curly hair and jewellery, but I know you’re an evil little-”

“Jed, stop,” Evan interrupted as the group gathered around.

Sintian sneered and started to walk away but Jed grabbed his arm. “The demon last night, I think *you* let it in. I think you serve them.”

Sintian ripped his arm away. His darkly handsome face contorting to an extremely dangerous mask.

“Serve who?” his words were ice cold and deathly quiet.

“I dunno’ the Dread Lords, or maybe those Dark-Venators…”

Sintian leaped at Jed, tackling him to the ground.

“Dark-Venators killed my parents!” Sintian roared, his fist smashing into Jed’s face.

Evan threw himself at Sintian, grabbing him by the shoulders and trying to pull him off as nearby Venators rushed over.

With one hand Sintian continued to punch Jed whilst the other squeezed like a vice around his neck, all magic forgotten.

“Never ever say that again!” Sintian howled as Elijah, Zeke and Brooke all helped Evan pull the unstable boy away.

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“Get your filthy hands off me,” Sintian spat, struggling in their grasp. When they didn’t relent, sorcery surged and everyone touching Sintian was flung back by a force of air.

Evan hit the ground hard but rolled to his feet immediately, moving to restrain Sintian again. He was spared the trouble as Sintian suddenly fell to the ground, where he remained motionless.

Tarensen stood feet away, his silver eyes smouldering. His hand remained outstretched as he bound Sintian with cords of air. He directed his fierce glare on Jed as he struggled to his feet.

“That was a very foolish accusation. No Realmer aided the demon, understand?”

Jed nodded quickly.

“Violence between Venators is not tolerated here.” Tarensen addressed them all,

“you will be punished most severely if this happens again.”

With that last warning he raised the still figure of Sintian into the air and entered the castle, the frozen body suspended before him.

“What a freak,” Elijah exclaimed, staring after Sintian.

Evan couldn’t help but feel a little sympathy for Sintian. Sure, he was a nasty individual, but Evan knew what it was like to live without a family.

Brooke went to Jed who was trying to stem the blood gushing from his nose.

“Here, let me.” She touched his nose and began a healing spell.

“I reckon I just made things worse mate,” Jed said.

“Yeah I think you did,” Xavier put in.

“How was I supposed to know about his parents though?” Jed complained, to no one in particular.

“Do you think he’ll try and get you again?” Brooke asked.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” said Elijah. “You can be sure Tarensen will tell him under no circumstances to retaliate.”

“I don’t think a psycho like that will listen to anyone though,” Jed said.

“He and his brother have been raised here since they were children. Sintian’s different to those of us raised on Earth,” said Elijah.

The crowd around them were muttering not only about Jed but Evan too, probably still discussing last night. Evan noticed with a jolt that Cera was amongst the crowd and she was walking straight towards them.

“Emi, what happened?” she asked.

“Sintian lost it again, attacked Jed.” Emillia pointed Jed out.

“This isn’t the first time either,” said Xavier. “There’s been other… occurrences, where he’s gone off on one.”

“Looks like we made enemies with the wrong guy.” Jed chuckled shakily.

Evan nodded, before locking eyes with Cera.

“You’re Evan Umbra right?” she asked, smiling shyly.

His stomach lurched. “Yeah that’s me,” he said, thankful he hadn’t stammered.

“I heard about last night, are you okay?” Cera came to stand beside him.

“Yeah fine…was a bit of shock when it happened is all.” Even as he spoke, he knew it sounded lame. *A demon attacking me is just a bit of a shock?*

“And today this.” Cera gestured to the departing crowd. “Well, for what it's worth, I'm glad the demon didn't eat you alive.” She giggled.

Evan grinned back, for that small moment his troubles forgotten .

Chapter 11- Sword Taste

“Settle down Venators,” Gettelung boomed as he entered the Archives.

“Xavier, get off that table. Pay attention Vladimir. Yuki and Cece, put those Holobook’s away.”

Brooke and the other Novices stopped chatting and took their seats. She chuckled as Blake and his cousin Seth ogled over the magazine Jed had found, which had portraits of sexy vampires and valkyries. Jed hastily shoved it under his desk before Gettelung saw.

“Now,” Gettelung addressed them. “Today, we’ll be learning about realm hopping.

You’ll all be going on missions once you've advanced up the ranks, and you'll need to be prepared for the many dangers.”

“Yeah, demons.” Jed grinned at her and Evan.

“It's not just demons that can harm you,” said Gettelung. “There are worlds with no oxygen, worlds with no gravity, and even worlds where you think you're in a forest when actually you're on top of a giant's head. Confusing realms exist which have no logic whatsoever. One realm I visited felt like I was walking on a marshmallow. On another, my shoes stuck to the ground like it was made out of sticky toffee, and one realm altered me and my companions’ speech so we sang everything we said in an extremely high falsetto.”

“Awesome,” Xavier whooped.

“Oh no,” said Emillia, “I can't sing.”

Gettelung continued, “The process of using portals to travel between worlds is called Realming, but Realm hopping is when you portal between worlds one after the other rapidly. This often occurs on missions when tracking down a moving target.

In the briefs before every mission, we have information about whatever world

you'll be travelling to. But in the case of realm hopping, you'll need to be prepared for anything. I remember Tyrell's first mission, he and Bane Madagant ended up hopping between nearly twenty worlds, including one which made them turn temporarily into jelly."

"Think I'd prefer realm hopping to battling hordes of monsters," said Jed.

They finished off the training by reading, or rather watching, holographic books showing examples of other realms. The miniature 3-D images floated above the book pages, looking real enough to touch.

Afterwards, everyone else set off for fire training whilst Brooke and Emi had weaponry. She and Emi were the only Serene class Venators out of their friends, so their training schedules were similar.

Today was Brooke's first day weapon training. Two weeks ago, she'd begun the physical side to training alongside the magical, beginning with daily exhausting laps around the Fortress. She'd always been athletic, in school she'd been on the soccer and track teams, but that was nothing compared to the Venators here.

Emillia led the way, she was babbling about the last episode of 'Wizard's Wives', a reality TV show she liked, but Brooke was distracted by the lurid posters on the castle walls. She'd seen some of the posters before, but never stopped to read them properly. The biggest poster was bright pink with large gold writing. It read:

Remember- The 3 main things magic cannot do

1. Time Travel

2. Forcing emotions (Such as hate and love.) **3. Reviving the dead**

Well, I guess love potions are a myth, Brooke thought. She turned back to Emi, before noticing that Emillia was already at the end of the corridor. She was still talking animatedly, this time to thin air, oblivious to the fact Brooke wasn't there.

"Hey, wait up."

When they’d reached the weaponry courtyard, the instructors were already barking orders. She and Emi lined up amongst the other Novices, as Mistress Casselle gave a speech about how important magical weapons and armour were on missions.

Whilst Casselle spoke, Brooke saw Apprentices training with laser guns metres away, whilst several Arch-Realmers on the other side of the courtyard were partaking in a knife throwing competition.

The first boy fell short of the circular target, although Brooke doubted any normal teenager could throw a knife that well. The next knife smashed dead centre into the bull’s-eye with such force the hilt quivered. Tyrell smiled modestly as the others clapped him on the back.

A silver blur hit the target next, smashing through the knife already in the bull’s-eye, splitting the wood of the handle and causing Tyrell’s knife to clatter to the ground. The shock on the Arch-Realmers faces echoed Brooke’s as they turned to see who’d cast the throw.

Early evening shadows sculpted his perfect form as Arantay stepped from an alcove between two castles. He walked through the crowd to retrieve his dagger, before approaching Casselle.

Brooke felt her heartbeat quicken as Arantay joined them. Emillia let out a squeak.

“Novices, this is Arantay, he will be one of the Arch-Realmers assisting your training,” said Casselle. “Show him the same respect you would me, his weaponry skill is equal to none but Urkzal himself.”

Brooke nodded along numbly with the other Novice’s.

She noticed the other girls couldn’t keep their eyes off him. Brooke was purposely trying not to stare, she didn’t want to meet that red eyed gaze. She'd come over all nervous and jittery.

As she attempted to keep calm, Casselle handed out wooden swords. Brooke took hers anxiously, the weapon felt bizarre in her hands.

Casselle then commanded the Novices all pair up and spar with one another.

Brooke and Emillia proceeded to touch swords clumsily, both embarrassed at how bad they were.

Casselle sighed, “You all need much work.”

She called over several Arch-Realmers, enough for each Novice to train with separately. Each Arch-Realmer began picking a Novice to train. As Brooke waited to be selected, she heard a cough behind her.

As she turned, Brooke swore her heart stopped beating for a second. Arantay stood before her. His eyes took hold of hers and a subtle smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

“Hello again,” he spoke, his voice soft but powerful. His eyebrows creased for a moment as he thought. “Brooke, right?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” she replied breathlessly.

He nodded, hefting his wooden sword and beckoning her forward. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Feeling stupid, Brooke lunged forwards, aiming to hit Arantay in the ribs, but not wanting to hurt him.

He evaded easily, turning his body to the side so her sword met air. She stared at him uncomfortably, wishing she was anywhere but here.

“Again,” he said.

Brooke slashed for his head this time, but he dodged back with liquid agility.

“Again.”

Soon her shirt was slicked with sweat and her arms were hurting, but Arantay showed no signs of slowing down. She noticed Arantay hadn't once attempted to attack her back.

“Don’t be afraid of hurting me, you hang back at the last second. I can take it, I promise.” He smiled at her then and she felt herself flush.

To mask her blushing, Brooke surged forwards. Once more he weaved away. She tried a back-handed swipe, but he leapt aside just in time.

“That’s better.”

Brooke arced her sword in an overhead strike with all her strength. Her target, Arantay’s head, vanished as her sword sped towards it. As the sword came down, she tripped over her own feet and fell, smashing her nose against the flagstones.

Arantay kneeled by her side. “Rueda. Are you okay?”

“Yeah just let me…” she trailed off, putting a hand on her bleeding nose and concentrating. Slowly, she repaired the damage and stopped the blood flow. Even so, drops of it had splattered everywhere, speckling her face and neck. Arantay delicately wiped the blood away with his sleeve. The touch of his fingertips shot thrills through her body.

Why does he have to be so attractive? She could feel his breath tickle her cheek and see the concern in his eyes. His hand moved down to her neck, his fingertips stroking the flesh as he wiped the red drops away. Her breathing quickened. Despite her blood surging, her nerves tingling, she'd never felt safer and secure as she did then, with him leaning over her, protecting her from anything.

Abruptly, Arantay’s eyes snapped up from her neck and met her own. At that moment, she felt compelled to kiss him. She yearned to touch him as tenderly as he'd touched her. But then Arantay was standing and pulling her to her feet.

“Thanks,” she said, shocked by her feelings.

“No problem,” he replied, his hand lingering in hers for a second.

“Teach her footwork,” Casselle called as she passed. “We can’t have Venators dying because of their own two feet.”

“Sorry,” said Brooke.

Arantay flashed her a devastating grin. “No need to be sorry. I’ll have you a master swordswoman in no time.”

She smiled back at him, unable to help how she felt.

“But that’s enough for today. Tomorrow we’ll do footwork,” he said, placing their swords in the pile feet away.

“See you tomorrow,” she said half anxiously, half eagerly.

Arantay waved at her before disappearing from view, merging with other Venators leaving the courtyard.

*

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Thoughts of the demon attack lingered in Evan’s thoughts throughout the week.

Paranoia and anxiety plagued him and the nightmares of the shadow-woman with purple eyes haunted his sleep more and more.

The fact demons were hunting him was turning him into a nervous wreck. Evan tried to push it to the back of his mind, but the dark thoughts kept streaming back.

He tried to focus on his training instead. His first lesson that morning was Creature-Study, where they sketched various creatures that had been brought in. To Jed’s dismay, none of the nymph models who posed for them did so in the nude.

After that was Anatomy training, where Evan enjoyed learning to transform his fingers into keys to unlock any door. Once he had his fingers back to normal, he headed for a recreational room in Castle-Coterie.

He’d never been in this particular rec room before, but the giant TV on the wall aired a soap opera about an orc and a goblin embarking on a passionate, but forbidden, love affair.

“So other realms have their own television channels?” Brooke said as Evan approached her.

“A few,” said Elijah, “it's not too popular amongst many races, but goblins love their soap operas, and elves are mad for the theatre.”

“Change the channel Emi,” Xavier shouted. “I wanna' see if my Jewelball team won their match.”

“No, put it on the news,” said Nena. “I need to know if our Arch-Realmers destroyed the trolls planning to invade Mongolia.”

As he sat down, Jed and Brooke began playing the Venator game *Where's Wendigo.* A large tome was spread between them as they looked through a picture of Veneseron city, trying to locate the hidden Wendigo.

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“Mate, we need to check out the city in person,” Jed said. “I still haven’t visited.

Vamps, ogre’s, gnomes, you name it, they all live down there.”

“Me too,” Brooke said. “It looks incredible.”

Evan agreed, whenever he glanced to the valley below his eyes drank in the fantastic vista, it was like something out of a dream.

“When can we go though?” he said. “We’re nearly always in training.”

“Umm, the day after tomorrow,” Jed decided.

“Yeah, I’ve only got to help Sniglog in the morning, then I’m free until weapon training in the evening,” said Brooke.

“Er, I’ve got physical in the morning and that’s it. I might have Extended Sorcery, but not until late,” Evan added.

Jed grinned from ear to ear. “Excellent. I’ve got cleaning in the morning, weapon training all day and then magic training afterwards, but I’ll come anyway.”

Brooke and Evan laughed loudly as Elijah said, “You’ll need me then, or at least

one person who knows their way around, otherwise you'll get totally lost."

"Awesome, I can't wait to see what it's like. I bet it's even freakier than this place," Jed said eagerly, glancing at the yellow grasshopper by the window, which highlighted his sentence by emitting a smog-like gas to combat the fairy teasing it.

"I'll inform Gettelung that we're going," said Elijah.

"You should check out Veneseron Zoo," said Emillia.

"No, no you should go to the museum," Xavier advised. "They've got the bones of the most intriguing monsters."

"Nah," Izekiel said. "You need to go to the gaming arcades and casinos."

"Right, I've got a lap around the Fortress to look forward too." Brooke smiled as she stood up.

"Yeah and I've got Astral-Projection training, Apprentice rank only." Elijah grinned.

"Oh, boys we've got theatre club in five minutes." Emillia addressed Zeke and Xavier.

"See ya" he and Jed chorused as they departed.

Evan knew additional training like magical theatre was on offer, but it wasn't compulsory. Apparently, the theatre instructor was a Tryclops. Like the mythical Cyclops, except he had three heads all with just one eye each. Supposedly one head was a method actor, whilst the other was a mime artist and the third was very flamboyant. The three heads were constantly arguing.

As Brooke and the others left the room, Cera entered. Evan sat up, straight and alert.

"What's wrong with you mate, oh-" Jed cut off when he saw Cera walking over.

As she stopped at their sofa, Jed shot a look at Evan, wriggling his eyebrows up and down.

“Is it alright if I sit with you guys?” Cera asked, her big green eyes focused on him.

“Er-” he started.

“No problem,” Jed broke in, gesturing to the seat beside him. Cera took the seat beside Evan instead. Jed took one look at Evan’s face and his grin grew wider.

“How come you guys aren’t training?” Cera asked.

“Er-” Evan started again.

“We’re supposed to be cleaning some random hallway, but Veneseron’s got robots for that, so we thought we wouldn’t bother,” Jed answered again. “What about you?”

“Oh, I just finished an Illusion session. We were working on glamours today.”

“So, not been here long then?” Jed asked, gesturing at her Novice attire, which contrasted starkly with Cera’s flawless dark skin.

Evan was furious, that'd been the question he'd been plucking up the courage to ask.

“Oh,” Cera winced. “No, I’ve lived in Veneseron all my life.”

“Huh?” Evan regretted the noise the moment it was out of his mouth.

“Well my family live in the city, all of them have been Venators. My blood line is pretty ancient,” said Cera.

Evan noticed sparks of anger in Cera’s eyes.

“But I’ve only recently been able to perform magic. The Masters haven’t even figured out what magic type I am yet. I might be a hybrid Caustic and Serene, they’re rare but not unheard of. For ages I was terrified I didn’t have sorcery at

all. Father was livid. I was going crazy seeing everyone else training and watching sorcery being used daily."

"That's rough," Evan said.

Cera giggled unexpectedly. "Don't feel bad for me. I might not have been able to do magic training, but Urkzal trained me since I was six. I could kick both your asses with any weapon."

"Well perhaps we'll have to test that soon." Jed wagged his eyebrows up and down again.

Evan desperately wanted to say something to impress her. "So…" he began.

Cera turned her brilliant emerald eyes on him and he lost the ability to speak for a second. "So." He repeated.

She continued to stare at him. "Um, yeah, well, we're, me and Jed that is… oh and Brooke too, and Elijah, you know him, we were thinking of going to the city, you know, to see it, and the like, we haven't--yet," he finished lamely.

He highly expected Cera thought he was simple minded after that speech. *Man, I'm such an idiot.*

"I think my friend here was inviting you to join us," Jed explained to Cera, as if he was the translator and Evan spoke a different language.

Cera smiled brightly. "Yeah okay, I can show you around if you want. I'll show you my house too."

"Awesome," said Jed.

"Yeah, awesome," Evan echoed stupidly.

Meanwhile, the Venators around them were squabbling over the TV again.

"No, put it on the Mertiger documentary," Jimmy Revlin squeaked.

"Oi, I've got a bet on three Unicorns in the races today, I need the sports

channel.”

“Aha, found him,” Jed shouted, pointing at the Wendigo in his book, he'd been hiding in the city plaza between two Minotaurs.

*

“Haha, you so fancy her,” Jed said for the fifth time in their Archives session.

“No I don’t” Evan hissed.

“Your face was hilarious.” Jed smirked. “And when you started speaking. That, my bashful friend, was mythological.”

“Shut up.”

“Sorry mate,” said Jed, still chuckling.

“You didn’t help things, coming on to her like you did.”

Jed looked affronted. “I was only messing, if you like her I’m not gunna’ step on your toes. You’ve got to admit though. We’ve got more chance seeing Gettelung belly-dancing then either of us bagging that gorgeous sheila.”

Evan privately agreed.

“I told you I’m not interested, I just had a stomach ache is all.”

“Stomach ache!” Jed roared with mirth.

“Jed Jagger,” Gettelung scolded. “Concentrate young man.”

As Evan continued jotting down notes from Gettelung’s lecture, Jed leaned over his shoulder, grinning mischievously. “Sexy Cera did invite us to her house though.

Maybe she does like me?”

“You! Why not me?” Evan asked angrily.

“Haha, you *do* like her.”

Evan tried his best to give Jed a death-stare but then broke into laughter himself as Jed hooted in glee.

“JAAAAGGERRRR,” Gettelung bellowed.

*

Thoughts of Arantay had occupied Brooke’s mind since their first training session and returned now as she ran her lap of the stronghold. Sweat soaked her body and plastered hair to her head. She failed to repress a shudder, just thinking back to Tay’s light touch on her cheek, her neck.

She'd heard so many rumours about him, but none seemed believable. Then again neither did Veneseron.

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A vampire, a super-human, an alien, she’d even heard Seth Silcorn swear Arantay was a robot. All scenarios were ludicrous, and yet it would explain how different he was compared to everyone else. The raw strength he exuded, whilst intimidating, was alluring. His blood-red eyes should be bizarre or creepy, yet Brooke was mesmerized by them.

The stronghold's mischievous ways had offered some distraction. Before she'd started her run, the floors had turned slippery, trying to make her fall. Even the castle walls were in on it. One hallway had walls sticky as glue one day and not the next.

The floor os one passage would turn bouncy like a trampoline, but only on a Tuesday.

“Trampoline Tuesday,” the Realmers dubbed it.

Brooke thought the Fortress was like a naughty child sometimes. When it wanted to, it could lock you in the bathroom or turn mirrors black. Once, Xavier went to sit on a sofa and it swallowed him whole, depositing him into one of the forest ponds.

He'd returned to the Fortress, dripping wet and furious.

The Veneseron fields also played tricks, like forming holes when you weren't looking so you fell into them, or when a tree with orange leaves got up and walked over to a clump of blue leaved trees, just to be awkward.

“Run, run, as fast as you can,” a voice disrupted her thoughts.

Brooke turned to see Sintian Stray leaning against the castle wall. Unease ran down her spine as she met his gaze. His eyes were blacker than eyes had a right to be.

“What do you want?”

“So rude, Mashok. I was merely…observing you.” He blinked lazily, his eyes like tethered beasts as they swept over her.

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Something about Sintian reminded Brooke eerily of her brother. Adam had given off the same unsettling demeanour. Yet the stares Adam had given her had always been of hatred. Stray's stare had hatred too, but it was mixed with… *was it lust?*

“Well, don’t,” she snapped. “And don't call me Mashok. We aren't friends.”

She resumed her run, wanting to get away from him as quickly as possible.

It was the first time she'd spoken to Sintian and hoped it was the last. As Stray left her mind, images of Arantay came rushing back, clear and as beautiful as ever. Before she knew it, it was time to meet him.

She hurried down to the training courtyard, feeling both excited and nervous. But when she entered the weaponry square her feelings melted into a wave of jealousy.

Arantay was already there, sparring with another girl, Cera.

They were wielding enchanted swords magnificently. Quicker than she could follow they danced and leapt. Brooke was impressed but at the same time

couldn’t help feeling disappointed. *She* was supposed to be training with Tay, not Cera.

Cera was faring well against him. She was fast, and very skilled, but not inhumanly so like Arantay.

He disarmed Cera with a flash of movement and before she could take another step his sword was at her throat.

He smiled his exquisite smile as the mock-battle ended. “One day you’ll beat me, but not today.” Arantay lowered his sword and bowed.

A giggling Cera bowed back before retrieving her weapon.

“One day,” she echoed, “I’ll get you.”

“I look forward to it.”

Arantay noticed Brooke standing on the edge of the courtyard then, but as he moved toward her Lyella assailed him.

“Wow, you were amazing Arantay,” she gushed.

Brooke gritted her teeth as Lyella grinned deviously at her.

Arantay nodded his head in thanks. “Cera too, don’t you think?”

Lyella didn’t even look at Cera. “Yeah great.”

She stroked Tay’s arm. “But wow, I'd love a private, one on one training session. I think you could teach me a lot, maybe I could teach you a few things too.”

Arantay frowned. “I'm only supposed to help the lower ranks.”

“Well, our sessions could be…off the record.”

She knew what Lyella was trying to do, but Brooke refused to feel jealous over *her.*

“Maybe,” Arantay muttered. “I've got to train Brooke now though.”

“Of course,” said Lyella, “the little runt looks like she needs all the training she can get.” Lyella dropped her smile as she slunk away.

“Sorry about that.” Arantay grimaced.

“No worries,” said Brooke. “I was paying more attention to your sparring. I hope you don’t plan on fighting me like that.”

“No. Cera’s been in weapon training for years, I know she can handle me.”

“I bet she can,” Brooke muttered under her breath.

“What?” Cera asked.

“Oh nothing,” she replied hastily.

She noticed Arantay smile, yet she was sure her words had been too quiet for him to hear, not unless he had phenomenal senses.

“Thanks again Tay,” Cera called as she departed, Arantay waved as she left, watching her go. Brooke went to stand in front of him, wanting his attention to be on her instead.

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“So, Cera and Lyella, ex girlfriend's then?”

“Hmm, oh no, I don’t have girlfriends.”

“Like, not ever?” Brooke was crestfallen, but hid it well.

His face betrayed no emotion. “There have been some, in the past, many years ago.”

“What do you mean many years ago? You don’t look older than nineteen.”

“Enough of my social life, let’s make a start on the training.”

Brooke had no choice but to let Tay change the subject. As he passed her the

wooden sword their hands touched briefly; it was like receiving a small electric shock.

She couldn’t believe she’d acted so jealously when seeing him with Cera. It wasn’t like Arantay was hers to be jealous over. She was acting as bad as Lyella over Lok.

Their sparring started similar to yesterday, Brooke swinging the sword and Tay dodging easily, but then it was time to work on her footwork.

Arantay stood behind her, touching both her elbows with his hands. The warmth and closeness of his body was almost too much. She found it strange that his body was so warm when the skin itself was cold.

He held her from behind, keeping her steady as he guided her through the correct foot movements when sparring. At one time his hand grazed her leg while urging her forwards, her hair stood on end and goose bumps erupted on her flesh.

Her breathing became shallow as her heart hammered. Just when she thought she couldn’t take it anymore he stepped away.

“Let’s see what you’ve learned.” A ghost of a smile hooked his lips as he circled her, sword held high. “Come at me.”

She’d been so distracted, Brooke could barely remember what he’d told her.

This time Arantay fought back, though his sword only licked out occasionally, and painstakingly slow compared to how he’d sparred with Cera.

Wood knocked against wood as their swords clattered together.

“Always look into your opponent’s eyes when you fight, you can predict his next move.” Arantay stared into her own eyes, the force of his gaze making Brooke freeze.

Why did he have to say this now? She'd been trying *not* to stare into his eyes. How was she supposed to train with such an off-putting distraction? But, she reflected, she’d much rather train with the distraction of Arantay than without.

“I can guess every move you make, just by your eyes.”

He'd been looking at her eyes all this time! She felt hot all of a sudden, and it wasn’t from her exertions in training.

She forced herself to look into those two startling rubies, trying to figure out what he intended next. He was making it obvious, staring at the place he was about to lunge before doing so, meaning she could flick out with her sword and parry.

“Couldn’t you trick them by looking in the opposite direction you’re about to attack?” she asked.

“Yes, but you’re only a beginner, and they tend to do this. A master swordsman nearly always bluffs, and double bluffs. It’s all about reading your adversary.”

Sword fighting, it appeared, was more complex than just waving metal about.

“Okay, I'll try showing you how footwork works. Watch me carefully, my entire body.”

This wasn’t a problem, Brooke smirked, watching Arantay’s perfect body in motion.

He battled an invisible opponent furiously, but Brooke could tell he was going slowly for her benefit.

“Now attack me, and try to bluff too.” He backed away, leaving himself open.

Brooke leaped forwards, aiming to stab his midsection. He stepped back from her thrust, but she kept on coming. Her sword arced down, but she shoved out her free hand to stop herself falling like she had yesterday.

Instead, her hand met a wall of solid muscle; landing on Arantay. His body seemed to surge with… *something.*

Her hand shot back quickly, reluctantly.

“Sorry,” she gasped.

“You apologise too much.” He smiled.

“Sorry, I mean, oh…”

“Don’t worry,” he chuckled melodically.

“Again,” he hefted his sword.

Their training resumed for a while after that, until, to Brooke’s disappointment, Arantay called a stop.

“Same again tomorrow?” she asked eagerly.

“Until you’re a master swordswoman, as promised.”

She watched him walk away, beaming stupidly.

If she had thought his touch was exquisite, then it was nothing to what she’d felt when she touched *him.*

*

The sky was a blood-red blanket, the ground a dry black desert. The air was stale, but sweet with the stench of death.

198

“The demon we sent failed, master,” the brute gurgled, his throat not used to human speech.

Kurrlan turned to his underling.

“Then send more. Send as many as you can get inside without detection. Our allies in Veneseron will open another portal for us.”

“Yes, master.” The brute bowed low. “We shall claim him soon.”

Chapter 12- Kingdom Enchanted

It was Veneseron city, city of sorcery, city of multiplicity.

The five of them stood in one of the many plazas. Evan, Brooke and Jed open-mouthed and astonished, Elijah and Cera already accustomed to the amazing sights.

Veneseron city was nothing short of a spectacle, Rome and Athens combined couldn't match its grandeur. It was busier than New York, bigger than Beijing and more colourful than Tokyo.

Everything appeared to be on a huge scale, as if built for giants, with twenty storey inns and towers so tall their spires appeared to touch the twin suns.

A barrage of smells filled Evan's nostrils, from braziers filled with multi-coloured fires, to the meats and sweets laid out on market stalls and even dung from the dozen

different animals used as transport. Exotic incense mixed with wood-smoke and the pungent fumes of futuristic vehicles.

All the colours from the interior of the Fortress were reflected in the city below it.

And the people traversing the city, they were another matter entirely.

Evan had seen some of the magical races at the Fortress, but standing amongst so many was awe-inspiring.

Tiny gnomes waddled down the packed streets, whilst elves glided through the seething multitudes, their hair every colour under the sun. Orcs sauntered beside trundling dwarves who grunted into their beards. The skies were speckled with bizarre animals. Sparkling silver valkyries, fairy swarms, and even a dragon or two flew overhead.

It occurred to Evan why all these races lived harmoniously with one another, because they all fought for the same cause, against the demons, for Veneseron. He remembered Gettelung saying Veneseron was the only place in all the realms where the races could live in peace.

“Wow,” was all Brooke could say.

“Pretty big isn’t it.” Cera smiled.

“These things aren’t gunna’ attack us right?” Jed asked loudly, pointing at a passing troll.

“They might if you stand there ogling them,” Elijah said.

Evan spotted guards stalking through the streets, covered from head to toe in armour of tyrian purple.

“Paladins.” Cera saw his glance. “The city guards don’t tolerate violence of any other kind. So don’t start a fight.”

200

“With who?” Jed asked. “The only race I could take is the pixies.”

“The only fighting is at Dante’s Hollow, and that’s all mock battles and melees, apart from the Great Games of course,” Elijah said, pointing to the biggest building yet.

Across the crowded streets a giant stadium brooded, stretching from the city-centre to the outer wall.

“It’s a coliseum?” Evan asked.

Elijah chuckled. “You’ll see. If it’s one thing Venators love, it’s their games.”

“Like football and stuff?” Jed frowned.

Elijah laughed. “More like dragon jousting, unicorn racing, Jewelball, and Arena-Battle.”

“What?” the three of them asked in unison.

“Jewelball is a mix of football and basketball I guess, except with dragons and manticores.”

“Yeah, totally like football,” Jed rolled his eyes.

“You’ll see,” said Elijah. “They don't let newbies attend the Great Games straight away, though. They want you to get used to training before you can compete.”

“Crikey, you Venators and your world just keeps on giving, don’t it?” Jed shook his head.

Evan noticed several glowing billboards were hovering in the air, blaring advertisements. One was a picture of dashing dark elves who were a famous boy band, according to the caption. A second soaring billboard was advertising Kneebob, the famous goblin comedian, also performing soon.

201

“Where to first then, chaps?” Elijah beamed, pointing out various other establishments. “Emi and Xavier told me about a clothes shop where the cloaks change colour every two weeks. It's a shame they couldn't come today.”

“How come?” asked Evan.

“Zeke and Xavier have extra laps round the Fortress for pranking a group of Mid-Realmers and accidentally blowing up a rec room, and Emillia's got extra Curse-Breaking because she said she didn't believe one of Elorian's elaborate stories.”

Elijah's face lit up as he spotted something in the distance. “Oooh we could go the Silver Chestnut inn, or the Golden Nut.”

Evan noticed other Venators in the streets, gathered outside taverns or visiting the fantastical shops. He saw Blake and Seth Silcorn enter a theatre with an all gnome cast, whilst Arianna and Nena were in line at a cinema. The movie currently showing was entitled: **Silence of the Satyrs.**

“I promised I’d show Evan my house, so we could go there first, and then meet you at the Silver Chestnut?” Cera proposed.

Evan gulped.

“Sounds good, me, you and Evan can go check out your house and Elijah can show Brooke one of the inns,” said Jed.

Evan wasn’t entirely sure Cera had meant for Jed to come along too. Elijah, however, loved this idea.

“Sounds great,” he said, snaking an arm round Brooke’s waist and steering her away. “We’ll all meet up later.”

They waved their goodbyes and parted for the moment. Elijah and Brooke were soon lost amongst the crowds and many maze-like alleyways.

202

As Cera led the way, a cacophony of sound swirled around, from the cries of bizarre beasts and the chatter of inn patrons, to the merchants shrieking their wares at every corner.

Evan managed to steal a few glances at the abnormal shops as they passed, his amazement growing. There were shops selling magic flutes, the goblin merchants proclaiming a single tune will make any listener instantly adore you. There were stalls selling silver bullets--for werewolf hunters--the grizzled dwarf yelled. And shops displaying wondrous armour imbued with peculiar abilities; like a gnomish helm that enabled the wearer to be fluent in all languages.

Evan walked past what looked like a gym, through the window he saw orcs and ogres working out with mammoth-tusk barbells. Next, he passed a store with a display filled with curious confectionery. The plates had labels like Troll Toffee or Blubbergum. The label on the food named Phantom Floss, which resembled navy-blue candyfloss, said it made the consumer's skin white as a ghost.

Evan spotted another flying billboard where a guitar wielding Padrake stood amidst a rock band, with a banshee lead singer.

“Padrake’s a rockstar?” Evan exclaimed.

“A terrible one yes,” said Cera. “He sings like an ogre in pain.”

Half-an-hour passed, in which Evan and Jed were beyond baffled by everything they saw. He had to physically stop Jed from buying an expensive pair of djinn parachute pants. Finally, Cera stopped outside a gargantuan building with iron gates flanked by elven statues.

“You never said you lived in a mansion,” Jed exclaimed.

“Well I don’t really. I spend most of my time at the stronghold.”

203

“I wouldn’t if I were you. Look at this place.” Jed bounced up to the gates. “Well, what’re we waiting for?”

“C’mon,” Cera giggled, taking Evan’s hand and leading him to the door.

Her hand was so small, and warm, he liked the feel of it in his.

“Are you hungry?” she asked him through long lashes, her almond-shaped eyes captivating.

“Yeah sure,” Evan said.

“You bet I am,” Jed shouted from up ahead.

Cera giggled again, “I’ll ask if my mum can add extra plates.”

Jed turned back to them, “Your mum’s going to be in? Is she fit?”

“Sssh you,” Cera replied.

“If she looks anything like you she will be.” Jed said, subtle as a flying toilet, which could happen with the right enchantment.

Cera waved Jed’s compliment away as Evan gawked at him angrily, Jed just continued to grin.

*

She *did* look like Cera. Her hair was the exact same shade of jet; her skin the same toffee colour, only her eyes weren't green.

She was preparing food when they entered. Jed’s eyes nearly bulged when he saw her.

“Oh you’ve brought home two little friends,” she beamed.

“Yeah, is it cool if they stay for dinner?”

“Of course.”

204

“Thanks Mrs Sangel,” Evan piped up, followed by Jed.

The meal was a surreal experience, being served dinner by a robot, whilst creatures of every shape and size could be seen through the window. It was a pleasant experience though, that was, until Cera’s dad walked in.

They heard Mr Sangel before they saw him. His voice boomed throughout the house as he came through the door.

“Honey, have you heard from Cera?

Mrs Sangel stood up fearfully.

Mr Sangel continued, “I need to do another test, check for side eff-”

He cut off as he entered the room and spied Evan and Jed.

Mr Sangel’s demeanour switched from highly agitated to stern in a second.

Cera’s father was an imposing man with milky skin, thick sandy hair and moustache to match. He bore little resemblance to Cera, except for the eyes she'd inherited. He strode into the room, cutting a powerful figure in soft blue robes and cloak. He wore a laser sword at his hip.

“Who…are these?” He asked Cera’s mother, nostrils flaring.

“Friends of Cera’s,” Mrs Sangel replied innocently as she sat back down, looking relieved.

“Boyfriends?” He demanded of his daughter.

“I don’t have one boyfriend father, let alone two.”

“I see how it is,” Mr Sangel snapped. “A few months after you *finally* have sorcery and you’re already making boyfriends.”

“No dad, they’re not-”

Mr Sangel cut his daughter off, to Evan’s horror he came to sit down at the table opposite him and Jed and asked *that* question.

205

“What,” he said menacingly, “are your intentions with my daughter?”

Evan just blinked, flabbergasted. Jed had to smother a snort of laughter.

“Answer me,” Cera’s father bellowed. “I’ll not have my girl gallivanting around with testosterone fuelled riffraff.”

Evan daren’t even breathe.

“Cat got your tongue eh?” said Mr Sangel. “Well boys, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave my-”

“We’re gay,” Jed bellowed suddenly.

Cera’s father did a double take. “Excuse me?”

“We’re gay,” Jed repeated, “me and Evan that is.”

Evan looked at Jed stupidly.

“Oh, well, er- that changes things.” Mr Sangel harrumphed.

Evan began to catch on. “Oh right, sorry, yeah we’re gay.”

“Yeah, we have no intentions,” Jed assured.

Evan noticed Cera trying her hardest to suppress laughter.

“Okay then.” Mr Sangel pulled his plate towards him and settled down to eat.

After a while he looked back up and said, “I do hope you don’t have a boyfriend Cera. You were wise to make friends with boys that are gay. Other boys always want more than friendship, you understand.”

Evan panicked when Mr Sangel's eyes met his, causing him to drop his fork onto his trousers.

"Oh darling, you've got food all down yourself," Jed fussed melodramatically,

"now let me, that'll stain you know."

He spat on his sleeve and proceeded to rub Evan's breeches, near the crotch area.

206

Evan's cheeks flamed and Cera's parents stared at each other whilst Cera disguised her giggles by coughing.

"There you go sweetheart," Jed cooed as he passed Evan his fork back.

"Thanks-"Evan thought desperately for a word, "baby."

Jed's face almost broke as Evan said this, but he fought desperately to contain himself. He looked back at Mr Sangel.

It seemed, for the meantime anyway, he believed them.

Although Evan found Mr Sangel kept glancing at him in curious suspicion, as if he was studying Evan in some way.

*

"Elijah where are we going?" Brooke asked for the fifth time.

"Come on," was the inadequate answer she received.

She struggled through the flow of pedestrians, holding the back of Elijah's tunic as he guided her through the city. It felt like they were the only ones moving forward and everyone else was moving against them.

They passed merchants of all races, hawking their wares:

"Pixie perfume, pixie perfume, the finest pheromones anywhere."

"Oni eggs, get your oni eggs, if you want a loyal monster to protect you, you

need an oni egg.”

“Seelie sleep-away, just rub some in your eyes and it'll keep you awake for hours.”

It was still unnerving, all of it. But, strange as it sounded, Brooke was starting to feel at home.

207

Elijah pointed out various city monuments as they went. “More examples of us copying Earth,” he grinned, pointing to the two-hundred-foot-high demon statue carved out of red stone. One of its green glass eyes housed a restaurant, the other a coffee shop.

“The Crimson Colossus,” Elijah pronounced, “inspired by the statue of Liberty.

And that’s our Big Ben.”

Brooke looked round to see to a clock tower carved out of blue stone.

“We call it Humongous Harry. We’ve got loads of other monuments mimicking other realms,” said Elijah.

Elijah had been leading her through winding streets for almost an hour. As they wheeled around yet another alley an Inn appeared, but Elijah kept on moving.

“Aren’t we going in?”

Elijah looked back at her, his expression serious.

“Not there. That’s the Midnight Behemoth, one of the dodgiest places in Veneseron,” he whispered.

Brooke looked over her shoulder as they passed. The seven storey building looked normal enough, by Veneseron standards, but then she noticed the sign. Above the inn’s double doors lurked a huge, glittering spider, so life-like she shuddered. She felt like the spider’s eyes were watching her.

She was about to turn away from the inn, and its macabre image, when a familiar

face stepped out of its door.

Lok, accompanied by two belligerent orcs, strolled out looking left and right, as if not wanting to be seen. As she watched Lok he engaged in frantic conversation.

Brooke noticed the blade sheathed on his belt and his hand upon it. She hadn’t seen

him since he'd been assigned a mission. Lok’s joking manner had vanished now, it didn’t suit him.

Lok moved from sight as Elijah guided her away. As Brooke wondered what Lok could be up to, Elijah stopped at last.

“This is it,” he pronounced.

They’d arrived at a translucent purple tower with several giant clock faces all with a variety of hands and numerals.

“Different races run on different time zones,” Elijah explained.

Brooke was surprised to see the interior was a network of caves, but with more stairs than she'd ever seen; the stone slabs snaking up the tower all the way to the top.

A purple river sliced through the middle of the cavern, weirder still were the giant bubbles bobbing on the river's surface.

“Bubble Spheres, you'll love this,” Elijah said, leading her to the lip of the river.

She saw a booth where a creature as tall as a Halfling sat. His body was humanoid, but covered in blue fish scales. His face was humanoid too, except it was furry and resembled a lion’s. He had gills and a mossy green mane.

“Merlion,” Elijah whispered “they’re the ferrymen. One ride to the Marine Motel please.”

The Merlion grunted, punching in several keys on a computer in the booth. As he did so the nearest bubble glided over to them.

“It's perfectly safe.” Elijah smiled at her expression. “I swear on Rueda’s left nipple.”

Elijah grabbed a tiny handle and pulled open the transparent door. Brooke only got in after him because she trusted him. The bubble sphere possessed two narrow benches either side for them to sit, which were also transparent.

209

“What happens naaaaaaa-” Her question warped to a scream as the sphere shot forward at incredible speed.

In a matter of seconds the bubble had zoomed across the river, bounced down a waterfall and submerged itself underwater seamlessly.

Brooke stopped screaming when she realised Elijah was laughing.

“What the hell! Where are we?”

“Veneseron ocean.”

Brooke looked wildly from side to side. All she saw for miles was violet water.

She realised the sphere was still travelling at terrific speed, but now it felt like a normal taxi ride, just one through the ocean.

It was the most inexplicable feeling, and her eyes were drunk with the sights around them.

Naiads rode atop seahorses the size of stallions, galloping across the ocean bed.

A school of orange dolphins circled a trio of two-headed sharks and far in the distance Brooke saw a creature that had to be larger than a blue whale. One golden eye the size of a Jeep flickered as their bubble sailed past.

Many underwater houses squatted on the seabed at various intervals. Each house was festooned with seaweed and garish coral and appeared to house the Merfolk, Selkie's and Siren's she'd learned about in Creature-Study.

Brooke was so immersed in trying to see everything, she didn't even notice the massive aquarium-like structure until their bubble shot into one of its tunnels.

The bubble arced upward and suddenly they were out of the sea and bobbing gently along a stream.

They stopped at another booth where a second bored Merlion sat.

210

As they climbed out of their bubble and on to a glass pathway a large group of Mid-Realmers emerged from another tunnel.

“We need two spheres, two,” one said in a thick Brazilian accent.

“Next stop, Veneseron beach,” the Merlion gestured.

The group of Mid-Realmers crowded into the bubbles, four to each sphere. Elijah chuckled as they bundled in, shooting off back into the sea.

“I knew you'd like it.”

“That,” Brooke gazed at the ocean through the clear walls all around her, “was awesome.”

Elijah led her off into one of the many tunnels.

“The other paths go to the Marine Motel and this one ends up at the Miscellany Market, it has the best view I reckon.”

Brooke understood when Elijah stopped in the middle of the tunnel. It felt like she was standing at the bottom of the ocean. She was afraid the glass walls might

crack at any moment, but she was too excited by the sights before her to let the fear take hold.

A cow-sized starfish whirred past, followed by a yellow stingray encrusted with a hundred eyes.

“What's this aquarium thing here for?”

“It's like a hotel for the sea races,” said Elijah. “Oh and a shopping centre too.

When you're an Apprentice your Creature-study class will go on trips down here.”

“I don’t know which part of Veneseron is the most amazing,” Brooke murmured.

Elijah smiled. “This realm has more secrets than we could ever find. Just last week I took a wrong turn in Dragonrock Keep and found a luminous bedroom where two kobolds were playing online computer games.”

They both noticed one of the aquarium-esque chambers below their tunnel was full of Venators celebrating, crowding around one boy in particular.

“Ah, that’s Andy Warvek,” said Elijah. “I think the party’s because he’s finished his training.”

“Oh, what happens once we’ve completed training?”

“Once the masters deem an Arch-Realmer ready, they leave the Fortress to go on missions full time, otherwise known as ‘Roaming the Realms.’ Or they’re given specific missions that last years.”

Brooke exhaled heavily. The prospect of travelling through worlds packed to bursting with demons was terrifying.

For a long while they stood in silence, gazing at the splendour of it all.

“Remember your first day here?” Elijah asked out of the blue, breaking the tranquillity.

“Yeah?”

“You said you didn’t want to learn sorcery?”

“Oh yeah.” She smiled.

“Well, just shows how things change doesn’t it.”

Brooke wasn’t sure where Elijah was taking this.

“I’m glad I met you on your first day,” he said quietly.

“Me too,” she replied, noticing Elijah’s stare from the corner of her eye. She continued to gaze at the ocean.

“You’re just really, really nice.”

“Thanks Elijah, you too,” she said, nervous to where this was going.

“And…beautiful,” he whispered, leaning forwards and taking her chin in his hand.

She turned to face him at last, eyes widening, she hadn’t expected this at all.

212

Elijah stared at her, his bright tawny eyes wide, his lips *puckered.*

Brooke’s suspicions were confirmed a second before it happened. Elijah leaned in, aiming to smash his lips against hers. She pulled back sharply, sharper than she meant to.

There followed one, tense, horrible moment, where they both froze; Elijah confused, Brooke surprised.

“Sorry,” she said sincerely.

“But-I thought,” the hurt in his eyes made her feel terrible.

“Elijah, I-I don’t know what to say. I thought we were just friends,” she said weakly.

“But,” he repeated, “but the vibes man, I thought you were giving off all the right vibes.”

Vibes. Vibes. What an earth was he on about *vibes.*

“Arrrr,” he groaned, slapping a hand to his forehead, “I’m such a Doofus.”

“Ah, no. No you’re not,” Brooke protested.

“Yes I am. I’m an idiot,” he said mournfully, “is there someone else?”

Arantay immediately popped into her head.

“No,” she lied. “It’s just I’m still pretty new here, and I haven’t taken everything in yet. The last thing I’m thinking about is boys.”

“Oh, okay,” Elijah cheered up somewhat. “Wow, I’m sorry, it just felt like the right time, the perfect place.”

Brooke suspected the real reason for Elijah bringing her here and she thought it wasn’t just for the *view.*

“Look,” he braced himself. “Do you reckon, I mean… can we just forget this? I-er- wasn’t thinking straight.”

213

She smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring way. “It’s already forgotten.”

He let out a sigh of relief and shook his head, laughing at himself.

“C’mon,” she changed the subject, “we better bubble back to the others.”

214

Chapter 13- Brawling with Goblins

They collapsed outside Cera’s house, shaking with laughter.

“You idiots,” Cera giggled.

Evan recovered himself. “What were you doing, rubbing my leg like that?”

“Well I had to make it convincing didn’t I!” Jed said. “It worked too.”

“Yeah I think it did,” said Cera. “C’mon let’s get out of here before he hears us.”

Still laughing, the three of them ran down the winding path and back into the busy city streets.

“I guess we should go to that inn,” Jed said.

Soon, they found themselves in another plaza, this one distinguished by a water fountain gushing acid-green water. Jed went up to the fountain to inspect it. He stupidly plunged his hand into the bright green liquid to see if it burned like the acid it resembled. Luckily for him, it didn’t.

Abruptly, a goblin barged past Cera, almost knocking her to the ground.

“Watch where you’re going, wench,” the goblin shrieked. A second goblin beside him guffawed idiotically.

“Say you’re sorry,” the first goblin demanded, shoving her again.

Evan’s temper flared, he jumped between them as the goblin went to manhandle her again.

“What the hell are you doing, pushing a girl?”

The goblin glared back, his dirty yellow eyes too large for its peanut head. His skin was a grey-green colour and his bald head reached the height of Evan’s chin.

“What are you going to do about it? You Glarqing Ushk faced Glarquer,” the goblin spat between rotted black stumps for teeth.

Both goblins laughed, “Silly Venator,” the second cooed.

Evan was about to retort but then the goblin’s fist connected with the side of his head and he stumbled to the floor.

“OI!” Jed roared, running up from the fountain and pouncing on the goblin from behind. Teenager and goblin alike fell to the floor in a tangle of flailing limbs as the crowd around them dispersed.

The second goblin bounded forward but Evan met him head on. Magic was forgotten in the desperate scramble that ensued.

The goblin shrieked hideously as his scabby hand groped for Evan’s neck. Evan punched his craggy head hard and the goblin screamed in rage. Both of them rolled about on the city street, each fighting to pin the other beneath them.

Evan scrambled to his feet and pulled back for a vicious blow. The goblin ducked his punch however, then jumped up, his knee ploughing into Evan’s stomach. He gasped for air like a fish out of water as the wind rushed out of him. The goblin seized him by the collar and charged Evan towards the fountain. His back hit the side of the fountain but the goblin kept pushing, trying to dunk Evan’s head in the water. With one of his free hands Evan searched desperately for a weapon in the fountain’s emerald depths, with the other he beat futilely at the goblin’s back. The goblin’s eyes bulged as his hand wrapped round Evan’s neck again. This time it found flesh and squeezed tight.

Evan started to choke and his vision blurred.

Suddenly Cera hit the goblin from behind, driving her foot into his back. The goblin swatted her away, but as he did so his grip lightened around Evan’s throat and that distraction was enough.

Evan seized a rock from the fountain and flung it with all his strength. The rock flew out of the water and smashed straight into the goblin’s long crooked nose. The bone shattered and the goblin fell back, splattering blood as he hit the ground.

Evan leapt back to his feet and ran to Cera, the goblin had only got in a glancing blow and she was relatively unhurt.

Jed and the other goblin were still fighting. Jed had him in a headlock and was dancing about the cobbled path with the goblin in toe. The sight would have been comical if Evan wasn’t aware how vicious the goblins could be.

He ran forwards before Cera could stop him and aimed a kick at the goblin’s abdomen. The goblin fell to the ground with a wail.

Suddenly, a shrill siren broke out over the city.

“For Rueda's sake,” Cera snarled. “It’s the guards.”

“Run for it,” Jed advised.

Panic hounding them, they dived into the multi-race mass and back into the worm twisted alleys, praying the guards didn’t catch up.

As they hurtled round one corner Jed stopped abruptly and Evan ran straight into him, shoving him forwards accidentally.

“Glarqing hell,” Jed swore.

A purple clad Paladin wheeled about the street opposite, unsheathing his enchanted blade. Without a word, they turned straight around and ran back down the alley, past several gnomes who were spraying enchanted graffiti that changed colour continuously.

217

It was anarchy trying to race through the crowd, trying not to squash sprites, bowl over Halflings, or slam into the solid brick walls that would be trolls. As they ran through one street, Jed collided with a kobold, knocking him over and sending his shopping bags flying through the air.

“Oops,” Jed exclaimed, hopping over the fallen kobold, “sorry mate.”

Minutes later two more Paladins joined the chase. Their capture appeared imminent.

“Faster,” Cera roared.

Evan was already sprinting as fast as he could, a stitch knifed into his side and his breath came out ragged.

He leaped over a clockwork cat and ducked under a hover-craft. As they flew

around a bend in the street, they bumped straight into Brooke and Elijah.

“Where did you guys get to-” Elijah was cut off as Jed grabbed his shoulders and spun him in the opposite direction.

“No time. Run!” Evan ordered.

Brooke and Elijah took one look behind them at the three Paladin’s brandishing their weapons then turned tail and followed him.

The five Venators ran for the looming Fortress ahead feverishly, Evan urging the five castles to come closer as they charged forward.

Eventually the city walls receded and they were climbing the sloping valley back to the Fortress.

“The guards won’t follow now we’re out of the city will they?” Evan panted.

“No.” Elijah bent down low, gasping for breath. “We made it.”

Evan looked back down the valley behind them fearfully, it was clear.

“What a rush,” said Jed. “Pretty great city.”

“Well I’d say that was an eventful day,” Elijah smirked as they trudged back to the stronghold, Evan and Jed sporting a few nasty bruises from the goblins.

“Trust you two to get in trouble on your first visit,” Cera said.

“Ha, yeah and have to pretend we’re gay,” Jed added.

“You what?” said Brooke.

“We’ll tell you about it later,” Evan laughed.

*

As she lay awake that night, she distracted herself from the pain her borrowed magic brought her by focusing on Veneseron. She’d do anything to stay here, to

wield sorcery like all the other Venators. The price was high, but it was worth it.

The demon had failed, even though it had been given access directly to Evan’s bedroom.

She knew what she had to do now. If the demons couldn’t do it, she’d have to bring him to Lord Kurrlan herself.

Chapter 14- A Traitor's Grasp

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The twin suns of Veneseron had vanished behind thick layers of cloud in the early evening. Tired as she was from visiting the city, Brooke still had weapon training to attend. Not that she begrudged it, considering who her training partner was.

The early evening shadows played across Arantay's sleek, powerful body as they sparred. The training courtyard was as empty as she'd ever seen it.

Brooke was getting used to swordcraft, the weapons no longer felt so heavy and obtrusive at least. She was far from adept, but a lot less clumsy.

“Much better.” Arantay flashed her his incredible smile after a rally of exchanges.

Her cheeks flushed.

“Now,” he continued, dropping his sword arm. “You’ve learned the sword, but I need to teach you simple hand to hand combat before we move on.”

Excitement rushed through her in a torrent. This meant he’d be touching her again, and she’d be touching him.

They discarded their swords and his eyes found hers. His cat-like pupils were big tonight, adding an extra gleam to the blood-red pools around them.

“Hit me,” he said simply.

“W-what?”

“Hit me.”

She pivoted forward and thrust her fist at his forehead.

She had expected him to move, but he didn’t. Her fist smashed straight into Arantay’s skull instead.

His head didn’t move an inch. Brooke’s fingers however, felt as if they’d been snapped in half, like she’d punched a brick wall.

“Good.” He chuckled.

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Brooke held her fist in her other hand, biting her bottom lip from the pain. “Why didn’t you move?”

“I wanted to see how you threw a punch, that’s all. You had the right positioning and used all your weight behind it.”

Brooke glared at him, wanting to punch him again, just a little.

“Ooh sorry.” Tay’s expression twisted to concern when he realised she was in pain.

“I forgot it might hurt, can you heal?”

She nodded, placing her good hand on her fist and eradicating the pain.

“My turn. Raise your fists,” said Arantay, “and try to block.”

She raised both her hands slowly, not knowing where to hold them.

Arantay surged forwards, both arms shooting out like pistons.

Brooke yelped, instinctively ducking low, leaping back and shielding her face and stomach with each hand.

Arantay’s left fist stopped a millimetre away from the tip of her nose while his right an inch from her stomach.

“Excellent stance Brooke, you’re a natural.”

Although she'd protected herself correctly, Brooke knew Arantay could’ve smashed her defences and sent her sprawling to the floor, but she smiled all the same at his compliment.

“On missions you’d need hand to hand combat if you lose your weapon and were also drained of magic. But that’s known to happen, so this is vital.”

Brooke nodded, trying to take it all in.

“Now we move onto feet.” Arantay stared down at her legs, then moved into position, beckoning her forwards.

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She kicked hard, sweeping her leg and aiming for Arantay’s waist. His hand shot out, whipcord fast. Suddenly she was standing on one leg, his hand resting on her thigh.

After a heart-stopping moment, he released her.

“I can’t believe I was scared when I first saw you,” Brooke admitted. “Well actually, when I first saw you I couldn’t believe such a human could exist.” She blushed as she realised what she'd said.

She hurried quickly on. “Did you-I’m sure you did something to me to make me follow you from the club that night?”

Arantay’s face was expressionless. “Perhaps. I have certain abilities other Venators do not. Like drawing others to me and calming them with my touch.”

“How come you have these abilities?”

Arantay coughed. “On with the training.”

Brooke frowned. She wanted to know all about him, unveil the enigma, but she didn’t want to push it either.

“Lastly, is wrestling.”

“Wrestling?” she giggled.

“Well when arms and legs fail, use both.”

Arantay moved back, spreading his arms as wide as his grin. “Try and take me down.”

Brooke took a second to compose herself, before attempting to tackle him like her old schoolmates did in American football.

Arantay didn’t budge, his body seemed as heavy as the marble statue he resembled.

Suddenly she felt his hands as Arantay lifted her up, flipped her over and laid her smoothly on the ground. Both of them laughed, Brooke giving in after pretending to be annoyed.

The atmosphere changed as she their eyes met, their faces only inches apart.

He was so close she could feel his warm breath tickling her face. Again, Brooke was struck with the almost overwhelming urge to bring her lips up to meet his own.

But then Arantay stood upright, holding out his hand to pick her up.

She took it reluctantly. Perhaps the disappointment showed on her face, because he gave her a curious glance.

“Well, another good training session.”

“Yeah, thanks,” she replied, still unable to keep the disappointment from her voice.

“Same time tomorrow,” he promised.

As Brooke considered whether to tell him how she felt, she discovered she was alone in the courtyard. He had already melted into the shadows.

*

Evan smiled as he walked through Castle-Coterie, making his way back to his room. It had been a long, but fantastic day.

Apart from the nightmare which awoke him, (the same recurring vision of the beautiful but terrible purple-eyed woman,) it'd been his best day of training yet.

He'd invented a trick with his sword, casting his own green flames on Ruaden's emerald crystal so the whole blade was alight, and looked awesome too. Zeke was so surprised by the trick, that Evan bested him in sparring for the first time. Evan was skilled, but considering the Yurod aliens were renowned for being great warriors who

craved physical activity, (a fat Yurod didn't exist,) Izekiel was the best Novice with weapons.

Training had finished for the day, but many of the clubs were still going on. Evan passed through the corridor where the theatre and magical music chambers were situated. A sign on the door to the theatre read: **Rehearsals for the play: Werebear on a Cold Castle Battlement, in progress,** whilst the strange tunes of the musicians were so loud they blared through the stone wall beside him.

As he turned the corner and stepped on to the illuminated escalator, the music faded and the castle fell silent. Evan was relieved he could finally navigate his way around the castles, well, he hadn't gotten lost in three days at least. He'd quickly learned walking through the Fortress was a mini-adventure itself, even without getting lost. Almost every corridor had statues and Realmers were forever jumping when one of them moved unexpectedly. A golem in Titantower actually made it his job to jump out and scare Venators several times a day.

Almost as bad was the statue named Proffesor Brainberg, who always asked everyone philosophical questions in the hope of a lengthy debate. There was a horrible Hobgoblin statue who insulted anyone who walked past his perch and threw food at trainee's heads. Statues of white knights were stationed in the bathrooms, demanding that Venators wash their hands before leaving. Then there was Manox the Mannequin, who jumped round corners to steal things. Two days ago he'd snatched Evan's banana and ran down the hall, slapping Xavier across the face with it as he went.

Some of the doors were alive too. One door snored loudly, another whooped when you opened it and a third door constantly told knock-knock jokes. Even the plant-life

joined in. Yesterday Jed had walked by a sunflower who felt it opportune to head-butt him. Evan had to drag Jed away before he destroyed the flower and got in trouble.

Evan’s favourite castle creatures were the pack of Droges who lived in Castle-Coterie. He was thrilled when he first met one of the half-dragon, half-dog animals.

They were as big as medium sized dogs, but otherwise appeared as a dragon would, except for the lolling tongue, excited panting and the tiny spouts of flame that accompanied their bark. Whenever Evan saw one of the Droges it bounded up to him, licked his hands and rolled on its belly so Evan could stroke its scales.

As he arrived on the fourth floor atrium, Evan guessed the time was around eleven, as the majority of Venators were in bed.

Other than Xavier on cleaning duty and Padrake, who stood on one of the balconies smoking a pipe, no one else was around.

Evan waved to Xavier before starting down a route he'd discovered was a shortcut.

The series of narrow corridors were dark and silent, but it would lead him straight to the Novice rooms. Halfway down the final corridor Evan felt sure someone was behind him. He turned sharply, but there was no one there.

He chuckled at his nervousness, and then began to choke as his air supply was cut off.

Evan clawed at his throat as the invisible vice squeezed tighter. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't breathe. As he staggered into the wall, he saw the figure in the distance, walking purposely towards him.

The stranger was covered by a hooded white robe. Whoever it was weaved their

air magic so tight around Evan's neck that he sank to his knees, convulsing.

He was suffocating, he was going to die.

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Chapter 15- Paranoia

Evan’s fingers scrabbled at his throat on instinct, as if he could rip the choke spell away with his hands.

Abruptly the silence was shattered by a chorus of laughter. The hooded figure froze before sprinting down the corridor and out of sight. As his attacker disappeared, the invisible vice at his throat snapped and Evan collapsed, gulping and spluttering.

“Hey, are you all right?”

Evan managed to look up, it appeared a group of Apprentices, (the source of the loud laughter,) had appeared at the other end of the passageway and scared the strangler off.

Evan lurched to his feet without speaking to the group, running down the corridor in the direction his assailant had fled. When he reached the fourth-floor atrium however, it was empty.

*

“Neither of you saw anything?” Tarensen demanded of Padrake and Xavier.

“I told you, I went up to the fifth floor to scrub Greg the gargoyle clean, seconds after I saw Evan,” a wide-eyed Xavier replied.

Evan had done the only thing he could and told Tarensen what had happened.

He must be in shock, it had happened so fast, it didn’t feel real.

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“I only went to the balcony outside my quarters for a quick smoke,” Padrake said meekly. “I saw no sign of this hooded figure Umbra describes.”

Tarensen's face twisted in fury. “Right under our noses. And you say it wasn't a demon this time, Evander? It was one of our own people?”

Evan nodded. It couldn’t have been a demon. He’d seen two human hands beneath the robe. He felt like he was having heart palpitations. It was bad enough demons were hunting him, now he couldn't trust the Masters or even the other Venators.

“Now, let’s not be hasty,” Padrake stammered, “just because Umbra was attacked in the castle doesn't mean a Realmer was the attacker. Someone must've got into the city and travelled here afterwards. If Umbra *is* correct and his attacker was human, it must've been a Rakarn.”

“Rakarn?” Evan asked.

“The official term for a Dark-Realmer,” said Padrake. “In demonic language it translates to child, named so by Akirandon as she considers them her children.”

“Whether it was a Rakarn masquerading as one of us, or a traitor, I will find him,”

Tarensen snapped. “Umbra, did you see your attacker's face at all?”

“No, nothing. Their face was covered. Their hands were pale, but that's all I know.”

Tarensen cursed. “Padrake, tell the Masters to question every Venator. Find out if anyone saw someone wearing hooded white robes tonight. I will station orc guards from the city throughout the Fortress and place two outside your door. We will root out this attacker, I promise you.”

*

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Tarensen was true to his word. The Novices in Evan's corridor awoke the next morning, shocked to see two huge orcs outside his bedroom door. Brooke and Jed were gobsmacked when Evan told them. Then they quickly became like his very own orc guards.

“I can't believe something like that could've happened dude,” Jed kept repeating.

“We'll have to make sure you don't go anywhere alone again,” Brooke vowed.

“That means you even have to go to the toilet when Evan does, Jed.”

“Oh, do I have to bathe with him too?” Jed replied as they entered their first training session of the day.

Evan's mind had festered with fear and paranoia all night. But at last he'd convinced himself the hooded stranger would be stupid to attack again. Not with the Fortress on high alert now. Still, Evan couldn't help himself from worrying. He hoped training would take his mind off it.

In Alchemy and Enchantment class they created augmentation stones that once bound to a weapon, would permanently make it sharp enough to slice through brick.

Extended Sorcery was next, where they were learning an incantation to make language universal.

“From Russian to Romanian, Dragyr to Orcish,” Master Balzabar proclaimed,

“you can understand them all temporarily. This spell is especially convenient on missions, dealing with races who wouldn't understand human languages. The Fortress is enchanted with this spell so all of us, no matter where we come from, can understand one another.”

“I wondered why I could understand those sexy Mediterranean chicks in Ethanc’s.” Jed grinned.

After that, Brooke had Healing training as the rest of them headed for an early lunch. As Evan picked his food, (roast cockatrice,) Elijah appeared and immediately gossiped with Emillia about other Venators. Some Evan knew vaguely, whilst many others he'd never heard of. It seemed Elijah knew everything about everyone.

“And between you and me,” Elijah leaned in as if to reveal a secret, although he

didn’t bother lowering his voice so everyone still heard. “It’s only a matter of time before Tyrell and Casselle get together.”

Elijah and Emillia continued gossiping as Evan finished his lunch and they made their way towards a rec room. They walked down one hallway where a gargoyle was discussing Twinsphere tactics with a *Plant.*

The recreation chamber was packed with Venators and the buzz of their chatter.

Blake and Tristan played a game of Ogre-eye, whilst Xavier was on one of the computers, watching funny videos of cats on a website named Realmtube, where videos from hundreds of realms were uploaded by users.

The TV aired a music video for Yaranus the Yeti rock star, whilst Adara, the chosen one, was expounding on one of his legendary feats to a group of adoring Apprentices.

“…of course Lok's been up to no good,” Elijah continued, “rumour is he’s dated half the girls in the Fortress.”

“He is pretty fit though.” Emillia acknowledged with a grin.

“Considering half the Venators here actually *are* girls, I’d say he’s doing pretty well for himself,” Xavier chipped in.

“Here, here,” Jed agreed between mouthfuls of spectre-spaghetti he'd brought from the Banquet chamber.

“And Bane Madagant has been fending off all the girls with a stick,” Elijah said.

“Bane Madagant?” Jed asked.

“He's a High-Realmer as hot as Lok or Arantay,” said Xavier, “but with a personality worse than both Stray brothers. Well, maybe not as bad as Sypher Stray.”

Zeke shuddered in disgust and Evan wondered how one person could be worse than Sintian, let alone two. He hoped he never had the misfortune to meet this

Bane, or Sintian's brother.

“Well *I* think Bane's the second hottest guy in this place,” said Emillia. “Joelle would skin me alive for saying that. She loathes Bane with a passion.”

“I suppose you’re referring to Arantay as being the best looking,” Elijah said, with a hint of jealousy.

“Well, he *is* gorgeous,” Emi replied.

Jed, who’d been about to shovel more food down his mouth, smeared it all over his cheek as he lost focus; he didn’t have a very good attention span did Jed. “Who is this Arantay character? Swear I heard Brooke mention ‘im before.”

“Brooke *would* mention him, I reckon she has a thing for him you know,” said Emi excitedly.

“Did she say that?” Elijah definitely had more than a hint of jealousy in his voice now.

“Not in as many words, but it’s pretty obvious,” Emillia replied. “Mind you, Arantay is pretty irresistible.”

Elijah snorted loudly. “Not to me he isn’t.”

Evan smiled, he'd bet that Elijah and Emillia could gossip for days on end.

“What about *you* and Brooke, I thought you liked her,” Xavier interjected, to Elijah’s horror.

Emillia squealed, “Oooh, really Elijah?”

“No, not at all,” he denied hastily, “you must have got it wrong, Xavier, and stop grinning, Jed.”

Jed didn’t do as he was told. “Can’t blame you, mate. Brooke ain’t bad to look at.”

“I don't *like* her, are we clear?” Elijah glared.

“Whatever you say, dude.” Evan laughed.

“Tell you who is gonna get together,” Jed said knowledgably.

“Who?” Both Elijah and Emi leaned forward.

“Evan and Cera, he can’t get enough of her,” Jed proclaimed.

Evan snapped round to look at him. “That’s a lie.”

“I knew it.” Elijah grinned.

Jed wolf whistled.

“Shut it.” Evan laughed it off.

“Do you want me to put in a good word Evan?” Emillia asked.

“No,” he panicked. “Jed’s just messing about.”

“Tut Tut. So much denial around here,” said Jed, mock-solemnly.

“How about you then Jed?” Emi asked, batting her eyelashes.

Jed looked about the chamber smugly. “I can’t limit myself to just *one* girl, I’m afraid. There are many around the Fortress I see myself procreating with.”

Emillia's eyebrows shot so far up they disappeared into her hairline.

“Yeah, right.” Evan snorted.

“I'll have you know that in many parts of the world I'm known as quite the sexual intellectual.” Jed smirked.

“About as intellectual as a fish,” Evan returned.

They used their time before their next lesson hanging out in a rec room. There were a variety of games in the rec rooms, as well as vending machines full of magical

sweets. There was also virtual reality devices for them to practice being in different realms. “**Which realm will you get?”** A sign above the machine read.

He and Jed tried on a pair of the strange goggles and were instantly transported to a spaceship. The window next to Evan showed a universe with two dozen planets and three dozen moons. A second later they were promptly killed by aliens that resembled fluorescent green ostriches. Then they had to get off because Seth and Blake were waiting for a go.

“It doesn't actually transport you to the realm.” Elijah said, looking pleased to have more knowledge than everyone else once again.

“But those realms really exist. You never know, you might be playing on a realm where you'll have a mission one day.”

Jed wanted another virtual game, but Evan clapped him round the head.

“C’mon, we’ll be late for Anatomy.”

They left the recreation room and proceeded through the winding corridors.

Although Evan and Jed knew the routes to their training rooms by now, they still stumbled across new passageways daily. Evan doubted whether anyone knew all of the Fortress’s secrets, except maybe Vanderain, the guy who’d supposedly created it all.

BANG!

He whirled rapidly; power surging to his fingertips, looking for the demon.

“Whoa dude, relax,” Jed cried.

Evan realised the noise had just been Tristan and Nena messing around with magic behind them.

He released the bubbling power inside of him, his heart hammering fast. He’d been sure the sudden sound would be another demon trying to attack him, or the hooded

figure again. Ever since the demon attack, he'd been looking round his shoulder wherever he went, now it was even worse. As much as he tried to push it from his mind the paranoia would surge right back, but perhaps paranoia would save his life if it happened again.

Jed appeared to have read his mind. “Don’t worry mate. I don’t think a demon will be able to break in again. Tarensen will make sure of it. He'll find whoever attacked you too.”

“Yeah,” Evan said, although he didn’t believe it. If he let his guard down just once it could be the end of him.

He’d taken to having Ruaden on his person at all times. He’d used the transmutation switch to make Ruaden shrink into a dagger and found himself clutching it as he walked around corners.

“Hey, do you reckon the white robe dude was Sintian?” said Jed. “It could be his idea of a sick joke, or he may really be working with demons.”

Evan shrugged, he’d agonized over the identity of the hooded stranger, but he didn’t have a clue to who it was. It could've been anyone, and that made it all the more terrifying.

“I’ve also thought Sintian looks like a constipated monkey when he’s angry,” Jed remarked.

As they walked, Evan couldn’t help looking behind him, his hand straying to Ruaden’s hilt.

As he and Jed passed through the Archives, they found Tarensen and Taretta in a secluded corner, deep in conversation. Gettelung hung on the periphery, listening intently.

Jed signalled for Evan to follow as he crept forwards to listen.

“A demon portal was summoned by Dark-Realmers in Germany and a pack of demons have found a way into Japan, with another horde sighted in the Amazon rainforest,” said Taretta.

Evan and Jed ducked down behind the immense shelf of books nearest to the Masters, peering through the tiny gaps the ancient tomes afforded.

“Li-Azar already informed me,” Tarensen said, “he has departed for Tokyo and I’ve sent Arch-Realmers to Germany and Brazil.”

“There are rumours the Dark-Venators are planning to release outbreaks of demons in London, Chicago and Cairo.”

Tarensen nodded. “I'll put a full task force on it and lead the eradications myself.”

“Who’s Li’Azar?” Evan whispered to Jed.

“The Master of Dreamwielding, I think,” said Jed. “We don’t get that training until we’re Apprentices.”

Evan nodded, turning back to the Masters.

“They're getting stronger,” Gettelung muttered, “their attacks more frequent. We need Vanderain.”

“I have no idea where he is.” Tarensen rubbed his temples. “The last time he spoke with Li-Azar in the dream realm was months ago. Has he been in contact with you?”

“No,” Taretta said. “Last I heard he was tracking down one of the Demon Disciples, maybe even Akirandon herself.”

Tarensen nodded, worry creasing his brow. “He needs to know our barriers were breached, there could be a turncoat among us. Only Vanderain knows all the entrances to this world, if he were here, he could make *sure* it never happens again.”

“Perhaps Vanderain’s already dealing with this on the other side,” Gettelung said.

“He may know who masterminded this attack. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Maybe,” Tarensen amended, his voice dripping with doubt.

Tarensen and Taretta stood in strained silence for a moment. Evan had never noticed before that their eyes were the same pale grey, almost silver.

“You don’t think anything could’ve happened to him, do you?” Taretta whispered.

“No,” Tarensen replied, “he’s been alive and well for millennia. Not even the Disciples can kill him, not unless they form an alliance, and we know that’ll never happen. Alert me immediately if you do make contact.”

Taretta promised she would and Tarensen took his leave.

Jed turned to Evan. “I take it they were talking about that Master Eternal. He must be a real powerful dude.”

“I wish he was here too,” Evan muttered. “I wouldn’t have to keep looking out for demons wherever I go.”

“You shouldn’t have to. I mean, you’ve seen Tarensen in action, he’s no push over, and the other instructors are around too.”

“Yeah, if it wasn’t for Tarensen I’d have been dead when the first demon attacked, none of them were around when the second got me though, were they? If it hadn’t been for Brooke, I’d have been dead then too. I'd probably be dead if that group of Apprentices hadn't been making a racket at that precise moment last night.”

“Hey, how'd you know this hooded bloke wanted to kill you? He might’ve just wanted to knock you out before taking you to his Master's realm. Anyway, you killed the demon in your bedroom yourself,” Jed argued. “You could do it again if it came to it.”

“I got lucky. I’ve never conjured magic so powerful before, and haven’t done it since. There’s a good chance that when the next demon comes, it’ll finally get me.

And if whoever’s sending them sends more than one, there’s no way I’ll survive.”

“Think positive, mate.” Jed punched him on the shoulder jovially, trying to lighten the mood. “There probably won’t be another attack, they might’ve given up, or Tarensen will find a way to stop them.”

“Maybe.” Evan sighed.

Evan tried with all his might to push demons and traitors from his mind, but inevitably, they kept rushing back.

PART THREE

TAINTED BLOOD

“Every realm in existence shall be enslaved by our one true god, or

every realm shall burn.”

--Queen Akirandon’s proclamation.

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Chapter 16- Falawn

The giant crab scuttled towards him rapidly. Before Evan could dodge, the demon was on top of him and he was forced to wriggle madly as he held the pincers at bay.

The crab's frantic clicking was thunderous and Evan knew he couldn’t stop the pincers from gouging out his eyeballs for much longer. The crab mimicked a human scream as Brooke shot a lightning bolt at its back. Evan used this distraction to summon fire and burn the minion to ash.

He scrambled to his feet as Brooke laughed. “That's the second time I've saved your life, Umbra.”

“Hey, this time doesn't count. I wasn't in any real danger.”

Almost as if the virtual reality device had heard him, a dozen bestial skeletons

rose from the ground around them.

The game had transported them into a wide expanse of orange rocks which appeared to have been a recent battleground, going by the many demon carcasses littering the place.

Evan seized the spear stuck in a nearby corpse and ripped it out with a squelch as the skeletons advanced.

Brooke continued to fire off bolts of electricity whilst Evan danced around their lumbering enemies, jabbing and lunging whenever he saw an opportunity. One skeleton almost took his head off with its poleaxe, but Evan narrowly avoided, before sticking his spear in its eye socket.

A minute later, their assailants were no more than fragments of bone. However, as soon as these enemies were defeated, a huge hole in the Earth opened up behind them.

“I guess the game wants us to go down,” said Brooke.

“Ladies first.” Evan pushed her playfully.

He jumped in after her, falling through depths of blackness, until he landed beside Brooke in a large steel chamber. Before Evan could say anything, three figures materialised before them.

Their newest enemies were just normal teenagers. Evan noticed they were strangely sharp featured, like the reflection of a human oddly distorted and twisted, and bearing subtle hints of something…unworldly. All three wore clothing similar to Evan and Brooke's Novice attire, except their uniform was black as night.

“For Velkarath,” the female stranger screamed, raising a hand and shooting a torrent of flames Evan's way.

As he rolled sideways, Evan saw a hideous winged demon barrel into Brooke from behind. The demon’s talons gouged into Brooke's back and lifted her into the air as she screamed in agony.

“Bring us the boy,” one of the strangers cried.

A second later, a huge slimy hand gripped Evan by the throat and threw him at the teenager’s feet. He couldn't believe it. The three strangers were commanding the demons like they were pets. But that was impossible.

One of the teenagers kicked him hard in the stomach, pinning Evan to the ground as he used sorcery to weave a phantom dagger into his hand.

“Weak Veneseron scum,” the boy snarled, insanity filling his eyes as he brought the dagger down into Evan's chest.

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Evan and Brooke landed back in the Illusion chamber in front of the class, panting heavily. Evan looked at his chest, sure he would find blood.

“They, they killed us,” Brooke gasped.

“Who…what were they?” Evan looked to Padrake.

“They,” Padrake addressed the class, “were Rakarn, otherwise known as Dark-Venators.”

Evan noticed most of the Novices were staring at the big screen atop the virtual-reality device. Brooke and Evan were the first volunteers, the others must've seen everything.

“The Dark-Venators are just as much our enemy as demons,” Padrake continued.

“Nearly a quarter of our missions are disrupted by them causing chaos and many other missions consist of stopping whatever the Dark-Venators are planning next.

“They are trained by masters steeped in evil. To reside in Velkarath is to be warped by the demonic. The Dark-Venators are in league with demons, not trying to eradicate them. They create gateways to Earth and other realms and let demons through to feed, or else they ignite wars between races and generally try

everything possible to remove us.”

“But they were our age,” said Brooke, “maybe younger.”

“The worst thing is, it could've been you,” Padrake muttered darkly. “Dark-Venators take most of their demon hunters from Earth. If the teenagers do not join the Rakarn willingly, the Velkarath Masters torture them, driving them mad until they do.”

“So, we might have to fight them, kill them?” Xavier asked.

“But they're human. Killing demons is different,” said Evan.

“But they will try to kill you,” Padrake interjected, “and they will succeed if you are not prepared to face them.”

“Why did they look a bit…odd?” Emillia asked tentatively.

“The Rakarn I created for this test were those who’ve bonded with demons. The demonic has taken hold and altered them.”

“Right. Jed, Emillia,” Padrake clapped his hands together, his grimness replaced by his usual cheeriness. “Your turn in the virtual device.”

As Emi and Jed stepped forwards, Evan noticed Padrake shoot him a glance. He thought Padrake had often given him shifty looks in his lessons, ever since he'd almost been strangled.

Evan just put it down to his ever-increasing paranoia and continued the training.

*

Brooke’s Dark-Venator worries were put on hold as she and the gang headed for the fun and games of the rec rooms. Evan and Elijah became enthralled with a holographic book whilst Jed began chatting up Apprentice girls, claiming to be the chosen one, Adara. He wasn’t successful, to no one’s surprise.

Brooke herself was unusually quiet and didn’t stay long. She found herself

instead in front of one of the girl's bathroom mirrors, fixing her hair. She didn't consider herself particularly vain, but her mind dwelled on a certain scarlet-haired boy she was meeting next.

She knew something had passed between them at their last training session. They'd almost kissed, she was sure of it.

She hurried from the bathroom and almost ran down one of the zigzag staircases.

Their private sessions only took place after the twin suns had set. Tonight however, the suns were lingering on the horizon, illuminating the lush grasslands as she gazed out of the windows.

Various Venators lolled about on the fields. There was no specific time they were to be in bed. Only if everyone stayed up all night causing anarchy would the Masters get involved and deal out punishments. It was mainly High-Realmers and Mid-Realmers around, chatting amiably, or else getting some extra training in.

Magical creatures also occupied the area, but Brooke wasn't nervous around them anymore. Several Venators were mounted on giant lizards, racing against satyrs, and a bright blue grasshopper dozed on the next windowsill she passed.

Things with Elijah had been awkward after the kiss-attempt. Brooke hadn't mentioned it since, hoping it would be forgotten and their friendship wouldn't be affected. She hoped he could try and forget about it too. She really enjoyed having Elijah as a friend.

The fields vanished from view as Brooke turned into a narrow hallway which housed no windows. This one ran the length of the Archives and was sparsely lit.

Aside from a Master she didn't recognise, the Archives looked empty. Brooke knew there were more Masters than just those who taught her. Elijah had mentioned there were three to four Masters for each area of sorcery.

As she neared the end of the Archives passageway, she noticed a light flickering in a corner. She stopped, peering curiously towards the light and recognising the silhouette behind the magical lamp.

Sintian leered over an ancient tome, following the words with one snake-like finger and muttering to himself. *What's he doing alone in the Archives, looking up old manuscripts? He's definitely a weirdo*, she decided, before moving on.

As she approached the training courtyard she saw it was almost deserted. Only Urkzal, a small group of Venators he was training and Tyrell stood in the yard.

Tyrell was staring at her. She paused, but then he waved her forward.

“Where’s Arantay?” she looked around, hoping to see him step out from the shadows, as he appeared so fond of doing.

“He can’t make it,” Tyrell explained, passing her a wooden sword and hefting his own.

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe he's been called away on a mission. Maybe he had things to do in the forest…” Tyrell trailed off, shrugging.

“But, he promised,” she said faintly.

“Don’t worry. Trainers change all the time. We Arch-Realmers get called away pretty often.”

“So he could be in the forest? If he’s not on a mission, that is.”

“Most likely. No need to sound so upset, he hasn’t died,” said Tyrell, picking up on her tone.

“Sorry. Will he be back?”

“Of course, haven’t got a clue when though. Could be ages, could be tomorrow. I just got a message after Astral Embodiment class that I was needed here.”

Tyrell signalled for her to be on guard before lunging in artfully.

Forty minutes later, Brooke was streaked with sweat, a little bruised, and considerably exhausted. Tyrell was a good trainer. He just wasn’t Arantay.

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As she walked back to Castle-Coterie, intending to collapse on her bed, she felt miserable because of Arantay's disappearance. If it was because of a mission, then she could understand. It would be selfish of her to want him to train her instead. But what if it wasn’t? What if he was just in the forest?

Brooke mulled it over, until finally her feelings took over and she changed direction. The suns were still up, evening had deepened but darkness hadn’t yet conquered the day. *I’ve got time to check if Tay’s in the forest, don't I?*

She walked briskly, acknowledging the few Venators she knew by sight but not stopping to chat. Brooke remembered how creepy the forest was last time she'd entered. She avoided taking the route that would lead her past the Archives, preferring not to bump into Sintian.

Brooke thought she was alone as she walked back across the now empty courtyard, until she glimpsed the tendril of purple smoke.

She turned to see Lok, watching her through a first floor window as he smoked. It was twenty feet up but he jumped down with ease, landing on the courtyard beside her.

“Arantay disappeared again?”

She nodded.

“He makes a habit of that.” Lok grinned wolfishly. “I'd offer to train you in his place, but I'm afraid I'd be too distracted by your beauty.”

Brooke was unable to muster a reply.

“I'd wager you're off to the forest to find him?”

“How…what makes you think that?

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“I'm an expert on the female mind.” Lok’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “Tell you what Brooke, when Tay breaks your heart you come find me. We can…hang

out.”

Brooke frowned as Lok walked away. She felt eyes watching her and looked at the window Lok had been in to see Lyella glaring at her. Brooke tried to ask the blonde what her problem was this time, but Lyella merely sneered before turning away.

I don’t have time for childish games, Brooke pushed Lyella out of her mind as she continued towards Veneseron forest.

As the woods loomed closer the trees didn’t resemble dark foreboding creatures like last time, but were swaying gently, their leaves whispering and sighing in content.

The enchanted forest was a different world during the day, thick with undergrowth and ceilinged with an emerald canopy of foliage, pierced by shafts of sunlight. As she entered, the woodland swallowed her whole, converging from all sides. Brooke immediately saw the other beings Veneseron shared the forest with.

Flickers of light burgeoned as fairies and will-o'-the-wisps soared in every direction. Many lounged on toadstools or holes inside trees. When not bickering with one another, they teased the other magical creatures, their luminous wings fluttering madly as they dive-bombed groups of brownies who grumbled in fury.

The brownies resembled garden gnome statues from Earth, except they were smaller, with skin like parchment and beards so long they brushed the ground.

Slightly bigger, were the camouflaged imps scuttling around, their skin matching the leaves they frolicked in. They were hairless, with pot bellies and bug-like eyes.

Bigger still were the grumpy grey kobolds who rifled amongst the trees, snatching up flowers and gulping them down heartily.

A group of mischievous pixies ran into another glade, carrying luminous mushrooms above their heads like trophies. The pixie miscreants were followed by a nymph, a girl with muddy-green skin and clothed in leaves. She ran after

the pixies, shaking her fist at them for stealing her mushrooms.

Brooke recognised these creatures from training, but the pictures were nothing to the magic of seeing them here and now, snug in their woodland home.

She had no idea where she intended to go. Her feet seemed to be automatically taking her somewhere as she stared about in awe.

The forest creatures emanated a playfulness which affected everyone who entered their vicinity. A natural high whooshed over her and she couldn't help but smile. She wondered where these creatures were the night she'd arrived. Perhaps they surrendered their home to the beasts of the night? The thought should have been foreboding, as darkness was soon to envelop, but she was too happy at that moment to let it worry her.

She saw other creatures she'd learnt about recently in Creature-Study. Like Elmclackers, creatures with limbs made out of twigs and leaves for hair; similar to stickmen children draw. Alongside them were the gross Fuglugs, which resembled slugs the size of cats, made entirely out of fungus.

In the next glade, the forest was lit by a hundred sparkling lights as fairies flashed to and fro or else capered through the flowerbeds. All was a flurry of flickering colour, emeralds, azures, pinks and golds. The sound of their squeaky voices filled the clearing with music.

As Brooke stopped in amazement, staring open-mouthed, the scene suddenly changed. One minute the fairies were cavorting carelessly, the next they had vanished from view, melting into the trees beyond.

The contrast of their beautiful voices to the utter silence was unnerving. A soft breeze stirred the clearing, playing with the strands of her hair. Shadows on the outskirts of the glade were encroaching. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as she felt the sensation of being watched.

A twig snapped.

Fear clutched at her heart and she backed out of the clearing.

The rustle of leaves came next. Something was coming.

“You should not be here, Venator.”

Brooke spun on her heel, looking for the speaker. A shape stood hidden by the trees.

“Who are you?” She tried to sound more confident than she felt.

The shape moved, at first she thought it was Arantay stepping out of the shadows.

She was mistaken.

The stranger was tall and powerful, with golden skin and sinister green eyes. Long hair hung to broad shoulders, the dark emerald tresses coiled like snakes.

He could only be an elf. He stared so fiercely she had to look away. Brooke noticed his pupils were vertically slit.

“Why have you come?” One thin lip curled in the ghost of a sneer. “You do not belong here.”

He stood, proud and menacing, his muscled arms and chest bare but legs and waist covered by an amalgamation of leaves and ivy.

All the elves Brooke had seen had been tall, golden skinned and cat-eyed like this stranger. But none of them emanated such a strong aura of hatred.

His eyes glinted maliciously, daring her to answer him.

“I’m looking for someone,” she said resolutely, standing her ground.

“Who?” The elf hissed. “You *Venators*,” his lip curled again, “are no Mashok to us.”

“Arantay is a friend to us,” she disagreed.

The elf’s eyes flashed and a muscle in his jaw twitched.

“Arantay is a traitor to this forest, and to his own kin,” the elf snarled. “He is no better than you, Venator scum. This forest belonged to the elves first. This whole world belonged to us before you fools intruded.”

Brooke stepped back as his voice rose. “Sorry,” was all she could say.

“You are not sorry,” the elf spat, “none of you are sorry for what you’ve done.”

His face was full of a dark passion. “You have polluted our sanctuary, tainted it with your iniquitous magic.”

“Our magic isn’t evil,” she argued.

“Leave this forest. You are weak, foolish, and have no place amongst those true to Veneseron.”

“I-I,” Brooke reeled at his words.

“You have no need of Arantay. He is too cowardly to leave the forest tonight.” The enraged elf stared up at the sky, at the twin suns only now submitting to darkness.

“While the suns still shine, Arantay will hide. He is craven like all you Realmers.”

The elf was obviously deranged. Brooke wanted to see Arantay, she also wanted to be back up at the Fortress. Just anywhere but here with him.

To her horror the elf lunged forwards. Before she could stop him, his hand shot out to grip her chin.

“Are you scared, Venator?” his words were soft but laced with venom.

Brooke glared back. She could feel magic building inside her, ready to erupt if he tried to hurt her.

“No,” she said resolutely.

The elf smiled, but instead of highlighting his beauty like it did Arantay, it

distorted his features further.

“I can feel your fear, girl. I can smell the stench of it on your skin. I can taste it on your breath,” he leaned forwards, as if to kiss her.

“All you Realmers fear me,” he emphasised each word with laconic brutality.

“No,” Brooke repeated, fear shooting through her veins. She snapped her head out of his grasp and moved backwards.

He grinned maniacally as his other hand snaked out, grabbing her shirt and pulling her towards him. “Then I shall *make* you fear me.”

A figure dropped down from the treetops high above, its movement a white blur.

Brooke whirled round and screamed. As the lithe shape landed, Brooke saw a scarlet mane and two blood-red eyes.

Chapter 17- Arantay Unveiled

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Lips pulled back to expose teeth too sharp to be human and growling like an animal, Arantay was the scariest she'd ever seen him.

His eyes shone from the shadows with a vivid light. The elf clutching Brooke growled back, his own pupils dilating.

“Release her,” Arantay snarled savagely, his voice distorted with rage.

“Come and take her from me.” The elf smiled.

Brooke felt like she was caught between two ferocious beasts competing for dominance.

“Come Arantay,” the elf taunted, “if you do not fear the light.”

Arantay remained in the shadows.

Brooke’s magic boiled to the surface. Her skin brimmed with electricity, shocking the elf’s hands and causing him to flinch back.

“Venator filth,” he spat as Brooke ran to Arantay’s side of the glade.

“Falawn, control yourself.”

“I do not take orders from murderers,” Falawn snapped.

Brooke thought she saw Arantay recoil, but his expression was half-hidden by the gloom.

She could feel the barely suppressed rage in his tone when he spoke next, “Father would not want this, Falawn.”

“Father is as weak minded as you, though his blood… is not as tainted.”

Arantay took a step forwards.

“Stay in your shadows,” Falawn sneered.

Arantay reluctantly remained where he was.

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“Leave this Venator,” Falawn approached Brooke again, smiling mirthlessly, “to me.”

“I’m warning you Falawn. Vanderain forbid you to ever touch the Venators again.”

“You think I care what the old one says? We were here first, before these scum, it is our right to do what we want.”

“Only you think that. Only you have twisted it in your dark mind as a threat against you, the rest of us tolerate the Venators, work with them.”

“Traitors all,” Falawn grimaced.

“Leave, now.”

“Will you fight me Arantay? I have bested you before, I shall do so again,” Falawn drew himself up to full height.

Brooke stared between the two of them, paralysed with terror.

“You are wrong Arantay, and you know it.”

Brooke finally found the ability to move, stumbling further towards Arantay. To her shock, Arantay moved away from her.

Falawn’s laughter erupted throughout the clearing. “Too scared to show your true form?”

Arantay remained silent. Brooke tried to look through the shadows he'd cloaked himself in, confused and hurt.

“I’ll leave you to it, dear brother.” Apparently seeing Arantay like this was more amusing for Falawn then scaring Brooke.

Falawn dissipated back into the trees from where he came, his cold laughter ringing through the air.

“That,” said Brooke, “was your brother?”

“Yes.” The word was filled with sorrow.

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How could Arantay be related to someone like *that*?

“He’s twisted, don’t heed anything he said,” Arantay urged.

Triggered by Falawn’s words, Brooke realised he was wrong. She had seen Tay during the day once or twice.

“Come out of the shadows, Arantay,” she whispered softly.

“I cannot,” he replied, his voice breaking.

“Why?”

“You do not want to see me in the light, Brooke.”

“Why? I have before.”

“I had taken my tincture then. I’ve run out now. Without Vanderain here to prepare more…” He trailed off, sounding like he was in immense pain.

“What are you talking about? What could sunlight possibly do to you?”

She heard him sigh heavily, a faint groan escaping his lips.

“Please Arantay, let me see you.”

He came slowly, as if each step was agony.

And then she saw him.

The few timorous rays of sunlight left shone down and sculpted his body the way shadows never could.

His alabaster skin was not the unblemished white as usual; instead it held a sickly pallor. The sunlight had turned his flesh paper thin, veins shone through, veins as black as midnight. They wrought his skin spasmodically, littered all along his neck, his bare chest, even his usually perfect face. Instead his face looked like it had been slashed repeatedly, except the cuts weren’t red, but blacker than ink.

“What happened to you,” she gasped.

“*This* happened over a hundred years ago,” Arantay rasped, his eyes filled with a deep anguish.

“But… what… I mean, how?”

“I was bitten.”

“By who, what?”

“A vampire.”

Silence descended between them.

Brooke couldn’t believe it. She didn’t want to believe it.

“You- you’re a *vampire?* ” She forced herself to ask.

“No,” he muttered softly.

Brooke thought back to Falawn, there were definite similarities between the two, they were brothers after all.

“An elf then?”

“No,” Arantay repeated, his voice shook this time. “I don’t know what I am. An anomaly, a hybrid, torn between two races but not belonging to either.” The hurt in his voice was so strong it made her want to cry.

“Look at me,” he whispered. “I am contaminated, poisoned.” He pointed to his chest, where the black veins spiralled. “Vampiric blood flows through my veins, distorting my elven blood. I’m a hybrid of both but part of neither. I can only assume the elven blood allows me to stay in sunlight without burning, but it makes me terribly weak.” He looked to the two suns in despair. “Vanderain makes a very precise tincture which allows me to look normal, as normal as I can, but I’ve run out of vials now. With him gone, whenever sunlight touches me I’m reduced to…this.”

“I- I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Do not say you are sorry,” Arantay said sharply, “everyone says they are sorry, they cannot be as sorry as I am.”

Brooke was lost for words.

“Do you understand? You’ve seen this forest and the magical creatures that inhabit it. The gnomes, the nymphs, the fairies. I used to be one of them. I used to live harmoniously with them. But now… my blood is tainted, inflicted with evil. Now, I’m a curse upon the home I cherished as a boy. My brother is right, I am a traitor. I don't belong here. Elven blood is the most pure of all the races, and vampiric the most evil. They have mixed inside my body, and now I don't know what I am. I am nothing.”

Tears rolled down Brooke’s cheeks as she stared at him. Arantay, who resembled

a boy no more than seventeen years old, appeared so wounded right now. So vulnerable, despite the sheer power she knew he possessed.

She moved towards him unfaltering, laying a hand on his chest. “You're not evil,”

she said softly. “You’re strong and kind… and beautiful.”

And she truly meant it. Even the midnight veins that streaked his body were beautiful in their own way.

Arantay stepped away from her, moving to sit on the trunk of a fallen tree, his head resting in his hands.

Brooke sat beside him, yearning to comfort Arantay, to make him feel anything but this.

“Why don’t you use an enchanted ring like other Venators who’re supernatural?”

“The majority of magical items can only be used by magic-users. I’m a Venator in title only, I have no sorcery. I’m just an elf, at least I used to be. Vanderain calls me an Elfpire,” he chuckled bitterly. “I think he made the name up. Vanderain says he’s

heard of others like me, but I’m the only one he’s met. And coming from Vanderain that means my kind must be rare. He’s probably met every creature imaginable.”

Arantay turned to look at her, his eyes wet. “Do you know what it’s like Brooke, to feel completely and utterly alone?”

Brooke shook her head, wishing she knew the right thing to say.

“I know everyone feels that way sometimes, but with me, I actually am alone,” he mused.

“Don’t you have family? Other than Falawn I mean,” she added hastily.

“There’s a tribe of elves in the forest,” Arantay nodded, “but even they treat me differently. My parents try to hide it, but I see it in their eyes. My brother loathes me.

Falawn knows I am something wrong, that I lead an existence which shouldn’t be led.”

“That’s not true,” she burst in angrily.

Silence followed her statement until Arantay spoke up again, exhausted, as if tired of his own being.

“You know I was the youngest in my family, in my whole tribe. Now I will live beyond all of them.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, not sure if she wanted the answer.

“The life of a vampire is an immortal one. The life of an elf typically spans a thousand years. I’m unsure of whether I will live forever. I haven’t aged a day since the moment I was turned, so I presume I will. All my tribe, my mother, my father, shall die before me.”

“That’s horrible,” she choked.

The suns had finally lowered now, replaced by moonlight. The black veins faded on Arantay’s skin, becoming an unblemished white once again.

“But, you aren’t evil?” she repeated. “You don’t feed on humans.” Brooke remembered the time he'd cleaned her blood off her. “Do you?”

“Never,” he said vehemently. “For years the pull was there, the *need* to drink human blood. But as I continued to fight it the lust eventually lessened. My hunger, however, had to be satisfied.” His voice was so wretched it hurt her to hear it.

“Animals?”

“Yes.”

“But that’s not so bad is it, I mean-”

“Yes it is! Elves are linked to the forest we live in. We have a kinship with every animal, every insect. All the magical creatures you saw earlier, we all share the same bond. And I was forced to break that bond, to feed on the animals that were a part of my home--a part of *me*.”

Brooke was appalled to see a tear finally break through, rolling down his cheek to the forest floor. She couldn’t imagine the pain it must cause him to feed on his own.

“That’s why Falawn called me a murderer. I killed accidentally when I was new.

I’ve now mastered my impulses, but he still hates me.”

Silence once again permeated the area.

“How did it happen?” she dared to ask. “Were you bitten?”

For a long moment she thought Arantay was not going to answer her, but then he spoke.

“I was little more than a child, a boy of just a hundred years. It was only my fifth mission as a Venator. The other elves didn’t want a part of what Vanderain had created, but I did. I wanted to help people, save them from demons and other perils.

But most of all I wanted adventure. I guess getting bitten was fate’s way of telling me I should have stayed in the forest with my own kind. The mission was simple enough;

eliminate a group of demons that’d settled into a country manor on your Earth realm.

They had slaughtered the owners and were continuing to kill any human that came near. Unfortunately they were in an alliance with a coven of vampires too. The vampires attacked us as we sought to clear out the demons and I was bitten. When I awoke I had changed. My skin had whitened, my eyes turned red, my

teeth into fangs, my nails long and black. The rest you know.” He finished, likely not wishing to remember all he'd felt when he first realised what he’d become.

“What did you do?”

“I killed them,” his voice took on a dangerous tone. Brooke was taken aback by the wild gleam in his eyes.

“I tracked them down, one by one, not just destroying the one who'd infected me, but the entire coven. I was ruthless, out of control. That was when I came closest to feeding on a human. It was Vanderain who helped me. He found me after I killed the coven. He calmed me down and helped me deal with everything going on inside my head. Without Vanderain I might still be out there, roaming the demon realms, roaming the human realms, slaughtering everything in sight.”

Brooke didn’t doubt it, she'd seen how powerful Arantay could be. The thought was too terrible to imagine him out of control.

Darkness deepened further, as did Arantay’s mood. Brooke shivered as the wind picked up. Small, eerie sounds whispered between the trees. The night beasts were stirring from their heavy slumbers. Brooke would rather take them over Falawn returning though.

“Sorry for telling you all this,” Arantay muttered. “It shouldn't be your burden too.

It’s enough that all the Masters and Arch-Realmers know. I’m not usually this

sensitive about-- my *condition*, but Falawn always knows how to rile me. I didn't want you to see me like this.”

“Why?”

“I enjoy training with you, and I thought…if you saw my true form you would be frightened and not wish to see me again.”

Brooke felt such a strong emotion at his words that she leapt forwards before she could stop herself, wrapping her arms around him and holding tight. Arantay

started, obviously confused, but then relaxed, laying an arm around her waist gently.

“I could never be scared of you,” she whispered.

“Thank you,” he whispered back, holding her as tight as she held him. She never wanted to let go.

Chapter 18- Kiss and a Catfight

Many of Veneseron’s statues talked during the day, but at night some would walk around too. Evan saw many of them as he, Jed and Emillia were on cleaning duty tonight. Golems, gargoyles, mannequins and a bevy of historical statues gathered in the courtyard outside the window.

“I hate cleaning,” Jed remarked, polishing statues from the Babylonian period.

Luckily none of these statues were alive, although Evan thought he heard one giggle, as if ticklish.

Although steam powered robots worked as chefs and hi-tech cleaning droids clunked up and down the stairs, the Novices still had to help out too.

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Evan was in the process of wiping clean a mirror. Many of the mirrors around the Fortress were enchanted to reflect other realms. Evan had looked in one mirror to find his reflection standing on a green sand dune amidst an orange sea. Another mirror had showed him on a mountaintop with what looked like velociraptors running around below. The mirror Evan was cleaning now showed his reflection in UV light.

He knew he’d changed on the inside since arriving to Veneseron, but gazing at his reflection, his appearance had altered too. His skin was darker, thanks to the twin suns. And his body was more muscled, due to all the training. Evan thought his eyes looked darker too, that or the odd red specks around his pupils were brighter.

He moved on to polish an Anglo-Saxon helmet, but a high-pitched singing interrupted him.

The three of them turned as a bizarre being danced into view. Half of his skin-tight outfit was black, speckled with yellow dots; the other was red, speckled with blue dots. He wore a jester hat, which jingled with every step, and a golden flute was clutched in a gloved hand. His face was covered by a metallic white mask, painted into a beaming smile.

“Good morrow, hunters. Hark now, I am being Halfrigg Moonladder, Jester and Bard of Veneseron stronghold. Would thou like a song?”

“Erm, not right now thanks,” Emillia said kindly.

Halfrigg Moonladder's face shifted, the smiling mask rotated round his head, replaced by another mask, this one wearing a sad expression.

“Very well, I shall find dear Graham, he always likes my songs. Fare thee well.”

And with that his face rotated again and he skipped down the hallway and out of sight.

“Graham?” Jed asked.

“He's a genie,” Evan put in helpfully, laughing at Jed's expression.

“Don't mind Halfrigg,” Emillia said. “He's a little insane. He means well though.

He’s just one of many peculiar residents of the Fortress. I’ll tell you about Ectoplasm Eddy and Hamley-Hans another time.”

“How many weirdoes does this Fortress have?” Jed asked.

“What, including you?” Emillia shot back.

“Ooh, that was a quick comeback for you, Emi. Maybe you're not as stupid as we all thought.”

“Say that again Jeddy Bear and I'll-”

Just then Evan spotted Brooke. Her eyes were puffy and red, as if she'd been crying.

“Where have you been?” he interrupted Jed and Emi's conversation.

“Umm, just training,” Brooke mumbled, turning her face away as she moved past them as quickly as possible.

“Wonder what’s got into her,” said Jed.

Evan was worried, it looked like something serious had happened. Emillia's expression reflected his thoughts.

“She couldn’t have been training this late, could she?” He asked.

“Dunno’ mate, we’re cleaning this late, aren’t we?”

“Her eyes were wet. Do you think she was crying?

“Dunno’ mate, maybe.”

“Thanks for your insight, really helpful.”

“Dunno’ mate, I think I’m pretty helpful when I wanna’ be.” Jed grinned.

“Yeah, sure you are.”

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“Do you reckon Sintian could’ve upset her?” Emillia said, “and don’t say, you dunno’.”

“Dun… Maybe. It seems he’s more than the pompous prat we first thought, he’s a raving lunatic instead.”

“I’ll make sure to ask in the morning,” Evan vowed.

“Yeah, even if it wasn’t him, that kid deserves another beating.”

“Er- I think he beat you up,” Emillia pointed out.

“I wasn’t ready,” came Jed’s poor excuse.

*

Evan hadn’t had a night of peaceful dreams in days, demons flitted into his mind even in sleep. Last night he'd dreamt of Cera kissing Jed and Brooke being chased by Sintian, then himself being chased by Mr Sangel. The shadow with purple eyes had appeared too. He’d only had nightmares about the purple-eyed woman a few times a year before, but since becoming to Veneseron she was appearing far more frequently.

Once he'd donned his Novice attire, Evan opened his door to find a clockwork scorpion crawling towards him. The scorpion raised a pincer clasping a note. Evan took it uncertainly.

The scribbled writing read: *Evan Umbra, kindly report to my quarters first thing this morning. Master Gettelung.*

He heard the creak of Brooke’s door and she stepped out to find the scorpion passing her the note in his other pincer.

“Wonder what Gettelung wants?”

“You don’t think we’re in trouble, do you?” Evan asked.

“I dunno’,” said Brooke as they set off. “I did go into the forest last night, but there’s no rule telling Venators not to.”

“You did what? Why?”

“Oh I- er was looking for Arantay, he didn’t show up for training last night.”

“How come?”

“Erm, I don’t think it’s my place to say, it’s kind of private.”

“Oh okay,” Evan dropped it, feeling it would be rude to pry.

“The forest is amazing, isn’t it?” He switched topic.

“It’s wonderful. But not all the creatures there are friendly.”

“What, worse than Sintian?” He laughed.

“The elf who threatened me yesterday, Falawn, makes Stray look like a fairy.”

“*Threatened* you?”

Evan felt hot all of a sudden and realised it was anger rising to the surface.

“It’s okay,” Brooke said quickly. “Arantay scared him off.”

“I thought elves are supposed to be kind, mostly.”

“Well this one wasn’t. He hates all Venators.”

“That bad?”

“Terrible.”

“Is that why you were upset last night?” Evan asked tentatively.

“A mixture of everything I guess.”

“Wow, this place just keeps coming up with surprises,” said Evan, bemused.

They reached Gettelung’s quarters on the top floor of Castle-Coterie. Evan knocked on the door politely.

“Come in,” the Master boomed as the door swung open of its own accord.

261

Gettelung was behind his desk, tucking into a hearty breakfast as Padrake sat by his side, nibbling at his own meal.

Evan was surprised to find the walls were pink, laden with pictures of alien landscapes, similar to those dotted around the Fortress. Evan had guessed the unfamiliar, and often downright bizarre, panoramas depicted other worlds. Perhaps these paintings were the favourite realms Gettelung had visited.

A large globe sat in the corner. A smattering of red dots lit up the globe, signalling magic users. The globe couldn't be Earth, there weren’t enough oceans and one country was the size of Africa and Russia combined.

The preposterously plump and rakishly thin Masters contrasted one another comically. Evan and Brooke took the two seats Padrake gestured to. As he sat beside him, Evan noticed Padrake shift uncomfortably.

“Well, you’ve both been with us for a little while now,” Gettelung said, “and in that time you have progressed well as Novices.”

“We believe the time has come for you to face your Apprentice trials,” Padrake pronounced.

“The next step in your Venator careers.” Gettelung slapped his thigh.

Evan was blown away. This soon! *Am I ready yet*? *I can’t be.*

“Now, no offense Evan,” Gettelung continued, “but Brooke is the stronger magically. You’re not far behind though and I hear your swordplay is excellent.

Brooke, you shall have your trial in a month’s time. Evan, yours will take place not long after.”

Evan nodded. He knew he had to complete his trials to move up the ranks. He still didn’t think he was ready though.

“You’ll both need to prepare extensively for this challenge, and will be told the details closer to the time. I’d advise you to train in all areas as each trial is different for everyone. Good luck to both of you, now go and start preparing,” Gettelung finished.

As they stood up and left the office, Padrake called after them, “Good luck.”

*

“JED, JED,” Evan and Brooke burst into the Australian’s room, Brooke whacking a pillow round his head when he refused to get up.

Jed mumbled incoherently as they pulled his covers off him.

“JED!”

“Don’t… don't eat the Mayonnaise past midnight,” Jed whispered sleepily.

“What!” Evan and Brooke burst into laughter.

“Oi, Mayonnaise boy,” Evan shook him out of his dreams.

Jed opened his eyes to glare at them.

“Guess what? Evan and I are going to be Apprentices, once we get past the trials.”

“Wow. That’s a great story. Tell it to me in the morning,” Jed rolled over and pulled the quilt back over his head.

“It is morning, you idiot,” Evan laughed.

“Bye mate,” was Jed’s muffled reply beneath the blanket.

Brooke launched a pillow at Jed’s head as they left the room, still laughing.

When he and Brooke entered the Banquet chamber, their good news temporarily slipped his mind as he spotted Elijah and Emillia.

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Elijah was wearing a ludicrous orange and green top hat, whilst Emillia had donned an equally ridiculous pink cowboy hat. To top it off, they both had matching polka-dot bowties.

“What the hell are you two wearing?” Brooke giggled.

“We’ve got a performance in drama club later.” Elijah replied. “The hats are enchanted to help us remember our lines.”

“And the bowties?” Evan asked.

“Wards off stage fright,” Emillia blushed.

Evan and Brooke roared with laughter, whilst simultaneously trying to tell them their news as they took their seats.

“That’s incredible, it took me almost two years before I faced the trials,” said Elijah.

They were spread out over two tables, Elijah on one with Emillia, Izekiel and Xavier, whilst accompanying Evan and Brooke on theirs were Cera and her friend Layla.

“I’m so happy for you,” Cera smiled at Evan coquettishly. *She’s so pretty when she smiles,* he found himself thinking; not for the first time.

As usual, the Banquet chamber echoed with a sea of chatting Venators.

At a nearby table Blake and Tristan were boasting to a small crowd about a Scribduel game, where they’d won a lot of money from a group of drunken gargoyles.

A cluster of Apprentices were gathered around another table, excitedly watching two Fuglugs racing, whilst two Venators Evan didn’t know passed behind him, the girl saying, “The incubus Roma Tai is holding another party in the city, we should go for our next date.”

Across Evan’s table, Elijah and Emillia chatted, “… yes, my spear work needs improvement, but I think Arnvar’s being too hard on me.” Elijah rambled on as Emi nodded sympathetically. Brooke and Layla were discussing various Venator males, including Tyrell, Domnican and Lok, whilst Cera leaned towards him, her foot brushing his leg under the table, probably accidentally.

“Will you still talk to me once you’re an Apprentice,” she joked, “or will you be too good to be seen with people like me?”

Evan found himself staring at her large green eyes just a little too long before realising he was supposed to answer.

“Oh yeah obviously, it would tarnish my reputation hanging out with lowly Novices.”

Cera laughed musically, her foot definitely touching his leg this time.

Anxiety began to seep in. *Why do I have to be such a nervous wreck all the time?*

“Well we should probably make the best of the time we do have together then.”

“Yeah- sure,” Evan felt his stomach tighten and worked to keep his breathing normal.

She asked, “Do you fancy hanging out after training today?”

His heartbeat quickened, and he found himself feeling nauseous. Before he could reply Jed plonked down next to him, finally arisen from his bed.

“G’day guys,” he said cheerily.

“How’s the mayonnaise?” Brooke smirked.

Jed looked at her like she'd sprouted two extra heads, “Mayonnaise? What on Earth are you on about?”

Everyone burst into laughter around the two tables, Evan and Brooke had told them all about it.

265

“You’re all mad,” Jed shook his head, before stealing some of Evan’s breakfast.

“Dude, it’s such an effort to walk all the way down here for breaky and the escalators take too long,” Jed grumbled. “Isn't there a faster way to get round this place?”

“There are teleporter rings on each floor of every castle, that'll transport you to the floor above or below,” Elijah replied.

“Why didn't you tell us sooner? You twonk.” Jed burst out. “I had to walk down eight flights of stairs to get here.”

“So how about it?” Cera said as Jed and Elijah carried on arguing.

She leaned in close, “Just me and you, tonight?”

Evan looked around, but no one else had heard to wind him up. “Uh- okay.”

“Coming to Illusion, Cera?” Xavier asked her then.

“See you later,” Cera smiled brilliantly at him as she left the Banquet chamber.

Emillia, ever the gossip monger, had evidently heard the conversation. She said to Evan, “Oooh Evan, you'll be double dating with Izekiel and Xavier soon.”

“Why, who’re they going out with?” asked Jed.

“Uh- each other,” Emillia said, like it was obvious.

“What! They’re gay?”

Emi and Elijah frowned at one another. “I thought everyone knew that?”

“They do,” Elijah put in.

“But they don’t look gay. Well, maybe Xavier is a little camp but…” Jed trailed off.

“Well what do you expect them to be doing, skipping down the castle corridors hurling glitter in the air?” Emi giggled.

“Doesn’t bother me,” Evan shrugged.

“Doesn’t bother me either, I’m just surprised. Especially at Zeke,” said Jed.

“Yeah, Evan’s camper than Izekiel,” Brooke quipped.

Evan smiled as he shook his head.

“I can't believe you never knew,” said Emillia. “Next you'll be telling me you didn't know Lyla Storm and Dion Datan are lesbians, or Yusef Mustafa and Shakara Silcorn are Bi.”

Evan and Jed exchanged incredulous looks, obviously he hadn't heard of any of these Venators either.

“Enough gossip, we’ve got Air element?” Brooke took Jed's spoon away mid-mouthful.

“Hey, I 'avn't finished my food yet, woman.”

“Should've got up earlier then,” Brooke replied, pulling Jed and Evan to their feet.

*

The rest of the day was much like any other for Brooke. After lunch she, Emi and Evan headed for Extended Sorcery, whilst Jed went to Earth element with Zeke and Xavier.

As they entered Dragonrock, Brooke noticed Emillia plucking a vial of bright blue liquid from her pocket and gulping it down.

“Aaah, I needed that. Shouldn’t have wasted my sorcery messing around with Elijah.”

“What was it?” Brooke asked.

“Sorcery potion, gives you a boost if you’re drained,” said Emi, “drinking more than one a day has dangerous side-effects though. The Masters only give them out along with health potions for missions.”

“Health potions?” Evan exclaimed.

“Yeah, for Realmers who don’t have healing magic and get wounded. They’re hard to make and our rank aren’t supposed to use them, so don’t tell Elijah.” Emillia grinned. “He’s a right goody-two-shoes.”

For Extended Sorcery, the orcish Master Balzabar had them partner up and take turns conjuring balls of acid. Both Brooke and Evan succeeded in dissolving their rocks, whilst the Silcorn cousins ended up hitting each other and had to have Balzabar rush to heal them before the acid ate away at their skin.

After that, Brooke and Evan split up as he had Fire training and she, Healing.

Brooke set off down the corridors with Emillia as they talked about their lives before Veneseron. Unlike most Venators, Emillia wasn't taken from Earth, but a world named Sarume.

“My sister's had a few missions on Earth and she said Sarume was similar, except for a few differences.”

“Like what?” Brooke asked.

Emil ia explained how all poor people on Sarume were slaves to the rich.

“My sister and I were the slaves,” she said, her eyes downcast. “That's why I'm so happy we were found and taken here.”

“That's terrible.” Brooke hugged Emillia tight.

“It's okay,” Emi’s voice was muffled by Brooke's shoulder. “I'm an ass-kicking demon hunter now.”

“You know you can talk to me anytime, right?”

“Of course,” Emil ia headed down a flight of steps. “I'l see you in the Banquet chamber for dinner.”

It was late afternoon and many other Venators had finished for the day.

Brooke was walking down a deserted passageway when movement caught her eye. She saw two shadows in a secluded corner who appeared to be interlocked. Brooke first thought one of the figures was attacking the other, she moved to see what was happening. Seconds later she gasped in embarrassment.

Two Venators were fiercely intertwined, one of them pinning the other against the wall as they kissed furiously. They stopped and turned as Brooke gasped.

She discerned the silky, ash-blonde hair of Lok and the silver-gold of Lyella.

Brooke’s cheeks flushed as she stammered an apology but Lyella wasn’t embarrassed at all.

“I’ll catch *you* later,” she said to Lok, removing an unruly strand of hair from his eyes.

“Okay babe,” he answered with one of his cheeky grins, watching her as she strutted away. As Lyella turned the corner she shot Brooke a venomous look, filled with more hatred than those before, if that was possible.

“Are you stalking me?” Lok’s eyes twinkled.

“I could say the same about you,” she said.

Lok merely looked at her, grinning.

“So, Lyella's your girlfriend? She acts like she owns you.”

“Lyella? Hmm, yeah you could say that,” he shrugged. “I think it’s just a bit of fun to be honest. Oh, and no one owns me.”

“And do you have *fun* with many of the female Venators here?”

“Naturally. Why, are you in need of some fun yourself, Brooke?” His chocolate brown eyes flickered up and down her body.

Brooke started back up the hallway, “No thanks.”

Lok’s playful laughter followed her down the corridor.

*

After deciding to grab a quick shower before dinner, Brooke redressed and left for the Banquet chamber. On the second-floor landing however, she saw Lyella and her gang at the bottom of the stairs. Arianna Silcorn stood beside Lyella, whimpering as the blonde clenched a fistful of her hair.

Lyella flung Arianna to the ground whilst her gang giggled like goblins. Arianna scurried to her feet and ran away, sobbing.

Molten rage rose in Brooke's stomach.

“Hey! You think you're cool huh, making other girls cry? You think that's something to be proud of?”

“Just something to pass the time whilst we were waiting for you,” Lyella snapped.

Lyella strode up the stairs towards her. “Too many times you've made moves on my man.”

“You need an army to back you up,” Brooke observed, glaring at the three girls converging around her.

Brooke edged away, until the stair banister blocked her exit. She was surrounded on all sides.

270

“I'm not your everyday bitch. There's a reason the other Venators fear me and it's not because I'll mock their fashion sense or any of that inconsequential crap. Now, you’ll do as I say, or I'll ruin you. You can't beat me, so just accept it.”

“No, you're not your everyday bitch, you're the most pathetic one I've ever met,”

she replied.

Lyella's face blanched.

“I warned you, you ugly Glarqing whore,” Lyella snarled.

Brooke ground her teeth together. “Back off.”

Lyella's hand snaked out and snatched her hair, yanking her head down hard.

“Kick her ass, Ly,” Lyella's witches screeched in unison.

Lyella pulled back a fist but Brooke seized a handful of Lyella's hair in turn and shot upwards, head-butting her in the face.

Lyella staggered back, a look of utter surprise on her face as blood squirted from her nose.

Surprise morphed into fury and Lyella flew at her like a hell-cat, throwing Brooke to the floor where they rolled, clawing at each other. Brooke managed to pin Lyella underneath her and wasted no time smacking her across the mouth.

Brooke paused, about to call an end to it when Lyella punched her straight back.

She rolled off Lyella, seizing the banister to pull herself up.

“That's enough,” Brooke said as Lyella stood up.

“No it isn't!”

Lyella launched herself at Brooke, this time ramming her into the banister railing.

Before Brooke knew what was happening Lyella had seized the front of her shirt and purposefully threw her over the banister.

271

As Brooke fell fifteen feet through the air she flung out her arm instinctively to break her fall. She felt the bone break instead, snapping in half at the elbow with an almighty crack.

Blinding pain like never before assailed her. She felt her body go into shock and cried out in agony.

Suddenly, she felt a hand at her elbow and the sensation of healing enveloped her, taking away the immense pain with a cold tingling.

She looked up to see Lok crouching over her, for once no playful glint in his eyes.

“You're helping *her.* What about me?” Lyella screeched.

“It was four against one,” Lok snapped back.

He lifted Brooke to her feet gently. “C'mon.”

“Where are you going?” Lyella raced down the stairs, “we're supposed to be going to the Elfpunk Emporium tonight, baby.”

Lok laughed hollowly. “You think I'm going to a nightclub with you now. Get away from me.”

Brooke saw tears burst from Lyella's eyes, leaking mascara everywhere. She screeched like a demon as Lok led Brooke away.

*

Minutes later, Lok set her down on a bench in one of the courtyards. Silently he laid a hand on her cheek and healed a scratch Brooke hadn't even noticed.

“Thank you,” she rasped, “I don't think Lyella would've stopped at breaking my arm.”

“You don't need to thank me,” Lok replied. “Lyella’s just got…issues.”

He finished his healing and stepped back.

“Why are you with someone like her? Did you know she was that vicious? Not to mention crazy.”

Lok didn't answer. Instead he gazed at her intently.

“We all have our problems, Brooke,” Lok leaned forward and cupped her cheek tenderly, “but I admit, sometimes I wish I was with a girl like you.”

Her breath hitched as her heartbeat skyrocketed.

What do I say? How do I reply to that?

But then Lok spoke on. “I'll deal with Lyella, she won’t attack you again.”

Brooke wanted to talk more, but Lok was already walking off, his expression uncharacteristically grim.

*

After a long day training, Evan finally got to his bedroom to rest. His sorcery felt close to being depleted and his body weak. As he lay on his bed he felt his magic

slowly recharge. The side-effects of using fire element had left his skin cold to the touch, but as his sorcery recharged Evan felt heat return, spreading gradually up through his arms and into his chest.

For the first few weeks of magic training, Evan felt drained of all power for hours, but now he found it was restoring itself faster. He couldn’t wait to move up the ranks, learn newer, more powerful magic, and visit other worlds. Maybe then he'd be able to handle these demons, if they were still after him, which they probably weren’t. Ever since the attack in his room he convinced himself daily that the demons must have given up trying to capture him. *They must have*. Either that, or they realised they were

hunting the wrong person. He was just like any other Venator. Maybe the demons weren’t actually looking for him at all. He hoped so anyway.

Evan was broken out of his reverie by a knock at the door. When he opened the door he was surprised to see Cera on the other side, he’d forgotten they were meeting so soon. His insides instantly started squirming.

“Hey, Mashok,” she said brightly.

“H-hey.”

“So, you ready?”

“Um…yeah,” he said, stepping into the corridor.

“I thought we could go for a walk,” Cera suggested.

“Oh, cool.”

He sounded awkward and he knew it. Cera appeared not to notice, or pretended she didn’t anyway as she led him down the hallways through the castle.

A few Venators passed them as they wandered, and a couple of brownies had broken in. They scuttled past, laughing mischievously as they looked for something to steal. Evan was fascinated when they walked past one Venator speaking to a hologram. He’d heard that when Realmers were on long missions

they sometimes got to talk to their friends in hologram form.

Soon they were outside and walking beneath a grim sky which had started to spit raindrops. The water felt pleasant and refreshing on Evan’s skin as he watched Venators training.

Tyrell, as ever, was busy educating Novices in weaponry. Evan thought Tyrell was probably the best swordsman Veneseron had. Urkzal was training a large group of Indian Venators and Evan spotted Sintian amidst a cluster of Realmers who looked as

shifty as him. Luckily Sintian didn't see them, he was staring at his own hand as he conjured then extinguished small blue flames, then repeated the process.

Several other creatures were out and about the Fortress, climbing the castle walls, playing in the courtyards or lying amongst the long grass of the fields as Cera led Evan through them.

“They’re adorable, aren’t they,” she gestured to a group of fairies fluttering about the head of a pixie, teaming up to lift off his hat and fly away with it.

“Yeah,” Evan replied. *Just like you*, he wanted to say, but didn't have the courage.

The wind picked up, causing raindrops to swirl around them. The rain beat down harder, soaking their skin, and drenching their Novice uniforms. Evan considered suggesting they should go back inside, but found he liked spending time alone with her too much.

Other Realmers began to desert the area because of the weather. Until the only other people were the group of Mid-Realmers playing fetch with the dog-like Droges.

He found his eyes wandering to Cera more and more, he couldn’t help himself. Her hair was an ebony river as it fell across her face, dripping at the ends. Tiny rain drops had settled on her face, like transparent freckles, and her eyes were the brightest shade of emerald.

“I heard your parents abandoned you when you were born?” She asked suddenly.

“Sorry to pry, it's something Jed mentioned, if you don't want to talk-”

“No, it's fine,” Evan said, “my Gran raised me, not my real Gran, but to me she was both my mother and father.”

“How did she die?”

“Just old age, she was ninety-three. I wish I'd been a Venator when I found her, I could’ve brought her back,” he said bitterly.

“No Evan, sorcery can’t bring people back from death, or stop death from natural causes. We can heal, even from the brink of death if we’re really powerful, but not if the person is already dead.”

Evan nodded miserably.

“Haven't you ever wondered about your real parents?”

“I don’t care who my parents are, whoever deserts a baby in the forest is nothing more than a monster,” he replied vehemently.

“There could've been a good reason.”

“I don’t think so, my Grandmother said I would’ve died if she hadn’t found me.”

“You’re right. I just can’t wrap my head around why someone would leave a baby without really good reason.”

“What about your parents? Your father seems, uh, nice.”

Cera laughed, “He’s strict but I’ve seen him smile before, once or twice. He puts a lot of pressure on me. Both he and my mother are great Venators. When I couldn’t do magic for so long my mother was really worried, father was incensed. It would’ve been the worst thing in the world to him if I didn't have any sorcery.” Her laughter had long faded by now.

“I thought there were lots of Realmers without magical relatives,” said Evan,

trying in part to distract Cera from her sadness.

“Yes. It’s quite common to be a Realmer and have ordinary parents, but it’s almost guaranteed a child of a Realmer will have sorcery,” she replied. “If you’re born into an old Venator family like I was, the chances of having magic are even higher. It’s not right for someone like me to not possess any sorcery at all!”

276

The torment of what Cera had gone through, believing she was magically barren, was etched clearly on her face. Evan could tell by her expression how much fury, sadness and desperation she must’ve felt. It was almost like she was reliving it now.

She took a deep breath and steeled herself. “I, uh…The day I used magic for the first time was the happiest I’ve ever seen my Father.”

“That must’ve been rough. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“It’s okay, everything’s better now. Father still pushes me hard. Makes sure I’m doing as much training as I can. Tells me I'll need to do well on missions when they come. He thinks I should be a Mid-Realmer already, that I’m taking too long to move up the ranks.”

“You should tell him to lay off you,” Evan bristled.

Cera smiled then. “Go on then, you tell him.”

“Yeah, I see your point.”

“He’s not that bad, just expects a lot, you know.”

“My grandmother was a little like that, she loved reading my stories. I remember her telling everyone she met how talented her Grandson was.”

Cera laughed, “She sounds great.”

“She was,” Evan replied, “she never had children, or a husband, so in a way I was the only family she ever had. I’m glad I was able to be that to her before she passed.”

As they entered the forest the rain instead fell on the canopy of silver leaves above, pattering gently and putting him at ease.

The ground was dry here, protected by its natural ceiling.

“I come here a lot,” said Cera as she sat down, gazing at the creatures moving on the outskirts of their cosy little clearing.

277

Evan tore his eyes away from her to see the magical beings gallivanting through the undergrowth; besides them, he and Cera were alone.

The trees provided temporary shelter from the wet, but the wind followed them in, howling as it rifled through their hair.

“I sit alone for hours sometimes.”

Their eyes met for a long time before Evan realised and looked away hurriedly,

“Er- do you want me to leave then?”

“What?” she giggled.

“You said you like being here, alone,” Evan explained, feeling like the biggest idiot in the world. *I don’t want to go! Why did I say I wanted to go?*

“Oh Evan, you’re so cute.” Cera’s lips widened into a smile that made his heart leap.

Before he knew what was happening, Cera leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. He blinked in disbelief.

“And you don’t even know it, do you?” she giggled again.

This time Evan leaned in, surprising himself. *What am I doing?* He pulled his head away from her as soon as he realised what he’d done.

He was about to open his mouth to say sorry when their eyes met again. All Evan knew was that he needed to kiss her again. Suddenly Cera’s mouth was on his. The feel of her soft, warm lips was amazing. She clutched at the back of his

head, grasping his wet hair. Her skin felt electric when his fingertips grazed her lower back. Cera's grip on his hair tightened.

Dimly, Evan was aware of the sky growling above them, the rain must be foreshadowing a storm. *What!* What was he doing thinking about the weather when his lips were locked upon Cera's.

278

The wind howled vociferously, the rain smashing down so hard it broke their leafy canopy. The ice-cold rain descended around them, whilst the wind howled, louder than before. The sky growled again and this time Evan broke contact, his head snapping back as he realised the sky hadn't growled at all.

Hideous parodies of humanity dropped from the trees above, edging toward them and growling in hunger.

The demons had come back for him at last.

Chapter 19- Strike Three

"RUN!" he roared, pushing Cera away, caring more for her safety than his.

"They've come for me not you. Get back to the Fortress."

Evan leapt to his feet, seizing Ruaden's hilt frantically, horror-struck at the demons emerging from all sides.

There were five of them!

A gigantic yellow scorpion with three near-human heads fixed haphazardly around it. A cobalt wolverine creature, with elongated spikes all along its spine. A grotesque mass of pulsating, blubbery skin made up the next horrific creature, like a terribly obese man, warped by chaos. A long serpent demon slithered, its lower body a snake but its upper bearing four arms and six wolf heads. A tall purple devil emerged last, his body humanly muscled, but with bat-like wings and scarlet horns on his head.

The devil smiled wickedly, revealing black fangs dripping green saliva.

The wonderful sensation Evan felt seconds before was ruthlessly ripped away.

Replaced by an almost paralysing coldness which consumed him; threatening to smash his mind apart. His eyes were seeing what his mind struggled to comprehend.

Creatures like this shouldn't exist, they couldn't exist.

The devil spoke in a sibilant but guttural language Evan didn't understand. He figured the meaning when the other demons shambled, loped, or slithered closer.

"Cera," Evan whispered, his urge to protect and get her away overriding his own fear. "Please," he begged, "run, before they attack."

But Cera wouldn't, or couldn't move, she sat frozen, her eyes locked on the pus-oozing demon closest to her.

The devil hissed a second command and the demons charged.

Evan's sorcery, already at the surface, broke through as they raced towards him. He left his feet in an inhuman leap and streaked towards the yellow scorpion, his emerald sword carving down and slashing through its middle head, cleaving it in half. Black blood streamed out, splattering Evan's face. The scorpion screamed, scuttling to the side as its ichors spat out of the newly created orifice.

The wolverine-demon pounced at Cera. Evan flung Ruaden with all his might. Just before the beast clamped its jaws down on Cera's leg, Ruaden plunged into its eye.

The demon rolled away, howling like a banshee, clawing to remove the magical crystal piercing its head.

Evan ran to stand in front of Cera as he faced the monsters down.

"It's me you want," he rasped, blue flames crackling inside his fist. It doubled in size as he raised his arm above his head. He saw the devil's gaze follow it.

The devil's lipless gash of a mouth widened as he uttered another command.

280

The three uninjured demons attacked simultaneously, the snake striking for Cera whilst the oozing bulk and the purple devil came at Evan from either side.

Evan span, throwing his handful of flames, scorching the devil's face and causing him to reel back in agony, but then Evan was seized from behind by two gelatinous arms.

He used magic to electrify his body but the enormous demon just laughed, apparently immune to his magic. Evan snarled, mad with panic to get free and protect Cera. He elongated the nails of one hand to daggers and struck deep into the flabby arms that bound him. This time the demon dropped Evan, hollering in rage. Evan twisted wildly, slashing with his claws, ripping up the length of the giant's chest.

Evan looked back to Cera but she was saving herself. As the six armed snake lunged she conjured a ball of electricity that scorched its scales and sent it sprawling.

Cera screamed as she sent energy blast after energy blast at the writhing snake until it was no more than a sticky mess.

The fat demon clobbered Evan whilst he was watching and sent him crashing to the floor. He tried to get back up, but was pinned by two heavy paws as the wolverine returned.

The beast roared, Ruaden still impaled in its eye and blue blood running down its snout. Its massive maw was wide open, intending to snap down on Evan's head. His hands shot out just in time. The demon's putrid slobber roped down off its fangs, coating Evan's arms as he struggled against it. The beast yelped as Evan's hands flared into flames again. Evan used all his power to send fire down the monster's gullet. The cobalt demon blazed into a fierce inferno, and in seconds turned to ash, only the stench of burned flesh giving sign it had ever existed.

281

Before Evan could retrieve Ruaden from atop the demonic ash-pile, he was seized by the devil. But Evan was frenzied, as the demon lifted him he used the

momentum to head-butt the devil brutally, a split second beforehand using Anatomy magic to make his head hard as steel. A strident snap of shattering bone and the devil released him with a shriek. Evan used an energy bolt next to propel the devil back, off into the trees.

The sound of breaking glass struck out amidst the chaos. Evan turned to see Cera had attempted to encase the fat demon in a prison of ice, but the demon was too strong and broke free. The revolting monster seized Cera now and threw her to the floor.

Evan surged forwards, fully intending to obliterate the demon, but as he moved his leg buckled with a sick squelch. He looked down and turned cold. The now two-headed scorpion had returned and its giant stinger was imbedded in Evan’s calf.

Screaming, Evan swiped with his clawed hands and severed the scorpion's tail.

The monster writhed away, but its stinger was still lodged in Evan’s flesh.

Fighting unbearable agony, Evan lurched towards the giant who leaned over an unconscious Cera.

Just as he summoned the sorcery to send this demon back to hell, his leg gave out and the demon whirled at his outcry, smashing its colossal arm against his skull.

Evan’s world blurred as he bounced against the ground. It felt like his cranium had cracked in half. Dimly he held on to consciousness, trying to grope blindly to his feet.

It was impossible, his leg was on fire and his head was as heavy as lead. Every bone in his body felt broken and his sorcery was almost drained. He was useless, helpless to save Cera, to save himself.

He heard the fat demon’s bellowing laughter as he picked up the motionless Cera.

This was it, *he's going to kill her in front of me.* Faintly, amidst his anger and despair,

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Evan was aware of something building within. The feeling was as alien to him as magic had first been. But this wasn’t the sorcery he was used to; it was something *more*. He couldn’t control it, it didn’t feel right.

His body convulsed, every limb trembling violently. Evan must’ve been imagining it, but he thought he saw a thin black mist seep from his fingertips, like soft ebony veils. They curled sinuously as the demon continued his frenzied laughter. The midnight torrent rose, snaking around the monster’s feet. Then they evaporated so suddenly Evan thought he'd imagined it all.

As the giant opened its slime ridden mouth to devour Cera, a fleeting white blur flickered into being. Two slender arms whipped out, seizing the giant’s head.

The demon’s skin parted sickeningly at the neck. The stranger then ripped the giant’s malformed head straight off its gelatinous excuse of a body.

Midnight blood gushed out of the headless form like a fountain as its many folds of flesh melted to the ground.

As Evan stared, he realised the stranger could only be the Arantay he'd heard so much about. Arantay soared across the clearing to combat the writhing scorpion demon.

The scorpion reared up to its full height, keening abysmally. Arantay didn't break his stride. His hand plunged straight through the demon’s chest, smashing the exoskeleton and grasping the heart within. With a ruthless wrench he pulled out the still beating black heart. The demon crumpled, lifeless.

Arantay looked about wearily, searching for any remaining life.

He found it in the purple devil lumbering back into clearing.

The devil froze when he saw Evan’s unlikely ally and with another hiss turned and fled. Before he got far Arantay was back in the air, landing on the devil and pinning him to the ground. The demon struggled but with one punch Arantay put him to sleep.

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It was over.

“Arantay!”

Evan was able to lift his bloody head an inch above the ground to see Tarensen run into the clearing, his pale eyes glaring, taking in the gory surroundings.

Arantay turned to him, hefting up the unconscious devil as he did so.

“Are they all dead?” Tarensen stormed, immediately tending to the motionless Cera and checking her pulse.

“I left one for questioning,” Arantay gestured to the devil.

“Thank Rueda, you’ve done well, Arantay. If it wasn’t for you…” Tarensen trailed off.

Tarensen moved towards him and Evan gasped as, without a word, Tarensen seized the stinger in his leg and yanked it out. Pain seared all along his calf. A second later the agony was soothed as Tarensen channelled his magic to heal the wound. He then moved his hands to Evan’s head, stemming the blood flow and knitting the skin back together. Feeling better physically but still scarred mentally, Evan looked for Cera who was also stirring after being healed.

Tarensen was breathing hard, barely controlling his rage.

“Arantay, take that vermin to my quarters with Cera and Evan. I shall join you shortly.”

“Where are you going?” Arantay asked.

Tarensen unsheathed the boomerang-like weapon at his back. “I sensed demonic activity and hurried here as soon as I could. Someone opened a portal in this very forest.” He looked positively menacing. “I will meet you in my chambers,” Tarensen repeated, ending the conversation as he ran into the trees.

“Come,” Arantay motioned to them, who looked at each other, nonplussed. Tears had slid down Cera’s cheeks, causing clear tracks amongst the filth and dried

blood coating her face.

Evan was in no better a state, his Novice attire was black with demon blood, and his own blood crusted the back of his head and leg.

Despite his helplessness towards the end, where he would've failed to save Cera if not for Arantay, a strange feeling couldn't help but shine through. He thought back to when he wrote tales of Alwar and how he'd emulated him moments before, instinctively acting courageously to save someone else.

Unlike Alwar, he just hadn't been good enough. *But I will be*, he gritted his teeth, next time he wouldn't fail. He knew he was strong enough now to fight the creatures that plagued him. He would train harder and get stronger. He would never let anything like this ever happen again.

He wanted desperately to promise Cera he'd be able to protect her if this ever happened again, but he couldn't find his voice. In the back of his mind was the horrible feeling she'd blame him for what happened. After all it was his fault. Evan would rather she didn't speak to him at all than that.

They walked in shocked silence back to the Fortress, Arantay apparently the only one unfazed. Evan supposed he must be used to it by now, always encountering demons on missions, it was probably second nature dispatching them.

Arantay walked behind them, carrying the devil as if it was weightless.

The wind still howled around them, tossing their hair about wildly as rain splashed their faces, washing the worst of the blood and dirt away.

"I don't blame you, Evan." Cera said softly as they entered the Master's Citadel.

Evan felt a huge weight lift away, but it was far from making everything better again.

"Thank you, I just wish you hadn't been with me when it happened."

"Don't be stupid, if you'd been on your own you would've been killed or

captured and taken to their realm. I don’t know which would be worse.”

“Better me than both of us,” he returned.

Before Cera could reply, Padrake ran across the hall towards them, followed by Taretta.

“Oh in Rueda's name,” he gasped, “are you all okay?”

They nodded mutely. Evan noticed the usual smile had slipped off Padrake’s face, replaced by an unnatural death stare focused on the devil.

“Tarensen’s quarters?” he asked curtly. Arantay nodded.

Taretta rushed towards Cera, double checking she was healed properly, then moved on to Evan, her face creased to a worried frown. Evan was feeling the consequences of his fire spells, his body shivering uncontrollably, but otherwise he was fine.

Padrake led them to Tarensen’s study where Arantay propped the devil against the wall.

Padrake leaned over the demon. He placed one hand on the monster’s head, then clicked his fingers. The devil grunted, his grotesque head rising off its chest to glare at them all. Padrake swished his hand again and Evan knew he'd bound the fiend with cords of air as he immediately tensed.

Arantay leaned against the wall opposite, crimson eyes smouldering, while Taretta and Cera sat on the wooden chairs. Evan remained standing, watching Padrake as he communicated with the demon.

Padrake weaved a complex spell which enabled them to understand the devil’s guttural language.

“Release me, Venator.” Black fangs worked at the lipless gash.

“Who sent you here?” Padrake demanded.

The devil hissed repulsively. “Foolish Venators. You think I will tell on my Master, he would slaughter me.”

“We will kill you, demon,” Padrake spoke in a dangerous tone. Evan was taken aback by how uncharacteristic it was.

The devil sniggered. “Yes. You will kill me either way. I am already dead. My master can torture me for a thousand years; rip my soul apart strand by strand. Death by him, when it comes, will be a mercy.”

“You think we cannot torture you?” Padrake whispered.

The door burst open, nearly snapping off its hinges as Tarensen entered.

Evan moved out of his path, Tarensen looked more terrifying than any demon.

Within two strides Tarensen had walked towards the demon, unsheathed his weapon and slashed down, hacking off the devil’s leg.

The devil howled as gore gushed out in a red spray.

“Tarensen, the Novices,” Tarretta exclaimed.

“They’ll see worse,” Tarensen snarled. “Who sent you, monster? Who let you inside this realm?”

The fiend whimpered, blood pumping out of his stump and soaking the carpet.

“Soon my master shall be more powerful than even Akirandon,” he hissed, “you Venator fools will be the first to perish. My master will resurrect Ezanathul himself.”

“Tell me your master’s name,” Tarensen ordered.

“He will punish me for that,” the devil said, grinning through his pain, “and you cannot do anything to me that he cannot do tenfold.”

“Is that so?” Tarensen’s hand distorted to a rotting, dead thing.

The demon’s eyes bulged as Tarensen seized his forehead. The screams he emitted now were a hundred times worse then when his leg was severed.

“Who is it?” Tarensen rasped again.

“KURRLAN.” The devil screamed, unable to endure the immense pain.

Although Tarensen took his hand away, the devil’s pain didn't stop.

Evan had to cover his ears the cacophony was so heinous.

Tarensen looked confused.

“He has found me,” the devil shrieked once before exploding, showering the room and all its occupants with lumps of flesh and innards.

“Ushk!” Tarensen roared, smashing his fist on the desk and snapping it in half, “his Master destroyed him, I needed more information.”

“He screamed a name,” Taretta contradicted.

Padrake waved his hand, immediately cleaning the room, and everyone else, of the gory mess.

“Kurrlan,” Tarensen nodded grimly.

“Do we know him?” Arantay asked.

“No. This brings us no closer to stopping these attacks. Where the hell is Vanderain?”

Even Tarensen had admitted there may be more demon attacks. Evan couldn’t let that happen because of him. Because of him, Cera could’ve died.

“Tarensen,” he called out, “I-I think I should go.”

“Go where?”

“Away from here, back to Earth. Or maybe to one of the other Realmer

strongholds. I've been attacked twice already. It's a danger to everyone the longer I stay here. I couldn't bear it if someone was killed because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Don't be stupid, boy." said Tarensen. "Admirable sentiment, Umbra, but impossible. They will find you wherever you go. You cannot escape them. Veneseron is the safest place for you in all the realms. Especially once Vanderain returns."

"But he's not here now, is he? He hasn't been since I arrived." Evan argued.

"He will be soon," Tarensen replied fiercely.

Evan fell silent, not wishing to raise the Master's ire. He wished Vanderain truly would return. Knowing demons could come back for him again was too much to take.

Tarensen inhaled heavily before giving out his commands. "Taretta, tell Elorian to track down Vanderain. You said last time he contacted you he was on Eventyre. Tell Elorian to search there first, ask around, someone must have heard a whisper to his whereabouts."

Taretta nodded and left the chamber.

"Padrake, inform Master Li-Azar he is to scour the demon realms and find any information about this Kurrlan. Whoever he is, he's interfering with Veneseron and endangering our Venators. I'll station city paladins at every door of each castle."

"I will," Padrake bowed before leaving, striding purposefully in place of his normal jaunty gait.

Arantay stepped forward.

"No Arantay, you are ideally placed in the forest. If the demons are gaining access that way you'll be first on the scene. You're more than able to handle yourself if the situation arises. Alert your family and the other elves, we all need to be on our guard."

Arantay conceded reluctantly, but then left the room also.

Tarensen turned to them at last. “I shall inform Urkzul that all Venators from this moment on will need to be equipped with their enchanted weapons at all times. We can’t take any chances. Umbra, you are to go nowhere alone. I shall notify all the instructors to keep a close eye on you. I want you to keep inside the Fortress too, no city, beach or forest trips.”

“Yes, Sir,” Evan replied grimly.

I might as well go down to the forest now than risk anyone else being attacked just for being near me. What if they decided to come when I’m eating in the Banquet chamber, or training in the courtyard? There’d be too many casualties.

“Come,” Tarensen finished, “I’ll escort you to your room.”

It was a ghostly, silent walk back to Castle-Coterie. The only light outside came from the glittering walls of the Fortress itself, the triplet moons obscured by bruised clouds as rain smashed down ceaselessly.

Evan bid an awkward farewell to Cera as they entered the castle, thinking how their goodbye would have been different if demons had never attacked. Kissing Cera was one of the few good things that'd happened to him throughout his life, and even that had been ruined.

Tarensen walked him to his door and checked Evan’s room thoroughly.

“Um,” Evan said fretfully, “who’s Ezanathul? Only I heard the devil mention his name.”

“That was gibberish,” Tarensen replied, refusing to divulge further as he left.

Evan entered his room anxiously, half expecting another monster to jump out at him.

Before, it'd been bullies hunting him. Now, it was demons. But he loved living at Veneseron. On Earth he'd never fit in. Here he at least had a place, a home. But what could he do now? It was agonising to simply sit and wait for another attack.

Evan couldn’t get images of the grotesque demons out of his mind, no matter how hard he tried. He didn’t have the power to leave, to find them on his own and sacrifice himself, and was he really brave enough to do that? It was inevitable, it was horrible, but he couldn’t do anything about it.

Eventually, after hours of brooding and struggling against his own mind, he fell into a fitful sleep, plagued by nightmares.

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By the following morning, the storm had grown silent and the sky was once again an unblemished ocean of blue. At first light Evan was in the Archives, scouring the aisles. If Tarensen and the other Masters weren't going to give him any answers, he'd find them himself.

Setting himself the task also distracted Evan from his paranoia. He couldn’t take putting anyone else in danger.

It took two hours rifling through the demon section, but finally Evan found what he was looking for in a demon history book for Mid-Realmer level Venators: **Millennia ago there was a demon god named Ezanathul, also known as World killer. When Ezanathul was alive he was the biggest threat to the existence of all the realms, unlike any other. He rebelled against the other gods and tried to enslave all the realms to his will. Ezanathul destroyed billions of lives and wiped**

out whole races and realms. After much struggle and strife, the other gods banded together and ultimately sacrificed their own lives to destroy Ezanathul and put an end to his reign of horror.

Evan almost dropped the heavy book on the floor as he remembered the demon-devil’s words. He’d claimed Kurrlan was trying to resurrect this god, or at least thought it was possible.

But why the hell does he want me? Can you resurrect something if it’s been dead for thousands of years, even if it was a god?

Hundreds of questions raced through his mind, but more than anything, anxiety

and dread threatened to consume him.

*

For the next week, Evan was jumping at the slightest of sounds. His hand was straying to Ruaden whenever a shadow flickered nearby.

His mind was swollen with a paranoia that infected his every waking hour and even tormented his sleep.

Wherever he went, Evan felt he was being watched by demonic eyes. He'd always had a vivid imagination, leading him to write stories about flawless heroes who could combat any foe, no matter how terrible. But this was different, this was real. He wasn't flawless, Evan was hardly a hero, and he knew the foes hunting him could easily kill him, or worse.

It wasn't just Evan who was paranoid. Everyone in Veneseron had discovered what had happened to him and Cera. They either came up to him grimly, voicing

encouragement and telling him how brave he'd been, or they avoided him at all costs; probably in case of another attack. Evan didn't blame them. He was surprised his friends stuck by him at all. Jed even made light of the situation once Evan told him the details.

"You and Cera kissed!"

"Well yeah, but it's the demons I'm concerned about at the moment."

"Yeah, but at least beforehand you got a slice of Cera action eh," Jed winked.

Evan didn't smile back, reflecting on how close she'd come to death because of him.

Why?

The thought reverberated through his head relentlessly.

Why are demons hunting me?

He was exactly the same as everyone else, well, every other Venator.

Finally Evan decided what he had to do. He couldn't keep them all in the dark any longer.

Three anxiety ridden days after the attack, Evan found Elijah and Jed before training and asked them to gather all of their friends, and Cera too. Cera he was dreading most of all.

Elijah and Jed both agreed, but also asked why.

“I'll tell you tonight, all of you, we'll meet in the Archives this evening, yeah?”

*

“Av it!” Jed cried, bowling his Ogre eye and hitting a strike.

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“I win, in your face,” he laughed at Emillia, ducking seconds later when she launched her Ogre eye at his head.

They were in one of the many rec rooms of the Fortress. The TV was airing a dating show where a Hobgoblin and a Banshee had just won a holiday to the world of Bealurn, where it was always sunny. The Banshee had been screaming in happiness for five minutes now.

“So Brooke, you're saying this Lyella is single now?”

Brooke glared at him.

“Oh…er yeah, because what I was going to say… is it doesn't matter how hot she is, I wouldn’t touch her with a barge pole.”

“I'm so sorry about her, Brooke.” Emillia hadn't stopped apologising since Brooke had told them about the fight.

“It's not your fault,” Brooke reiterated, “you can't choose who your siblings are.

Let's just hope vicious attacks don't run in the family.”

“I dunno',” Jed smirked, “you two are welcome to mud wrestle one another anytime you want.”

The girls ignored him.

“Lyella went too far,” said Emillia, “are you going to tell the Masters?”

Brooke shook her head. “There's no proof, she'd probably find a way to get out of it. But if I hear she's tried bullying another girl I'll make sure she gets punished.”

“Be careful,” Emillia warned, “my sister will take you down with her if it comes to that.”

“Yeah, she's a right Bliak,” Xavier chipped in.

“Bliak?” Jed asked.

“A female Taeny troll, the ugliest type of troll there is,” Xavier said.

“We've got bigger things to worry about,” said Brooke, “both Evan and Cera could've died in that attack.”

“Yeah and Evan's not handling it too well, poor lad,” said Jed.

“We'll just have to make sure we're there for him,” Brooke said.

Jed didn't want to let on how worried he was about Evan. He wished the demons were after him instead, better yet, Jed wished the demons would just leave Evan alone for good.

Last night he and Brooke had promised each other they'd be there if, or when, the demons attacked again. Evan shouldn’t have to face them alone.

Jed turned to take a swig of his Fiznizz, (a gnomish juice full of vitamins,) only to see the bottle flying out of the door instead, being stolen by two fairies.

“OI!”

Ignoring Emillia’s and Brooke's giggles, he slumped down on the sofa opposite Zeke and Xavier.

“Here, take my Mavla,” Xavier offered.

“Really? Thanks dude.”

Jed took Xavier's glass and drank eagerly. Seconds later he gagged.

“Eurrgh. Is this… vinegar?”

Everybody roared with laughter as Jed spluttered, realising too late Xavier had used illusion magic to make vinegar resemble Mavla.

“I'll get you back for that,” said Jed. “You don't know what you just started.”

“Oh it's on.” Xavier grinned.

Izekiel and Xavier returned to the books they'd been reading as Emillia continued to chuckle.

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Zeke was reading a comic with the pictures full of blood and gore, whilst Xavier was reading a romance novel named, “*Bryan and Boris: two trolls against the world*.”

A purple and gold scaled Droge was curled up on the sofa in-between them, its head on Zeke’s lap. The Dog-dragon growled pleasurably as Zeke tickled its chin.

Xavier frowned and pulled a glowing object from his pocket as it emitted a loud beeping noise.

“Wha… is that a cell phone?” Brooke asked, amazed.

“Uh huh,” Xavier pushed a button to stop the beeping.

“I didn't know we could have them? How do they work?” She asked excitedly.

“Oh, you have to buy these special ones in the city,” Xavier replied, “they can

only pick up signals in this realm, handy to text mates though. Venators used to use scrying mirrors to communicate, and some still do, but most use phones.”

“Jed,” Brooke turned and hit him in the arm, “as soon as we can, you, Evan and I need to get these phones and exchange numbers. It'd be so cool. God, I've missed texting.”

Xavier snorted in derision as he read his latest text. “It’s not that cool when you've got an orc stalker who won’t leave you alone. I told her she wasn't my type, but I guess she didn't get it. Maybe I should let her know she's not my preferred species *or* gender.”

“Or, you could just tell her you're already taken,” Zeke interrupted moodily, causing everyone to laugh.

“I can't believe I didn't know you two were gay,” Jed remarked.

“Well I don't blame you with Zeke.” Xavier popped his phone away. “He never even told his parents. I thought you'd have sussed me out though.”

“How come you didn't tell them?”

“Wasn't close to them,” Izekiel mumbled, burying his head in his comic, “at all.

There’d be no point either. I was in breach of the Yurod religion.”

“When I told my dad he kicked me out of the house,” Xavier said.

“That's horrible,” Brooke exclaimed.

“Oh it's alright. The Venators found me a couple of months later.” Xavier smiled, but there was no humour in his eyes. Being thrown on the streets by his own father must've been hell.

Just then Elijah poked his head round the door,

“C'mon, Evan wants to meet us in Archives now.”

“What for?” Emillia asked as they set off.

Jed shrugged, although he thought he knew.

*

Too soon the twin suns sank below the city's tallest towers and darkness encroached. After his Water element training, Evan hurried to the Archives and waited for his friends to arrive.

Zeke and Xavier emerged first, quickly followed by Jed, Emillia and Brooke. Jed and Emillia were engaged in conversation, but Brooke stared at Evan thoughtfully.

Last to arrive was Elijah with Cera in toe, Evan's stomach knotted painfully.

“So what's this about then, mate?” Jed asked, sitting on a book as large as an armchair. There were several giant tomes in the Archives, originating from the realms of trolls or ogres, but certain Venators merely used them as seats.

Jed smiled as he asked, but concern filled his eyes.

Evan swallowed hard before gathering his courage.

“Look, everyone I've been… I've been hiding something from you.”

“Is it that you like guys?” Xavier grinned.

“Uh, if he does it'll be me he's attracted too,” Jed joked.

“What is it, Evan?” Brooke asked seriously.

Evan took a deep breath, “Th…there’s someone, or rather a demon of some kind, that's after me. I think he's the one sending all these minions to try and capture me.”

There was a long silence.

It was broken surprisingly by Izekiel, “Yeah, we know. Well, we kinda' guessed after you and Cera were attacked. I mean that's the second time demons have managed to break into the Fortress and both times they went after you.”

“Yeah, it wasn't hard to put two and two together, mate.” Jed smiled.

Evan was shocked, “But… but how come you're all still hanging out with me, why aren't you staying away? Any time you're near me you're in danger, more demons could come and hurt you, kill you.”

“It's what we've been trained for,” Elijah shrugged. “We have to deal with demons, even if they are terrifying.”

“Besides,” Brooke added, “what kind of people would we be if we stopped being friends with someone just because he was being hunted by demons?”

“Probably normal ones,” interjected Jed.

“We’ve got your back, Evan,” Brooke promised.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Evan was in awe, he'd never met one person, let alone a group of people, who’d put their own lives in danger for *him*.

But he couldn't let them.

“But it's my fault, the demons want me, not you guys, if anyone got hurt because of me I'd…”

“It's not your fault dude,” said Jed, “you didn't ask to be a magnet for monsters and all that other evil crap.”

“Well actually, we sort of all do by training to fight them,” Elijah laughed.

“Is there anything else?” Cera spoke up, “do you know anything that can help us sort this mess out?”

“Well,” Evan struggled, overwhelmed with emotion, “there's a name, I tried tracking it down in the Archives but, no luck.”

“A demon name?” asked Xavier.

“I think so, Kurrlan it was.”

“No way,” Emillia shouted.

Everyone looked at her blankly.

“I know that name, I saw it in a book just a couple of days ago.”

“Out of all of us, I’d never guess *you’ d* be the one to know something,” Xavier exclaimed.

“What, why?”

“Because, you know I love you, Emi, but you're dumber than a box of Imps. No offence,” Xavier put lightly.

Emillia gasped, “Offence taken you…you…”

“Let me know when you think of a good insult,” Xavier snorted.

“Pompous swat?” Zeke offered in his deep baritone.

“Hey, you're supposed to be on my side.” Xavier looked affronted.

“What book?” Brooke said.

“Erm, well I don't remember,” Emillia struggled, “it was big and had a really long name.”

“That helps.” Jed raised an eyebrow.

Emi's face lit up, “I know which section I found it in though.”

“Lead the way,” Elijah said.

All eight of them followed the ditsy blonde as she hurried through the many bookshelves, Evan praying they found something useful.

Fortunately Emillia discovered the tome in question within minutes. It was hard

to miss, considering how large it was.

Emillia picked it up with effort and placed it on one of the nearby tables. The book was ancient, it's cover originally black but had started to grey.

The title read: **The Most Powerful and Influential Figures in Demon History.**

Evan stared at it curiously, could this book finally hold some answers?

“It was about three quarters into the book.” Emillia flicked through the pages. “I remembered because some of the demons have pictures too, really gross ones.”

“There,” Brooke pointed to a particular page.

Evan bent down hastily to read the small passage, nerves mounting: **The Dread Lord Kurrlan: A demon Dread Lord who fought in the Great War of the Realms. Kurrlan served as a minor lieutenant to the High Queen Akirandon. Akirandon was Ezanathul’s right hand and is now the ruler of Velkarath, domain of the Dark-Venators. Not much is known of Kurrlan, save he faded into obscurity after the dark god was defeated.**

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So Kurrlan was indeed a Dread Lord. Fear ripped at Evan's stomach and nausea slid up his throat. If this Kurrlan was after him he didn't stand a chance, not against the most powerful type of demon. There was no more information, not even a picture like other demons in the book had. Not that Evan had expected the book to tell him exactly why an evil monster kept sending his minions to capture him.

“Akirandon?” Zeke whispered. “Gettelung said she's the reason Dark-Venators exist and why they always try and sabotage our missions.”

Emillia shuddered.

“But it says Kurrlan hasn't served Akirandon for ages,” Jed pointed out. “He must be working alone to get Evan, but we still don't know why.”

“Hmm, could be worse,” Xavier offered, attempting to lighten the mood. “At least this Ezanathul doesn't want a piece of you too.”

“Yeah, good thing the god dude’s long dead,” said Jed.

“What about the man who tried to strangle you?” Cera asked. “Do you think he’s working for Kurrlan, too?”

Evan shrugged, lost for words.

“Try not to worry.” Elijah looked at him seriously. “The Masters have dealt with Dread Lords before. Only Arch-Realmers get given missions where they have to face them, but still, we know they can be defeated.”

Evan nodded. *Perhaps I'm going into shock.* He felt both hot and cold at once.

Seeing it written down made everything more real somehow. At the back of his mind he'd hoped, prayed, that the demon attacks had just been a coincidence. He knew now there was no way they could be.

“I'm-er, fine. I think I'll just go to bed early. Training really wore me out today.”

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He left the Archives chamber without another word, aware his friends were staring after him.

Evan escaped to his bedroom, making sure to set the seal on his door. After the first demon attack, he’d looked through the Archives books for anything that could help him. It wasn’t until recently that he’d discovered a spell which would alert him to anyone entering his room. He’d been laying the spell by his door every night for the past two weeks.

He knew it wasn’t necessary, he had the orc guards and the Masters were on high alert, but Evan felt safer with his own spell there too.

He climbed into bed, relieved that his friends were willing to stand by him, but still feeling rotten that he was the reason everyone was in danger. He thought he’d be too agitated to sleep, but less than an hour later he felt himself drifting off.

*

Evan awoke to utter darkness. His first thought was he awoke because it was too hot… until he realised it was because he couldn't breathe.

As he sat up, alarm turned to abject terror as he saw the white hooded stranger creeping towards him.

The stranger's face was covered by his hood, but his outstretched hand was visible as it worked the spell cutting off Evan's air supply.

Spluttering and choking, Evan stupidly tried to pull the invisible vice off his throat, until he came to his senses and flung an energy bolt at his attacker.

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The stranger stumbled as the spell hit him and Evan could immediately breathe again. He seized Ruaden by his bed and was about to swing at the stranger when the hood was pulled back and Evan saw who was beneath.

"Jed?"

Evan's best friend grinned back at him. Not his usual mischievous grin, but a smile that made him look maniacal.

"Ah, I was hoping I wouldn't be discovered until I'd delivered you to my Lord. Oh well, it might be more fun this way."

Evan just looked at him. He had to be dreaming, this wasn't real life.

"Jed, what are you… why are you pretending to be… you were strangling me."

Evan struggled to speak as his mind tried not to collapse.

Jed continued to grin, his eyes afire with sick hilarity.

"It's nothing personal, mate. Just following my orders. Now, will you meet my master willingly, or do I have to… convince you."

"You don't serve the demons," Evan blurted out. "You didn't let the demons inside Veneseron, you're not… the traitor, you can't be."

"Never judge a book by its cover," Jed chuckled. "There's much you have to

learn, but don’t worry, my master will tell you everything. He’s a powerful Dread Lord, it’s best not to keep him waiting.”

Jed took a step forward but Evan instinctively raised Ruaden.

“C’mon now, Evan, you aren’t gonna kill your best mate, are you?”

Before Evan could reply Jed had snatched a dagger from his robe and attacked.

Evan was too slow. The dagger buried itself into his side, right up to the hilt.

He stumbled back, Ruaden clattered to the floor. Evan saw a red stain growing larger and larger on his shirt. He fell onto his bed, his vision swimming. It felt like he’d been stung by a bee, not stabbed by his best friend.

His body was shutting down, blood was leaking all over the sheets.

Evan felt himself falling unconscious, or maybe he was dying. Jed stood over him, beaming eerily.

“Hush Evan, my master will want you alive.”

As he bent down to pull the dagger out, Jed’s body blurred at the edges. Abruptly he flickered into shadow and back again, before finally disappearing with a pop.

Evan bolted upright, the wound and his pain erased. Sintian chuckled from his seat in the corner of Evan’s room.

“Relax Umbra, it’s just an immensely powerful illusion, I knew I could do it,” he boasted.

“Wha…why the hell would you do that, you sicko?”

“Your little demon problem inspired me. I needed to see if my new spell would work. I’ve been practising especially. That ward spell on your door was pathetic by the way.”

Evan leaped off the bed. He was so angry; he’d been so terrified, traumatised. He

threw a fireball, in that moment he wanted to hurt Sintian badly. Sintian evaded the fireball, however, and it smashed into Evan's wall, obliterating the paintwork.

"Calm down, Umbra, can't you take a joke?" Sintian spoke calmly, simultaneously attempting to create a cage of air around Evan.

But Evan's rage fuelled him and he used his own air sorcery first, throwing and pinning Sintian against the door. Sintian's calm wavered now.

"Okay Evan, I'm…"

304

The door flew open and Evan ceased casting magic instantly. Sintian fell straight into Tarensen, who seized him by the collar.

"You think I wouldn't have this room monitored after the first attack? Foolish child."

"I'm no child," Sintian snapped.

Tarensen ignored him, saying to Evan, "Apologies, Umbra. Sintian has behaved heinously. He'll get the Uqari coils for a month for this."

Evan didn't know what to say, yet he saw fear in Sintian for the first time.

"No… you can't. I'm sorry, Master, I…"

Tarensen hauled him into the hallway and out of sight.

The disruption had caused other Novices to come out of their rooms. Evan wandered out to meet them, still full of fury and shock.

"What the hell happened this time," said Jed. *The real Jed.* Evan felt bizarre staring at him.

"The coils?" Brooke whispered.

"Bracelets that block your sorcery once locked on," said Elijah, "the harshest punishment for a Venator."

A myriad of faces looked to Evan. After he'd told them all what had happened, every face had whitened.

Jed was uncharacteristically lost for words. Eventually he said, "I'd never betray you to demons, dude. And I wouldn't serve one either, they're all pretty ugly. But man, your bedroom has seen a lot of action, hasn't it mate?"

305

Chapter 20- Twisted Youth

The forest was peaceful, trees whispering in the soft wind as Brooke hurried between them.

She gazed around wearily. Of course she wasn't completely alone, several brownies scampered about whilst a gnome and a pixie chattered idly, but she was paranoid she would run into Falawn again.

Evan had looked a lot better at breakfast, but Brooke could tell he was still shaken up after Sintian's cruel trick. She was glad Stray was being punished and sincerely hoped it wouldn't make Evan's paranoia worse.

Sunlight spilled in every direction as she entered the next glade, Brooke smiled as she saw him.

Arantay crouched in the distance, his hands clasped over something.

As Brooke emerged through the trees she crushed leaves underfoot, the sound was barely audible but Arantay's head snapped round, searching for the intruder in his enclosure; a white tiger defending his domain.

His eyes softened when he saw it was her.

306

"You're making a habit of visiting my home," he said, amusement in his tone.

"I needed to talk to you about yesterday, about the demons. I also wanted…to see you."

She watched as Arantay placed the four headed frog in the hollow of a tree.

“What are you doing?”

“Nursing him back to health,” Arantay replied, “He had a run in with an Ammit or a Chimera, I sucked the poison out, little fellow should be fine now.”

“So,” he stood up to face her, “what do you want to know?”

“Well the whole Fortress is buzzing about it. Everyone’s in shock, Tarensen’s furious and Evan’s acting weird. I don’t blame him, it must be awful what he’s going through. Evan said he and Cera would've died if it wasn’t for you-”

“Or worse,” Arantay interrupted, his mild amusement evaporated.

“Worse?”

“We discovered a name of one who, perhaps, is behind these attacks, but we don’t know his orders. They might have been to kill, or to take Evan into their own realms.

Evan would’ve suffered horrors worse than death if that'd happened.”

“But it didn’t, thanks to you.”

“I was merely in the right place at the right time. Any other Venator would have done the same.”

“But- weren’t you scared?”

“I’ve fought too many demons over the years. I feel anger and disgust more than fear.”

Brooke was about to speak again but Arantay asked, “You wanted to see me, why?”

She felt herself blushing. “I…I was just wondering whether we’re training tonight.” She glanced up at the sky instinctively.

Lancinations of light streamed down from the twin suns into the clearing, highlighting Arantay's face, the only skin visible, wrought intricately by his dark veins.

"Because," she continued, "I don't care how the sun makes you look. I don't care that you're half elf, or half vampire, a mixture of both or neither. I don't care what you are, all I know is…"

She hesitated, not wanting to say anything stupid. She wasn't in love with him. No, she didn't know him well enough yet, besides, she'd never been in love and didn't know how it felt. There was lust there, definitely, and the strongest attraction she'd ever felt for anyone else before. He was the most beautiful creature she'd ever seen, but it wasn't just his looks, he was so kind, but also mysterious, she yearned to learn more.

"All I know is, I really enjoy training with you and don't want it to stop just because you think you'll scare me away," she finished breathlessly.

He stared at her curiously, and then he was in front of her, moving faster than she could follow. Brooke's body surged with magnetic emotion as he stood so close.

"You mean that?"

"Yes," she said instantly.

Her breath came in sharp as Arantay lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it gently.

The feel of his lips against her skin was electric, the feeling spread up her whole arm, flooding through her.

He let go of her hand and looked up at her. Their eyes met, his sparkling pools of liquid ruby looking deep into her own amber. She felt herself leaning in before she knew what she was doing.

A colossal shadow suddenly enveloped the clearing, accompanied by the deafening beating of vast wings.

Both of them looked away from each other and upwards.

Brooke reeled back, then realised what it was.

Arantay's dragon hovered above them. As magnificent as his master, the dragon was a spectacle to behold.

Brooke had seen it once before, and seen others in the city, but up close it blew her mind all over again.

The enormous beast descended, filling every inch of the clearing. With scintillating scales, terrific talons, gleaming teeth and lambent yellow eyes the dragon inspired awe.

"Thank you for what you said," Arantay repeated, "but I'm afraid I cannot leave the forest. Tarensen has bid me to guard it against any future attacks," remorse filled his voice. "I cannot leave here until the danger has passed."

"Oh," disappointment flooded through her, "okay, I understand."

Arantay mounted his dragon fluidly.

"We fly above the trees, scouring the forest in case they return," he explained, stroking the dragon lovingly.

"Did you order him to you?" she asked, wondering how the dragon had known to find his master.

"No." Arantay smiled. "No one orders Daggenite to do anything."

They rose steadily; Daggenite's serrated wings ripping through the air.

Brooke watched them go, the two ultimate predators, as one with the enchanted forest as they were to one another.

She was filled with a sense of longing, wondering when she would see Arantay again.

*

As Brooke walked back through the forest, she found herself in an area she'd never been before. Here the dense undergrowth writhed with a dozen narrow ravines.

Veneseron forest had to be as big as the Boreal forest in Canada she'd visited once.

Everyone knew it was inhabited by thousands of creatures and was easy to get lost in.

In Archives they were told how the fairies would lead you back to the Fortress if you asked. Gettelung warned them to beware the Wisps though, as they'd lead you only deeper into the woods. If a Venator did go missing in the forest, Brooke expected the Masters could track them down easily enough.

Brooke didn't have Illusion for another hour so she decided to follow the water, just for a little bit. She'd heard about water-wyverns that supposedly lived here and wanted to get a glimpse of them.

She didn't encounter many creatures this time, apart from the cheeky-looking gnome giggling at her from atop a giant mushroom. As their eyes met the gnome blew a raspberry at her.

The streams soon converged and widened into a river which flowed into a bright green pond, set in a grove of lilac trees.

What she saw in the pond, however, surprised Brooke more than any mystical animal could have.

310

Lok sat on a rock wearing only breeches and the boots he was lacing up, his bare torso dripping.

“Hey?”

Lok's head snapped round at her voice, he tensed before realising who it was.

“You hang out here too?” she asked, walking along the ponds edge.

“Course. It's noisy everywhere else. This is the only quiet place.”

“I wouldn't have thought you liked the quiet.”

Lok shrugged, the familiar cheeky smile unfurling across his face. “Maybe it's just the skinny dipping I like then.”

“You swim here, naked?”

“Yeah, the naiads love checking me out, just like you are now.”

Indeed, she hadn't failed to notice his body. He wasn't particularly muscular, but incredibly toned, with barely an ounce of fat on him. His skin appeared more aureate than she'd ever seen it, his hair a deeper shade of gold. His eyes reminded her of milk chocolate.

She also noticed the fine white scars across his back, littering the length of his spine.

“I thought we can heal most wounds, even so they won’t leave a scar? The arm Lyella broke is completely fine thanks to you.”

Lok's smile faltered and he bit back whatever joke had been on the end of his tongue.

“Scars can't be healed if they were inflicted before we came here.”

“What do you mean? What could've happened to you to make your back like that?”

“There’s not that many,” he muttered, “I’d take twice as many if it would've saved my mum.”

311

“What…” she thought she'd misheard.

“Nothing, don't worry.”

He jumped off the rock and put his shirt on hastily.

“Wait are… are you okay, Lok? What did you mean?”

He turned back to look at her, smiling bizarrely.

“Oh you know, dead mum, abusive dad, cliché bad boy stuff.”

“Wha- are you serious, this isn't another weird joke, right?”

Lok chuckled vacantly. “Yeah, I'm just messing. I never used to hide under my bed, listening to my mum’s screams. Hearing my dad's fists smack her flesh repeatedly, too little to help, too little to fight him off. I never saw her in the morning, face swollen, bones broken.”

Brooke couldn't stand it, she needed to make him stop. “Lok I-”

“No, it's all good. My mum’s dead now. He didn't kill her. Some drunk driver mowed her down. She escaped the torment; my dad just turned his anger to me then.

That belt buckle, well…”

Lok cut off suddenly as he glanced at her face. Her upset made him fall silent.

“Sorry, you didn't need to hear that. I dreamed about him last night, haven't been able to get the scum out of my head since. I hate him! Even if he’s my flesh and blood, I hate him.”

“It's… it's okay. You don't have to apologise, I know what it's like.”

He looked at her disbelievingly.

“Well, not exactly, but my brother Adam. He was… troubled. He-”

She took a deep breath. “He wasn't as violent as your dad, god I can't imagine what you had to go through. Adam just hit me when he couldn't control his anger, he hit

other boys too, got expelled from loads of schools, until… until he strangled another boy to death.”

Lok looked at her curiously, his expression unreadable.

“Adam got put in a home for the mentally insane afterwards, but I think there was just hatred in him, not insanity. What… happened to your dad?”

Lok paused for a long time.

“Dunno’. Not in prison like he deserves.”

“I'm-I'm sorry.” It was all she could think of, she knew everyone said it, and it was never enough.

Lok bit his lip as he stared about the clearing, as if making sure there'd been no one else around to hear.

“I'll keep your secret if you keep mine.”

She saw the intensity in his stare and sensed he already regretted telling her anything.

“Umm, okay.”

A mischievous smile splashed across his face again, though his eyes remained intense.

“I'll er… I'll see you around, Brooke. Try not to spy on me naked again.”

He chuckled hollowly before leaving the glade, not waiting for her to catch up.

Once he'd gone Brooke remembered their meeting after she'd taken a shower.

He'd said his dad died, hadn't he?

Brooke stared at the space Lok had stood for a long time after that, her eyes itching.

*

313

Kurrlan screamed in fury, throwing the head of his messenger across the throne room.

“You failed me again.”

His underlings cowered before him.

The Dread Lord's grotesque gaze fell on his lieutenant, a gaze so terrifying a demon cowered before it.

“Raise the army! Prepare the bulk of my forces. I shall inform our allies in Veneseron. Arok, you will bring me the Spawn yourself. Fail me and I shall have you flayed for a century.”

Arok ran to obey.

Kurrlan seethed atop his throne. He would stop at nothing until the boy was his.

He would burn Veneseron to the ground if he had to.

Chapter 21- All Dead

Brooke’s Apprentice trial was looming.

As the days trickled by, Brooke had scarcely a thought for anyone due to training, even Arantay… almost. The Masters trained her hard and she often holed up in the Archives, searching for anything that might help. Elijah said the trial was different for each Apprentice, so it was impossible to fully prepare.

Brooke would have to train in

everything. She read books detailing the most effective way to kill a certain demon, or how best to utilise water magic, and a lot of other stuff she'd no use for at all, like how to grow a forty-foot tall sunflower.

She was in the Archives again tonight, looking up healing tips in a leather-bound book so old it now resembled an elderly orc’s backside.

The sky outside the window darkened as Brooke spent an hour reading. After a large group of Brazilian Venators left, the Archives fell silent. Then soft mutterings began somewhere behind her. At first, she thought it was other Venators studying late, but as the minutes dragged by, she realised it was only one voice speaking unnervingly fast.

Intrigued, she set her book down and moved towards the voice. A couple of rows behind her a dark, wavy haired boy was poring over a manuscript, black eyes flickering from page to endless page.

Brooke thought she’d been silent, but Sintian’s head snapped up as she approached.

“Yes?” His soft voice belied his near-savage appearance.

“Nothing, I was just leaving.”

She made to go, but Sintian said, “You think you’re something special around here, don’t you? Just because you’ll be an Apprentice soon, if you pass.”

His eyes were unsettling in the sparse light.

“No. I was just spending some extra time studying because I don’t want to fail.”

Stray’s lip curled. “Well then, I wish you the best of luck.”

Brooke decided it was useless attempting to talk with him. She turned to leave, but then another thought struck her.

“All I ever see you do is looking up old books. Why?”

315

Sintian’s heavy lids blinked at her lazily for a few moments before he answered.

“There are things we can do with sorcery. Great, and ancient things the Masters won’t teach us.”

A twinge of anxiety filled her. “Why would you want to learn things the Masters don't teach?”

“Because I want to learn more, to learn all I can. Knowledge is everything, Brooke.” He spoke to her like she was a child, “and I intend to garner all the knowledge this place holds. To delve deep into secret arts few have learned and fewer mastered. I was just a Phantom class Venator once, but I’ve managed to become a Hybrid, I’m strong now in the Serene and Caustic classes too.”

“That’s impossible.”

“No, hybrid classes are extremely rare, but I’ve done it. It’s just impossible for us to perform every single type of sorcery, that won’t stop me from trying though. I crave power, and I'm not afraid to admit it. The other Realmers may mock me, call me a freak, but I don’t care. Soon I'll leave Veneseron, journey into the darkest of worlds, always seeking new sorceries. The rest of you are fools. If you’re lucky enough to be blessed with sorcery, then why wouldn’t you want to test yourself to the limit, be the very best? You think me Conceited? Maybe even evil? But they’re foolish notions. I am simply smarter than the rest of you. I have ambition, a path set out for me, and this path I shall follow throughout the worlds.”

Sintian’s eyes burned into her own. “You don’t understand me, do you? No one ever does.”

“But, why do you seek more power? So you can be stronger against the demons?”

“Demons, no,” he barely whispered, “Dark-Realmers.”

“Because they killed your parents?”

316

She'd gone too far.

There was a deranged gleam in Sintian’s eyes as he hissed, “Never speak of that again!”

Brooke jumped, taken aback by his vehemence.

He leaned over the table so he could whisper.

“You've got skill, Brooke, but you could be so much more, better than the other Venators. Just like me. You could learn with me.”

“Um, no thanks.” She backed away.

“If you ever change your mind,” Sintian called after her, smiling hopefully.

She left him in his dark corner of the Archives to continue his lustful learning of ancient arts. But when she chanced a look back, she thought he looked sad, almost close to tears.

Veneseron Fortress was ethereally silent. Moonlight shone bright as she stepped outside, giving the castle walls a ghostly tinge.

She walked across marble pathways snaking towards Castle-Coterie. Mechanical arms protruded from the ground beside the paths, grasping rush lights to ward off the gloom. Brooke wasn’t usually scared of the Fortress at night, but with news about the most recent demon attack she couldn’t help but wonder.

*

The day of her trial had dawned. Brooke’s stomach knotted painfully as she entered the Master's Citadel.

She needed to get to the top floor so decided to use the teleporter ring. She stepped onto the circular silver platform and punched the **‘10’** on the keypad in the wall.

317

Seconds later she was transported to the tenth floor. Brooke still wasn't used to teleportation, but it was faster than the stairs.

Teleporting itself was surreal. It was like she'd blinked and suddenly she was on a different floor. Her body would feel peculiarly light for a minute afterwards, but there were no other side-effects.

She tried to stop breathing so fast as she hurried down the passageway and the pushed the door open gingerly.

Masters Gettelung and Greller were waiting for her.

A circular basin stood at the end of the chamber, it reminded Brooke of a giant golden well. She went to peer over its edge. At first, she thought it was a bottomless pit that went on forever. Then she noticed a strange blue-purple substance at the bottom. It appeared to be a portal, like the one she'd gone through to reach Veneseron.

"Good Morning, Brooke," Gettelung smiled.

Brooke just nodded, not wanting to open her mouth. The portal swirled silently.

"Nervous?"

Brooke nodded again.

"Now when you jump into the portal you must remember that what happens is beyond our control. The trial is influenced by your own imagination. You will see things, strange or downright terrifying, but it's all in your head. Just remember, follow the red sphere; eventually it'll lead you back here. If an hour passes and you've not been able to escape, we shall retrieve you, but you will have failed."

"Don't worry," Greller chipped in, "this is the easiest trial."

"What if I fail?

"Then we try again at a later date, but by then your friends may have travelled

up the ranks without you. Okay then, in you go." Gettelung gestured.

Brooke took another deep breath and jumped. She fell fast, she was going to splatter at the bottom, it wasn't going to work, it was… the portal swallowed her whole.

Lancinations of brilliant light blinded her, she was caught in a terrible whirlpool, and then she was on her feet again. She looked down; no ground, no nothing. She was in the middle of a blank white space.

Whiteness stretched all around, there were no doorways, no exit. Panic burgeoned in her chest, she couldn't stay in this whiteness for an hour.

The red sphere winked into existence. Brooke sighed with relief, but then something seized her hair, tugging her backwards. She collided into a muscled chest, hard as stone.

Arantay's eyes blazed ghastly fires as he leered down at her, his fangs bared in hunger.

Brooke screamed when Arantay brought those teeth down, ripping into her neck, severing her jugular. Her hand shot up, trying to push his clamping jaws off as blood spurted between her fingers.

"Why?" she sobbed.

She kicked out wildly, her foot connecting with the red sphere. The world blinked.

She was transported to a labyrinth of dark, ominous trees. She realised she was in Veneseron forest, the three moons weakly warding off the entrapping darkness.

Melodic, mirthless laughter echoed from within the gloom.

A shadowy shape emerged behind her. The elf rose to his feet, green hair coiled about his shoulders like snakes and emerald eyes glinting wickedness. Falawn.

Chuckling maniacally, Falawn lurched forward, arms outstretched.

With a strangled cry she ran, twisting and turning through the dark maze of forest, Falawn on her heels.

The sphere appeared again. Brooke leapt towards it, but Falawn reached her first, seizing her round the middle and throwing her to the ground.

She screamed as he pinned her down, his eyes bleeding hate.

She weaved sorcery feverishly, making the sphere soar into her hand. The world blinked.

Brooke stood on a narrow platform, hewn out of stone.

The panorama before her was all rock, a ruined earth.

Figures burst into existence on the stony plain before her.

It was Evan and Jed, weapons raised. Brooke opened her mouth to speak, but then shuddered in horror as a horde of demons emerged.

Thousands swept across the plain like a tide of scuttling spiders. Slowly evolving into darker, more sinister shapes the closer they got.

She screamed at them to climb up the rocks towards her, but they were deaf to her warnings.

Brooke saw the sphere appear between the demon army and her friends. She climbed down the boulders towards them. She had to get them to the sphere too so they could all escape.

The demon tide reached them first.

Brooke sobbed as Evan and Jed tried desperately to beat them back, swinging wildly and cleaving limbs with their weapons. It was no use. In a matter of seconds, demons overwhelmed them. Hysterical with terror, Brooke saw a winged demon delve deep, picking Jed up by his head and chewing it off.

Evan roared, an inferno of flames shooting out of his hand, but there were too many. They leaped on him, smashing him to the ground, ripping his body to shreds.

Brooke seized the sphere. The world blinked.

She was in the Banquet chamber, Evan and Jed beside her, whole and alive. She reeled at the bizarre change of scenery. Then she realised what was happening and looked frantically for the sphere. This trial was like one long, horrific nightmare.

Suddenly she saw it, hovering above another table of feasting Venators. Brooke scrambled up and over her table and sprinted towards it.

Elijah materialised in front of her, holding a long, lethal halberd. His gold eyes were dribbling tears, his face screwed up in despair.

“Why won’t you love me,” he choked. Thrusting forwards with his halberd which ripped straight into her stomach. Brooke fell back, stunned, the halberd’s spike rending a gaping hole in her abdomen as blood bubbled around it.

Her fingertips managed to graze the sphere. The world blinked.

She was in the middle of the training courtyard. This was becoming too much. This time the sphere appeared as soon as she did, taunting her as it bobbed feet away.

Lok and Arantay rolled on the ground, punching each other savagely.

“Brooke’s mine,” Lok roared, smashing his head into Arantay’s own.

“NOOO,” Arantay bellowed back, “she’ll never love you,” he bit down on Lok’s arm.

“Stop!” Brooke tried to move between them, but Lok shoved her aside.

At the force of his push she fell into the sphere, banging the back of her head on the stone floor.

The world blinked.

She was in Veneseron city, clutching a long sword.

321

Even as she arrived, many of the city races ambushed her.

A Hobgoblin lunged at Brooke first, trying to scrape her face off with a metal claw.

Her training kicked in instinctively. Her blade bit into his neck and a gush of green goo frothed forth. She leaped over the fallen Hobgoblin and sprinted out of the city plaza and into an alley as a bloodthirsty mob followed.

The sphere was just round the next turn. The world blinked.

She was now in Ethanc's, sitting at one of the glass tables as all her friends laughed at some joke Xavier had told.

Brooke rose, needing to leave before something bad happened, but everyone clamoured around her, clapping like she'd won an award.

"Don't go Brooke, we love you," Evan sang joyously as he hugged her.

The red sphere was floating in Ethanc's huge aquarium.

The door to Ethanc's burst open.

Lyella and Sintian stood on the threshold, knives in their hands.

Sintian rushed into the room, hacking at people like a madman.

Brooke struggled desperately to untangle herself from her friends.

They laughed as they died. Sintian, looking livid, waded into the group. He cut Elijah in half, slashed off Cera's arm, stabbed Jed in the heart, and punctured Emi in the stomach.

Evan's head bounced off his shoulders and came to land before her feet, still laughing joyously.

Lyella appeared behind her, knife raised, ready to plunge. Brooke wheeled round

and dived over the bar. She ignited her fist with a spell she'd learned in Extended

sorcery and thrust it straight through the aquarium. Water exploded through the hole in a torrent, but she'd already touched the sphere.

The world blinked.

Arantay had returned. He smiled lovingly as he walked towards her across the Fortress fields. His arms outstretched whilst he laughed. "Brooke, my love."

The sphere was here, waiting for her.

She raced towards it, refusing to look at Arantay. She didn't want to witness what would happen next.

As she came to within two steps of the portal Falawn careened into her, knocking her to the ground before flying at Arantay. The insane elf pounced on his younger brother, ripping into him with his nails.

Brooke watched horrified as Falawn splintered the bones of Arantay's chest, shoving his hands deep into the gore, trying to get at the heart and squeeze it until it exploded.

"You see," Falawn shrieked, "his heart is as black as a demon's!"

She punched the sphere furiously. The world blinked.

The sphere appeared again a second later. Brooke was once again in the forest, but this time it was daylight. It was beautiful, magnificent. She could see the tiny fairies fluttering past, hear the excited pixies chattering.

Despite the wonderful sights, she knew she must leave, quickly while the sphere remained.

"BROOKE, NO!"

Arantay came stumbling into the glade. Desperation was inked on his paper-white face. As their eyes met, Arantay crumpled to the ground.

She took another step towards the gateway.

323

“NO!” Arantay screamed, his voice ringing sorrow.

“I’ll die if you leave me, Brooke,” he wailed, “I'm dying without you.”

She had to keep telling herself it wasn’t real, because all she wanted to do was run to him.

“Brooke,” he begged, crawling towards her,

“PLEASE, Brooke.” Arantay wailed, tears oozing down his face.

“I need…to feed on you so much.”

No!

Her mind was starting to beat her, she couldn’t let it win.

“BROOKE,” Arantay sobbed over and over again.

“Let me drink you. Just a taste.”

His face contorted to a mask of rage. “I’ve wanted to do this since I first saw you.”

He lunged at her, flitting across the clearing so fast she didn’t have time to move. His hand snatched Brooke’s hair and yanked her to the ground. She began to summon sorcery, but he was on top of her, his fangs savaging her neck.

Pain spiked throughout her body as her blood leaked into Arantay’s eager mouth.

He gnawed at her throat like a rabid dog, tearing off strips of skin. Brooke screamed in agony as Arantay spat out a gobbet of her flesh. He grinned in ecstasy as her blood spewed out, painting his face.

Her scream turned to a war cry and his ecstasy turned to torment when she filled her hands with electricity and clapped them either side of his head. He jolted back, convulsing. Brooke lurched to her feet and leaped at the sphere.

Abruptly the sphere spat her back out into the trial chamber. She fell to the floor, trembling.

Greller hurried to her side. “It’s okay, you’re safe now.”

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Brooke knew she was shaking in anger as much as fear and shock. Why had the trial been like that? Showing her horrific things, horrific things happening to her friends, made Arantay…

“It…it was horrible,” she gasped.

Gettelung nodded emphatically. “We all see different things when we enter. The trial prays on the worst our imaginations can conjure, best not to think about it dear.”

“Good timing,” Greller said, “you made it with only three minutes left.”

“Well done,” said Gettelung. “You’re an Apprentice now. You'll be going on missions throughout the worlds in no time.”

Brooke nodded numbly, her fingers tracing where Arantay had bitten her. Part of her expected a gaping hole gushing blood, whilst the larger part of her knew none of it had been real.

But still, as her fingers touched the flesh, she felt two small punctures.

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Chapter 22- Darkness Opened

“I knew you could do it,” Elijah yelled, giving her a high-five.

“Brilliant, Brooke.” Emillia grinned.

“Yeah man, not bad,” said Jed.

Brooke smiled back, dressed all in blue now she was an Apprentice.

Once she had time to get over the shock of her trial, relief had filled her. She’d

done it. She was an Apprentice, one step closer to saving countless lives throughout the realms.

“You’ll probably be in loads of my lessons now,” Elijah said eagerly.

It seemed silly how much the trial had affected her, now it all felt like a bad dream.

Her last encounter with Arantay, however, had a lingering impact, though she tried to push this to the back of her mind.

The four of them were in a field outside Dragonrock Keep, lazing in the hot summer suns. Jed sprawled beside her, twiddling a blade of grass with his fingers, and staring off into the distance at the city beyond. Elijah and Emillia sat opposite, gossiping as usual.

“Where’s Evan?”

“Training I s’pect,” Jed yawned, “he’s got his own trial too soon.”

“I hope he does okay,” said Brooke.

“Course he will, acts well under pressure, doesn’t he? He’s been attacked by demons enough times.” Jed’s tone took on a grimmer aspect.

“How is he?” she asked anxiously.

“Evan’s doing okay. It’s lucky he’s been training so much, takes his mind off everything I reckon.”

Brooke nodded, she wished she could do something for Evan.

It wasn’t until mid-afternoon that she saw Arantay.

She was walking across one of the bridges connecting castles, when a huge shape caught her eye. It was Arantay’s dragon Daggenite, and atop it was the Elfpire himself. The dragon skimmed the tops of the forest trees as Arantay scoured the area.

Brooke decided, if Tay could no longer leave the forest then she would go to him.

She couldn’t help herself, she just loved being around him, near him, touching him.

Minutes later, she was walking towards the enchanted woods. Songs of the flittering fairies filled her ears as she entered, passing by gambolling brownies and frolicking imps.

Brooke kept thinking back to her trial, where Arantay had… *no*! She had to keep telling herself it wasn’t real. Yet, it had appeared so vivid.

He appeared so suddenly that she stopped in her tracks.

Tay must've just finished his round of the forest, for he stood beneath the trees as Daggenite took off, back into the sky.

Arantay turned to look right at her, although she had to be too far away for him to have heard her.

She saw it this time, a definite flickering smile when he saw her.

He appeared as resplendent as ever, dappled sunlight and shadow playing equally across his features.

It was almost unbearable how attractive he was.

“Arantay, I made it, I’m an Apprentice,” she shouted. Brooke ran into his arms and hugged him tight on instinct.

To her amazement, he placed his own arms around her. The feel of his skin on hers, even between layers, was amazing.

She felt so safe.

Brooke stared into his fantastic eyes. She couldn’t restrain herself anymore. The tension between them was just too intense.

She leaned in and stole a kiss from him. Her heartbeat went into overdrive, her eyelids fluttered uncontrollably. She wanted this more than anything. His lips felt better than they looked, they were so soft.

His eyes were like scarlet stars as she kissed him again, not moving away this time, letting her emotions control her.

He kissed her back.

He kissed her so tenderly and yet so passionately she felt her soul shiver. She had been waiting for this moment since the first time she saw him, and it felt better than she could've ever imagined.

She had kissed other boys before but none compared to this, none contained such raw emotion and passion.

Her hand snaked in his hair, pulling him towards her, her other hand brushed against his stomach, feeling the hard ridges of his abs. His own touch made her skin burn, lighting a fire deep within.

This was exquisite, unbelievable. She never wanted it to stop.

Suddenly Arantay broke off, stepping away from her, horror-struck.

Brooke stared at him in dismay, wanting more.

“That…was a mistake,” he shook his head.

“What-” *No one could kiss like that without meaning it.*

“This, this isn’t right, Brooke.”

“Why?”

Arantay took another step back; he almost appeared ashamed of his actions.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” he berated himself.

“Why?”

Arantay inhaled heavily, anguish and regret alike painted on his face.

“This is all my fault. Perhaps I should have done things differently. I never meant for you to feel that way about me.”

What! Why was he saying all this?

“Why not?” she found herself shouting.

“Brooke you’re human,” he whispered. “I’m not. I’m not- right.”

“Oh shut up,” she snapped. “I told you I didn’t care who, or what you are!”

“I care,” he said softly, “you and I, it’s just not meant to happen, even if I was still an elf.”

“What do you mean if you were still an elf?”

“I’m two-hundred-years-old, Brooke, and will doubtless live a thousand more. I cannot have a normal relationship. I will already outlive my family. You will be dust long before I die in battle, the only way I can.”

His words hurt, biting into her ruthlessly and without mercy.

“We could continue with all this,” Arantay continued, his voice strained, “but that would only make it harder for me to leave you. And leave you I would. I can’t burden both of us with my condition. It’s best I end it now, before anything can begin.”

He turned back into the shade.

“But it’s already begun,” she cried out desperately.

Arantay only turned his head, half concealed in the darkness, “You must try to forget,” was all he said.

Brooke tried to go after him, but he was already gone.

Her eyes watered and stung, her body heaved with every sharp intake of breath

she took. Her chest ached, her head hurt. She could still feel the touch of his lips on hers.

Brooke couldn’t believe this was happening. She felt a sudden prickling at her forearm. She glanced down and thought she saw a black mark near her hand, but whatever it was had already faded, if it had been anything at all.

Her eyes kept threatening to leak, so she rubbed them furiously, she refused to cry over a boy. *If he wants to be like that, then it's his stupid loss,* she tried to tell herself, make herself believe.

A soft chuckle erupted behind her, so similar sounding was the chuckle she thought Arantay had returned. Instead she found Falawn standing in the trees, a hideous smile disfiguring his face.

She stopped breathing altogether now.

“Poor Venator,” he hissed cruelly.

Brooke turned back, willing Arantay to reappear and save her. There was only darkness beyond.

She whirled back again, but Falawn too, had gone.

*

Evan had resolved to throw himself into training. If monsters were coming for him, he wouldn't go down without fighting.

As well as the possibility of demons around every corner, Evan had to worry about his upcoming trial.

He forced himself to train until exhaustion forced him to stop. This way he could almost forget his paranoia, just focusing on getting stronger, not only for the trial, but for the return of his hunters.

Evan kept Ruaden near him even when sleeping, but he wished he could wear Venator armour too and relished the times in training when he could. At least

then he felt an ounce of safety.

He’d just beaten Xavier in a sword duel when he found Cera standing off to the side. His stomach turned to lead and he felt like he’d swallowed a bucketful of sand.

Evan knew he had to talk to her. They’d already made eye-contact and it would be foolish to pretend they hadn’t.

“Er-hi,” he tried to say casually.

“You’re pretty good,” She wore a smile that didn’t match the rest of her face.

“Oh, yeah, thanks.” Maybe this wasn’t going to be so bad after all.

“Not as good as me though,” she said playfully, hefting her own sword. “If only I had this when the demons attacked, maybe I might’ve been some help.”

This was exactly what Evan hadn’t wanted to talk about.

“It'll be okay, Evan,” she said softly. “The Masters will make sure no one's lives are in danger. Even on missions they monitor us.”

Evan nodded, but he couldn't help thinking. *Demons had never invaded Veneseron before, and the Masters couldn't be around all the time.*

Before he could change the subject Cera did it for him.

“It’s your trial tomorrow, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, yeah it is,” his stomach squirmed, this time nothing to do with the beautiful girl before him.

“Well, good luck, Evan. Your skills with the sword and fire magic should help you pass easy.”

Evan nodded, letting his face betray no emotion.

“See you around, and good luck again.”

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The morning of Evan’s trial dawned misty and grey, perhaps an omen, he thought grimly as he dressed and went down to breakfast.

He fought to keep his nerves at bay as he ate, thankful he’d risen early and the chamber was almost empty.

After breakfast he started his customary run around the stronghold, three laps now.

By the time he'd finished he wasn’t nearly as heavy of breath as an average person his age would be, and he was proud of it. Urkzal had instructed him not to do anything else physical today, or any other training. He was meant to save all his magic for tonight, he would need it.

After his run he took a long shower. He enjoyed the relaxing sensation of the hot water but was nervous not having his sword on him. He propped it outside the cubicle, just in case.

By the time he stepped out of the shower the suns shone bright, attempting to pierce through heavy ropes of fog swirling across the fields and pressing against the windows.

With no training to distract him, Evan decided he could no longer avoid everyone.

He would go to Ethanc’s and see who he could find.

Whilst he walked through the Fortress he thought back on his life before sorcery, demons and Veneseron. He remembered being haunted by Ollie and his gang.

Although now only a distant memory, it was like an old wound, something he could never forget. Being hunted by demons was similar, but far worse. Before, he had only had to look after himself. Once Gran died he’d been alone, the bullies could at most, only hurt him. This time he had people with him he cared about, people who could end up dead because of him. He couldn’t take the questions clawing at his mind anymore. *Who’s letting the demons into the*

Fortress? Why would someone betray Veneseron?

Evan knew what he had to do, to stop the demons attacking again and putting someone else's life in danger because of him. He had to escape. He had to leave Venseseron and everyone he cared about behind. He needed this constant threat hanging over his head to disappear.

One way or another.

He put on a brave face as he entered Ethanc's and he thought his friends believed it.

Jed got him three pints of Mavla immediately, saying he had to build his strength up for tonight, whilst Elijah and Emillia informed him about all the gossip he'd missed. Zeke and Xavier were there too, offering words of encouragement and advice.

Brooke was nowhere in sight.

Evan knew this was yet another thing he had to learn at Veneseron, everyone had their own problems. Perhaps they weren't currently being hunted by demons, but they

didn't treat him like some freak either. He supposed he should've expected it; they were all chosen and trained to fight on missions after all.

Feeling decidedly better, he laughed and joked with the rest of them, until afternoon deepened, and evening began.

Inevitably nerves seized hold of him as he said his goodbyes and departed, heading back to Castle-Coterie to face his trial.

Gettelung was waiting for him in the trial chamber. As Evan entered, Gettelung gave him the instructions each Venator only acquired seconds before the trial took place.

"And remember," he warned as Evan turned towards the swirling portal, "if in doubt, just blast 'em to pieces."

As Evan made to jump into the portal, he knew something was dreadfully wrong.

Screams erupted throughout the Fortress.

*

It was a weak wind tonight, one that struggled to rustle a leaf, and failed to part the thick layers of fog surrounding Veneseron.

The gloom was fathomless on this starless night. If the wanderer’s eyes hadn’t been long accustomed to his surroundings, he would have surely lost himself. Deeper and deeper he wandered, delving into the very heart of Veneseron forest.

His breathing was ragged with excitement. Tonight at last would put an end to it all. *An end to the existence of those filthy vermin who thought they belonged here.*

This was his forest, it had been for hundreds of years, his ancestors for millennia

before that. Tonight he would reclaim it. *Let Kurrlan do what he wants with the Fortress, but the forest is mine*, that was their arrangement.

The wanderer wandered no more, striding with a purpose into the vast clearing. He took the object from his cloak and hissed the word Kurrlan had instructed him to speak. The instrument ignited like a sparkler, triggering a violent eruption in the very fabric of the world.

A portal opened before him.

He stepped back, lowering the instrument and surveying what he’d done. Only an insider could've done it. Veneseron was protected by Vanderain from all outside magic, but Vanderain wasn’t here.

He’d stolen a Rambrace from one of the Master's chambers. He'd used it to travel the realms, to find one such as Kurrlan who would help him destroy the Venators.

Lord Kurrlan had used his own sorcery on the Rambrace, creating a direct link between Veneseron and his realm. This would be the third time he or his accomplice opened the portal, but this time Kurrlan was going to unleash his army.

Tonight the wanderer and his accomplice had disabled the magic traps which warned the Masters of demonic intruders. They'd never see the invasion coming.

The crimson portal gave one final pulse… then the demonic horde spewed forth.

Slow at first, grotesque limbs groping for ground. Then faster, as the otherworldly hands found purchase and moved in. Erratic, frenetic, gruesome, the demons clawed their way out of hell's abyss, polluting their new home.

The wanderer obscured himself in the shadows, his work done.

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If someone in the Fortress happened to look out of a window, they may have seen them approach and been able to give warning. Unfortunately they did not.

Unnatural shadows exploded out of the trees onto the fields, not yet taking clarity under cover of darkness and rolling mists.

They loped, they slithered, they crawled, they scuttled and they leapt. All the awful amalgamations the human mind could comprehend, and some it could not, made their way to the Fortress. For once the fiends were silent, it was in their nature to shriek wildly, laugh ghoulishly and roar thunderously as they prepared to attack, but this time they had been ordered to not make a sound, at least until the killing started.

They were ordered to kill all but one. At all costs they were to leave the boy untouched, he was important above all.

The first of them reached the nearest castle.

With silent mirth and insatiable hunger those who could began to climb, scuttling up the walls like giant spiders, mammoth insects whose forms were

worse than any giant bug could ever be.

The first of them reached the first window, where inside; sleeping, lay the first Venator victim.

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Chapter 23- Demon Invasion

The scream still rang in his ears.

Not any scream, a scream so full of horror and agony it could only mean one thing.

As Evan stepped away from the trial portal, he heard Gettelung cry out as the door exploded open.

Mad cackles and insane shrieks filled the chamber. Evan surveyed the scene in dismay. Five demons already lay dead, burned to a crisp. Three more had Gettelung pinned up against the corner of the chamber, trying to rip him limb from limb.

Evan surged into action, ripping his sword from its sheath and plunging into their midst, whilst simultaneously flicking the switch to make Ruaden morph from a dagger into a sword.

The first demon wasn’t aware of Evan until his sword had sloshed through its rubbery back. It keeled over as Evan yanked Ruaden free. Gettelung dealt with the others himself. His hands now released, he placed each one on the remaining minion’s heads and burned their brains from the inside out.

As the demons fell, their heads blown off, Evan heard more shrieks reverberate around the castle.

Gettelung opened his mouth to speak but then a black blur struck him in the side, throwing him to the floor. Evan spun to see the wounded body of the demon he

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thought he'd killed rise back up, having just deposited its stinger in Gettelung’s

body.

With half a roar of anger, half a scream of terror, Evan hacked its body into chunks.

He hurried over to Gettelung. The demon’s stinger was lodged in his stomach, oozing green venom.

“Gettelung,” Evan pleaded, but the Master laid a hand on his shoulder, trying to speak as the poison took hold of him.

“Go, Evan! Find Tarensen and stay with him, you need to get out of here.”

“But what about you, I can’t just leave you-”

“You must,” Gettelung gasped. “I will only slow you down, you need to get yourself to the Master's Citadel immediately, you’ll be protected there.”

“But--you’ll die,” Evan choked.

Gettelung pulled the venomous stinger out of his body with a groan, throwing it away from him as he gushed crimson.

“Maybe… maybe not…who knows how potent this poison is.” His eyes stared grimly into Evan’s own.

“But if more demons come here, you’ll be vulnerable.”

“Then pray they do not. Now go. Get to the Citadel before the Fortress is overrun.”

Evan continued to hesitate.

“NOW!” Gettelung roared.

Evan ran, desperately wishing one of his magic abilities had been healing, and dreading what he would find beyond the door.

The passageway appeared empty, yet a second later it echoed with a demon’s keen.

His blood boiling, his head spinning with chaotic thoughts, Evan raced down to the end of the corridor, and into the next, and the next.

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In the fourth corridor he encountered a wolf-headed brute with the wings of an eagle. Its lupine head snapped towards Evan as he crossed its path. Evan never stopped running. Before the demon could spread its wings and take flight, he rammed Ruaden straight through its chest, piercing the heart.

The demon died silently, and Evan hurried on, moving downwards through the castle, praying he could find Tarensen before any Venator was killed. *What if someone's already dead?*

As he streaked down a colossal set of stone steps his worst fear was confirmed, the fear he'd purposefully refused to think about since the demons attacked the trial chamber.

He overlooked a banister down to a landing below. This vast space of the castle had become a battlefield, a battle where Realmers fought against a multitude of abhorrent monsters.

A demon army had invaded Veneseron. No longer had they come for him alone or in small groups, a whole horde had assaulted the Fortress just to get him. All his fellow Venators were fighting for their lives because of *him.*

Evan couldn't bear it. With a roar of rage, filled with more anger than he'd ever felt in his life, he vaulted the banister and landed in the blood drenched chaos below.

It was anarchy.

Magic blazed, demons screeched. Condensed energy shot out of Venators hands to smash into twisted bodies. Flames engulfed, ice froze, bullets ripped into demon flesh and the element of air flung bodies across the room.

Evan saw one girl firing flame tipped arrows at a crowd of fiends, whilst another lobbed grenade after grenade at the minions, causing electric explosions which sent body parts everywhere.

He even saw Halfrigg in the commotion, with what looked like a powerfully enchanted spoon, slapping demons' heads off.

Evan whipped through the confusion like an inferno, his sword cutting down here, his magic striking down there. A tempest of emerald flames swirled as he cast it at his foes. He then willed the flames to ignite Ruaden's blade as he cut a bloody, fiery swathe through them all.

A trio of demons surrounded Evan, but he beheaded two of them simultaneously, before stabbing the third through one of its five eye sockets.

Another group of monsters crashed through a window. These demons were armed with their own enchanted blades. Fortunately an Arch-Realmer burst on to the scene, carrying a Spellzooka.

"Everyone down," he roared to his fellow Realmers.

Evan threw himself to the floor as the Spellzooka fired off a huge bomb of electricity that exploded amidst the new demon group with a terrifying blast, frying them to ash.

Evan longed to continue venting his rage, but he couldn't ignore Gettelung's command. The demons were here to get him, not the other Venators. He needed to find Tarensen.

He hacked a crimson path through the room, tearing down yet another flight of steps and racing across more stone floors until he burst out into the misty night.

Horror clasped at his throat as he saw demons everywhere.

They ran in all directions, many crawling up the castle walls and sneaking in through windows. Other demons flew through the air, picking out their victims.

Fortunately many higher ranked Realmers were using their guns and bows to shoot the monsters down. As Evan arrived an Arch-Realmer threw his spear at one fiend

climbing the Fortress. The spear sunk deep into the demon’s back, it screeched once, then fell to the ground with a messy splat.

Evan struck out towards the Master's Citadel, but he didn’t take more than five steps before a huge winged brute was on him.

It hit him from behind, landing on him as they fell to the floor. Ruaden clattered out of his hand, but his other reached instinctively for the demon’s beak. Within seconds the beak had melted and the beast wailed in agony.

An axe soared past Evan’s head next, cleaving the demon in half.

Evan turned to see Jed standing over him.

“You noob.” Jed grinned.

“Jed,” Evan exclaimed, getting to his feet and retrieving Ruaden.

Jed wasn’t alone, Emillia, Zeke, Xavier and Elijah were with him. They were all tense and ready for battle.

Where was Brooke?

“They came through the windows at Ethanc’s,” Jed gasped, “smashed the aquarium and everything, we were lucky to have gotten out without drowning.”

“I’m so sorry,” Evan started.

“No time for that now,” Jed intercepted him.

“We need to find Brooke,” said Elijah.

“You can’t go into Castle-Coterie, there’s more of them,” Evan said, hoping against hope Brooke wasn’t inside.

“They’re everywhere, mate,” Jed argued, hefting his axe and moving in the direction Evan had just come from.

“No, we need to get to the Citadel,” said Evan. “Tarensen and the other Masters will be there.”

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“He’s right,” Izekiel growled.

“Fine, let’s go.” Jed changed direction again.

Elijah still looked reluctant, but followed. “Maybe she’s already there?”

“I only saw high-rank Realmers in Castle-Coterie,” Evan said. “I think they might’ve evacuated the Novices when it first started.”

The group tore through the Fortress, adrenaline surging through their veins.

They came across another demon, which Jed quickly dispatched, hewing off half its face. Then another, which Elijah hurled a lightning bolt at. More monsters passed by in blurs as they raced under bridges and through courtyards. At one point a demon that resembled a giant grasshopper pounced out of nowhere, seizing Emillia. Zeke quickly smashed it to pulp, with fists transformed into rock.

Evan saw that even the Fortress itself was aiding Venators against the demons. A cluster of spiked and slime-ridden monsters chasing a group of Novices were tripped up and pounced on by Veneseron’s statues, whilst a secret door embedded in a castle wall opened quickly to allow the Novices to escape. The door then disappeared, causing the demons to smash into solid stone instead.

Evan almost had a heart-attack when they witnessed a demon bearing down on two Novice children who hadn’t made it to safety. He would never, ever, forgive himself if any Venator were to die because of him. He and Jed plummeted forwards, reaching the beast and hacking it apart.

Izekiel and Xavier grabbed a child each and they continued to race on.

When they hurtled round the next corner it was with relief. Outside the Citadel the Veneseron Masters were in full flow, eradicating the monsters as they moved on to protect the whole Fortress.

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Master Greller, with arms elongated to vast knives, sliced fiends into quarters as

he spun about, whilst Aqenna used water magic to flood demons out of the area in waves.

As Evan and the others approached, Urkzal, Arnvar and Casselle came into view, leading an army of elves, orcs and every other race from the city into battle.

Evan watched, astounded as the city races rushed into the battleground in a wave of fury, beating back the tide of grotesque demons that plagued their homeland.

“Protect every castle.” Mistress Taretta appeared in the centre of the fray, her voice booming magically. “Let no Venator be harmed. Destroy every demon.”

The new army roared in unison, led by the gargantuan Orc. Urkzal was terrible to behold, obliterating fiends with his hammer as he ploughed on to guard the other castles.

Evan wasted no time now the path was clear. He led his friends towards the Citadel doors. Zeke and Xavier urged the Novice children to Taretta’s side as they went.

Suddenly an octopoid monster charged. Evan’s death flashed before his eyes as the fiend’s flame-filled tentacles came down. But then Elijah and Emi cleaved off a tentacle each. Purple blood arced in the air as Elijah thrust an energy bolt into the monster’s face.

Before Evan could thank Elijah, a scorpion demon became his next foe. Fiends withered by decay followed. Evan cast emerald flames again, ripping through the horrendous horde. The group scurried through the temporary path, flinging themselves at the Citadel.

Evan launched himself through the doors into a silent chamber beyond. This was one castle the demons hadn’t invaded.

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Jed, the last of them through, slammed the heavy doors behind him, barring entrance to the hideous hands clutching at them. The doors quivered as demons piled against it. Abruptly, their jeers switched to wails as the city races enveloped them all, hacking them back to oblivion.

Evan clambered up the steps towards Tarensen’s quarters. Since the battle started he hadn’t thought coherently. His mind was one chaotic blur and it hadn’t occurred to him Tarensen might not be there.

A huge weight had been lifted now, they were winning, it would be over soon.

They had just seen the Masters and all the city races at work. The demons didn’t stand a chance.

BOOM!

Behind Evan the stone wall exploded, showering them with shards of rock.

Evan veered to the side, landing against the opposite wall alongside Jed, Zeke and Xavier. As he came to a halt he saw Emillia swallowed by the avalanche of broken stone.

“Emi!” Elijah screamed, diving amongst the rocks, frantically pulling out her limp body from underneath.

Demons vomited forth from the newly created hole in the side of the castle.

Elijah screamed again, this time in rage as he rushed the monsters, flinging magic wildly. Evan and Jed tried to pull him back but they were too late. Elijah was enveloped by the demon sea.

Izekiel, Xavier and Jed screamed in fury, plunging in with weapons raised, beating against the monstrous mass to retrieve their fallen friends.

After slaying a horned demon with a face reminiscent of a seal, Evan spotted Elijah and Emi’s immobile forms feet away.

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“Cover me,” he yelled, sheathing Ruaden.

Whilst Zeke and Jed fought like madmen, he ducked down and clasped Emi and Elijah by the wrists before hurrying backwards, dragging their bodies out of the fray.

Evan found both of their pulses still beating, though faintly.

Wrath consumed him, he turned back to join the fight, but before he could another explosion rocked the foundations and a second avalanche smashed into the castle. The rubble burst in upon the battle itself, squashing several demons with a nasty squelch and blocking up the passageway. Evan and Jed were separated from Zeke and Xavier.

Jed struggled back to his feet as the castle trembled and yet more demons clambered through craters in the wall.

Not knowing the fate of his friends on the other side of the passageway, or how seriously injured both Elijah and Emi were, Evan barely held it together as he fought the demon mob.

They were severely outnumbered and the monsters continued to trickle in. Evan knew it wouldn’t be long before he and Jed perished.

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Brooke had been lying in bed for hours. She hadn’t left her room since her last meeting with Arantay, when he’d rejected her. Her eyes kept trying to cry but she wouldn't let them, she wouldn't let a boy rule her life. *So why have you shut yourself in your room?*

It was evening now but she hadn’t seen anyone all day. *C'mon you stupid girl, pull yourself together.*

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As she threw herself off her bed and strode towards the door she heard a scrabbling, as if a rat had scurried across the floor boards. The scrabbling came again, although it sounded from outside now, on the castle walls themselves. Brooke walked towards her curtained window. She paused inches away, ears strained to hear that sound again. Silence.

Tentatively, she placed her hand at the edge of the curtain, then snapped it back fast.

Only empty night and swirling mist appeared beyond the glass.

She was about to turn away when…

SMASH!

Brooke screamed as the window shattered and a grotesque hand plunged in, gripping her throat. Her scream was cut off as the rest of the demon followed. Sorcery flared within her and a shock spell careened into the fiend, sending him flying back out of the window and through the air. The malformed body fell a hundred and fifty feet before landing with a crunch.

Brooke had no time to think, as an ape-like demon swung in to her room, followed by still more monsters.

She threw herself backwards, rolling over her bed and grabbing her short sword.

As she yanked open her door she conjured a poison cloud behind her to fill the room and choke out the demons within.

She couldn't believe what was happening, it didn't feel real. All she knew was that she had to keep running.

Whilst sprinting down the hallway she noticed the other doors had been ripped apart. Brooke prayed no Venators had been inside when that happened. As she ran,

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more demons emerged from her fellow Novice's rooms. She utilised air sorcery, shoving the monsters away as they leered towards her.

Worse than the shrieks and cackles of the demons, were the human shouts and screams.

Brooke had no idea where to turn, how to escape. Before she could round the next corner a hairless caricature of a man stepped out in front of her. His skin was rotten and thick with oozing sores. *Zombie.* She lashed out with her sword, severing his head from his body. There was a sick squelch but no blood when the skin of his throat parted and his head dropped off. She watched, horrified, as a newly formed head sprang from his neck, grinning.

Brooke ran back the way she'd come, only to find three more demons behind her.

One was little more than a skeleton, its skull wreathed in flames.

The zombie groaned and lunged but she rolled underneath the cadaverous limb and flung herself to the nearest exit. She raced through an archway ahead as all four demons stalked her.

The archway led onto one of the many bridges connecting the castles. It also opened up a terrible vista.

Violence reigned all around.

Winged atrocities swooped through the Fortress as giant monsters roamed the courtyards below.

With a pang, Brooke saw people she knew taking part in the vicious battle.

Many Arch-Realmers, led by Tyrell, stormed through the courtyard, hacking and slashing at the fiends with their weapons and obliterating them with their magic.

Explosions of fire and ice erupted in bright flashes of devastation.

Brooke saw others she knew, Lok, Domnican and even Lyella were there.

As Brooke sped along the bridge Tyrell spotted her, he called out but his words were lost amongst the cacophony of battle.

She was halfway across the bridge when more demons emerged from the castle opposite; she was trapped on both sides.

She whirled, casting a shock spell towards the two new monsters, knocking one off the bridge to smear the stones below and stunning the other.

Unfortunately in doing this, Brooke left herself open and before she could turn back the zombie's rotting arms had encircled her.

*

Evan and Jed fought back to back, both moving instinctively, knowing that if one of them stopped, both would be dead.

The demons flowed against them in a seething stream, their current too strong, their lust to kill and feed too great.

The demons surrounded Evan on all sides. Exhaustion had drained them, both physically and magically. This was the end.

Suddenly, as the demons pressed in, a human shout pierced their ears.

Evan turned to see Sintian Stray fighting through the monsters, drenched in demon blood, his black eyes blazing.

“If there’s one thing I hate more than you two, its demons,” Sintian snarled at their looks of amazement. “This is all your fault Evan.”

Jed and Evan just gazed at him in shock, but then the brief respite was over, as the demons reformed.

348

The three of them fought now, but even with the renewed aid of their rival they couldn’t hold the monsters off forever.

Evan cried out in despair. One second Jed was fighting alongside him, the next moment a gargantuan demon’s paw smacked straight into his skull, flinging Jed feet across the air to collide with the opposite wall.

Evan flinched as Jed’s head bounced against stone and he slid down the wall to land motionless, blood pooling around him.

He looked dead.

“NO!”

Evan’s mind exploded with emotion.

Because of him all this had happened.

Because of him Emi and Elijah lay at his feet unconscious, possibly worse.

Because of him Jed might be dead. Because of him many more Venators could've died at any time since the invasion.

Even as Evan hacked around him savagely, his mind fighting madness, Sintian was dragged to the floor beside him.

A dark mist began to emerge.

Evan felt that strange sensation he'd felt before. The mist he thought he'd just imagined was back. But yet, he had been mad with anger and desperation those times too, this had to be a figment of his imagination.

The clotting blackness rolled and surged.

Evan was numb to it all, yet some part of him felt connected with the mist now circling the corridor. His sword clattered out of limp hands and he sagged against the wall near Jed.

A dozen demons came for him, unaware of the nefarious mist rising above them.

349

Evan didn't say a word, he didn't even move, but suddenly the shadow-fog rushed to devour the unsuspecting demons.

Amidst screams more horrible than any he'd ever heard, the sound of bones snapping echoed off the walls. The demon's bodies wilted, formless as the horrific sorcery sucked out their very souls.

Evan shut his eyes tight, not wanting to witness the scene anymore. *Is this my fault too?*

"You," he heard a venomous hiss.

He opened his eyes to see Sintian struggling to his feet, spitting blood.

The black mist had vanished without a trace.

"That- was demon magic," Sintian rasped, panic-stricken.

"What-no-I didn't..." Evan fought against all that had happened tonight. It was

the worst nightmare anyone had ever had to endure. It just couldn’t be real.

Sintian was backing away from him, a mask of terror painted on his face.

“What are you?” he breathed.

Evan frowned at him, “What? I’m like you-”

“You are nothing like me,” Sintian choked. “You’re not right, you’re not human.”

“Of course I am,” Evan shouted.

“No human can wield demon magic,” Sintian’s eyes were consumed by fear.

“You’re one of them.”

Evan couldn’t believe he’d choose a time like now to play a sick joke like this.

Sintian really was disturbed.

Evan slid to the floor. He was so drained he could hardly move. *I was drained of magic before the black mist appeared, wasn’t I? So it couldn’t possibly have been me?*

350

He attempted to crawl over to Jed, hoping against hope he wasn’t dead. To his relief he felt a pulse, very weak, but there.

His relief increased when Cera sprinted into view.

Her eyes were alight with a manic fire and her whole body heaved as she panted.

“Evan, thank Rueda. I've been looking everywhere for you. Come with me quick, I know a way out of here.”

He was so tired, his surroundings were spinning and he felt like he was going to black out at any second.

“Cera, wait…we can't leave the others behind.”

“Just trust me, Evan,” she said desperately, “it's not far, nothing will happen to them.”

She pulled him up and dragged him down the hallway as Sintian followed.

“Cera,” Evan slurred, “we need to tell Tarensen, make sure everyone's okay. What if the demons take Jed and the others, someone needs to help them.”

“Everything will be okay.” Cera steered him down another passage.

“Where are we going?” Sintian demanded.

“Here, this is it,” Cera announced, stopping outside a green door.

They entered a chamber with huge windows on every wall. Even as Evan noticed the hole smashed into one of the walls, a huge shape lunged towards him.

No! Not again. He couldn’t take anymore.

The demon, a blue giant with the head of a hyena, was the biggest and most grotesque thing Evan had seen yet.

“Kurrlan sends his greetings, he will reward his Arok,” the demon rasped, his throat not used to human speech.

With one careless swat he sent Sintian rolling across the floor, unconscious, then moved towards Evan.

He had nothing left. He tried to stand before the demon got to him but it was hopeless. He saw the black mist curling around his ankles once again.

Arok paused, the eyes in his hyena-head widening in fear. Unlike the other demons, he appeared to recognise the mist.

Evan didn't want to use that terrible sorcery again, but he knew it was his only chance of destroying his giant foe.

He looked round to tell Cera to run, but she was nowhere in sight.

Good, at least she's safe. But I have to make sure they're all safe.

Emillia, Elijah and Sintian were out cold, he remembered Jed, blood pooling around his head as he lay, possibly dying.

Then he saw Brooke. Over Arok's shoulder, through the crater in the wall, he saw her sprinting across one of Veneseron's bridges as demons chased her. *Not her too!*

He could stop this, make the army go away, he just had to sacrifice himself. Who knew what else was happening around the Fortress? So many lives were in danger, so many lives may have already been taken.

"Wait!" he shouted as Arok advanced tentatively.

"I'll come with you, no struggle, if you promise you'll call off the attack. I don't want anyone else to get hurt. Please, do what you want with me, just leave everyone else alone."

If the demons were called off now they might not catch Brooke in time. He had to surrender himself before they caught her, before Jed died, before the demons killed anyone, if they hadn't already.

"You, come with me? ...No demon magic?" Arok cocked his head.

352

Evan realised the demon was right, the black mist had disappeared.

"Yes, just take me, call off all the others, Yes?"

Arok merely nodded, before flinging Evan over his shoulder and jumping back out of the huge wound in the castle and into the night.

*

Brooke screamed in revulsion as the rotted hand smothered her.

"BROOKE!" She heard the shout in the distance, but then steel blossomed inches to the left of her ear, embedding itself in the zombie's face. The zombie

toppled off the bridge with a groan. Brooke looked down to see Lok throwing another dagger, this one striking the demon behind her.

“Hold on!” she heard him cry as he stared wildly about for a route to take him to her.

Brooke could hardly stay put, there was still two demons on her tail and more pouring out of Castle-Coterie across the bridge.

She kept running, diving into Dragonrock Keep, leaping over the stunned demon before it could stand.

She could feel her magic dwindling and her breath came in ragged, sharp gasps.

She looked at her forearm, expecting to see a terrible wound it stung so badly, but there wasn’t a mark.

This was the third time this had happened, something odd was going on.

Brooke ran the only way she could, up. Up stone staircases and slanting corridors, below her the demons gathered. She climbed the castle until she was on the top floor,

soon there’d be nowhere else to go. A countless multitude of monsters stalked her now, longing to feast.

Panic crashed over Brooke in waves, she was at a dead end. She could hear them just behind her, their excitement increasing to a feverish pitch now they knew she couldn’t escape.

Frantically, Brooke attempted the only thing that might work. Using a fire spell, she burned a hole through the ceiling, then cast an enchantment upon herself so she could jump high enough to seize an edge of the ruined rock and pull herself up onto the battlements.

It was dangerous Brooke knew, but if she didn’t keep moving they’d rip her to pieces. She had never been so scared in her life, and had never felt so alone. She was sure Lok wouldn’t be able to find her in time, and no one else would either.

Brooke attempted to reseal the hole in the roof, but before she could the first of her demon followers was scrabbling his way through. Her sorcery was drained, so she assaulted the abominations with her sword. Over and over again she hacked at the many grotesque bodies until her arms gave out and she could hack no more.

Brooke fell back and slumped to the floor, utterly beaten.

The demons came on relentlessly, shrieking with abysmal mirth as they surged towards her.

She backed away on her hands until she reached the edge of the battlements. The drop below was terrifying, but it would be a better death than the one facing her.

The demons had climbed to the roof now, over a dozen of them, all grinning maliciously; those with mouths at least.

One gave a barked command and they all leapt towards her.

What she thought would be the last scream she ever made was drowned out by the demons' own cries as a blazing orange torrent rushed over them. An inferno smashed into the pack of monsters from above, smouldering them to ruin.

As Daggenite landed on the roof, Arantay bounded from his dragon and hurried towards her. Tears of relief ran down her face as Arantay lifted her to her feet, hugging her tightly.

She sagged in his arms, drained, physically and emotionally.

Brooke wanted to stay there forever, but all too soon Arantay laid her down by Daggenite's magnificent head.

"Ssssh." He hushed his velvet voice as she tried to speak, "rest here, Daggenite will protect you."

Daggenite's yellow eyes gazed into Arantay's and Brooke knew the dragon understood the Elfpire perfectly.

Brooke tried to ask him where he was going, but without another word he’d gone.

*

Arantay leaped from the castle battlements, like a ghostly spectre as he hung mid-air, illuminated by the moons, then he was falling, plummeting towards the earth two hundred feet below.

He landed lithely, before moving across the Veneseron fields faster than any human could.

It had been his job to guard the forest from an attack like this, but he’d left his post.

He’d felt a need to make sure Brooke was safe. As soon as he saw the first demon

from atop Daggenite he had flown, not through the forest to find the source of the attack, but to scour the Fortress to look for her.

It had been a selfish and foolish error and he berated himself as he ran, although he was relieved to have found her when he did, a moment later and the demons would've had her.

His tainted blood pumped through his veins and the fields were replaced by the forest as he ran. Demons whooshed past, but he paid them no heed. To stop this he had to cut off the gateway allowing them access to Veneseron.

As he moved fear shot through his body. The demons appeared in more abundance as he neared his home, where his family had always resided peacefully.

Arantay could not let the demons invade their home. He could not let them harm his mother, his father, even Falawn.

It had previously been indistinguishable through the heavy veils of mist, but now he saw it, smoke was billowing all around. Fire smoke.

No!

The cloying smell of burnt flesh assailed his nostrils.

Then he saw it.

He stopped as suddenly as if he'd been frozen in ice.

His heart ceased to beat, bile rose in his mouth and his stomach heaved.

His home was in ruins.

The huts of his tribe were ablaze, and bodies littered the forest floor, their blood staining the foliage red.

He arrived only to see his brethren being ripped apart by the demons.

Arantay rarely showed emotion, never even raised his voice, but in that moment a piercing scream was wrenched from his soul.

356

His lips skinned back in a vicious snarl, exposing razor-sharp fangs as his face twisted and emaciated, becoming a mask of passionate fury.

He gave himself over to the vampiric side he had restrained for so long. The peaceful elf had surrendered.

A pale flash and then he was amongst them, ripping their arms off with his bare hands, rending their faces with his teeth.

The demons fell back before the red haired terror that exploded through them, cutting them down like wheat, a vampiric harvester.

So many dead. Everywhere he looked he saw fallen elves.

Since he'd turned into an Elfpire he'd no longer been truly one of them, but he still remembered. He remembered the young days as an elven boy playing with those that were now no more than husks and body parts. He cursed the demons, he cursed himself for letting it happen, and he cursed the vampire inside of him.

This madness was nothing, however, nothing to what he witnessed at the end of his rampage.

He had slaughtered them all save a small group clustered over something in the distance.

Arantay loped towards them, growling like the horrific beast he had become, blood dripped from his elongated fangs to stain the porcelain of his skin.

He felt his mind collapse when he saw what the demons were clustered over.

His body gave out and he fell to his knees, breath seemed to have left him forever.

His parents! The demons were eating the dead bodies of his mother and father.

He was paralysed with appalling horror and unbearable grief. His whole body wracked as his heart smashed his chest and his brain pounded against his skull.

And then...

357

Arantay roared. The anguish and sorrow that consumed him was devoured by hatred as he saw the lone figure in the trees, watching the demons slaughter his own parents.

“Falawn!” Arantay’s mouth barely formed the word, he was beyond speech.

The two brothers looked at one another, Arantay a quivering mess upon the ground, Falawn still and silent.

“You would not understand, parasite,” said Falawn, a fanatical gleam in his eyes.

His face was like nothing human. “I am a hero. I am only saving Veneseron from its own destruction.”

Horrible, dawning realisation broke upon Arantay’s fragile mind.

His own brother had done this, he'd let the demons invade Veneseron, let them kill their entire tribe, destroy his own parents. Falawn was beyond madness, and

now Arantay had joined him.

Fear distorted Falawn’s cold countenance as Arantay rushed him.

Falawn yelled and the demons rapidly left mother and father to kill the son whilst the traitor made good his escape.

But the demons couldn’t stop Arantay, nothing in this world or any other could.

The monsters converged as Falawn took off into the shadows and Arantay keened awfully. Ripping the face off one demon, then obliterating another with a single kick, caving in the skull. A twist of his hands and he’d uncorked another malformed head, a tug and he had yanked a body clean in half.

He thundered through the trees after his brother, all coherent thought vanished.

Pain wracked his body, but all he could think of was vengeance.

Before them the vast crackling portal appeared, continuing to spit demons into the night.

358

Arantay screamed as Falawn plunged straight through it.

Arantay followed him, throwing himself into the demon realms beyond, stopping at nothing to hunt down and kill his brother.

*

Tarensen crashed into the trial chamber, minutes after the first demon attack. He looked frenziedly for Evan and instead found Gettelung unconscious on the floor.

He swooped down to heal the fallen master. He felt the venom inside Gettelung’s body and used his healing magic to cease its course. Abruptly Gettelung awoke.

“Where's Evan?” Tarensen commanded.

“…the Citadel…after you,” Gettelung wheezed.

Tarensen swore violently, leaping to his feet and storming from the room.

His wrath was incredible. A demon invasion on Veneseron should be impossible.

Tarensen had failed, every single Venator was in danger, he couldn’t find Evan and he didn’t know why the fiends were after him.

Most of all, his wrath was for his father.

VANDERAIN!

He roared inwardly, willing his father to pick up on it. He hadn’t heard from the Master Eternal in months.

Father, your world is under attack! Demons have invaded Veneseron!

He knew the higher ranked Reamers could take care of themselves, they always encountered demons on missions and it was what they were trained for. But the Apprentices, and especially the Novices, would be battling for their lives.

He couldn’t, and wouldn’t, let that happen under his command.

359

If Vanderain was here this never would've happened, if Vanderain was here he could put an end to this.

Tarensen blasted demons apart as he passed them, breaking back out into the night.

He cast a spell on himself so he could glide over the battling Venators towards the Master's Citadel. He was much delayed however, as he kept needing to save Novice’s from danger.

By the time he arrived outside the Citadel, Urkzal and the city army had already flooded through, annihilating the immediate threat of the demons to the children.

The relief he felt at this was immediately dashed when he reached Taretta.

“Did Umbra pass through here?”

“Yes, I called after him but he didn’t hear me,” she replied.

A second later the far wall of the Citadel exploded.

Tarensen and Taretta both dived into the Castle.

The chamber beyond was crawling with demons. Tarensen waded through them frantically, spotting Sintian on a flight of stairs ahead, running towards the scene of the explosion.

The two Masters quickly destroyed the dozens of demons filling the room, but not quickly enough.

By the time they had travelled up to the explosion only the motionless bodies of Elijah, Emillia and Jed remained.

“We’re too late,” he gasped.

Evan was gone.

Taretta hurried to Jed, the other two were breathing shallowly, but Jed wasn’t breathing at all, and his head was covered in blood.

360

Father. Tarensen called out desperately, seeking a connection with the Eternal wherever he may be.

They have taken one of our own; they have taken a young Venator boy.

As Tarensen sprinted to the gaping hole in the side of the castle he felt the presence he had been striving to feel for months.

Vanderain had returned.

I will find him.

Then he was gone, a second’s communication and the Immortal Master had vanished.

Tarensen prayed his father could find Evan in time.

*

Evan felt consciousness slipping from him as his head lolled drunkenly from side to side. He was just too drained, too weak.

It was over.

There was nothing he could do. Even if he did have his magic back, even if he could summon the black mist again he wouldn't. He was doing the right thing; he was saving countless lives by surrendering himself.

The forest was eerily silent as the demon bounded through it.

The only thing Evan could feel was fear.

Burning buildings flitted past, broken bodies splayed across the forest floor.

All this death, all this suffering, because of him. And Evan didn’t even know why.

361

Terror consumed him as a vast demonic portal loomed into view. This was it. He was being taken to the demon worlds. To leave Veneseron forever. To leave the only place that had ever felt like home, to leave all the people he’d ever loved.

He saw rows upon rows of the demon horde following Arok as he headed for the portal, they were leaving. Evan had done it, his friends would be safe now, one life for thousands, that was fair.

The grotesque monster leapt into the swirling portal, Evan helpless in his arms, helpless against whatever lay in the demonic depths ahead.

Chapter 24- Dread Lord’s Doom

The cirrus clouds were wisps of scarlet as they raced across the ravaged sky. It was a vicious ocean of rolling, seething blood, a terrible black sun brooding among its midst.

The juggernaut landed on the other side of the portal, entering the hellish domain

of his master. Evan slung, half conscious, across his scaly back.

The crimson sky was rent as black forks of lightning streaked across it and struck the warped grey earth with sickening explosions.

362

A broken castle lay in wait beyond an acidic emerald river, complete with a vast bridge of bones, which was the only way to cross- alive.

The Dread Lord’s domain stood sadistically, its razor tipped turrets gleaming, whetted by the blood of those whose remains lay littered everywhere.

Evan glimpsed all these nightmarish scenes hazily as his monstrous captor headed for the hideous black castle.

Fear ripped into every fibre of his being as the ghastly images continued to assault him: A flock of giant horned bats soaring through the sky, gargantuan golems crawling sluggishly through the grey earth, and mysterious saurian things writhing in the green river below the bridge they crossed.

Evan saw more demons up ahead, hanging from the castle windows, scuttling along its black walls like giant spiders, capering across its battlements in brutal bliss.

This can't be happening. Why is this happening? Couldn’t they just kill me and have it over with. Death has to be better than what these things have planned for me.

These thoughts screamed through Evan’s mind as his eyes glazed. He longed for them to close, to shut out the horrors hounding his vision, but he couldn’t help himself, he was oddly mesmerised by the sick sights.

They passed through the castle entrance. Other monsters, insectoid apparitions and phantasmagorical forms, followed Evan and his unwanted escort, giggling or moaning with relish.

It was hot outside, like a furnace, but inside it was cold as the arctic. Evan’s breath was a misty vapour, forming into cloudy tendrils which snaked to the stone ceiling.

His captor didn’t seem to need to breathe at all.

Goosebumps broke out on Evan’s flesh. His skin ached; the cold was so vicious.

His body shivered uncontrollably, not only from fear now.

363

The mountainous black walls widened, opening into a majestic chamber. The demons continued to follow, sealing off the doorway. Further demons leaped through the windows, clinging to the walls with mirth, growing in number by the second, multiplying like bacteria.

There was no way out, even if Evan’s magic wasn’t depleted. He knew, without any flicker of hope, he was going to die soon.

Arok set him down, at the foot of a twisted throne.

The throne appeared to be hewn from the bones of many victims, like the bridge had been. Atop this formation of once living beings sat a medium sized figure, hidden beneath a midnight blue cloak and hood.

“At last, Arok, a thousand thanks,” a voice beneath the hood rattled.

Evan stared transfixed. He couldn’t move a muscle, not because of any enchantment, but by pure terror. An army of monsters lapped against the walls like demonic waves as they hissed, crooned and giggled.

He couldn't stop his eyes flitting from side to side, drinking in the grotesqueries leering at him voraciously. Evan knew the only reason they were not upon him now was because of the hooded lord atop the throne, but he sensed it was only a matter of time before the lord gave the order.

His life rushed by in fragments, his quiet upbringing alone with his grandma, how it shattered when she died, the bullying from Olly, the miraculous discovery he was a Venator, the weeks of knowing he was being hunted, and now this, seconds away from death. Never once, even after Evan discovered he was a Venator, did he think his death would come being ripped limb from limb and feasted upon.

Through his fear-crazed mind he was aware that the hooded figure sniffed. The raw power and dark charisma was such that Evan noticed even the smallest gestures of the figure. This had to be the Dread Lord.

“Your fear is delightful,” the Lord rasped, sick mirth laced in his papery tone.

Evan was unable to look away, as the hooded head slowly rose from its bowed position to face him.

A scream of pure insanity erupted from Evan. The face of the Dread Lord made him scrabble backwards on his hands, screeching.

Kurrlan’s eyes were purely flame, ethereal balls of blue fire that blazed blasphemy.

These sapphire fires were set in an unimaginably grotesque head of saggy grey folds.

Only the eyes and a thin gash of a mouth marked the appalling face. He bore no visible nose, teeth or ears, just lank green hair resembling seaweed which flowed to his shoulders.

Kurrlan laughed hollowly at Evan’s reaction, a sibilant sound that bred despair.

He drew forth a whip of blue fire from the folds of his cloak, flinging it towards Evan lazily.

Evan backed away frenziedly, but the whip snaked around his ankle, scorching the flesh as it touched.

The rows of demons cackled ecstatically as Evan was dragged across the floor.

Kurrlan’s laughter overrode Evan’s screams of terror as he pulled Evan towards him, inch by inch. At last he tugged the whip again and the fire left Evan’s ankle, back into its wielder’s hands.

Evan rolled into a ball, whimpering as he clutched his blistering foot.

“Pathetic,” Kurrlan spat, concealing the whip in his cloak once more.

“It amazes me it took you so long to bring him to me, my dear.”

365

Evan looked up, confused as to who Kurrlan was speaking to.

Then he saw her.

She walked out from behind Kurrlan's throne, grinning gleefully, very impressed with herself.

Evan couldn't believe his eyes. He couldn't understand what she was doing here.

Why was she smiling? The demons could rip her to pieces at any moment.

“Cera?” he rasped.

*

A tingling sensation, bright light ripping through the dark and then Jed awoke.

Taretta bent over him, her hand resting on Jed’s head where moments before she’d managed to heal him, possibly from death. If Taretta hadn’t been so skilled at healing, Jed suspected he wouldn’t have survived.

After a few confused seconds Jed snapped to attention, lurching to his feet and searching for the demons.

“They have been destroyed,” Tarensen informed him curtly.

Jed’s Novice clothes were splashed black with demon ichors, but his hair was scarlet with his own blood. He looked about blearily, noticing Taretta crouched over Elijah and Emillia as she healed them.

Sintian lounged against the far wall, his dark eyes brooding and downcast, as if deep in thought.

“Where’s Evan?”

“Gone,” said Sintian, clutching a wound at his side, “this big-ass demon grabbed him and jumped out of the castle.”

366

“No!”

Jed ran to the nearest window, only cold night and heavy mist stretched beyond.

“We’ve gotta’ go after him,” he shouted. “They’ll kill him!”

“They’ll do worse than that,” Sintian muttered.

“Silence,” Tarensen barked, “Vanderain has returned at last. He will find Evan and bring him back.”

Rage boiled up inside of him.

“Oh, so we’re just supposed to sit here and do nothing, rely on some bloke who hasn’t been here in months to do it for us.”

“Vanderain will not fail,” Tarensen glared.

“How do you know? We don’t even know where *he* is. He’s never seen Evan, how’s he supposed to find him if a demon’s taken him off to some hell? There are thousands of different worlds. Are you telling me this Vanderain has a better chance than we do? If we don’t hurry Evan will be lost forever.”

Sintian spoke up, “You’ve been out of it for a while, the demon would've taken Evan out of Veneseron by now, it’s hopeless…”

“No,” Tarensen cut in. “I told you Vanderain will find him. For millennia he has roamed the realms, if anyone can find Umbra, it’s him.”

“And what if he’s already dead?” Jed yelled.

Tarensen’s hard lined face softened. “Then there’s nothing we can do.”

The words hit Jed like an avalanche.

Right now, there was a very strong possibility his best friend was dead, eaten

alive by demons.

“We have to do something,” desperation filled Jed’s voice. “I can’t just stand here and wait.”

367

“You must,” Tarensen commanded. “Now, I must attend to the other Venators,” he strode down the corridor, “and pray Evan was our only casualty.”

Silence reigned after Tarensen left.

Elijah and Emillia staggered to their feet, staring at the blood staining their uniforms.

Jed heard voices faintly. He remembered their group had been separated by the explosion during the battle.

Taretta told them all to stand back as she shifted the pile of rubble using Earth element.

His mind fraught with anxiety, Jed whirled and left without a word as his fellow Venators emerged. He couldn’t stand to be around them all at a time like this.

Horrible visions of what could be happening to Evan refused to leave his head as he left the Master's Citadel back out into the night.

He felt unbearably weak as he walked, his magic drained and every muscle aching.

Despite Taretta healing the wound in his head it throbbed agonisingly.

After a couple of minutes in the cold night air he realised he was being followed.

He whirled to find Sintian behind him, his malevolent eyes glaring.

“If I were you I wouldn’t be so sure if I wanted Evan back.”

“What are you on about?” Jed demanded, in disbelief that Sintian would continue their petty rivalry at a time like this.

“Before he was taken, after you got knocked out, Evan used a magic.”

“So what,” Jed snapped.

“It was a dark magic, a power only certain demons possess, a power only Dread Lords can use.”

Jed didn’t know what to say, *was he lying? But why would he*?

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“What was it?” he asked quietly.

“I’m not sure how Evan did it, or exactly what it was, but I know what it did.”

Sintian hesitated. “He ripped out their souls, Jed. Evan’s sorcery did far worse than kill the demons.”

A long pause ensued between them, until Jed broke it. “It’s no more than they deserve. I’m surprised demons have souls.”

Jed turned and left. Sintian didn't follow again.

Jed tried to push this new revelation away from his mind. As far as he was concerned Evan had never done anything else like that before, and there was still the possibility Sintian could be lying. Either way, it didn’t matter, Evan was his friend and he was missing.

He'd thought the Fortress was supposed to be safe.

He hadn't been strong enough to fight them, he had fallen, and Evan had been left helpless.

But this wasn’t supposed to have happened, they were only Novices. Veneseron shouldn't have been attacked. *Why? How?*

Above all he hoped no one else had been hurt in addition to Evan, he couldn’t bring himself to imagine someone might’ve been killed.

Brooke. The thought reverberated through his consciousness.

None of them had seen her throughout the battle. In fact, Jed hadn’t seen her for perhaps a day before.

Where was she?

*

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Brooke struggled to keep her eyes open. They kept attempting to seal themselves shut as she fought fatigue.

Daggenite stared serenely down at her, his scales as red as Arantay’s hair.

The sounds of battle had faded, the cackles and shrieks of the demons had vanished. She prayed that meant good news.

But, if the demons were beaten, why hadn't Arantay come back?

At one point there’d been a soul-shattering cry from the forest.

Daggenite’s head had snapped in the direction of the cry, a scream full of more despair and grief than she'd ever heard. She thought Daggenite had wanted to fly off and leave her, but Arantay's command kept him in place.

Brooke attempted to sit up, breathing jaggedly against the pain coursing through her body, as she did two figures burst out onto the roof, swords raised.

The Arch-Realmers gasped when they saw her. Their swords and armour were marred with demon blood, but they appeared unhurt.

Lok, ash-blonde hair for once dirty and untidy, looked immensely relieved; he rushed to her side.

Daggenite growled as Lok approached. Lok glanced at the magnificent beast once wearily before proceeding towards her and bending down.

“Thank Rueda, we-we thought you might’ve died.”

His blue eyes still blazing from the battle Tyrell said, “We tried to reach you as fast as we could, but there were so many demons in the way.”

“It’s okay. Arantay, well his dragon, killed the monsters after me.”

“Arantay,” Lok said sharply, “where is he?”

“I don’t know, he jumped off the roof. The forest I think, but I can’t be sure.”

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Tyrell nodded. “He must've seen the demon scum off back through the portal. I’ll make sure he’s okay.”

With a nod to Lok, Tyrell departed.

Lok placed his hand gently on her shoulders. “Here let me.” As Lok lifted Brooke to her feet Daggenite growled.

“Easy beast.” Lok eyed the great behemoth. “She’s fine now. I’m here.”

The dragon gave a thunderous snort before spreading his wings and leaping off the castle, soaring towards the forest.

Lok’s hands remained on Brooke’s shoulders as her body trembled. “I’ll be okay,”

she rasped. “I just need to get some sleep I think.”

Lok nodded, his large brown eyes staring into her own amber.

His gaze averted as he watched the gargantuan dragon begin to skim the tree tops, already far away. “Bet you that brute finds Tay before Tyrell does.” A crooked smile broke his heart shaped face.

Brooke didn’t respond, wishing it was her that could find Arantay first.

She thought she heard Daggenite roar mournfully.

Brooke made to turn back to Lok and screamed.

Before either of them could move, the demon behind him smashed its boulder-like fist into Lok's head.

The Arch-Realmer was thrown to the floor, instantly unconscious.

No, I thought they were all gone.

This newest demon was terrible to behold. A Cyclops with one terrible eye, black spikes for hair and giant hands carved out of rock.

As Brooke staggered away, she saw two more demons pull themselves through the hole in the roof.

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The monster swung at her with astonishing violence, no doubt trying to take her head clean off. Brooke managed to duck his strike, but tripped over her own feet doing so.

The Cyclops stamped on her leg, pinning her to the floor. As Brooke screamed in agony the monster seized her neck with one of his stone hands and squeezed. Her air supply was cut off instantly. It felt like her whole face was swelling up and her eyes were going to pop out of her head.

The other two demons chortled as she punched their companions' massive body desperately. Her frantic blows had no effect whatsoever. Her vision was going black at the edges. This was it, a few seconds more and she'd have been choked to death.

Faintly, Brooke felt the stinging pain in her forearm resurface.

From the corner of her eye she saw one of the veins in her arm had gone black, weirder still this vein was pushing itself towards her wrist.

She felt only a burning itch as the vein forced itself out through the palm of her hand, separating into a curling black mist. Waves of shock matched the pressure of being choked as the black mist contorted itself into the shape of a dagger.

Brooke had no time to question this phenomenon as her life was on the line.

Instinctively, she snapped her hand up and drove the black dagger into the demon's one massive eye.

As the monster roared in horror, his body was sucked into the shadow knife.

Brooke spluttered and coughed, her body convulsing as it tried to retrieve all the oxygen it had lost.

For the first time, Brooke witnessed fear in a demon's face as she stood. The two remaining monsters stared at her shadow dagger in utter terror. The knife snaked forward of its own volition, dragging Brooke behind it as it plunged itself into the

nearest demon's stomach. This demon too was sucked into the dagger, the dagger that was still using her palm as a sheath.

The third demon tried to run, but Brooke's shadow weapon caused her to slash lightning quick, slashing the monster's throat.

The minion’s blood was sucked into the blade first, and then his body followed, as if her shadow knife was a magnet.

As this final demon was destroyed the blade flew out of her palm completely, levitating in the air instead.

Brooke watched in astonishment as the blade contorted into a dark swirling portal before vanishing from existence.

She looked down at her hand, but there wasn’t even a scratch.

“By Rueda!”

Brooke whirled at the sound of the voice and saw Tarensen behind her.

*

Evan fought to find words, “Cera, wha- what's going on?”

“He's not just pathetic, he's rather stupid too, master.” Cera grinned up at Kurrlan.

“Demon magic is wasted on him,” she snarled.

It felt like a hand had gripped Evan's heart and was throwing it repeatedly at his ribcage. He felt sick. This couldn't be happening. This couldn’t be real. *Not her!*

“You didn't really think a girl as hot as me would be interested in an ugly loser like you, did you?” Cera giggled. “Oh Evan, that's tragic.”

“Why?” Was all Evan could say.

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“I couldn't do magic,” Cera's face contorted as she seethed. “No matter how many experiments my father did, I just couldn't do it. It's rare for someone, even with two Venator parents, to just be a normal human, but it happened to me. My father couldn't stand it. *I* couldn't stand it. But thanks to Lord Kurrlan I can. He gave me the gift of sorcery.” She grinned maniacally. “All I needed to do, to keep my magic forever, was betray the Fortress. I had to get close to you, Kurrlan said you needed to trust me completely, you’re all he wants. But we can still be together, Evan, you can even share your demon sorcery with me too, I don't mind. I want it.” Madness glittered in her eyes. “Demon magic is just so strong, why don't you give me some? We can be unbelievably powerful together…please,” she pleaded.

Evan couldn't comprehend that this was Cera in front of him. This had to be a trick, some illusion. Cera was a kind, sweet girl, not a power-obsessed lunatic who’d betray Veneseron.

“Now, now, my dear, don't get ahead of yourself,” Kurrlan hissed.

“You, you must've possessed her,” Evan stammered, “or one of your servants has just shifted to look like Cera.”

Kurrlan laughed, a deep and terrible sound. “No boy. Cera has become one of my most loyal servants. The idiot elf Falawn was a helpful soldier, but he obeyed my commands through Cera. I needed her to make sure I got you.”

“It was so annoying,” Cera sounded so different, like a petulant child. “After the demon I led into your bedroom failed, I had to attack you myself. I was going to choke you until you collapsed, then bring you to Kurrlan. But then those Realmers entered the passage and I had to run.”

“No, that couldn't have been you,” Evan cried.

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“Sure was,” Cera beamed. “When I took you to the forest I was sure I'd succeeded.

I told the demons to make it look real when they attacked me too, but then Tarensen and that damn Elfpire intervened.”

“It's okay, child,” Kurrlan cooed, “tonight you led him straight to Arok, your job is complete.”

“But…your family, I went to your house,” said Evan.

“Oh, they just wanted to see the demon-child I was delivering to our master. Father wanted to kill Jed and take you to Kurrlan right then, but mother convinced him it was too dangerous, people on the streets may have heard something.”

Evan continued to stare at her, appalled.

Cera smiled meekly back at him. “I told you before, someone like me shouldn’t be magically barren. I had to do something to get sorcery of my own. My family and I were desperate.”

“Enough,” Kurrlan snapped. “We must check our efforts were not in vain.”

“He does possess demon magic,” Cera said, eager to please. “He almost used it in the forest attack. He had no idea of course.”

Kurrlan nodded, his eyes burning with iniquitous intent.

“Let’s see if we can bring it out of him.” The Dread Lord descended from his throne to where Evan huddled. He stretched out one rotting grey hand and black tendrils seeped up from the ground.

“You can only fight demon magic *with* demon magic,” Kurrlan purred, his atrocity of a mouth widening in glee as the tendrils snaked around Evan.

PAIN. The most unendurable, unimaginable pain he’d ever felt surged through his body, through his blood, through his soul.

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“Your soul shall be ripped from your body if you do not combat it.” Kurrlan rasped sickeningly, “FIGHT ME, BOY.”

Evan broke.

Magic flooded through him, not the sorcery he'd been taught at Veneseron, but the dark magic he had no idea how to control.

The wisps of shadow that bound and leeched into him snapped as Evan's sorcery ripped it apart. What looked like an army of black snakes battled one another around his pain wracked body.

“YES,” Kurrlan crooned ecstatically, “after years of searching. I had all my sensors out, just waiting for you. A flicker of your demon magic meant I could pinpoint your location. I have you now. You’re the one, aren’t you? You are mine.”

Suddenly the magic was gone, the pain evaporated.

Evan thought back to one of Ollie's more brutal beat-downs. It was the first time he’d seen the black mist. That must've been when Kurrlan started the hunt for him.

He laid on the cold stone, panting erratically, the memory of the pain tormenting him.

Kurrlan sat back on his throne. “You shall be rewarded, Arok, for you have brought the one I seek. With him, my powers can at last come to fruition.”

Arok bowed his head solemnly at his master’s words. Evan’s sight was blurring from the aftershock of the pain, perhaps now he would get his wish and be consumed by the darkness forever.

“You too, my dear, I'll make sure you possess sorcery until the day you die.”

“Oh thank you, my lord,” Cera gushed.

“Now go, inform your family our deal is done.”

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Cera giggled as she left the hall, pausing to pet the head of a ferret demon affectionately.

“Bring him to his feet,” Kurrlan hissed.

Arok obliged, hefting Evan to his feet once again and propping him up.

Evan’s head sagged as he struggled to stay awake. Arok seized his head and held it in place, leaving Evan no choice but to stare at the atrocity lounging in his throne.

“You have no idea just how important you are, do you?” Kurrlan said. “I thought you were lost forever. I thought none of your kind existed anymore. Oh, you can only imagine the desire I felt when I heard that *you* were still out there. You are the key. I don't know how many of you Akirandon managed to create in the end, but I only need one to gain the power I've always dreamed of. And she has no idea,” Kurrlan cackled.

“With you I will be able to overthrow her. Claim Velkarath as my own and go on to rule all the realms.” Kurrlan’s smile slipped. “But Akirandon may have more like you at Velkarath. I might have to find your kin before I can destroy her. Hmmm, but you will lead me to the others, won't you? Yes, two more should do.

With you at my side, my power shall become unimaginable. Time itself will bend to my will, space shall be my servant. I shall be second only to the Dark God himself.”

Evan hardly registered Kurrlan’s speech. He was in too much pain and barely anything he'd said made any sense.

His eyes wandered the demon decorated room of their own accord, no longer caring what happened to him, wishing only for release.

As he watched still more demons crawled through the windows into the room,

clambering over one anothers abominable bodies to get closer to the human flesh lying tantalisingly before them. A winged snake-like demon flew through one

window, followed by a grotesque monkey-like amalgamation with vibrant eyes of brilliant silver. Evan noticed the monkey demon was not laughing at his fate like the others, he moved silently, weaving his way amongst the horde of fiends between them both. His silky golden coat contrasting with his amazingly silver eyes.

“Years ago Akirandon used me to spy on the other Dread Lords, but I spied on her too.” Kurrlan continued. “I learned of her secret, she’d succeeded in creating several demon-spawn. Then I learned they all died in the war. That was, until Arok informed me of a strange power when he was visiting your realm. What Arok described to me was so strange, I wondered, could it be? Could one of you have survived?”

The mist, thought Evan, the first time he saw it was in the beating Ollie gave him a few days before Pete’s disappearance, it must’ve been like a beacon for any nearby demons.

“I could not enter Earth myself, nor could I enter Veneseron once you were there, thanks to your damned Venators. I sent a minion to Earth, unlike me his lowly power wouldn’t be detected by Vanderain and his Realmer fools. But his stupidity led him to the wrong boy, and his hunger led him to eat instead of capture.”

Pete, thought Evan faintly. Kurrlan’s minion had killed his Orphanage neighbour; it had nearly been him.

“Fortunately my demon did not feast upon you too. Now I knew where to look.

I could still sense you were alive and well. You were so nearly mine, but then Sellatur betrayed me. Some might say fate is on your side, little monster, but I don’t believe in fate, only the power you will give me.”

Kurrlan’s laconic laughter cut short as he considered Evan in further detail. “I never thought to see one such as you ever again.” His voice altered, becoming soft, and full of awe.

“Akirandon shall serve me now. Her Rakarn will bow and scrape at my command.

She'll never resurrect her god and rule with him. Indeed, it'll be better for all the realms if I am their ruler.”

A dark green tongue flitted out of Kurrlan’s mouth to lick his wretched lips. “Do you even know who your mother is, child? All she went through to create you?”

Mother? What mother? Evan could hardly put thought together in his mind.

“You don't, do you?” Kurrlan cackled again. “Don’t worry, you belong to me now.

My demon child, I always fancied a son.”

Evan found his stare transfixed on the golden monkey in the demon crowd. The monkey’s eyes suddenly locked on to Evan’s and he gasped as the demon winked at him.

Vanderain!

Evan didn’t know how he knew it; he just knew that he did.

Impossibly, irrevocably, hope flickered inside of him. There might be a chance he could get out of this alive.

The monkey was transforming and as it broke through the demon ranks it showed its true form.

The golden coat contorted to a head of long blond hair. The body grew and became human, only the vibrant silver eyes remained the same.

A young man of medium height and dressed in red tunic and trousers stood before them. Apart from the eyes Vanderain appeared entirely unremarkable. He was rakishly slim, his blond hair falling to his shoulders, framing a roguishly handsome face. However, that face was currently set in a death mask of power and barely restrained fury.

Kurrlan’s head snapped in Vanderain’s direction as he appeared, his gash of a mouth opened in a silent scream as Vanderain’s brilliant stare came to rest upon him.

Without a word Vanderain flicked his wrist. Instantly, the mountainous bulk that was Arok exploded. Evan fell to the floor, Arok's grip relinquished as his body parts flew everywhere.

Seeing this, Kurrlan recovered his voice. “KILL HIM,” he screeched hysterically.

As one, the demon ranks flew towards the Eternal.

Vanderain’s eyes remained on Kurrlan as his other hand twitched and Evan witnessed the most amazing spectacle he’d ever seen.

Every single demon was destroyed simultaneously. They did not die, they simply ceased to exist. With one casual gesture Vanderain had disintegrated their very beings, erasing them from all the worlds.

At Veneseron Evan had had no luck sensing the magic in his fellow Venators, but the magic emanating from Vanderain was beyond belief. It appeared to make the air around them tremble.

“NOOOO,” Kurrlan crooned.

The Master Eternal moved to stand between Evan and the enraged Dread Lord, his face passive as he regarded the monster.

He cocked his head to the side as he addressed Kurrlan. “Your army is less than dust, you shall soon share their fate. You may prolong your undoing if you tell me why you captured and proceeded to torture one of my Venators.”

Kurrlan answered by wielding his whip. Eyes of blue flame blazed as hot as his weapon as he slashed at the Eternal.

Vanderain didn’t flinch, but caught the whip effortlessly, showing no reaction to the fire burning him.

With a sharp tug he pulled Kurrlan forward, flinging the Dread Lord from his throne to the floor.

Kurrlan gibbered as Vanderain pulled him across the flagstones like a rag doll, just how Kurrlan had earlier manipulated Evan.

Through the struggle Kurrlan’s cloak slipped off. Evan screamed again. Kurrlan’s body was indescribable, even worse than his mockery of a face.

Kurrlan screamed too, lashing out at the whip and hacking it in two.

Vanderain cast the now useless weapon aside as Kurrlan struggled to his feet, summoning demon magic.

Evan’s breath caught as he again saw the black tendrils which caused him so much agony.

“Cease, or I shall destroy you now,” Vanderain spoke in his powerful, melodic tone.

Kurrlan’s answer was indistinguishable as he leapt at the Eternal, the black magic twisting into hideous formations before him.

Vanderain's face showed discomfort for the first time as the black sorcery writhed around him. He conjured a brilliant sword of bright light and began hacking the tendrils apart.

Kurrlan roared in fury, summoning more and more demon magic.

Evan could see Vanderain struggling under the onslaught, but he couldn't help him.

All his sorcery was gone and Evan didn't know how to use his demon power.

He saw one half of Kurrlan's fire whip feet away, the half with a bone handle.

Evan seized his moment, dragging himself to his feet and fighting through the agony.

Clutching the handle Evan swung the whip of flames with all his might, striking Kurrlan's skull.

Kurrlan stumbled, turning towards him in shock as Evan struck him again. This time the whip lashed across his face. Kurrlan screeched fury.

He ran at Evan, his rotting hand clasping him by the throat. Evan began choking, his breath squeezed out of him.

In the distraction Vanderain had cut the black tendrils aside and now surged forwards, plunging his sword into Kurrlan's stomach.

Evan fell back, gasping for air as Kurrlan's body shone with a bright light.

Vanderain wrenched his sword back out and Kurrlan convulsed, the light spreading all over his body like fire.

“Ezanathul will destroy you all,” he rasped before falling to the ground, no more than smoking ash.

Evan trembled from the shock of all that had happened to him. His body was wracked with wounds, from the battle at Veneseron which now felt so long ago, and the immense torture from Kurrlan.

“I am so sorry,” Vanderain crouched by his side, his expression filled with remorse. “This is my fault. I should never have left the Fortress for so long.”

Evan wanted to speak but nothing came out, he was so utterly exhausted, blackness encroached upon the edges of his vision.

Vanderain placed a hand on Evan’s chest. Evan immediately felt the cold tingling sensation that always came with healing as his body started to mend itself.

The Master Eternal, however, couldn’t rid Evan’s mental pain, all he'd seen, heard and felt.

“It’s all over now.”

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At last Evan’s wish was granted and he fell into the realms of unconsciousness, shrouded by darkness.

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Chapter 25- Mother Of Evil

Brooke paced the length of her room relentlessly. Tarensen had told her to stay there until he returned. Her mind was awash with anxiety. Whatever Tarensen was doing couldn't be good.

She'd been there for hours. Just…waiting. It was driving her crazy.

The enchanted knife she'd conjured played on her mind too, but what tormented her most was not knowing if everyone was alive and safe.

She had no idea if Evan, Jed, or Arantay had been injured in the battle, or worse.

The door opened suddenly and Tarensen strode in.

“Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To see Vanderain.”

“Where did you go? It's been ages, I've been so scared.”

“I travelled to your former home,” he replied curtly.

“You what!” Brooke gasped.

Tarensen sighed. “No normal Venator can do what you did. There had to be a reason why you possessed such magic. As I expected, your parents, or who you thought were your parents, had had their memories altered. A man had visited them sixteen years ago, carrying you. I don’t know why he picked them, perhaps he saw that your mother looked similar to Herak. Regardless, this stranger used powerful sorcery to convince your false-parents that you were their newest child. From their

bizarre description of this strange man I have no doubt he was a demon lord in disguise, maybe even a Demon Disciple."

Brooke wondered if she was hearing things right.

"How- how can this be possible? What do you mean my parents aren't my real parents? What's this damn Herak guy got to do with it?"

"Vanderain will explain everything."

*

Evan awoke on a hard bed. He was back at Veneseron, he knew by the sense of familiarity and safety he felt. As he looked around Evan recognised Tarensen's quarters. It was Vanderain, however, who stood over him.

"Easy," Vanderain said softly, "demon magic is a lot harder to cure. I've healed your wounds, but you will feel very weak for a few hours yet."

Evan sat up, indeed feeling feeble and unfocused.

Vanderain sat on a wooden chair before him, roguish smile once again plastered on his youthful visage.

"Lo' there, I haven't officially introduced myself. I'm Vanderain, but you can call me Neddy."

"Wha…"

Vanderain chuckled. "Probably ill timing for a joke."

Everything came flooding back to Evan in a torrent, for a moment all the horror threatened to overwhelm him. Slowly, the horror was replaced with relief as Evan realised it was over, he wasn't going to be slaughtered by Kurrlan and his demons.

Evan stared up at the mythical master in wonderment. Vanderain was so different

to what he had expected. Aside from his silver eyes he appeared normal. He looked very young, in his late twenties at most. A timeless quality to his features indicated how long he'd been alive however.

Evan hadn’t been expecting this at all.

From all the rumours maybe he'd expected some intimidating muscular warrior, even bigger than Urkzal.

Then again from what he'd heard about how old Vanderain was supposed to be, maybe he'd anticipated an elderly man with a stooped back and a long white beard.

Vanderain was short and slender, his skin a suntanned bronze. He had high cheekbones, thin eyebrows and lashes the same light gold of his hair. He appeared so harmless and ordinary that Evan had trouble remembering how powerful and infuriated he'd been in Kurrlan's realm.

But there was no mistaking the raw and devastating power emanating from him, just below the surface. Evan had seen what the Eternal was capable of.

“Is everyone okay? Did the demons kill anyone?” Evan blurted out.

Vanderain’s brow furrowed faintly and his smile retreated. “None of the Venators were harmed seriously. There are two dozen injured Realmers in our infirmary, but they shall make full recoveries. It was a bold but desperate attack by Kurrlan. His army consisted of lesser demons, little match for our higher ranked Realmers.”

Evan breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“However,” Vanderain continued sombrely, “there were casualties.”

Evan’s stomach lurched.

“The elves of Veneseron forest have been slain.” Anguish overshadowed Vanderain’s voice. “Except two. The brothers Arantay and Falawn have disappeared.

Rumours are circulating that Falawn was the traitor, that he opened a gateway for Kurrlan's demons.”

The word traitor made Evan's stomach clench painfully as he remembered all Cera had done.

“Vanderain, it was Cera too, she-”

Vanderain held up a hand for silence. “I know. Lord Sangel and his wife disappeared shortly before the battle began. After I returned you here, the Masters noticed all the Venators were safe and present except Cera. When Padrake checked the Sangel house he discovered evidence of communications between the family and Kurrlan himself.”

Vanderain sighed heavily. “I suspect they turned to the side of demons only recently. Lord Sangel may have brainwashed his daughter to follow his ways, but I suspect otherwise.”

“What do you mean?” Evan asked.

“There have been other instances where Dread Lords have given humans their power. Unfortunately, Kurrlan likely never told the Sangel’s the magic is temporary, or that it drives whoever uses it slowly insane. I'm afraid there won’t be a happy ending for Cera now, such is the price when you make deals with demons. Soon, her borrowed magic will disappear and insanity will begin to plague her. I’ve sent a force of paladins to track the Sangels down.”

Evan didn't know how to respond. He wanted to say Cera didn't deserve such a fate, but part of him thought she deserved everything she got. Out of everything that had happened to him, Cera's betrayal was the hardest for him to understand.

“I must find Arantay and his brother shortly, but I had to speak to you before I left,” Vanderain hurried on. “Knowing that you were in a Dread Lord’s clutches, you were my first priority.”

“You’re leaving again?” Evan exclaimed. “But you just returned.”

Vanderain nodded gravely. “I know. If I had never left in the first place none of

this would’ve happened. I accept full responsibility. Even without me here and with help from the inside, Kurrlan shouldn’t have been able to get demons into Veneseron.

Kurrlan must’ve had help from a Disciple, only they might’ve been powerful enough.” Vanderain frowned. “Not Akirandon though, she wouldn’t have sent a pawn to do her work. I must think on this. Regardless, I was foolish in neglecting the Fortress for so long. The Venators need me, always.”

“It’s not your fault, it’s Kurrlan's,” said Evan grimly.

“That’s why I needed to talk to you before I depart again, Mr Umbra. I need to ask, do you know why Kurrlan wanted you?”

“He…he was speaking, but I was in too much pain to focus properly. It’s all over now though, right? They won’t come here again?”

“Never,” Vanderain promised. “Never before has a demon gained access to this world, and never shall it happen again. From now on my absences from Veneseron will be as brief as I can make them.”

Evan nodded gratefully. A huge weight had been lifted from him now he knew he didn’t have to look over his shoulder for monsters anymore.

“I regret that I had to destroy Kurrlan so soon, I wished to question him. My son tells me you survived three separate demon attacks, not including the mass invasion.

He said you dealt with it amazingly, even killed a few of them.”

“Your son?” Evan frowned.

“Tarensen of course, didn’t he tell you?”

“No,” Evan said, thinking just how strange this revelation was. Tarensen appeared double Vanderain's age. But then he remembered Tarensen’s pale blue, almost silver eyes, like his father’s.

“And Taretta is your daughter?” Evan remembered the conversation he’d spied on between Tarensen and Taretta, how their eyes were the exact same colour.

“Indeed, a fine pair of children.”

“But, they look older than you.”

Vanderain’s smile faltered and Evan immediately knew he’d said the wrong thing.

“Yes, they get that from their respective mothers, both were human you see.” Evan was startled to see a great sadness fill Vanderain.

“They’re long dead now. But it appears my children have some of my Eternal blood in them. Their lives have spanned far more than the average human, I just hope I don’t outlive them too.”

Evan was lost for words.

“But…where have you been all this time?” He finally asked.

“On too many realms to count. The forces of Velkarath are rising and their eventual end game is to destroy us. Don't worry, when I am in Veneseron nothing can portal in or out of this world without my consent. It is my spell that protects this realm and it's stronger when I am near. I'm only sorry I was gone for so long, my attention was needed elsewhere. A dozen Dread Lords had formed an alliance and planned to destroy your old realm.”

“Earth! Is it okay?”

“Yes, my companions and I took care of the Dread Lords, but know Evan, that Akirandon is far more powerful than any demon.”

“Who is she? I keep hearing her name.”

Vanderain looked incredibly uncomfortable, as if building up to something.

“I need to tell you everything I know.”

Evan was filled with a horrible dread.

“I wouldn't have truly believed it if I hadn't seen you produce demon magic myself.”

Demon magic!

Evan thought back to the black mist that appeared whenever he was in mortal danger, how it had ripped the souls from its victims. Sintian had been right. *I am a monster.*

Vanderain took a deep breath. “Evan, I'm afraid to tell you, but I feel you have the right to know.”

“Know what?” Evan stammered, fear stampeding through his veins.

“Akirandon, demon queen and ruler of Velkarath, is your mother.”

Silence suffocated the room.

Evan stared at Vanderain, dumbstruck. Surely, he was joking. He couldn’t be telling the truth, it was impossible.

How can my mother be a demon queen? I'm human. I've seen demons. I'm nothing like them! He's wrong, he has to be wrong.

“No one knows this but my children and I. We hoped that Akirandon had failed.

But it's the only explanation for why you're able to conjure demon magic. It's just not possible for anyone but the most powerful of demons to use. One ray of light is that I’m sure Akirandon doesn’t know you still exist, and I will keep it that way.”

“Wait! Failed at what?”

“In creating you and your siblings.”

Siblings! This just keeps getting worse.

“So, not only is my mum a bloody demon queen, but I have brothers and sisters too, and they’re all monsters like me.”

Evan leaped off the bed, not knowing what to do with himself. His head was a whirlwind, thoughts crashing into one another incessantly.

“No Evan, you are not a monster.” There was a firmness to Vanderain's tone that made Evan sit back down.

The door opened and Tarensen entered, with Brooke in tow.

“What the hell is going on?” Brooke shouted.

Evan was taken back by her tone.

Vanderain sighed. “Two of them, right here in my Fortress, after it was thought impossible.”

“Two of what?” Brooke cried.

“Demon-spawn,” Evan said quietly. “Wait, Brooke is one too?”

Brooke just stared, shell shocked.

“You were right Taren, she is the spitting image of Herak,” said Vanderain gravely.

“Can someone tell me who this damn Herak is?” Brooke demanded Tarensen answered, “Herak was a Master here at Veneseron. He disappeared some twenty years ago, captured on a mission by the demon Disciple Adena. Due to your appearance Brooke, and what I retrieved from your Earth parents, we believe that after your birth Adena hid you in the home you grew up in.”

“What…why?”

“So you wouldn’t be discovered during the demon civil war most like,” said Vanderain. “Although why Adena didn’t reclaim you after the war ended, I don’t know. Something must’ve happened.”

“And you’re saying both Evan and I have demon parents?” Brooke asked, “are we related or something?”

“I don’t think so,” said Vanderain, “you, Evan, bear the mark of Akirandon in your eyes. I've only ever seen that pattern of red flecks in her own eyes. Considering you can also perform demon sorcery no human could wield, she must be your mother.”

“I recognise the names,” Evan murmured. “I read that both Akirandon and Adena were Disciples that were rivals to be the demon god's favourite.”

“Correct,” Vanderain replied. “I don't know how either of them did it, but they created the two of you, and likely more.”

“Oh my god,” Brooke sagged against the wall, shaking her head in shock.

“I know this a lot to take in, and none of it is your fault. Let me explain as best I can. You know a little of the god Ezanathul, I trust?”

They both nodded.

“Hundreds of years after Ezanathul was destroyed, two prophecies emerged. One proclaimed that Ezanathul would be resurrected by the sacrifice of a demon-spawn.

The second proclaimed Ezanathul could only ever be truly destroyed if he met his death at the hands of a demon-spawn. This caused much confusion, least of all because a demon-spawn had never existed. It’s impossible for a demon and human to procreate.

Some think both prophecies are true, just that the first has to pass to activate the second. The first prophecy foretold of only two demon-spawn, I believe one of these

is you, Brooke. The second prophecy spoke of seven demon-spawn. As Akirandon’s son, you are one of the seven, Evan.”

“How could you know that?” Evan rasped.

“Akirandon was Ezanathul's right hand and she loved the god with a fanatical obsession. She chose to believe that if she could somehow create demon-spawn she could resurrect Ezanathul and rule all the realms at his side. For years upon years she failed. Then, through ways I know not, she was successful. At first, they died before birth or minutes after, until finally news broke across the worlds that she’d succeeded.

“Fortunately for us, many of the Dread Lords didn’t want Ezanathul reborn. His cruelty knew no bounds, even against his own kind, thus civil war ignited. Reports are conflicting, but many say Akirandon's demon-spawn were stolen. Some say the spawn were killed, more believe Akirandon still has them, others say the spawn were lost or else scattered across the realms. Most believe there never was any demon-spawn to begin with. I myself wasn’t sure what to believe, until I saved you from Kurrlan only hours ago.”

“God damn it,” Brooke snapped. “So I've got some demon twin running around out there and Evan's got six other siblings in who knows where? That’s *nine* in total.”

“I fear some demon-spawn will already be dead,” said Vanderain. “I’m sure they couldn’t have all survived. They may have been hunted, or let their demon sorcery destroy them from the inside.”

“Could… could that happen to us?” Evan found his voice at last.

“I will make sure it doesn't,” Vanderain vowed.

Tarensen interrupted, “Akirandon and Adena despised one another. You two may have been created to fight against one another.”

Brooke looked at Evan. “What, like, kill each other?”

“Hush, son,” said Vanderain, “we have no way of knowing that. So far it appears to be the opposite. I suspect you two gravitated towards one another subconsciously because of your demonic link.”

Evan remembered the first time they’d met and how he was sure he’d known Brooke before. She’d even asked him if they’d met already. *Was this why? We*

were drawn to each other because we're both abominations.

A thousand questions speared though Evan's head, this was all too unreal.

He thought back to his recurring nightmares of the purple-eyed shadow woman.

Was that her, Akirandon? Is that who my mother is?

"I've never had a mother," said Evan, "I don't know how to feel about having one who's evil. Wait!" He panicked. "You said she only created me for sacrifice to resurrect the god."

"I don't understand it all myself," Vanderain replied gently, "one prophecy does say that sacrificing a demon-spawn shall resurrect Ezanathul, another says a demon-spawn will be the one to destroy him forever. What I do know is that if you two exist, then other spawn could too."

Evan wasn't sure how he felt about having siblings either. *Would they look and act like me? Could they be evil too? Brooke clearly wasn't evil, but then their mothers weren't the same, just both iniquitous demon demi-gods.*

"So what now?" Evan asked.

"We find the other Demon-Spawn." Tarensen said. "If the prophecies are to be believed, then one of them could be in danger of being sacrificed, another may be the key to destroying Ezanathul, should he ever return."

"In all my years, if there's anything I've learned, it's that nothing is set in stone,"

said Vanderain. "Some say prophecies are made to be broken, others that prophecies

can be ignored or translated falsely. Before we do anything, I think we need to know more. The only thing we know for sure is that Evan and Brooke are two of a kind, the first two of a kind. Either way, I will not let anyone be sacrificed. Firstly, because I'll battle with every last breath before an innocent's blood is spilled. And secondly, if Ezanathul is born again, all the realms will be in danger of being enslaved or destroyed."

A shocked silence infused the chamber at Vanderain’s words.

“All we know is that you are capable of conjuring very powerful, very dangerous demon magic that could be harmful to you and everyone around you. But I promise I will help both of you in learning to control your powers.”

Evan didn't know much, but he knew he had to get a reign on this magic. He couldn't bear it if he hurt someone accidentally.

“I advise you tell no one, except those you trust completely, about this.” Vanderain continued. “I fear if the whole Fortress knew, some of them would not take kindly to you, others would cause mass panic.”

Evan nodded again, feeling numb.

“I shall return shortly.” Vanderain stood up. “But first I must find Arantay and Falawn, wherever in the realms they may be. Come Tarensen, you need to double check all our Venators are safe and accounted for.”

Tarensen strode from the room, whilst Vanderain paused by the door. “I'm so very sorry for all you've been through and all that I've told you. Know only that we will get through this.”

Once Vanderain left the chamber Evan stood, still in a state of shock. Brooke did the opposite, collapsing on Vanderain’s chair. She looked as dumbstruck as Evan felt.

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A lump of nausea had formed in his throat and anxiety bubbled in his stomach.

How can I be the son of a demon queen?

“I guess that's why I felt my family never really loved me,” Brooke said at last.

“Some part of them must've known I was nothing more than a stranger to them.”

“Probably explains why I was abandoned in the forest as a baby too,” Evan replied, just as miserably.

“So… let me get this straight.” Brooke struggled, “both our moms are not only demons, but two of the most powerful demons ever, who served this terrible god.

Both these crazy women, if you can call them women, figured how to do the impossible, which is creating us, only half human demon-spawn. Oh and apparently they hate each other too.”

Evan felt like his mind would collapse under all this information.

“We can both perform the same magic Venators use to hunt demons,” he said. Is that because our fathers were Realmers? Vanderain sure thinks yours was.”

“I dunno’” Brooke shrugged. “We know Venators usually pass their sorcery through their children, but not always.”

Evan continued, “We also possess sorcery only demon Dread Lords can wield.

Power we have no control over. Power we *need* to learn to control.”

Brooke breathed heavily. “Why us eh? Weren’t we special enough just being demon hunters?”

A concentrated silence hung between them like a heavy thread, Brooke snapped it in half as she asked, “Do we tell the others?”

Evan hesitated. “We will, but not yet. We should let them know we’re safe from the battle and everything before we drop this bombshell.”

Brooke nodded and then froze, as if something had dawned on her.

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“I need to check on Arantay and Lok,” she leaped back out of the chair, “and Elijah and… did Vanderain say something about Arantay? I was too busy taking everything in, I…”

“Vanderain told me all the Realmers were okay,” Evan cut in, “but all the elves have been killed and Arantay and his brother are missing.”

The colour of Brooke’s face was sucked out of her skin.

“Oh god, I think Falawn has done something terrible.” She made to run from the room but then turned and hugged him instead.

“Vanderain’s right you know, we can get through this, we will get through this.”

Brooke smiled suddenly. “We can’t change our parents, or who we are, but at least we’re in this together.”

She released the embrace and opened the door, “I need to know what’s going on with Arantay but I’ll see you in a little bit.”

Evan nodded gratefully as Brooke departed.

He followed her out of the chamber and set off in the opposite direction, meaning to tell Jed and the others he was back. He was safe.

Evan smiled faintly despite himself. Vanderain was right. Brooke was right.

Neither of them could change what they were, so they just had to accept it. Evan vowed to himself he’d get this demon magic under control as soon as he could. And then he could continue his training to one day journey throughout the realms, saving innocent lives from demons, Dark-Venators and other monsters.

As he walked through the Fortress, the twin suns of Veneseron shined through the windows, illuminating the wonders all around him. Throughout everything that had happened, all that Evan had discovered, at least he was back at Veneseron. At least now, he was home.

EPILOGUE

Velkarath lounged before him in all its wretched glory. It’s twisted towers gleamed malice and he always suspected the walls themselves dripped with poison.

All four of Galk’s ears were filled with the duelling sounds of misery and delight that always accompanied Velkarath. The misery of the tortured and delight of the torturers.

If despair was food you would grow bloated on the abundance here.

Galk couldn’t stop himself from smiling as he entered the black Fortress. Like many others he’d thought Akirandon training humans to serve her would be a futile endeavour, but he couldn’t deny that some of the children were up to the task.

As he approached the stronghold, the Dark-Realmers were plentiful. Many regarded Galk with interest whilst others, the newer ones, reacted with abject fear at seeing a Dread Lord.

The Fortress was one colossal citadel, festooned by an assortment of towers. The towers themselves were adorned with cages, swaying in the arid air. Many cages were occupied with prisoners left to die there, but a few of them held Dark-Venators who’d misbehaved. Galk knew their stays in the cages were only a day long, so he relished the other Dark-Venators who humiliated them. As he passed, a group of Rakarn were

levitating pebbles, attempting to hit the prisoners. Galk saw one boy weeping in his cage and his smile widened.

The whole realm was a volcanic wasteland with the city and Fortress built atop and amongst it. Magma dribbling across the ground was a constant, bright green or a deep red; although more times than not the red lava was usually blood instead.

In front of the entrance doors was a training courtyard. The Rakarn were being forced to duel with swords instead of sorcery and the first one to draw blood or knock his opponent out was the victor. The loser was unceremoniously dragged off the courtyard and dumped into a pile of fellow losers. A few of the defeated were crying out in pain. As Galk passed, a Velkarath master seized a young girl roughly. She’d been attempting to heal the huge gash on her leg.

“No!” the master ordered. “Let the scar remind you of your incompetence. The Venators won’t give you time to heal.”

Galk entered the castle, which was bone-chillingly cold compared to the relentless heat outside. Galk knew it was by design. Everything in this place was

to toughen the Rakarn up.

The slaves scurried to Galk as he entered the Fortress, their chains clanking behind them as they yammered to serve him. He merely snarled; amused by the way they cowered. One slave boy's terrified squeak made him chuckle.

He remembered the way to the throne room. The castle passages were empty as he walked, except for the myriad of spiteful creatures. A spider as big as his head scurried up one wall away from him and an emaciated Hydra was chewing on dead rats in a corner.

Galk glanced into several chambers as he walked, one showed a pit full of zombies being taunted by a gleeful ghost, whilst another was occupied with several Rakarn ingesting demon narcotics.

He moved to avoid the onlekk guards who came around the corner, dragging a struggling Dark-Venator with them.

Another Master followed behind. "If you refuse to use your sorcery to inflict pain upon others then you will be punished. Today you'll have a public flogging, next time it may be execution."

"No! Please Master, please!" The Dark-Realmer's cries echoed off the walls.

"Silence boy, anymore struggling and we'll remove your sorcery permanently and leave you in the Wildwastes, a death far more horrific than execution."

The boy fell quiet immediately.

Galk chuckled under his breath.

He ducked through a jagged hole in the castle and stepped outside onto the bridge leading to Akirandon's personal tower. The air here was acrid and the bridge was littered with high spikes for handrails, the tip of each spike decorated with the heads of Akirandon's more famous victims.

As he walked across the bridge a valorc soared above him, Galk sneered at the valkyrie-orc mutant as it glided towards the heinous army in the distance.

From his vantage point, Galk could see the Wildwastes far beyond the castle.

Usually the ruined black sands were filled with demons squabbling over scraps, but today the wastes were home to Velkarath's ever-growing army.

Thousands of black tents and multi-coloured fires barely stood out amidst the terrible dark mass of wretched creatures that made up the horde.

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Galk knew that some were enslaved, but many more served Velkarath willingly.

Legions of orcs, onlekks, goblins and dark elves made up the bulk of soldiers, but the giant nephilim, ogres and mandons were present too, all three latter races standing out due to their size. Valorcs were the eyes and the ears of the horde, whilst demons of all kind outnumbered them all.

On its other side, the bridge overlooked an amphitheatre below, where a large crowd of higher ranked Dark-Venators were gathered. They faced a Master on a podium in the middle of the amphitheatre, giving a fierce speech.

"Soon we shall strike the realms, harder, and more frequent than ever before. It is our time my Rakarn. The Dark-Realmers are rising! We are more powerful now then we've been in centuries. Akirandon is greatly pleased with you all. Soon, Veneseron will cower before us. They cannot stop the natural order of things anymore. Demons need to feed upon the vulnerable humans just as humans feast upon animals. The weak races deserve to be crushed and the strong to survive. The Realmers are fighting a losing war, a war that has waged for nigh on eternity, but now the end is in sight and it is we, Velkarath, who shall be victorious!"

Thunderous chants of, "Velkarath, Velkarath," heeded the master's monologue.

Galk nodded his approval as he entered Akirandon's tower.

Galk grinned all the way to the throne room, until he reached the entrance doors.

The valorc guards knew him, and did not question his entry as they pushed the doors open.

Fear touched both his hearts for the first time.

He longed to please his queen, but he knew that every time one was in her presence they risked death by her merest whim.

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Galk knew that Akirandon would not kill him today though. She would surely reward him for his news. Still, the fear clutched him. She was more than just a demon, more than just a Dread Lord. She was everything.

As soon as Galk entered the chamber, Akirandon's latest pet approached. The winged lion stalked forwards, growling deep in his throat. A great dragon clung to the far wall, asleep, for now. The other occupants of the room, (half a dozen Dread Lords,) were bowing and scraping their way out, murmuring their reverence of the demi-goddess.

"You may approach!" A sonorous voice echoed inside his head.

It took Galk a second to realise it was the dragon who spoke. As he walked, the lion kept close, its eyes hungry. He knew if he displeased Akirandon the lion would get its wish and devour him, if the dragon didn't get him first. Fortunately, his news would delight the Queen. Oh, she'd reward him greatly. Maybe she'd give him some Dark-Realmer slaves to perform his every command.

Galk kept his eyes down, to look at the queen's beautiful yet terrible form was near impossible for even the bravest of demons.

He was trembling, his hearts fluttering wildly. Akirandon was powerful enough to burn Velkarath to the ground with the flick of her wrist, to slaughter him and everyone else in this realm without effort. She wasn't just queen of Velkarath, but queen of all demonkind. It wouldn't be long before all demons served her, and all Realmers were defeated by her.

"My beloved Queen… I have news," said Galk. "Your child has been found."

Akirandon stirred on her throne, purple eyes glowing.

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…To Be Continued

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed **A Darker Shade of Sorcery- Book 1 of the Realmers Series.**

As an author, I love feedback. Whether it's positive, negative or constructive, it can always be helpful. You can shoot me an email at will_collins@msn.com if you'd like to know anything about the series, or just to share your thoughts on the books.

If you have the time, please feel free to leave a book review. As the reader, you have the power to let other potential readers know what they'll be getting, why they might like it, or why they might not. You can even contribute to the book's success.

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Thank you for reading, I hope to see you again.

In gratitude,

William Collins.

Moonlight War

The Realmers- Book 2

PREVIEW

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Josh hated having a werepanther for a roommate sometimes. Of course, the vampire and the demon hunter in the room next door weren't ideal either. Being a weretiger himself, Josh should've been the one always breaking things by accident, but it was Ryan who constantly underestimated his own strength. Ryan hadn't got his new animal instincts under control yet either.

"Sorry," Ryan grumbled, looking down at the broken ping pong table in dismay.

His other housemates were roaring in laughter, but Josh wasn't too pleased.

"You're paying for that Ry," he said, dropping his own paddle on the broken table. "Jeez, just because you lost again."

"I said I'm sorry," Ryan scowled, "I can fix it, honest. Have we got any super glue?"

Ed snorted around his straw, and turned to Silas, "Shifters eh? Bloody felines."

"Hey I didn't do anything," Josh said, collapsing on the armchair beside the other two. "And stop downing all the drinks, pace yourselves."

He ran a hand through his hair. He'd have to style it before they headed out.

Ironically, his ginger hair matched the colour of his fur when he shifted forms; much to the amusement of his roommates.

He made to grab a drink of his own.

"Oh, not that one dude," Ed said, "I've already mixed blood with the vodka."

"Why would you do that?" Josh demanded.

"I only put blood in a few drinks," Ed said, popping the straw back in his mouth as he sipped, "so no one steals my share."

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Whilst he and Ryan had been playing ping pong, Silas was showing Ed the Venator card game of Urengi. Both of them held several cards each as they got a start on the pre-drinking tonight before they went out.

The front room of their frat house was large, but barely furnished. The broken ping pong table was just one less item in the bare room now. The brown carpet was covered in hair. Anyone would think half a dozen dogs lived in the house. Josh was the only one who tried to keep the place clean and tidy, but it was an eternal and futile task. His roommates were beyond lazy when it came to cleaning up after themselves.

If someone had told Josh before he became a weretiger that supernatural frat houses and sororities existed, he would've politely recommended they check themselves into an asylum, but here he was.

Josh checked his watch. "Ten o'clock now guys. We'll have a few beers then go, yeah?"

"Yeah baby," Silas whooped, handing Josh a can, "get this down ya'."

"What the hell is it?" Josh stared at the florescent green can, the writing across it resembled Latin, but weirder.

"I got a case of elven wine in," said Silas with a wink, "fresh from my world."

"Fair enough," said Josh, taking a gulp. "Hmm, surprisingly good, a mix of grape and… something else."

"Unicorn urine," Silas said seriously.

Josh spat it out everywhere.

Ed and Silas burst into laughter again. "Just kidding, bro. It's some sort of elven plant or fruit in it. Trust me, it's good."

Josh shook his head, "I'm not sure if I can trust you, but it's nice so what the hell."

Josh had first learned magic was real shortly after he'd been turned, he didn't learn of Venators until over a year later. The other shifters in Chicago he got to know didn't have too high an opinion of the demon hunters. They'd told Josh to watch himself around Venators, "they're always looking for races like us to be breaking the law, so they can punish us," they had said.

Josh had only met two Venators, the other being Amy from the sorority, but in his opinion they were both cool and down-to-earth people.

Silas did make sure Ryan kept his anger in check however. Silas always asked Ed if he was drinking animal blood too, or if it was human blood, that it had

come from a hospital, not a helpless victim.

Josh looked over the room as Ryan attempted to repair the table, to little effect.

His angry mutters were growing louder. Any second now he might accidentally shift into his panther form and cause more damage throughout the frat house.

“Give it up, Ryan,” he said. “You can’t fix it. Come and have a drink.”

Ryan threw the two pieces of the table down and stormed over to take another empty armchair.

“Breathe Ry,” Silas warned him.

“I’m fine,” Ryan replied, grabbing his own can.

“Yeah, you don’t want to let Amy see you all hot and bothered at the party.” Ed sniggered, his needle-sharp teeth glinting.

Maybe it was because Josh had met a few vamps now, but he could always tell them apart from the humans or other Moonlight races. The fact Ed was startlingly pale also helped.

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Sharing a house with Ed was almost as annoying as sharing with Ryan. Ed had his ‘house rules’ he tried to impose. Obviously, the rule of not going into his room and drawing back the curtains made sense. But the fact Ed wouldn’t allow garlic in the house was ludicrous. Not because it affected vampires in any way; Ed was just allergic. Even though his recent vampirism rendered any allergies redundant, Ed still wouldn’t let them cook a meal with garlic in it.

Most recently Josh had been forced to buy a new set of pans for the kitchen and make sure no other iron was around. Silas was dating a fae girl from the sorority and didn’t want her getting burned accidentally.

“I told you, I’m not into Amy,” Ryan grumbled. He downed his can in one go, before popping the top of another.

“And yet you always hook up at every party,” Silas pointed out.

“Good thing too,” said Ed, “as a Venator she can use her sorcery to knock him out when he has one of his tantrums. He might hurt a normal girl.”

“I do *not* have tantrums. And I’d never hurt anyone… on purpose.”

“You should be fine tonight.” Josh tried to put him at ease. “We went hunting in the forest yesterday,” he told Ed and Silas, “got all that pent up rage out.”

“Good,” said Silas, “we don’t want another fight. I almost had to use my magic on you last time. If any of the other students saw me I’d have to leave.”

“Hey, would that count as a mission failure?” Josh asked.

“Probably,” Silas said, “my superior Realmers wouldn’t be happy at least. And my current mission is to stay in this college as long as I can. With two supernatural frat houses and a supernatural sorority they need a couple of Venators here to keep the peace.”

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The Shifter pack Josh had joined told him about the college. He’d learned that being a weretiger didn’t mean he couldn’t continue his career, as long as he hid what he was. Many of the Mooonlight races had gone on to be actors or lawyers.

Josh was going to be a marine biologist.

“Like Josh said, I’ll be fine,” Ryan assured them.

“Right,” Josh stood up and grabbed another can. “I’m gonna go change my shirt, then we’ll go.”

The others nodded as he headed upstairs. He sighed heavily as he entered his room, picking up more books to put under Ryan’s bed. He’d broken it again by sitting down too hard. They’d been stopping it from collapsing by using college textbooks.

He pulled off his t-shirt and picked up the shirt he’d ironed earlier. Just as he was buttoning it up, the thunderous crash of broken glass exploded downstairs.

Josh swore under his breath. *What the hell have you done this time Ry?*

He was about to storm downstairs and see how Ryan had managed to break their window, when he heard roars of fury, cries of fear and high laughter that made him go cold.

Josh frantically yanked open his bedroom door and raced down the stairs. He'd only taken a few steps however, when someone abruptly appeared before him, as if out of thin air.

He caught only a glimpse of a teenager with long hair and dressed in black armour, before the boy's boot connected with Josh's chest and sent him sprawling back into his room.

"Hi," the teen said casually, his face expressionless as he pulled a curved dagger from his belt.

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Josh's shock and confusion at what was happening overwhelmed him. He scuttled to his feet as the armour-clad boy advanced. He looked possibly sixteen, with a pasty face swarmed with acne and the beginnings of facial hair. His eyes however were a dull black, lifeless.

"What are you doing," Josh growled, "get away from me, man."

"Have to kill you, sorry," the teen mumbled. He stepped into the bedroom and held his knife high.

Josh could sense his body begin to morph as the haze of battle fell over him. He could almost feel his blood heat up and skin itched unbearably.

"Get back," Josh said again, his voice mutated to a lower pitch as his teeth elongated. "Or I won't be able to stop myself from killing you."

The boy shrugged, "I said sorry." He lunged at Josh, jabbing the dagger at his stomach.

Josh turned sharply, letting loose a bestial roar as the transformation took over.

In seconds his hands turned to paws with wicked claws and rust-coloured fur sprouted over his skin. His nose widened and his jaw expanded as his human

features twisted into beast.

The teenager slashed at his head this time, but Josh batted the dagger away with one paw, whilst swiping with the other. His claws scraped across the boy's face, ripping a chunk out of his cheek and a scrap of lip too.

The boy stumbled back, screeching in agony as the gaping hole in his face squirted blood.

Josh was more beast than man now. He pounced on the teen, savaging his neck, ripping into flesh, cartilage and artery. The boy choked for a few seconds into the mauling, before falling silent, forever.

410

He stumbled back to his feet, his muzzle stained scarlet. Josh looked at the ruin of a teenager below him and felt nausea hit him like tsunami. He'd done this. He'd ripped a guy to death. Josh had attacked him yes, but the guy was obviously mad, and now Josh had slaughtered him like a pig.

Regret and guilt assaulted him like physical blows, but Josh was jolted out of his imminent panic attack by the battle cries still erupting downstairs.

The boy hadn't come alone?

He tore from his room and leaped down the stairs, only to enter a scene of chaos and sheer horror.

He saw Ryan first. He'd half mutated into his werepanther form, but the multiple stab wounds had rendered him crawling sluggishly on the floor, swimming in his own blood.

Next he saw the attackers, seven teenagers, dressed in the same black armour as the boy he'd murdered.

It took Josh seeing Ed suspended in the air and bound by a rope of blue magical energy before it hit him. *Dark-Venators!*

Silas had told Josh about them, alongside demons they were the Venators biggest enemy. They named themselves Rakarn, the demonic word for children.

It was mayhem. He couldn’t believe what he saw above him. Two Rakarn boys skipped in a circle around Ed. They looked like twins, identical, apart from one had spiky blue hair and the other purple. The sadists laughed as they threw handfuls of fire at Ed’s legs.

The lone female Dark-Venator must’ve been the one whose laughter had chilled him to the bone when he heard it from upstairs. She held a whip of flickering

flames in her hands, her tangled hair a darker shade of red then the flames. She stood on their sofa, her poisonous green eyes focused directly on him.

At least Josh thought she was the only female, she and the twins were the only unmasked Dark-Venators. The other Rakarn wore helms the same ebony as their armour, each helm had two curled horns and the eyehole glass was an ethereal blue.

Josh was about to spring into action when he noticed Silas next to the girl. He sat on the sofa, where he’d been before Josh went upstairs. Silas’s eyes were open, yet he slouched on the sofa’s arm, a knife poking out of his temple.

The girl gasped theatrically at Josh’s reaction, clapping a hand over her mouth.

“Oh no, don’t you like it? It’s my latest art piece. I’m thinking of putting it in a museum.”

She threw back her head and cackled. “C’mon tiger, ravage me!”

A roar of rage and terror erupted out of him as he dashed across the room to rip her to pieces. He was inches away from where he could bite down into her skull, when a giant form smashed into him. He crashed to the floor with a thump, his skeleton jarring.

“Give the naughty boy a slap,” he heard the girl demand.

Before he could rise to his feet a huge fist cracked against his jaw, making his vision flash black and his hearing muffle. As his hearing returned, he heard the twin Rakarn boys singing in turns as they continued to skip:

“Round and round we go, burning the vampy vamp.”

“Ooh, look at that skin sizzle.”

“Eek, look at the flesh bubble.”

“Oh vampy vamp, you sure are in trouble.”

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Mad, they’re all mad!

“Leave him alone,” Josh cried out. He noticed his face had returned to normal, and tears of anger and despair were rolling down it.

“Ah, the vampire has a friend,” one of the twins beamed.

“I wish we had more friends,” the other remarked thoughtfully.

“Rath, Ragul,” the girl addressed the twin boys, “shut the hell up, or I’ll put you in the cage again.”

“No, no, we’ll be good.” Both Rath and Ragul simpered, backing away.

Josh staggered to his feet, staring about wildly. He was surrounded on all sides by a circle of the Dark-Venators.

Directly behind him loomed a monster of a man, the one who’d collided with him earlier. Even clad head to toe in the black Rakarn armour, Josh could tell the big man was deformed, the armour stretched around unnatural bulges of muscle.

With his horned helm, the giant resembled a Minotaur.

“Attend to the panther,” The red-haired girl commanded. She stepped off the sofa and strutted towards Josh, gesturing with her hand.

Josh had been about to attack, but an invisible force wrapped around his body, forcing him to kneel before her.

“Watch this, pet.”

He was paralysed by her sorcery, but the girl gently tilted his chin. Josh saw Ryan try to crawl away, completely human now. His arms and chest were riddled with gaping holes however, and the blood continued to leak out.

Josh screamed Ryan's name over and over again. Right up until the giant Dark-Venator bent over Ryan, grabbed his head in both hands and snapped his neck.

The girl giggled. "Aww, were you two close?"

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Josh struggled desperately to break free of her spell, but it was no good, he could only move his eyes and mouth.

He called out to Ed repeatedly. But Ed still hung in the air, his jeans on fire as he screamed into the gag stuffed in his mouth.

"Hey baby." The girl crouched down close, licking her lips seductively. "You can call me Selina."

"You- you killed him," he choked, unable to stop staring at Silas's body.

"Obviously," Selina purred. "All Venators deserve to die. Do you know they exiled me from their oh-so-great Veneseron when I was a child? They dulled my magic and took my memories before chucking me back to Earth like a piece of trash. Do they sound like the good guys to you? But Velkarath found me, saved me. They can save you too little tiger."

Selina crouched down beside him, delicately draping a hand against his face.

"We are the children of Velkarath," she whispered into his ear. "The Masters of monsters, and the instruments of agony. Will you join us, or will you die?"

Sequels Available Now

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Document Outline

- A Darker Shade of Sorcery
- The Realmers- Book One
- Padrake grimaced. “I know it sounds ludicrous, but…”
- Chapter 5- Of Venators and Veneseron
- Chapter 6- An Orc, A Dwarf and an Australian walk into a Bar
- Chapter 7- Sorcery Unfurling
- TODAY’S TRAINING SCHEDULE FOR EVAN UMBRA
- BREAKFAST
- SESSION ONE: ILLUSION
- SESSION TWO: ANATOMY
- SESSION THREE: EARTH ELEMENT
- LUNCH
- SESSION FOUR: AIR ELEMENT
- SESSION FIVE: HEALING
- SESSION SIX: WEAPONRY
- AFTER YOUR DAY’S TRAINING FEEL FREE TO DO AS YOU WISH
- BUT DO NOT!
- 1. ENTER VENESERON CITY BEFORE FIRST NOTIFYING AN INSTRUCTOR
- 2. PERFORM PAINFUL MAGIC OR VIOLENCE ON ANOTHER VENATOR
- 3. PLAY JEWELBALL, TWINSPHERE, ARENA-BATTLE OR ANY OTHER DANGEROUS GAME IN A CONFINED SPACE IT PROBABLY WON’T END WELL
- TODAY’S TRAINING SCHEDULE FOR EVAN UMBRA
- “I was fine until…”
- Chapter 8- Girls and Gargoyles
- She screamed again and again…
- … She burst awake still screaming.
- Chapter 9- There's A Demon In My Bedroom
- “I dunno’ the Dread Lords, or maybe those Dark-Venators…”
- Chapter 11- Sword Taste
- Chapter 12- Kingdom Enchanted
- “No dad, they’re not-”

- Chapter 13- Brawling with Goblins
- Chapter 14- A Traitor's Grasp
- Chapter 15- Paranoia
- Evan’s fingers scrabbled at his throat on instinct, as if he could rip the choke spell away with his hands.
- Abruptly the silence was shattered by a chorus of laughter. The hooded figure froze before sprinting down the corridor and out of sight. As his attacker disappeared, the invisible vice at his throat snapped and Evan collapsed, gulping and spluttering.
- “Hey, are you all right?”
- Evan managed to look up, it appeared a group of Apprentices, (the source of the loud laughter,) had appeared at the other end of the passageway and scared the strangler off.
- Evan lurched to his feet without speaking to the group, running down the corridor in the direction his assailant had fled. When he reached the fourth-floor atrium however, it was empty. *
- “Neither of you saw anything?” Tarensen demanded of Padrake and Xavier.
- “I told you, I went up to the fifth floor to scrub Greg the gargoyle clean, seconds after I saw Evan,” a wide-eyed Xavier replied.
- Evan had done the only thing he could and told Tarensen what had happened. He must be in shock, it had happened so fast, it didn’t feel real.
- “I only went to the balcony outside my quarters for a quick smoke,” Padrake said meekly. “I saw no sign of this hooded figure Umbra describes.”
- Tarensen's face twisted in fury. “Right under our noses. And you say it wasn't a demon this time, Evander? It was one of our own people?”
- Evan nodded. It couldn’t have been a demon. He’d seen two human hands beneath the robe. He felt like he was having heart palpitations. It was bad enough demons were hunting him, now he couldn't trust the Masters or even the other Venators.
- “Now, let’s not be hasty,” Padrake stammered, “just because Umbra was attacked in the castle doesn't mean a Realmer was the attacker. Someone must've got into the city and travelled here afterwards. If Umbra is correct and his attacker was human, it must've been a Rakarn.”
- “Rakarn?” Evan asked.
- “The official term for a Dark-Realmer,” said Padrake. “In demonic language it translates to child, named so by Akirandon as she considers them her children.”
- “Whether it was a Rakarn masquerading as one of us, or a traitor, I will find

him," Tarensen snapped. "Umbra, did you see your attacker's face at all?"
- "No, nothing. Their face was covered. Their hands were pale, but that's all I know."
- Tarensen cursed. "Padrake, tell the Masters to question every Venator. Find out if anyone saw someone wearing hooded white robes tonight. I will station orc guards from the city throughout the Fortress and place two outside your door. We will root out this attacker, I promise you."
- BANG!
- Chapter 16- Falawn
- Chapter 17- Arantay Unveiled
- Chapter 18- Kiss and a Catfight
- Chapter 19- Strike Three
- "Arantay!"
- Chapter 20- Twisted Youth
- Chapter 21- All Dead
- "BROOKE, NO!"
- No!
- Chapter 23- Demon Invasion
- "But what about you, I can't just leave you-"
- BOOM!
- "NO!"
- VANDERAIN!