

## **The Wheel**

Selia shaped her Qi, crafting weapons that she moved with her will. She danced on top of the mountain's peak, whirled around as she moved dozens of constructs around her in a carefully choreographed pattern. The Sanguine Flame of Laquud burned inside of her, keeping her warm. Her control had increased far beyond what she had been able to do before. The Qi answered her call almost as if it was moving before she even thought about it. She no longer felt the cold around her, and she felt... closer to her Aspect than she had ever been before.

Yet... she still hadn't passed Laquud's test, in his eyes, she still didn't understand what his power was for. She had tried, she contemplated on it for days on end. And still she hadn't stumbled on that which he was looking for. Selia was starting to lose hope that she would ever figure it out.

His Qi was a blood that burned, it had seemed obvious to her that it was meant for the things that fire usually was. Destroying things, burning. And the blood... it evoked the feelings of killing, of combat. Yet Laquud disagreed.

She emptied her mind of all intrusive thoughts, hoping that if she unburdened herself a spark of inspiration would come to her. So, she just danced, not caring for the time, or the burning in her muscles as she tired herself out.

Time passed without her notice, and she continued until she was spent completely and her Core emptied. She faltered, stumbled and fell, her control slipped and her constructs crashed into each other, shattering as

she hit the ground. She felt pieces of her broken constructs hit her, draw blood as they ricocheted around the mountain top.

She didn't pay attention, she continued to lay on the ground, breathing deeply, trying to calm herself down.

**“Your dance was a beautiful creation,”** she heard Laqrud comment. **“But what is beauty worth if it isn't witnessed.”**

Selia groaned and rolled to her back. “You saw it.”

The lindwrum hummed, a deep sound that made the mountain shake.

**“And so I have,”** Laqrud said. **“Thank you for the gift of it.”**

Selia opened her mouth, and then closed it. She didn't understand him, even after all this time. He was such an old and strange being, it would be apparent to anyone who listened to, or even just laid eyes on him. Laqrud's body was weathered, ancient, covered in scars and missing scales. Selia didn't know much about the afterlife, but she would've thought that the way a soul appeared here would not be tied to how they looked when they died. Even a few stories from Laqrud had made her suspect that the way souls appeared here were as they were in their prime. He even had a few visitors, all of which had been a lot smaller than he was, but also looked almost flawless. All of them had been Laqrud's descendants. She hadn't been invited to their conversations, which had stung a bit. She caught the looks of other souls, though she didn't quite know what to make of them. She didn't know if they were wishing that she was gone, that she hadn't inherited Laqrud's power, or if it was something else. Perhaps they stared because they had never seen anything like her before.

She felt her Qi regenerating slowly, and she spun the trickle of it through her conduits, feeling the wounds on her back slowly closing up as her Qi helped her regeneration along. She pushed herself up to her feet and glanced at the giant head of Laqrud, he was looking out in the distance, and she walked over to the edge then sat down. She looked in the same direction, seeing the endless scape of mountains jutting out of the ground, the ridges that connected them.

Each was unique, different. Each represented a soul, it was the home they had earned in the afterlife. Even from a distance, she could tell that they were beautiful,

small pieces of the heavens, exactly what she imagined an afterlife was. Yet, the mountain that she stood on was completely different. Almost withered and broken, covered in ash, nothing grew here, aside from few small hardy root-like plants. The mountain of Laqrud was cracked stone and soot, burned away.

Yet it towered over most of the others, though there were a few mountains in the distance that were greater, taller even than Laqrud's. She had asked him once why that was, he didn't give her an answer other than to chuckle with a kind look in his eyes. She didn't understand it, perhaps that was why she couldn't learn his lesson.

Laqrud tensed, she felt his breath halt for a split second.

She felt the change happen and instant later. One moment the tranquility of the afterlife was around her, and then... Laqrud sighed.

**“Ahh,”** she heard him say. **“It is Erinaad.”**

Then the sky split open.

Selia watched as a feeling of pure awe filled every part of her being. High up in the sky, a giant construct appeared. It took her a moment to figure out what it was. It was painted in all the colors imaginable, and so massive that she couldn't see the top. She saw the giant wheel turning, and then a mountain far in the distance started to glow. It was a mountain that was larger than Laqrud's, tall and pure, covered in life, with green flames flickering around the top. A massive lindwrum moved, slithering around it. She wasn't sure, but she felt like he wasn't quite the size of Laqrud, yet still massive enough. He stretched beyond the peak, then reached up with his hands. A moment later he started to glow, then fell apart and turned into a white stream that flowed up to the sky. The mountain behind him crumbled and turned white as well, joining him as it flowed up toward the wheel, joining the colors that turned alongside it.

Selia watched, stunned, as the white flow mixed with the wheel, but was still clearly visible, separate from it. Then the wheel turned, and the white flow moved up so high that it was outside of her capacity to see. The wheel trembled, then rose, disappearing as it went higher and higher, and the split in the sky closed. For a split second before it did, Selia glimpsed something beyond it that made her mind stop, something truly beyond her ability to comprehend.

It took her a while to recover, and once she did, she turned to Laqruid.

He was staring at the sky, a warm look in his eyes.

“What was that?” Selia asked.

Laqruid didn’t react for a few seconds, and then he started to speak. **“Erinaad, my great grandson. One of the greatest of my brood, while I still lived,”** he shook his head and chuckled. **“I remember him as a child, when he told me that one day he would rule the entire world. I had dared him to show me, and so he did. He took all that I offered and used it masterfully. I am glad that I had lived to see it before I passed.”**

“What was that thing?” Selia repeated.

Laqruid’s eye glanced down at her, then he spoke.

**“The Wheel, we call it. I do not know what it is or where it takes the souls that choose to go. But sometimes, when a Soul is ready, it comes down and takes it away to somewhere else. Perhaps it is reborn in some way, or perhaps there is something more than this afterlife, who knows.”**

Selia opened her mouth, then closed it. She sat in silence for a few minutes, before she got the courage to speak again. “Why haven’t you gone? You were here for a long time?”

**“Hm... I guess that I am not ready yet,”** he turned his head so that he faced her fully. **“Perhaps if there was no one to continue my line left, perhaps then I would go and see what is beyond this place.”**

Selia grimaced. That might come sooner, if she wasn’t worthy.

Selia pushed that thought away, then turned her eyes to where Erinaad’s mountain used to be. She saw the ridges that had connected to his mountain now growing to fill in the gap, connecting to other ridges that had flown out of his.

She paused, then blinked as she noticed something. Slowly she stood up and walked around the edge, looking at the mountains, looking at the ridges that

connected them and their foundations. Something stuck out to her, something that she had missed.

All the mountains had ridges seemingly flowing outward, spreading as their descendants spread. But they all flowed in one direction back. Selia walked around the mountain's top and saw that Laqrud's mountain was different, it had no ridges flowing into it, it was as if...

And then it clicked into place. She saw that the ridges flowed out of one mountain, out of Laqrud's weathered and old monument. They were part of it, every ridge as weathered and burnt as this mountain was. The ridges were the base of Laqrud's mountain, and they were the foundation for all others. Laqrud's mountain and its ridges were spent, almost... drained. As if...

"You... they all grow out of your mountain," Selia whispered.

Laqrud leaned down to look at her, but he didn't speak. Selia didn't look at him, instead she felt her Qi burning inside of her as the pieces started to click into place. "It's not destruction, it is the opposite. Your blood, your fire. You spent it all for them, to create something for them."

Selia turned her eyes on the lindwrum, seeing him truly for the first time. His scars, his weathered appearance, the tiredness, the noble and proud spirit that encapsulated his whole being. He had bled for his brood, for his descendants. This was how he saw himself, the appearance that fit him the most and why he looked like this in the afterlife. He burned a path for them, scorched the soil and soaked it in his blood so that they could grow beyond him.

Selia looked at the mountains that rose higher than his, and remembered the times when he looked on at them with pride in his eyes.

"Your power," Selia said slowly, feeling so full of shame that she hadn't seen it before now. "It is meant for others, to create a foundation that they can use to grow beyond you."

Laqrud smiled. "**You understand,**" his voice boomed. "**At last.**"

Selia saw it in her mind's eye, saw inside of him and his blood. An Aspect that he shaped alone. Creation for the future of his bloodline.

Things shifted inside of her, and she felt the connection inside of her core deepen.

**Insightful knowledge acquired**

You peered into the deeper law and the concept of an Essence. You glimpsed the truth behind it.

Personal Feat accomplished

Rewards:

—Gift of My Blood and Flame Title and Grand Perk

—Glimpse of Sanguine Flame of Laqrud Title

“Oh,” she said.

The world around her trembled, and she turned as she felt Essence shift. A golden portal opened up behind her. Immediately, she felt a pull on her being, forcing her to leave this place.

**“A lesson learned,”** Laqrud rumbled. **“Perhaps you are worthy enough to continue my line.”**

Selia closed her eyes, and sat down on the ground. Somehow, she felt exhausted. But after years of being in this place, now, she felt... sadness at having to leave it.