

The stairwell was crumbling, but it was solid enough to take their combined weight. The silence was eerie in its utter completeness. He expected to hear the metal creak, their boots clank, but Stevenson's earbuds cut all of that out.

Getting going hadn't been as simple as he'd hoped. Jennifer hadn't wanted to come. She'd wanted to go back to her lab. He'd managed to talk her into coming, pointing out the research possibilities of studying the animalistic machines and how they reacted to her canon.

That had mollified her and they'd gone the long way around to avoid them. They'd reached the rear of the building without having to fight. It hadn't been guarded, and they'd entered.

They came across the first group there. Four of the machines who seemed to be patrolling the interior perimeter. He'd motioned for Jennifer to come to the front so she could blast them and she'd shaken her head. When he'd come closer to talk, she'd shoved the cannon at him, told him to do it himself. He was the soldier, not her.

He pointed out that he had no idea how it worked, and she'd started explaining it. He didn't listen; he had no interest in trying to use it. He wanted as little to do with Crazy's tech as possible.

When she was done, she looked at him expectantly. He asked her how she would collect the data if he was the one using it? She wouldn't know what strength he'd set the cannon. Was he qualified to run this experiment?

She sneered and took the cannon back. She pushed him aside, and he barely had the time to put the buds in before the floor vibrated.

With the four machines in pieces, she turned to face him with an expression of superiority. She said something he didn't hear, but he expected it to be something to the effect of how useless he was and that she could do all of this on her own.

They'd cleared the floor, and she'd taken the initiative of destroying the machines they came across. They had a moment when she'd almost walked into a group of them because she hadn't understood the gesture to stop moving El had given.

He'd spent five minutes after that teaching her the basic ones. It only took a minute to show them to her, but then she argued that there were better ones to use and he had to convince her they didn't have the time.

Convince might be a strong word. She'd finally given up when he'd pointed out that if they adopted her signs, she would then have to go around every military base teaching them. She'd be doing that probably every day for years to come, with no time for research.

She hadn't given him any problems from that point on as they went up floor by floor, clearing them and hoping to find the fabrication machine.

He motioned for a stop as he reached the door leading to the fourth floor. He considered taking the buds out and checking on how everyone was doing, but didn't want to risk it. Jennifer had become eager to use her cannon.

He had a pang of sadness as Peek came to his mind. He would have shone in this situation, relaying information without words being needed. He missed his friend, and with thinking of Peek, Rhine came to mind. The otter was finally back to his jovial self after two

years. He still had days when he could barely get out of bed, but those were rare now.

He shook his head and brought his focus back on the now. He motioned for Jennifer to go in and she kicked the door open. The floor shuddered as she fired her cannon. She poked her head back in the stairwell and motioned for them to come out.

The lynx took the lead again. They moved slowly and checked every room they passed. They couldn't ignore any, since they had no idea what the fabricator looked like, how big or small it would be. Like almost everything, Milton and Stevenson hadn't been able to agree on that.

He smiled. Static would have made this so much easier. She could have sensed where the fabricator was from outside the forcefield. And would have rendered every machine they'd come across inoperative. He was starting to think this mission was tailor made for their dead friends.

Bullets peppered the wall next to him, only they had come from behind. He spun and found his team was under attack. Three of the machines were making their way through them. The ceiling was caved in, indicating how the machines had gotten the literal drop on them. The one person he could see was Jennifer.

He took careful aim. One stray shot and he could be killing one of his people. A minute later, the machines were twitching on the ground and Vee was healing people.

He stopped at Jennifer's body, looked at El and shook his head. Next to her was the crushed cannon. The bull took the buds out, El followed suit.

"They went directly for her," Milton said. "Didn't give her time to react."

"It's basic algorithm," Stevenson added. "They must be networked. They reported on what caused the most damage and took that out." He shrugged. "So, we keep going?"

El looked around. There was another body, a dog with short, silver fur. He didn't know his name.

"Guys?" a bat said. "Do you hear that?"

El listened. "What are you hearing?"

Like him, the others didn't seem to hear anything

"It's pretty faint, but it's like a rhythmic beat."

"Really?" Milton scoffed. "Music? You expect me to believe a machine bothers wi  
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"Not music," the bat cut him off. She glared at him. "A beat. Something...something tapping on something else. There's more, but I can't make it out."

"An assembly line!" Stevenson clapped his hands. "I told you it would be a mass production thing. You and 'they're self-assembling.' Shows what you know."

Milton rolled his eyes. "Tapping and banging doesn't mean a factory floor. It could be  
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"Will you two shut the fuck up?"

Another surprise, they did. They looked at Leech, who was staring at them.

"Maybe what we need to do is go check it out? What do you think? Or do you two prefer continuing to bang on your chest like two monkeys?"

"Gorillas are the chest bangers," Milton said. "And they aren't monkeys."

"El, can I shoot him? We can say one of the machines got him. We're already going to have to explain Jennifer's death. Might as well stop this one, too."

“No.”

The lion sighed. “Freya, where are the sounds coming from?”

“This floor,” she replied. “Deeper in.”

“Then we’re continuing the sweep.” El motioned them to take their position. “If Stevenson’s right, they know we’re coming, so everyone, stay sharp and keep an ear on the ceiling. We can’t afford another surprise like this one.

They moved. They passed a window and El saw the flash of gunfire. The machines were going after the other soldiers. He wanted to rush, take down whatever was in charge to save his soldiers. But he held himself back. Rushing in was a sure way to get everyone killed.

They continued clearing the rooms as they followed the outer hall. When they’d ensured nothing could attack them, they took a corridor heading deeper.

El felt what Freya had pointed out to them now. A rhythmic vibration. Three steady beats, a pause, two of something else, a longer pause, six beat, a whine, a pause. Then the sequence restarted.

Again, he wanted to rush and fought it. They made a circuit around it, clearing every room. They only encountered two of the machines and dispatched them with headshots before they could react.

There were no halls heading deeper now. The only things that had been on their left were the occasional door. Freya indicated from where the sound had felt the strongest to her. So El expected the assembly line to be closer to there. Did he want to go in close to it or far? The element of surprise? Or the ability to judge the environment?

He set Freya and the other soldier, a jackal who hadn’t said one word this entire time, at each end of the corridor as guards, and looked to the humans.

“Do either of you have something that can see through walls?”

The older man rolled his eyes. “You can’t see through walls.”

“Of course you can,” Stevenson replied. “That’s what windows are for, or holes.” He pointed his ‘gun’ at the door, but Vee pushed it down before he fired it.

“Don’t be an idiot,” the bull said. “He wants to see in with them seeing us.”

“That isn’t what he said.” The human pulled his hand from Vee’s grip. “You can’t blame me if he gives unclear instructions.”

“So you don’t know of a way where we can see in and not alert them that’s what we’re going?”

Stevenson thought for a moment, looked around at the debris on the floor and shook his head.

El nodded and recalled the two soldiers. “We’re going in. Find cover and look for whatever is making the sounds. I’m betting that’s what is making the machines. That’s the target. Try to avoid wasting bullets on anything else. If we run out we’re going to have to get out of there and figure another way of destroying it. That isn’t going to be to our advantage.”

“I’m not running away,” Stevenson said.

El didn’t comment. He made sure the six others were ready, then kicked the door in.

He got a sense of a large room as he headed for what might have been a desk at some point. Lots of rubble on the floor, crumbled walls. A large machine in the middle of it all

and a lot of animal-like machines growling mechanically.

A flash of light, animals exploding. That would be Stevenson.

“An assembly line!” the voice confirmed it. “I told you that’s what we’d find!” Instead of finding cover, the human walked toward it, firing at, and blowing up, the animals in front of him.

El cursed and fired at the animal running for the human from the side. Of course Stevenson hadn’t noticed it, he was too damned focus on his goal.

The animal went down and El was the one running at the human. He grabbed him by the collar and pulled him down behind what was left of concrete a wall.

Gunfire erupted.

Coming from the center of the room, not his people. He glanced around the edge of the wall. A dozen tripods were visible, swiveling machine guns on the top. They’d been lucky they hadn’t activated the moment they came in.

There was nothing left of the door and wall where he’d come in, but he didn’t see any blood or bodies. That meant everyone else had good for cover. Good.

The gunfire stopped.

He sat back to consider the next step. He turned to ask Stevenson if that gun of his could destroy the tripods, and he saw that his hands were shaking.

The human dropped the gun as if it was burning him. He put his hands to his head and rocked in place. When El placed a hand on his shoulder he jumped. When he looked at him, The humans’ eyes were filled with fear.

“Eric?”

“El? Why did I come here? I’m not a soldier, I’m a scientist. Oh God. I’m going to die. We’re all going to die.”

A machine gun fired and Eric tried to bolt. Only El’s grip kept him in place.

“Calm down. This isn’t the place to panic.”

“Where the hell am I going to do it then? In my bed? In my coffin?”

“Eric, I need Stevenson.” This was probably the worst time for him to revert to this.

“You think I don’t want that too? You think I want to be sane right now? This place is insane!”

El tried to recall their conversation back in the mess. This wasn’t the kind of environment that should have brought this one. He’d said it was when things were calm that he tended to regain his sanity. But El had also gotten the impression Eric didn’t really know much about what caused the switch. He had mentioned that stress brought the craziness on, but this place should be stressing him out.

He watched as the human took deep breaths. He was holding his head, eyes closed, but he was trying to calm down. El couldn’t have that.

The ruin of this temple had yet to be cleared. The roads around it were, but in the months since it had happened, little of the rubble had been moved. Carts lined the road, but people were moving smaller stones, those one person could carry.

Most of the building fell in on itself, following the lines of the cut stones, shattering when they hit the ground, not as part of bringing the temple down. The back wall fell outward and as one tall

sheet, crushing houses, shops and people. The cost to life was extensive.

"Shame what happened here." The man, a canine, his natural coloring hidden by the stone dust, leaned against the tavern's wall, drinking out of a tankard. He looked at LRK, exhaustion in his eyes. "They say it did this."

"It?"

"The demon," the man spat. "That thing who's jealous of the Celeste."

"Did it leave a message?" LRK asked.

"It did," the dog answered. He motioned to a section of the wall still standing. "The Celeste corrupts. Like anyone's going to believe a demon."

"How man dead?"

"Six of the Keepers were crushed to death. Two so injured they had to be taken to the healers."

"And among the citizens, at the back?"

The man shrugged. "Who's to know? There's always too many packed in those houses. Plenty were hurt and didn't make it to any of the healers."

"Didn't anyone do a count of the dead as they removed them?"

The man shook his head. "Can't remove what we can't reach. And it's all poor folks, so I'm sure Lord Denrick will get to them when the rest of the city is fixed again."

Had it been carelessness, or was it that whoever had done this hadn't cared? Not cared that innocent were hurt. That some Keepers might walk away, or be carried.

"You seemed mighty interested in this," the man said, suddenly suspicious.

"There's rings to be made killing it."

The man eyed the sword at LRK's hip. "You can't kill a demon. Only the Keepers can."

"The one who did this can be stopped. I won't let it kill innocent indiscriminately. Those surviving Keepers, where can I find them? Where would they reside with the temple destroyed?"

The man shrugged. "Still at the healers I figure."

"It's been months, why are they still there?"

"We don't have any healing wizards. The high and mighty Lord Denrick don't like them. Story's that a second cousin of his was one, a wizard, not a healer, and almost killed him with a contraption. When he became king, he chased them out of the city, won't let any of them back."

"Where can I find the healers, then?"

The dog motioned to their left. "Expect the Keepers went to the market's healers. They're the most expensive."

LRK handed a copper ring to the man. "Much obliged for the information." He stopped by the section of wall still standing. As the dog said, the words 'the Celeste Corrupts' were there, marked in something that could be blood, or the kind of berry made ink LRK

used. Too much time passed to tell, but this was an outside wall, and only the bottom of the letters had dust on them, dust raised by the people walking by.

This had been written after the temple fell, after the dust settled. Had it even been done by the person responsible? Could be children, thinking it a funny joke to pull. LRK moved on, asking direction to the healers until he came to a large building on the side of a market square teeming with stalls.

Inside he stayed in the entryway until one of the person tending the sick past it, in the larger room with beds along each walls, noticed him. She was a goose, matronly in her gray robe. They were all in gray, some stained at the hem, and all women.

"What are you in need of?" she asked, looking him over. He saw surprise to realized she was looking for injuries and not evaluating how wealthy he was.

"I'm looking for the Keepers who were injured when the temple fell. I was told they were brought here."

"They were. They are still healing. Their injuries were severe."

"Crushed by stone, or did they have other injuries?"

"Crushed. Why would they have other injuries?"

"They saw a demon did this. The demon who destroyed other temples. The Keepers there died at its hand, before the temple was destroyed."

"It didn't do that here."

LRK nodded. So the person had either not been confident they would kill the Keepers, or didn't know, or care, LRK did it first.

"I'd like to speak with them. I'm hunting it and they might be able to give me information about it."

"I'm sorry, but they need to rest."

LRK considered walking past her. It wasn't like she could stop him, but not until he had exhausted other avenues. "Got ask them if they'll speak with me." He smiled. "Tell them Rak of Soulsburg, Demon Hunter wants their help."

Antoinette would be here eventually, maybe she was only days behind him, if not hours. He'd hurried, but she was a Keeper, she could request horses. Let her know he'd been here. Maybe she'd understand he didn't approve of this, she already realized it wasn't him. Or maybe she wouldn't. She'd still get his message.

The matron returned and led him past the bed to stairs, then to the second floor, where doors lined the hall, instead of beds. "They are weak, and in need of rest. Please be quick." She opened the door. He closed it before she could follow.

The room was simple, but clean the two beds on each side of the shuttered window so they could get fresh air. At least they knew to keep the room aired and clean.

On one bed was a human girl, barely a woman. An acolyte. On the other was a Furrian, a hyena whose limbs didn't look right under the sheet. Next to each bed was a small table with parchment, ink, and a quill. On the top page something he couldn't make out was written

either a language he hadn't learned yet, or something specific to the healers.

"Did He send you?" she asked. LRK heard the reverence in the pronoun. She sounded older.

He shook his head. Three pages under the top one they were free of writing. He smiled again and took the stopper off the inkpot.

"Then who?" she asked.

He finished writing before answering. "Money." Everyone understood the drive for rings. "And it needs to be stopped."

"It's a demon," the hyena rasped. "You can't kill it."

"Everything can be killed." He checked the ink was dry and ripped the message out of the page, then crumbled the rest in his pocket. He didn't the healers to notice things too quickly. "What can you tell me about that night?"

"I woke up to the shaking and hid in the corner of my room. The Celeste protected me."

"I heard a scream," the hyena rasped.

"While the temple fell? Someone in pain? Anger?"

"Before. It was high, almost a keen, but he didn't have any sorrow in it. I was searching for it when the walls shook. I ran for the door, but stones fell on him as I stepped outside."

"The Celeste saved you." The girl said in awe.

"He could have done so in such a way I didn't get crushed," the man replied bitterly.

"The Celeste tests our faith," she replied.

The hyena sighed.

"Was it only the wall that shook, or also the ground?" he asked before the girl could reply.

The man shrugged.

"Did the sound come from inside, or outside the temple?"

"The keen was stronger toward the east wall, but it was night, there was no one inside."

"Like it came from the wall itself, like it was the thing keening?"

The man frowned. "Possibly. There was another sound over it. Something I could barely hear, that hurt to listen to, like mortal ears weren't meant for the sound."

Most Furrians could hear a broader range of sounds than humans. If the person took down the temple using sonic powers instead of control over stone, he could have heard that and the grinding of the stones against each other as they slowly shifted. Back during the wars, Rod had done something like that, but on a building of glass and metal. He'd explained about frequencies, and how the right one would make anything tear itself apart. To prove it, he'd then shaken a tank to pieces.

LRK rolled the message tightly and placed it in her hand. "Hold on to this tightly. Don't let go of it no matter what. I need Antoinette to get it when she comes here." She looked about to asked, but he patted her shoulder. "Don't worry about it. Just hold it and

she'll know what it means."

She shrugged and nodded.

"You're going to kill it?"

"Yes," LRK answered since it was expected. He'd see who, and why, they were doing it, before making the decision.

"May the Celeste go with you," The hyena whispered.

"Probably not," LRK whispered to himself before leaving the room.

The matron glared at him. "Did you get what you were after?"

He smiled. "I did."

"Then you can see yourself out. I need to make sure you haven't made their conditions worse."

"I haven't." Not yet. He went outside and felt for the two Keeper's body. Once he had them he raised their temperature. Not enough to set them aflame, just to get their brains boiling.

A cry of alarm came from the room and he felt others join the matron. Felt the water they carried, the cloths and their attempt to cool them down. They worked in vain. The two Keepers trashed, then became still.

He listened to their cries, their praying and felt a nasty satisfaction. His message to Antoinette reflected it. 'Your Keepers might have escaped him, but none of them will escape me.'

The matron would remember him, when Antoinette asked about the lynx, she might even remember the name he gave. He'd been tempted of telling her he'd take care of him for her, but why make her life easier. Let her continue to worry there were two of them.

Let her continue to be afraid.

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Finding a love Furrian in a world of them wasn't easy, even when he had an idea what he could do, since no Furrian advertised his ability. He searched for months, trying to determine where he would have gone from Sunkberry. The possibilities were too large, even ignoring the towns without temples, which this person was. No Keepers in them died, other than by his hand.

When he heard about the destruction of a temple in the city of Almunim, he had a chance, but even before he headed there, he knew he'd be too late. The news took weeks to reach and took him more to reach the city. The one thing that might be a clue was that Almunim was more west than south.

It could be a coincidence, but if someone was heading west, as he should be, and wanted to avoid Tall Arches, where the destruction of the temple would shout his presence, this would be the best route. He stayed in the city only to confirm this was the same person, the same sloppy work and disregard for innocent death and the same message. No Keepers survived this time, so he took the road heading west out of the city.

It had been months between the destruction in Sunkberry and Almunim, but they were only weeks apart. That spoke of some care not to get caught, any city with a temple would be on high alert for



months after news reached them.

Some of that would be planning. The work was sloppy, but no one saw or heard anything. That mean they were careful. Knew where they could act without being noticed. But that didn't take months. Even if they had to be close to bring the temple down, there were enough places to hide that within a few days, they could do it.

The one thing he was confident of, was that they would only stay around after the destruction long enough to leave the message. They couldn't stay while the city was on alert, any stranger would be interrogated, held for the Keepers to question. Any hint of involvement would lead to more questions, possible burning.

The city of Firebright was coming into few when he overheard the merchants talking about the destruction of the temple. It had happened during the night. And the city was closed because of it. The guards preventing anyone from exiting. They'd barely made it out by sun up before the gates were shut.

Cursing LRK ran. He didn't bother with the city, he went around it, to reach the more or less westerly road. This had happened faster than he'd expected. They were growing confident. But he was right on their trail. Hours behind, a dozen, at most.

He was panting by the time he reached that road, no caring about he looks he got from the people waiting for the gate to reopen. His quarry would have to rest after bringing down the temple. Even as powerful as he was LRK needed to catch his breath. His quarry was nowhere near as powerful as he was.

Would have stopped among these people? He wouldn't be the only one covered in dust. Anyone not wanting to be stuck in the city would have rushed out, most of those would have been close to the temple. These gates had also closed at dawn.

Asking he confirmed the exodus, and learned that guards had followed them, questioning those they caught and bringing some back inside. Still many were searching the woods.

LRK felt for them, found them, but no one else.

His quarry wouldn't stay by the city. The risk someone had seen them was too high. All that was needed was on detail, like fur pattern, and they'd be caught. He walked away from the city, was stopped by a guard, and told them the truth, that he was on his way west and had walked around the city since it was closed, and they let him go.

He kept his senses wide, and the further away from the city he got, the fewer people he felt in the forest the road cut in two.

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He found the group two days later, deep in the forest. They were far enough it was possible they hadn't been on the road at any times, but had only gone to check to confirm they were hunters or bandits.

Fourteen of them, bandits, by their clothing and lack of hides or drying meat. LRK had turned to head back to the road when the laughter made him stop. There was something nasty in it, and as he considered killing them just for the crimes, they had probably

committed the laughing man stopped and spoke.

"Did you see the look in that Keeper's eyes? I swear, he thought I was the Celeste himself, come done to save him. Right until I plunged my sword through his heart."

The laughter started up. His the loudest. He was human, one of six, and the largest. LRK would have through he was in charge, except for the way no one sat close to him, and even those laughing cast worried glances at him. The woman, a zebra holding a baby, moved further away from him.

LRK watched them. Listened to them speak. They talked about the temple, about how well it went. The youngest, a fox, bounced in place, exclaiming how fun it had been.

A human knelt by a wooden crate behind a tent. LRK couldn't make out what he took out, but the way the man cradled the device, the patched clothing and the wild black hair, made LRK shudder and the word 'wizard' sounded in his head.

A group.

He hadn't considered that. He'd expected to find a lone Furrian. Someone driven mad with grief. Lashing out. But for a group to function took even more planning than LRK had considered.

It could also explain why this time they'd acted faster. Maybe they'd gathered new people, send them ahead to scout. And a group would be less worried about guards. The fact they were a group would make guards overlook them. Everyone knew demons worked alone.

This group of people were destroying temples. Why? And why was there someone barely old enough to be a teen, and a mother with her baby? The questions didn't change what he had to do. He was here to stop them.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked, walking out of the trees.

They reacted faster than he'd expected, but before he was done asking the bruiser who'd been laughing was up, sword in hand. An eagle had two knives out, a marmot was looking at him. What stuck LRK more than that was the lack of panic. The woman and baby were backing away the furthest, but she wasn't scared. Except for those three, there were all moving away from the fire, but in an orderly way.

The human with the wild hair appeared between tents, gauntlets on his hands, big things with wires and rods poking out. Some seem to be glowing. The realization he'd been right about him being a wizard was such he barely noticed the marmot raising her hands.

Then the sound wave hit him hard enough he flew back and hit a tree, the force of it holding him in place. His ears ringing he tried to push forward, but the wave increased.

Well, that had been easier than he'd expected. He now knew who had brought down the temples and confirmed sonic powers were used. The presence of the wizard worried him, but he'd deal with that once he'd had his talk with the marmot. Get her to leave this to him, whatever her grievances with the Celeste were. Of course, to have that talk, he couldn't be stuck to this tree, with the head-splitting sound louder than he could scream.

He smiled, sounds he could deal with.

He created a line of vacuum between him and the marmot. Vacuum wasn't easy to maintain, but he'd done it often enough it wasn't paralyzing anymore. He dropped to the ground and stood. Now she was panicking.

The wizard slammed his gauntleted fists in the ground and the earth rolled toward LRK. He moved slowly, but the dip was visible. They were going to use earth against him? Who did they think he was?

Right, they didn't know him.

For effect he slammed a foot down and the earth smoothed over, except for where the wizard's gauntlets touched the ground, the earth climbed up them and solidified. The wizard tried to pull his hands out and panicked as he couldn't.

A human exited one of the tents, yelling something LRK couldn't hear. The marmot replied something, her face a snarl, and the wizard's face filled with fear as he spoke. The young man spoke louder by his expression. And the marmot threw her hands in the air.

"Fine," She said, her voice coming from far, around the edges of his wall of the vacuum, "but don't come bitching to me when he kills everyone." She headed in the closest tent.

LRK let the air flow and the thunderclap startled them.

"Everyone stand down," the young man said. He looked at LRK. "We don't mean you any harm."

The bruiser ran at LRK with a yell, sword high. LRK stopped the flow of air in his throat and two steps later the man stumbled.

"Finn," the young man said, exasperated, "I wish you'd pay attention sometimes."

The man, Finn was on his knees, grabbing his throat.

"Please don't kill him."

LRK had been wrong, the marmot wasn't in charge, this young man was. Another surprise. He allowed enough air for the bruiser to breathe, but not so much he'd consider causing problems.

"Can you let Bertrand go?" he indicated the wizard.

LRK eyed the terrified man. "I so much as feel the earth tremble and I'm going to bury you so deep they're going to forget you ever existed, do you understand?"

The wizard nodded eagerly and as soon as LRK released him he was up, gauntlets cradled to his chest, speaking to them softly. LRK rolled his eyes, then looked at the young man in charge.

He was looking back at him, eyes wide with a level of amazement LRK didn't think was warranted.

"It's you."

"Me who?" LRK asked cautiously. He couldn't know he was who they were copying.

"You're the one who saved me, I recognize your voice."

LRK shook his head. He didn't even try to figure out who he was. He didn't recognize him, so if it was something he'd done, it hadn't been recent. And trying to figure out what he might have looked like younger wasn't going to happen.

"I was a kid, the Keeper was a woman, she'd accused me of being a demon because I wouldn't let her abuse me. Just before they put me to the fire a storm came and you free me."

The man's story had a sense of familiarity to it, but only in that Keepers using their position to abuse children happened far too often.

"Look, kid—"

"My name is Kamdy."

LRK rolled his eyes. "Really?" He couldn't believe someone was trying to steal her name. If she ever found out this boy was in for a world of pain.

"It isn't the name my mother gave me. You told me to take another one, so I took this one."

"You do know Kamdy is a woman, right? And a Furrian. She's a tigress."

"Kamdy was a hero. I heard the legends. She protected the defenseless. She stopped armies with a glare."

LRK chuckled. What had she done to deserve that story? "A glare?"

"Yes," the would-be Kamdy said, getting angry. "One angry look was all it took, and you'd be frozen in place."

Well, he wouldn't be able to move if she didn't want him to, he did have that right. But frozen? Angry looks? What had she been up to since the last time he saw her?

It had been a few decades before he left Vee's army. She'd sought him out, without Vee present, he still considered her a deserter and the previous time they're encountered each other the fight had been epic, and only the fact they'd agreed not to use their powers kept that town intact.

LRK and CM had talked for hours, about their travels, the things they'd done, the people they'd met, but brother's and sisters they hadn't seen in centuries. It had been a bittersweet meeting, and now he wondered what she was doing.

He looked at the young man, and CM would be pissed at him for doing so, but as he'd just said, those were legends. "Look, Kamdy—" he couldn't help the smile— "those are just stories. There never was some tigress who went around saving people. That isn't what people do. Those who try end up dead. So take your friends and go back where you came from."

"No." The anger in the man's voice surprised LRK. "There are people who save others."

LRK sighed. "No, there aren't."

"Yes," he growled, "I'm looking at one of them."

"Kid, that is so not what I'm doing."

"Maybe you don't want to see it that way, but you saved me. I'm going to do the same to the people out there."

LRK looked up at the darkening sky. "No, you won't. All you'll—"

"Yes, I will."

"No!" The fire died to ambers, casting everyone in shadows.

"This isn't a game. You won't end up with stories told about how brave you were. No one's going to sing your praises."

"We're not playing games, we're saving people."

"Jesus fucking Christ, you're stubborn." LRK ignored the stares, his curse had been in English. "Didn't you hear what I said, all you're going to do it get yourselves killed?"

"So what?" a jackal said, a sword planted in the ground before her. LRK let the fire grow so he could see them. She was older than Kamdy, but because of what she'd gone through. The scars on her body spoke of pain. "You think some of us aren't dead already? Don't you think that it's worth it to save even just one person? I'd rather die doing that than just wait for them to find me again."

"Dying isn't—"

"Oh get off it," she cut him off. "You think you're the only one who deserves to die? Who deserves to make some great gesture against the Celeste? Yes, I know who you are. Who else would be here right now trying to stop us? Well, I don't know what you did to piss off the high and mighty, but let me tell you why I was going to be put to put to the fire. I was hired to protect this town, and the Keeper there objected to me loving another woman. That's not in the Celeste's rule, none of the Keepers back home ever had a problem with it, but that didn't matter. That town had become his own little kingdom, and he was going to rule it as he saw fit."

"Finn's brother and sister," Kamdy began then paused when Finn stood, glaring. "They were burned because they loved each other more than siblings should, the Celest—"

"Don't you dare finish that Kam. There was nothing wrong with them. They did nothing wrong." Finn closed his eyes, tears falling. "I told them to be careful. But it didn't help. Our father found out, and he dragged them to the pyre. When I tried to save them, my own mother locked me in the house."

Kamdy indicated the zebra and her baby. "Charlene's husband was accused of being a demon by a rival shopkeeper. By the time I got there the pyre was done burning. But they weren't done talking. She was with him, she might be corrupt. What about her baby? Could the result of such a unit be blessed by the Celeste? I was barely ahead of the mob. Everyone here had a story about how we were betrayed by the Celeste."

"I don't care." LRK kept his eyes closed. He didn't want to see the pain in their eyes. Hearing it in Kamdy's voice, in Finn's, was already making him question his decision, and he couldn't afford doubt. "I don't care what your stories are. You're going to stop this right now."

"Yeah? And why is that?" Finn said, mockery in his voice. He strutted toward LRK. "Id your pain so much greater than ours? I don't care what they took from you, you can—"

"Stop. Talking." LRK fixed his gaze on the man. "And stop thinking too, because the only thing that's going to do is get you killed. You don't know me. You have no idea why I'm doing this. Don't even think of comparing what you went through to me." He looked at

Kamdy. "I will not have you ruin this."

It was Finn who spoke, his voice soft. "We're trying to help."

"No. You're lashing out. You're angry and hurt and you want to hurt other people."

"And you don't?" the jackal said coming out of her tent.

He ignored the attack. "You're a bunch of amateurs, you don't even know what you're doing?"

"We're doing the same as you," Kamdy said.

"No, you're not."

Kamdy sighed. "We're destroying the temples, just like you."

"You're killing innocents," LRK growled.

Finn snorted, and LRK was already turning. "There are no inno—" The fist caught him in the face and Finn flew off his feet. On the ground he glared at LRK, spitting blood.

"That is why you're going to stop. There are always innocents. There are always victims. If you don't think that, you're no better than they are." He looked at Kamdy. "What did the people in those houses do to deserve having a wall of stone crush them?"

Kamdy looked away. "It wasn't supposed to happen like that. Bertrand was supposed to direct the way the wall fell."

"The wall falls," the wizard said. "The stones come down, down, down, go boom boom boom. The Keepers die." He beamed.

"Getting him to follow instructions isn't always easy."

"He's a wizard," LRK said. "They're all crazy. You shouldn't have one among you for something like this."

"Hey," Finn spat. "He suffered just as much as any of us. He lost his entire family to Keepers."

LRK closed his eyes and tried to stay calm. "I, don't, care."

The wizard giggled, but there was an edge to it.

"You don't let innocent die," LRK growled.

"You think it's easy to control how a wall going to fall?" the marmot said. "You think Bertrand can just snap a finger and every stone will jump at his command."

"Jumping!" the wizard said, "what a great idea!" and the man ran behind the tent. No one seemed worried at that, but LRK wondered how safe it was to leave him unsupervised with an idea.

"I don't see what the problem is," the jackal said, "this is war. There are casualties in wars."

"You have no idea what a war is," LRK scoffed, "And I will not allow innocents to die, especially not because of a badly prepared plan. You've shown you can't do this correctly, so just go back where you came from."

"And where's that?" Kamdy said. "You talk like we have something to go back to."

"Then do elsewhere. This isn't your fight."

"Yes, it is."

"No! I won't have a bunch of amateurs getting in my way."

Kamdy shrugged. "It isn't like you can stop us."

"You're wrong there."

The human straightened, but it was Finn who spoke. "You're going to have to kill me."

LRK eyed the bruiser. "Don't tempt me."

"Me too," the jackal said.

LRK glared at her.

"And Me," Kamdy added.

The others didn't seem as confident.

From being a tent the wizard spoke up. "Whatever this is about, count me in."

"I could kill each and every one of you."

"I thought you didn't kill the innocent," the marmot said.

"You are far from innocent. And if you continue, you're just going to end up getting yourselves killed. At least I'll do it cleanly."

"I'd love to see you try," Finn said, and the fighters in the group added their comments. Swords were drawn, knives pulled.

"Train us," Kamdy said.

LRK stared at him. Even the others fell silent. "Excuse me?"

"Whatever an amateur is, you don't like it. So, train us. Teach us how it should be done."

"No," the idea was ridiculous. "I'm not the head of some boot camp for would-be saviors. I don't have the time to waste training anyone. I have a mission, and you aren't part of it."

"And what's that mission?" Charlene asked. She was standing, holding her baby to her breast. "I get that you're destroying temples, killing Keepers, but what's that accomplishing? Other than giving sell-swords employment as bodyguards?"

"I'm killing their faith, killing the Celeste."

"Really?" she said. "And how is that going? You've been at it a while, have you seen any fewer Keeper?"

He waved the comment aside. "In time, once enough of them have died, enough temples are wiped the face of the earth, they're going to realize there's nothing protecting them."

"Do you remember the city of Stalgard?" Kamdy asked.

He ground his teeth as the image of Alaine came to him and he wondered how she was. How many other children did she have. Had her husband kept her safe, as he'd promised to do?

He buried her in the deepest part of his memory. He was done with that part of his life. "It's the first temple I destroyed."

"Have you been back there?"

LRK glared at him as Alaine tried to force her way to the surface.

"I have. Not long before I began assembling this group. It's almost completely rebuilt."

LRK stared at him. He wanted to contradict him, but it was the first temple. They wouldn't have understood what happened. It was only after the fourth or fifth temples that stories of the demon circulated.

"I've sent people to every city that lost a temple to you,"

Kamdy said, and LRK didn't like the look in the human's eyes. "They're all in the process of being rebuilt. You think you're destroying their faith, but they've turned that around and made it a test. They've rallied the people to them because of the destruction."

It couldn't be true. His plan was sound. Every war had been won when the enemy understood they were outmatched, and the Keepers couldn't stop him. They had to know that.

"You're one person," Kamdy said. "There's one demon out there, testing us, testing our faith that the Celeste will keep us safe. Looked to the faithless city that fell, we will not be one."

LRK staggered. How? How had this happen? One of the Keepers was hunting him, so they knew the damage he could cause. So why weren't they running away? How had he not seen the lack of fear? They were protecting themselves, but none of them were cowering behind their protections. They went about their business, kept going to the temple, stayed strong in their faith.

When he focused on them, Kamdy was no longer in front of him, but in front of Finn and they were glaring at each other. The bruiser had his sword in hand.

"Do you want me to tell you what I think you're doing wrong?" the jackal asked, and he glared at her. She raised her hands. "I'm going to take that as a definite no."

He looked at her, around, even Finn and Kamdy were no longer glaring, but looking at him, expectantly.

"Go ahead," LRK sighed.

"I said it was a war, but I'm wrong. You had it right yourself. This is a vendetta. With we all get here. And it was fine, until you said you were destroying the Celeste. You can't destroy that kind of being with a vendetta. Sure you'll hurt them, one Keeper, one temple at a time, but you're seeing what the result is."

He ground his teeth. He didn't want her to be right. He was older, knew more, had fought thousands of wars. She couldn't know better than he did here.

But he was also old enough to recognize his pride talking. That's he'd invested himself so much into what he was doing that he'd ignored the signs and focused on doing something. It had been more focused, but he was still simply lashing out. Why had he gotten at Antoinette for protecting one of the Keepers otherwise? She was the enemy, he knew she'd do what she had to protect them.

Now that he'd been forced to confront his flawed thinking, he needed to decide. What did he want? Did he want the satisfaction each kill gave him? The sense of accomplishment destroying a temple brought? Of did he want to destroy the religion that abused the innocent?

Was he doing this for himself, of for everyone else.

"I am not a savior," He grumbled. He a soldier. He'd lead, had been decent at it, but he'd been happy to pass the responsibility to someone else.

And where had that gone? Vee turned into someone who would fight



anyone for a few rings because he loved killing so much, inflicting violence.

Just like LRK had enjoyed killing the Keepers.

He looked at the people assembled around him. Kids, compared to him, but kids who had suffered, had come together and did the best they could with what they had. They were trying to do what he had convinced himself he was doing.

And they wouldn't stop.

Short of killing them, he couldn't stop them. They'd said it, he saw it in their eyes. Even Charlene, holding her baby would fight to stop this religion.

And he hadn't lied.

All they would accomplish was get an ugly death. If he allowed them to continue, he would be as much responsible for their death as they would be. He'd be no better than some of the commanders he served under, who cared nothing for their units, the Anthros under their commands.

He let his breath out. There was only one way he could resolve this.

"I want to make something clear. If I do this, I'm not training you. I'm taking over. When I give an order, you obey it. You don't ask why, you do it, and you trust me to have a plan that will save as many of you as possible. Is that clear?"

"Doesn't that imply some of us will die?" Charlene asked, but there was no fear in her voice.

LRK looked at her. "Yes." He looked around, making eye contact with everyone. "Some of you will die." He returned to Charlene. "They want to do to war, soldiers die in war."

"You said them," she said.

"Yes. You aren't joining."

She bristled and stood taller. "I am perfectly capable of helping. It isn't because I have a—"

"Yes, that is exactly why." He fixed his gaze on hers. "Your child lost its father. I will not be responsible for it also losing you."

"And where do you expect me to go? I have no one. Vernon was my world. His family will have nothing to do with me, by now my family will know how he died and they will shun me."

LRK thought it over, and this time when Alaine came to him he smiled. "I know someone who will help you. She'd take you in if she can, if she can't, she'll make arrangements for you to have a place. It's far, so no one will know you."

She looked at the others, silently pleading. He let her. This was the first test of his army. If they couldn't obey this order, what chance had he of getting them to obey the really bad ones? No one said anything.

He suspected none of them had wanted her to take part, but they hadn't had anyone they could send her to.

"Before we continue. I want each of you to tell me you are okay

with me being in charge. You need to mean it, because I'm not going to be nice. I'm not a friend, here to help out. I'm here to make soldiers out of you and get you to fight a war with me."

"I'm in," Kamdy said without hesitation.

"Me too," the jackal said.

The marmot shrugged. "I already knew I was going to die doing this. I'm in."

"Yes, yes," came from behind a tent. "I'm in too."

The others each said their were in, in their own way, until only Finn was left. He looked around. "You're all going to just go along with this? He just walked in, we don't even know who he is."

"He's the one who started this."

"According to who? We weren't there when the first temple was destroyed. We haven't seen him do anything like that."

"He killed the Keepers we missed."

"Says who? We can't sit here and wait until one of back from Sunkberry after checking. For all we know all he's looking to do is start trouble."

LRK liked that unlike the others he wasn't taking this at face value. So long as Finn could keep his mistrust from turning into outright paranoia, it would be a useful mindset to have among people too willing to believe.

"I fought you and won."

"Kam ended the fight," Finn corrected. "And I have no doubt you're powerful. That's not my problem. My problem is you coming here and wanting to replace Kam. He's our leader. I don't care if you don't like how he does things. He's in charge. Not you."

"Finn, I want him to—"

LRK raised a hand and Kamdy stopped talking. He looked at Finn, the bruiser who lost his family. The man desperate to protect the one he'd found. He took a chance. This would either be a good decision, or it would eventually blow up in his face.

"Then leave."

"What?" Finn narrowed his eyes. "You think you can just get rid of me like that?"

"Everyone here has made their decision. I'll even point out they insisted. I wasn't going to do this until—" he looked at the jackal.

"Harleen," she answered.

"Until Harleen pointed out I was screwing up. You're in the minority. I'm not going to force you to follow me, but that means you are leaving everyone behind."

Finn got in LRK's race. "You think I'm going to leave them in your tender mercy?"

"You either do that, or accept to follow my leadership."

"I don't need to follow you anywhere, none of us do!"

"Finn, that's enough!" Kamdy yelled.

"No! You don't just let that—"

"I did! If you aren't happy with my decision, just leave."

"But..." Finn trailed off, the fight leaving him.

"I'm not going to change my mind just because you're yelling. Finn. We need someone who knows what he's doing, and I chose to believe that's him."

"Kam, we were doing fine."

"No, we weren't. We were mostly lucky. You heard him, we were going to get killed."

"Fine," Finn grumbled. He glared at LRK. "I'm going to do what you say, but that doesn't mean I trust you. The moment you try to screw us over, I'm going to kill you."

LRK smiled. "Fair enough. First thing, I need a volunteer to escort Charlene to Stalgard." He smiled at Finn. "Ideally someone who knows I to fight."

"Oh, no, I'm stay right by your side."

"Then don't volunteer."

"What does that mean?" a pigeon, who'd stayed at the outer edge until now.

"Volunteering means you make the choice of doing what's asked, instead of being ordered to do it. If no one volunteers, then I'll have to order one of you to do it." He looked at Finn again.

"I'll do it," Harleen said. "But I'm coming back. I'm not staying there to look after her."

"Then first thing in the morning, get you, Charlene, and her baby ready. I'm going to need paper and ink." He needed to write a letter to Alaine, explaining what he needed, in such a way that she wouldn't worry. He'd have to instruct Charlene and Harleen not to say anything about him. If she worried she'd insist on coming back and trying to talk some sense into him.

"I have that in my tent."

"Alright. Harleen, Before you leave I'll be able to tell you what my plans are so you have an idea where to meet up with us. Now, I have one last thing to say then we're done for tonight. Civilians are off-limits. I don't care what they've done, if they aren't a Keeper or an acolyte, you will not lay a finger on them." He looked at Finn. "If you do, you are going to answer to me."

"I said I'd follow your orders. I won't hurt any of them, but what about guards? They're not going to stand around letting use destroy their temples."

"Defend yourself and incapacitate them. If they push things too far, your life is more important than theirs, but if I find out you've been manipulating the situation so you could kill them, you won't live long enough to regret it."

"Got it, so I can go sleep now?"

"Yes." He caught Kamdy's arm and held him while the others went to their tents. He nodded toward the noise the wizard made, still behind a tent. "We can't keep him around. Wizards are insane. It's just a question of time before he blows himself and us up."

"Bertrand isn't bad. He'd just a little odd."

"What are you doing?" Bertrand came running out from behind the tent toward the young fox who was taking a leak against a tree. "Get

away from her. You're making her wet."

The fox sidestepped, and the wizard picked up a rock at the foot of the tree. "There, there. It's okay. I'm going to dry you."

LRK eyed Kamdy.

"I did say he was odd, and yes, he does have a thing for stones."

LRK rubbed his face. The others probably wouldn't let him leave the wizard behind. Well, he'd have to keep an eye on him and deal with the chaos when it erupted.

"You know," Kamdy said, "if this is going to be a war, we're going to need more people."

"Yeah, but we can deal with that later, we already have plenty on our plate."

"Actually, I already know where we can find a lot of people who are going to be happy to follow you."

"Where?" LRK asked cautiously.

"Fort Worth."