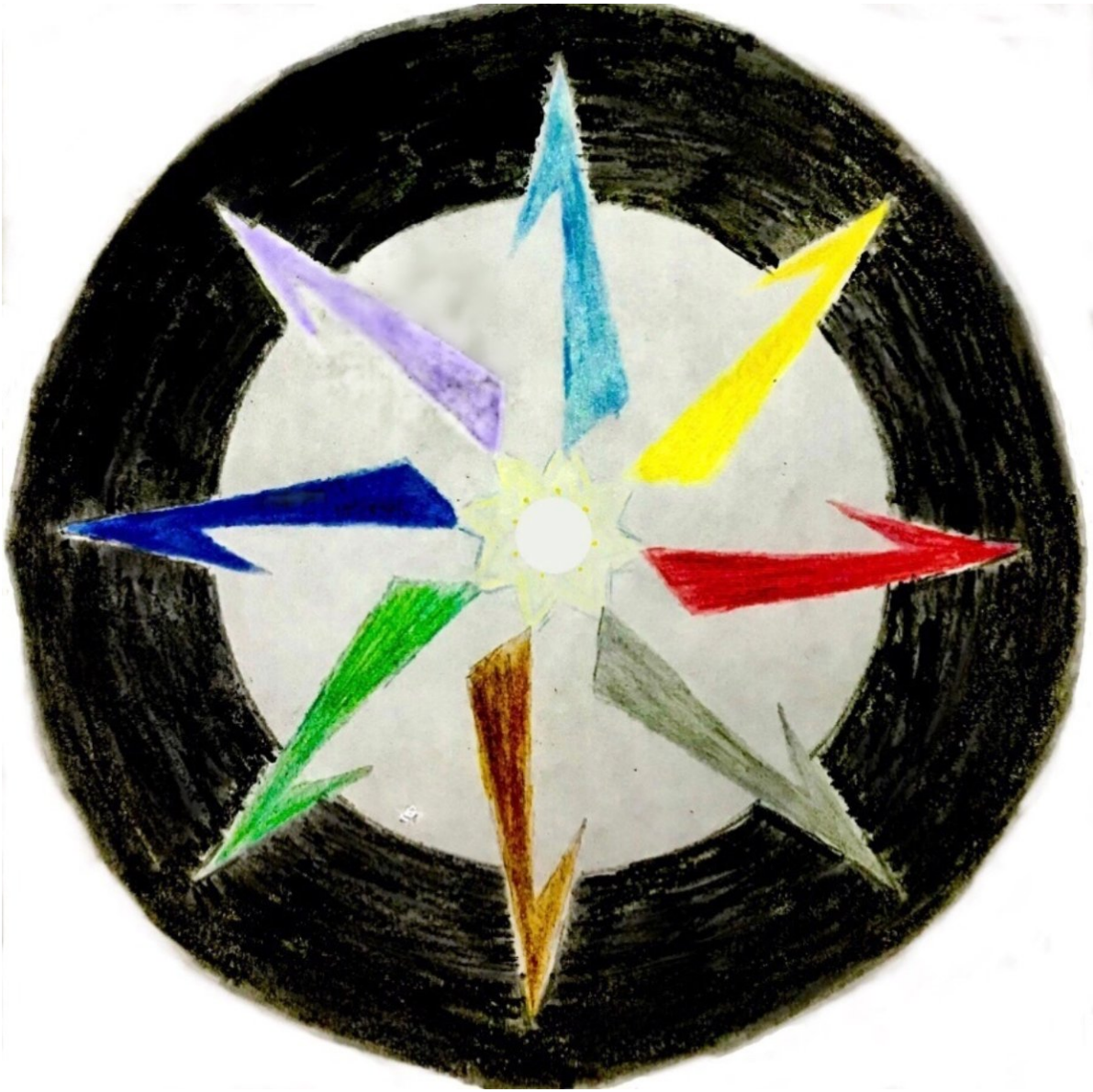


# HOMECOMING



Elemental Gatherers  
Book 7

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Especially a big thank you to you, my readers, for sticking with Aiden and I on this awesome journey. Please leave a review after you read the story, find me on Facebook to follow for news of my next stories, and join me on Patreon to read ahead on new works.

# PROLOGUE

Light staggered into the library chamber, causing Darkness to leap to his feet.

“My dear, what is wrong?” he asked.

“Chaos and Death have joined,” she said. “I was able to get the location of the sea Dungeon through their distortions, but only to the Ashkhas. I started with them, and now I am too drained to attempt another.”

Darkness moved in an instant, pulling her into his arms. “That should be enough. Come, look.” He directed her to the globe. With a thought, it zoomed in on the Ashkhas Baqiya. Originally clear, the image started to distort until a flood of Aether from Darkness stabilized it. “The priest is seeking out Qaq now.”

They kept watching and saw the urgent discussion between the Ashkhas. Sultah Aleahil summoned Master Narwan, Ritter Felix, Guardian Altan, and four other Soul Strengthening gatherers. They discussed and planned, before voting to destroy the Dungeon with extreme prejudice.

“See, my love, you succeeded,” Darkness said, pulling her into a hug.

“That is good,” she said, “but I worry. The Naga and Harpies are growing more active, recovering from their banishment and exile. They still hate the other races due to their defeat by the M’Zee.”

“It will be fine,” Darkness whispered. “As long as they cannot find the Staff of Nammu, our warding will hold. Death is isolated on her world, and no one is stupid enough to let her in. I doubt even Chaos will truly ally with her.”

“They will just fight over the corpse of our world if we cannot keep them out,” Light said. “Unless your gamble with the Chosen pays off. You know Chaos cannot turn down a challenger.”

“We just need a Chosen to become strong enough,”  
Darkness said.

“And for the world to unite, to hold back Chaos’s hordes while the challengers fight,” Light said, gazing at the scene in the crystal ball. “I just hope they have time.”

“Me too, love, me too,” Darkness said with a sigh.

# CHAPTER ONE

I staggered into my room, emotionally and physically exhausted. The sounds of the ongoing city-wide celebration filtered in through the silencing Inscriptions, but I'd been partied out. *Six hours of dancing, talking, and drinking.* I marveled at my endurance and social change. I'd never been one for long parties before, but here I felt like I could have continued if I hadn't been so tired to start with. I collapsed into bed and stared up at the ceiling. *The last few months have been insane. I still barely believe that I came in second in the individual tournament, and I might have won it entirely if I hadn't killed that Illyrian jerk. We went to the Divine Territory! Wait, I never asked Spirit what they called it!* I started laughing, the world spinning around me from too many toasts.

*Well. It's amazing what we discovered there. Chaos is being summoned.* I sobered up almost immediately. *Light, what is going to happen when the Craesti army attacks Illyria? Will an infinite flood of Chaos Beasts await them, or are only some of the Illyrians in league with the enemy?*

I took a deep breath. *No idea. I'll have to talk to Librarian Narwan and Sultah Aleahil at some point. I've got eight medallions to communicate with people. Gotta give one to Aleks—I grinned at the thought of my princess—and definitely to Gunther, the muscle-headed dwarf.* Another laugh at the stereotype pulled over from Earth. *Probably should make sure Sezhade Iswat and Shehzada Maayari both get one, gotta keep the lines of communication open among the heirs. That still leaves four more medallions, so I could have Aleks give one to King Craesti, and one to each of the other monarchs. I wonder if we can have two conversations at once? Let the heirs and I talk, while the monarchs or their representatives negotiate. An hour limit once a month will hopefully help cut through the politicking.* I yawned as the results of the last few days hit me

again. "Sleep time, deal with the rest later," I whispered to myself, then plunked my head onto the pillow and fell asleep.

Two hours later, I woke up. "Of course the party is still going on," I said, laughing. "The army leaves, uh, today, and it's not like Condensation soldiers can't go without sleep for a day or two. Light, I used to pull all-nighters back on Earth, and it's even easier now." I debated for a few seconds about going back out, but the siren's call coming from my ring was too strong. I sent a tiny filament of Aether into the ring, and the football-stadium-sized space unfolded in my mind's eye. I looked over the equipment given to me by Spirit, then moved to the carefully set out line of knowledge stones.

"Where to start, where to start," I mumbled to myself. "Gathering, obviously. Start at the beginning." I summoned the Aether Gathering-level technique knowledge stone into my hand. The translucent blue crystal was a bit larger than my fist, and glowed in my Aether Sight. I pulled another knowledge stone out of my ring, one of my old ones from Azyl Academy, and compared. The stone for my stealth technique was a smoky red color and half the size of the Legacy one. The Aether inside was noticeably thinner, flickering on the verge of being extinguished. *Huh, I thought, I wonder if I can figure out how to strengthen it. Make it last longer, since the next person's usage might break the stone.*

Dismissing my thoughts, I stored the stone again, then put the Legacy knowledge stone to my forehead and put my Aether into it. This time, instead of a flood of information streaming into my brain, I found myself standing in a hallway. My body was misty and felt similarly to when I was looking internally at my center. "Huh, weird," I told myself.

I glanced around, and saw a few dozen doorways on either side of the mental construct. The first hallway had writing in the M'Zee language, but after a second it transitioned to Craesti. "Cultivation runes," I read aloud. "That might be Core runes. I wonder what they have here." I reached out and touched the door. A wave of Aether accompanied a feeling of examination. A few seconds later, the door popped open.



A row of shelves lined the room, each with three layers of displays. White jade tablets the size and shape of an iPad sat just above labels describing what was on them. “Fire runes for low compatibility,” I read from the first one, then picked up the tablet. A simple rune of four lines that combined an *F* and an *X* traced itself across the surface, and I knew how to make it and when to use it. “Neat. I have no idea how this compares to what’s available in Craesti, but this would be usable by people up to medium Affinity. Way too weak for me, though.”

I browsed down the shelves. Two dozen different runes for low and medium compatibility, which I assumed meant Affinity, for each Element. I grabbed the first one I saw labeled high compatibility, for Lightning. The rune displayed itself, hundreds of lines rotating slowly to show the three-dimensional nature of the rune. “Not quite as good as the one I’ve got now,” I said. “Especially because I get some benefit to Air and Fire from mine. Oh, there.” I put the tablet down and took a few more steps to where I saw a label for True Flame.

“True Flame rune, a rune for those with extreme compatibility with Fire and at least high compatibility with Lightning and Metal. Uh, Outstanding and High respectively, I guess. It will enhance gathering speed and it gives a small improvement to Fire technique strength. Nice,” I exclaimed.

I reached for another, but my hand was rebuffed. I looked closer at the plaque describing it. “Huh, a Core rune for someone with Excellent Affinity to Fire, Water, Ice and Metal? Is that why I can’t touch it? I don’t meet the requirements. Just barely. My Water and Ice are close to Excellent—though Water should be there soon—but I still got a ways to go.”

I moved to the end of the room, where a single tablet sat in the most prominent spot, taking up the space of a dozen on the side walls. The label read, “For one who has achieved perfect compatibility with every Element, surround your Core with this to ascend.”

“Wow.” I gaped at it. “Perfect compatibility, Outstanding Affinity, to every Element? Is that even possible? Well, now I want it.” I poked at the shield preventing me from accessing the tablet, then

punched it. I tried to channel Aether into my fist, but it wouldn't come. "Oh yeah, I'm in my mind. I guess I'll have to check out the others." I sulked for a couple of seconds before going back down the line.

After a few minutes, I found a Fire Core rune that excited me. "Smithing Rune of Fiery Growth. Requires Outstanding Fire, Excellent Metal, and Excellent Earth. Enhances gathering speed, improves Fire and Metal technique strength, and allows for easier creation of Lava, Ore, and Enhancing Aether," I read from the plaque, mentally translating the compatibilities to Affinity levels. "I want Lava!" I grabbed for it, then gasped at the complexity of the rune.

Hundreds of lines made a picture that somehow seemed to evoke a miner collecting ore in a volcano's tunnel, then using that same volcano to smith the ore into a flame that grew into the sky. Except it was just a series of runes twined together. "It's like my Lightning rune, enhancing everything I do." I laughed, then I grimaced. "Oh, this is going to suck to draw. Sooo much." I looked at it critically. "Do I really wanna?"

I took a deep breath, then pulled myself out of the Legacy stone. I glared at it. "Fine. This will enhance my strength and improve my gathering speed. I definitely need to get stronger, faster. Everything seems to be coming to a head, but I know there's still a long road ahead. Heh." I laughed, then dove into my center.

I looked at the Fire Core rune I had, still the same campfire I'd started with so long ago. "Sorry," I told it, laughing at the human tendency to humanize objects, then with a grunt of pain I wiped it away.

My spirit felt seared, and I had to spend a few minutes just breathing before the pain dropped to the point that I could continue. I pulled in a bit of Aether, testing the difference. Without eight Core runes, my gathering efficiency was drastically curtailed. *Nice, now I got another baseline to compare to.* I called to mind the new runic pattern, and realized that the knowledge was more strongly imprinted on my mind than from a normal knowledge stone. "Well, that's useful," I told myself, my inner monologue coming out as speech while I was a mental construct floating in my core.

“Okay, try number one,” I said, then started to draw. My Aether flowed around me, burning and carving the rune in the air. I felt around, and realized that I was carving into my spirit, which was separate from my soul. “I’m so confused.” I shook my head, and that moment of distraction made me screw up a line. I tried to erase just the bad spot, but it wiped away all of what I’d drawn.

I found myself pushed out of my center, and barely staggered to the bathroom before throwing up as the spinning pain of my spirit overwhelmed my senses. *Healing powder*, I thought, then summoned one from my ring. I grinned at the awesome treasure I’d won, then poured the powder into my mouth. The sickly sweet flavor overpowered the vomit, at least, and I felt my headache fade away.

I moved back into the bedroom and sat down before dropping into my center. This time, I focused on pulling Aether out of my Core to soothe the area around my focus where I wanted to draw the new Core rune. Tiny amounts of Wood, Fire, and Air Aether vanished and the minute ache that rolled from my center decreased significantly.

Ever since my advancement, I figured the range I could grab Essence from had increased significantly, and while the normal animals slaughtered for food did not provide much, in a city of millions there were hundreds dying in my aura. Every once in a while, I noticed a larger input, and felt sad that someone had just died, but again, in a city of millions, there were people dying all the time, even with the massive increases in lifespan that gathering provided.

I grabbed a tiny piece of Essence from the few dozen drops I had received since the time I’d used every bit to facilitate my advancement to Seed Core. The Essence burned, especially when I tried to force it into my spirit, but the pain vanished as soon as I successfully merged the Essence with the spot I’d tried to draw the rune. My brain felt off for a second, but the painful soreness of my center disappearing helped me focus, along with a swirl of Geist that just appeared and vanished again. “Okay, that was weird. Never mind, now for try number two,” I said, then grimaced. “I do wish that

growing stronger didn't hurt so much. Oh well. Suck it up, buttercup."

I drew the rune again, carefully measuring and moving slowly, but still ended up making a small mistake in the angle of the rune piece that meant pickaxe, hammer, or right arm, depending on the angle you looked at it from. "Darkness hide it," I grumbled as I wiped away what I'd created. Again, nausea filled me, but this time I resisted tossing my cookies. A few minutes of Aether treatment and another drop of Essence fixed the damage, and I started again. *Stupid more complex runes causing more damage, I grumbled, why couldn't this be easy!*

Sixteen. It took me sixteen attempts to successfully create the Smithing Rune of Fiery Growth. I was covered in sweat, my face pale from holding in the groans of pain each wipe tried to drag from me. My center felt bruised and tender, sore from the repeated abuse I'd just thrown at it. The last two failures especially hurt, as I'd been just about done with the complex assemblage of lines that was the final piece of the rune.

I pushed myself up off the floor, then staggered toward the bathroom. I quickly doffed my pajamas, grimacing at the tiny black flakes embedded in the clothing, then sighed as the hot water of the shower hit my back. "I'm so, so, so glad that the hotel has hot showers." I moaned in pleasure as the water, most likely just shy of boiling, soothed away the tension in my muscles.

After a few minutes, I felt more human again. I looked over at my pajamas, then sighed. "I liked those. Why did putting a new rune into my center push out impurities from my body? I didn't temper anything or work toward advancement. Maybe the staff will be able to wash them out?" I groaned and scrubbed my hair aggressively to get out the frustration of losing another set of clothing.

Finally, I'd gotten all of the gross black flecks out of my hair and scrubbed every inch of my body. I stepped over the pile of hopefully not trash and grabbed a bundle of cheap paper stuff that was specifically for wrapping dirty laundry with. I picked up the pajamas with it, then shoved it into a cloth bag and dropped it into the hallway. I knew the inn's staff would attempt to save my clothing,

but I doubted they'd succeed. *Stupid impurities*, I grumbled, *next time, just sit in a tub naked when I do this*. I walked over to where I'd dropped the gathering technique knowledge stone.

I picked it up, then sucked it back into my ring, mentally guiding it to the table where the other stones rested. I felt at my Core and frowned at the tenderness of my spirit and my center. "Yeah, I probably shouldn't replace any other runes for a bit," I said with a frown. "Even if I found a couple of really cool ones. I wonder what's available in Craesti City, or at Azyl Academy. Maybe there will be similar-level runes in the library. I mean, there probably are, but this one was cool. Lava Aether, come on!"

I focused in front of me, holding my hand up and pulling up four motes of Earth Aether, three of Fire Aether, and one Metal Aether. I stared at the circling Aether motes, then reached out mentally to grab them. I crushed them together, thinking of the Hawaiian lava flow I'd seen at Hickam Air Force Base on a summer trip at the Academy. I thought of the different materials that made lava, the heat and stone and ash that a volcano eruption caused.

After nearly a minute of effort, the eight motes of Aether merged into one larger one, reddish brown in color, that wanted to burn through anything in its way. I looked at what I'd created, then laughed, folding over my waist as I giggled in success. "Okay, definitely need more sleep," I wheezed before absorbing the Lava Aether into my center. The ball of advanced Aether didn't break apart, and I realized that I could now hold combined Aether in my center. "This is awesome!"

I yawned again, the pain and effort having drained me, and put on my second-to-last pair of pajamas. "Can't lose many more," I told myself, then shrugged. "Eh, got plenty of storage. Just got to go buy a bunch more sets of clothes. Of course, Ma was right. I did need ten pairs of pants." I laughed, thinking back to packing for the trip here. "Oh well. Might as well act like I'm rich, since I am, you know?" I yawned yet again, my mouth stretching, then I snuggled up under the blankets.

## CHAPTER TWO

After a three-hour-long nap, it was still dark outside. I woke quickly when I realized there was a warm body lying in bed with me. Vaya shifted slightly at my motion, murmured nonsense, and went back to sleep. *She's adorable*, I thought. I very carefully got out of bed, making sure to not move too quickly or abruptly. Once I fully extricated myself, I just stood and looked at her for a minute.

A quick glance out of the window showed the party was starting to die down, as the majority of people were at most Condensation-level gatherers, so they needed more than the five hours' of sleep that I'd gotten. *Well, I still have a bunch of time. Let's do another Core rune*, I thought, then flinched as my center seemed to spasm. Vaya stirred again at my gasp, but didn't wake up. *Or not*. I frowned down at my chest. I sent my Aether into my storage ring, and looked over the Legacy again.

*What should I look at now?* I mused to myself as I poked through it. *I guess back to the gathering technique stones? I wonder what I could find in the Soul Strengthening-level knowledge stone?* I summoned the aforementioned stone. This one was a deep purple. With a grin, I put it to my forehead and sent my Aether into it.

Again, I found myself in a mental projection. This time, though, there was a sitting room with two doors on the wall in front of me and one to either side. Two bookcases full of the jade tablets sat against the wall. I tried to step forward, but a wave of Aether swept over me. A few seconds of being judged by whatever Inscription was behind the Aether passed, and when I could see the room again everything was gone except a single tablet.

I carefully walked over to it. "A Primer on Advanced Gathering Tiers," I read aloud from the plaque underneath it. With a grin, I picked it up.

Spirit appeared in my mind. Well, Spirit as they were before they became Spirit. “Congratulations to you, my inheritor,” they said. “I knew that you would seek to grab all of the knowledge inherent in the Legacy, but what is within this area is beyond you. Knowing how I was and you most likely are, though, I am sure that you will be unwilling to leave without any information. Thus, this primer. Soon you should be creating your Core, buttressed by the gains of the Tower of Trials. The initial few layers of your Core are key to your ability to successfully advance to Soul Opening. Each time you compress your Aether to crystallize it, you need to control how the layer forms, to prevent any imperfections as best you can.”

They took a deep breath. “At larger numbers of layers, you need to be creating the runic structures dictated by your cultivation technique, but do not be afraid to experiment. In the end, every path to the peak is unique, and no technique created by another will be perfect for you. While grinding away your advancement is painful, there is little permanent damage. More information is readily available in the Core Technique stone.”

Spirit laughed. “But you are here for what comes next. Once you are ready, you will trigger the Tribulation, where the world will test your Core, your mind, your techniques, and, most importantly, your heart. Will you have the will to hold on and fight, or will your Core shatter under the judgement? The Tribulation will purify and correct any mistakes in your Core, and open your Soul Space.”

They shook their head. “I do not mean to minimize this. Less than a quarter of the people who attempt the Tribulation are successful in opening their Soul Space. I do not doubt, though, that anyone able to win my people’s Legacy will succeed. Upon opening your Soul Space, return to this technique stone for guidance on appropriate techniques. In general, though, you will begin by forming your Soul. Aether itself is insufficient, and must be condensed and purified to become Ashe. Many who succeeded in opening their Soul Space are unable to create Ashe, and find themselves limited forever, but this will not happen to you. Afterwards, similar to creating your Aether Pool, you will be enhancing your Soul Opening to allow

for a larger storage. Only with sufficient stored Ashe can you change your spherical soul into a facsimile of your body.”

Spirit gestured at themselves. “Once your Soul is Primed, you can begin working to perfectly copy yourself. The better the resonance, the easier the next step will be. To continue to advance, you must rip your Soul out of your Soul Space. This is the singularly most unpleasant experience you will ever encounter.” They shuddered. “Once separate, you will work to strengthen your Soul more, until it matches your physical body in capability. This is the stage that stymied all of the gatherers of the M’Zee for nearly two hundred years. It is only when conflict with the Harpies threatened us again that I experimented by absorbing my Soul back into my body.”

“It reset me back to the very beginning of Soul Forming, but I was stronger than I had been. In less than a decade, I had surpassed everyone else in strength. The war ended when I challenged the Harpy Queen to a duel, and destroyed her utterly. Others copied me, and we eventually found that a single reset still had a ceiling to the power you could gain. Sanaa was the first to try a second merger, and then, twenty-five years later, Sadik performed a third. Each attempt was more difficult; each return to my previous height took more Aether, more Ashe, more resources.”

“It was only with the final war that we discovered how to feel the fabric of the world. At the thinnest point, the Tower of Ascension was built. When you are ready, you will need to seek it out. Until then, good luck, and keep your people safe,” Spirit finished, before vanishing from in front of me. I was immediately kicked out of the knowledge stone, and unable to enter into it again.

“Well, that’s super important,” I said. “I need to tell Librarian Narwan soon.” I looked outside, but there wasn’t even a hint of the sun rising. “Later today, though.” I held the stone up in front of me. “You’re my ticket to even greater wealth, I think. Probably should trade being able to look into it for resources to push Jamila, Aleks, and everyone else still in Condensation to Core, and maybe some more equipment? I don’t know.” I stuck the stone back into my ring.

“What did you say?” Vaya asked, sitting up.



“Oh, sorry,” I said sheepishly. “Uh, I was just looking into the Legacy, and found something very interesting.” I paused dramatically. She threw a pillow at me. I laughed, then continued to explain what I’d just found out.

“That is amazing,” she said. “So, to advance you have to move backward.”

“Basically,” I said with a shrug.

She nodded, looking thoughtful, then stood up and stretched. *Light, she’s gorgeous,* I thought, admiring my girlfriend, and she grinned at me noticing her. “Well,” she said. “I am going to take a shower and change.” She was still wearing the dark-green dress she’d changed into for the party.

“Enjoy,” I said. “I’m going to look more into the Legacy. I will join you for breakfast afterwards?”

“Sounds good,” Vaya said, then left with a sashay in her walk.

After watching her leave, I stood up and did some jumping jacks before looking into the ring again. *Now what do I want to look at? Core-level gathering techniques? Not really. I kinda want to learn what Librarian Narwan wants to teach us first. Maybe some attack or movement techniques? A Lightning-based movement technique should be faster than Gusting Northern Wind, though I doubt it’ll let me fly. Maybe there’s a Speed Aether that I can use for a technique?*

I pulled out the Core-level technique knowledge stone, then dove into it. As with the first one I’d examined, I found myself in a long hallway. “I want to look at Lightning-based movement techniques,” I said aloud. The hallway rearranged itself, and I was suddenly at a door.

I reached out and grabbed the doorknob but found it locked. I tried to pull my hand off and go to a different doorway, but I couldn’t let go. A tiny suction feeling came from my hand after a second, and I realized it was looking for Lightning Aether. I fed a tiny streamer into the knob. I felt a tumbler move, but it was still locked. My mind followed the Aether into the inner workings of the door, and I had to carefully maneuver it around an obstruction through the tiniest bit of feedback I could get from my Aether sense.

My Aether sense had become significantly sharper from my advancement to Seed Core, and I could vaguely tell what Aether was around me in a five-meter bubble. By focusing, I could feel minor details. This let me guide the Aether through a challenging course of twists and turns. Twice I had to hold the Lightning off the sides of a section, as touching it caused shocks to hurt my hand. Finally, I flipped a fifth tumbler, and the door knob turned.

There was another hole I could put the Lightning Aether into, but I wasn't fast enough. The door opened, and the testing apparatus vanished from my perceptions. "Well, I guess I got a good enough grade," I grumbled, then shrugged. "I still have to work on fine Aether control some more. Let's see what I can access now." I stepped into the room.

There were hundreds of jade tablets here, each one a different technique. "Well, that's awesome," I said exuberantly, bouncing on my heels before rushing to read the plaques. "Floating Spark Movement Technique. Air with minor Lightning and Fire Elements, uses unpredictable movements to confuse enemies and close in for devastating melee attacks. Neat." I nodded, then moved to the next one.

The first two dozen were in the same vein, different techniques to move in a battle. On closer inspection, I saw that the jade tablets themselves had a series of stars on them. The first I looked at, Floating Spark, had three stars, four stars, then two stars. As I moved farther into the room, the number of stars increased in all three sections, though some were lopsided. One technique, Lightning Flashes Through The Field, had nine stars on the first row, but only one in the second. The third row was seven stars, though.

I read the plaque. "Use Lightning Aether to explode forward, giving incredible acceleration and speed while limiting your movement to a straight line. Huh, so maybe the first row is speed or acceleration or how quickly the technique lets you move? The second row then could be maneuverability or control, I guess? Not sure what the third row of stars is."

I paused for a minute, then spoke to the room. "I need a technique that'll combine with Dancing Northern Wind to get a bit

more speed in battle. Gusting Northern Wind is good enough, but I am starting to get eclipsed by some of my friends in speed, and I'd like to try to catch up."

The room sparkled for a second, then all but six of the tablets vanished. The first one had two stars in all three rows, so I moved on. The rest were disappointing as well, until I got to the last one. Eight stars, eight stars, and ten stars, the highest I'd seen yet. "Voltage Differential Nerve Induction Technique. Use Lightning and Reflex Aether to enhance your body, allowing for faster reactions and movement speed. Create voltage differential fields within your aura to allow for unpredictable and rapid direction changes and extreme straight-line speed. Now that looks awesome," I exclaimed with a giant grin on my face.

I reached forward and picked it up. "Oh, that's what the third star was," I said. "Compatibility with my current techniques. Light, this will be useful." I glanced to the side, and suddenly an armchair appeared. I shrugged and sat. The jade tablet glowed like an iPad, and I found that I could swipe through the data on it. I looked at the very beginning, and saw, both in front of me and in my head, a teacher instructing the memory giver on the technique.

"Your nerves control your body," the M'Zee said, "and only through enhancing them will you be able to react fast enough at the highest levels of combat. You do not need to worry about that, little seedling, but by increasing your reflexes, you will stay safer while hunting the low-level Spirit Beasts your team is tasked with. Now, here are the main nerve pathways of your body."

The teacher pulled down a rolled-up drawing. The outline of a person was there, along with the brain and all the nerves extending from it. More organs were traced out but not filled in, along with the bones. I noticed a few things immediately. They only had one kidney, and the intestines were larger. I didn't see anything that could be an appendix either. That was the limit of my biological knowledge, though, and I had absolutely no idea what might have been different about the brain or nerves.

The teacher then showed how to selectively enhance each nerve bundle, allowing for faster movement of a specific limb. The

limits here were fairly noticeable, with a ten percent increase in reaction speed before you'd start having to worry about tendon or muscle damage. "This technique is recommended for you, little spark, because of your near-perfect compatibility with Lightning," the teacher explained. "You should learn a high-level Metal or Earth body-strengthening technique if you truly wish to excel at it."

I moved on, and found where a different teacher was explaining how to create what they called attraction locations. The memory giver was now in Foundation Core and thus had a sphere of nearly a hundred meters where they could express their Aether and will. "Huh," I said when I realized "attraction locations" were just electrostatic attraction moving their body. "That could work. The strength of the movement is much greater than I'd have thought it would be. Silly Aether, not following physical laws."

The student was jumping around, shooting to their attraction locations at jaw-dropping speeds. I could feel them running a Metal technique through their muscles and an Earth technique in their bones and tendons to deal with the shock of stopping. *Good to know, I thought. Either get my body strong enough to deal, or learn a better technique than the General Strengthening Technique. I guess that should be next.*

In the middle of a jump, the teacher blasted me with a Lightning Bolt. I, I mean the student, rolled to the side and leapt to their feet. "Good. You can use this technique because Lightning is so much weaker against you," the teacher said. "Just as you use Lightning to leap between locations on the battlefield, so will Lightning attacks be diverted to either you or your attraction locations."

"Teacher, what about my own attacks?" the student asked.

"Yours will not react to your technique," they answered. "But even your allies will be affected. You must be aware of this. The Lightning Attraction Technique is extremely useful for quick, sudden movements, but it does have its downsides. Now, continue."

The student created another attraction location, then jumped toward it with a thought. They saw the teacher creating another Lightning attack, and threw down a different attraction location

nearby. Their movement curved, hitting a middle spot between the two locations. The teacher's attack diverted away from them and went directly into the closest of the attraction locations to the student. The teacher beamed at the student. "Excellent! Your battle awareness is superb. Just as the technique can pull attacks toward you, it can pull them away. We will continue to practice."

The scene changed again. This time the memory giver was alone. They were at Complete Core, or nearly, at least, but their focus was all internal. The runic structures for the Nerve Enhancement Technique and the Lightning Attraction Technique floated in and around them. "Oh!" I exclaimed again, "that's how they combined them! By linking the Nerve Enhancement to the attraction points, you don't have to create the internal voltage points. That's so cool."

I paused for a second. "I can combine this with the General Strengthening Technique too," I said, my eyes going wide. "Wait, I need to look at all of my techniques with an eye for combinations. There are so many options." I shook my head. "Though what is better, learning a new specialized technique or adapting one I've already learned? I don't know. Let's see what Librarian Narwan wants to teach us soon, and ask him and Knight Kaminski."

The tablet went blank after that scene, but the knowledge was all implanted in my head. I stood, about to go look for another technique to learn, but my head started to hurt. I left the knowledge stone and massaged my temples. "Okay, gotta take a break before implanting more info in the noggin." I glanced around, but Vaya hadn't come back, then looked out the window. The sun was just starting to come up. "Yay, breakfast time."

## CHAPTER THREE

I was directed to a different dining room. It was much smaller, with only enough room for three tables of six. Vaya, Jamila, Lea, Lilianna, and Milenna were chatting quietly over cups of tea and coffee. Jamila saw me first, her beautiful, olive-skinned face lighting up with a grin. I waved and headed toward the last open seat, next to Vaya. Vaya's golden hair glittered, silver and gold threads braided into it. I could see the Aether on them. "Neat hair ornament," I said, sitting next to her just as she finished telling the rest of the girls about a carnival game. "You look lovely."

"Thank you," Vaya said, pulling me into a hug. I hugged her back, then reached over the table to squeeze Jamila's hand.

"Your aura changed a bit," Lea said, looking at me with a frown.

"Oh, I finally got a chance to look at the Legacy," I said, then paused as a servant brought pancakes and eggs in. "Thank you. The first part I looked at was about Core runes, and I found a really neat one for Fire. So I replaced my old one with it. Hurt like it always does, ridiculously bad due to the complexity, but I can already feel the effects. I was going to find another one, but my center was not ready for a new one. In fact..." I paused and summoned the knowledge stone. *Gotta get everyone stronger, so let's share with my friends.* "Jamila, here. Find one that works for you, then give it to one of the others. We'll have a lot of time on the trip back to Craesti, but might as well get started."

"You are just giving us this?" Milenna asked. "I know you are generous, but we could pay you for access?"

"It's free," I said, then looked at my finger where the ring rested. "I'm planning on going through everything that is for Aether Gathering-level gatherers and distributing it to everyone in all nations. If we can improve the average gatherer's strength, I think it'll

help reduce the damage that is coming. The war will not be easy, and whatever Darkness summoned me here for will be worse, I'm sure of it. This way, less people will die."

"Then I will not turn down your generosity," Milenna said, "and will instead pay for this by charity work."

I grinned at her. "Thank you."

"Master Narwan told us that we should be ready to advance to Seed Core less than a month," Jamila said. "I would like to do so sooner, but he said it would require some rarer pills now that we have taken the ones from the Trials."

"Well, I have something to trade for those pills," I said with a grin.

"Ooh, what?" Lilianna said, leaning in. Everyone else turned and waited expectantly.

"Uh, I wasn't able to get much detail, but the Legacy includes the path forward for everyone at Librarian Narwan's level," I said.

A burst of air threw my hair forward, reminding me that I needed to get it cut shorter soon. "It does?" Librarian Narwan said. Lilianna and Milenna had jumped, but the others didn't, used to my master's proclivities.

"Yes, Librarian Narwan, it does," I said. "And of course you will get access as my master."

"Good, but not right now," he answered. "Now you are called before Sultah Aleahil, myself, and the ambassadors and heirs that are present in the city."

I looked down at my plate, and realized that he'd timed his arrival with the last bite. "I am ready," I told him, and stood up.

"Then follow," he said, and rushed out of the room. He didn't vanish, but was moving fast enough that I had to push myself to keep up.

I waved over my shoulder to my friends as I hurried after him, my surroundings blurring slightly as I pushed Aether into Gusting Northern Wind. I tried to use the Voltage Differential Nerve Induction Technique, but I hadn't practiced enough to form the attraction points fast enough, so I gave up. The Nerve Induction part, though, did let me turn corners a bit easier.

Librarian Narwan sped up more, making me push every bit I could out of my two different movement techniques. I wanted to use the General Strengthening Technique too but running three different sets of runes was too much for me, right now at least. *I need to put together the Nerve Induction with a strengthening technique, but I need time to figure it out*, I thought, my mental voice panting.

We arrived in less than five minutes, racing up to and through a massive gate made of a gold-plated metal. Two Ashkhas guards, both at Complete Core, stood aside as we ran, and saluted with the pikes they held. I gave a salute back, my right fist across my chest, and then we were past them.

Librarian Narwan finally slowed as we entered the main palace, changing into a brisk walk rather than a run. It was still faster than an Aether Gathering-level person could run, but no one I noticed was weaker than Circulation Condensation. And those were fourteen-year-old servants who'd probably only been gathering for less than a year.

A few servants looked like they were going to approach, but a single glance at Librarian Narwan's face dissuaded them of the notion. He led me unerringly through the twisting maze of hallways for a minute, and then we arrived at a small, nondescript door. A single guard was a few meters down the hallway, in front of a more ostentatious doorway. "Go on in, Master Narwan," the guard said with a bow.

"Thank you," Librarian Narwan said, then opened the door and marched in. I followed nervously. The square room was fairly large, each side around seven meters in length. Each wall had a different map on it. Straight ahead was a map of the Ashkhas Baqiya and Monster Island, to my right was a map showing the entirety of the Interior Sea and the countries surrounding it, and then to my left was a map of Borgby, the Illyrian fort city. That map was only partially filled in, with many areas left blank as we just didn't know enough about the Illyrians.

A table filled half the room's floor space, and seated at the head was Sultah Aleahil. To his left was an older male Ashkhas who had streaks of gray in his brown fur, and to his right was a female



Ashkhas with light tan fur and purplish eyes. Aleks was next to the female Ashkhas, and smiled happily when she saw me enter. Two seats were empty beside her, and then an older man in a keikogi was sitting stiffly next to Gunther, who gave me a brief nod. Ritter Felix sat next to him, and I felt the weight of his gaze evaluating me. Another Volk sat next to him. On the other side, to Sultah Aleahil's left and across from Aleks was the Ashkhas heir, then the Topraki heir, an older Topraki male that made me think of Librarian Narwan, and a female Topraki who had a very large notebook in front of her.

After I was seated next to Aleks, I grabbed her hand under the table and squeezed it. "Now that we are all here," Sultah Aleahil said, "we can begin our discussions."

"Why is the boy here?" the Ashkhas sitting on Sultah Aleahil's left asked haughtily.

"He is the possessor of the Legacy of the M'Zee, Councilor Darius," Sultah Aleahil answered, "along with being an advisor to King Craesti. His presence is germane to the discussion."

The look on Darius's face was obviously condescending, but he didn't say anything else. Ritter Felix spoke into the silence that followed. "Where are the troops now?"

"The first wave is still roughly a week away from landing," Sultah Aleahil answered. "They have sighted the Primordial. The Craesti team herding it plan to direct it into the fortifications a day prior to our initial assault. We will not hear from them again until nearly a week after the assault begins. The second wave of ships will be launching from our ports in two days, with nearly a hundred thousand Ashkhas troops on board."

"The Topraki Empire will contribute two hundred thousand to the second wave," the female Topraki said, still writing in her notebook. "I heard back from Emperor Futuh, and they will be ready to launch in two weeks, joining your army."

"The Weltreich has eighty thousand soldiers available," Gunther said, not looking at his ambassador. "I will be joining them on the front lines."

The Craesti ambassador added, "We will be sending one hundred fifty thousand troops in our next deployment."

“We would send more,” Aleks said, “but we lack the ships to hold them.”

“Once the initial assault has created a beachhead, our ships will return to Craesti to move another hundred thousand people,” the Craesti ambassador continued. “Thank you, Princess Aleks.”

“Uh, sirs and madams, I may have something that will assist with getting information from the assault,” I said, then reached into the spatial bag Knight Kaminski had gotten me to conceal the ring’s effects. I summoned the Connecting the Myriad Peoples plate and pulled it out of my bag. “This is one of the items I received from Spirit in the Tower of Trials.” I popped off one of the medallions and tossed it to Gunther. “Once a month, I can use the plate here to connect everyone holding a pendant for a one-hour conversation. I do not know exactly how it works, but that should allow for slightly easier discussions and information sharing.”

“Who do you plan to give the pendants to?” Counselor Darius asked snidely.

I handed another to Aleks and then one to Izhade before sliding one to Sultah Aleahil. “My plan is one each to my friends that are heirs to their thrones, and then one to the heads of each state. That way we will be able to communicate among the nations, and will allow me to further the next generations’ connections among our countries.” With that, I passed two to Shehzada Maayari and one more to Gunther and Aleks. “Please give the second one to your parents.”

“Thank you, Aiden,” Gunther said, leaning forward to look closely at the pendant. “I cannot even see most of the Inscription on this. Fascinating.”

“This will be very useful,” Maayari said, his voice rough. He gave a short bark of laughter. “I look forward to our discussions.”

“Aiden, that is a good segue into our next point of discussion,” Sultah Aleahil said. “How much are you willing to share from the Legacy?”

“And what precious resources will we have to spend to assuage your greed, nang Craesti?” Counselor Darius added with a growl.

I looked at Darius, then over at Aleks and Librarian Narwan. He gave me a nod. “Counselor Darius,” I said firmly. “If you speak to me in that way again, I will ask you to leave. I have done nothing to earn your enmity that I know of and it is distracting from the purpose of this meeting.”

“Listen here, you —” Darius started, then Sultah Aleahil slammed a fist into the side of his skull. The flash of Aleahil’s aura made my breath catch, and Darius was flung into the wall with a wet thunk. He groaned weakly.

“Leave,” Sultah Aleahil said. “You are removed from my Council. Your masters will have to appoint another to sit in these meetings to replace you.”

“You will regret this,” Darius said darkly to me.

“No,” I said, “I won’t.” I turned back to Sultah Aleahil. “I have not had a chance to look over the majority of it yet. One part of the Legacy includes, I believe, a listing of every single Core rune that the M’Zee had discovered, including many more for those with lower Affinity levels than I knew of. I plan to make all of the single Element runes available to everyone, and I do mean everyone.”

I looked around the table seriously, then continued. “We need to seriously increase the strength of the average citizen in our nations. Right now, the majority of our populations cannot even clear the hurdle of condensing a single drop of Aether. Imagine what we could accomplish if every adult was able to reach Complete Condensation?” I looked around the table, noticing the thoughtful looks on everyone’s faces. “Additionally, a cataclysm is coming.” Sultah Aleahil looked at me sharply, while Gunther had a quizzical look on his face.

I paused to take a deep breath. Several of the people around the table opened their mouths like they were about to speak, but Librarian Narwan and Sultah Aleahil both motioned for silence. Aleks grabbed my hand again, and I continued. “A bit over a year and a half ago, I was extremely sick. At my worst, I found myself, my spirit, speaking with Darkness, who warned me that something was coming, and charged me to get stronger in order to fight it. He cured my illness, and I recovered.” I sighed and shivered, remembering the

feeling of being in Darkness's presence. "One of my goals to do so is to make everyone stronger. Alone, I cannot stand against a calamity, but together, we will succeed."

"Is that why you precipitated the war with Illyria?" the Topraki Soul Strengthening advisor asked.

I almost bristled at the question, but the tone didn't have any accusation in it, only curiosity. "No," I answered, "I didn't mean to do that, if my actions in the tournament are what sparked it at all. Defeating the Illyrians will make everyone else safer in the long run, but I worry that in the short run we will all be weakened. Chaos is coming, and Illyria seems to be allied with them. Maybe the war will cause their plans to trigger sooner than they want, or maybe this is exactly what they wanted. I don't know."

"It is good you did not deliberately cause a war," was the response. "And it is good that the war will hurt our enemies more than ourselves."

I smiled grimly, then continued. "Other than the Core runes, I'm going to find gathering techniques, powder recipes, Inscriptions, and anything else I can discover. If it is for people at the Aether Gathering level or equivalent, it will be given away for free. Completely, utterly free. Condensation-level knowledge will be shared for a minimal cost, and a moderate one for Core-level techniques. Soul Strengthening techniques, though, will be expensive."

"What could they have that we would want?" Ritter Felix asked.

"Information on how to advance beyond where you all have stalled out, and how to ascend to the next level," I said simply.

"What!" the Topraki advisor exclaimed. "How? Why? How much?!"

"Uh, I haven't decided yet," I said.

"And do not be tempted to try and rob him," Librarian Narwan said, looking at the others. "I and Sultah Aleahil will be watching."

"That is the extent of what I've found in the Legacy so far. I will figure out prices and what is available in the Legacy as soon as I can," I said.

“You said that you will make single Element Core runes free,” Gunther stated. “Does that mean there are multi-Element Core runes available?”

“Yes,” I said, “though they are a pain to engrave in your center.”

“We will talk later,” Gunther told me.

“Excellent, now that that has been discussed, we can move on to the proposed trade agreement from Princess Aleksandra,” Sultah Aleahil announced.

“Uh, one last thing if I may,” I interjected. Sultah Aleahil nodded. “Spirit, the moderator of the Tower of Trials, gave me designs to fix the portals to the Divine Territory. They would like you to build the portal again, allowing the trial to occur much more easily for everyone.” I took a deep breath, then said, “The portals include an Inscription to teleport anyone inside the Divine Territory out before they can take lethal damage, so no one else will die exploring it.”

“No one!” the Topraki Soul Strengthening advisor exclaimed, pain in his voice.

“No one,” I repeated, giving him a sad smile. “They did require that each of the races that were present this year, all of us”—I gestured at the table—“have an equal representation in the Trial. Spirit doesn’t want to let the Tower be limited by greed among the nations.”

“And what if something happens that prevents it?” Sultah Aleahil asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think the portal design will allow you to communicate with Spirit, but they were adamant when talking to me about it. Also, the trials will still be limited to once every five years, since they need time to re-create the rewards.”

“Another will be able to get the Legacy?” Ritter Felix asked, incredulous.

“No,” I said, “but the pills that enhanced my tempering, increased my gathering level, and for creating a Core will be available. There is still much Spirit and the Tower of Trials can teach us, and it will provide rewards for those who enter.”

“What do you want to provide the plans?” Sultah Aleahil asked.

“Uh, just to make a copy of them for each nation to study,” I said. “They will help all of us develop new technologies, and Spirit already rewarded me for this.”

“I will do so, please give them to Casmir as soon as you can,” he replied. “I will ensure that multiple copies are created as quickly as possible. Anything else, Munqiz Aiden?” I shook my head. “Thank you. Now, Princess Aleksandra, on to your proposal for a trade treaty.”

The discussions continued for the next hour about various trade deals and other treaties. I managed to make a few poignant comments, but mostly sat and listened. Finally, the meeting was dismissed.

“Knight Aiden,” Prince Gunther called out, “wait a second please.”

“Sure thing, Prince Gunther,” I answered, stepping aside. Two pages had appeared, young Ashkhas standing just out of earshot of a private conversation. A third was already escorting the Topraki delegation away.

“I need a Metal, Earth, and Wood rune. We have not discovered a Core rune of that combination suitable for those with Significant Affinity,” Gunther said quietly.

“Can you trade the next level of your people’s tempering technique?” I asked.

He looked up for a second, then nodded. “Yes, I can do that.”

“Then I will see what the Legacy has,” I told him.

“Ritter Felix and I will speak with you tomorrow,” Gunther said. “Thank you.”

“This is mutually beneficial,” I told him. “We both get stronger. You need to advance soon, or I’m definitely going to beat you into the ground when we next spar.”

“Hah,” Gunther laughed. “We shall see about that.”

“Well, bring it on.” I grinned.

He shook his head, then gave me a slight bow. I returned the gesture, and then a young Ashkhas girl in a formal uniform stepped

forward.

“Knight Aiden, I am Tudien Maryam, and have been tasked with escorting you out of the palace. Please follow me if you are ready,” she said, her voice high-pitched but steady.

“I am ready,” I said. “Thank you.”

# CHAPTER FOUR

It took me nearly an hour to get back to the inn, since I wasn't sprinting as fast as I could this time. When I arrived, I saw Librarian Narwan speaking with Sam. I waved, but left them to do what they were doing. I could see the Aether flowing in Sam as Librarian Narwan talked. She didn't respond, too engrossed in her center to notice me.

I opened the door carefully to my room, and found it empty yet again. Jon's bed was ruffled, though, so he must have slept in it at some point. I laughed, then pulled out another knowledge stone along with a few sheets of paper. I found myself in the Herbology hallway, and started to explore. Low-level plants, Inscriptions to enhance the growth of hundreds of different crops, mixtures and fertilizers and all sorts of information flowed onto the pages in front of me.

After the first three Inscriptions caused me to start having a headache, I figured out the trick to not getting a direct download of information into my brain. I would read reports and transcriptions from memories. Every few minutes, I'd pop back out of the stone to write down what I'd been reading, checking over it a couple of times to ensure I wasn't missing anything important. *I'll still have to share this stone around, I thought, but at least these notes should help me as well. Light, I wish I could just absorb everything in the Legacy. That would be so awesome. Alas, all that lies in the way are crippling migraines and my brain exploding.* I shook my head and laughed, then dove back into the stone.

After about an hour, my door echoed with a knocking sound. I got up, stretching my legs to get the blood back in them, and called out, "One second!"

"Meet in the courtyard for training in five minutes," Librarian Narwan commanded.



“Yes, sir,” I yelled back then changed into a looser set of clothing. After getting ready, I hurried out the door, only to leap backward as Jon tried to open it.

“Gotta change,” he said quickly.

“Yup, see you down there,” I told him, stepping aside so he could enter.

A few minutes later, I was waiting with my team. No one else had been summoned. “So, is anyone else excited to learn about gathering at the Core level?” Vaya asked.

“Definitely,” Bridget responded.

A second later, Librarian Narwan appeared in front of us. “Yes, you will be learning about gathering in Seed Core. Most will tell you that the layers here in Seed Core do not matter, that they exist only to get you additional Aether storage and strengthen your physical body. Those who say so are short-sighted fools who will be doomed to languish in mediocrity. Of course, that is not you.” His glare promised significant pain if it was us.

“Your advancement through Core will be significantly personal, so I will be instructing each of you individually. In general, each time you create a new layer on your Core, you will be adding to a runic structure that we will design ahead of time. This will not be easy, and starting at Seed Core will make it harder. Most start in Foundation Core. As an example, here is the initial setup I used as a Seed and Foundation Core gatherer.”

A spherical crystal appeared in front of us, and the top layer pulled away to reveal a tapestry of runes that formed it. They were three dimensional and linked together in ways that revealed the truth of Librarian Narwan. The connection of gathering and Wood runes and the way they curved into the knowledge rune next to them told me that he sought knowledge wherever and however he could get it. Another spot, where a connection rune merged with one I didn’t know, evoked his desire to lift up the common people of Craesti. Looking at his core was like looking into his soul. One spot, though, spoke to me of the pain of his loss. An entire quadrant of his Core shouted his love for his wife, and his despair at losing her. Tears

formed in the corner of my eye, and Vaya took my hand as she sought comfort as well.

Librarian Narwan ignored us, and refused to acknowledge anything about that portion of his soul. “The Primordials I have spoken to call this level Truth Seeking,” he continued. “You can see why. Your Core will evoke the truth of who you are. If it doesn’t, you will get few benefits. Now, each of you go to a corner of the yard, and meditate on who you are as a gatherer and as a person. I will speak to each of you individually.”

“Yes, Master Narwan,” we chorused. I jogged out to the far-right corner, the farthest from the doorway, then sat cross-legged on the dirt.

*Okay, who am I? As a gatherer, I’m a Lightning-focused all-rounder. I mean, even my lowest Affinity is High, which is better than most people’s best Affinity. Uh, let’s not get arrogant. There are many people with Affinities near mine. I frowned, then shrugged at my thoughts. I probably do have the highest level of Affinities among anyone in my generation at least, though. So, who I am as a gatherer is the best. It is what I strive to be, what I want to be, and what I am. Of course, I don’t know if I really am best, since I’ve never gotten to fight Aleks as an equal with both of us at full strength. In Craesti, she had fought three other people already, and in the Tournament of Champions I was injured. Does it matter though? If who I am is one who strives to be the best, then losing is fine as long as I learn and grow from it.*

*Now, who am I as a person? Why am I going through the pain, torment, and stress that my current path puts me on? I want to save, well, everyone. I know that’s not realistic, but, Light, Darkness summoned me here and asked if I wanted to save the world, after I literally died to save someone else. That’s heavy, but I’m going to meet his challenge. I can, I will be the hero of this world. I sighed. Is fame really a part of my desires? I used to think that being a celebrity would be horrible. Here, at least, there aren’t any paparazzi, even if at least half the Ashkhas give me that worshipful look that makes me uncomfortable.*

*What would these desires look like in a Core?* I thought, then started to sketch in the dirt in front of me. *I know being a gatherer is important to me, so gather needs to be a prominent rune, but I need to bend it to make it part of a sphere. If I link it to Lightning, I can bend the edges like...* I drew, then got frustrated when the dirt didn't let me do what I wanted.

I focused on the air in front of me, and let out a tiny bit of Aether. I used Earth as the Core, and then a tiny blade of Metal and Lightning mixed to carve away at it. Tiny [\[A1\]](#)grooves and swirls were cut into it. *Hey, at least this way, when I make a mistake, I can just fix it.* I laughed internally as I sent a bit more Earth Aether to fill in a part where the two runes didn't connect like I wanted them to.

I ended up erasing the entire thing twice, rotating each of the two runes and bending them in different ways. "You have to think about what you are trying to express," Librarian Narwan said once I deleted my practice core for the third time. "And let the feelings that the sentiment evokes in you guide your creation."

"Yes, Master Narwan," I said, then closed my eyes. I focused on the joy I felt when I advanced, on how fulfilling gathering was, and my goal of getting stronger and being a pillar for the kingdom and world. The two runes formed in front of me, and I could feel the bends necessary to link them. Together the runes made up about a third of the space available on my pseudo-core in front of me.

"Good," Librarian Narwan said, "and it only took you two hours. Well done. Remember the configuration, and we can work on another set of runes shortly."

"Uh, sir, what should I do now? Should I not be gathering until this is complete?" I asked.

"Gathering at the Core level is different," Librarian Narwan said. "Currently, it would probably take you around two hours to create your next layer, assuming you use a gathering powder and are in a place with significant Aether density. Out here in the yard, without a supplement, it would take you six hours or so, and that is very fast. Never forget that your gathering speed is abnormal, even among the elite of the nations. The only reason your friends are keeping up with you is your incessant need to give them gathering

powders, pills, and other enhancements. Anyway, if you were to start gathering and have to stop before you could create a new layer, all of the Aether you had gathered above your normal storage capacity would quickly bleed off and be lost. To advance, you will have to schedule significant time periods of just gathering.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “Uh, so should I work on another rune set now?”

“Take a few minutes to move around, stretch your legs, and refresh yourself,” he said. “Jon is just about done; I will speak with him next. Come back in a few minutes to work on this.”

I stood and bowed. He nodded back before seeming to teleport to Jon’s side. Jon was poking at a floating ball of Ice Aether, then frowned at it and washed it in Fire. Librarian Narwan started speaking to him, and Jon nodded with a look of concentration on his face.

Over in another corner I saw Vaya contemplating a carved Wood core. She had three runes on it already and was tweaking how a vine rune connected to one that meant control. Her core seemed to say that she controlled the growth of everything around her, and that she could control anything within that growth. *Well, that’s cool*, I thought.

Bridget wiped away what she’d been working on when I looked over, though not because I had. She quickly reformed another core, dense Air rotating slowly in front of her, then it shifted to show the rune for speed and one for agility.

Lindsay walked over to where I was standing with a tray of lemonade. “Master Narwan bade me bring refreshments to you.”

“Thanks, Lindsay,” I said.

“No, thank you.” She smiled and gestured at her face. “I advanced to Condensation, and the healers were able to remove my scars. The Affinity Powders you gave me made it so much easier, and now smiling does not cause me pain. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. “I plan on giving more and more people those powders, and I know Librarian Narwan is still looking at ways of making them better and cheaper.”

“That would be amazing,” she said. “But I should go, Jon is standing up now.”

“Thanks again,” I said before taking a deep sip. The tingle of the sour melded with the sweetness of the sugar, and a rush of Aether showed that they’d used level three Sourburst Lemons to create it, rather than the cheaper, more common Jungle Lemons. I enjoyed the lemonade, and deliberately concentrated on it rather than let my mind poke at the question of my core.

Once I was done, Lindsay appeared, gently took the empty glass from me, then walked away. I grinned at her, then sat and created the ball of Earth again. A few minutes of concentration gave me the runic structure I’d created already. *Now I have to add something to either side. Alchemy needs to be included. I love making powders and pills, and it’d be really neat to make a potion that was usable for longer than fifteen minutes or so. I wonder if there are ways to make the containers better, would that help with longevity?*

I shook my head. *Focus on this now. There’s not really a rune for Alchemy, but generally a combination of Wood, Fire, and reaction can be used to mean it. Three more, let’s make these smaller though, so that the three take up the same space as two. Actually...* I stood up, and Librarian Narwan appeared. “Uh, is there an optimal size for the runes?” I asked him.

“Too big, and you will lose too much storage capacity in the areas where there is no crystal,” Librarian Narwan said, “and too small will make the creation and expression of them extremely difficult. Remember, anything you decide you want to create, you will have to make layer by layer as you advance. Any mistakes will make your eventual Tribulation harder, or cost you valuable time to fix.”

“Can we just advance like others and then add in the runes later, carving them down into our Cores?” I asked him.

“Yes, but it takes three times as long, as well as being extremely painful,” Librarian Narwan said. “It also risks shattering your Core, forcing you to start over with damage to your center. Starting over takes twice as much Aether, generally, to create a new

Core, which is one reason why most who fail to advance to Perfect Core end up never attempting to advance again.”

“Okay, thanks sir,” I said. “So putting three runes in the space that I used for two already should be fine?”

“Yes,” he answered. “You could probably shrink the runes down to half the size to give you more space to work with.”

“Got it,” I said, then focused on my model. I remade the runes so that they took up a sixth of the space available, then asked, “Is this going to be the fullness of my entire Core? So I won’t get many benefits until I’m all the way to Complete Core?”

“No,” he said shortly. “The design you make now will be through Foundation Core. At Constructed Core we will discuss adding another layer of runes on top, and connecting them throughout to what you have created already. Here at Seed and Foundation, you focus on who you are. When you get to Constructed Core, you will focus on who you want to be. Mistakes there are more damaging, as they will change your personality. Do not worry about that, though. You can always grind away the top few layers of your Core to fix it.”

“But—” I started.

“But it will hurt, like everything else about gathering, especially when mistakes are made,” Librarian Narwan said. “I will explain the answers to your questions to the others. Jon did ask a good question that you did not. You should make sure to include your Bond in your Core, and use that to strengthen the connection you two share.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, then bowed as he walked away again. I turned and plopped to the ground. I idly gestured at the floating ball of Aether, suddenly giddy at what I was doing, then stopped it and started to connect my Lightning rune to the reaction rune. I focused on my desire to know things, to create things, and the reactions that electricity could cause. I thought about endothermic reactions, those that required an energy input to create, and then threw the Fire rune on the other side.

Fire and reaction had me thinking of Sia, and the instant reaction that Jamila and I had to him flying over the Meditation

Grotto back at Azyl Academy. I thought about exothermic reactions, and the heat that Vaya, Jamila, and Aleks brought to my cheeks when they teased me, along with the joy and passion they brought to my life through their friendship and love. I realized that I needed to bend the runes a bit, so that Fire, Lightning, and gather all touched at the bottom, and Wood connected to all three.

Wood, symbolizing the growth of my body, my growth as a person, and the growth of my relationships in this world. Wood also represented Jamila and Vaya, while the Fire took on aspects of Aleks and Sia, of course. *What if we don't end up together?* I thought, then realized, *I can't see a future where we stop being friends. I could see us growing apart enough to not want to become married, but I doubt we'll ever end up not in each other's lives.*

With that thought, I moved and put another set of runes, Ice and steadfast together to symbolize my desire to be a shield for the world, and how Jon acted as a shield for me. He had been my first friend here on Zemias, and would always be my best friend. He had helped me and shielded me from others at the start, and he acted as the shield for our team. I knew he would stand with me to the end, and I knew I had to help him get stronger so he could. *If Jon's not equal to me, he's going to get hurt trying to stand in front of my enemies,* I thought.

Over the next ten hours, we worked, took breaks to relax our brains, and looked over each other's cores. Vaya blushed brightly when she saw mine, then threw her arms around me and pulled me into a kiss. Her core did have a representation of me on it, along with Jamila and Aleks.

Librarian Narwan saw that, and shook his head. "Youths and your infatuations," he said, laughing. "Just be aware, if your relationships don't last, you will need to modify your cores, or remake them to show your pain."

"I know, Master Narwan," I said. "But I doubt it will be needed."

"Well, you are released for the evening. We will work on gathering a layer tomorrow, and see how effective you are now that

you have designed a core. The first few layers are the easiest to change.”

“Do we not get any benefit until after finishing Foundation Core?” Jon asked, echoing my earlier question.

“You will see benefits nearly immediately,” he answered, “though they will be minor. Your spirit knows what you are attempting, and your Aether will be affected. Now, go.”

“Aiden,” Vaya said, “Aleks asked me earlier to have you get dressed for a formal evening out.” She grinned. “It is her turn for a date, as you called it.”

I gave her a hug. “And you are sure you’re fine with this?”

“Of course; she’s smart, funny, hot, and politically powerful,” Vaya answered.

I shook my head, then nodded. “And so are you. What are you going to do tonight?”

“Jamila and I are going to spend an evening together,” Vaya said.

“Cool, have fun,” I said and gave her a quick kiss.



# CHAPTER FIVE

In my room I found a set of black slacks laid on my bed. Next to them was a bright-green long-sleeved shirt, a brown vest, and a dark-green jacket with a tight neck and bone clasps. I could see Inscriptions laced into all of them, though I wasn't sure what they were. A note sat on top of the shirt. "Aiden, please wear these tonight." I read the note, then shrugged. "Better than the keikogi. That would have felt too much like a business meeting, not a date." I grinned. "I'm going on a date with a princess! A princess who is amazing, kind, thoughtful, and extremely hot!"

I quickly took a shower and then got dressed. I nearly tripped on the black shoes that were next to my bed, and laughed. "If you were a snake, I'd'a been bit," I said with an exaggerated accent, then pulled on the black socks draped over the shoes. "Wow, whatever tailor she went to did a great job... Wait a minute, how did she get my measurements?" I looked concernedly at the shoes before shrugging. "She's a princess, probably just asked one of the staff here, and superpowered vision got a good approximation. Magic makes the world go round. Alright, let's go. Totally not nervous at all, no way. That's not why I'm talking to myself instead of walking out the door."

I laughed, the ridiculousness of what I was saying finally driving me to motion. I strode down the hallway, then leapt down the stairs two at a time before stopping right in front of the door into the lobby. I nervously smoothed my hair down, even though it didn't need it, then calmly opened the door. At least, calmly on the outside.

Aleks wasn't waiting for me in the lobby. Lindsay was sitting at the desk quietly gathering, but she jumped to her feet when I stepped through the doorway. "Knight Kupiec," she said formally, the twinkle in her eye showing me how much she was enjoying the story unfolding in front of her. "Princess Aleksandra has asked me to

inform you that she shall be present shortly. Please, come over and allow me to assist you until she arrives.”

I walked over. “Thank you, Miss Lindsay,” I said, giving her a small bow.

She grinned, then flicked an imaginary piece of lint off my shoulder and tugged at my jacket to center it a bit. “You can undo the top three buttons,” she whispered, her tone losing the excess formality of her earlier speech. “It is more comfortable and considered the fashion right now.”

At my nod she undid them for me. “Yup, much more comfortable,” I said. “Do you know how long she’s going to be?”

“I signaled to her as soon as I saw you,” Lindsay whispered conspiratorially. “She wanted to make an entrance.” I could tell the teen was enjoying my discomfort, and very enthusiastic about Aleks and I going out together.

The door to the stairs opened again, and Princess Aleksandra, my Aleks, walked regally through the open doorway. My jaw dropped as I took in the sleek, dark-green dress, matching my jacket. It hugged her frame, showcasing her lithe body in a way that made me gulp. Her black hair was curled, with bouncing ringlets highlighting her heart-shaped face. She had a light dusting of makeup that emphasized her green eyes. The best part, though, was her smile when she saw my face, and the way her cheeks flushed.

I stepped toward her, then swept into a bow. “My lady,” I said, mimicking the formality that Lindsay used earlier. “I am delighted to accompany you this evening.”

Aleks giggled, and my grin grew wider at the absolute adorableness of the sound. She reached out and put her arm in mine, and gently guided me toward the door. “You look very handsome,” she said.

“You are absolutely stunning,” I responded.

“I could tell,” she said, then giggled again. “Thank you.”

Lindsay had rushed over to the door, and held it open for us. I could see she had a silly grin on her face, and then she gave me a wink. “Your carriage awaits,” Lindsay told us.

“Thank you, Lindsay,” Aleks told her. She reached out with her right hand and patted Lindsay’s shoulder. “I owe you a favor for this.”

“All part of my job,” Lindsay said, losing the formal veneer to her speech.

“Still,” Aleks said.

Lindsay just waved us goodbye, and we exited the building to find a fancy carriage of a dark mahogany wood with silver and green trimming and the Craesti symbol embossed on the door. A middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair opened the door as we approached. I could feel that he was in the middle of Foundation Core. An Ashkhas driver held the reins, and my newly expanded Aether sense pegged her at the same level of power.

I helped Aleks step up into the carriage, then joined her. The inside was fairly tight, so we ended up sitting with our legs touching. Aleks just pushed into me a bit more, leaning against my shoulder and sighing. When the door shut, the outside noise vanished, and the carriage started to move forward.

“Wow, the Inscriptions on this are amazing,” I said, not feeling any bumps or hearing the clip-clop of the horses’ hooves.

“Yes they are,” Aleks said.

“I wonder if there’s anything in the Legacy like it? I haven’t had a chance to look through most of it,” I told her, then shifted my arm slightly to put it around her shoulders. “So, where are we going?”

“Ash-khana Ifsanos, the Chef of the Sea,” she said. “They make an amazing dish called poke which I have never gotten anywhere else. I have only been there twice, but I remember every bit of each meal. They create the dish right in front of you, making a big production of it each time. Dad took me there three years ago on a diplomatic trip, and the chef threw a piece of fish into his mouth from halfway across the room.”

She’d leaned forward slightly and turned to look me in the eye. Her face lit up as she described the meal and how she’d really enjoyed the trip because she got to spend more time with her dad during it than she had over the entire year before. “It is hard

sometimes,” she said softly, “having my dad so busy. We only see each other for dinner most days, and often Mom or Dad miss that meal as well. Twice Mom went into closed-door gathering and did not come out for six months.”

“That’s gotta be hard on a little Aleks,” I said.

“It was,” she admitted, “but I still grew up in a palace. My life is infinitely easier than other people’s...”

“It is okay to be sad about your problems,” I told her, pulling her in close again. “Just because others might have worse ones, does not make your own invalid. I know you want to help everyone, and you will be able to, but making sure that you are taken care of as well is important. If you cannot support yourself, you will be unable to support anyone else.”

She was silent for a beat, then said, “That is a good point. Something you had to learn yourself?”

“Yeah,” I said with a laugh. “I got in a lot of trouble my first year at the Air Force Academy back on Earth because I was spending all of my time helping my classmates out, and didn’t take care of my own stuff. My sergeant took me aside and gave me that advice.”

“I will try to follow it,” she said.

“Good. So, have you had a chance to see the Core runes in the Legacy knowledge stone?”

“Not yet,” she said. She looked shy for a second, then added, “Can we not talk about the Legacy, or the war, or anything that Princess Aleksandra has to decide on? I, um, would really like to just be Aleks tonight.”

“As you wish,” I said with a grin.

“Vaya told me about that story,” she said. “Though she only gave me a quick summary.”

“I will have to tell everyone about Westley and Buttercup on the trip back,” I said. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Uh, green,” she said. “Even though Wood is my worst Affinity, I have always liked green.”

“Well, your eyes are green, and really give me a better appreciation for the color,” I said.

She blushed prettily, then laughed. “Well, my mom’s eyes are green too, so that is where I started liking it from. Mom was always able to give me more time, and would often spend an hour reading books to me when I was little. At first they were stories of princesses finding friends and solving mysteries, but as I became older she would read to me romances where the princess would be married for political reasons, and then fall in love after the marriage. She wanted me to be ready for when my time came. Thankfully, that should not happen now.” She gripped my arm tighter.

“I hope not, at least,” I said.

“You know Dad is going to want to make us officially betrothed as soon as we get back, right?” Aleks asked, going tense against my arm and looking away.

I smiled at her. “Yes, I’m fairly certain of that too. So we should spend the time now to get to know each other, you know, just in case you end up disliking me by the time we get back.”

“I would never,” she said indignantly. I laughed, and she smacked my shoulder. “Are you sure you are okay with it? I know Vaya, Jamila, and I had a few long conversations about your world and multiple partners.”

“It is sooner than I would have preferred,” I said. “But that’s because on Earth, usually courtships would take years before proposals and marriage.”

“How long were you and Jasmine together?”

“We dated for a bit over two years before I asked her to marry me,” I told her, “and we still had another four months before the wedding.”

“Well, even if we are betrothed immediately, we still will not actually marry for at least a year,” Aleks told me.

“Okay,” I said, and she shook her head at the relief in my voice. “Gives you a chance to really get to know me, and not have an idealized version of me in your head. Same for me to get to know you.”

“True, but ending a betrothal is difficult, and generally looked down upon,” she said.

“Well, then we’ll just have to resolve to be worthy of each other’s love and trust,” I said.

“We will be.” She smiled happily at me, and then the coachman knocked on the door.

“Princess Aleksandra, Knight Aiden, we have arrived,” he said, his voice the only sound from outside we’d been able to hear the entire time.

“Thank you,” I said, then the door opened. I exited in front of Aleks, and held her hand as she stepped down. I knew she didn’t need any help, as she was physically stronger than anyone on Earth could ever possibly become, but it made her happy.

The restaurant towered over its neighbors, half of which looked like warehouses. I could hear the waves in the harbor, but it wasn’t visible. Two guards stood on either side of the door, wearing silvery chain mail and wielding tridents. One of the guards held the door open, revealing a boisterous crowd. The maître d' was waiting for us, most likely signaled by the coachmen and door guards.

“Princess Aleksandra, Munqiz Aiden, you honor us with your patronage,” she said, her mane, something only about a third of the Ashkhas peoples had, flopping over her head before she flung it back like a girl in a conditioner commercial. “Please, follow me. You will of course have our best dining room.”

She turned and moved to the right through the doorway, revealing a set of stairs. The walls were tastefully decorated with paintings of the sea, ships sailing on the harbor, and one that depicted the Kraken swallowing a boat whole. That one caused me to stop, as I tried to calculate how big the Primordial was, but my brain was breaking at the number. *Its beak is the same size as the boat, I thought, stunned. So roughly fifty meters long. Its beak! That tentacle is ten, twenty times longer! A kilometer-long tentacle at least! What, how!? Every time I learn more about the Primordials, I end up with more questions than answers.*

I felt a tug on my arm, and looked over at Aleks. She gestured up the stairs where the maître d' was calmly waiting. “Your reaction is not uncommon,” the maître d' said. “The Kraken is truly

awe-inspiring. Thankfully, it has been a long time since a ship has been taken by him.”

“Him?” I asked, following Aleks up the stairs.

“Yes, we have an agreement with him. Every year, we provide one hundred Beasts from the island, and he avoids the ships marked with our Inscriptions. He allows it because it lets him taste Beasts he would have no access to, and attacking the ships takes up too much of his energy,” she said grimly.

“How do you know this?” Aleks asked, intrigued.

“I used to be the logistics officer on a merchant ship,” she said, “but I wanted to raise a family, and Chef Tamin prefers to hire those who have left the sea.”

“Do you ever miss it?” Aleks asked.

“Many days, but my tule is worth it,” she sighed happily. Aleks grinned at her, then hugged my arm happily. We went up three more floors to the end of the stairway. An ornately decorated hallway greeted us once we turned right off of the stairs. Every door out of the hallway was to my left. Three doors passed before the hostess opened it, and inside we found what looked like a hibachi grill with a table set halfway out on a balcony. The view in front of us looked out over the harbor. We were high enough that the warehouse directly behind the restaurant didn’t impede our vision at all. Dozens of boats and ships dotted the waterscape, visible only by the lanterns and Inscripted lights on them due to the nearly moonless night.

We were led to the table on the balcony, and I stepped to the seat on the right and pulled it out. Aleks let out a little “oh” and sat. I carefully pushed her in, then went around the table and sat as well. She reached out and caught my hand, and we ended up holding hands across the table.

The maître d' gave us a big grin, always slightly disconcerting on a feline face, then placed a menu in front of us. It was a small rectangle of engraved metal, written in Craesti, with a dozen different meals available. “Up to you,” I told Aleks.

“Uh, we want poke, poi, lau lau, and then haupia for dessert,” Aleks said confidently.

“I will inform Chef Ramin, who shall be up shortly,” the maître d' said, then bowed and left.

“I've never had any of these dishes,” I told Aleks.

“Well, I told you about poke,” she answered. “Poi is a dipping sauce that I reallllly like. They serve it with these flat pieces of soft bread. Lau lau is a leaf wrapped around veggies and Jungle Boar meat braised with some type of red sauce. Haupia are these white squares that are just the right amount of sweetness to finish off a meal. Those will not be cooked in front of us.”

“I didn't realize you were so into food,” I told her.

Aleks blushed. “Um, is that okay?”

“Of course,” I told her. “That just means I'll have to find some good places to take you in Azyl City.”

“I really want to go to Jamila's parents' bakery,” Aleks said.

“Your visit will probably triple their business from then on.” I laughed, then shook my head. “Make sure to talk to her first, and her parents. It would be bad for them to not be able to handle the surge of business.”

Aleks nodded. We talked about food, about her life growing up, and mine. The chef was amazing, deftly cooking a dozen different dishes at once all while flipping knives and food items from one location to another. Aleks clapped and cheered when the chef flipped me a piece of One-Fin Tuna and I caught it in my mouth.

After finishing the cooking, Chef Tamin grinned his big, toothy smile, and gave us both a bow. “Enjoy your evening, young loves” he said, then left.

I lifted Aleks's hand, which hadn't left mine once over the last half hour, and kissed it. “Thank you for this evening,” I told her.

“It is not over yet,” she said, “and I feel I should thank you.” She stood, then walked over next to me and pulled me into a kiss. “I feel like I am in a story, living my own happy ending. I never thought I would be with someone I loved.”

I laughed and squeezed her hand. “I'm the one with a princess, living a fairy tale.”

She giggled, then sat back down to eat.



# CHAPTER SIX

Librarian Narwan took my team aside after breakfast, after getting Aleks's and Ming's teams to head to the courtyard. "I want you four to go to the Jungle Arena, and try the middle difficulty again," he told us. "Once you are done, Knight Kaminski will spend some time with you discussing new techniques and how to adapt your current ones. I want you to understand how much you have grown and truly *feel* the difference between a Condensation- and a Core-level gatherer. Your strength and capability, I believe, has tempered your view on the differences, but you need to truly *know*. The Sayaad Guild is aware that you are coming. Go."

"Yes, Master Narwan," we all intoned, bowing, and when we straightened he was gone.

"I hope he's helping the rest of them advance quickly," I said. "I really don't like being a full tier above our friends."

"You know that everyone back at Azyl is probably going to be only at Circulation, right?" Jon asked.

"Ugh, don't remind me," I told him. "I'm going to have to make so many gathering powders and pills. So will you."

"Hey, I am focused on my explosives and technique enhancers," Jon said.

"Inscriptions do not really help people advance faster," Bridget said, shrugging, "or I would donate some."

"Well, they kinda can," I said. "Use the Inscriptions to run missions, earn credits, and use them for gathering pills. Not a straightforward conversion of gift to advancement, but still helpful. Of course, I'm not saying any of us should lose money, but selling them for just above cost could be worthwhile to help our friends who stayed behind."

"Jamila and I have already decided we are going to spend more time in the infirmary," Vaya said. "Though we will not be able to

really change the costs.”

After a quick stop at our favorite alchemist to restock our powders and pills, we jogged the entire distance to the Sayaad Guild transport facility. I stared in trepidation at the teleportation pad before hesitantly stepping on it. The swirl of Aether around me and the disorientation of the rapid movement, left me gagging and valiantly holding my gut to stop myself from leaving a mess on the receiving surface. “Ugh,” I said, then spat to the side of the trail. “I really hope this gets better eventually.”

“Well, we do not have anything like this in Craesti,” Vaya offered. “So this will be one of the last times you actually have to use this.”

“What is worse,” Jon asked, “feeling like chum for a few minutes, or taking two days to get to the Great Western Forest?”

I cocked my head in thought for a second. “Oh fine, yeah, this sucks but it’d suck more to have to hike here instead,” I grumbled.

“Come on,” Bridget said, pulling Jon down the trail, “I want to see what the third level looks like.”

“We should be able to make it to the fifth,” I said. “I mean, we probably could have made it through the third round last time.”

“Not without an injury that would have taken too long to heal,” Vaya said. “We have a long trip home, but I still do not want any of you to take unnecessary risks. Okay?”

“Yes, dear,” I said, pulling her into a side hug. Her grumbles were barely audible, and I tuned them out. At least, I did until she tickled me, and I jerked sideways while laughing.

We reached the Sayaad Guild’s stand, and a different Ashkhas was meditating behind it. The haze of Aether in the air was noticeably thicker. I said so out loud. “Huh,” Jon said, “do you think Bruno is causing it?”

“Probably,” I said with a shrug.

The Ashkhas stood and stretched before looking at us. She huffed, then said, “Yes, the Dungeon is causing the Aether in the region to increase in density. This is causing the Beasts nearby to

advance faster than normal, and seems to be increasing their birth rate as well. Names?”

I gave her our names, and she nodded. “You are scheduled to enter the medium difficulty. The team currently inside should be out soon, so you may wait here. As you are all Seed Core, your rewards will be very little for completing the medium, and I would recommend the hard, though you will struggle with going beyond the first round.”

“Okay,” I said. “Master Narwan wants us to run the medium difficulty to see what the difference is between what we were able to do at Threshold Condensation and now at Seed Core.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “You are Munqiz Aiden! I did not recognize your name, I am so sorry!” She fell into a deep bow, which looked awkward with their slightly different skeletal structure.

“It’s okay,” I said.

The doorway behind us surged for a second, and then four Volk stumbled out of it. All of them were injured, cuts from the Ants’ wings and mandibles evident across them. The Ashkhas minder leapt over to them, and a stream of green and brown Aether covered the Volk. Their injuries stopped bleeding, but that was the extent of their healing. “You can go into the Dungeon,” the Ashkhas told us, “I will take them to the healer.”

“Thank you,” Vaya said. We echoed her, then stepped into the Dungeon.

“Aiden! Vaya, Jon, Bridget! Yay, you’re back,” Bruno yelled around us. “And wow, you guys got swole!”

“Uh, swole?” Bridget asked, confused.

“It means strong, usually in reference to large muscles,” I said.

“You know you’re way too strong for the medium difficulty, right?” Bruno asked.

“Yeah, just wanted to see how strong we got,” I said.

“Ooh, ooh, ooh, do you want to do a challenge mode? I haven’t gotten to do a challenge mode,” Bruno said.

“Uh, that depends, what’s a challenge mode?” I asked.

“You fight by yourself, and get much better rewards. Your friends can wait nearby, and jump in to save you, but you lose all of your rewards,” Bruno said.

I looked over at the others, having learned my lesson about jumping into things without talking it over first. Jon gave me a thumbs-up, while Vaya looked nervous. “It should be fine,” she said. “We will be ready.” Bridget nodded.

I turned back toward the center of the clearing and answered, “Sure, though we do need to talk about your difficulty levels afterwards too, okay?”

“Yay!” he shouted, his voice echoing over the interior of the tree-lined circle. A glowing yellow line formed near the entrance. “No creatures will cross that line. If Vaya, Bridget, or Jon cross it, challenge mode ends. Once you move to the green circle”—it formed in the very center of the arena—“the Dungeon Beasts will be summoned. They’ll be the same types as your last attempt at conquering the Jungle Arena to start with. Good luck, and use lots of Mana!”

“It’s called Aether!” I said with a grin.

His laughter rang through the area.

I jogged over to the center. Before stepping in, I pushed the Aether in me into the General Strengthening Technique with a focus on Water and Ice Aether to increase my dexterity, toughness, and strength. The second I entered into the green circle, sixteen Soldier Ants plowed out of the ground and rushed me. They gave off the aura of a level four Beast each. I turned to the nearest and punched, sending a quick Aether Blast into its head.

The Beast exploded, with tiny bits of its innards reaching all the way to the tree wall. “Wow!” I exclaimed, then stepped sideways to dodge a bite. I kicked the Beast, and my foot sent it flying, broken, into another. An Aether Slash took out three more, then I ran forward to intercept another two. I quickly broke them, and then finished off the last nine with the Four Twin Lightning Blasts technique. Each Aether Blast of my weakest attack, usually used to disorient or distract, killed an Ant.

I stared at the holes blown in the last Soldier Ant, each the size of a baseball, and shook my head. “Wow,” I repeated.

“Whoa, dude, that was awesome! One minute until the next round,” Bruno said.

I checked my center, and shrugged. “I used less Aether there than my natural regeneration, so I’m ready whenever.”

“Okay, then let’s GOOOO!” Bruno said, excited, and twenty-four Beasts of a slightly higher gathering level leapt out of the ground.

Aether flowed down my arms and into my weapons, thicker and denser than before. This time I paid attention and felt the difference. My trisula drank up the Aether, easily able to handle the increased weight behind it, and the two Aether Slashes I sent to each side crashed into and then through the Sword Bites the Beasts tried to attack me with. Behind my attack, I blasted forward. In less than thirty seconds, I demolished the second wave.

My Aether Shield, the thin layer of Aether that had become second nature to hold at all times, deflected every attack they sent out that I didn’t dodge. It drained my Aether storage a bit, but previously they would have broken the Shield. Even breaking, the Shield would keep the foreign Aether from rampaging through my body, like when I accidentally pushed Aether into Nicolai.

“One minute until the next round,” Bruno announced when the last Ant’s twitching stopped.

Every Beast dissolved into the unattributed Cores, then all but four vanished. “Hey!” I shouted.

“You’ll get them back if you succeed,” Bruno told me. “Otherwise, this is all you’ll get.”

“Got it,” I said. “I am kinda too strong for this.”

“Yup!” Bruno said.

“You know, the jump to the second round was too high when we ran this before,” I said. “The Beasts should have been high level fours not level fives.”

“Oh, why is that? And round start,” Bruno asked.

I barely paid attention to the Ants this time, stepping through a quick circle before flinging my hands out and generating fifty

Lightning runes around me. A blast of electricity exploded out of me as my Aether dumped into the runes. In ten seconds, I'd cooked them all, though I'd used more than five times as much Aether as the previous rounds. "Usually in games where you're fighting various monsters or enemies, the first time you meet newer ones they're a bit weaker, so you can adapt to them. You can leave the end result the same, making each round's jump a bit bigger, but the first round of the second wave is probably the most dangerous, right?"

"Huh, makes sense," he answered. "I'll try to change it, but I'm not sure I'll be able to until I level up again. I'll get five different difficulties then! Oh, one minute."

"Ugh, I need to make that attack more efficient," I grumbled. I took a deep breath. "Not in a rush, use less Aether even if it takes more time."

"Go Aiden!" Jon cheered from the side. "Yay! Kill those Ants!"

I waved at my friends, and Vaya grinned back. Her sword was in the ground, and my Aether vision showed hundreds of tendrils of Wood Aether, and a deeper-green-colored one as well, almost writhing under the ground right at the demarcation line for my trial.

Ants surged out of the ground and dropped off the treetops, Bruno having refined his presentation for them arriving. The flying Ants proved to be weaker than the walking ones, as I was able to send an Aether Blast through three of them at once when they lined up for an attack on me. The fourth round ended quickly, and so did the fifth. When the last Ant twitched its last, Bruno announced, "Five minutes until the second wave. You may stop if you wish."

"No thanks," I said, scooping up a Core. "Can I give the Cores to my friends?"

"Sure," Bruno said. "You can cross the line freely during the breaks. They can't, though."

"Thanks," I told him while jogging over to the others. "Hold these?"

"I can do that," Jon said, opening up his bag.

I dumped eighteen of the Cores into it, keeping two in my hand, and then pulled the Aether out of them into my meridians. A

rush of neutral Aether flowed into me, then broke into a perfect mix of my Affinities. I went from slightly down on Aether—*Light, I can hold so much now*—to being slightly above my normal capacity. My center felt tight, but I drained it quickly into thickening my Aether shield.

“One minute,” Bruno said.

I gave Vaya a quick kiss on the cheek.

“I am ready to save you if necessary,” she said.

“I know,” I told her. “I love you.”

She grinned happily. “And I love you. Now go, and continue to impress us.”

I jogged out to the center again and charged up a Wrath of the Lightning Herald. It took me a third of the time it had previously, and I ended up having to hold the technique partially finished to wait for the Bears.

Eight Bears roared into the Arena, and I threw my technique at the one directly in front of me. I drilled a hole straight through the Beast the size of a beach ball, and it collapsed into two pieces. And just like that, there were seven Bears in the Arena. “Whoa!” I exclaimed, then quickly formed another Wrath as the Bears charged. I used only half as much Aether this time, making the runes smaller and more clustered toward my front, but it still obliterated the Beast.

I was able to kill a third before they got close enough for their attacks. A series of Earth Aether Slashes came off their claws, and I dodged most of them. I noticed yet again that everything they did seemed slower, but there were still enough attacks flying at me that I had to block one. Aether lined the edges of my trisula, and I charged through one set of attacks with my blades crossed in front of me.

The Bear’s attack shattered on my defense, and then I stepped into it, punching forward with an Aether Blast formed on the rear stud. I hit it, and the Fire Blast I’d charged blew through the Beast, throwing the five-hundred-kilogram Bear ten meters back in a heap of destroyed flesh.

A paw flashed at me from another Bear, and Earth and Metal Aether surged through my body as I formed the first and second layers of the Granite Skin, Iron Bones Technique in the split second

before it hit me. My feet set, and the Beast could not move me. I cut its paw off, then flipped a trisula around and stabbed it through the brain. A few seconds later, I'd killed the last of them.

"Well, that was impressive!" Jon shouted, and Bridget clapped.

"One minute," Bruno said.

"Am I getting a shorter break due to the challenge mode?" I asked.

"Yeah," Bruno said. "Though it'll increase when you get to wave three."

"Awesome," I told him, then grabbed the two Cores that had stayed. I checked my Aether reserves, but I was still in the upper ninety percent range, so I just dropped them into the bag on my hip.

The next three rounds went nearly the same. The Beasts, strong and tough as they were, were unable to take any serious attacks from me. The Four Twin Lightning Blasts Technique killed one, though it took sixteen shots from it, and Aether Blasts usually worked with a single hit. The only exception was an Earth Aether Blast, which was their strongest Affinity. The last set of Bears, near the top of level five, took two hits from my Earth Aether Blast before they stayed down.

"One minute," Bruno announced.

"This is the level six one," I stated, then started to build a Pride of the Plasma Herald, runes flashing into existence around me. Again, I finished way too soon. When the Beast formed, I was glad, as my brain felt tight from holding the runes steady. The Bear roared at me, and a bar of Plasma the size of my body swept through it.

The Beast wasn't dead yet, but it was a close thing. I sprinted forward, watching as its fur and skin started to heal, and leapt onto it before its eyes and ears finished fixing themselves. I stabbed downward, and blew it apart. All told, it took me five seconds to kill a Bear that had taken everything my team had been able to send, including our Bonds (though Sia had been limited) in the mix. I just stared down at the Beast, then it shimmered and the Core stayed.

"Well, Light," I whispered. "What next?"



Adrakhsh Foxes were next, sixteen midlevel five Beasts that shot bolts of Lightning and Fire at me. The Lightning tickled. They were faster than I was, just barely, but blades of Air Aether slashed across the field took them down, though I ended up using about ten percent of my Aether reserves to do so. Of course, I was able to suck down two of the four Cores left and fill myself back up.

*I honestly can't believe how strong I am compared to just a month ago,* I thought while ducking under a burst of Flame from one Fox while grabbing another's Lightning technique and redirecting it into a third Beast. Their Affinities with their main Aether were weaker than mine, and my higher gathering level let me just take their Aether away from them once it was close enough to me.

The third round was where it started to get tricky, as there were twenty-four of the Beasts at a peak level five, nearly level six in strength. The Lightning attacks were still too weak to do anything, but their claws were enough to damage my armor. I quickly got scratched up, but each time they hurt me I killed one, a cut for a backhand or stab.

The fourth round repeated the third, but with thirty-two Beasts instead. Each gash took Aether to heal, each attack Aether to send, and just keeping up with the speed-focused Foxes took Aether in the General Strengthening Technique. I started to use the Voltage Differential Nerve Infusion Technique as well, the attraction locations deflecting the Lightning attacks and making the Foxes tumble when they tried to speed up. Two ended up literally rolling across the ground toward an attraction location when I amped up the Aether usage.

The fifth round left me bloody and chugging down a healing powder. "You have ten minutes until the next wave, if you wish to continue," Bruno said.

"Do you think I'll make it?" I asked.

"Yes, even with me pushing the difficulty as high as I can for it," Bruno said. "Your strength and previous runs force me to."

"Has anyone in Condensation beaten the medium difficulty?"

"A full team of five Ashkhas at Complete Condensation with three Bonds did, though it took them a large amount of resources,"

Bruno said.

“I really can’t wait for you to have more difficulty settings,” I told him. “That seems excessive for a medium difficulty.”

“Me too, my friend,” Bruno said with a sigh. “Me too.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

The fourth level was, in many ways, easier than the third. The Beasts, Mountainside Boars, were just higher level versions of the Earthen Boar. Even at peak level five, I was able to outmaneuver the dumb creatures. Twice I took the final one out by letting it charge into a tree on the border of the Arena. I did end up injured, misjudging a dodge on the third round and getting my left leg broken, but a quick splint of Aether and a healing pill gave me enough maneuverability to finish the wave.

Right after the last Boar bled out on the ground, I stumbled back to my friends. “Can I have Vaya heal me and still continue the challenge?” I asked Bruno.

“Hmmm.” His deliberation hum echoed throughout the area. “Yeah! It counts the same as using a pill did, so a minor downtick in your rewards, but nothing major. But only now, between waves, not during a wave or in between rounds. Sorry. ”

“Oh, thank Darkness,” I said, and hobbled over to her.

“Aiden, your tibia is cracked in three places,” she scolded. I felt the surge of Aether from her; Wood, Water, and Earth supporting and healing.

“That feels better,” I said.

“Are you going to continue? I believe we have gotten a good feeling for the difference in your strength now,” she asked. “Is it worth it to try and continue?”

“This is good training too,” I said. “I’ve gotten significantly faster at creating runes, and I have the third layer of the Granite Skin, Iron Bones Technique down pat now.”

“We will be watching anyway,” Jon said. “Bridget and I can get to him in a second anywhere in the Dungeon, and your techniques will intervene even faster. Come on, let’s see what the last level is like!”

“I do not like it,” Vaya said, “but you are right. We need the training, and it is safer here than elsewhere. Go. You will win.”

“Of course I will,” I said. Jon and Bridget laughed, while Vaya just gave me a look. “Sorry, I’ll be careful.”

She leaned in and kissed me. I stroked her hair, then hopped back to my feet and jogged out to the center. I used two Cores to refill myself, amazed at the usefulness of the Dungeon’s rewards. “Light, I hope we can find a Dungeon that’s reasonable like you in Craesti,” I told Bruno.

“I’m gonna be sad when you all leave,” Bruno said. “And I am really thankful you found me. So, survive here, please.”

“You got it,” I shouted, then a single Beast snorted and stepped into the clearing. It was a Rhinoceros of some type, and a bit over initial level six in strength. It charged, quickly rushing toward me. It was slower than the Foxes but faster than the Boars, and I didn’t quite have enough time to finish a Pride of the Plasma Herald, so I just sent two Lightning Aether Blasts into it. Flakes of brown cracked off its skin, but its charge didn’t falter in the slightest.

I leapt into the Air, my Dancing Northern Wind Technique letting me run forward over its head. Two steps into the run, I was thankful for the Tower of Trials teaching me to place platforms at various places to push off of, as I had to shove myself sideways to dodge a shotgun blast of Metal spikes. I rolled in midair, shoved off another Air platform, and formed the Forceful Punch runes along my right arm. I slammed into the side of the Rhino as it tried to turn and follow me, and the Punch blasted a hole through it.

It didn’t go down. Instead, its body flowed back together like mud. *Earth crush it. I’ve heard of Beasts like this, I thought, I’ll have to drain it of Aether to make it drop.* The Beast bucked sideways, smashing me away from it. I flipped over and dove to the side to avoid a wave of Mud that engulfed the area behind me. Two Ice Spikes shot out of my trisula and stabbed into the Beast. It bellowed in pain.

A glance over at the others showed Jon was screaming something at me, but the rules of the challenge prevented me from hearing it. Considering I’d heard them cheering earlier, I knew he

was telling me how to beat the Beast. *Ice freeze it*, I cursed, then paused. *Of course, freeze the mud then shatter it. That's what Jon's trying to say!* I looked back at the Mud Rhino to see a skewer of Earth Aether heading for me, only a meter away. A quick twist had it rip through my side instead of my heart, cutting through my armor and a centimeter of my skin.

I gasped in pain, then leapt at the Beast, pissed off. Ice Aether flowed into my trisula, and I ducked under its thrashing horn and hamstringed it. The Rhino fell, but its wounds started healing, though a bit slower than before. I stabbed both of my weapons into its chest before it could fully recover, and blasted a chunk of Aether through its heart. Ice filled it, and a line through its body froze and shattered, cutting the Beast in half.

It shimmered and vanished, leaving a different color of Core. "Huh, what's this?" I asked myself, bending over and picking up the fist-sized object. I saw the same mud-brown Aether as the Rhino swirling inside the crystal. "Mud Aether? No, it's not the same, there's still the swirls of unaspected Aether too."

"It's a Core of Mud and Neutral Mana," Bruno said. "And it'll help you figure out how to make Mud Mana easier, I think. Still kinda figuring out this whole Dungeon thing, ya know?"

"Thanks, Bruno," I said with a laugh.

"My pleasure," he responded, and giggled. "You have five minutes. I can warn you, though, that the Beasts will all be different this time, and they will all have a second-tier Mana type."

"Oh, neat," I said with a grimace. I jogged over to where I'd dropped my bag, and dug out a gathering powder and a healing powder. I chugged the gathering powder, then spread the healing powder along the gash in my side, not even wincing at the pain. *Light, my pain tolerance is insane*, I thought. *I guess that's what happens when you get hit by a Tribulation and work on tempering your body over and over again.*

With the powder's effects surging into me, I walked back to the center of the arena and started to channel my Aether into a Pride of the Plasma Herald, copying how I'd used it against the giant Crocodile that was munching on Aleks. I pushed myself into the

same headspace, reaching a level of clarity where my only focus was that my opponent must die, but I held back from dumping all of my Aether out again. I only used around fifteen percent of what was stored in my center, a value that was nearly equal to what I'd used to destroy the Crocodile. *So much, I thought, no wonder it takes so much longer to advance through Core than Condensation.*

An Ostrich squawked as it landed in front of me, swirls of an off-white Aether flowing around it. I blasted the Beast, and the Wind Aether, a focused form of Air, tried to deflect the beam, but it wasn't enough. The deflection did prevent its instant death, but the changed angle let my attack cut off one of its legs. It bugled in pain, then the Wind Aether shield shattered toward me, the edges of the Aether sharper and faster than I expected. I got my arms in front of my face, my trisula covering my forearms, but the pieces that hit my legs cut to the bone.

*What's the point of all my tempering if I still get injured so badly!* I growled to myself, but I felt the wounds closing. *Yeah, yeah, healing faster, stronger, still tougher. I bet if I hadn't tempered as much I would have lost a leg to that attack. Level six Beasts are not jokes, even if I am strong enough now to deal with one by myself!*

I sent a stream of Wood Aether to my leg, then jumped over a swirling whirlpool of Wind Aether that tried to finish slicing me apart. In midair, I shot two Earthen Spikes that I put a sheath of Metal Aether over. The Metal was abraded away by the Wind Ostrich's shield, but the solidness of the attack was unable to be deflected, and the Earthen Spikes punched into the Beast and pinned it to the ground. Four more finished it off, after I pulled a stone wall out of the ground to block its wild flailing.

"Five minutes," Bruno said. "And the Ostrich has a Wind Core to let you figure it out better."

"Awesome," I said, "three more." This time, I pulled one of the four high-quality Flesh Mending Pills out of my belt and swallowed it. I carefully controlled the Aether from it, letting half flow into my injury but corralling the rest in my center to be used during the next fight. It wouldn't dissipate for over an hour, so I knew I could hold it in place.

I decided to start out with Pride of the Plasma Herald again, though I did assume it would just be the opening attack against whatever Beast was up next. This time, a Frog landed, a pale-green Aether swirling around its mouth. I attacked, and it spat a ball of Acid Aether. The Plasma of my attack burned through the Acid, but the Frog's technique continued toward me. My beam hit it before I had to dodge, but I couldn't keep it stable while moving sideways. *That's something I'll need to practice*, I thought with a grimace, then sent a Fireball at the Beast.

It was croaking in pain, one of its eyes burned away and a massive wound across its meter-wide face. The Fireball detonated, knocking it sideways, but it recovered quickly. Another *ribbit* preceded a belch of Acid into the air, and a stinging rain fell over half the arena. "Ow, ow," I grumbled. Each drop that hit me caused a tiny burn and a drain on my Aether. I flipped my trisula around, then formed a Forceful Punch with a quick addition of a rune meaning extend. I sprinted at the Beast, then threw the Punch from about two meters away.

It was a good thing I stopped, as a cloud of Acid swirled around the Frog the second I did so, and the ground dissolved under the punishment. The Punch blasted it away from its defense, and I leapt up, over the Acid, and landed next to the Beast. I quickly formed a dozen Metal Blades out of Aether and stabbed them into the stunned Frog. It swelled, and I ran. Behind me, the dying Beast exploded into a fountain of Acid, and only my quick rabbit impression kept me from being engulfed in it. It wouldn't have killed me, but the injury would have made me easy prey for the next challenge.

"Whew," I sighed, then walked into the area where the Acid had vanished and picked up the Acid and Neutral Core. I noticed then that the sleeve of my blue training shirt was scorched through and cut apart. "Air blow it, I need to get stronger clothing. I guess this is why there are specialty stores catering to those at the Core level and above."

I meditated for a minute, setting up a single spiral in my gathering technique and letting it fill my Aether stores a tiny bit more,

before Bruno gave me a one-minute warning. I quickly stepped through the motions of the Pride of the Plasma Herald Technique, thinking, *If it isn't broken, don't fix it.* I kept the power level down to fifteen percent of my Aether reserves, then frowned when that dropped me to less than half full. *Only I would whine that I'm running low on Aether after fighting through a veritable horde of Beasts,* I laughed internally.

A low mist settled over the ground, and a Mountain Mist Gorilla formed out of it. My Plasma beam speared toward it, but a gesture from the Beast had a chunk of stone create a wall in front of it. The Earth Aether wall burnt away in front of my attack, but the Beast gained itself enough time to dodge. I formed another attack, switching to Wrath of the Lightning Herald to shave a second off the time needed, and sent it just as the Beast cleared the left side of its wall. I could see the swirling pale-blue color of the Mist Aether in its body, visible through the brown Earth Aether. The Beast screeched in agony as my Lightning hit it, then it vanished in a puff of Mist.

The Mist surged across the Arena before solidifying again into the Gorilla, now only a meter away from me. Its arms were easily that long—the Beast stood nearly four meters tall—and I only just avoided its backhand. The attack moved fast enough that the air cracked at its arm's passage. I ducked underneath the blow, but a wave of Mist followed behind it, knocking me backward.

I rolled with the motion, coming to my feet just in time to see the Beast springing upon me. I joined Earth and Metal Aether to form Strength Aether, and I shoved it through the General Strengthening Technique while guiding Lightning and Fire into my trisula. The bladed edge of my weapons caught the Beast's fist, burning through the Mist surrounding it, and I held my stance.

The Gorilla screamed as its hand was cut in half, and I yelled back as I felt the bones in my arm crack. Mist flowed around, as it tried to retreat again, but I just threw more Fire at it, burning away the Mist as it formed. As the last drops of my Fire Aether flew out of my arms, a swirling Core of Mist and Neutral Aether plopped onto the ground. I dropped to my knees and moaned for a second, before forcing myself to my feet. I pulled out one of the earlier Cores of just



Neutral Aether, and pulled it into my meridians. Compared to the emptiness in my center, though, it was like a light sprinkle on a parched field.

I groaned, and quickly moved to my backpack, where I pulled out a Fire, Lightning, and Metal refill pill I'd gotten from the Alchemist in the city, and a Bone-knitting Pill, a specialized version of the Flesh Mending Pill I took earlier. My Aether reserves surged, but I was off balance enough that I pulled out an Earth and Wood Refill Powder and chugged it down as well. "Light, this is getting expensive," I said, then looked at my bag. "Except I'm sure these combined-Element Cores will be worth a bunch. If we want to sell them; learning a bit more about how to use and create these would be helpful."

"One minute," Bruno said helpfully. "Last round. Good luck."

"I won't need it," I said cockily, deliberately not looking toward the others. My arms were still sore—the pill needed more time to work before they would be fully healed, but I pressed on. *I should've gotten one of Jon's explosive potions, I thought. Light, I should've taken everyone's powders and pills, and some of Bridget's Inscriptions too. Too arrogant, and I didn't take the time to think. At least Vaya will be able to finish healing me up afterwards, cause I'm definitely feeling all the injuries I've taken throughout this last wave.*

Each of the Beasts I'd fought in this round were just barely level six, strong but not exceptionally so, but this was the last one. I was worried, but decided to just go big on the first attack. Pride of the Plasma Herald, my favorite and strongest attack, formed around me, only this time I used the extra range I'd gotten by advancing to Seed Core. I created two layers of the runes, doubling up on the effectiveness of the area technique, and pumped half of my Aether into it, causing some of the runes to vibrate in the air because they were so overcharged.

A Porcupine that glowed a silvery white appeared in front of me, only to be obliterated by my attack. The Plasma was drawn into the Sharpness Aether, a mixture of Metal and Fire that was mostly Metal, and the Beast was shocked into a stupor. I followed up with a dozen Lightning Blasts that were attracted to its spines, and it died

without acting. The stress filling me loosened up, and I dropped to my butt laughing.

Vaya reached me in seconds as the yellow line turned green. Bruno saying they were free to enter did not really process in my brain. Vaya knelt down in front of me and said, "This is going to hurt, but I've got to get it out."

"What?" I asked, then looked down. Two of the porcupine's quills were sticking out of me. A glance behind showed that they were sticking through me, actually, and I realized I didn't collapse due to relief, but because my spine had been cut. "Oww."

Vaya grabbed the one not in my spine, and pulled it through after cutting the end off. A Flesh Mending Pill was shoved in my mouth as her Aether surged into me, and then she yanked the other one out. It hurt a lot. Jon and Bridget lifted me by my arms and legs respectfully.

"Don't forget the reward," Bruno said, as a chest formed in the center.

"I will grab it," Vaya said. "Just get him to the healer outside."

They hustled me out, and the administrator exclaimed, "How did you get so injured in the medium difficulty?" while sprinting to me. Another wave of cooling Aether soothed the pain in my gut while Jon and Bridget kept running toward the healer's hut.

The healer, a Perfect Core-level Ashkhas, appeared at the entry flap, and took me from my friends. More Aether, a cream that was spread over the injuries, and a powder that I was told to just hold in my mouth, and then Vaya was there as well.

My head was swimming, so I missed the discussions, but Vaya and the healer were both working on fixing the issues in my stomach. The Beast's Aether was still there, cutting away at every bit that was healed, and only with significant effort and the last of my personal Aether were they able to get it out.

A few minutes later, Vaya slumped against me and the Ashkhas healer walked away tired. "Go back to your lodging and rest," she told us. "Do not train or do anything but eat, read, and sleep. Got it?"

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, then Jon helped me to my feet. I leaned on him, and Vaya leaned on Bridget, and we staggered back to the teleporter. “So, what did we get?”

“A dozen more advanced Element and Neutral Aether Cores,” Vaya said, “none of them the same, and a metal ball that we’re supposed to attach to the mapping device we got at the last Dungeon run.”

“You know,” I said, laughing hysterically for a second, “we totally forgot to use that in the Divine Territory.”

“Well, oops,” Jon said, and we all chuckled ruefully.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

A few hours later, I was sitting with Vaya and Jamila looking at my right arm and left leg respectively. Jon was bragging about the Dungeon run. "And then he went with a 'pah' and the Rhinoceros split in half!" Xiao laughed good-naturedly, while the others listened in rapt attention.

"So, if we go into a lower difficulty, we might be able to earn significant rewards alone?" Ming asked.

"Seems like it," I said.

Librarian Narwan appeared next to us. "I want you to get prepared to leave. There is a merchant ship heading back to Craesti tomorrow midmorning. Unfortunately, I will not be able to join you, as I must go back to the King as soon as I can. Knight Kaminski will be joining you, however, along with Miss Samantha."

"Uh, Master Narwan, could we take the Skysurfer home? I'm sure it'd be faster," I asked.

"Skysurfer?" he said.

"Oh, uh, can I stand?" I asked Vaya.

"Yes," she said, "you will be fine."

I started to stand up, and Jamila helped me to my feet. I summoned the two-meter-long surfboard from my ring as I faked pulling it from my bag. Instantly it was taken from me.

Librarian Narwan was running his hands over it, a tiny streamer of Aether flowing into the device from his fingertips. "Hmm, yes," he said, and it floated over our heads and expanded to its full size of six meters wide and twelve long. Instantly, everyone else in the dining room was looking up at it. It shrank back down and he caught it again. "This will hold you all and let you travel much quicker. Unfortunately, it is designed for increased weight bearing capability and Aether efficiency, not maximum speed. My own flying device is significantly faster, so I will not be joining you still. I will let

Captain Martin know that his services are not needed.” He paused, then nodded sharply. “Instead of tomorrow, we will depart in three days. Use this time wisely.” He handed me the surfboard, which was remarkably light for something made of metal.

“Yes, sir. Uh, I have an idea I need to test,” I said, after getting a look at the full size. “But this is something I really don’t want anyone else to see.”

“Come.” Librarian Narwan gestured, and walked out to the rear courtyard.

I injected a tiny bit of Aether into the Skysurfer, and it floated half a meter off the ground. I sat down on it and sighed, my leg still hurting. Apparently advancing to Seed Core, especially with the Tribulation I underwent, made it much harder to heal, and I would have to use my natural regeneration to get the rest of the way better. Of course, I would be fully healed by tomorrow, but still, not pleasant. Riding the surfboard down the hallway was so much cooler, anyway.

Jon held the door open, and I floated into the courtyard. Everyone followed, missing only Aleks, as she was still in negotiations with the Weltreich trade ambassador, and Sam, who was in a lesson with Knight Kaminski as she had been since we rescued her. The area around us quickly grew hazy, and the noise from the square outside the inn vanished. “We are secure,” Librarian Narwan said, “Not even Sultah Aleahil can sense what happens inside my technique.”

“Cool,” I said, slowly getting off the Skysurfer. I felt Librarian Narwan’s disapproving gaze at my statement. I bade it to lie flat on the ground, and injected Aether to expand its size. “Neat.” I then summoned the Portable Home from my ring, letting it appear at full size on top of the surfboard. The Portable Home took up nearly half of the area. *Still got some room on the Skysurfer*, I thought. *I doubt we’ll be able to control the Surfer from inside, so having some space will be useful. Now, for the all-important test.* I told the Skysurfer to rise, and it did, though I needed to triple the amount of Aether I was giving it. “Hah! It works! So, we can travel in style on the way home.”

“What is that?” Librarian Narwan asked.

“Uh, Spirit called it the Portable Home,” I said.

“I have never felt anything of its power, besides the Primordials,” he said. “Tell me about it.”

“It’s supposed to be a collapsible, storable home, hence the name,” I answered. “Spirit said it had sixteen bedrooms, a kitchen, an Alchemy lab, an Inscription lab, and a Forge. I have not been inside yet.”

“Then you should be first,” Librarian Narwan said.

I grinned, then tugged at Jamila, who had her hand on my arm. “Come on,” I said. I limped the six steps it took to get to the door. With an effort of will, I dimmed my Aether Sight enough to admire the outside of the Portable Home, rather than the brilliant glow of its Inscriptions. Its siding was a pale wood with green striations in it. The windows, one on either side of the door, didn’t show anything through them. Each was a circular pane of glass with a crimson wood trim. The trim on the door was Auric Gold, as was the door handle. I pulled and it opened.

The main room was six meters long and wide. The left wall had four doors, each a different color. The closest to the front was silver, though I could tell it was still wood. The second door was the same crimson as the window trim, while the third was the pale green of the siding’s striations, and the door closest to the back wall was a bright, cheery yellow.

There were three doors on the far wall, a bright red, a dark green, and a pale blue. On the right wall were three more doors, a dark blue, a pale purple, and one without any paint on it, the same color as the walls. Other than the doors, the room was barren, leaving me to furnish and decorate it.

We walked in, with Jamila pausing at the doorway to look at the side, where it seemed to extend only a meter and a half to the side of the door, then inside the main room. She went back and forth a few times, then just shook her head and said, “This is amazing! Is this what you won in the Tower of Trials?”

“Yup,” I said, “and a couple more things. Once we’re on our way I’ll hand out presents.”

“I like presents,” she said with a playful grin. “Which door first?”

“You pick,” I said, as the others filed into the main room behind us.

“Um, we should go left to right, so the silvery one,” she said, and I nodded. We strolled over to it, and I pulled the door open. A wave of heat rolled out of it, and I saw an Aether Forge, an anvil, a workbench, and a large set of tools hanging on hooks on the wall.

“Can I work in here?” Xiao exclaimed, peeking over my shoulder. “That is the strongest Aether Forge I have ever seen.”

“Sure,” I said, chuckling to myself.

“Next room,” Jamila said.

The crimson room was the Alchemy room, with a vent hood, several mortar and pestle sets, a workbench, an Aether Bunsen burner equivalent, and a large pill furnace. The pale-green room was for Inscriptions, with two workbenches, empty ink pots, another Aether Bunsen burner, and a small cauldron. The yellow room was the kitchen, with two ovens, a preparation table, a large pantry, an Inscribed storage box to keep perishable items cold, and a six-burner stovetop to put a fancy house to shame.

“The left side is all of the production rooms,” I said. “So the rest must be the bedrooms, but there were supposed to be sixteen.”

“Then let us go see,” Jamila said.

I heard a clang from the Forge, but when the door closed a moment later all noise cut off. “Well, that’s useful,” I said.

“Yes. I can just shove him in there when he is talking too much,” Ming said.

I looked at him askance, then laughed. “Yeah, he can be a chatterbox.” A few steps later, I opened the bright-red door to find a small sitting room, only three meters on each side. Each of the other three walls had a door, and there was just enough space between them that a nice chair fit in each corner. The chairs were the same color as the door, plusher than anything I’d seen yet. Each door had a number on it, one through three.

Opening door one I found a bedroom. It was fairly small, only four meters by three and a half or so, with a simple double bed, a dresser, and a desk with a chair in it. Next to the bed there was a doorway that opened into a bathroom, with a toilet, a tub, and a sink.

“Well, that’s nice,” I said. “I wonder how much water is stored, or if it uses Aether?”

“If Aether, how does the Portable Home even work?” Jamila asked. “There are so many Aether-fueled functions that seem to be working, but I could not sense the Home pulling in the ambient Aether.”

“No idea,” I said. “Maybe it has special storage and we’ll have to keep it filled up? I hope not, though, as I’m sure that will be extremely difficult.”

The other two rooms had similar furniture in them. “Huh,” I said, “I wonder why the main room didn’t have any furniture, but these rooms do?”

“Maybe Spirit wanted you to be free to put your personality in the main room, but still wanted you to be able to use the rest immediately?” Vaya suggested from behind me as I looked into crimson room three.

I shrugged. “That’s as good an idea as any will be. Come on, let’s see the rest.” The next four doors mimicked the red one, with each having the same sitting room, color matched to the door, and bedrooms in it. The difference came when I opened the door of pale wood with green striations into what could only be the owner’s suite.

The room was easily the size of three other bedrooms put together. The massive bed in the center had an ornate headboard, three large white pillows, and a pale green comforter with gold stripes. There were two desks with chairs, one empty and the other with a clear crystal ball set into an Auric Gold insert. The ball glowed with Aether bright enough to make me squint. Two night stands and a dresser completed the furniture in the room. The door into the bathroom was open, and I could see that it was similarly huge, with a tub big enough for four people and a fancy shower as well.

“Well, someone is going to be living fancy,” Jamila said.

“Yup, and I’ll enjoy every minute of it,” I said. “I’ll probably let Knight Kaminski have this room, at least for the trip back.”

“Why? It is yours,” Xiao said.

“Politics,” I said. “So I’ll let Knight Kaminski have it as the strongest of us, or Princess Aleksandra as, well, the Princess. The



other rooms are fine for me, and we have plenty.”

“Aiden, inspect the crystal ball,” Librarian Narwan said, not acknowledging what I’d said at all.

“Yes, sir,” I said, then stepped around Xiao and Lilianna, who were looking into the bathroom and remarking on the Inscriptions decorating the outside. I pulled the chair out and slowly settled myself into the seat. The cushions seemed to adapt to my body, a tiny stream of Aether leaving me to power the function. “Ooh, that’s nice.”

“Do not become distracted,” Librarian Narwan chided me.

“Sorry, Librarian Narwan,” I said with a grimace, then leaned forward. Two spaces on either side of the ball seemed to be highlighted in my vision, so I reached out and put my hands on them both. This time, instead of Aether flowing out, Aether surged into me, and then I knew what the orb was and how to use it. “Wow, this is the control orb for the entire facility. I can reshape it, though the total area and volume must remain the same. It is upgradeable, but I, uh, don’t believe that it is reasonable to do so.”

“How much?” Jon asked.

“The first ingredient needed is the core of a level ten or higher Primordial,” I said flatly. Choking sounds came from the others, as by itself that was a priceless item, and it was merely the first of ten items. “Yeah, that’s not happening for, well, probably ever. One thing that is available is I can change the color of each bedroom triplet. Probably won’t now, though. I can also grant access to all of you to specific rooms, since the only reason the doors are opening right now is my presence. That won’t work during the entire flight home.”

“Be careful who you show this item to,” Librarian Narwan said. “It is most likely the most valuable single thing I have ever seen.”

“Of course, Master Narwan,” I said, standing up to bow to him.

“Good, get some furniture for the main room and stock up the kitchen. I will prepare a few items for your journey, then we must speak of your task,” he said, then vanished.

“All right, uh, let’s all pick our room, and then go shopping afterward!”

I grabbed room number three in the dark-blue region, ignoring the others cajoling me to take the master bedroom. Once everyone had their rooms picked out, I gave them access to their room, the kitchen, the workrooms, and the main door. Librarian Narwan had left the privacy field up, so I didn’t store or shrink the Portable Home. “Who wants to go shopping?” I asked as we stepped out of the shrouded area.

## CHAPTER NINE

Almost everyone bowed out of furniture shopping, leaving me with only Vaya and Jamila. Lindsay pointed us to a few different places, though we'd need to walk pretty far to reach them. Just as we were leaving, Aleks arrived in the carriage. "Hi, Aiden, Vaya, Jamila," she said, sounding tired.

"Are you okay?" I asked, stepping forward to help her down from the carriage.

She grinned at me. "Yes, just a long day," she said. "What are you up to?"

"Furniture shopping," I said.

"We have a six-meter-by-six-meter room to furnish before we leave," Vaya added.

"Ooh, can I come?" Aleks asked.

"Of course, Aleksandra," Jamila said quietly. "Can we use the carriage?"

"Herd on in," Aleks said, taking Jamila's arm.

The entire experience was strangely intimate. I could tell Aleks was confused about why we were furnishing a room, but she didn't ask the burning question. The girls went all out in coordinating the decorations, and purchased a few paintings and tapestries to put on the walls. Vaya subtly got Aleks to buy a decoration for her room as well, though only one painting of the lighthouse overlooking the city.

After a bit of discussion, I decided to get one big u-shaped table for us to eat at, and then a bunch of lounge pillows for the other half of the main room. It took some finagling, and a very expensive Core-level carpenter, but he was able to make the table come apart and pack flat, so if we really wanted we could clear the space.

Vaya arranged the delivery, and we followed the wagon back to the inn. "Where do you want us to unload?" the head Ashkhas

porter asked.

“Right here is fine,” I told him. “We’ll haul it into the right spot ourselves.”

“Sure thing,” he said, then the other four carefully handed us the pieces of the table.

Jamila had run into the inn when we first arrived, and came back with Jon, Ming, and Lea. “The others are coming once they put down what they were carrying,” she said.

“Thanks, Jamila,” I said, hefting the three-meter-long centerpiece over my head. I carefully walked to the rear entrance to the courtyard, where a servant was holding the door open. I didn’t recognize the young man, but he gave me a big grin then bowed. I could see a couple of servants working on something in the rear of the courtyard, occasionally glancing at the dome-shaped privacy field. Since I couldn’t see through it either, I held the board as high as I could.

This was a good thing, because Knight Kaminski was standing only a meter in front of where I entered with a face like a thundercloud, and I would have clocked her in the side of the head if I wasn’t careful. “Oh, sorry, Knight Kaminski,” I said hurriedly, stepping to the left to avoid running into her.

“Good, you are here,” she said. “Master Narwan said that you had changed our plans, but did not specify how, and only told me to bring Miss Samantha here and wait for you.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” I said. “Uh, the metal platform on the ground is a flying device that can hold all of us up and utilize everyone’s Aether to keep us moving. Librarian Narwan said his is faster but won’t hold enough people, but this will be much faster than taking a ship.”

“That is correct.” Knight Kaminski nodded. “Though before we leave I will have to tell you the rules of flying over the ocean. What is that shack, and why can I not sense inside it at all?”

“Let me show you,” I said. I walked up and found Sam leaning against the side of the Portable Home. “Hey Sam, come on.”

“Is this yours?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“These are by far the most intricate Inscriptions I’ve ever seen,” she said, pointing at the wall. “I can’t even see the detail in parts of it.”

“You can see the Inscriptions?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah, uh...” she said, blushing and suddenly shy. “My, uh, Darkness gift is the ability to focus on an object and see its Inscriptions.”

“Neat, mine was language translation and the ability to see Aether,” I said. I held the table up with one hand, and opened the door with the other. No one was exiting, so I moved in and set the piece down.

Knight Kaminski audibly gasped when she entered behind me. “What is this?” she asked, awe and a little fear in her voice.

“The Portable Home, one of my prizes from the Tower of Trials,” I said, “and the pinnacle achievement of a peak Soul Strengthening crafter. Through those doors—” I pointed to the front and right walls “—are bedrooms. Most have been selected already, but there are enough for everyone to have a separate room. Knight Kaminski, the wood door there is yours.”

She went over to the door, but couldn’t open it. She stepped aside so I could open the door, and when she saw inside asked, “Are the others of similar size?”

“No.” I shook my head. “All are much smaller.”

“You will take this room,” she said sternly. “It is yours, this building is yours, and you need to act like the noble you are.” I opened my mouth, but she held up her hand. “I know you want to be polite, but this is yours. You do not give up your own room, even if the king visits. Now, show me the other rooms.”

“Okay,” I told her, trying hard not to sound sullen.

“This is really nice,” Sam said, looking into the room, which dispelled my worsening mood.

“The other rooms are pretty nice too,” I said, “just a little smaller. The rooms still left are red two, light-blue three, dark-blue one and two, and purple one.”

“Purple,” Sam said. “It’s my favorite.”

I stepped over and opened the purple door. “Each of the other colors has a sitting room as well; gives you a bit more privacy if you just want to sit and read or something.” I opened room one’s door. “Each of the bedrooms is exactly the same, except the color of the bedspread.”

“I will take the light-blue room then,” Knight Kaminski said.

“Then I’ll make it official,” I said, and went back into the master bedroom to give them both access to their rooms and everything else.

“Hey, Aiden,” Vaya said, poking her head in. “Princess Aleksandra cannot get inside.”

“Light! I thought it’d let her in if I was inside,” I said, jumping to my feet and rushing out the door. “Sorry, Aleks.”

She was standing off to the side, holding a lounge pillow and looking perplexed. “What is this?” she asked.

“Come inside,” I said, and this time the doorway didn’t block her entrance.

“What, how!?” she exclaimed.

“Uh, Spirit made this just before they ascended,” I said. “You need to pick a room.”

“Is that room available?” she asked, pointing at the yellow door.

I laughed. “Well, if you want to sleep in the kitchen...”

She smacked my arm lightly, then laughed. “Okay, fine, jerk,” she said. “Which ones are the bedrooms?” I pointed at the other two walls. “Are any available? If there are only five...”

“Come on,” I said, taking her hand and pulling her to the dark-blue door. I opened it and showed her the sitting room, then said, “One and two are open, as is room two through the red door.”

“So there are eighteen rooms? How big is this place?” she asked.

“Well, sixteen, the owner’s room is bigger,” I said sheepishly, “and then there is a kitchen, Alchemy room, Inscription room, and a Forge.” I opened door one and she followed me into the room.

“This is fine. Show me your room, please?” Aleks asked, leaning a bit into me.

“Of course,” I said, “I have to program the control core to let you in anyway.”

We exited the room and sitting area to find Jon, Ming, and Vaya setting up the table while Jamila and Lea were arranging the lounge pillows into three different circles. “Looks great, thank you,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jon said, waving a leg of the table at me. “You schmooze while we work.”

I sent a tiny twister of Air Aether that jerked the table leg, bonking him on the head, then I had to duck under a small ball of Water Aether. Ducking was the wrong move, as it hit Aleks in the face and splashed down her pale-yellow dress. “You,” she said, playfully angry, then she sent a wave of Water and Ice Aether into me.

I didn’t try to break the technique, but I did push against it so I didn’t fall down. The added Ice made me shiver, even though I barely felt heat or cold from the weather anymore. She gave me a look, then broke out laughing. I shook my head, carefully collected the water off me and her, then cooled it down even more before dropping it on Jon’s head.

He spluttered, and then Bridget walked in, frowned at me, and made a snowball in her hand and threw it at me. Within seconds, all work was forgotten as a widespread water and snowball fight exploded among us. It lasted until Knight Kaminski came in with a grin on her face. Her power flared, snuffing all of our Aether out, and then we were all drenched in her summoned Ice and Water. “I win,” she said simply, and everyone lost it, laughing.

“Okay,” I gasped, then grabbed Aleks’s hand. “We still need to get you registered.”

She followed me to the master bedroom. When she saw inside, she said, “Wow, that is a nice bed.” She let go of my hand and went to explore the room.

I sat down next to the control orb and accessed it, setting Aleks’s permissions to her room and the other spaces, then I heard her whisper, “Definitely want to use that tub.”

“Anytime,” I said, then gave her, Vaya, and Jamila access to my room. “You can get in here without me opening the door.”

“Oh really?” she asked, then gave me a sultry look. “Aiden, we are not yet betrothed.”

I blushed, then shook my head and laughed. “Yet,” I said, a big grin on my face. “My life here seems much like a dream sometimes.”

She sashayed toward me, flaunting her figure for a second and drawing my eyes. When she reached me, she leaned down and gave me a soft kiss, then whispered, “Right reaction.”

Someone knocked on the door, and we both froze. Aleks looked at the door grumpily. After sighing, I reached out and opened it, grumbling under my breath. “Time for the lecture on flying,” Knight Kaminski said.

“Thank you, Knight Kaminski,” I said, standing from the chair. Aleks took my hand, and we walked into the main room. The lounge pillows had been rearranged into two semicircles, one wrapped behind the other, that were open in the center front. We walked over and sat, with Jamila next to me and Vaya next to Aleks. I reached over and grabbed Jamila’s hand, and she gave me a big smile, before Knight Kaminski cleared her throat.

“In general, flying devices do not have the Inscriptions needed to divert the attention of the Primordials of the deep,” Knight Kaminski started. “This puts a limit to how low you can fly over the ocean with minimal risk. Eighty meters in altitude is considered the start of the safe zone, and it is recommended that you maintain an altitude of ninety meters at all times. This is not zero risk, though, as Kraken and Tizheruk can both reach that high, and Leviathan’s storm is always above them. We will fly around every storm we see, or we will not make it to Craesti.”

“Ma’am,” Jon asked, “can we just fly higher? If ninety meters is not completely safe, then why not two hundred?”

“That is our other limitation—we cannot fly over one hundred meters in altitude. Somewhere above two hundred meters, the world distorts, and the Primordials of the sky rule. The Beasts of the sky generally will not attack if we stay below one hundred, though that is



not a guarantee. Nothing in life is safe, and the ocean is beyond our control.”

“Um, how will we maintain our altitude correctly?” I asked.

“Master Narwan has gone to procure—” Suddenly Knight Kaminski’s hands extended in front of her and two shining silver objects appeared in them. “Casmir,” she grumbled under her breath, and I vaguely heard laughter from outside. I wisely kept my face completely neutral, and the snort of laughter from Jon got a quick glare that promised retribution later.

She sighed, then held up her right hand. “This is an altimeter that measures the change in Aether densities from Water to Air, and is accurate within about five meters. The rate of change isn’t always consistent, but the altimeter will attempt to adjust for slow changes. A quick change will scramble it, and I will reset the device once we are away from whatever is causing the issue. During those times, I will be assisting with maintaining our altitude, and everyone will be ready for defense. There are more Primordials and near-Primordials in the ocean than anywhere else, and we will need to convince them that we are not a worthwhile meal.”

“Does that work?” Milenna asked, horror in her voice.

“Usually,” Knight Kaminski answered. “The majority of level five and six fish are much easier to hunt than a flying device full of Condensation and Core gatherers. As long as we can weather the initial attack, they will generally leave us alone.”

“I cannot help but notice that you used a lot of qualifiers,” Aleks said.

“Flying over the ocean—any travel over the ocean—is never truly safe. Master Narwan and I believe you will be safer using the Skysurfer than taking a merchant ship, if for no other reason than that it will be a shorter trip. Make no mistake, though, I will require constant vigilance and we will do as much training as we can,” Knight Kaminski said. Immediately afterwards, she unleashed an attack ten times stronger than my best Pride of the Plasma Herald into the wall. She didn’t build up an area technique to do it; she simply used her internal power. The spiraling putrid-green spear

slammed into the wall, then dissipated before it could touch anything else.

The wall was not scratched, but I could feel a pulse from the control core that it wanted more Aether. “We will do some sparring and training in here, as the walls and doors can handle anything you could possibly do.”

“Uh, we’ll have to recharge the Home’s Aether stores every time too,” I said. “I can kinda feel it.”

She frowned but nodded. “That will put a small limiter on our training. I do not want anyone going below half their total Aether capacity, just in case.”

“Knight Kaminski, what is the other item?” Jamila asked before she could dismiss us.

“This is a compass that will point unerringly toward Craesti City, where the Navigators Guild has a large Formation. Every ship that travels the ocean from Craesti has one, and often multiples from every nation they trade with. I will procure an additional one from every nation before we leave if I can, but this one is the most important. Now, finish getting ready to leave and make your final purchases,” Knight Kaminski said. “I want you to spend the next few days training and ensuring that you are truly ready.”

We all stood and bowed, before heading back out of the Portable Home.

# CHAPTER TEN

I pulled Aleks, Vaya, and Jamila off to the side. “So, I have something that literally everyone wants,” I said without preamble, “and I plan to trade it to all of the Soul Strengthening gatherers here.”

“What do you have that the King would want?” Jamila asked, curiosity oozing from her as she leaned in.

“The Legacy includes how Spirit and a few other M’Zee advanced through Soul Strengthening and reached the next tier of gathering,” I said. Jamila gasped. “So they want it, almost need it. What should I ask for?”

“Pills and powders to get the others to Seed Core,” Vaya said, her arms around Jamila’s shoulders. “The sooner they advance, the safer we’ll all be on the trip back.”

“Gathering techniques and tempering techniques,” Aleks said. “You should ask for and get their best tempering techniques. I know my father will give you literally anything you could ask for...”

“Including you?” I said with a grin and an eyebrow waggle.

She laughed, and Jamila reached out and poked me in the gut. “Be serious for a bit,” Jamila said with a grin.

“Who, me?” I asked, and then had to laughingly deflect a bunch of pokes from all three girls. “Okay, fine. So gathering techniques, tempering techniques, pills and powders to push you all to Seed Core. Anything else? Uh, how about live plants for the garden you wanted to do, Jamila? Anything specific?”

“Make a list,” Librarian Narwan said from beside me, “and then you and I will bring it to the others. You are correct that it will make you safer. Include in your demands one Aether Ocean Core Burrowing Pill for each of you. It is a Water Affinity pill that only the Ashkhas make, and a dozen will be the entire production for the last two months. They should have them, and if not you will get the promise of more.”

“I do not really want any plants from here,” Jamila said. “It would be too hard to grow them properly in Craesti. The climate is wrong.”

“We could build a greenhouse,” I suggested. “Use glass to let in light but hold in heat and humidity.”

“Okay,” she said, smiling brightly. “Then I will make a short list for you soon.”

“I will go with you,” Vaya said, “and add anything I would like as well. Thank you, Aiden.”

“Of course,” I said as they both left. I turned to Librarian Narwan, and summoned the Soul Strengthening-level gathering technique knowledge stone out of my ring. “Master, please look over this prior to meeting with the others.”

“This is it?” he asked. I nodded, and he took it from me gently, then held it to his forehead. Aleks and I waited nervously for a few minutes. He suddenly dropped his arm. “Thank you. This—” he paused for a second “—was not quite what I was thinking would be the way forward. There is more here to see, and I will ask that I may keep it for the journey across the ocean.”

“Of course,” I said.

He nodded. “Unfortunately, this path would result in a temporary reduction in my, our, power, so it is not extremely useful for the war. The others may argue for a reduction in cost due to this. Do not let them. Now, Lindsay will be delivering crates of food for you to store. Use your ring and the spatial bags you were given.”

At my confused head tilt, Aleks added, “Sultah Aleahil let everyone keep the bags we took into the Divine Territory as a reward for everything we brought back.”

“Yours is in your room, did you not notice it?” Librarian Narwan asked, then laughed. “It seems that our training in observation must continue.”

*Aww, Light,* I thought, then ducked under a smack only to have my knee kicked out from under me. “I look forward to it, Master Narwan,” I said, getting back to my feet as I held in a groan from my bruised and battered body.

“Good! Pack enough food for a month, though Knight Kaminski will probably allow Siarczysty and Zimnodlot to fish. Listen to Knight Kaminski, she has traveled across the sea many times. Now, prepare your demands. I will bring you to the meeting in a few hours,” Librarian Narwan said, then vanished.

The next two hours passed quickly, as Aleks, Vaya, Jamila, and I made a list of what we wanted to trade for. Aleks included in the requirements that anyone not in the current area had to pay a similar amount to be taught any of the information gained. “Yes, that includes my father,” she said when Jamila asked. “Aiden earned this, and he deserves a reward for it. It is still far too cheap of a price, but the nations will be unable to pay what he truly deserves with the war going on. This way at least all of us will be able to get stronger faster, and reach a higher level of strength with the other nations’ gathering and tempering techniques. Even the Legacy has different, not necessarily better, techniques.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

She blushed. “Uh, I got to look at the Aether gathering technique knowledge stone when Vaya and Lilianna were handing it around to everyone. I found a good Ice, Air, and Water rune to match my upgraded Affinities after the Tower. I took a look at some of their lower-level techniques too. They were basically a mix of a gathering technique and a tempering technique, always focused on one Element.”

“Neat,” I said. “Speaking of tempering, Vaya, you and I should use the Volk method again in another Element or seven, since the Tribulation counted as tempering in every one of them.”

“Can you temper in other Elements?” Jamila asked. “Like Mud, or Acid?”

I looked at Aleks, then Vaya, who all just shrugged. “No idea,” I said. “That’s something to ask Librarian Narwan.”

“Yes, you can,” he said, appearing directly behind Vaya and making her shriek. “Though it is often not as useful as simply advancing with the base Elements. Very few make it past the third level of tempering, where it would be potentially advantageous to temper with advanced Elements. For Aiden and Vaya, it should

provide some additional strength and defense, but the amount is nowhere near as significant as the first level of tempering in the base Elements. Using the Element tempering Attack method will provide better results. Come, all four of you are invited to speak before Sultah Aleahil and his guests.”

We followed him out of the inn, waving at Jon and Ming as they hauled a crate toward the courtyard. “Sure thing, you go have fun with your girls and leave us working here!” Jon yelled with a grin on his face.

“Yup, but I’ll be bringing presents back afterwards, I hope,” I called, waving jauntily.

Bridget ran up to the wagon that was holding the food. “Ooh, I love presents,” she said.

Librarian Narwan created the Air platform he’d used to bring me to the forest for my Tribulation, then Jamila, Vaya, Aleks, and I stepped on. He joined us, and we shot off like a rocket, zooming over people’s heads at a height of four to five meters. What had taken ten minutes to run or an hour to stroll only took thirty seconds of motion on the Aether transport. We set down right in front of the palace, and the guards waved us in.

“Why don’t more people fly around on these things?” I asked. “I’m pretty certain I could make something like it, though I’m not quite sure how to make it move yet.”

“Most major cities have laws against flying,” Aleks explained. “To keep the skies clear in case of attack. Those with urgent need can get permission, or seek forgiveness later, but usually people just walk or run. In Craesti, there are more mounted riders as well, but the Ashkhas do not have the food reserves to allow more than Bonds in.”

“Um, has anyone heard from the Bonds over the last few days?” Jamila asked. “I have not been able to communicate with Fluffy since he left with Sia.”

“Sia told me he was taking the Bonds on a trip into the forest, that they would be safe, and that he would come back before we left,” I said.

“I have already informed him of the departure time.” Librarian Narwan preempted my question or attempt to speak with Sia. “They will return either tonight or tomorrow to allow for better planning. Use your time wisely. Now, get the rope in your hands, it is time to speak with the other Soul Strengthening gatherers and their representatives.”

He led us into the same room where I’d spoken to them two days ago, and the same people sat around the table. “Welcome back, Munqiz Aiden,” Sultah Aleahil said. “Thank you for offering the techniques for us old wheezers, giving us hope to continue to advance. Casmir has let us know the majority of your initial price, and I speak for us all when I say that it is not enough...”

“Uh, Sultah Aleahil, I honestly believe you are incorrect,” I interjected. “The knowledge in this stone is literally priceless, and should easily be worth some pills and plants.”

“Yes,” he said, a grin stretching on his feline face. “Exactly. Your demands are not sufficient, and would create too much debt between us. Each of us will provide a number of pills and powders, including some that may take longer to arrive.”

“Yah,” Gunther said, “I sent a message back to my da to put together twelve Stahlbruchfestigkeit Pills. You will be the first Craesti, the first non-Volk, to ever take them.”

“Please do so near a healer,” Ritter Felix said, “and record what happens and how effective they are.”

“Are you agreeing to share a gathering and a tempering technique as well?” I asked. “I thought that would be a harder sell, actually.”

“Yes,” the Topraki Soul Strengthening gatherer said, his voice gravelly and deep. “And we are not going to scrimp and scratch to make value.” He placed on the table two knowledge stones, Aether dimly swirling around inside them. “Though I do ask you to not share these beyond the twelve of you and your families. This is the Aether Ingestion Core Dissolving Technique, used by the elite of our Hayil Bayta”—my mind translated that as Warrior Lodge— “and is a better technique for using Beast meat and Cores to advance than anything your nation has. The other is only usable by those in the latter stages

of Condensation and Core gathering: the Self-Flagellation Tempering Technique. It is not pleasant, but is the second-best technique for strengthening your skin and muscles to prevent damage.”

*Self-flagellation, fun times*, I thought, nodding.

“We have already shared part of the tempering technique,” Ritter Felix said. “On this stone are the next three layers of the technique. It is the Äthermuskelfusion Einatmen Technik. I look forward to seeing what you become when combining all of our techniques together.”

“If only we had a few years for you to grow,” Sultah Aleahil said. “Rather than an Aether gathering technique, I have a single Geist gathering technique, the Mind-Enhancement Inward Focused Technique. It is slow if you do not have a source of Geist, but you naturally create just a little, and can use that to gather and temper your mind to produce more. With a source of Geist, such as our Tower, you would advance faster. As the others have provided external tempering techniques, I will share my Bone Crystallization Marrow Cleansing Technique, further preventing harm and allowing you to utilize the prodigious strength that combining the other techniques will grant. Become our champion.”

I nodded. “I will—we will—do our best.”

“In addition, we will each provide one thousand level three Cores, five hundred level four, and one hundred level five Cores from the Jungle Arena Dungeon or twice as many Beast Cores from other sources,” Sultah Aleahil continued. “All of you will be given priority for Dungeon instances when you are around, and one platinum to allow you to commission armor and weapons to keep yourselves safer.”

“Yah, and when you come visit the Weltreich you will be given access to the Tower of Geist for as long as you are available,” Gunther said. “Though I do expect some spars!” He burst into laughter.

“That just means you gotta catch up,” I told him with a wink.

“Nah, now it is fair!” he said, then pounded the table in mirth.

“If you are ever in the Topraki Empire, you will have access to one of our national treasures as well,” the Topraki said. “Though I am



unsure if it will be helpful to you. Our Temple of the Moon strengthens our wolf and hybrid forms. You are welcome to try your luck anyway.”

“That is very generous,” I said. I looked over at Aleks, Vaya, Jamila, and Librarian Narwan. Three nods and a shrug met my questioning gaze, then I turned back to the others. I reached into my bag, summoned the knowledge stone in question, then handed it to Sultah Aleahil. “I accept.”

“Then take your earnings,” he said, gently accepting the stone from me. He hesitated for a second, then put it to his forehead.

Iswat scooted the two knowledge stones in front of Sultah Aleahil toward me, and I scooped them up and put them in my bag, then into my ring. The others gave me their stones as well, and then a servant in a fancy silver coat gently placed a long sheet of parchment in front of me. A quick glance showed me that it included all of the items from Jamila and Vaya’s list, everything Sultah Aleahil had just offered, and the limitations on the techniques we’d been given. There were a few more special pills called out to be delivered within six months, and then there were five lines to sign.

Aleks stepped forward and signed it on the Craesti line. “My father will pay similar amounts to learn this technique.”

“Okay,” I said, then signed the document myself. I looked around the table. The servant had placed another of the contracts in front of each of the others, and once signed, they passed it to their right.

Sultah Aleahil blinked out of the knowledge stone, then signed the papers. “I had hoped for a quicker path, but this will be useful. I will speak with the rest of the Council. Will you allow us to spread the knowledge if we send additional payments?”

“Yeah,” I said.

Aleks cleared her throat and whispered, “You should increase the monetary cost, since learning additional new techniques will not be helpful.”

“Yes, we can double the amount of Dungeon Cores, or pay the market gold price for them,” Sultah Aleahil agreed instantly. “This is still low enough of a cost that I feel a debt, but it is not

insurmountable.” He passed the stone to Ritter Felix, who immediately used it.

“I would like to add twenty level six Dungeon Cores to the list,” I said. “The level five and below will only be useful for a little while, or for family instead of us.”

Sultah Aleahil nodded. “That is acceptable. I will put out a notice that I will purchase the level six Cores, as none have been sold yet.”

“Thank you,” I said, seeing our path forward solidifying. The same servant passed out another agreement, penned in just the last few seconds, stating our new agreement as well.

Librarian Narwan signed this one on behalf of the Craesti. “Headmaster Glav will be able to use this technique immediately,” he said, “since she is unlikely to be sent to the front lines anytime soon. I will work with her on advancing quickly.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Every one of the Soul Strengthening gatherers around frowned, or emoted something that felt like a frown through my translation ability. “I’m sorry that this isn’t the slam-dunk advancement to give you the win in the war,” I explained.

“No, this is useful,” Sultah Aleahil said, “though I doubt any of us will be using the information until someone has been groomed to take our place.”

“I hope the war does not last long enough for this technique to make the difference,” the Topraki said, gesturing with the stone.

“Should I leave the stone with Sultah Aleahil?” I asked Librarian Narwan quietly.

“No need,” Sultah Aleahil answered. “I am more than capable of transmitting the knowledge to another, as are any of us. Give it to your King, and make sure you get paid.” He grinned, his sharp leonine teeth making the gesture somewhat terrifying, but I could feel the mirth in his face.

I nodded back, keeping my laughter inside, as I thought, *Khajit has wares, if you have coin.*

“The items for the initial purchase will be delivered before the end of the day,” Ritter Felix said. “Master Narwan informed us you

wanted to leave by tomorrow midday, so we prioritized getting the items to you quickly.”

“Thank you,” I said, then bowed. “And thank you for your generosity. Please, send some Core-level gatherers to Azyl City or Craesti City to learn the Aether Gathering-, Condensation-, and Core-level techniques as well. For Condensation techniques, ten level five Dungeon Cores; and for Core, one level six Core or one hundred level five. Aether Gathering-level techniques will be free, as I said before.”

“Can we send someone tonight?” Gunther asked.

I nodded. “Sure.” We organized having three people come tonight, one from each of the other nations, and Gunther told me he’d be bringing some Volk spirits to toast a successful tournament.

“I look forward to it!” I told him, then everyone got up to leave the room and get back to their days.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next morning, I woke up in the main room of the Portable Home, lying in a pile of lounge pillows and bodies. We'd all staggered back to the Portable Home once the party had started to wind down. My head was on Vaya's lap, and she was stretched out over Jamila's stomach. Aleks was sleeping on my right thigh, and my leg was numb. *Huh, I guess I can still have body parts fall asleep.* I laughed internally, then sent a tiny stream of Aether into my leg along the nerves. With a bit of effort, I was able to flex the muscle to allow my blood to flow better.

I thought back to the party the previous night, and then the aftermath where Vaya, Jamila, and Hanna healed all of us from the impending hangover. Gunther was disappointed I wouldn't show him the flying device, but I told him it was Librarian Narwan's rule so he didn't push it. "I couldn't race you anyway," I told him. "It's designed for cargo capacity, not speed."

"Ah, bummer," he complained. "Fine. More grog."

I grinned while remembering, then grimaced. *Gotta pee,* I thought, looking down at my leg. I very, very carefully formed a thin film of Air Aether, my power responding easier than ever before, and put it under Aleks's head. I used a second one to compress my leg down, and gently slid it sideways. I moved a pillow from under my back to under her head, and let her down slowly before carefully sitting up.

I looked around, surprised at the pile of people. Jon, Bridget, Xiao, and Lilianna lay in a group, while Hanna and Milenna spooned off to the side. Ming was sleeping in an awkward half crescent, and the slightly open door to the kitchen informed me that Lea was cooking. She'd taken a liking to the culinary arts during our trip, learning how to purify and enhance Beast meat and Aether herbs.

I stepped around my friends and into my room, silently laughing at our silliness for not going back to our rooms that were only a dozen meters away. I quickly familiarized myself with the bathroom, then moved over to the kitchen where I found Lea frying eggs that gave off a slight hint of Aether. “Good morning,” I said, closing the door behind me. “Need any help?”

“Sure,” she said, then gestured with her left hand, which was holding a whisk, at a large metal door. “Can you get out a kilo of Earthen Boar bacon? Should be at eye level on the right.”

“Got it,” I said, then went and opened the door. A blast of cold air, which I felt more as knowledge that, ‘hey this is cold’, without any physiological reaction to the near-freezing temperature. I was surprised to find that the refrigerated area was the size of a walk-in closet, not just a normal fridge. Five shelves ran across each side and around the back, and they were all piled high with meat, fruit, and vegetables. I searched through the fourth shelf, the one at eye level, and found a box of bacon. I separated out about a kilogram of it, and brought it to Lea.

A streamer of Aether took it from me, and quickly separated it into strips and onto a pan on the stovetop. “Now, in the pantry, grab twelve Ground Potatoes from the bin on the floor, wash them, and put them in that bowl.” She gestured at a large steel bowl that floated next to the sink.

I spent the next twenty minutes fetching items and washing produce. “Is there anything else I can do to help?” I asked once I finished the most recent task.

“Would you allow anyone to help you make a pill?” she asked, flipping the hash browns she’d made from the potatoes. Metal Aether from a peak Condensation-level gatherer cut level two Aether Plants like a hot knife through butter, letting her expertly dice the potatoes in seconds.

I realized, watching her cook, that I’d been neglecting some of my capabilities while preparing ingredients. “Well,” I answered, “only if they’d been trained on what I was doing.”

“I feel the same way,” she said. “So, no, I do not need any more assistance.”

“I’ll go make the table,” I said, laughing while shaking my head.

“You do that,” Lea answered, and I could feel her grin from behind her.

I exited the kitchen twenty minutes after entering it to find Ming, Aleks, and Hanna groggily sitting up at the quiet click of the door closing. “Go perform your morning ablutions,” I told them softly. “Lea is cooking breakfast right now.”

Aleks got up and gave me a hug, then stumbled toward her room. I tuned the other’s movement out, and used streamers of Earth Aether to pull the table pieces out of their storage location and insert the legs into their slots. It only took me a minute to put the enormous table together. The only tricky part of setting up was sticking a chair such that, when Jon sat up, he’d run into it. I quietly chuckled at the pending prank, then found where we’d stored plates and silverware in the cabinets that now lined the walls between the doors. Each cabinet was half a meter thick, and filled literally every centimeter of the available wall space, giving us a massive amount of storage.

Even my room had new storage, as we’d used as much space as we could to fit in foodstuffs and purified water. Water generated with Aether was great for cleaning yourself off, but only mildly satisfying for quenching your thirst, so we needed to carry some with us for drinking. Once we ran low, we’d refill by purifying sea water, but that wasn’t super safe, so we wanted to delay it as much as we could.

*“We are returning,”* Sia told me, his voice clearer than it had ever been. *“The others learned a great deal, and we are ready to support the group as best we are able. We will arrive in three hours.”*

*“I can’t wait to see ya, bud,”* I sent back, grinning. Over the next ten minutes, everyone else slowly stirred awake, and then stumbled to the bedrooms, or more importantly their bathrooms, to finish the getting-up process.

About halfway through the process of everyone waking up, Lea opened the door to the kitchen with four large platters of food

balanced on Aether tendrils. “Food is ready,” she said. “Thank you, Aiden, for setting the table.”

“Thank you for cooking,” I said. “It smells delicious. The Bonds are on their way back, so we should be able to make our plans for the next few days before leaving.”

“Awesome,” she said, “I cannot wait to explore that ruin we found on the way here. Are you going to teach us any of the tempering techniques Vaya told us about?”

“I’m pretty certain we’re supposed to head straight home,” I told her. “But yes, of course. That’s one of my main goals tonight and tomorrow.”

“Awesome!” she repeated, then pouted. “Do not be a fuddy-duddy. An extra day or two to get back will not kill anyone. Come on, ancient ruins from the same timeframe as the M’Zee people? Maybe there is a Geist tower there. Did you not say that we have a technique on gathering Geist that would work better with a source?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Let’s talk about it with everyone, especially Knight Kaminski and Librarian Narwan.”

“Pfft,” she said, “better to ask forgiveness than permission.”

“We’ll see,” I said.

“We will see what?” Ming asked, sitting next to Lea. I pretended not to notice him grabbing her hand under the table, knowing that he was very uncomfortable with public displays of affection.

“Let’s talk about that once everyone is out,” I said. “I don’t want to repeat myself over and over again.”

“Of course,” Ming said, gracious as always.

We waited silently for the next five minutes as everyone filed out. Jamila sat to my left, and Aleks to my right. Vaya sat across from me, and winked while gesturing for me to take both their hands. I was still getting used to having three girlfriends, and still terrified that I would hurt one or more of them by being an idiot. Ming and Lea served everyone once we were all there, then Lea stood and said, “Light and Darkness, without you we would be lost. Thank you for your blessing, and thank you for your children’s sacrifice. Guide

our lives, and let us do good to those around. Light up the correct path, and hide those we should not follow. Light and Darkness.”

“Light and Darkness,” Jamila, Ming, Jon, and Milenna echoed. I belatedly joined in.

“Thank you for cooking,” Aleks told Lea, then bit into her eggs. “This is really good.”

“You are welcome, Princess,” Lea said, bowing in her seat.

“None of that now,” Aleks said, then blushed and smacked my arm. “You have corrupted my speech. No bowing, not here. Here we are all equal in rank, having surpassed the Tower of Trials, survived the Divine Territory, and placed in the International Tournament of Champions. You all will be knighted, at least, upon returning. I would not be surprised if Aiden is raised to Baron, skipping Lord entirely.”

“Wait, what would I be obligated to do as a Baron?” I asked.

“Probably establish a town,” she answered. “That is usually what Dad tasks new Barons with. We have too many people in the cities, and only with extensive Aether techniques can we support them all. Every new farming community established allows for more people to be supported, for more soldiers to be supported, and more power to be projected on our enemies. Usually people are not raised to Baron until they have proven their ability to protect a town, or have reached Perfect Core.”

“So winning the tournament means I can protect a town?” I asked.

“Not necessarily, but it does mean that Dad will gamble on you being able to,” Aleks said. “He also loves raising people to higher political ranks from those who held none in childhood, hoping to help break the noble council’s stranglehold on the Kingdom’s politics.”

“Should you be saying this?” Hanna asked. “I know our families are with you, but what about the Los or Volkovs?”

“I will not speak out of turn about things spoken in confidence,” Ming said, and Xiao gave an enthusiastic set of nods. Vaya looked conflicted for a second, before agreeing with Ming.



“So, to distract from the political discussion that shouldn’t be talked about, I have presents for most of you,” I said. “You know, once breakfast is over.”

I have never seen people eat so fast. A few minutes later, we’d cleaned all the dishes, dried them, and stacked them back in their cabinets before putting away the table and congregating in the lounge area. I summoned To Hold The World On High, the shield from Spirit, and said, “Jon, you need this. Maybe if you had had this I wouldn’t have been brutalized in the Tower of Trials.” I paused for a second, then laughed. “Sorry, I don’t think that’s really true. You are an awesome defender, and my best friend. As the only shield user in the group, I wanted to give you this. It’ll help you protect all of us, and keep yourself safe too.”

“Thank you,” Jon said, examining it in awe. “I do not think I’ve ever owned anything so valuable.”

“Use it well,” I said. Then I pulled the Spear Of Twilight out. “Jamila, my heart, I believe this is the best item I can give you.” I held it out to her.

“I will have to get used to using a short spear, instead of a staff,” she said, “but I can tell that this will enhance my healing ability as well as combat. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. “It should also help with growing your garden, as it enhances any Wood technique used through it.” I turned to Ming. “You have stood by me, and helped me as best you can. Now I can return the favor.” I held out the sword, Starkiller.

He took it reverently. A gentle flick of the blade made the air scream, and he looked at it wide-eyed. “This is amazing. Thank you, Aiden,” he said, standing and bowing a full ninety degrees to me.

I nodded at him, then pulled out the cloak. “Bridget, as the sneakiest among us, I gift you this, to let you be even sneakier. Trick Jon all the time.”

“Of course,” she said, taking the Hidden Mantle. She slung it over her shoulders, and then I had a hard time focusing on her, even knowing that she was sitting right there. *That is amazing*, I thought, then shrugged. *I already took the best items, the Skysurfer and Portable Home. I can share the wealth of these amazing items.*

I pulled out the breastplate and helmet, the Bulwark of Kasa'ulin'zi, then turned to Aleks. "These are supposed to be a set, so I want to give them to you—" I started.

"I am going to refuse them," she interrupted, her voice oddly formal. "I will have access to the entire palace armory when we return, and my mother has already commissioned a set of armor for when I advance to Seed Core. Please, if you must gift it, give it to someone that needs it and cannot afford something of this quality."

"I will not accept," Lilianna said.

"Me either," Hanna chirped in, then Milenna shook her head when I looked at her.

I frowned for a second, but nodded. "Okay, then Lea, would you accept this set, to keep yourself safer?"

She nodded, then put the helmet on her head. "This burns!" she exclaimed, excited. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome," I said. I looked back at Aleks. "I am going to insist that you take this, though." I accessed my ring and retrieved To Call The Heavens. "This Inscription could kill Librarian Narwan, so keep it handy just in case. Your enemies will be stronger than mine, and vastly stronger than you for now."

She took it reluctantly, folding it and slipping it into her belt pouch. "Thank you," she said, her voice husky.

I grinned, then pulled out the necklace. "So, I'm not giving this away, but for the journey home I want all of you to share it. This is the Center Of The Universe, and it allows you to gather significantly faster while wearing it.

"So, what did you keep for yourself?" Jon asked, looking at me over top of his new shield.

"Well, the house we're in right now!" I said excitedly, gesturing around, "plus the Skysurfer. I still have the plate from Connecting the Myriad Peoples, and a belt that increases strength, but I can't use that safely until I advance a lot more."

"Why did you not keep everything?" Milenna asked.

I blushed and scratched my ear. "Well, I'm going to be even more stupidly wealthy once the payments for the Legacy knowledge I sold arrive this afternoon, plus all the gems I'm sure Da has created

and sold in our absence. I can afford to purchase armor and weapons to my own specifications, so I wanted to help out my friends.”

Xiao pouted, then Lilianna spoke up. “Well, I will have to have my mom make an armored keikogi for you.” She poked the young man, who perked up immediately. *Hah, I bet he’s just happy to spend time with her,* I thought, then grinned. *Of course.*

“Sorry, Xiao,” I said, “but it seems like you’re getting a better consolation prize anyway!”

The door opened behind me, and I turned to find Librarian Narwan holding a crate as he maneuvered through the doorway. “Ah, good, take this from me,” he commanded.

I hopped to my feet and grabbed the crate, nearly staggering under the weight. “Uh, sir, what is this? I’m not sure we have room for much more.”

“As your master, I was planning on gifting you a much more capable travel Alchemy set once you reached Seed Core and I could teach you the finer points of potion and pill making. Because you have this house, I was able to scale the equipment up drastically! Inside, you will find a significant amount of herbs for Ice Flower Tempest Pills, and a book with the recipe included. I expect you to have mastered it by the time you arrive in Craesti,” he answered.

I smiled hugely, my cheeks hurting a bit, and I hefted the box. “I cannot wait, Master Narwan,” I said. I rotated toward the Alchemy room to find that Jon had already opened the door. I hauled the box over, a bit of Aether running through my muscles to assist, then carefully set it down next to the workbench. A quick jab of my fingers pried the lid off, and I found a second small box, an Auric Gold-encrusted pestle, a Volcanic Iron pestle, an Ironwood Bark pestle, and six other pestles along with four mortars, one each for the Air, Fire, Water, and Earth Elements. The other half of the box was a massive pill furnace, heavily Inscribed with a silvery metal I’d never seen before.

“The different mortar and pestle sets can be combined to enhance, counteract, or diffuse the properties of the ingredients prepared in them,” Librarian Narwan explained. “The set I had

planned to provide would only include the Auric Gold pestle and a Spiked Basalt mortar, as that combination is the best for the Affinity Powders. The pill furnace is Inscribed with Elemental Palladium, an extremely rare Aether-infused metal. It allows for near-perfect control and transfer of Aether along its runes, which will be necessary as you advance.”

“Sir, why use the metal in a pill furnace, and not a weapon?” I asked.

“It is too soft and is easily damaged,” he answered. “Additionally, it is best used for moderate amounts of Aether over longer periods of time, not large bursts.” Librarian Narwan straightened out, then looked over all of us. “I am proud to have taught you. Be safe, and return.” He suddenly got a serious look on his face. “I am commanding you to explore the ruins we discovered.”

“May I ask why?” Aleks asked.

“The Lamia—” he started, and I gasped.

“The Lamia was a Naga! Why did that not occur to me before!” I exclaimed. “Oh, Light, the Lamia was a Naga!”

“Yes,” Librarian Narwan said. “They were doing something there, and we must know what. Naga have been sighted a dozen times in the last two weeks. Sultah Aleahil believes they may have been involved in the loss of another eight merchant ships. The Ashkhas are looking for their home, but their available forces are limited due to the war.”

“We’ll find whatever they were looking for,” I said.

“Good. I need to leave as soon as possible,” he answered. “The priest of Darkness at the temple spoke with Sultah Aleahil yesterday. A message from Darkness came to him in a dream, and it took him weeks to interpret it. There is a Dungeon on the seafloor that is growing stronger. Ritter Felix, Guardian Thaddeus, and Hunter Fatemah will be joining me.”

“Four Soul Strengthening-level gatherers,” Jon exclaimed. “Are you truly that worried?”

“Darkness’s message said to not underestimate it,” Librarian Narwan explained.

“Uh, Librarian Narwan, can you not just leave now?” Jamila asked.

“I do not trust the other Soul Strengthening gatherers who are not joining me to not move on you if I was to leave,” he said. “I know there is much more knowledge in Aiden’s hands than he has revealed, or even seen himself, and so do they. You do not dangle meat in front of a starving Beast without protection.”

Most of the crowd looked moderately scared at that. I just shrugged and said, “I guess we need to get stronger, then, so that no one can take our things without payment.”

Librarian Narwan boomed out a laugh.

“Should we all not leave now then?” Aleks asked.

“No,” he answered. “Just as you will use the next two days to enhance your power, we will be training. The hard level of the Jungle Arena will provide a useful training ground for the four of us, though we will not be able to go all out. As for you, plan your time wisely, and be ready to leave at any moment.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*“Hey, Sia, we’re all packed, but Librarian Narwan wants us to train for the next day and a half or so,”* I told Sia mentally. *“Are you going to be back soon?”*

*“We are crossing the city now,”* Sia said. *“Five minutes.”*

*“Got it,”* I responded, then repeated that to the others.

“Lampart’s armor should be very interesting,” Vaya said. “She would not let me be part of designing it.”

“Armor?” I asked.

“Yeah, the Bonds were testing out armor they had commissioned,” Jon said.

“Fluffy looks so cute in his!” Jamila exclaimed.

“Sia didn’t even tell me about it,” I groaned, then laughed. “Oh well, not sure how much armor he could even use. What about Kami? Didn’t she already have armor from Bruno?”

“No idea,” Bridget answered, “she wants it to be a surprise too.”

The next few minutes passed quickly, waiting outside the privacy shield for the Bonds to arrive. Zimnodlot was the first, dropping out of the sky and flaring his wings to land on Jon’s arm. Thin layers of an icy-blue metal lined his talons, and a helmet covered part of his head, extending over his beak to enhance his bite too. “That looks awesome, Zimnodlot,” Jon said.

*“And they enhance my attacks and protect my head,”* Zimnodlot told us, causing several of us to look at him in surprise.

“Well, of course he can talk to all of us,” Jon said. “He made it to level six during our Tribulation.”

“I didn’t know that!” I exclaimed, then gave Zimnodlot a slight bow. “Congratulations!”

*“So did I!”* Kami said, bounding around a tree. Her voice was definitely higher than expected coming from a massive pangolin. I

saw her new Stone-scale armor was covering her body. Her hands had dark-brown leather gauntlets over the scales, with a greenish metal covering her claws.

Just before she reached Bridget, Lampart leapt from the top of the nearest tree to land nearby. Sleek, black leather armor covered her torso, head, and the upper parts of her legs. Unlike the other two, she had no additional claw extensions added, but it would have been difficult for her to run with them on.

Fluffy leapt off the tree following her, the flying squirrel zooming through the air with a puff of Air Aether from the four bracelet-like jewelry items he wore on his upper legs to give him a better gliding time. Like the others, he had a helmet on, and his upper paws had leather gloves on them, though the bright green of Life Aether let me know they were probably to help him heal better instead of fight better.

The rippling rainbow of colors that was Sia's wings exploded into view as he flew over the tree and grew to be four meters wide. The metal helmet he was wearing seemed to stretch, getting a bit thinner but still covering the top and sides of his head. Unlike Zimnodlot's, his helmet didn't extend over his beak. His claws had blades the same dark red as his helmet, and they extended out with his Aether, reaching nearly thirty centimeters in length. I shuddered at the thought of being hit with those. He screeched in excitement, then dove at me, shrinking again and flaring his wings before acrobatically flipping around and landing on my right shoulder. I could feel his Core-level aura through our touch, since he'd advanced at the same time I had. *Soon, we'll be unstoppable*, I thought.

His new talon blades clinked against my armor, and made me realize I really needed new armor now that I'd advanced. *Eh, I'll deal with that when we get back*, I thought. *I have a stupid amount of money now, and can get something really good. Anything I could find here wouldn't fit me right, since the Ashkhas have a different body structure.*

"Are you ready to train?" I asked.

“Yes,” he answered, projecting it to the group. *“We went hunting to test the new armor and weapons, and used the Beast parts and Cores to help pay for them. The rest came from our proceeds from the Divine Territory, so we do not have any last-minute tasks. The others are still struggling with the necessary Aether control to change size, and I will continue to work with them on the trip back.”* He projected a hint of exasperation at the younger Beasts. *“Which boat are we taking?”* Sia asked the last part of just me, plaintive whining in his voice at the thought of being on a wooden ship again.

“No boat,” I said. “Come on, let’s get settled and ready to go.”

I could feel Sia’s confusion, and Kami twisted her head sideways and tapped her fingers together so cutely that I nearly laughed. *“Can we hurry?”* she asked. *“These are really neat, but they are not very comfortable.”*

“Yup, we just need to get to the courtyard,” I told her consolingly.

Kami and Lampart stopped for a second upon seeing the black eggshell of Aether in the courtyard, then followed us through. Sia and Zimnodlot could not stop, riding on my and Jon’s shoulders, though Sia did turn his head to look at me with narrowing eyes before I stepped through. “This is part of my rewards from the Divine Territory,” I said once we were safe from prying ears. “A flying device and a spatial house. Vaya, can you show Lampart and Kami to an available room, if they don’t want to sleep with you and Bridget respectively? Sia, I got a perch added to my room for you, and to Jon’s room for Zimnodlot.”

I paused. “Uh, weren’t you going to try to get Bonds here?” I asked Aleks and her team.

“It did not work out,” Aleks said with a pout. “But Gunther has promised he will look for a cub whose mother would be interested in having us Bond and get them to travel to Craesti.”

“Nice of him,” I said, giving her a reassuring smile.

“I had to give him a trade concession for it. He negotiates like an Ashkhas!” she complained, and everyone laughed.



We entered the Portable Home to find Knight Kaminski reading a book on a lounge cushion. “The Bonds are here. What is the plan for training, Knight Kaminski?” Aleks asked regally.

“Good,” she answered, hopping to her feet. “Aiden, have you explored the Self-Flagellation technique yet?”

“Uh, not yet, ma’am,” I said with a shrug.

She nodded. “Then your task is to learn it and teach the rest of the group. Princess Aleksandra, Lo Ming, your teams will work on the Pinpoint Tempering Technique taught by Ritter Felix. Advance yourselves through another Element. You are all ready for it.” She turned to Vaya, Jon, and Bridget. “You three will spar, with your Bonds joining you. Test out their new equipment, and make plans. Siarczysty, work with the rest of your team. I will be watching.”

“Yes, Knight Kaminski,” we all chorused.

The others spilled back out of the Portable Home, but I took advantage of it to plop into a lounge cushion and pull out the knowledge stone which held the Self-Flagellating Tempering Technique. I shook my head, then dove into it.

I found myself in the body of a Topraki, with another standing in front of me. They were in a small, sand-covered courtyard, with bamboo walls lining the area. The Topraki I was learning the technique through was in the early stages of Condensation, still building their Foundation, while the teacher was at least a Perfect Core.

“The base principle of the Self-Flagellation Tempering Technique is the same as every other.” He spoke quietly, and my ears flicked forward to listen. “The details define the technique, though.” He shrugged out of his shirt, then a whip of Earth Aether formed, floating in front of him. After a second, it split apart, revealing dozens of runes that were its makeup. “Here is the basis of our defensive strength.”

He then went on to explain the function of each rune and how they changed the effect of the next one in the line. My borrowed body then spent days working on the whip, each attempt slightly better, before they finally were able to create the whip without error.

“Good,” the teacher said. “Now you will need to coat the skin and fur where you will be strengthening yourself with the Rapid Skin Healing Technique.” Again, he demonstrated the technique, then slashed himself with the whip. A tiny mark on his skin almost instantly healed.

“Master,” the source of the knowledge stone said. “Must we be the one to injure ourselves? Would it not be easier to let someone else control the whip?”

“The technique is possible to use split in that manner,” he explained, “but it is weaker by a significant margin. The Rapid Skin Healing Technique resonates with the Aether in the Self-Flagellation Technique if they are both done with the same Aether. No one has the exact same Aether makeup as you, and thus you lose the exponential increase in effectiveness.” He snorted. “It also trains you to focus on multiple techniques at once, and to continue to do so through immense pain. Now, begin!”

Another few days passed quickly in the knowledge stone as the young Topraki learned the intricacies of the first layer of the technique. It ended soon thereafter, and I woke up in my own body.

I stood and stretched, getting back the feeling of me after being a Topraki for nearly a week, though only a few minutes had passed in the real world. I extended my hand and tried to create the whip out of Fire Aether. It took me only six tries to get it working properly, one of the many benefits of using knowledge stones.

*Huh, I thought, looking at the glowing band of Fire Aether in front of me. With a gesture, the runes spread out, losing a significant amount of power but letting me examine them better. These three. They are similar to some of the runes in the Pinpoint Tempering Technique’s attack side. The healing side is too different, though. I wonder if the Pinpoint healing part would work with the Flagellation? Did they only focus on skin tempering because it is too difficult to hold better healing techniques and attack yourself at the same time? I bet I could do it.*

“Wait!” I exclaimed. “If I did both sides of the Pinpoint Tempering Technique, would that make it stronger?” I shucked off my shirt, knowing I was going to try the Self-Flagellating technique soon

anyway, then formed the Pinpoint Tempering Technique over my right pointer and middle finger and my left bicep.

Well, I tried to anyway. Splitting my focus on two very complex and different techniques that I hadn't practiced extensively was harder than I thought it'd be. Five minutes of focus, though, along with the massive increase in power, concentration, and Aether density from advancing, had both parts of the technique stable. With a grunt, I slammed my fingers into my arm.

The Fire Aether flared through my skin and muscle, burning away any impurities and weaknesses found, but it didn't seem any different than when I used Lightning with Aleks. I frowned at my arm, then shrugged. *I'll think about it more later. There's definitely something there, but I need more information. When we get back, I'll ask Librarian Narwan about getting access to more tempering techniques. With some work, I'll make a supreme technique that will shake the heavens and advance myself to supreme ruler! Ahahaa. Okay, weebness averted; moving on.*

I laughed, then created another Flame Tempering Whip. "You know, this might be a useful attack technique too," I told myself, then shook my head. "Eh, maybe. Focus on tempering now."

I took another minute to practice the Rapid Skin Healing Technique before I mentally commanded the Flame Whip to slash across my chest. I was unprepared for how much it hurt, somehow piercing straight through all of my previous tempering and my advanced level. I didn't bleed from the injury, but only because my flesh was cauterized.

It was a struggle to hold the Rapid Skin Healing Technique, but I did. It took almost two minutes to heal the damage done. I stood up, having dropped to my knees from the pain, then grunted. "A little pain won't stop me." The Whip slammed back into me, in the same spot. If it hurt less, it was minor enough that I couldn't tell.

After repeating it ten times, though, I knew that it was doing less damage. I grinned before creating a small ball of Water Aether that I used to scrub away the sweat covering my torso and head. I then spent another minute just meditating, dropping the stress of repeatedly mangling my own body to advance, before putting my

shirt back on and opening the door. Aleks, Milenna, Lilianna, and Hanna were standing inside the privacy technique that Librarian Narwan had created, poking at each other.

I grinned at Aleks, then walked toward the inn's back door. "Stay between the poles," Aleks called to me, gesturing to where two thin sticks had been stabbed into the ground. "The others know to avoid the spot on the other side."

"Thanks!" I said, altering my path slightly to walk through them. The noise of the city, and my friends sparring, assaulted me as soon as I cleared the barrier. "Hey Jon, come here for a second!"

He turned to look at me, then yelled as Zimnodlot took advantage of his distraction to smash him to the ground with a Wind Burst. I laughed uproariously, then slapped a weak Icicle out of the sky. "Very funny," Jon shouted, jumping to his feet covered in mud. "What do you need?"

"I figured out the first level of the Self-Flagellating Tempering Technique, so you get to be the dummy so I can test something," I called.

"Oh fine," he said, walking over. Zimnodlot screeched a greeting, then zoomed off after Sia.

I spent a few minutes teaching Jon the Rapid Skin Healing Technique, then told him, "Now, keep it running on your left forearm and extend it in front of you."

"This is going to hurt, right?" he asked.

"Yeah, it is," I said. I created an Ice Whip this time, using the smallest amount of Aether I could, and gently slashed it into the spot I could tell his technique was running. It barely did anything, only a tiny scratch forming even though he'd let the technique through his Aether Shield.

"Uh, that technique is going to take forever to work," Jon said, looking at his arm. The scratch healed within seconds.

"Watch," I said, then held out my own arm. This time, the Whip flayed through my skin and muscle, nearly reaching the bone. "I guess that's why it's the Self-Flagellating Tempering Technique. Now I need to figure out why."

“Later,” Knight Kaminski said, walking over calmly.  
“Everyone, come. Aiden, please teach the group the technique as best you can. You have until dinner time. After dinner, your time is your own.”

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The next two days passed in a blur of training, learning, and preparing. I'd picked up the Bone Crystallization Marrow Cleansing Technique, which was a very different form of tempering. It felt more like the cultivation techniques from the Legacy, as it both improved my ability to store and use Aether while making me tougher. The technique turned my bones into Aether crystal, very, very slowly, while improving my marrow's ability to provide blood cells. These blood cells were also better at transporting both oxygen and Aether, almost causing my blood vessel meridians to simply merge into my blood vessels. I planned to investigate that more, but I didn't have time.

Prince Gunther popped by on the second day to spar with me, but the difference between Complete Condensation and Seed Core was just too much. "Fine," he grumbled after the third time I'd knocked him into a wall, "I concede."

"Advance to Core and this'll be fun," I said, helping him to his feet.

"Bah." He brushed his arms off, then pulled me into a one-armed hug. "I leave in the morning for the front lines. Safe travels, my friend."

"Safe travels, Gunther," I said. "Kick lizard tail for me."

He laughed and nodded. "I promise."

That evening we bought even more supplies, this time focusing on Alchemy, Inscription, and Smithing ingredients to let us utilize the awesome capabilities of the Portable Home. I took Vaya on a date one night, and Jamila the next, exploring through the town both evenings. After breakfast on the last day, my team and I were sparring, the Bonds using their new equipment so we could all get used to their new capabilities.

An hour into training, Librarian Narwan appeared and announced, "I am ready to leave. Prepare yourselves."

"We are, Master Narwan," Aleks said from the side, where her team was working on the Pinpoint Tempering Technique.

"Good," Librarian Narwan said, gesturing at the privacy shield. We all filed through, then found Knight Kaminski reading a book in the Portable Home's living room. "Time to go."

"Yes, Master Narwan," Knight Kaminski said, jumping to her feet. "Everyone, please set down what you do not need, grab a lounge cushion, and leave the room. Knight Aiden, once we leave, store the Portable Home how it was before you showed it to us. We want to leave without it being visible."

Bridget helped Kami out of her claws, and Sia plucked his blades off his talons and carefully put them on a shelf. He was deft with his beak and a bit of Aether. Everyone filed out of the house we'd just entered and circled up. I reached my hand out, and tapped the ring to the wall, mentally pushing my Aether out to envelope it. A much smaller chunk of my overall storage was used to pull it into the ring this time, rather than the large amount it took in the Tower.

When it vanished, so did the privacy screen. Lindsay and the other servants were waiting outside, and they all bowed and chorused, "It was our pleasure to serve you. May Light and Darkness guide your journey!" Every one of them left except Lindsay, who stepped forward and said with a smile, "We will miss you. Thank you for being excellent guests of the Murih Khamara."

"Thank you, and all the others, for taking good care of us," Aleks said.

Librarian Narwan appeared next to us. "You did excellently," he told Lindsay, "and I have relayed that to Ambassador Arvid to ensure that you are all rewarded thusly."

Lindsay bowed deeper, blushing a bit, and obviously extremely happy. When she straightened up, she turned and left, recognizing the dismissal in his tone.

He turned back to us. "Good, now we should be leaving. I will follow you for the first part of the journey. Now, all of you channel Aether into the Skysurfer. Aiden, fly."

The others sat on the lounge cushions they'd brought out, and I could see a steady flow of Aether from each of them into the Skysurfer's storage. My Aether streamed out of my feet to the control Inscription, and I mentally commanded it to rise. With a lurch, the Skysurfer flew. I was slowly increasing our altitude when Librarian Narwan zoomed in front of us on top of an honest-to-Light flying sword. Off to my right, I could see the other three Soul Strengthening gatherers on their own conveyances, though they were far enough away to be barely noticeable. "Follow," he commanded again, and took off at an angle upward.

I pushed the Skysurfer to keep up, and the drain increased on me a bit, but its Aether storage kept filling up from the input of eighteen people. We shot off across the sky, and two Complete Core Ashkhas waved at us as we passed them. Librarian Narwan kept speeding up, and after only a minute had started to seriously outpace us.

I was able to keep track of him, though, so I just gamely pushed on. *The Skysurfer is definitely not built for speed.* I laughed inside. *I'm pretty certain I could run faster than this.*

"*Why are you going so slow?*" Sia asked from his perch on the back of a chair. Knight Kaminski had pulled out all of the table pieces, two chairs, and three boxes of food to create the impression that was our storage. Each box was Inscribed like my spatial backpack, giving about six times the internal space. Only those three boxes were Inscribed; all of the others placed inside the Portable Home weren't, to save on costs. Each Inscribed box was two hundred gold, not including what it stored.

"*This is the fastest it accelerates, and we're getting close to the maximum speed too,*" I told him.

"*Bah,*" he told me, then took off. He quickly grew to his full size and blazed after Librarian Narwan. We were still inside the harbor area, climbing up to maybe forty meters in altitude, so we were still safe from sea monsters. Suddenly, Sia dove down, a sheen of Air Aether surrounding him as he speared into the water. Two seconds later, he exploded back out, Fire pushing him forward, with



a massive Sea Bass in his talons. His beak flashed downward and pecked through its skull, putting the Beast out of its misery.

*"I am hungry,"* he told us.

"Just don't make a huge mess!" I screamed at him, as he dropped the fish at the tip of the Skysurfer. The splatter got on Lilianna, who glared at him before conjuring a small wave of Water to wash the gore away from her. Sia chittered in amusement, then ripped a piece off his meal. Zimnodlot and Lammy joined him. "Uh, Kami, can you eat fish?"

*"I can, though I do not like to,"* she answered. *"It upsets my stomach and I have to use Aether to calm it down. I prefer ants, and Knight Kaminski said that she has a full crate of them for me."*

"That's great!" I told her. As I watched, a wall of Air Aether shot up from the edges of the Skysurfer, and the wind noise vanished. I could see through it easily enough, and saw Librarian Narwan turn back toward us.

He blurred, stopping right next to where I stood in the middle of the Skysurfer. "I had hoped it would be faster than this," he said softly, a frown on his face. "It will take you nearly three weeks to reach the ruins at this rate."

"How quickly can you get back?" I asked, forming a quick tunnel of Air and Ice Aether from my mouth to near his ear.

"Three days," he said. "If you were to use my Po Kong Zhi Jian it would take you seven days. I do not know how long it will take us to destroy the Dungeon, but I believe I will still beat you home."

I laughed. "I'll definitely take a month of travel in style over a week on a sword, unable to move properly."

He shook his head, a grin forming on his normally stern mouth. "I would too, but there is too much to do and not enough time to do it in." With that, he sped back up, and took his position in front of the Skysurfer. We flew together for the next hour, gradually getting up to forty kilometers per hour, which seemed to be the fastest that I could push the Skysurfer.

The others had stopped feeding Aether into the Skysurfer, as it had started to reject their attempts. Knight Kaminski and I were the only two still working, maintaining our speed and height.

Finally, another hour later, Knight Kaminski walked over. “Aiden, we are far enough away now, feel free to place the Portable Home and take a break. I will guide us for the next six hours. Use this time to set up a rotation and eat a snack. Once you have done so, return outside with your team for training. The others will get training afterwards.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. I felt her Aether slip into the Inscription, and released my own. With a wave of my hand and a surge of Aether, the Portable Home popped into existence on the back half of the Skysurfer. I grinned at my awesome gift. I went inside, and immediately noticed that it was a bit warmer. The chilly air outside didn’t bother me, but it was more comfortable in the Portable Home. “Huh.”

“Yeah, this place keeps the temperature perfect,” Milenna said. “I definitely will not tell Mom, or she will try to buy it from you incessantly.”

“Yes, please keep this place a secret,” I said. “I don’t particularly want to be plundered.” Jon snorted, and I grinned at him. “So, we’re going to need to set up a watch routine, since someone needs to be steering the Skysurfer at all times.”

“I would rather not be alone outside,” Lilianna said.

“I feel the same,” Jamila said.

“Well, I only need two to three hours of sleep a night,” I said. “Jon, Vaya, Bridget?”

“Yeah, Core rocks!” Jon said, throwing his pinky and pointer finger up.

I rolled my eyes at him as he mimicked something I’d done a few times over the last year. “Yes, it does. Maintaining altitude and direction doesn’t take that much mental power, so you should be able to train a bit while doing so. Knight Kaminski is going to be training us hard over the next few weeks. I really want to have all of you reach Seed Core before we get back.”

“Is that what the small boxes with our names on them are for?” Ming asked. “They were dropped off by some Askhas porters along with several large boxes of Dungeon Cores. We packed them in our rooms, but I have not opened mine.”

“Yes,” I said. “One of the things I bargained for was resources to push you all to the next level.” Several of them started to protest, but I held up my hand. “This is not just generosity. If you, my closest friends, are stronger, I am safer, and our country is safer. We are the future of Craesti, and we will be a massive force on the battlefield once we arrive there. Stand by me, stand together, and we will all make it. I refuse to accept anything less.”

“You know that is unrealistic,” Ming stated.

“Yeah,” I sighed, “but it doesn’t mean I’m not going to push for it.”

We sat quietly for a few seconds, before Aleks stood. “I am going to grab a sheet of parchment,” she said. She quickly came back with a long sheet of parchment, then tacked it to the wall.

“Wait, what?” I said, seeing the little pointy object stuck into the indestructible surface.

“Neat, huh?” Aleks said. “I discovered that we can put things up on the wall with nearly no difficulty, even though any deliberate attack on the wall will fail. This place is amazing. Here...” She wrote out time slots for each hour for the next five days. “Now we can just put our names on the list, and rotate through who we are all working with.”

I stepped forward and wrote my name on the line six hours from now. “Knight Kaminski said she was going to steer for the next six hours, but that is it for her. Vaya, Jon, Bridget, we have training with her after we finish this, so we should take the next couple of slots. That way everyone else gets to train afterwards.”

“Got it,” Bridget said, putting her name down.

“I want a snack first,” Jon said, heading to the kitchen. “I will stand watch with you, Bridget.”

“We’ll probably just keep training,” I laughed, following him.

We ate a small snack of crackers and cheese, the rich flavors accentuated by the Earth Aether in both. “This is going to suck, isn’t it?” I asked.

“The training? Yeah, probably,” Jon said. “Not as urgent, but the war is more life-threatening, so...”

“Gotta get stronger,” I said. “The stronger we are, the less likely it is that one of us dies.”

“You know...” Jon started.

“Yeah, I know war is dangerous, and there are going to be hundreds or thousands of enemies at our level. Even if I could beat a dozen Seed Core gatherers myself right now, if there’s fifty, I’m still screwed. Together, we could stand in front of an army and defeat it, but we’d probably lose people doing so. I know, I know, it’s not realistic, you don’t need to keep hammering it in,” I growled at him, my aura leaking out and smothering Jamila, Ming, and Milenna, who’d joined us for the snack.

I took a deep breath, pulling my aura back, and said, “I’m so sorry.” I drew Jamila into a side hug, and she hugged me tighter.

“It is fine,” Ming said. “You are still new to your strength. Clan Lo generally has newly risen Seed Cores spend a month learning to keep their aura in at all times. Though that is more for the protection of children and Aether Gathering level gatherers.”

“I’ll work on that more,” I said. “Are you okay?” I asked Jamila.

“Yes,” she said. “It just surprised me. After a second I was fine, but...” She pulled me in tighter. “We will be fine. We are all strong and capable, and we still have time before we will be sent to fight. Focus on what you can do now.”

“Good point,” I said, kissing the top of her head. “Come on, Jon, it’s time to train.”

“Fun,” he groaned, following me out of the kitchen. We’d just been standing at the counter, munching away. Xiao and Lilianna were sitting at the table, looking at a manual on Smithing and discussing it quietly when we opened the door. Bridget, Vaya, Aleks, and Lea were arranging the lounge cushions. Bridget and Vaya immediately dropped the two they were holding and joined us when I motioned at them.

Aleks gave me a bright smile and waved, then plopped down on a cushion and closed her eyes. The Aether in the room rushed toward her as she started to gather, the Center of the Universe enhancing her gathering speed immensely. A Dungeon Beast Core,

placed on an Inscription built into the main room, released a stream of unsuspected Aether into the air.

A quick glance showed me that there were four different Core receptacles around the main room. "Neat," I said. "Good thing we've got so many Cores."

"Hundreds from Bruno's Dungeon, and nearly a thousand of different Elemental Affinities in various boxes and bags," Bridget said. "I should know, I counted them as we packed up. Now, come on, I want to see what Knight Kaminski wants to teach us!"

I laughed and pushed open the door to the outside.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Knight Kaminski was holding the compass and frowning at the horizon. “Master Narwan left after we discussed your training plan.”

I heard Jon gulp. “We will give it our all,” I said, bowing to her.

“Yes, you will,” she said. “Now, come, stand in front of me.”

We strode forward, then lined up next to her. I was astounded yet again at the size the Skysurfer reached. Six meters wide was plenty of space to spread out. The six meters of free space on the front, what the Portable Home didn’t take up, was long enough that I could have run wind sprints. Well, before I advanced at least. Now, that would entail less than a second’s worth of acceleration, and turning around would require an Aether platform to push off of. I grinned at the thought.

“It is good to see that you still have a superior attitude,” Knight Kaminski said. *Oh, crud*, I thought. “First we will be working on aura control. All of you are able to suppress your aura, keeping it contained within your body. This is all that you are capable of while in the Condensation stage of gathering. Now you will learn to control and utilize your aura as a weapon and a defense.” As she said this, I felt her aura manifest around me and crush me downward.

I resisted, easily able to stand up under it, but I could feel my Aether react sluggishly when I tried to strengthen myself with it.

“When you are able to suppress another, you limit the power they can utilize,” Knight Kaminski continued. “In an army, there will be a hundred Condensation gatherers for each Core. Even for someone of your power, getting surrounded by the enemy can result in your death, unless you are able to suppress them all. Even now, you four are barely able to move, because you are not trained in using your aura yet.”

I stepped forward and felt the truth of her statement. She was two meters in front of us, barely out of reach, but it felt like I was covered in weights while back in basic training. Getting closer to her was a mistake, as the pressure seemed to double for every quarter meter that I crossed. When I reached a meter away, I was driven to my knees. I unleashed my own aura, forcibly pushing it out of me. To my left, I caught Vaya with her head bowed in my peripheral vision. “Good, Vaya, your family taught you the beginnings of aura control. Now, can you reach me? The pressure will not stop until you touch my hand,” Knight Kaminski said with a laugh in her voice.

I growled, shoving my aura out of my body. It worked, a little bit at least, and I was able to stand again. I shuffled forward, my feet unable to get all the way off the ground. Knight Kaminski’s aura seemed to focus on me, commanding me to stay still. I could feel my aura being smashed back into my skin, and when it was pushed inward enough, my ability to move vanished entirely.

I roared in my mind, grabbing my Aether and circulating it out of my skin. It didn’t want to flow, and it took entirely too much to free myself from the restriction. “Good!” Knight Kaminski said. “Your Aether is your aura. Your aura is your Aether. Connect them and understand. Only when you are truly able to move will you succeed.”

I ground my teeth, stood, and stepped toward her, only to be blown back by a small blast of Air Aether. She pushed me back three steps, drastically dropping the suppression on me. I immediately took two steps forward before being suppressed again. “Yes, the distance from you affects how effectively you can suppress someone,” Knight Kaminski said with a laugh. “When you grow strong enough, or become capable enough at manipulating your aura, you will be able to extend the range on specific targets or in specific directions. Right now, I am just controlling the volume around me, wasting strength on the space above my head and below my feet. If I was not, you would be unable to move entirely. The best way to learn how to project your aura—your Aether—around you is to resist someone else’s aura suppressing you. Now, step forward and touch my hand. I have all the time in the world to stand here.” She laughed again, her hands drifting at her side.

A wave of Ice Aether shot out of Jon, his aura almost exploding out of him as he screamed, pushing forward the two steps he needed to grab Knight Kaminski's hand and then collapse. He rolled onto his back, panting, as the rest of us tried to emulate his success.

The second person to succeed, finally figuring out whatever was the key to moving forward, was Vaya. The wave of Wood Aether seemed to bolster Bridget and I, and we both took a half step forward. I laughed, my Aether surging in response, then with a flick of my mind I pushed, a wave of Plasma, Lightning, and Fire ripping apart the suppression. At the same time, I felt a wave of Ice, Air, and something I didn't recognize, and together we stepped forward to grab both of her hands.

The release of the pressure on me caused me to jump almost three meters into the air. I landed and let my legs collapse under me. I slumped onto my back, panting as the exhaustion piled onto me like a giant blanket. After a few minutes of just languishing, I finally forced myself to my feet.

"Excellent," Knight Kaminski said. "You all have succeeded at pushing against the Aether suppression of a Constructed Core-level gatherer. If I was to truly attack you, you would still be unable to move, but progressing is better than stagnating. Now, form back up and undergo a bit stronger of a suppression."

The pressure pushing against my shoulders redoubled, and only a stronger push of my Aether, rebuffing the utter compression of Knight Kaminski's aura, let me still take a couple of steps toward her. Her Aether pressed against me, trying to throw me farther back, but I cut the resistance with a feeling of peace from Earth and Metal Aether. I surrounded myself with my own strength, and pushed against the force that Knight Kaminski was trying to force me down with. Her aura felt immense, and my ability to rebuff it seemed more about redirecting the force she was exerting versus actually forcefully pushing against her aura.

After a few minutes, I was able to completely redirect her aura and stand up. I felt it focus on me, but I had practiced how to appear as the surrounding aura, and felt its pressure vanish against



my shoulders' surface. My steps forward felt constrained, but I was able to slowly push my way forward. Each tiny step increased the pressure on me, but I was able to sluice it off. I couldn't actually take steps forward, but each shuffle of my feet moved me the tiniest fraction of a meter closer to Knight Kaminski's hands.

For the second time, I barely touched her fingers, and then was immediately thrown backward. I rolled with the force, coming to my feet facing Knight Kaminski. I roared, throwing my aura, myself, against her suppression before crashing into her capability and competing with the utterly ridiculous amount of force required to push through it.

I forced my way through the restrictions of her aura, feeling her force as she redirected my own. I threw my will against her, breaking apart her resistance and shattering the wall that tried to hold me in place. The distance I'd been thrown made it much simpler, as I was only a few centimeters from the front edge of the Skysurfer. *Wow, Knight Kaminski is powerful*, I thought before grinding my teeth and throwing my left leg forward a half step. *Restricting all four of us, flying the Skysurfer, and preventing the others from being affected. I thought the difference from Complete Condensation to Seed Core was huge, but this gap of power feels immense.*

We continued for nearly an hour. Bridget was the first to fall, twenty minutes in, and not get back up. She lay in the middle of the training area, groaning, her hands on her head. Vaya went to check on her, but Knight Kaminski said, "She is fine. Using your aura takes Geist, and overdrawing it can cause headaches. Only time will allow you to feel better, and by doing so your ability to use Geist will be slightly stronger."

"Is that one reason you are pushing us this hard?" I asked, panting as I pushed forward another step.

"One of many," she answered. "There are many people who will be attempting to have you assassinated, and I need you to be stronger so that I do not have to devote as much time and attention to protecting you. Princess Aleksandra is tying herself to you, so your strength also protects her. Keeping the knowledge inside your

head safe, both the Legacy and what came from your previous world, is incredibly important. All of these reasons push me to make you stronger, with the strongest foundation we can possibly set up. Now, move!”

Vaya roared, taking four steps in a row to poke Knight Kaminski in the gut before being blown backward again. “I will be strong enough too,” she said, standing back up.

Jon was the next to collapse, two minutes later. I could vaguely feel the aura around him change, going from a suppression to an exclusion to keep him safe. I marveled yet again at Knight Kaminski’s control and strength. Vaya and I lasted for thirty more minutes, with her crumpling to the ground only about thirty seconds before I did.

I tried to stay upright, but my vision narrowed into a single, lighted dot, and I lost all control of my body. A few seconds after I collapsed, I managed to move my hands to my temples, squeezing on them as the worst migraine of my life bloomed.

“Amazing,” Knight Kaminski said. “No one I have ever used this technique with has lasted that long at your tier. The Stairway of Determination has enhanced you immensely. Now, rest here until you can stand, then return inside. Send the others out, including Miss Samantha, for their training.”

I didn’t even bother trying to answer, though I noticed that Bridget was staggering to her feet. I just concentrated on breathing, letting the pain in my head flow through me without stopping to concentrate on it. I tried to use Aether to soothe myself, but it didn’t do anything. *Geist really is something completely different, I thought, and I definitely need more of it. Resisting the suppression of other, higher-tier gatherers will be super important on a battlefield, and if I grow strong enough to protect the people around me, that could turn the tide of a battle. Ow, stupid head.*

It took me nearly ten minutes to get back up, my migraine finally dropping to “very bad” from the “atrocious” point it had been. I slowly got to my feet, then helped Vaya to hers as she tried to get her feet under her. Together, we slowly limped back to the Portable Home.

I opened the door, and we stumbled inside.

“Light!” Xiao exclaimed, “if training is that bad, are we sure we want to do it?”

“It’s your turn,” I said. “Everyone else is supposed to go for training. That includes Sam.”

“She’s in the Inscription room,” Milenna said. “I will get her.”

“I will knock on doors to inform everyone else,” Lilianna said.

“Thanks,” I said, turning toward my bedroom. Vaya was still leaning on my shoulder, and we both collapsed into my bed. I was asleep before my head hit my pillow.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I woke up groggy, but the migraine that had dominated my thoughts before collapsing was gone. I shifted slightly, about to roll over and stand up when I realized that Vaya was still sleeping on my shoulder. Unfortunately, she stirred just after I did. "Sorry," I whispered, worried she'd still be in pain.

"It is fine," she said, then yawned hard enough I thought I heard her jaw crack.

Yawns being contagious, I immediately began one as well. Once I had my face under control, I asked her, "Do you feel that?"

She gave me a confused look. "No?" she responded.

"Huh," I said. "I can feel the others outside, gathering I think. It's hazy instead of clear, like seeing through cloudy glass."

"I cannot," she said. "I am hungry, though."

*"It is about time you woke up,"* Sia said, then he chirped a laugh, letting me realize that he'd been in the room the whole time. *"Why did you stumble in here? Drinking already?"*

"No," I groaned at him. "Training with Knight Kaminski. What have you been up to?"

*"Sleeping,"* he replied, *"until someone woke me with their snoring."*

Vaya laughed softly, poking me in the side.

*"I was talking about both of you,"* Sia said smugly, then squawked when she threw a pillow at him. He chirped another laugh, then flew toward the door. The door opened for him before he reached it, without him using his Aether as a telekinetic hand.

"Nifty," I said. "Automatic doorways."

Vaya turned over and stood from the side of the bed, then flipped me off the other. I thumped to the floor and got to my feet. "Fine, fine, let's get food."

We left my room to find Jon sitting at the table, dejectedly poking at a book instead of reading it, his head resting on his left hand. The expression of pain and misery on his face let me know he hadn't recovered from our training session yet.

Vaya hurried over to him and put her hand on his shoulder. "Do not bother," Jon whispered. "Jamila could not help earlier either. It is as Knight Kaminski said. I just need time to recover."

"You need sleep," she told him. "It helped us, and it will help you. Now, up and to your room, or I will have Aiden drag you."

Jon nodded, the motion causing his eyes to squint harder, then he carefully stood and shuffled out of the room.

"Well, I guess it's good to know that sleeping is a good way to recover Geist," I told her.

"Can you sense how much you have?" she asked.

I tried to feel inside my own head, but didn't find anything. "Nope," I said with a frown. "That's not useful."

"I will collect some food for us," Vaya told me. "You look into the Legacy and find something on gathering Geist. I want to get better with it as well as Aether."

"Yes, ma'am," I said with a grin. She shook her head at me and walked toward the kitchen. I watched her leave, then plopped down on a lounge cushion.

It took some digging, but I found the Geist techniques before Vaya returned. They were in the Core-level gathering techniques knowledge stone. As when I examined the core runes, I was scanned by the door and limited in what I could see.

There were dozens of options, from extremely simple techniques used to bring someone's Geist levels up to a minimum standard, to tempering techniques where you used the Geist your brain and spirit naturally developed to forcibly enhance your meridians. "Huh, that's what I'm talking about," I said, picking up a jade tablet and letting the knowledge of the Enhanced Natural Geist Growth Technique enter my mind. Its description stated, "The best technique for midlevel Geist cultivators to grow their capabilities without strain, creating a solid foundation for future advancement, both in Geist and Aether capabilities."

I laughed as I pondered the technique. “Okay, set up an Aether circuit in my head, then move the Geist that naturally rests in my brain along it in a spiral,” I told myself, “and once that is set up, do mentally challenging activities. Seems simple enough. The author of this jade recommends math puzzles. I could do Alchemy too, I guess, but I’d be worried about wasting ingredients if I got distracted.” I brightened. “I know, I can teach people Latin Squares or Sudoku. I wonder if they have something similar here? Could probably play board games too. Anything that stimulates the mind will result in the production of really tiny amounts of Geist, and the Aether circuit captures and refines it so it stays around longer. That’s so cool.”

“You are mumbling to yourself,” Vaya told me from the table.

I looked up and said, “Oh, sorry. So I found a good technique, I think, for all of us to use. Well, it does require that you have enough Geist to start with, and it was in the Core area of the Legacy, so maybe only us four can use it? I don’t see why the others couldn’t, though Sam might not have the requisite Geist capability yet.”

“What about the Geist technique Sultah Aleahil gave you?” Vaya asked.

“I looked at it earlier, but none of us have enough Geist for it to work yet,” I said with a shrug. “So hopefully this technique will get us there.”

“Well, what is the technique?” Bridget asked.

I shrugged, then gestured in front of me. I formed the Aether circuit in midair, then said, “You need to form this in your brain, so the runic structures here and here are tiny.” I pointed to either end of the oval-shaped Aether flow, where a series of seven runes anchored it. “Then you’ll have to take Geist and wrap it around like this.”

I combined Fire and Air into Joy Aether, letting the bright-pink Aether be my visual cue that it was supposed to be Geist, and twined it around the Aether circuit I had floating. “Once you’ve got this stable, you need to do something that is mentally challenging.”

“That seems ... difficult,” Vaya said, her lips tight as she concentrated on the image I had created. “Just maintaining this

technique will be challenging at first.”

“That might count, honestly,” I said with a shrug. “The jade recommended math puzzles, and I know a couple different logic puzzles that might be fun to learn.”

“My village had some good puzzles too,” Bridget said. “Though they were more to help the farmers with thinking about planting their crops.”

“Neat,” I said, giving her a grin.

“I need some paper to show it,” Bridget said, hopping to her feet and brushing the crumbs from her sandwich off her pants.

I felt a small surge of Aether, and every bit of food that touched the ground vanished in a swirl of it. *Autocleaning, nice!* I mentally prodded the Portable Home, and got a feeling that it was about two-thirds full in its Aether tank. *I'll need to drop a Beast Core into the charging port soon.*

Bridget hurried to her room, then came back and sat down. She quickly traced out a grid, then wrote numbers to the left and above it. “Each number tells you how many squares in each row or column need to be filled in,” she explained after finishing. “And only that many can be filled in.”

“Picture square!” Vaya exclaimed, then her face fell. “I used to do these with my mom, before she got too busy for me.”

I pulled her into a hug. “Well, now we can do them together.” I looked at Bridget. “May I use this one to try out the technique?”

“Go ahead,” she answered. “I have plenty of paper to make more.”

“Why give it up though?”

“I only use it to practice some Inscriptions before actually creating them. I think this will be a better use of the paper,” she said.

“I have some as well, and I’m sure the others do too,” I said. “Thank you for offering.”

“Well, go on,” she said. “Try out the technique and let us know how it works!”

Vaya rubbed my back and said, “I will be watching, just in case.”

“Sure,” I laughed, “thanks. I don’t think it’ll be necessary, but it’s still nice to know.” I smiled at them both, then dropped into my center. With a few mental adjustments, my perception moved from my chest to my head and encompassed it utterly. I’d been doing this for nearly a year now, and it still amazed me that I could see my body like it was a model, or one of those exhibits at a museum. I traced the different parts of my brain, following the bumps and creases. I could feel my synapses firing off, my perception somehow looking at my perception. *Trippy thought*, I giggled to myself, then mentally shook my head. *Focus*.

I pulled a strand of Aether from my center, naturally formed from a balance of Elements equal to my Affinities, and formed the circuit, creating the oval of Aether that mapped to the inside of my skull minus a centimeter, then peeled off pieces to create the runes. They were pretty complicated, taking me several minutes to form correctly. Twice I messed up, a tiny surge of Aether springing from them that made my head spin for a second. *Don’t like messing with my brain*, I thought after the second failure. *Hopefully this is worth it*.

After finally getting the Aether portion of the technique set up, I was ready to start on the Geist piece. I reached into the center of my brain, where the Enhanced Natural Geist Growth Technique said I would find the pool of mental energy. It took another minute to find the subtle off-white energy blending in to how I perceived the brain matter around it. My imaginary fingers pinched the Geist and gently stretched it out of the pool. I then wound the thin streamer around the Aether circuit and carefully pulled more to finish the technique.

It took about a third of the Geist in my mind to create a long-enough spiral to fully circle my brain and return to the pool. Once ready, I opened my eyes and looked at the picture square puzzle. It hurt to think and the world felt like it was wrapped in cotton wool. “Ugh,” I groaned for a second. “Concentrating is hard. I definitely wouldn’t want to do Alchemy while using this.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Vaya asked, healing Aether flowing into me from her without finding purchase.

“Yeah,” I said, my eyes squinched only half open. “Just a headache and brain fog.” She patted my shoulder, and I bent over



the puzzle. I worked through it, eventually creating a set of back and forth lines down the page like alternating rows of crops. It took me at least four times longer than it should have to work my way through the fairly simple problem. I did notice the extra Geist the technique generated, though it kept getting swept into the spiral, so my thinking ability didn't get any better.

After finishing the puzzle, I checked my Geist pool, and saw that it was a tiny bit larger. "So, did it work?" Bridget asked, leaning in to look at the paper.

"Yeah, but it's not a large increase," I said. "Maybe one percent. Maybe. It was enough that I could tell my Geist increased, but it will take a long time to get much stronger with this technique."

"Were any of the others better?" Vaya asked.

"Again, maybe," I said. "Several of the others would have helped at the top of the Stairway of Determination, so if we can go to the Weltreich at some point to use their equivalent we'd get better results. There were a few techniques I couldn't look at, so maybe once we get enough Geist, or hit a threshold of capability with it, or something, we'll have access to better ones. For now, I think this is the best one to use. It just sucks, well, like most tempering or gathering techniques do."

Vaya shook her head while Bridget snorted at that. "Well, let's draw out a couple of puzzles for each other and try out this technique some more."

"Oh, I can teach you both a number game from Earth," I said. I drew a nine-by-nine grid, then thought back to when I played Sudoku all the time at the Academy as mental stress relief. My memory was still hazy, but I could bring up the occasional perfect glimpse, giving me a single beginner puzzle to show. I wrote the initial numbers, glad yet again that Craesti used a base-ten number system. I showed it to the girls, then tore the paper in half to repeat the puzzle for Bridget. I explained the rules.

"Huh, that is a bit more complicated than Elements In A Row," Vaya said. "It is played with an eight-by-eight grid, and each row and column can only have each Element represented once."

I thought for a second. “Yup, very similar. Each Sudoku puzzle has a single unique solution, and I think an Elements In A Row puzzle might not. Still a good challenge.”

“There is also the Unique Elements Puzzle,” Bridget said. “It is also on an eight-by-eight grid. You have to put each Element on the grid without overlapping in any direction, including diagonally.”

“Oh, that’s the eight queens problem from chess,” I said, excited. “I know how to do that. Neat!”

We talked for a few more minutes about different puzzles, then both Bridget and I went to our rooms to get more paper. I wrote out a dozen different Sudoku puzzles, Vaya wrote a couple Elements In A Row she remembered, and then Bridget put together twenty Unique Elements Puzzles. Once ready, we swapped with each other. I ended up with a Unique Elements Puzzle, but I didn’t start gathering yet. I watched as Bridget and Vaya both set up the new technique, instructing them on a few missteps that they made and ensuring that they were stable.

Once both of the girls were working on their respective puzzles, obviously moving slowly and carefully as their headaches exploded on them, I dove back into my center to create the Aether circuit yet again.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two hours of puzzles and headaches had me sitting on a lounge cushion with my head in my hands. “What have you been up to?” Jamila asked, crouching next to me.

“Gathering Geist,” I whispered, then looked her over. “You?”

“Body weight calisthenics under Knight Kaminski’s direction,” she said, gesturing to the sweat-plastered clothes she had on, “and the technique that makes you feel like you are ten times heavier than you are. She had us use Aether to strengthen our muscles the entire time, which is the only reason that I can still stand up.”

“May I?” I asked. At her nod, I swept my Aether through her, and felt a resonance from almost all of her. “You are very close to advancing.”

“I took one of the pills you bartered for,” she said with a cute blush, “and it smoothed out and enhanced my center and meridians. Now I only have to finish working on my muscles and a few bones that I did not get right during Threshold.”

“Good,” I said. “I’m glad you’re getting stronger, so you’ll be able to heal better.”

“Yup,” she said, smiling brightly. “I have many questions that I need to ask Counselor Stojka about healing techniques. I do not have any for the Core level.”

“Great,” I said, pulling her into a hug.

“I should go get cleaned up,” she said, her voice muffled from where her mouth was near my robe.

I released her, and we both stood up. I saw Lilianna and Milenna stagger through the doorway into the common room they shared, Xiao was leaning on his sheathed sword as a cane, and Lea was helping Ming stand as they limped through the main door.

“Knight Aiden, bring your team out here, please,” Knight Kaminski’s voice echoed in the room.

“I will get Jon,” Bridget said.

I helped Vaya stand from where she was lying across two cushions. “This trip is going to be as bad as the one here, isn’t it?” Vaya asked.

“Hey, contraction,” I laughed, and she shook her head. “Yeah, probably. I’ll take it, though, if it keeps us alive in the war.”

“Me too,” she whispered, and we strolled arm in arm out the door. I let her go through first, as we didn’t fit side-by-side.

Outside, we found Knight Kaminski talking quietly with Samantha, walking her through the steps of the Eight-by-Eight Gathering Technique. She was trying to finish the third set, but was messing up the twenty-third movement, which was an awkward single-leg crouch with a sweeping motion of the left hand while the right hand and right leg were pushed straight out behind you. The angle between the left sweep and right leg had to be just over one hundred degrees, but the natural motion was to make it about ninety instead. It had taken me quite a few tries to get that through my thick skull.

“Knight Aiden,” Knight Kaminski said, then she frowned. “Hmm, you are more drained than I expected.”

“Uh, I found a Geist gathering technique from the Legacy, and taught it to Vaya and Bridget,” I told her.

“Please teach it to me,” she said.

“Me too,” Jon said brightly, stepping up next to me with a spring in his step. “That nap was great, thanks, Aiden.” His deliberately chipper attitude made me glare at him. His grin grew wider, then he yelped.

“Aiden is not the only one with a headache,” Bridget growled, and mimed pinching him again.

“Sorry,” he told me.

“Now that that is over,” Knight Kaminski said. “Aiden?”

I quickly demonstrated the circuit and spiral design, and explained the need for mental stimulation.

“It takes a lot out of you, and it is hard to think while using it,” Vaya added. “So we have been using puzzles.”

“I really like the Sudoku game,” Bridget said.

“You are unable to continue the training from before, which was my plan,” Knight Kaminski said with a frown. She brightened after a second and nodded sharply. “Instead, I will work with each of you individually on a single technique. Knight Aiden, you are first. Vaya, assist Samantha in her attempts.”

“Yes, Knight Kaminski,” Vaya said. “Bridget, come with me and demonstrate, please.”

Vaya and Bridget broke off and walked over to Sam, who had just stumbled on the same movement as before. Jon walked to the end of the Skysurfer and watched Sia and Zimnodlot as they flew in front of us.

“Your Dancing Northern Wind Technique should allow you to continuously run on the Air, and with some advancement to fly directly with wind currents,” Knight Kaminski said.

“Yes, ma’am,” I responded. “But I have only used it for a few steps at a time.”

“Good, then you will practice. Run two hundred laps around the Skysurfer. For each time you have to step on it, add ten laps.” I nodded, then glanced down. “Yes, even the steps to get off the Skysurfer the first time,” she added with a smirk.

“Okay,” I said, then leapt off the side, clearing the two meters easily. As I started to come down, I formed an Air platform under my left foot, then pushed off. I circulated my Aether in the way the technique had taught me, creating a pulling force in front of my legs and a pushing force behind while solidifying the Air underneath my feet. I ran forward, nearly jumping off each platform to clear two to three meters with a single step. *It'll take me less than twenty steps to circle the Skysurfer,* I thought, *I can do this easily.*

Each step increased the Aether cost, though. Even my prodigious reserves started to drain as I worked on my third lap. I glanced at the Skysurfer and saw Jon standing on a chunk of Ice. He levitated for a second, sliding backward toward the Portable Home, then dropped down. Knight Kaminski spoke to him quietly, her hands gesturing as she described something. Vaya and Bridget were still working with Sam, leaving me alone in the air around the flying surfboard.

*“You are not a bird,”* Sia told me, flying up next to me.

“Nope,” I said, my next step vaulting me forward almost four meters as I tried to outmuscle my problem.

*“Then why are you in the sky without something to stand on?”* Sia asked.

“My Dancing Northern Wind Technique should let me run indefinitely at this stage,” I said, “and Knight Kaminski wants me to figure it out.” Another platform, a turning jump as I cleared the front of the Skysurfer. “At this rate, though, I’ll run out of Aether before I can complete ten laps. I don’t know why this is getting harder with each step!”

Sia increased in size and flew in front of me. I landed on his back, then jumped off to create another Air platform. The cost had dropped to be negligible again. “I don’t get it!” I screamed.

“That counts! Ten extra laps!” Knight Kaminski called out to me. “Keep going, you can figure it out.”

I grumbled under my breath, then focused more on what I was doing with each step. *Okay, runes go in front, behind, and below my feet. The platforms are created just before I step down. Can I delay it slightly? Putting less lag in there should reduce Aether usage a little bit,* I thought. I tried it on the next step, only to have the Air platform break when my foot hit it.

I created another, much larger, one to land on, and caught myself with a huff of expelled breath. I stood up and winced at the drain that continuous contact was causing. “Well, I guess that’s why I can’t just do what Jon is,” I grumbled. I hopped up, this time giving the requisite amount of time for the platform to form. “Only a few milliseconds, but still, grr.”

I continued on for another lap, trying to see what was going on. *Where is the Aether going?* I thought, then looked closely at my feet, taking short steps to get a better view. After five steps, my eyes widened. *There’s a connection to the previous steps! Of course, that’s how I can use the technique to create the mist clones. Ooh, I should use Mist Aether to do that!* I sent a burst of Aether into the barely felt connection, and a human-shaped body of mist appeared at the previous step.

I laughed out loud, then, on my next step, I cut the connection. I had to consciously break it with every step, which kept the Aether consumption down. *Wow, I'm taking in more Aether than I'm expending now,* I thought. The distraction let a few connections build, and I had to sever them with a flare of my will. I noticed that a tiny bit of Geist was being spent with each cut, giving me a different limiter for my technique.

*Huh, there's got to be a different way of using this,* I thought, *or I'm going to run out of Geist before I can finish the next hundred sixty laps. Maybe only cutting it every fourth step?* I shrugged, keeping my steps long to reduce the number of platforms I had to create. I let the Aether cost build up, then sliced the lines reaching to my previous steps.

A quick calculation let me know that was slightly more efficient on Geist, and kept my Aether consumption to just below my replenishment rate. Still wasn't sustainable for hours on end, though, so I tried six steps. This made it so I was losing Aether slowly, but I figured I'd still run out of Geist first. At eight steps, though, the Aether drain was significant enough that I'd probably run out of Aether first.

I ran four laps with that pattern. *Okay, get used to this, and try to set up a gathering technique,* I thought. *I wish there was a way of gathering Geist from around us everywhere, but only very specific locations create it. Otherwise, it's only what I can make myself. I guess that's why the technique I picked is good, it increases the pool of Geist I have.*

Twenty laps in, and I finally had enough of a grasp of the intricacies of the techniques to set up a single Spiral Gathering Technique. I didn't try to make it perfect, just enough that my Aether gathering rate got closer to my Aether channeling rate. The three gathering meridians on my back, one of the many ways that I was unique in Craesti, pulsed with Aether as I pulled it in, only to have it distributed by my leg, skin, and leg bone meridians. I didn't quite reach equilibrium, but my Aether storage was high enough that I wouldn't run out before I finished the two hundred and ten laps.

I ran another fifty laps, each circuit a weird extended rectangle due to the Skysurfer's movement, just letting myself get

into the zone. Finally, everything felt automatic enough that I could examine the runic structure of Dancing Northern Wind, to see if I could figure out where the connection was being created and how to stop it.

It took another ten laps, but I finally decided to remove a series of runes that wrapped around my ankles, and the connections stopped forming. "YES!" I screamed in exultation, then sped up, blazing through the sky. "I found it! Why isn't this just shown in the base technique? I mean, at this drain, I could have run in the air forever at Circulation, instead of only now." I grumbled at the last part.

"You could have," Knight Kaminski said, running along beside me. I could see a large pillar of Aether still connecting her to the Skysurfer, but I had to shake off my fascination to focus on her. "Most people cannot regenerate anywhere near what you can just by existing, so the technique focuses on creating options instead of efficiency. Have you been using the distraction aspects of Dancing Northern Wind, or have you just been using it as a way to increase your speed?"

"Uh," I said, "just speed, ma'am."

"And have there been times when having a distraction would have been helpful?"

I thought back to both fights against the giant Crocodile, then other fights where it could easily have helped. "Yeah," I said with a defeated sigh.

"Then you need to practice creating and utilizing the mist clone aspects of your technique," she said. "Finish your laps, and then we will focus on that. You can worry about true flight later. Running on air is enough to save you in case you go overboard, and will let you fight if any Beasts try to make us a meal. Go." She gestured to the side.

I nodded, then took off, falling back into the zone with my new technique and letting the next twenty minutes or so fly by. Every step, I tweaked the rune placement a tiny bit, the removal of the connection runes changing the overall flow enough that I needed to



reoptimize it. Finally, I completed the two hundred and tenth lap, then guided my steps to land on the Skysurfer next to Knight Kaminski.

I dropped to my knees, panting, and shook my head. *That took more out of me than I thought it did*, I thought, while waiting for her to finish instructing Bridget on an aspect of her movement technique.

“You need to be able to focus all of your movement,” Knight Kaminski told Bridget. “You are utilizing the straight-line speed of Arrows’ Flight well, but you should be able to put all of your momentum into a single strike as well.”

“I am sorry, Knight Kaminski,” Bridget said, shrugging with her machetes in her hand. “I probably should have picked a different technique. I have not been able to make it work with these. It really wants a spear or a lance.”

“Then adapt it slightly,” Knight Kaminski said. “Try to change the attack into a slash instead of a stab. Show me the runes again, and let us see if we can figure this out.”

Bridget nodded, then two dozen runes appeared in front of her. They glittered purple, made out of Ice Aether. “May I?” I asked, and Bridget nodded. I looked over them, but only understood half of it.

“These here,” Knight Kaminski said, and a ribbon of light-blue Air Aether circled five runes in the latter two-thirds of the sequence. “I believe these are what controls the final impact.”

“Those three are from Aether Blast,” I said, pointing at the first three of what she indicated. “Maybe change them for Aether Slash?”

Bridget nodded. “I can try that.” She stepped back twice, then took three steps forward. Her third step blurred, clearing the four and a half meters to the back of the Skysurfer in an instant. Her right machete swung down, and a wave of Air and Ice Aether exploded out of it. The wave wasn’t very coherent, though, and dissipated after only a meter or so of travel.

“That was good,” Knight Kaminski said. “Much better than the last few attempts. Now, how can you adjust it?”

“Well, instead of using Aether Slash, I can maybe base it on my Air Blades technique? I’d have to replace all five runes with seven others, but that should be doable,” Bridget said, then projected the technique with her proposed insertion.

“This one will interfere with the rest of the technique,” Knight Kaminski said, highlighting the second to last, “and you should be able to leave it out.”

“I will try,” Bridget said. She focused for a few seconds, then streaked forward. The wave off the end of her technique was completely unstable, and detonated almost as soon as it appeared.

Knight Kaminski vanished, appearing in front of Bridget and shielding her from the blast. “Maybe not,” she said.

We spent the next thirty minutes working on Bridget’s technique. Jon was sliding around on his Ice sheet, muttering to himself and adapting it every few minutes, while Vaya danced in circles near the door to the Portable Home. Her form seemed to blur, waving about like grass in the wind, and Knight Kaminski would occasionally throw a very weak Aether Blast or Slash at her. Vaya swayed out of the way of the attacks, her movement seemingly random but still taking her out of danger into safety.

“We’re all working on different aspects of movement,” I commented when Knight Kaminski turned to give me the majority of her attention.

“Correct,” she said. “Vaya’s technique is exceptional at close combat, Jon’s will let him take multiple people flying for distance but not speed, Bridget’s technique lets her close into a fight quickly with a strong opening attack, and yours allows for rapid movement with a distraction factor, allowing you to get away from stronger opponents. You could also use it to close and fight them, though without the initial attack that Bridget’s brings. Now, let us focus on your mist clone.”

I nodded, and we went to work.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Three hours later, I staggered into the Portable Home. Jon, Lilianna, Xiao, and Lea were all collapsed on the lounge cushions. The others had come out to train about an hour after I started on my Mist Clone Technique. I'd decided to rename that portion because I could now cut it out of Dancing Northern Wind and use it with just quick dodges. Using Mist Aether, made from three parts Air to one part Water, drastically improved the fidelity of my Clone.

With Knight Kaminski's help, along with Bridget and Jon, I'd figured out how to create a layer of Mist over myself, making it harder to tell which was the Clone and which was me. This led to a series of tests against Ming and Xiao where I had to trick them with a Clone, and they tried to see through my technique. After four passes, I'd managed to finally tag Xiao. An hour's worth of work let me figure out how to add a third, and then a fourth Clone, though the Aether cost was multiplied for each additional Clone.

After the hour, I was given the direction to manipulate a single Mist Clone and have it mimic my movements, while the others went into different training regimen. It was hard to fit everyone outside, so we cleared out the table and shoved the lounge cushions against the wall to get some more space inside. Everyone was gradually exhausted, pushed to their breaking point and slightly past it.

When I plopped onto a cushion, helpfully pulled away from the wall by Jon, I had a full Core. My tiredness was more mental than physical, my body continuously healed and refreshed by my Aether even as I spent several times even my prodigious capacity in Aether. Keeping a low-level gathering technique going the entire time was great practice. I'd lost it many times, but keeping my Aether reserves high would be super important once we managed to get to the war, and gathering while channeling was a useful skill.

“You finally dropped,” Jon complained.

“Ming’s still sparring with Knight Kaminski,” I said.

“Yeah, but he had several hours of break,” Jon whined, “and he is the only one still going.”

“Sam’s piloting,” Xiao said.

“Stop raining on my pity boat,” Jon grouched.

The rest of us laughed, though it was a weak sound. “So, did you learn anything?” I asked Jon.

“Yeah. If your weird metal stick breaks, I can fly us all to safety,” he told me.

“You do not have that kind of endurance,” Lilianna said. More laughs.

“Funny,” Jon said with an eye roll. “I have had a bit of success on my Floating Ice Barge Technique. I have a long way to go to master it but I should be able to fit everyone on it if we really need to though. Uh, I would need a lot of recharge pills and powders, though, to make it to land.”

“That’s fine. Several of us could ride on Sia and Zimnodlot,” I told him. “And I can keep myself in the air indefinitely.”

“I cannot wait to reach Core,” Lilianna said. “My Flametrail Technique will finally let me fly.”

“That is awesome,” Xiao said, giving his crush a grin. “Unfortunately, my movement technique does not have a flight component to it, so I will be relying on you.”

“Come on, Xiao,” Lilianna said, struggling to her feet. “Let us go gather. I am ready for another of the Varme Ugn Pills. A few more, in addition to gathering with the Beast Cores we were given, should be enough to advance.”

Xiao hauled himself to his feet, and they both shuffled toward the green door, where he was in room one and she was in room two. Each of the common rooms had at least one box of Beast Cores available for use, and another couple boxes were stored in the Alchemy lab.

“Hey, Aiden,” Jon said once they left.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Wake me up in an hour,” he responded, then let his head flop backward. Within seconds he was snoring.

“You know, that’s a great idea,” I said, then conked out myself.

I woke up to a kiss. I blinked my eyes open to see Vaya kneeling next to me. “Hey, you,” I said, a giant smile on my face.

“Wake up time, sleepy head,” Vaya told me. “It is our turn to take a watch. Samantha is ready to be done with her time piloting.”

“Got it,” I said, standing up and stretching. I took her hand, and we walked out the door together. “Hey, Sam, we’ll take over from here.”

“Oh, good,” she said. “I don’t know how you do it, keeping channeling for hours at a time. My meridians hurt.”

“They are like muscles, the more you use them, the stronger they get,” Vaya said, taking the other girl by the arm. I saw a flare of green around their arms, and Sam straightened a bit from her slump.

“Thanks,” Sam said, “I didn’t know you could heal meridian strain.”

“Only a bit,” Vaya said with a shrug. “Jamila can do more, but rest is still your best option right now.”

“Oh, yeah, sleep is good,” Sam said. She looked at me. “Can we talk sometime?”

I nodded. “Of course,” I said. “But not right now.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, then turned and walked off.

“I will control the Skysurfer,” Vaya said. “Can you keep an eye on our surroundings?”

“Can do,” I said. “I was going to ask you to anyway. I need to rest my leg meridians too.”

Vaya reached over and grabbed my shoulder. A sweeping feel of her Life and Healing Aether, made from various mixes of Water, Wood, Earth, and Metal, ran through me, and many of my tiny aches vanished. “Do not make me have to force healing,” Vaya grumbled.

“Sorry. I should have asked earlier,” I said.

“Good. Now, what are you going to do about Miss Samantha?” Vaya asked.

I looked over and saw she was gone, and we were alone outside on the Skysurfer. Sia and Zimnodlot were still flying and the only people who could possibly overhear us, though it was unlikely given their distance in front of us. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“She desires you,” Vaya said.

“I know,” I said, my hand combing through my hair, “but I don’t desire her back. I mean, she’s a great young woman, but ... Light! I don’t feel that way about her.”

“Yet,” Vaya said. “This is a very similar protest to yours about Princess Aleksandra.”

I shook my head. “No. I still don’t know how I’m going to give the three of you enough attention, care, and respect. I don’t think I am good enough for one amazing young woman, let alone all of you. Why would I try to add a fourth? Sam is latching onto me because I saved her, and that is not the best foundation for a relationship anyway.”

“Her drive to catch up to the rest of us is admirable,” Vaya said, “and her instinctive ability with Inscriptions is amazing.”

“Do you want me to try and pursue her too?” I asked. “Really?”

“We will see,” she said. “I do like her.”

“I’d be more than happy to have Ma and Pa adopt her, but she needs to be part of this world and not a slave for a lot longer before I think she’d be ready for a real relationship. She is very strong, mentally, to be able to just bounce back from her horrid experiences, but there is no way she’s not extremely fragile right now. This is not a good time for anyone to pursue her romantically,” I said.

“True, she needs recovery right now,” Vaya said.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing off into the distance behind us.

Vaya turned to look. “I do not know, but there are a lot of them, and they are closing in pretty quickly!”

*“Sia, there are things closing with us from the rear,”* I shouted mentally at my Bond.

*“We are returning now,”* he responded.

*“Good!”* I told him, then ran back to the door to the Portable Home. I threw it open. “Some kind of Beasts approaching. Get ready for a fight!” My shout echoed through the common room.

“I am ready,” Knight Kaminski said, appearing next to me while throwing on her shirt. “Help me with this.” A scale mail top was thrust into my hands, and I held it up to allow her to wriggle into it. The power of her armor was evident in the way it burned in my Aether Sight.

Ming threw open the door to the purple rooms while buckling his sword belt across his waist. Lea followed him, and he turned to help her into the armor set I’d gifted her.

The door to the outside was open, and Vaya shouted, “We have at most a minute left until they get here. There are at least fifty of whatever they are. They look like a mix of birds and people.”

“Harpies!” I shouted. “They are one of the peoples that summoned Chaos last time. Be ready to defend, but they should be intelligent. Maybe they aren’t here to fight?”

“We will give them a chance for peaceable contact,” Knight Kaminski said, “but we will also be ready if they want to fight.”

“Would it be better if you revealed your power to start with, or if you hid as a trump card?” I asked Knight Kaminski.

She thought for a second, then said, “Better to intimidate them and possibly prevent a conflict than to appear weaker and guarantee it.” She unveiled her presence, and I felt, deep in my bones, that I could not defeat her. She took a step and moved to the other end of the Skysurfer, then she jumped into the air above us.

“I do not think this will end well,” Jamila said. “I feel uneasy.”

“I’ll protect you,” I told her. I pulled out my trisula and growled toward the incoming Harpies. “No one will hurt my friends.”

Knight Kaminski’s aura exploded out of her, and for a second I felt like I was suffocating. The initial impact dropped away quickly, and I pushed the rest off with my own aura. “Greetings and welcome,” Knight Kaminski said, her voice echoing across the

distance to the oncoming swarm. “If you come in peace, we welcome the opportunity to meet new people. Be warned, we will defend ourselves if you desire war.”

An answering aura, nearly as strong as Knight Kaminski’s, flared out from the foremost Harpy. He looked older, with gray-tinged feathers coming out of the scalp of his human-like head. The Harpy’s eyes were closer together than a human’s, and his mouth was a hooked beak like a vulture’s. His wings extended out from his torso nearly three meters in each direction, and ended in a three-fingered hand with a wicked claw on each digit.

I scanned through the Harpies and saw that nearly all of them were using some type of Air technique to increase their lift. Most were near the peak of Condensation, with six in Seed Core, one in Foundation Core, and the leader, either Complete or Perfect Core, I wasn’t sure.

The leader cocked his head sideways and cawed, and my gift of tongues triggered again. “M’Zee? No, you are too thick. What are you? Cah, no matter, your blood will satiate Ozomene, and she will reward us with power. Kill them!”

“They’re going to attack!” I yelled up to Knight Kaminski, then I jumped into the air. I created a platform under my right foot, channeling a Fireball through the Bond mark in my center to my right arm and trisula, letting it improve the power with its Inscription. The Fireball came out blue, though I could also see the red of the Fire Aether inside it, and I could feel the heat coming off it.

Before I could throw it, though, a massive slash of Wind Aether formed from the Harpy leader and shot out at us. It was big enough to cover Knight Kaminski, myself, and the entirety of the Skysurfer. Knight Kaminski threw her hands out, and hundreds of Metal Spikes formed and exploded like the pellets of a shotgun, blowing apart the attack.

My Fireball streaked in as I aimed it at a gap between the other attacks. A Complete Condensation Harpy at the bottom of their formation was my target. It cawed, a cone of Sound Aether streaking into my attack in an attempt to block. My Fireball blew through the defense like it wasn’t there, then impacted the target. It detonated,



the unstable runes dumping all of the Aether in it instantly. Two Harpies tumbled from the sky.

The rest of the Harpies started to chant. “Kill, kill, blood for our Ozomene, marrow for our brood!” Dozens of attacks rained down on us.

“*I am coming now!*” Sia said, and I saw him dive from above. He grew, wings extending until they were eight meters long each, carrying his three-meter-wide body. Sia was enormous and terrifying. He plunged through the Harpy flock, whose eyes were all on their prey, and fired off a Flame Wave. In his talons, he crushed the Foundation Core Harpy.

She screeched and flexed, ripping his claws out of her, but one of her wings was broken. Sia’s beak flashed down to bite her. She screamed, using the same Sound Cone, only this time it knocked Sia’s head back. With a twist, he threw her, then dove again to gain speed.

I glanced down and saw Jon, Kami, and Lilianna focusing on defense. Jon had streamers of Ice extending from his shield, giving him a nearly three-meter-diameter circle to block with. Lilianna had dozens of leaves floating around her, each one rushing out to slice apart an attack before it could strike the others. Kami grew to four meters tall, her armor extending over her body as she stood in front of Vaya, Bridget, and Milenna.

Ming and Xiao were sending out intricate Aether Slashes from their swords. Each cut and swing changed the angle, spin, and composition of the Aether attacks, and any Harpy that failed to dodge risked being cut in two. Bridget was corralling the flock, sending Wind Gusts spiraling around to keep the Harpies in a group, while Vaya had grown five-meter-long Vine Tentacles that snapped at any Harpy that got too close.

That moment of distraction, though, cost me. One of the Seed Core Harpies’ talons pierced through my shoulder and yanked me off the platform I’d been standing on. It tried to peck my brains out, but my circlet’s shield stopped it. “Let go of me,” I growled, grabbing its leg with my uninjured arm. With a yank, I snapped the leg. *Whoa, that broke easy*, I thought.

The man screamed, Sound pounding me while I held on to its crippled limb. My other hand spasmed and my trisula started to fall. A quick twist of Metal Aether brought it back to me, but I couldn't grip it while I had a bird in my shoulder. With a twist and an application of internal Aether, I got the claws out of me, and realized that we were falling.

I threw my Aether into Dancing Northern Wind and rotated so the Harpy was below me. It took four platforms shattering before I managed to make one able to hold our combined weight. Of course, the Harpy took the brunt of the impacts, though they didn't seem to do much to him. "I will eat your bones," he said, spitting in my face, and three Air Blades formed in front of my eyes.

I released my aura and created a dozen Fire Blasts to knock aside the Air Blades. My aura was stronger, thicker than his, and caused his attacks to slow down. My left hand regained its function, and I used it to punch the birdbrain in the chest. Forceful Punch formed instinctively, and the Harpy nearly exploded as my Aether shattered his body.

*Light!* I thought as I glanced into my center, *I'm down at least a third of my Aether. That Beast's attacks were hard to defend against. No time, more to fight.*

The battle had moved past me, and I sprinted toward the others. A massive wave of Air Aether, coordinated between the four Seed Core Harpies, swept onto the Skysurfer, buffeting Jon and Kami's defenses. Six Harpies sped through the gaps created. Four were cut down almost immediately, Ming, Xiao, and Aleks showing why they placed so high in the tournament. Another tried to attack Lampart, only to get eaten.

The final one, though, grabbed Milenna and threw her into the air. It didn't live to attack her again, but she fell screaming off the side of the Skysurfer.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Milenna!” I screamed, and I heard Lilianna and Aleks at the same time. I jumped, flipping around, and created a platform under my feet. In my panic, I dumped a massive amount of Aether into it, and when I leapt off, throwing myself toward the falling girl, a gush of Air shoved me twice as fast as I was expecting.

One of the swooping Harpies tried to interpose themselves on my flight, but I cut it apart with a Plasma Slash before it could get between me and Milenna. The swing, though, caused me to spin, so that I slammed into her with my back instead of catching her.

Milenna’s arms wrapped around my chest, and she yelled, “Now what?”

“Hold on tight!” I bellowed, throwing my arms out to spin us, then I formed two cones of Fire and blew them out of my feet. *Gotta slow us down or she’ll get hurt!* I thought. The attempted rocket jets didn’t do enough, so I dropped them after a second. I used Dancing Northern Wind to make another platform under us, only to crash through it immediately.

Six more brought us to a stop, though my ribs felt squished from Milenna’s death grip. “Look out!” she exclaimed, and I jumped off the last platform. A massive tentacle, easily thirty meters long, slapped through the area where we had been. I looked down to see a Kraken, its baleful eye glaring at me from the water.

The Beast’s aura tried to stifle my ability to move, but the distance gave me enough of a buffer to dodge the return strike as I jumped upwards. It screamed, the air shattering in front of the sound, but Milenna quickly formed an Air shield that blunted its effects. My ear drums still burst, and I’m sure she was in even more pain. The world was silent for a second, but my hearing popped back into existence to catch Milenna whimpering.

Above us, I could see that the others were being bombarded by long-range Aether attacks, and having trouble returning fire. There were just too many Harpies, even as Sia swept through them again. Zimnodlot was perched on Jon's shoulder now, assisting with holding the shield. Zim's wing was bleeding, though Jamila was feeding Aether into him to restore it.

"Cover my back!" I told Milenna, then leapt again past the Skysurfer. Two of the Seed Core Harpies turned toward us, while the Foundation Core was chasing after Sia.

"Stop fighting like you're still in Condensation!" Knight Kaminski commanded us as she dodged a blade of Air that was easily the sharpest thing I'd felt to that point. Of course, she immediately put that thought to bed with her return slash, the Metal Aether viscerally slicing apart the sky. The amount of Aether they were both outputting with each attack would have been enough to cause my projection meridians to shatter if I tried it, and I would drain myself dry trying to keep up.

I stopped in midair, a dozen meters away from the Harpy flock. Milenna kept up her shield of Air, mixing in Ice and Water to create a V shape. It broke apart two Air Blades from the Seed Core Beasts attacking us. They were winging toward us, with only a few seconds before they crashed into the shield. *Fight like I'm Core*, I thought, then formed the runes for Forceful Punch two meters away from me.

I punched forward, and the runes mimicked my motion, exploding into the frontmost Harpy. With a thought, a dozen Plasma Blasts formed and shot into the same guy, and he screeched as his wings burned. Sound rippled from him, smashing apart the rest of the blasts before they reached him.

Of course, I wasn't the only one who could create techniques at range, and I saw the Aether streams from both of them enveloping us. I slashed my right hand, Plasma arcing off it to break apart their techniques before they finished forming. *Being able to see Aether is such a cheat*, I thought as my left hand sent out a wave of Lightning. *Turn to the dark side, we have cookies!*

The Seed Core Harpies in front of me dodged to either side. I followed the one to my left, my Lightning beating against its Aether Shield as it tried to retaliate. I felt its aura fluctuate, and then Milenna sent an Ice Spike into it. With a squawk, its Shield collapsed, and it cooked.

Milenna's distraction, fatal as it was to that Harpy, let the other one get an attack through. I shifted before it hit, letting the Air Slash rip through my armor and cut into my stomach to keep it from cutting off Milenna's arm. The enemy's Air Aether savaged my flesh, trying to cut deeper in. I grit my teeth against the pain, cycling Aether to that area. My Aether was denser, stronger than the Harpy's, and the attacking force was pushed out of me and dissolved. A small spurt of blood shot out of my gut, then the wound sealed itself.

I growled, quickly forming a Wrath of the Lightning Herald, and blasted the Harpy out of the sky. It was thrown backward and up, then it dropped. It twitched weakly, but didn't move beyond that. As it fell, a tentacle from the Primordial below us wrapped around its body, moving faster than I could comprehend.

I turned toward the rest of the group, ready to rush to their assistance, only to find Knight Kaminski ripping apart the remaining Condensation-level Harpies. Sia led the Foundation Core enemy in front of the others, who met her with a withering wall of firepower. Vaya's vine tentacles grabbed her, and though she broke through nearly immediately, the forcible jerk startled her and let Sia turn around.

Jon, Bridget, and Zimnodlot sent a combined Ice Air Blade into the distracted Harpy, while Kami and Lampart blasted it with Earth and Wood Spike respectively. The others contributed Aether Slashes and Blasts of various Elements, and her defenses were immediately overwhelmed. Sia finished off the Harpy with a Fireball that made mine look puny.

I sprinted for the Skysurfer, only for a bellow from below to shatter my Dancing Northern Wind Technique. We dropped for a second, as I tried to create new platforms only for them to be destabilized by the reverberating Sound. Milenna was trying to push against it, but fighting a Primordial was futile.

The Primordial's roar stopped after three seconds, and I was able to finally make progress toward the Skysurfer. I glanced down to see a forest of tentacles, many reaching higher than I was. The falling Harpies were grabbed and dragged under. "Throw the Beast the bodies!" I screamed. "All of them. Bribe it!"

I jumped one last time, and we landed on the flying device with a roll. "Hold on!" Knight Kaminski shouted, and I saw a flood of Aether from her surround the Skysurfer and grab onto it. With a lurch, we exploded forward, moving nearly ten times as fast as it normally could. Two tentacles swept through the area we had vacated. They wrapped around the bodies thrown overboard, bringing them down to a mouth that I didn't want to see. *I'm going to have nightmares forever*, I thought with a shudder.

Knight Kaminski could only sustain her movement technique for a few minutes, but we left the Kraken far behind as it feasted on our enemies. "We are safer now," she said, then collapsed.

Jamila was at her side in an instant. "She's just exhausted," she said after a quick check. "Help me get her inside her room?" Jamila picked up our unconscious mentor and gestured at the door.

I nodded, then rushed inside to open the door to Knight Kaminski's room, since no one else could. Jamila placed her on the bed, then told me to shoo. I went back to the front room to find everyone but Aleks and Sam collapsed on the lounge chairs, three Beast Cores discharging Aether into the air. They were gathering frantically, trying to refill their nearly empty tanks in case more Harpies came. Kami, Zimnodlot, and Lampart were all munching on some Beast meat at the table, while Fluffy was chittering on Lea's leg, channeling Aether into a wound to help it close.

Outside, Sam was still steering while Aleks was providing a bit of Aether to the Skysurfer to let it keep moving. I checked my reserves and saw that I was still over a third full. "I can take over," I told them, pulling a bottle of gathering pills out of my belt. "Here, each of you take one, then go inside and recover. I'll keep watch outside."

Sia landed next to me, still three meters tall. "*We will*," he echoed.

Aleks let my Aether take over, then stepped to me and pulled me into a kiss. “I will be out as soon as I recover to give you time to rest too. You cannot take all of the pain on yourself.”

“Got it, babe,” I said. I looked over at Sam. “You did great, keeping the Skysurfer steady.”

“How do you deal with...” She gestured at the splotches of blood around her.

“They attacked first,” I said, “and it gets easier with time. Go, rest. You’ll be fine.”

“I just wish I could do something besides huddling behind a shield,” she said bitterly.

Aleks looked at her sharply. “We talked about this. You did what was needed, keeping us steady and moving. If you did not do so, we would have been overwhelmed much more easily. Come on.” Aleks hooked her arm in Sam’s, and they walked into the Portable Home, leaving me with Sia.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

*"I do not know if Zimnodlot and I will continue to catch fish,"* Sia said after a minute, once I'd stabilized the Skysurfer and checked our heading on the compass. We were aiming for a path thirty degrees to the left of the position the needle pointed, which showed the direct line back to Craesti City. Hopefully this would bring us to near where we had found the ruins. Once we reached the Craesti peninsula, we would search the coastline for a few days. Knight Kaminski didn't want us using too much time, so we would only have a week to find it.

"Yeah, the Kraken was scary," I said. "Fire burn it, I thought we were all dead for a second. Hopefully it didn't follow after us."

*"If it did, we can fly higher than it can reach,"* Sia said.

"True, but I doubt we could avoid its attacks," I countered. "I bet it has really strong Water attacks. Its roar disrupted my technique without trying. What would it do if it was targeting us? We couldn't survive if it really wanted to get us. I guess we've just got to be a more difficult meal than what it could get otherwise."

*"We will endeavor to be hard to catch,"* Sia said sardonically. *"We will not fish for two days."*

"That should be fine," I said with a shrug. "We have enough food to feed everyone all the way to Craesti even if you don't catch anything. I'd rather you be safe."

*"Well, safer."* Sia laughed, jumping into the air and shrinking to land on my shoulder. I felt his Aether connect to mine. *"You pay attention to flying. I will work on gathering."*

"Do Beasts advance through the Core stages the same way?" I asked him.

"No," he answered. *"You will need to gather enough to create a new layer of your Core in a single go. I, however, can slowly add sections of crystal to mine. What I have to do, though, is imbue my*



*Truth into the Aether I use. This acts something like your runic structures.”*

“*What is your Truth?*” I asked him, mentally this time as I sensed this was a private matter.

“*To fly over all other Zarorzels, to surpass my mother, and destroy Chaos wherever it arises,*” Sia said. “*At least, it is now. My Truth can be mutable, though the farther I advance, the more I will be set in my thoughts. This is why it is often impossible to negotiate with a Primordial.*”

“*Will we be safe visiting your mother?*” I asked.

“*Yes. Her Truth will not allow her to attack a guest. I will instruct you on proper behavior before we visit, to ensure you do not violate her rules,*” Sia said, then pecked my ear. “*Now hush so that I may concentrate.*”

I shook my head, laughing. The Aether around us, slightly thinner than what I would find in the Meditation Grotto back at Azyll, started to flow toward Sia and I. I sunk into my center and quickly built a single spiral for my gathering technique. “Here,” I said after popping back out. “Try not to take so much that I go below a quarter of my reserves.”

“*I do not need much from you,*” Sia said, “*other than the natural boost to my gathering speed that being around you creates.*”

“Neat,” I said, letting my mind control both the gathering technique and the Skysurfer at once. Ever since my advancement, I’d been much better about holding or creating multiple techniques at the same time. *How far can I stretch this?* I thought, then created a small Fireball off to my left and held it in place. Three techniques I knew well were easy. I added an Icicle Spike to my right, then a Metal Blade in front of me. Creating the Metal Blade took twice as long as it usually did, and I could feel the strain from holding the five techniques active.

A sixth, a Lightning Blast, destabilized with a small clap of thunder, and the backlash broke apart the Icicle and Blade. I desperately reinforced the Fireball, then tossed it away. It flew ten meters before blowing, my frantic motions not quite enough to fully stabilize the technique. Thankfully, my control of the remaining two

techniques was sufficient that I didn't lose either my Spiral Gathering Technique or let the Skysurfer drift off course.

*"Really? I felt that,"* Sia complained.

"Sorry. I'll work on that later," I told him consolingly.

He butted the side of my head, then went back to gathering.

*Three techniques were easily doable, I thought, so how about I use this time to temper a bit more. Not Geist, but I can expand on my Ice, Water, and Wood tempering to bring them to match the other five Elements. Water first, since, you know, I'm above the Ocean right now.*

I dropped into my center after checking the heading one last time. From there, I moved my viewpoint to my aorta. *Okay, Librarian Narwan only ever showed us the first three levels of the tempering technique, but I'm at the equivalent of four levels now. I want to get to five, where my main Elements are. I think if I run the first- through third-level parts of the technique in series it'll do something useful.*

I set up the level one portion, three runes stacked on each other. Level two had another five runes, then eight more for the level three. *Wait a minute. Three, five, eight. I bet the next one will be thirteen more. Hmm, what other runes are needed? How about some from the Pinpoint or Self-Flagellating techniques?* I thought while channeling a tiny bit of Water Aether into the runic structure I'd created already. My blood cells passed cleanly through it, very tiny changes occurring in each one as minute bits of improperly tempered cells were discovered. The Tribulation Lightning had brought me up to a higher level, but the quickness of it missed tiny sections that needed to be raised up to the final level.

I held the technique while popping out of my center to look around, scanning for Harpies or other enemies. Seeing nothing, I went back into my center and found the technique again.

I watched for a minute, examining my blood as it was slowly brought to a tiny bit better temper with Water. Each bit flowed just that much better, only noticeable due to my advanced gathering level and brain processing speed. *This is amazing,* I thought, shaking my head in wonder. *Wait, I think I can collapse all three sets of runes into a single set. I wonder...* I reached out and grasped the runes

with my mental hands. With a few tugs, I had them laid out in a single sphere, rather than three lines, and then I crushed them together. Five of the runes merged with others, leaving me with eleven, and on instinct I added two more, one that represented destruction that I took from the Whip of the Self-Flagellating Tempering Technique and one for rebirth that I'd learned from Sia.

Immediately, every blood cell that moved through the technique was broken apart and then rebuilt. The reforged cell glowed with Aether for a few millimeters, and then deposited that Aether into the walls of my aorta. The cells of my artery were similarly broken down and reborn when the blood cell gave of the Aether it stored.

*I can hold this technique as one of my five, I thought, looking on it with awe. Now, let's build one for Ice and Wood. I can do all three at once, though it will take quite a while to finish. I need to show everyone this technique when I can.*

I quickly formed a copy of the runic structure I had set up, only with Water replaced by Ice. It didn't do anything at all. *Huh, I thought. After a few seconds, though, I realized, Well, maybe the Aether infused into the blood cell is preventing the technique from working? Let's move it farther forward, see if that helps.*

It did. As soon as the blood cell lost the film of Aether coating it, the tempering technique was able to break it down again. I pushed it farther, though, building the Ice technique at my jugular instead. I then created a similar set of runes at my femoral artery in my left leg, giving all three techniques space to work their magic. My plan was to swap locations once they met up, and keep the techniques working until all of my blood had been advanced with it.

*"That is interesting,"* Sia said, and I could feel his mental presence looking at my Water tempering technique. *"I should utilize it as well."*

*"Yes, you should,"* I told him. *"Get stronger so I don't have to worry about you."*

*"I did defeat a Harpy who was a level above me in strength,"* he said.

*“Yeah, you did. That was pretty epic, but I got the feeling those Harpies were not at the level of competing in an international tournament. They were more what we would get from the moderately talented people who get lucky. So they are not indicative of the strength of their elites. You know what I mean?”*

*“Yes,”* Sia responded, *“they were not our equal, but that does not mean there are not Harpies who are. So I should endeavor to get stronger, and so should you. Now, focus, we are starting to drift.”*

*“Oops!”* I exclaimed, then focused on the Skysurfer. I brought us back to the right two degrees, then another two for two minutes, before returning us to our proper heading. *“Okay, I’ve got steering, the Spiral Gathering Technique, and three Elements of tempering in my blood vessels. I don’t think I can hold any more, so now I just wait, keeping everything running.”*

Sia laughed, then said, *“Only you would be annoyed at only being able to hold five techniques at Seed Core. Everyone I have spoken to before could only hold three or four, at most, while you can use five and still hold a conversation! Stop with the self-doubt. You are the strongest gatherer for your generation, if not the strongest ever at your stage of gathering. You are going to be betrothed to the heir to the Kingdom, to an extremely savvy and capable noble, and to one of the best healers ever. Stop doubting yourself and realize your true capability.”* He slapped my head with his wing.

I grinned, shaking my head, then spoke aloud. “I know. It’s hard to go from, ‘Hey, I’m pretty crippled and can barely walk,’ to ‘I am the strongest person of my age group in the entire world.’ You know? It’s been less than a year and a half, and I’ve gone from someone who literally died and was born again into an extremely damaged body, to the best and most eligible bachelor of my generation. At least two amazing young women tried to get me to take them as a mistress, just on the off chance they’d get benefits and their—our—children would be set for life. In many ways, I’m having huge problems with that, just because that isn’t how the world should work. Why does a talented young woman have to basically sell herself to get a better future for her kids?”

“Is that not what Master Narwan and you are working to prevent?” Aleks asked, making me jump in surprise.

I steadied the ship, then turned to her. “Yes, exactly that,” I said. “The point of the Affinity Powders is to raise the poorest people’s Affinities, and thus let them advance faster. Imagine if everyone over the age of twenty was a Condensation gatherer? Even if they never could reach Core, they’d still be stronger, faster, healthier. How would it change farming if every farmer could use external Aether techniques to speed up growth?”

“I know,” she said, grabbing my arm. “Why do you think Dad funds Master Narwan’s experiments? The Affinity Powders are the result of two centuries of investment and time by the best Alchemist in the Kingdom, because we want to raise up the common person, and reduce the power of the noble clans.”

“And, if everyone is able to reach Condensation, then the available pool of soldiers is significantly greater,” I said.

“Yes, that is one aspect,” Aleks said with a shrug. “When we are surrounded by existential threats, saved only by the fact that most Primordials are apathetic about expanding their territory, having more soldiers is never a bad thing. The Beast Waves they send occasionally are just the dregs of their offspring, but every year tens of thousands of our people die to repel them.” She sighed. “Hopefully, we can reduce the casualties and let us stabilize the edges of the Kingdom.

“The Affinity Powders help with raising elites as well, though.” She pointed at me. “Look at you. How much did the improvement to all of your Affinities when you were just a Fog-level gatherer speed your growth?”

I nodded. “Probably quite a lot,” I said. “Upgrading my weakest Affinities especially helped, and selling the powders to others probably helped them all as well.”

“Your concern for your team, and me, is touching,” Aleks said, “but you could protect them better if you were to be more selfish, you know?”

“No, I don’t know,” I said. “I cannot be everywhere. Jon is one of the best defenders I know, and even he couldn’t protect me from

everything the Tower of Trials sent in our joint challenge, though we were both right next to each other. Even now, against the Harpies, if I had been selfish and hoarded all the advancement pills, used them over and over again to reach Foundation Core before we left, could I really have protected everyone better than having Jon, Bridget, and Vaya as Core, and the rest of you at Complete Condensation instead of everyone at Threshold?”

I took a deep breath, realizing I was ranting at my girlfriend. “Sorry,” I said, bowing my head.

She lifted my chin then leaned in and gave me a quick kiss. “It is okay,” she answered. “I know you want to protect us all.”

“Yeah, you just hit on one of my own worries,” I told her. “I wonder sometimes, if I had been more selfish, could I be even farther along? If I was, could I protect everyone? Librarian Narwan is one of the most powerful people in our Kingdom. Even so, he couldn’t protect us when the Chaos Beasts invaded the Askhas Baqiya, because the Illyrian matched him.” I shook my head, taking a few calming breaths. “I believe that improving everyone is more efficient and better for saving the world. One person at the peak of Soul Strengthening will be weaker than a dozen at the initial stages.”

“You sure about that?” Aleks asked.

“No, but I think I can keep all of us accelerating upward,” I said. “Befriending Bruno, opening the Tower of Trials. Darkness’s gift of languages is probably my most useful ability.”

“I think it is your ability to spread hope,” Aleks said, stepping into a hug and squeezing my ribs. “Before you, I was resigned to marrying for the benefit of the Kingdom. Vaya was stuck being a trading piece for her family. Jamila would probably have ended up a slave in all but name to a noble house. Jon and Bridget would have been mediocre gatherers and ended up just foot soldiers in the army. Thousands of people would never have learned to read, and been stuck at the basest levels of gathering because they could not understand the free directions given out. Our world is better just because of your presence.”

A weight I didn’t realize I was carrying lifted off my shoulders, and my gathering technique ticked up in efficiency. “Thank you,” I

said, my voice heavy and clipped.

“Why do you think I want to spend my life with you?” Aleks asked.

“Because I am ridiculously good looking?” I responded, then laughed. She giggled against my chest.

“You need to rest too,” she told me. “Go, I will steer the Skysurfer.”

*“I will stay with her,”* Sia told me. *“I am mostly recovered.”*

“Thank you,” I told him, then nodded to Aleks. “Fine, I can go gather in my room.”

“Lilianna and Xiao cooked a spread of Mountain Boar sausage and Zhaoze Goat cheese, with Gilded Grain Wheat crackers. Xiao said it was based on a tale from your old world,” she told me.

“Nice, adult Lunchables.” I laughed, then shook my head at her questioning look. “Sorry. There was a product called a Lunchable that was for kids. It was usually made of cheese, meat, and crackers, with a dessert of some type. When adults had it, it was called charcuterie but people would joke that that was just a pretentious name for an adult Lunchable.”

She smiled and shook her head. “I can tell you find it funny, but it...”

“Yeah, inside jokes don’t really work outside the context,” I said. I picked her up and spun her around. “Now we just need to make our own inside jokes, if we are going to spend centuries together.”

She giggled again, then cupped my face with both her hands and drew me into a much deeper kiss. We separated panting, and she said, “Go rest. You are still stronger than any of us but Knight Kaminski, so having you at your peak is important. We can spend more time together in the palace.”

“As you wish,” I told her, then handed her the compass and walked away. Inside, I found several platters full of meat, cheese, and crackers. Jon and Bridget were sitting next to each other at the table, with Jon’s arm over her shoulder. Bridget gave me a grin when I grabbed a plate, then turned back to her boyfriend.

I filled the plate, then headed to my room. I had to walk around Lilianna and Xiao, who were sleeping on the lounge cushions while holding hands. I smiled down at them, and winked at Ming, who had cleared a space to work on a sword technique. He nodded to me, then danced, his sword leaving afterimages that I felt could still damage his opponent.

In my room, I put the plate on the desk not housing the control orb. I opened one of the boxes underneath the desk to pull out a level five Dungeon Beast Core, and found one of the four Inscriptions to pull the Aether out of it. *There are four Beast Core Inscriptions in this room, I thought. Light, how dense could I make the Aether in here? Probably dense enough to cause me problems.*

I checked the Aether capacity of the Portable Home, and saw that it was nearing the halfway point. The control orb had a receptacle near it to absorb a Beast Core, so I put the strongest one I had available on it. It started to drain. I ate my food slowly, enjoying the perfectly seared sausage. Ten minutes later, I checked on the Portable Home and its Beast Core. “That’ll get it to seventy-five percent or so,” I told myself, then nodded. “I’ll stick another one on in a bit.”

A quick check showed the tempering techniques were still running, strengthening me, so I sat on my bed to focus more on them. Without having to worry about steering or even gathering—the Aether density was such that my gathering meridians were pulling in a massive amount by themselves—I built a second version of each of the three Elements, and focused on holding them all steady.



# CHAPTER TWENTY

I decided to create the first new layer to my Core a few hours after recovering from the Harpy attack. I placed two level five Beast Cores, one from the Dungeon and one that had Lightning Affinity, in the Inscriptions to increase the Aether density in my room by an order of magnitude.

I sat on my bed, breathing deeply to relax, then fell into my center. With a thought, I created the full Triple Runic Spiral Technique, all three spirals extending out of my body and almost reaching to the wall behind me. Immediately, the Aether density dropped as I absorbed as much as I could. Quickly, my center filled up, and then my meridians.

After a few minutes, I was holding as much Aether as I normally could. *Here's the hard part*, I thought, *gotta pull in twice this much. Ugh, this is going to hurt, isn't it?* I groaned, but kept pulling the Aether in as fast as I could.

After ten minutes, I was feeling bloated. Every meridian was overloaded, uncomfortably stretching outward to hold all the Aether I was absorbing. It flooded into my body; my bones, muscles, and organs holding more than they normally could as well. I felt full, painfully distorted, with my everything barely holding on. It wasn't enough yet.

Twenty minutes after I started, my entire body was shaking. The Aether I'd gathered was pulsing, barely under control anymore. My Core was full, my center uncomfortably stretched, my meridians distended, and I finally felt that I was ready.

With a thought, I pushed every bit of Aether out of my body into my meridians. They ballooned even further, but my mind was ready, and I clamped down on them. My center absorbed the massive influx of Aether, and I grabbed it all, crushing it onto my Core. The Aether in my Core shot to the surface and joined the film I

was creating. I infused into it the runic structure I was pushing toward, and forced voids where it was required. My Geist flowed into my Aether, supercharging it and compressing it at the same time.

I bellowed in agony, strain, and joy, as every bit of Aether I had stored and gathered compressed to form a single additional layer of my Core, with the barest hint of the runic structure evident in a few miniscule gaps left open. An explosion of Aether flew out of the newly formed layer, moving through me and changing my body in the slightest of ways. I felt empty.

The feeling soon passed. The Beast Cores were still discharging into the air and my gathering technique still pulling Aether into me at a fast clip. My Core filled, slowly, taking around forty minutes to finish. My center then took another thirty minutes before I felt reasonably full again.

Once ready, I hopped off my bed and stretched, my muscles tight from the concentration required to advance even a single step. “Only a thousand more of those to reach Complete Core.” I laughed. “Lightning blast it, this is going to take a while. Thirty minutes for just one layer, and the next one will take longer. How long will each layer take in Constructed Core? In Complete Core? And that’s with having a ridiculous amount of Aether available. I guess Bruno will be extremely busy forever, since he provides a large number of level four, five, and six Beast Cores that are perfect for everyone’s gathering capability.”

I shook my head. “I really hope we can find a Dungeon like him in Craesti, and not another crazy one that needs to be destroyed, like the undersea one Librarian Narwan is heading toward. I hope he’s safe. I’m still kinda worried about what the Dungeon’s appearance means. Is Bruno still helping Chaos, even if he doesn’t mean to? And even if he is, is the benefit he gives to everyone greater than the damage he does?” I shrugged, then bent over to stretch my hamstrings.

“Nothing I can do about it—no way to answer that question yet,” I told myself. “Plus, I don’t want to kill Bruno over something he doesn’t have any control over. So, moving on.”

I walked out of the room to find the common area empty. An increase in the Aether density around the runes on the Forge and Inscription rooms told me someone was inside them, working. I peeked out the door to find Ming and Lea talking quietly, with Lea holding the compass loosely in her right hand. They were glancing around at the sky and sea every few seconds.

I pulled my head back in, then thought, *Now would be a good time to work on Alchemy, I guess.* I went into the Alchemy lab, then frowned at the large stack of boxes along the back wall. “Well, I guess we had to put stuff somewhere,” I said. “First things first, what do I want to work on?” With a laugh, I shook my head and commented, “That kinda depends on what all we got. Inventory time!”

Two hours later, Jon poked his head into the Alchemy room. “Light! What are you doing?” he exclaimed.

“Inventory,” I told him. The work tables were covered in items, pages of paper were stuck to each box behind him, and I was counting out Cyan Lily Petals into a small glass jar. “Wasn’t sure what I wanted to make, so I decided we needed to know everything that we have available as ingredients.”

“There is more in my room, Lea’s room, and one of the empty rooms,” Jon said.

I sighed. “This is tedious and boring, but necessary. Can you grab the stuff from your room and I’ll go through them?”

“Nah,” Jon said. “I will inventory the rest. You make something that we can all use.”

“Well, I do have a recipe for an Ice Affinity boosting pill,” I said, “called the Polar Vortex Chill Pill. We have the ingredients.” I stood and grabbed a box from the second row. Metal Aether shot out of me to support the boxes above it, and I gently set them down so nothing broke. “Enough to make fifty of them. Should let me get fourteen made successfully.”

“Cool, I would love to get my Ice Affinity higher,” Jon said. “I will be back in a bit.”

“Thanks,” I told him, digging out Snowdrop Petals; Camellia Blooms, of which I needed the stamen; and Glory Of Snow Flower

Stalks. A different box held Nordlig Maple Bark, White Cotoneaster Berries, and Nandina Leaf. Three more boxes held the rest of the twenty-six ingredients I needed.

Once I had the ingredients set out, I put my new Alchemy set on the table, grinning at the amazing gift Librarian Narwan had given me. I grabbed the dark-blue marble mortar, feeling the resonance it had with the Water Aether in the air around me. "This should be good for most of it," I said, then grabbed the lightly purple-colored pillar of metal. I channeled a tiny amount of Ice Aether into it, and it flowed smoothly through the pestle.

I set the pill furnace aside, carefully positioning it so I could get it started soon, but I had a number of items I could preprocess to improve my success rate. I pulled out the knowledge stone that Librarian Narwan had included in the gift, and quickly reviewed it. Three different grinding techniques, thirty-seven different ways to use the pill furnace, and a general knowledge of ingredient preparation was included on the stone. *Wow, that's a lot, I thought, but I definitely needed it. According to the information I just got, using the pill furnace is significantly more complicated than I thought it would be. I can use the Ice Firmament Pill Condensate Technique to create the pills! I might even get more than one out of a batch with it. Neat!*

Glory Of Snow Flower Stalks were placed in the mortar first, and I ran my Aether through the mortar and pestle. I could feel and see the Ice Aether in the stalk get separated from Water and Wood, and the Wood was refined almost into something different, a lavender tinge added to the green. *Huh, what is going on there?* I thought, leaning in.

A tiny stream of Air Aether into my eyes enhanced my Aether Sight, allowing me to see the effects of the pestle crushing the stalk into paste. After a few rotations, I frowned. *The change isn't even, I realized, I've got to rotate both directions!* Immediately, I started to crush the greenery sunward, three full circles before I did one more widdershins like I'd begun.

After the change, I alternated back and forth, and quickly saw the lavender spread evenly across all of the Wood Aether. The Water

Aether seemed to evaporate into the air, and Ice Aether had become a blue-purple, lighter than Water but darker than Air. Once the paste was ready, I gently scraped it off the mortar and into a bowl. Two more ingredients, the Camellia Bloom Stamen and the Nandina Leaf, were then ground up as well, this time together.

The Camellia Bloom Stamen was interesting, as it was Elementally aligned with Lightning instead of the Wood and Ice of the rest of the flower. The Lightning acted as a catalyst, sparking the Nandina Leaf's Wood Aether into Ash and Growth Aether somehow, removing every bit of Water from it. After this mixture was ground up, it was dumped into the bowl as well, and then a quarter liter of Moonlit Glow Sap was poured in. I set the mixture aside to soak, flipping a five-minute timer over as I did so.

Two more sets of pastes were created, one a mixture of the Snowdrop Petals and the pit of an Arctic Supreme Peach, which I had to crack with a hammer blow of Earth Aether before I could grind it up. I used the Volcanic Iron pestle, Earth and Metal Aether flowing through it to grind the pit into powder that then deepened the Ice Aether into Arctic Aether, making my hand feel cold even from two dozen centimeters away as I scraped it into a second bowl.

Once three bowls were soaking, stirred each time the timer went off, I started a pot of Pure Spring Water boiling and mixed in the Nordlig Maple Bark, White Cotoneaster Berries, and Snowball Bush Flower Petals. I waited until half of the water evaporated and then added the pre-ground pastes into it. The concoction flared, Aether interactions trying to break apart what I'd made, and my Aether sunk into the water, pulling apart and smoothing out snarls in the Aether flows within the brew.

After another ten minutes, I'd gotten it under control and let nearly all the water boil away. Once ready, I pulled the pot off the burner, swirling Water and Ice through it to bring the temperature down rapidly. This goop was then scooped into the Flamewrought Copper mortar this time, and ground together while I ran Fire Aether through the pestle.

Another pot was set to heat up, though I kept the setting at its lowest point. Above it, I connected a few tubes and a hood to create

a condensation drip point into a bottle. In the pot went the flesh of the Arctic Supreme Peach, Glacier Water, and some more Cotoneaster Berries that were squished. I stirred the pot with one stream of Aether while continuing to grind up the first mixture.

A few minutes of muscle work, Aether manipulation, and drips of condensate gave me about twenty milliliters of slightly pinkish water. I poured it into the mortar, then began to grind in the pattern of the Ice rune. Sixteen times I created the rune, then immediately dumped every bit of it into the Elemental Palladium Pill Furnace.

My Aether surged, following the Ice Firmament Pill Condensate Technique to heat and cool different areas of the inside. Ice, Fire, Earth, and Air Aether all swirled throughout the mixture, kneading and combining the pieces while firming them into two lozenge shapes. After five minutes, my Core seemed to vibrate slightly, and an intuition that the pills were too big hit me pretty hard. I glanced at my ingredients, then shrugged. *I've got enough for a dozen more recipes, we'll see what this weird feeling is about.*

I cut the back third off both pills and crushed them into a third pill. A feeling of rightness flowed over me, and I nodded. The final stages of the pill technique required me to surround and condense each pill with a cage of Ice and Water Aether. The Elemental Palladium in the furnace made manipulating Aether inside it easier than manipulating it in the air in front of me, and I could see and feel the pills trying to form.

“Condense!” I shouted, burning with power as I poured my Aether into the pill furnace. Every bit of my mind and willpower was spent to crush the pills into existence, while tiny flickers of Fire and Lightning Aether played across the surface of them to burn away miniscule impurities that stuck up out of the smooth surface.

It took another thirty minutes and half my Aether to finally get the pills to form, and with a loud thump the pill furnace lid bounced up, signifying the finish. I pulled the lid off, panting in exertion, and grinned wildly. “Two normal pills and an exceptional one! Sweet, I almost can't believe I got it right the first time!” I shouted, jumping in

glee for a second before gently picking up the pills and dropping them in a jar for safekeeping. "Alright, let's make another dozen."

I pulled out another set of ingredients, and got to work.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The next few days moved quickly. Every morning, we spent two hours on aura training while the others gathered, pushing toward Core. Immediately afterwards, we cultivated Geist. We were lucky, in that everyone had enough Geist tempering from the Stairway of Determination to use the Enhanced Natural Geist Growth Technique, even if Lilianna and Xiao could only manage a few seconds to start with. Xiao especially pushed extremely hard, and would cultivate over and over again.

After Geist training, we'd eat a quick lunch, then I worked on creating various pills. Using the books Librarian Narwan and Spirit gave me along with the Legacy, I was able to create enough Ice, Water, and Metal Affinity enhancing pills for everyone. The Fire pill recipe, unfortunately, took some ingredients I only had small amounts of, and it was complicated enough that I messed up half of it. Still, I was able to make four, giving them to Aleks, Vaya, Jamila, and Hannah, strengthening our healers at Knight Kaminski's direction.

After a few hours of Alchemy, only occasionally interrupted by Jon causing an explosion on the other workbench, Knight Kaminski would have two of us spar. At first, we were made to fight without any techniques. It was eye-opening how different my body was, how utterly superhuman I'd become, ever since advancing. The first time Ming and I fought, it felt like he was moving in slow motion. I exaggerate a bit, but only a bit. I easily overpowered him.

Now, with techniques we were a little closer, as I still hadn't learned a better ability than the General Strengthening Technique. Even with techniques, though, I was faster, stronger, and tougher than he was. It was only his extensive training with his sword, compared to my less than a year's experience with my trisula, that the fights were even close.



Sparring practice was followed by technique practice, with Knight Kaminski focusing on teaching everyone how to hopefully not fall off the Skysurfer. Whether by creating small walls of Ice or Stone, quick bursts of Air or Fire to throw themselves back onto the surface, or tethers of Wood and Ice to hold them down, Knight Kaminski did not want a repeat of Milenna's fall. Jon, Vaya, Bridget, and I were directed to work on our ability to fly or run through the sky.

Vaya was able to modify her Entangling Vines Technique to create the vines from thin air, though she complained that it took nearly five times as much Aether to do so. Using those vines, she swung through the sky like Tarzan, and was able to quickly snatch me out of the sky when I faked falling. Jon worked on his Sky Glacier Technique, with the large barge of Ice slowly drifting on unseen currents. He couldn't move it as fast as the Skysurfer, but, with support from Zimnodlot, was able to hold the technique for hours on end.

I got faster, sprinting through the sky with the smallest Air platforms I could make, keeping my Aether usage well below my natural recharge rate. This would let me fight better, and longer, while staying up in the air. Knight Kaminski would also throw balls of Water at me while I was running, and I would have to create platforms as a shield. "Your modifications to Dancing Northern Wind are incredible," she told me the first time I showed her that ability. "I was trying to make you dodge, but this is better. We will work on dodging as well. Block Water, dodge Wood."

"Yes, ma'am," I said with a sharp nod.

"Now, go," she commanded, and I took off. A Wood Spike, barely holding itself together since she didn't want to actually hurt me, shot out at me.

I created an angled platform to sidestep the attack, then threw an Air platform in the way of a Water Ball. Another splashed against my left leg, hidden behind the first, causing me to trip. It took me a second to catch myself, and then I had to immediately throw my body sideways to dodge a spike. This continued for an hour, even as she was instructing Jamila on an Earth Technique and sending lines of Fire at Jon.

*Wow, I thought, creating four Air Shields. How can she manage so many streams of Aether and still hold a conversation? Hopefully the Geist training will help me get better at multitasking. How much is Aether changing me? Not just physically, but mentally? I'm able to remember things perfectly, I can think faster, react faster, to events happening around me.*

A Wood Spike broke against my chest and I fell off the platform I'd stopped on. I laughed out loud and stopped my fall again. "I guess I'm not that different," I mumbled to myself. "I still get easily distracted."

Sia's laughter echoed in my head. He and Zimnodlot were flying around, acting as scouts to watch for more Harpies or other Beasts, and he was close enough to hear my complaint.

In the late evenings, we worked on different tempering techniques. I shared with everyone what I had figured out about Librarian Narwan's technique, and how I was keeping it running almost all the time. The only time I dropped it was when we did a different technique, such as the Pinpoint, or during technique training as I needed to be fully focused on Knight Kaminski.

Five days after the Harpy attack, I was sprinting ahead of the Skysurfer, working on straight-line speed. Gusting Northern Wind, the first modification I made to Dancing, helped enormously with that, but it had been created to help with running on the ground. So I was working on fixing and updating it, and wasn't paying too much attention to my surroundings.

Which was why, when a shadow fell over me from above and talons the size of my torso wrapped around my chest, I was unable to react for a few seconds. Not that doing anything was possible, as the instant I was captured the aura of a Primordial froze every movement of my body. Only my heart continued beating, as even my lungs were paralyzed.

"You are different." A rumbling chirp, like a parakeet the size of a skyscraper, sounded over me. "Why are you different?"

The aura holding me still vanished, and my Aether senses showed that we were gradually drawing closer to the Skysurfer. "Uh, in what way?" I asked.

“Your soul does not belong,” the bird said.

I looked up at it. The Primordial was only a bit larger than Sia was at his full size, probably so that it could interact with me. Instead of feathers, though, it had metal scales. Its Affinity showed through its scales, nearly blinding me with silvery light until I could force my Aether Sight to its minimal setting. “Uh,” I stammered.

The bird snorted. “You are different.”

“Yes, I am,” I said. “I got very sick, and woke up with new memories.”

“Hmm, reincarnation, interesting,” he answered. “I am Minokawa, one of the Guardians of the Sky. Ozomene reported a violation of the Oceanic Flight Agreement, and I am investigating. You interest me, so tell me why you were flying above the limit.”

“We weren’t, sir,” I answered. “We have been careful about staying at around ninety meters from the sea. A few days ago, we were attacked by Harpies. Is that what the violation was?”

“I doubt that Ozomene would allow her offspring to violate the Agreement, and then have me investigate,” Minokawa said.

Sia streaked over. *“It is the truth, great one,”* he said. *“We attempted to greet them peacefully. They attacked with no warning, no communication.”*

A stream of Aether, as thick around as my thigh, shot out of the Primordial. It shimmered a pale lilac, though just looking at it made my eyes cross. The Aether paused right next to Sia’s head. A tiny feather of Flame tentatively reached out and touched Minokawa’s. They connected, and Minokawa’s Aether sunk into Sia’s head.

Five seconds later, the Aether tendril snapped, leaving a tiny piece with Sia. I felt his mind shudder and grow minutely stronger. “My payment,” Minokawa said. “I will investigate Ozomene’s knowledge of this attack. She will be sanctioned if she condoned it, otherwise the guilty party is dead already.” He let me go, and I quickly formed an Air platform to land on.

“Uh, sir,” I started. “May I ask you a question?”

“You already did,” he rumbled, then laughed. I could feel Sia roll his eyes through the bond, and I politely chuckled. “Yes, ask

away.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “What does it mean to be a Guardian of the Sky? How do your people live? Do you have islands you land on elsewhere in the sea? Are there Beasts that never land?”

“Breathe; I can only answer one question at a time!”

Minokawa said, his tone changing from the serious judge of our guilt to almost a kindly grandfather. “The Beasts of the Sky live on the Sky Islands. As a Guardian of the Sky, I keep the peace between tribes and protect the Guniguni Harang.”

“The Illusion Barrier?” I asked.

“You are limited to flying only below one hundred twenty meters, as your people measure them, to prevent intrusion upon our territory,” Minokawa answered. “The Guniguni Harang is a layer of Aether woven to block the senses of those below it, so that you cannot see the Sky Islands. It only works on those below Soul Expression, or Perfect Core as you would know it. One of the Guardians speaks to every person who advances to that stage, just in case they somehow missed being informed of the Sky Islands by one of their own elders.”

“Is there ever a way we could visit the Sky Islands?” I asked.

“You may request it, though I do not recommend even attempting until you express your soul,” Minokawa told me kindly. “Travel between the islands is fraught with danger.”

Drat, I thought, then nodded. “Uh, do your people ever come below the Guniguni Harang?”

“Often,” he answered. “We hunt in the sea for a portion of our meals. The Katiwala, or Overseers, guide our livestock and prey populations on the Islands, and fishing is a way of supplementing what our environment can sustain.”

“Do you have any problems between the Sky Islands? Or between the Sky Islands and a ground nation?”

“Many, but that goes beyond information I am willing to share,” Minokawa said, his tone slightly admonishing.

“Okay,” I said, hopping between feet, creating new steps each time. I’d figured out that it was more efficient to do so than to just stand still, surprisingly. Air did not like being chained to a single

spot. “My nation, and several allied ones, have just declared war on the Illyrian Empire, because they have allied with Chaos. Dungeons and Chaos Beasts have been invading our world, and a calamity is coming.”

“That is grave news indeed. Does Siarczysty know of this?”

“Yes,” I said. “I do not keep secrets from my Bond.”

“Siarczysty, will you allow me to examine your thoughts again?” Minokawa asked.

“Of course, Guardian,” Sia answered.

I watched the Aether form again, this time seeing tiny flecks of Geist flowing down the center of the tube. *It's Mental Aether, I think, I thought to myself. Maybe using Geist to transform the Aether, or using the Aether as a channel for the Geist to share information? He's obviously seeing something in Sia's mind. Maybe you can't lie effectively when connected that way, and so they trust information exchanged in this manner more? No idea, but I've not been experimenting enough with what Aether can do. Too much time and thought on combat only. Unfortunately, I don't see that changing anytime soon.*

“I thank you for this warning,” Minokawa said formally. He thought for a second, then shrank down to roughly my size. “I do not have any treasures with me, but I can show you how to make a stable Air construct. Now, watch.” A streamer of Air shot out of him, this time shimmering with light as the Primordial willed it to be visible to all. Minokawa did not know that I could see Aether, and I liked it that way.

He formed a platform very similar to my own. The runes, however, weren't still. The way the Air construct hardened kept rotating around, but the balance didn't change. It rotated flat. “Jump onto it,” Minokawa instructed.

I hurried and obeyed. I expected the platform to be rotating, but it wasn't. It held still, even as the runes underneath me swirled around in seemingly random patterns. “How?” I asked.

“Air does not stop moving, and when forcing it to, you weaken it. This is what is causing the additional drain over time of your technique,” he explained.

“Why am I not turning around?” I asked. “It looks like the runes for the hardening and surface are spiraling, and I thought the platform would mimic their movement?”

“The surface is not moving, only its support is,” Minokawa answered. “These two runes define the surface, and their relative position never changes.” Two runes pulsed.

*Light and Darkness, why did I never think of that! That’s amazing.* “Thank you,” I said. With a thought, I created the runes for Dancing Northern Wind’s Air platform, then started them spinning. After a few seconds, I released my control on most of them, with only two, very similar to the ones Minokawa was using, held in a sort of stasis, spinning around each other. I jumped over to it, and stood. The Aether cost was consistent, a tiny bit higher than one without moving runes, but it didn’t change. “This will be incredibly helpful.”

“Now will yourself forward,” Minokawa said. “You control your Aether, so move it.”

I reached out mentally to the construct I’d built, and pushed it sideways like I would if I wanted to create the platform at the end of my next step. It moved, the Aether drain tripling instantly, but it moved. *I’m flying.* “I’m flying!” I shouted, zooming around. With some minor movement of the runes and technique, I coated my legs and torso, then leaned forward and shot toward the Skysurfer.

Jon held his hand out, and I slapped him a high five as I flew past him. “Knight Aiden, is everything safe?” Knight Kaminski yelled, flying in front of me.

I stopped moving and nodded. “Yes, ma’am,” I said. “The Primordial is named Minokawa, and is a Guardian of the Sky. He was told that we violated the agreement, and came to investigate.”

“The one who reported the violation must not have known of Siarczysty’s presence,” Minokawa said, appearing next to us. “His people and my own share a bond, and we can speak experiences to each other. Thus I was able to confirm your version of the events that unfolded. I will bring this to the other Guardians, and we will uncover what truly occurred. Be safe, and know that I will be watching for your advancement, Bond Aiden.” He shot away and

grew to utterly enormous proportions before blurring upward and vanishing into the sky.

“I’m going to practice flying some more,” I said with a grin.

Knight Kaminski nodded, then hit me in the face with a ball of Water. “Yes, you obviously need it.” The smile in her voice made me laugh, and I blazed forward to continue my training.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The next two weeks passed quickly. I finally finished updating every one of my Core runes, and my gathering speed increased enormously. Of course, that only offset the rapid increase in Aether requirements to advance in the Seed Core stage. The first layer took me half an hour of continuous gathering to create. The second, after updating another Core rune, took thirty-three minutes. The third, forty minutes. I was only gathering to advance a single layer once a day, as the wave of Aether that each one created left me feeling sore and bloated afterwards.

At this point, Sia started to gather with me. With the second-to-last Core rune completed, and Sia's assistance increasing the speed of my gathering, it still took thirty-seven minutes for the fourth layer. Sia hopped off my shoulder and flapped over to his perch after finishing. "I still have hundreds of layers to add to my Core to advance," I said, panting as I stood and stretched. "How much longer will it take to advance in Foundation, or, Light guide me, Complete Core?"

*"Each layer does help you gather faster, but you are right. It will eventually take you days to advance a single layer,"* Sia said. *"There is a reason that the fastest advancement through Core I know of was eight years, and they only reached the end of Complete Core and stopped."*

"Who was that?" I asked.

*"The City Lord of Western City. His family is extremely wealthy,"* Sia started.

"Yeah, on the backs of their people," I interjected. "That rotten fish was the one trying to make a profit off the Beast Wave we stopped. Gah, I hate that city."

*"True. He bought his way to the top of Core, spending nearly all of his time gathering and using extreme amounts of pills, Beast*



*Cores, and other supplements. He never tried to advance because he knew he would die in the Tribulation. Too many impurities, too many short lines. He would be found wanting such that the Tribulation would destroy him.*” I snorted and we went to get food.

Other than gathering, I focused on sharing the Legacy with the others, and we all learned new techniques. Jon and I both found good widespread damage techniques. His was a field of sharp snowflakes that cut apart anything inside and mine was a storm cloud that blasted Lightning over its surface. “If the Harpies come again,” he growled, “I will be ready for them.”

“We will be,” I said. Everyone else learned at least one new technique, and we trained incessantly. Being Core made it so much easier to fit everything into my schedule, since I only needed two or so hours of sleep a night. Along with the pills I made for everyone’s gathering assistance, I also worked on mass-producing Affinity Powders. I still owed Librarian Narwan a few hundred of them, but my ability to focus on multiple items and channel five different Aether techniques at once, along with the awesome new mortar and pestle sets he got me, let me make ten at once. I created over a thousand sets before we found land, firmly meeting my debt to my master and giving me a lot of extras to sell.

Three days prior to finding land, Aleks advanced to Seed Core, which seemed to set off a ripple effect that brought everyone else up over the next two days. Pills, powders, elixirs, Beast Cores, all of a supremely high quality—all had been consumed in quantities that even Aleks didn’t normally get to use. The Alchemical items given possessed very little impurities, created by master Alchemists using exquisite ingredients. The Soul Strengthening gatherers of the four nations had truly paid me a fair price for the knowledge I sold them, with most of the supplements being items that were impossible to simply purchase. Even Sam was able to advance to Circulation Condensation, Librarian Narwan’s treatments having fixed her foundation enough for her to advance, finally.

At last, we found the Craesti peninsula after three weeks and a day of traveling. “Land ho!” I shouted, seeing the beach. “We’re home!”

“Well, sort of,” Jamila said, sitting with me on watch. “We still have to find the ruins, and then get back to Craesti.”

“So, which way to the ruins?” I asked.

Jamila shrugged. “You would have to ask Knight Kaminski or Aleks. I am not very good at navigation.”

“East,” Knight Kaminski said, appearing next to me in a similar vein to Librarian Narwan. “We will head east until we reach the point of the peninsula. If we have not reached the ruins by then, we will turn back and retread our journey and head west from here.”

“Got it!” I said. “We’ll turn to the left once we reach the coast. I can’t wait! I wonder what we’ll find? Maybe another source of Geist?”

“It would be good to be able to temper with it,” Jamila told me. “I have only made a little progress at gathering Geist.”

“Prince Gunther did invite us all to the Weltreich to train,” I said. “They have a tower of Geist there, so we’ll be able to advance with that.”

“Your method works, it is just slow,” Jamila said.

“What about the mapping device?” Bridget asked. “We still have not used that thing.”

“Good point!” I said excitedly, pulling it out. We’d merged the metal ball into it already, and it now stood up from the center of the plate. I started to charge it, though I didn’t push Aether in too quickly as we were still over the water.

We chatted for another twenty minutes before turning east to follow the coastline. Right after we turned, I surged the last bit of Aether needed to activate it. The metal ball lit up, runes scrawled throughout its surface, and jumped two meters into the air. A wave of Aether shot out from it, reaching at least three kilometers from where we were. When the wave returned, bouncing back like a slow-motion radar beam, a map formed just like last time, only covering ten times the distance the map previously was capable of. “Well, now we know that the sphere increases the range,” I said.

“Look there.” Vaya pointed, and the map grew bigger, zooming in on where she pointed. A spot glowed the green of Wood

Aether. “I think it also shows sources of Aether! This will be useful for exploring.”

Forty minutes later, and a dozen maps made and examined, Jamila pointed. “There’s the temporary fort we built! We’re almost there!”

“Can you go get Aleks and Knight Kaminski?” I asked.

“Sure,” Jamila said, then ran inside. A few moments later, she returned with Aleks, then Knight Kaminski appeared next to me.

“We are almost there,” Aleks said. “This is exciting.”

The rest of the crew slowly trickled out to see the land. Everyone started to chatter, pointing at the forest, and then at the beginnings of the ruins. Tiny broken-down walls and clear areas of the jungle revealed where houses, roads, and businesses used to be.

“There.” Jon pointed at a larger area that only had a few small trees in it. “I swear that used to be a warehouse. That would make that”—he pointed at an area of slightly less dense trees—“the main road in and out of the city. At least, in this direction.”

“Cool,” I said. “Should we set down to investigate here?”

“No,” Aleks said. “Up ahead there was a large area of partially intact ruins. We should land there.”

“Got it,” I said, pushing us ahead as fast as I could. It wasn’t that fast, the Skysurfer yet again showing that it was designed for comfort and carrying capacity over speed, as we pattered along over the slowly increasing density of ruins.

“Drop!” Knight Kaminski yelled suddenly. I immediately released the hover enchantment on the Skysurfer, letting gravity pull us downward.

A bar of a disturbingly greenish-black Aether shot through where we were flying before I let us fall. The Aether made my skin tingle. “Who shot at us?!” I screamed as I piloted us toward the ground. We corkscrewed through the air, and four more beams of Aether rose to meet us.

“I will block!” Knight Kaminski yelled. “They do not know how many of us there are, or how strong we are. Aiden, bring us down,

then store your Portable Home. Do not store the Skysurfer. I want them to think they brought me down, and I was alone. Now, dive!”

The urgency in her voice drove me to turn us nearly perpendicular to the ground. The training we’d undergone throughout the journey revealed its worth, as everyone was able to hold themselves steady even with the Skysurfer at eighty degrees to the ground. When we were three meters above the beach, I desperately pulled up, and we slammed into the ground with the Skysurfer parallel to it.

Everyone except Knight Kaminski fell down, collapsing under the impact of the Skysurfer to roll across its surface. Groans rose from the prone group. “Get up!” Knight Kaminski yelled, and I struggled to my feet. “Go, I will draw them off.”

“Who attacked us?” Lilianna asked.

“I do not know,” Knight Kaminski answered, “but they were proficient in the weird Death Aether just like the Naga before, so they are not anyone to play around with. Get into the jungle and hide yourselves. I will draw off pursuit. I will return to the crash site after half an hour. Be ready to ambush those that are tracking me.

“We will,” I said. “Come on.”

“Wait,” Jamila said. She grabbed Knight Kaminski’s shoulder and triggered the Steady Bazsazi Technique. “This will help you stay safe.”

“Thank you,” she said.

I struggled to my feet. Everyone else staggered to theirs as well, recovering from the impact with the sand. Jamila moved among us to use the same technique, enhancing our natural healing ability and giving us greater stamina.

The Skysurfer itself was embedded in the dirt at a thirty degree angle. *I hope it’s not damaged*, I thought. *No, it should be fine, it’s way too strong for a simple impact to break it.*

“Pull the Portable Home into your ring,” Knight Kaminski commanded.

I reached back and tapped the shack-sized structure, sucking it into my ring and taking up half of the available space. After that, we all ran toward the tree line. Knight Kaminski sent a massive bar of

Fire Aether through the woods, and I heard a dozen creatures screaming in agony as they burned. “You are weak and pathetic!” Knight Kaminski yelled, then she bolted in the opposite direction we had run. “I will murder you all for attacking me!” She sent another absolutely massive blast through the jungle, disrupting any trail we could have made.

*She’s protecting us while attracting the attention of all our enemies. Light, I hope I can be as brave if the time comes for me,* I thought. We ran for a few minutes, avoiding plants as much as we could to hide our trail. A tree thudded to the ground somewhere behind us. “Hold up!” I whispered loudly before extending my Forgotten Mists Technique, the stealth technique Headmaster Glav had given me, over everyone that wasn’t already covered in some type of stealth technique. When I finished, I hissed, “Be still!”

Lampart, Bridget, Zimnodlot, and Hanna had each hidden themselves, and Sia had shrunk down and landed on my shoulder to basically count as part of me for the technique.

Jon shifted, and I grunted. I was already straining to use it on nine targets rather than one, and every motion made my center twitch as the Aether drain increased.

After twenty minutes, Lampart said to us all, *“You can release the techniques. The nearest Naga have departed.”*

*Naga!* I thought, then dropped the technique. My right leg hurt from the surge of Aether I’d used, but I could feel it healing in real time. “What are the Naga doing here?”

“Looking for something. I do not know what,” Vaya said, “but it cannot be good.”

“We need to find Knight Kaminski,” Milenna said. “She might need our help. She is already late.”

“It has only been twenty-five minutes,” Lilianna said. “We should wait until she is actually late.”

“True,” I said. “Everyone, gather quickly. If Knight Kaminski doesn’t get back soon...” I trailed off, then shrugged. Everyone but the Beasts dropped into their centers to pull as much Aether in as we could. Five minutes passed glacially, worry soaking through all of us.

Finally, Milenna repeated, “We need to find her. It has been too long.”

“Yes, we do, but we need more information about our enemies to see how we can help. Lampart, did the Naga take the Skysurfer?”

*“Knight Kaminski did something to prevent them from moving it,”* Lampart told me. *“Two were attempting to steal it, but were unable to.”*

“I can track them,” Bridget said. “Especially with Lampart’s, Zimnodlot’s, and Sia’s help.”

Sia leapt off my shoulder to one of the low-hanging branches. *“Then let us go.”*

*“Be careful,”* I told him. He chirped, and I felt his amusement through our Bond. With a flap of his wings, he was suddenly well above the treetops, still in his smallest size. Somehow, he’d turned his feathers to a dark-blue color, making him harder to see. There were a dozen other birds off in the distance, helping to camouflage him.

“Follow slowly,” Bridget said before she ran off back the way we came.

“We will wait a few minutes to let you get ahead,” Jon called quietly after her.

After two minutes, I said, “That should be enough,” and moved after her at a walk while keeping my Aether sense and Sight on their highest settings. The dense Aether of the ZaboJ Swamp tried to hide what was around me, but I was able to focus through the haze. Dozens of trees glowed in my Sight, though they were all on the weaker end. I was still amazed at how many Aether plants were available here on the edge of Craesti.

We moved carefully through the swamp, retracing our path until I reached a massive clearing that hadn’t been there before. Over a hundred trees were lying shattered on the ground, the leftovers from Knight Kaminski’s attack. The Skysurfer rested in the distance, untouched by our attackers.

I scanned the open space, but the Fire and Air Aether that went into her technique screened everything around. I had to shut

off, as much as I could anyway, my Aether Sight. Even without it, though, I could see nothing beyond the tiny fires left over from the explosion. “Anyone see any Naga?” I asked.

“No,” came a short chorus.

“I’m going to grab the Skysurfer,” I said. “Do you see where Bridget went?”

“Over there,” Lilianna said, pointing to our right. I looked to see a fallen tree had an arrow carved into it. It was just three quick slashes, but that was enough to point the way.

“Go, I’ll catch up,” I said before taking off toward my flying device. A film of Aether coated it, but when I touched it, the Aether surged over me and vanished. With a flick of my Aether, the Skysurfer shrank to the size of a surfboard and then it vanished into my ring. I turned and sprinted after the others.

Vaya had reached the edge of the cleared area and paused, waiting for me to catch up. “There,” she said, gesturing at another mark. “They went that way. Come on.”

We spread out, keeping at least two of us in sight at all times, while trailing after Bridget and Lampart. I could feel Sia above us, and he fed me information on the moving Beasts around us. There were dozens of level two and three Beasts hiding in burrows or the branches of trees, but we ignored them and they cowered away from us. Even with our control of our auras, the lower-leveled Beasts knew we were beyond them, and they shivered in their homes until we passed.

“Sia, do you see anything?” I asked.

“There are at least a dozen Naga in the forest,” Sia told me. “And there are weird movements that make me think of the Alghul we saw from the last Naga. Be careful down there.”

“Do not blow your cover unless we call,” I told him. “Having you as a source of information is worth some minor injuries on our part.” I felt his disapproval but I didn’t care. “I’m serious. We need to know what is going on around us more than we need you to fight for us. If we are truly in danger, I’ll scream for help, and you can berate me later. Right now, it is better to know where the Naga are, where their forces are, than it is to have you fight our battles for us. We can

*beat the few Naga we encounter.” I paused for a second. “Do you know where Knight Kaminski is?”*

*“She left a few burning clearings behind her,” Sia said, projecting a vision of holes cut out of the forest to our left, “but I do not see any indications of where she is now. The ruins are ahead, and at least a dozen Naga are exploring the nearer edges.”*

*“Light blind it,” I cursed. “So how many total do you see?”*

*“Um,” he said, a feeling of focus echoing through our bond, “at least thirty. Only a few are close enough that I can feel their strength. Those are high-Condensation tier, with one at Seed Core. Her scales are a deeper green than the others. That may be an indicator, as several others with similar coloring are hiding their power. I cannot get close enough to break a veil without giving away my own.”*

*“Do not,” I told him severely. “We will simply assume that every Naga with darker coloring is stronger than we are, and avoid them if we can. Better to be safe than sorry.”*

*“Watch out!” Sia sent, and the underbrush in front of me parted. An Alghul stumbled out of it, saw me, and warbled loudly to its brethren.*



# CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

I lashed out with a squeak, my fist slamming into and through the rotting thing's chest. Its scream stopped, but it didn't stop moving. With a backhand to the head, I cut it down. A dozen more warbles echoed from our surroundings, the Alghul's compatriots responding to its call. "Fire burn it," I whispered, frustrated at myself for not noticing it quicker.

"Cut them down," Aleks commanded, her voice muffled by the trees separating us.

I leapt into the branches of the tree in front of me, the tiniest flicker of Aether enhancing the limb I landed on so it didn't break. I still couldn't see far, but I finally located an undead with my Aether Sight on full. It was like a hole in the Aether; the trees and grasses near the creature lost tiny bits of their Aether as it passed. The Alghul's Aether was the twisting green and black from before, but the colors seemed to fade into a dark gray if the creature wasn't in my direct line of sight. It was hard to notice among the swirls of brighter colors, which could be why I missed them earlier.

Vaya stepped forward and sliced the undead in half, and I saw its Aether spread into the ground where it fell. Even the dark brown of Earth Aether seemed to get a bit fainter, though the effect faded within seconds. *Those things are damaging the world around them, I thought, and the Naga are making more. This is not good.*

A choking growl was followed by a weight slamming into me from behind. Unfortunately for whatever it was, I was well braced and barely moved, while the sound of bones breaking echoed around me. I leapt up, spinning in the air to catch myself on another branch and found a zombified Jungle Panther standing back up on

the ground below me. Its front legs were bent awkwardly, but the Beast didn't care.

I dropped from the sky to crush its skull before yelling, "There are Beast zombies too. Everyone collect up so we can fight as a group."

*"There are four Naga near you,"* Sia said. *"I cannot sense the Alghul at all, so I am useless at protecting you. I will return to fight by your side."*

*"We are fine,"* I told him. *"We have twelve Core gatherers and four Core Bonds. These things are mid-Condensation at best. Sam could fight one, and so could Fluffy, so we will simply tear them apart. How strong are the Naga, though?"*

*"Three are at Threshold Condensation, and one Seed Core. There is something odd about their Aether, though,"* Sia said. *"You only have a minute before they will reach you."*

*"Guide me to intercept them?"* I asked. "Jon, Vaya, follow me. Four Naga incoming, we're going to meet them."

"Go," Jon said as he smashed a zombie snake into a tree, pulping it. "I think they turned most of the animals in the jungle into these things."

"They need to pay for that," Vaya growled.

"Then let's make sure they do," I said, then froze for a second. *"Sia, be careful, the birds up in the sky with you may be enemies as well."*

*"I have seen no indications of that, but I will watch them as well,"* Sia said. *"There is a small clearing ten meters in front of you. You will reach the edge just before the Naga do, be ready."* I could feel his thoughts communicating with Jon and Vaya as well.

We crossed the distance in a few seconds and crouched behind a tree. I pointed at Jon and gestured to my right, then at Vaya and my left. I then indicated I would go up, over Vaya's head, so that all three of us could attack at the same time. They nodded understanding and hefted their weapons. Crashes sounded from behind us as the others obliterated the zombies in the woods. Very little Aether was being used, though, so the Naga still had no idea how strong we were.

After a moment, I could hear the slithering of the Naga. I held up the last three fingers of my right hand, keeping a grip on my trisula with my thumb and pointer, then counted down. I leapt into the air, a small platform forming under my foot to redirect my charge. The closest Naga, a male with dark-green scales on his snake body and a silvery breastplate over his human torso, reacted too slowly, his eyes growing huge as an Ice Spike from Jon took him in the chest, stabbing straight through his armor.

I focused on the rearmost Naga, who gave me a feeling of danger. My Wrath of the Lightning Herald drilled into her, but a swirling shield of Water and Chaos-ified Death Aether formed nearly instantly. My technique broke the shield, but the tiny fraction of its power that was left shattered on the armor she wore.

Her human-like face twisted in a sneer, and she stabbed toward me with her hand like a claw. A two-meter wide talon of Death Aether exploded at me.

I cut it apart with Lightning before it reached me, but another followed quickly after it. I could see another technique forming behind her, only this one was targeted back the way they came. *"Can't let that finish!"* I thought, then I ducked under one of the Death Claws. I formed an Air Aether Slash and yanked a chunk of Essence out of my Core. Infusing the Slash with the Essence, I cut at the Naga while maintaining a connection to the technique.

She created that same shield and sent another Claw at me from the side.

I forged the Iron Skin, Granite Bones Technique and trusted it to take the attack while I pulled sharply at the Air Aether Slash. It curved over the shield and my connection to it snapped. Thankfully, I was able to line it up on her still-forming technique. When the Essence-infused Slash hit the Air and Lightning Aether runes, they were cut apart. The snap of the Aether rebounding into the Naga made her stumble. Her Claw slammed into me, cutting through the first two layers of my technique before breaking apart.

She unleashed her aura, no longer caring that it would affect her companions. Not that it mattered, as only a second later Vaya cut down the third Condensation Naga. "That's it?" I exclaimed,

surprised at how weak her aura felt. Aether surged into my legs, and I exploded forward. Aether coated my trisula as I went to slash with my right and stab with my left, only for her to catch my weapons with the gauntlets she was wearing.

My strength was beyond her. I wasn't able to cut through the gauntlets but I could hear the bones in her arms snap as she blocked. My left trisula continued, deflected down and to the right by her block, and cut through the side of her stomach. I planted my foot and spun, trying to backhand her across the face only to be smacked backward by a tail slap.

My reflexive attempt at attacking her tail cut off the tip, and she screamed again. Sound Aether tried to push me away, but instead degraded the last layer of my defensive technique. A Vine Whip ripped out of the ground next to her and wrapped around her chest, pinning her arms down. Jon arrived just after it, slashing across the Naga's gut. Her shield sprung up again to block, causing her Sonic defense to fade away.

I sent a Lightning Aether Blast into her unshielded snake bottom, altering the runes slightly to give it more of a shocking effect rather than damage. Her Aether Shield had been destroyed already, letting my Aether wreak havoc across her nerves. She spasmed, and Vaya used the distraction to push a dozen Wooden Spikes out of the ground into the snake. Jon straightened up and cut her head off with a powerful chop.

"Anyone else? *Sia, anything?*" I asked them.

*"There are some moving in the trees, but it looks like you are undiscovered for now,"* Sia said. *"Princess Aleksandra asks that you join her in another clearing, forty meters away to your right and rear."*

*"Thanks,"* I told him.

"Lampart says that there were two other Naga in the jungle near us, but she and Zimnodlot removed them before they knew they were under attack," Vaya told me.

"Awesome. Come on, let's meet up with the others," I said, waving. We hurried through the jungle and found the clearing Sia had directed me to. In the center, Jamila was crouched over Xiao while the others stood, nervously watching the plants around us.

Hanna was the only exception, as she was sitting off to the side, gathering. “What happened?”

“One of the undead bit him while he blocked an attack on Lilianna,” Jamila said, her hands glowing green in my Aether Sight. “Some kind of curse is causing his cells to necrotize. This did not happen last time!” She growled that last bit. “I am cleansing it now, but it is resisting. Vaya, can you assist? Hanna already exhausted herself trying.”

“Of course,” Vaya said, rushing to her side. Her Aether joined Jamila’s. “Wait, we have it isolated in his forearm right now.”

“Yes?” Jamila asked. “If I loosen my grip on it, it will spread rapidly.”

Vaya pulled out her knife, coated it in Metal Aether, and sliced a chunk out of Xiao’s arm.

Jamila flinched backward, losing control of her Aether, and the bloody hunk of flesh rapidly rotted away. “Well, that worked,” Jamila said, bending back over Xiao and quickly healing the damage done. She frowned as Aether poured off her. “Healing everyone is getting more difficult. With each temper and advancement it takes more Aether to fix problems and regenerate flesh.”

“That’s why they could heal us so well when we were only Aether Gatherers,” I said. “Huh.”

“Now what?” Aleks asked. “Do we wait for Knight Kaminski to find us, or do we seek her out?”

“The explosions stopped a few minutes ago,” Ming said. “So it is likely she lost her pursuers and is searching for us now.”

“Or she has been taken and needs our help,” Milenna said.

“What could we do against someone she could not beat?” Jon asked incredulously.

“Heal her with techniques and pills, then keep the weaker Naga off her so she is not overwhelmed,” she answered. “They do not have anyone stronger than Perfect Core, or we would already be destroyed.”

“She makes a good point,” I said. “Everyone, finish recovering and clean your weapons if needed. We’ll wait here for an hour or two. *Sia, can you look for Knight Kaminski? Do you see*

*where the ruins are?"* I repeated what I'd asked Sia aloud, so everyone else could hear.

*"The edge of the ruins is a kilometer away. I can see a dozen Naga inspecting a building, with a hundred or so of those Alghul standing motionless throughout the area. No sign of Knight Kaminski. The last place she used a technique has a few undead milling around. The Beasts around us have seemingly vanished, though the birds are still circling above me. They are not undead, but have not answered any of my calls,"* Sia told me.

"We should circle around to another side of the ruins," Aleks said, "if Knight Kaminski does not return. The Naga will be watching this area more closely, especially if they realize their patrols around here were killed."

I frowned. "Should we even wait then? If we move carefully, we might be able to pass through their lines, but if we delay too long, they may realize that Knight Kaminski was not the only person on the Skysurfer."

"Let us wait," Lilianna said. "I am not sure Xiao is ready to move."

"I am fine," Xiao said, trying to sit up.

Vaya and Jamila both held him down. "Wait," Jamila said. "I need to be sure that we fully cleansed you. If any of that Death Aether got into your heart or brain, I do not know what would happen."

He stilled, not resisting as they pushed him back down. The two girls continued scanning their Aether through him for another five minutes before Jamila was willing to say, "You are clean. Run your Aether through any meridians in the healed area. Let me know if you feel any discomfort."

"Thank you," he said, sitting up.

Lilianna sat next to him and put her arm over his shoulder. She pulled him into a side hug and whispered something I deliberately didn't hear.

"Did anyone else fight any Naga?" I asked.

"No," Aleks said, coming over to stand next to me.

I smiled at her. “The Seed Core Naga I fought seemed... weak,” I said. “I’m not sure if that is good or not. If they’re all like that, Knight Kaminski should have demolished them, and that beam of Death wouldn’t have forced us down. Did we get lucky, or are their strongest fighters doing something else right now? If so, what, and do we need to stop it?”

“We do not know,” Aleks said. “We can only act on the information we have. Have you used every current source of information you have?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you not get information from Light and Darkness once? Have you asked them? What about the mapping device?”

“Uh, no.” I shrugged. “I didn’t think of it, actually.”

“No harm in trying, right?”

“Sure,” I said. I bowed my head, closed my eyes, and thought, *Hey, Darkness, Light, any hints as to what is going on here? Should we get involved quickly, wait for Knight Kaminski, just leave? I’m not certain what is right here.* I waited for a minute, then shook my head. “I don’t think they can communicate with us easily. I’ve only heard from them once.”

“When was that?” Sam asked, nervously holding a club with some paper wrapped around it.

“When they told me about you,” I said. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have known you were a slave of the Illyrians.”

“I’ll have to thank them, then,” Sam said. “I’m going to kill the Illyrian slavemasters.”

“We all are,” Ming growled, angrier than I had ever heard him. “Their disgusting practices have caused too much pain for anything but death.”

“Focus on our current issues,” Aleks said. “While I agree and will be supporting the war as much as I am able to, we are currently near a substantial enemy force.”

Ming looked sheepish for a second, before nodding determinedly.

“I do not think we should use the mapping device,” Bridget said, answering Aleks’s third question.

“Why not?” Aleks asked.

“While none of us here can feel or see the Aether wave used,” she explained, “that does not mean that no one else could. If one of the Naga, especially the Perfect Core, can, we would be dead. Better to use our own senses.”

A round of nods met that declaration. We waited another hour, but Knight Kaminski never showed up. “Well, let us go explore and see if we can find her,” Aleks said, and we started to circumnavigate the ruins.



# CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

Over the next four hours, we carefully crept through the edges of the Zaboij Swamp. Every dozen meters or so, one of us would sense a zombified Beast or Alghul. Each one was avoided, making our path much longer than it would have been otherwise. While we could easily have obliterated them, we'd decided to try and actually be stealthy this time.

This was validated as a good idea when, after half an hour, Sia reported, *"At least fifty zombies have just sprinted into the swamp. Ten Naga followed, surrounded by another fifty undead. I can see their paths, as they are simply cutting through the foliage. Keep moving; you are already out of their way, but we need to be ready in case they spread out."*

*"Got it. Thanks for being our eye in the sky,"* I said.

We continued on, with Sia giving us updates about the search party. He didn't see Knight Kaminski, though. Even the undead near us were acting more agitated, with some pacing around. We avoided those at a larger distance, barely able to feel them in our Aether senses. My Aether Sight was less than helpful, as they were nearly invisible in it. I kept trying to enhance or change my Sight, but no matter what I did, the zombies were still just barely noticeable blobs of dark-gray Aether unless I was close to them, with nothing in the way. They faded into the background of Water, Wood, Earth, and Air that was everywhere in the Zaboij Swamp. It didn't help that there were occasional natural pockets of Death Aether, usually over a Black Lily or Shrouded Hyacinth, both of which Vaya noted the locations of.

"I really want to harvest them," she said, pointing at a small batch of Black Water Lily floating in a small pond. "They are

extremely rare and valuable, but it will take me an hour to get just one successfully. We do not have time now.”

“We’ll come back later,” I whispered back. “I’d love to see what I could make with those too.”

“Another undead snake, ten meters to the left,” Bridget whispered. “Follow me.”

We kept sneaking, until we’d reached about a third of a circle around the ruins that we knew about. A quick, quiet discussion had us head straight in from that point, until we found our first partially collapsed building. The visible architecture was interesting, as each of the still-standing bricks had the smoothness of Aether-built structures, but they were each only twenty centimeters tall. *Why didn’t they just conjure up the entire thing?* I thought as we looked at it. A Weeping Cypress Tree was growing through the center, its limbs bowing at the edges to partially shield it from sight.

Inside, there were the remains of three rooms, with one possibly a kitchen based upon the fallen-apart stove on the edge. “These bricks were Inscribed,” Sam said, scooting up next to me. “Each one only has a few runes, but they add up. That’s the only reason why they survived this long, though there is no Aether left in them.”

“Is that why they are bricks instead of a solid wall?” Milenna asked, leaning in.

Sam looked to see how close she was and grew flustered for a second before answering, “I think so?”

“As much as I want to examine this further,” Vaya said, “we should barrel that until we take care of the Naga problem.”

“Good point,” I said.

“Can you store a few bricks for later?” Sam asked.

“Uh, sure.” I threw two that had fallen from the wall but were pretty much intact into my ring, then looked around at the others. “Anyone sense any undead?” No one answered, so I nodded. “Okay. Let’s keep moving deeper into the ruins. If we find a lone Naga, we should try to capture them. Try to eliminate any undead we locate without being detected.”

“Spread out,” Aleks said. “Stay five meters apart or so, and we should be close enough to support each other while letting us cover more ground. Aiden, ask Sia to stay near us. Kami, can you speak with everyone here?”

“Yes,” Kami said. *“I can speak in your mind up to a hundred meters. I can speak to Bridget farther. I can speak to Lampart farther still.”*

*“I will explore ahead,”* Lampart said. *“No one under Perfect Core will be able to find me.”*

“Be careful,” Vaya told her.

“Of course,” Lampart replied, then seemed to fade into the plants around us.

“I’ll anchor the line,” I said. I scanned the distance, but didn’t see any major sources of Aether within my line of sight. “Come on.” We moved slowly, picking our steps with care and keeping our Aether senses extended. A few minutes later, a massive explosion occurred in the distance. I froze as I felt Knight Kaminski and another Perfect Core’s aura, though it was faint.

*“Knight Kaminski just attacked a group of Naga,”* Sia told us. *“And then she fled into the jungle. The Naga Perfect Core is chasing after her.”*

“Thanks, Sia,” I said. *“Relay to the others to speed up a bit? I’m sure the Naga are distracted now.”* I felt his affirmative response, and took off at a faster pace, though we still weren’t trying to run through the swamp. There were too many places we’d cause excessive noise and alert our enemies.

“Did Knight Kaminski look injured?” I asked Sia during our jog.

“No,” he responded. *“She did not. That was a lot of Aether though, so she may be hiding for a while to refill.”*

“Got it,” I told him. *“Keep an eye out for her, and shout if it looks like she needs help.”* Again I felt his agreement, then focused back on our trip.

“Aiden, follow me,” Lampart said as she appeared in front of me. *“Everyone, there are undead ahead. Sneak behind them and*

*behead them in a single strike.*” With that command, she turned and bounded through the jungle.

I hurried after her, running in a crouch and pushing my Forgotten Mists Technique as hard as I could. We passed another dozen small ruins, and then she hopped up to the second story of a larger one. I jumped up beside her, using the tiniest flare of Air Aether that I could to set down quietly.

Ahead of us, three Naga, two male and one female, were hissing at each other, one male having just arrived from inside a larger ruined building. “Did you find any hint of the vault?” the female asked in a commanding tone.

“Forgiveness, Enta, I did not,” said the male, who was wearing a light leather chest plate and helm with a spear on his back, lowering his head and turning it to the left.

“The Enti will not be happy,” she responded. “We have been searching for days, and still cannot locate her desire. Of course, ones as lowly as us only get to search the least likely of places.”

“Enta, we will find the vault and elevate you to Ente!” the other male said boisterously.

Enta, or *the* Enta—I wasn’t sure if it was a name or a title—nodded sharply then said, “Come, there is another to inspect.” She gestured at the building I was in. They were only five meters away or so, and with her gesture I saw a dozen Alghul shuffle out from various rocky places.

The closest undead was only a meter away from the door, or three meters from where I stood. The floor under us was only partially there, but the rotted remains of a desk provided some cover to hide behind. “*I have called the others over,*” Lampart said. “*When the second humanoid undead enters, I will attack and draw them through the rear. Be ready to remove the Naga.*”

“*Good plan,*” I told her, and started to form the Myriad Elements Enhancement Technique I’d learned a week prior. It was a direct improvement to the General Strengthening Technique, and seemed tailor-made for me. Every Elemental Affinity I had at or above Excellent—so every single one of them now—was able to be used to improve my strength, speed, flexibility, proprioception,

perception, and toughness. I went from being able to lift a ton, to ten tons. Measuring that had been a fun day, and I was still amazed at how much stronger I was.

I kept the technique only barely formed, not letting too much Aether run into it to prevent it from overwhelming my stealth technique. Lampart had padded over to the other side of the second floor and was looking down the hole in the floor. The first Alghul staggered through, made a chuffing sound, and kept moving forward, into a still-intact room. The hole I'd entered through was above it. All the walls on the upper floor were gone, but the bottom floor had three different rooms still intact.

The second undead that bounded through was a Rodent of Unusual Size, a giant rat with the body shape of a capybara but the pointier face of a sewer rat. It sniffed a few times, but didn't detect anything before it ambled over to the doorway the humanoid undead walked through.

The third enemy to enter was an Alghul, and Lampart pounced on it. It crumpled to the ground, Lampart's claws ripping its head off as a line of Aether extended from them. With a growl, she shot across the room to slam the ROUS into the wall, both front paws digging into it to pull it in half.

The undead in the back room bugled in alarm, with the other zombies joining in. Lampart growled, then went into the other area to take out the last Alghul inside before leaping out the window. Three more undead rushed through the main doorway before getting stuck trying to all squeeze into the rear of the building at the same time.

"Inanna's sake," the exuberant male said. "Stop. One at a time." At his command, the Alghuls ceased moving, and then orderly stepped through. I could sense the other six creatures heading around the building toward where Lampart had curved her path.

The Naga got close enough that I could feel their gathering level, even with my suppressed senses and their own suppressed auras. The Enta was at the high end of Complete Compression, almost ready to push for Seed Core, while the two males were only in Threshold. Individually and together, they posed no threat to me

unless I really screwed up, but I wanted to make sure that no warning went out to the other Naga.

The excited male entered below me, and I could see the other two were going around. I crept forward to one of the many holes in the floor, tiny, tiny bits of Air Aether keeping me from making the partially rotten boards creak, and looked down. The Naga was examining the first Alghul Lampart had re-killed, a frown on its human-like face. Except for the lack of a nose, the Naga could have been the upper half of a Craesti. The image was ruined due to the forked tongue that he flickered out to taste the air.

His back was to me. I tensed up, keeping my attention on the re-dead body, before I jumped down. My trisula slammed point first into his torso, and I ripped my hands across his body, eviscerating the Naga. He died instantly, without a single Aether flicker, and the two other Naga I was tracking with my Aether Sight didn't shift their path at all.

*Whew, that worked. Now I've just got to overwhelm the other male Naga and disable the female one. She's higher ranking, so we want to take her alive for better information,* I thought to myself as I carefully rushed out the door.

The area in front of the ruined building was the first place without significant ground cover. There were even patches of the road still visible. Up and down the road I could see dozens more buildings in various states of repair, with the area to my left gradually getting more complete than the building I had just left. The Naga were to my right, though, and had just turned into the alleyway between two standing walls. I ran forward, my Myriad Elements Enhancement Technique springing up to full power. The Naga started to turn, but I crossed the remaining distance in a blink.

My left hand formed a Lightning Strike, a simplified version of my Wrath of the Lightning Herald that I could produce in less than a split second, and sent it into the male Naga. He'd managed to turn halfway around, only to catch my attack in the side of his skull. He was blown into and through the wall next to us.

My right hand created a much weaker Lightning Aether Blast, again modified to be more stunning and less burning. The Enta had

turned all the way around and drawn the two-handed sword she was wearing. My blast went into her sword, which she dropped with a shriek, hands spasming. I rushed forward, and deflected away a Sound technique that was supposed to push me backward. My fist slammed into her gut, and then I brought my knee into her face as she bent over.

Both attacks I moderated a bit, as I was fairly certain my full-power blow would just kill her. After the knee, I smashed her head into the wall, breaking the leftover stone. The Aether Technique I could see her using to strengthen her body shattered, and she was left incoherent. *“Sia, tell the others that I have captured a Naga,”* I said.

*“Good. Vaya and Aleks both report that the others have killed two dozen Beast undead. None of them were able to make any sound,”* Sia told me. I felt his presence fly over me, and he directed me to a smaller house with four intact walls. I carried the barely conscious Naga into the only room to find Vaya, Jamila, and Aleks.

“Everyone else is on watch,” Aleks said. “I am here as Princess, Vaya wanted to guard, and Jamila is going to keep the Naga alive. I need you to translate for me, Aiden.” She smiled a grim smile. “Okay. Jamila, heal her head, please, but none of her other injuries.”

“I still do not like this,” Jamila said, bending over the scrambled Naga. Lighter-green Aether, Life Aether I thought, streamed into our enemy’s head.

After a few seconds, the Naga screamed. “It hurts,” she said.

“Tell us why you are in these ruins, and we will heal you,” I told her, my voice growling.

“I am an Enta of Tiamat, and will never betray my people,” she hissed at me, Aether collecting as she tried something.

With a tiny surge of Essence, I broke her technique apart. “Everyone talks sometime,” I said.

Another Aether surge, this time internal and too quick for me to do anything about. With a snap, her heart exploded.

“Great, religious extremists,” I said, staring down at her dead body. “That was unexpected,” Vaya said.

“It does give us good information,” Aleks commented. “We know not to bother taking prisoners.”

“At least, not prisoners who are Enta, or whatever that means,” Vaya said.

“My translation makes it something like junior priestess,” I said. “And Tiamat is Chaos, or related to Chaos or something. This is not good.”

Jamila was looking at the corpse in horror, and apparently didn't hear what I had just said. “She just... but why? We would have healed her.”

“She believed in her people and their cause enough to die rather than tell us anything,” I said. “That makes me worried.”

“Why?”

“Because if telling us about it was betrayal, that probably means it has something to do with us, or at least with Craesti,” Aleks said. “We need to stop them... whatever it is they're doing.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“We should split up,” Ming said. Aleks and I had called everyone together, other than Lampart, Sia, and Zimnodlot, who were all keeping watch, so that we could talk. They could all take part anyway.

“Why?” I asked.

“Each of our teams is fully capable of exploring the city. It is easier to keep out of sight when we are only four people, instead of thirteen. There are three major roads that Sia has spotted in the ruins, so we can each move down one. Sia, Lampart and Zimnodlot will need to split up, though, so that one moves with each team to allow for communication,” Ming said.

“What about Kami?” Bridget asked.

“I recommend that Kami, Fluffy, and Miss Samantha stay here.” He gestured at the building behind us.

“Kami, Sam, can you turn this house into a bunker? Kami, you could use Earth and Metal Aether to dig out an underground area, with tunnels that lead in all directions. Sam, I’ll leave you with Inscription materials. Can you strengthen the bunker and house, and make attack Inscriptions?”

“Yes,” Kami said, waddling into the house and nosing around in it.

“Uh, sure,” Sam said. “I’ll get Kami to help charge the Inscriptions. They’ll probably only reach Complete Circulation strength, but that’s better than I can make without help.”

I reached into my ring, and discovered that I could mentally grab things from inside the Portable Home. I pulled out every bit of Alchemical and Inscription material I could, then passed out to the others bottles of healing, gathering, and refill pills. The majority was retrieved from their backpacks and other luggage, while the rest were made by Jon, Hanna, and myself.

“Okay, we’ll take the center,” I said once we were ready to split up. “Ming, your team will explore the right side, while Aleks, you four will explore the left. Hopefully, Knight Kaminski will meet up with one of us soon. Be safe, everyone, and retreat if necessary. If one of us has to run, all three teams will regroup here, and we will fight it out. If they are too much, I’ll bring out the Skysurfer, and we’ll run.”

“Should we send Sam to Oddali to get reinforcements?” Milenna asked.

“I can’t power the Skysurfer for long,” Sam said.

“Then should we all just go?”

“That might take too long,” I said. “We’re still at least four days away even flying, and the Naga might have found whatever they’re looking for by then. Imagine if they were to attack Oddali with the undead and that curse was unleashed on the civilian population. What if it was trying to turn Xiao into an Alghul and they were able to spread exponentially? We cannot let that happen. We are here, and we are strong enough to deal with the problem. So we will.”

“Well said,” Ming told me, clapping his hand on my shoulder. “We are ready, let us explore.”

With that, Jamila gave me a quick hug, then jogged off to be the rear point in the diamond formation that Ming’s team fell into. Aleks nodded at me with a smile, then turned and led Milenna, Hanna, and Lilianna to the left, moving through the jungle for a bit before they would find the road on that side.

“Be safe, Sam,” I said, then looked at Kami, who was halfway buried as dirt rippled around her, and Fluffy, who was sitting on Sam’s head and looking around. “If you are discovered, be ready to run and hide.”

“You all be safe too,” Sam said. “I’ll make a fortress for you to return to.”

“Thanks.” I grinned, then looked at Jon, Vaya, and Bridget. “Let’s go.”

Ten minutes later we were twice as deep into the ruins as I had been when I ambushed the Naga. The buildings gradually got more put together, though vines grew over a significant portion of the

walls. We'd found and eliminated a couple undead, but no Naga so far.

A beam of Death Aether shot into the sky from a few kilometers away. The ruined city was huge, so that put it near the center. *"The Perfect Core is warning me off, or trying to kill me. I will have to watch from a farther distance for a bit, or else she will determine that I am not a normal Beast,"* Sia said. *"No sign of Knight Kaminski, but there was no pulse of Aether that would signify a fight either, so I think she got away. There are Naga clustered around a large building two hundred meters farther in, at a cross street to the one you are currently on."*

*"Thanks Sia, be careful,"* I told him.

We hurried forward before stopping at the edge of the building at the corner. I could hear some hissing, but it was too far away to make out what they were saying. Bridget vanished into the building, which looked like it might have been a storefront with a home above it. I glanced in and saw that there was a large open room. Bridget leapt onto the second floor through where the stairs used to connect as I watched.

The other side of the room had an open doorway that looked out on the opposite street. I snuck inside and followed the wall around to the farther opening, ducking under a small window that was mostly covered with detritus. "... believe this is the place," I heard a female Naga say.

"We still need to explore the entirety of the building," another one answered. "Male, what is taking so long?"

"There is a still-intact vault in the basement," a gruff, guttural voice said. "The Gallu are unable to damage the walls, and it will take us several turns to get in, if we can at all."

"Incompetent," the second female said.

"Forgiveness, Ente," the male said, then his voice changed. "Someone is listening to us."

I dove away from the wall just in time, as a lance of Metal Aether exploded through it. Three Core auras burst out, two Seed and one Foundation, and I could feel their Aether senses trying to

locate exactly where I was. I wrapped Air, Lightning, Ice, and Water Aether around me, dismissing myself from their senses.

“Behind the building, one Craesti,” the senior female hissed. I felt them dart around the building.

“Come get me, you stupid snakes,” Jon yelled.

I rolled to my feet, charging up a Pride of the Plasma Herald as Jon created a massive shield of Ice. Through the doorway I’d entered, I could see the edges of the Ice, and watched as the male Core Naga smashed an enormous maul into it. It cracked, but held, until a beam of Death Aether smashed into it. The Ice seemed to fade out.

“Hey, idiots,” I said. “He’s not alone.” The male turned, only to get a face full of Plasma as I poured a frankly ridiculous amount of power into it. He screamed for only a second, before his personal Aether Shield was overwhelmed, then having an open mouth just let the Plasma burn through his interior.

“Gallu, come,” the junior female bellowed, and dozens of howls sounded around us.

“Don’t forget about me!” Jon said, then his Ice Shield exploded outward, dozens of Icicles forming from the remains.

I darted out of the door to see the two Naga. The older female had a grayish sheen to her green scales, and was wearing an ornate bronze breastplate along with a silver hauberk of chainmail over her hairless head, neck, and shoulders. Her weapon was a boar spear, with larger lugs off the tip than normal. It glowed brightly in my Aether Sight, so I knew it was heavily Inscribed.

The younger Naga had blue-green scales and a black robe on. The robe had an eight-pointed star embroidered on it, but unlike the normal Elemental compass, each point was colored gray. She held a staff that again had a gray, eight-pointed star on it. That staff was even more heavily Inscribed, and she was the one with the aura of a Foundation Core gatherer. She gave off a feeling of danger, and I knew she was the biggest threat we’d ever faced, beside Primordials.

The weaker Naga had an Icicle embed itself into her arm, while the other one created a cylindrical formation of Death and Air

Aether that rapidly corroded the Ice Aether away. Ten Gallu, the Alghul as we'd been calling them, clambered around the corner behind the Naga, only for Bridget to leap out of the second story and sweep her blades across and away from her body. A blade of Air and Metal Aether, the Wind's Razor as Bridget called her new technique, shot out and bisected all but one of the Gallu.

A forest of Wood Spears blasted out of the ground underneath the older Naga. The majority of them skipped off her scales, but three hit just right to pierce all the way through. She screamed, and Sound Aether blasted apart all of the Spears. Blood poured from her wounds, as Vaya had learned how to add Decay Aether to her Wood attacks, which prevented healing. The explosion of wood shredded the last Gallu and tossed Bridget a meter away.

She rolled to her feet then glanced to the side. "There are more of those Alghul coming! I will delay them," Bridget yelled, then darted away.

The stronger Naga sneered at us, then chanted something that didn't translate. Jon and I both blasted at her with different techniques, while the older Naga fought with a set of Vine Whips that Vaya had grown around her. Both Jon's and my attacks were dissipated by the whirling cloud around her.

"Jon, defend me and I'll work on a stronger attack," I shouted, jumping back a meter and starting to form runes around me. Dozens flashed in every second, just like they did around the priestess. Aether poured out of Jon, creating a swirling shield of Water, Ice, and Air in front of us. Vaya was still hiding behind the store, letting her Aether techniques attack for her.

"Inanna's Judgement," the Naga shouted, her staff glowing a decidedly unpleasant green gray. A spinning star of Death Aether shot out at us.

"Ulinzi Dhoruba!" Jon yelled, using the incantation to focus his Aether a bit stronger. The spiraling Aether in front of him solidified into six layers of alternating Air and Water, with a film of Ice between each layer. The star reached the first layer, only for the Ice and Air to explode out at it. Each subsequent layer erupted when its

Ice was broken, and each eruption reduced the momentum and strength of the attack.

I finished the runic pattern I'd been working on just as Inanna's Judgement reached the last layer and was stopped. It detonated, spikes of Death Aether shooting in eight directions. Jon intercepted one with his shield, another pattern of runes etched into its surface. I held both hands over my head, and engaged the spiral of enhancement runes. "Electromagnetic Tribulation," I stated, not feeling the need to shout it. "Jon, move."

Jon dove to the side as I stepped forward and stabbed both of my trisula toward my opponent. *I'm really glad City Lord Kowalski made me new weapons before the International Tournament. My old pair would have exploded with this much Aether flowing through them,* I thought as the largest Lightning Bolt I'd ever created blasted out. It was an incredibly dark yellow, seeming to swallow all of the light around it. I'd enhanced the Lightning with more Lightning into what I was calling Electromagnetic Aether.

It skipped across the distance, both straight there and taking a staggered path in a way that made my head hurt, and shattered the Naga's defense. My attack blew up on her armor, throwing the priestess ten meters farther down the road. She flipped and rolled another two meters before getting her tail under her to stand up. Her motions were jerky, lacking the deadly grace she had demonstrated earlier. Her armor was cracked, and burn marks marred her skin underneath it. With a snarl, her staff swept at Jon and I, a dozen skulls screaming out of it.

I dropped to my right knee, panting with the effort of the single largest attack I'd ever done. With a groan, I dove forward to roll under three of the skulls, only to see them start to turn toward me. Jon sliced apart two and then blocked another one while dodging between another two. The other four were curving through the air, already changing their movement to catch us.

I flipped my trisula around and powered out a dozen tiny Aether Blasts from the modified Four Twin Stabs Technique. It took four to blow apart a skull, but I could make them fast enough to

defend against her attack. "I have them, attack the Naga!" Jon yelled, ten Icicles orbiting his head as he focused on defending.

"Got it," I said, then sprinted toward the Naga. She smirked at me, and I could see Aether infusing her body as it glowed. I did the same, pumping my strength to new heights. She smashed her staff down at me right as I got in range. Only the massive increase to my proprioception, perception, and reflexes from my new technique let me keep up with the higher-tier gatherer, but with them I was equal to her speed.

I roared as I pushed both trisula up, and caught her staff between the tines of my weapons. I spun to my left, twisting my trisula so they jerked her arms straight ahead. Her staff spun out of her hands, and I kept the spin going to slash at her with a backhand attack. She blocked it with the bracer on her right arm, hissing at me as the metal bent in. A Sound Blast rocked my head, and my ears rang.

I snapped a front kick at her, channeling an Aether Blast through and just in front of it. The impact doubled her over, then the blast sent her flying into the air. An Icicle slammed into her armor as Jon joined the attack. It glanced off, a small mark the only evidence.

She stopped in midair, a look of hate on her alien face. "Enough," she growled, and a stream of Aether Bolts shot out at me. I threw four Air Shields in front of the attacks, angled so that the blasts were diverted into the buildings around us. A quick glance showed me that the other Naga had ripped Vaya's vines out of the ground, but Jon had jumped over and was shield bashing her into the ground.

Vaya ran around the corner to send a healing technique into Jon, who had a bite taken out of his left leg. Bridget grunted audibly, then a Gallu's top half came soaring over the crossroad to land with a splat. It was still weakly moving, but an Air Blade removed its head shortly after landing. *Everyone's fine*, I thought, *focus on my enemy*.

Three of my Shields had cracked apart in the split second of my distraction, as the Naga poured out her power at me. I surrounded myself in Air Aether then rocketed upwards, dodging around her attack as she twisted to point her extended hands at me.

Her beam cut off as I spiraled around it, a Poisonous Metal Arrow—a combination Metal, Wood, and Decay attack from Vaya—embedded in her tail. She screamed, olive-drab lines extending out from the Aether in a venous shape.

Bridget leaped over the building to my right, and targeted the Naga with her Steam Spear, a combination of Fire, Ice, and Air that exploded into a burning cloud when it stabbed someone. The Steam obscured the Naga's vision, so she didn't see me as I streaked toward her. My blades were charged with a technique I was calling Plasma Edge, which created a cutting line on my weapons that was eerily reminiscent of a lightsaber.

A pulse of Air blew the Steam away from the Naga, only for her to scream as I flew, blades first, into her chest. Her armor held for a second but I created an Air Shield behind her to shove us together. My trisula cut into and through her. I started to drag them apart.

“Fine, then we die together,” she said, her arms wrapping around my torso and pulling me into an uncomfortable hug. I felt her Aether surge as she prepared to detonate her Core.

“No,” I screamed at her, channeling more Aether and Essence into my blades to strengthen them.

Before I was able to cut her apart, a massive force ripped her off of me. Sia had her in his talons and he slammed her into the ground before leaping away. All five of us threw Aether into various shields around her prone body, all of which barely contained the detonation of her Core. Every bit of Essence I'd spent was immediately refilled, and my Core stretched uncomfortably.

“Thanks,” I said, staggering over to Vaya, who immediately started to heal the deep cuts on my arms left by the Naga's last grasp.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“We should explore the building they were in,” I said. “I heard them mentioning something about a vault that they couldn’t open. Just like the previous group was looking for a vault. Hopefully, we can find what they’re looking for before they can, and stop whatever their plan is before it can start.”

“It would be a good place to recover as well,” Vaya said. “I am exhausted and need to gather.”

*“I too could use a rest,”* Sia said, shrinking down to land on my shoulder.

“There were three other Naga along with the undead,” Bridget said, “but they were all pretty weak. Nearly thirty of those Fire-blasted creatures though. Vaya, can you check me out for their curse? I got scratched and bit a couple of times, but I think I managed to keep it out of me.”

“Sure,” Vaya said as we walked toward the building the Naga were investigating. The structure was four stories tall, the largest of any we’d seen so far. There were four pillars stretching upward to the overhang, though only two still connected. The walls were made of brick, like all the other buildings, but these ones were various colors of white marble, brilliantly bright compared to the store next to it.

“Whoa,” Jon said.

“Yeah, now that I do not have ugly things pawing at me, I can admire it. This is a gorgeous building,” Bridget said.

We hurried inside, looking over our shoulders just in case some other Naga were coming to investigate the sounds of battle. *“Zimnodlot is still above the city,”* Sia said. *“Princess Aleksandra has not encountered any Naga, and he does not see any response to our fight. They were unable to hear it; something about the still-intact buildings is disrupting the sounds from around us. Princess*

*Aleksandra is investigating a structure now. Lampart tells me that Ming has ambushed two Seed Core Naga and eight Alghul.*

“Thanks, Sia,” I told him. “Come on, we can investigate this, uh, bank. It kinda looks like a bank.” Inside the double entryway, which was unadorned with a door like every other structure in the ruined city, was a large, open atrium. The room stretched three of the four stories of the building, and had a few windows looking into it from the wall across from us. A large stone counter still stood to the right, and the rear wall had three openings leading deeper in. The floor was mostly covered with stone dust and detritus, leaving the tracks of the Naga and Gallu obvious. Each doorway and the counter had a line straight to them.

“So, where first?” Jon asked.

“Probably need to find some stairs down,” Bridget said. “Vaults are usually placed underground if possible.”

“I am going to see what is behind that counter.” Vaya pointed.

“Uh, I guess let’s split up, but don’t go too far,” I said. “Jon, you take the far-left door. Bridget, the middle one, and I’ll check the right door. Sia, see if there is anything visible in the rooms through the windows?”

I felt Sia’s agreement as he leapt off my shoulder with a flutter of wings, while Vaya followed the Naga’s path to the counter. I kept looking around while walking to the right door. The room was bigger than I thought it was, as the doorway was three meters tall. The center door was nearly ten meters away.

My chosen door led to a large hallway that extended another twenty meters. Every four meters there was an opening to the right. I looked into the first one and found a small square room. “Huh, I wonder what this was for? Maybe the attendants would take the customers here for one-on-one meetings? All the furniture must have rotted away or been taken whenever the M’Zee evacuated the city.”

I investigated all the rooms, but they were identical. The end of the hallway had another opening, but I didn’t want to get too far into the building without talking to the others. I turned and jogged

back to the main atrium, and found Bridget had just gotten back out from her door as well.

“I found a bunch of small rooms, along with two bathrooms,” Bridget said.

“Only the small rooms for me, though the hallway extended deeper in,” I said.

“Mine too,” she responded.

“I got the stairs up,” Jon said, poking his head out. “The first floor has a smaller open area to the rear of the building, but I did not go past that.”

“There is a small lockbox in the counter that has not been opened,” Vaya said, walking over. “I could not figure out how to do so.”

“Neat,” I said. “Show me?”

“We are going to go upstairs and explore,” Jon said, grabbing Bridget’s hand.

Vaya led me to the stone counter and then around it. The counter had two built-in shelves that ran the entire length, with the exception of the very middle. There, fully enclosed in the stone, was a metal box. The door of the box was smooth metal, with the only blemish being a small hole. The box lightly glowed with Aether, letting me know that it was Inscribed and powered, but I couldn’t see the runic lines. “I wonder if we should get Sam to come check this out?” I said.

“Why?” Vaya asked.

“You know how I can see Aether?” She nodded. “Well, Sam can read Inscriptions. She’d be able to tell us what all of the runes are.”

“Or we could just break it open,” Vaya said. “Samantha has her own task right now.”

“Okay,” I said with a shrug. I formed a Forceful Punch, only using it with a hammer hand straight down on the counter next to the box. The stone shattered, collapsing the counter for nearly a full meter to either side of my impact zone. The safe tumbled out of the now-broken enclosure, and Vaya quickly caught it. It zapped her, but it was only at the upper end of Condensation in strength.

“Ow, that stings,” she said, carefully putting it on the ground. “I am going to slice off the very front of it only.” She held both her hands out, and then started to run Water Aether between them. It formed two lines, each one speeding up every second. After almost a minute, she slowly separated her hands until they were just wider than the box. The lines of Water were moving fast enough that they were howling, and as she carefully dragged them along the edge of the box the metal seemed to scream.

The Aether in the box flared for a bit, a small shield appearing on the metal attempting to stop the cutting. It broke nearly immediately, though, Vaya’s strength well beyond what it was designed to resist. Vaya spent nearly two minutes carving through the box. She could have done it much faster, but she was very obviously focusing on keeping any damage to the interior of the box to a minimum.

With a clank, the front of the box fell off. She’d estimated the thickness of the safe’s door nearly perfectly, leaving only a very thin film of metal blocking entrance to the interior. “I am not sure I can cut through that precisely enough,” Vaya said. “Can you?”

“I think so,” I said. I crouched next to the box, then extended a single finger. I coated the tip of my finger with Aether, modifying the Plasma Edge technique to use Metal Aether instead. I created a tiny blade, only five millimeters long, then tapped the upper left corner. It punctured straight through. I moved down the top, making a cut every centimeter or so. Once I reached the right edge, I moved back along the line to put another hole in the middle of each pair.

After finishing cutting through the entirety of the top, I moved a quarter of the way down on either side. Once done with that, I pushed the top in enough to get a finger through, then yanked outward with all my strength. With a shriek, the metal ripped off the front, giving us access to the safe.

Inside, there were three disks of metal covered in Inscriptions. I reached in and took them. “Well, these are pretty neat, but I don’t know what they do,” I said.

“Might be keys for the vault downstairs?” Vaya suggested.

“Here.” I handed her two. “I’m going to run some Aether through the input here.” I pointed at one of the few runes I recognized.

“Be careful,” Vaya said, stepping away from me.

“I’ll be fine,” I said. Once Vaya was a few meters away, I focused on the disk in my hand. I pushed a tiny streamer of Aether into the Inscription. Over the next few seconds, the runes carved into it gradually grew brighter. Nothing else happened beyond it starting to reject the Aether after ten seconds. I looked over at Vaya. “Eh, probably keys like you thought. They’re not doing anything else but glowing right now.”

“Well, what now?” Vaya asked.

“Hey Sia, where are you?” I asked him.

*“Third floor. I believe I am in the manager’s office. There is intact wood furniture in this room,”* he told me.

*“Can you tell Jon and Bridget that Vaya and I are going to the end of the right hallway?”*

*“I will,”* he answered.

“Want to check out the hallway there?” I asked Vaya, pointing where I had looked the first time.

“I do not have anything else to do,” she said with a grin.

The end of the hallway was a small room with the stairs down dropping from the middle of it. Piles of dust around the edges showed that there were probably cabinets or shelves there before the city was abandoned. There were ten stairs down before a landing flipped the direction, and then another ten stairs. There were two more landings, each separated by ten stairs, before the stairs ended.

In front of us was a small room, four meters by three meters. The only adornment was a two-meter square of solid metal. The left side had a meter-long rod that was attached into the door as a handle. The door was incandescent in my Aether Sight. “Whoa, that is huge,” Vaya said.

“Yeah, it is. I don’t think we’re going to get through that easily,” I said. “I can barely see the metal due to the Aether it is giving off.”

“Try one of the keys?” Vaya asked.

“We can try,” I said, then put it to the door and channeled some Aether into it. I felt the disk vibrate, then tried to pull the bar down. It didn’t budge.

“Maybe all three?” Vaya said, then put the other two onto the door. It didn’t work. We tried all three, two, each one individually, then tried to put them on the bar, under the bar, around it. After twenty minutes of trying, we finally gave up.

“Yeah, I don’t think these are for the vault,” I said. “Want to try to cut through it?”

“Let us explore the rest of the building first,” Vaya answered. “Maybe we will find the actual keys to the vault.”

*“Aiden, there is something in this room that seems odd,”* Sia sent to me. *“Can you come up here and see if you see something with your Aether Sight?”*

*“Sure thing, bud,”* I said, then looked at Vaya. “Sia thinks he found something on the third floor and wants me to check it out.”

“Well then, I will race you,” she said, then turned and sprinted up the stairs.

“Cheater!” I yelled after her, breaking into my own run to try and catch up. All I heard in response was laughter. I followed her up, down the hallway and around to the leftmost doorway. The opening led to the stairs upward, and I followed closely behind Vaya.

We ignored the first two landings, and the stairs ended on the third floor. “Ha, beat you,” Vaya said.

“Eh, I was just enjoying the view,” I told her.

She immediately turned bright red, then gave me a sultry smile. “Well, thank you,” she said. She spun away from me and sauntered through the open doorway, deliberately exaggerating her stride.

I gave her a wolf whistle, which only resulted in a confused look. I broke out laughing. “I guess that doesn’t translate,” I giggled.

“I can guess from context,” Vaya said with a grin, her face still red. “I do not think I have heard anyone whistle like that, or whistle at all to show appreciation for someone.”

“Huh, got it,” I said. “I think you are beautiful, and I am amazed that you are interested in me at all.”

She shook her head and laughed. “Only you would doubt your own worthiness. Come on, let us see what Sia discovered.”

I grinned after her, then we walked through a hallway before following the flickering light given off by Sia’s feathers. “*About time,*” Sia told us. “*That wall. What do you see?*”

“Uh, it’s definitely Inscribed, but I can’t tell how,” I said. “The edges of it are here.” I moved to the wall, then etched two lines showing the corner of the Inscribed area. I then did the same on the other three corners, only for the stone surface to ripple and then vanish, revealing another safe in the middle of the hidden area.

“I figured out what the disks are for,” Vaya said, then tapped the disk she was holding to the safe. It clunked, and the door opened. Inside were three bars of a glittering metal, green gold in color, and a single disk with a different set of Inscriptions. “That is orichalcum! I have only heard of it. It is an incredibly rare metal, stronger than anything else we have found, and it can hold Inscriptions like nothing else.”

“Well, yoink,” I said, putting all three bars into my ring. “Do you think the disk there is the key to the vault below?”

“It could be,” Vaya said.

“*Then take it down and try it out,*” Sia said.

“Will do, Sia,” I said. “And without you, we would not have found this at all!”

Sia cawed triumphantly, then flapped up to my shoulder. He pecked my ear, and I felt his impatience.

“Come on, Vaya, his imperial majesty Siarczysty wants us to open the vault below,” I said, faux importance dripping from my voice.

“Well, we cannot inconvenience his august self,” Vaya said, doing a giant bow, beyond even what I would give to King Craesti.

“*It is about time you recognize my importance,*” Sia said, though I could feel laughter in his voice.

We ran back down, waving at Jon and Bridget who were in the hallway on the second floor as we passed by. After navigating all

the turns, we arrived in front of the vault. Vaya stepped forward, pushing Aether into the new disk, only for nothing to happen yet again.

“Uh, ask Kami to bring Samantha here?” Vaya said, looking down at the disk.

“Yeah, maybe she can spot something. Sia, can you scout the path from the safe house to here?” I asked him.

“*Take me outside,*” he said. I ran out of the bank, and Sia jumped off my shoulder and spiraled up into the sky.

Two minutes later, Kami came running into sight, Sam riding her back with an expression of terror. “How can you be so fast?” she asked rhetorically, staggering as she slid off Kami.

“Once you advance enough, it will seem slow,” I told her. “We have a puzzle for you. I’m hoping that your Inscription Sight can figure out what we are supposed to do.”

“I’ll try,” Sam said. She followed me down to the vault, where Vaya was holding the manager’s disk and the disks we found in the atrium counter.

“Samantha, thank you for coming,” Vaya said. “This was found ...” She explained where the different disks came from and what we had attempted to do so far.

Sam nodded, taking the disks from her and looking at them closely. She started to mutter to herself, too quietly for me to really hear it, and turning the disks over. She moved over to the vault door, her head turning back and forth as she examined it.

Finally, ten minutes later, she handed me the smaller disk found in the counter. “Channel Aether into this, and hold it here,” she said, pointing to a specific location in the upper right. “Vaya, do you have another disk? Good, then channel Aether into it and hold it here.” She guided Vaya to a location in the bottom right of the vault door. After we both were settled, she started to channel Aether into the manager’s disk, and placed it just to the right of where the bar would go once it rotated ninety degrees.

A loud clunk sounded, and she grabbed the bar and pulled it down. It moved easily, and once it was horizontal she was able to push the door open with no issues.



“Whoa,” I said, looking inside.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The vault was huge, easily ten meters wide and deep, with a height of five meters. The door opened into the middle of one wall, and along the back wall in front of us were stacks of silver bars that reached the ceiling. A smaller stack of gold sat to the right of the silver, and beside it was another ten bars of orichalcum.

Turning the vault into a maze were lines of Inscribed metal cabinets, each of them one and a half meters tall and a meter wide with two doors that opened into the two-meter wide hallway. Sam darted forward to inspect the first cabinet. There was a wire wrapped around the handles, with a small lock holding the wire tight. Sam tilted her head in curiosity, then yanked downward on the lock. The wire broke. “The cabinets have Inscriptions for preservation, not to prevent theft,” she said. “The lock didn’t have any Inscriptions for preservation, so the wire grew brittle.” She looked inside. “Unfortunately, this is empty.”

“Even if we find nothing else, that wall of money makes this worth it,” Jon said. “Even divided among all of us. I absolutely cannot wait to play with some orichalcum.”

“You don’t smith,” I said.

“Well, yeah, but maybe we can grind some up and use it in a powder? Maybe it will be explosive, like you said aluminum is when ground into very tiny pieces,” he retorted.

“Uh, that takes really, really tiny pieces,” I said.

“You and explosives,” Bridget said, shaking her head with a grin. “Come on, let us explore.”

Jon nodded and went to the other side of the makeshift hallway to start looking in the cabinets on that side. I just walked to the end of the cabinets and looked to the left. More storage lined the

left side, while the right was the silver bars. More hallways extended back toward the front wall all the way to the end. The far end had two layers of cabinets instead of one.

To my right, though, the end was different. There was a large open area at the far-right corner, with an Aether Glow that made me shield my eyes for a second, until they adjusted. I immediately headed toward it to discover a heavily Inscribed display case. Vaya saw me turn right, so she went left to explore down those hallways.

Inside the case, there were five weapons. The leftmost one was a two-meter-long halberd, sitting at a diagonal. The ax head on the halberd was huge at sixty centimeters wide. The hook on the back was smaller, as was the spear head on top. All of the metal was the shimmering green color of orichalcum.

Next to the halberd was a jian, slightly longer than Xiao's current sword but otherwise perfect for him. On the far right was an unstrung metal bow. The bow had stripes of orichalcum and a silvery metal in it, and I was assuming that was what gave it the flexibility to bend. Next to the bow was a dagger with a twenty-five-centimeter-long blade, making it just short of what would be called a short sword. *Vaya switched to a dual long blade style, but she might be interested in the dagger,* I thought.

I glanced at the center weapon, a staff with an eight-pointed star on the tip. Inside the star was a black crystal. The staff was the only weapon without any orichalcum on it, and instead was made of a very dark gray metal with streaks of deep green barely visible, with black wood inlaid in the runes. Looking at it made my stomach clench, and I had an extremely uneasy feeling about it.

Sia felt uncomfortable as well, and the emotion spiked every time he glanced at the display case. "*What do you sense?*" I asked him.

*"Death,"* Sia said. "*That staff is not meant for good.*"

*"Why do you think it is in the display case?"*

*"Just because something is evil, does not mean it cannot be expensive and rare. The four other weapons all look like they were made by the same person. You can see the similarities in how the*

*blades were folded. Even the tips of the bow show the same pattern. The staff, though, does not."*

*"I think the staff may be what the Naga are looking for. I wonder why it is not farther into the center?"*

*"Maybe the center of the city was more of an administration district, and this area was where the wealthy actually lived. Like how Azyl's rich district is to the north of the city center, due to the presence of Azyl Academy."*

*"Good point," I said with a nod. "So we got extremely lucky that the Naga here were trying to open the vault themselves instead of calling for more help. Maybe there is another couple of banks or other places with vaults near the center that is keeping the other Naga busy?"*

*"No matter what, we do not have infinite time. How do we open this so we can take it away?"*

*"I do not know," I told Sia. "Sam," I called out. "Need your help here."*

*"Coming!" I heard her yell.*

About thirty seconds later, she walked over, and Fluffy jumped off her shoulder onto mine, on the opposite side from Sia. "That is disturbing," she said, her eyes locked on the staff.

"Yeah. Sia and I think this is what the Naga are looking for. I want to take it away, then leave this area so they can't get it. We'll go to Oddali to alert them to the Naga's presence, and then head to Craesti City," I said.

"Well, I will try to see if I can figure out the Inscriptions on this. Nothing I'm seeing right now points to the keys we used already," Sam said, moving closer.

"Where's Kami?" I asked her.

She looked at me absently, then shook her head. "She said she was going to stay in the atrium and watch for Naga. I'm going to need some more paper. Got any?"

"Sure," I said, then found and brought out a stack and handed it to her. She had a quill and inkpot that she'd taken out of a belt pouch. With a plop, she sat down in front of the display case and grabbed the top sheet of paper. She pressed it onto the glass, then

started to trace the Inscriptions that she could see. Tiny marks indicated the three-dimensional nature of the runes. Once she filled that sheet, she put a small Aether rune on the edge, and it stuck to the glass.

*Huh, I thought, leaning close to see the rune. That's neat. I'll have to remember that. It's not very strong, but it's enough for a sheet of paper. Maybe I can scale it up to use to attach my trisula to the sides of my legs? I'd have to ask her, or Librarian Narwan, how to use the rune properly for that, though. While she's working, I'll start loading up the gold, silver, and orichalcum.*

With that thought, I walked along the rear wall until I got to the pile of metal ingots. Each bar of orichalcum absorbed easily, but when I stacked them inside my ring I realized that they were actually floating a bit. I pushed more Aether into my ring, dragging my perception to right next to them. "Weird," I said aloud. "It feels like the ingots are twice as big as they actually are. I wonder why? Did the Inscribed weapons do that same thing? Good thing I've got plenty of room in here."

The gold and silver stored easily enough. I jogged down the row to find Jon holding a book that had seen better days. "Eh, I do not think the preservation Inscription was up to keeping a book intact for a thousand years," he said. "The ink is gone and I am pretty sure if I sneeze the paper will disintegrate."

"Let me have it?" I asked, holding my right hand out.

He shrugged and gave it to me.

I immediately absorbed it into my ring, where it settled on the table in the Portable Home. "There, I'll keep it safe in my ring until we can get Librarian Narwan to look at it. Maybe he'll be able to get something from it?"

"Sure," Jon said. "He is a librarian. I have not found anything else of interest in the cabinets. Most of them are empty, and the few that were not mostly had piles of dust or rotten wood. I would say that this bank was mostly empty when whatever happened to the city happened."

"Yeah, probably," I said with a shrug. "So the gold and silver ingots were probably the bank's collateral or reserves."

“I found some coins!” Vaya yelled from the other end.

“Ooh, I want to see,” Jon shouted, taking off in a run. Bridget was already on the path toward the far-left side. She looked over her shoulder and laughed at us, then turned sharply, using her movement technique to let her corner better.

Vaya was standing at the end of the little hallway, where a much larger cabinet was set into the wall. Inside were five bins. Two were full of bronze coins, one was mostly full of silver coins, one of gold, and the last had twenty-seven orichalcum coins. “I guess they used orichalcum the same way we use platinum,” Vaya said, gesturing at the bins. She held up one of the gold coins. “Does that not look like Spirit?”

“Yeah, it kinda does,” I said, taking the coin. On the front of the coin, an M’Zee looked regally out of the metal with a crown on their head. The back of the coin had a tower engraved on it, along with writing that said, ‘Long may they reign!’ I translated for the others. “Are the coins the same?”

“They all have Spirit, or whoever that is, on the front, but the backs are all different,” Vaya said. “The orichalcum coins have an Elemental Compass on them, while the silver ones have a winged horse and the bronze a building that looks like a fancier version of this one.”

“Neat,” Bridget said, pulling out a silver coin. “How many do you think there are?”

“A few thousand bronze, around a thousand silver, around five hundred gold, and twenty-seven orichalcum. Though I honestly have no idea how much these will be worth,” Vaya said. “Aiden, store them for us?”

“Sure,” I said. Each bin stored easily, though the orichalcum coins exhibited the same strange metaphysical presence that the ingots did. We explored for another few minutes, finding two more books and a smattering of silver and gold coins. Two metal blades were found in a cabinet. They had not been Inscribed, but were elegantly created. The alloy they were made of gave them a brown-silver color, but none of us recognized them. Again, I pulled them into my ring.

“It’s a good thing we ate so much food on the way,” I said laughing, “or I wouldn’t have space for this stuff.” The blades were in the last line of cabinets before the clear area with the display case.

Finished with exploring the rest of the vault, I returned to find Sam had completely covered the left half of the display case with papers, often stacked two or three deep. “Sooo, I have no idea how to get through the Inscriptions on this,” Sam said. “There are quite a few runes I don’t know, though I can infer most of them by position. Like this one.” She walked over to point to a rune that was shaped like two x’s touching. Three vertical lines were drawn through the letters, one through each x’s center and one through the place both x’s connected. Above the lines, a notation told me that the x’s twisted on themselves in the z-plane, and the vertical lines created another set of x’s.

“Yeah, that’s weird,” I said. “Though, with only one twist, it could be a variant reinforce rune.”

“Exactly,” Sam said, giving me a grin. “I think this means ‘reinforce structure,’ or ‘reinforce plane,’ or something along those lines. More specific than a reinforce rune, and thus stronger in its niche. I thought about trying to disrupt some of the runes, especially the five lock runes around the handle, but I cannot so much as scratch the surface of the glass.”

“Well, I’ll try,” I said.

She moved over and cleared a spot on the glass. Pulling a piece of chalk out of her pocket, she made a mark. “Cut a few millimeters into the glass here,” Sam directed.

I nodded, then played around with some runes before creating a blowtorch technique. The tiny flame burned blue before turning a deep indigo as I cranked up the heat. “Shield your eyes,” I said, then bent to the glass. The bright light made me squint a bit, but my eyes had been strengthened like everything else about me. Which made me wonder about the Aether brightness making my eyes hurt. I shook my head and touched the flame to the glass.

The Inscriptions inside the display case flared, rejecting the heat from my torch. My finger started to grow hotter, but my own Fire couldn’t hurt me. I frowned, and pushed, focusing on increasing the

flow rate of Aether. After five minutes, I gave up. “Wow, you’re not kidding,” I said. “That case has some serious defenses on it.”

“Must have been owned by someone very important,” Sam said. “And unlike the wire and locks for the cabinets, this setup was done well enough to last forever.”

“Maybe we can just blast it down?” I said. “There are four Seed Core gatherers here, and Sia as a level six Beast is just as strong. Collect your papers off the case and I’ll try to just break the glass.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Jon, Bridget, Vaya, get ready to join in,” I said. “There is no way that this still has significant amounts of Aether left, so we should be able to deplete it fairly rapidly.”

“Does it have some kind of defense?” Jon asked.

“There is an alarm,” Sam said, “but it doesn’t have any active defenses that I can see.”

“Where does the alarm go?” Vaya asked.

“Uh, no idea,” Sam said with a shrug.

“Are you sure this is a good idea, Aiden?” Vaya said, turning to me.

“An alarm would probably go to the manager’s office, and maybe the local guard station,” I said. “Since there’s no one there, no one will hear it. The ruined state of the buildings around us probably means it won’t work anyway, but it should be fine. Unless you all have a better idea?”

“Can you just store the entire case in your ring?” Vaya asked.

Everyone looked at me. “Okay, that is a great idea,” I said. I reached out with my Aether and tried to wrap it around the display case, like I did with the ingots earlier. “No can do. It’s attached to the wall too firmly for me to break off,” I said.

“Well, then let’s cut it out of the wall,” Jon exclaimed, and channeled a large Ice Spike that he stabbed into the stone. A tiny chip cut out of it. “This might take a while.”

We laughed. “Okay, Jon, Bridget, you take this side. Vaya and I will work on the other. Sia, can you cut away from the top?”



Sam, do what you can here in front.” They nodded at me, and we all got to work.

Ten minutes later, Sia said, *“Princess Aleksandra reports that they have met up with Knight Kaminski, and killed another Naga search party. Hanna and Milenna took some injuries and will need time to heal. They are retreating to the safe house. Ming’s team is investigating another bank-like structure. They have managed to avoid the Naga in their area. Kami says all is quiet around our building.”*

*“Thanks, Sia,”* I told him, stabbing my trisula with Plasma Edge on it into the rock at chest height. It took significant effort to carve into the stone, its inherent Aether resisting our attacks. Thankfully, whatever Inscriptions were on the walls had failed at some point before. *I guess the M’Zee never thought someone would tunnel into the vault from outside without detection. The external Inscriptions on anything but the door were much weaker.*

We were barely carving into the wall, only trying to break the connections it had to the display case so I could pull the whole thing into my ring. We didn’t want to do too much damage, in the hope that we could fix it with some Earth Aether and keep the Naga guessing for even longer.

*“Naga coming!”* Kami shouted, pounding into the vault. *“Lots of Naga are coming down the streets now!”*

# CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

“No more time!” I shouted. “Break it out now! Kami, shut the door. We can open it from the inside. Sam, make sure the door is locked. Sia, tell the others that we are going to be trapped here and to converge on us. Make sure they know not to reveal themselves until we are ready for them to. Go, go, go!” I extended the Plasma Edge and slammed it into the wall. With a surge of willpower, I bent the technique and shoved against the stone. I could feel the stone resisting, but my Aether and stubbornness overpowered it. I didn’t do this earlier as I was vaporizing the wall in large chunks, way too much to ever cover up.

I saw Jon form a spinning saw blade out of Ice; the power he poured into it was more than any of us could possibly have done before we advanced. The door into the vault closed with a quiet thud, Kami and Sam keeping it from hitting too hard. A couple more clanks sounded as they locked the door, trapping us inside. For now, at least, since we could open it ourselves from the inside.

*“I cannot speak with Lampart and Zimnodlot anymore,”* Sia said once the locks were engaged. *“The vault is preventing it.”*

“Well, fish guts,” I said. “We may need to carve our way out.”

“That will take entirely too much time and Aether,” Vaya said. “Just getting the case off the wall is tiring us out.”

“We may as well fight our way through them, once they have started to attack the vault again,” Jon said. “As long as their Perfect Core is not here, we should be able to. Especially if the others are nearby.”

“Do not count your catch before bringing the nets in,” Bridget said. “We still have to figure out if you can even store the case.”

A wash of flame curled around us as Sia blasted apart a huge chunk of stone. *“Hurry,”* he told us. *“And maybe we can get out of here before the Naga arrive.”*

Grinding from Jon’s Ice Saw started again, and I created a small film of Air Aether over my ears to block it out. Vaya and Bridget were working together, where Vaya was creating small cracks using Earth and Wood techniques, then Bridget would fill them with Water and freeze it with Ice to break it apart faster.

It took another three minutes, and a good third of my Aether reserves, before I was able to push the case over. With a crash, it fell. *“Okay, store it,”* Vaya said, *“and let us get out of here.”*

I extended my Aether over the case, measuring it, and realized that I didn’t have enough room in my football-field-sized ring. *“Heh,”* I said, then turned to the side and dropped out a crate of preserved level three fish meat. *“Now I have room.”* With a grunt, I pulled the case into my ring.

The staff clattered to the ground, rejected by the ring the same way a living animal would. *“Lightning blast it!”* I said, looking at the distasteful thing on the ground. The uncomfortable feeling had increased massively now that it wasn’t in the display case anymore.

*“Ugh,”* Sam said from the doorwat, loud enough that I heard it.

*“Now what?”* Jon asked.

*“The Portable Home can store things and shrink so that it is tiny, right?”* Vaya said. *“Put it in there?”*

*“Gotta clear some room first,”* I said. I turned to the nearest line of cabinets, then kicked over the first one. The bottom of the storage broke off, but it cleared space. We smashed apart enough cabinets to give me space to put the Portable Home. It settled with a crash, crushing some of the debris left on the ground.

Vaya threw her cloak over the staff, unwilling to touch it even with her gloves. In spite of that separation, she still shuddered as she picked the staff up. I opened the Portable Home’s front door. She took off at a run, trying to get it put away as quickly as possible. She hit the plane of the door, and the staff stopped moving instantly. With a grunt, Vaya ran into it and collapsed backward.

I caught her, and the staff rolled out of her arms onto the ground. “I swear that thing is laughing at us,” Jon said, looking at the now-uncovered black thing again.

“I can sense the staff from the other end of the vault,” Sam said, walking over. “It’s making my stomach curdle. No luck storing it?”

“No,” I said, pulling the Portable Home back into my ring. “It won’t go into the Portable Home, or my ring. Light, I’m not even sure I could get it back in the display case again.”

Just as I said that, the vault’s door rang as something hit it. “Fire burn it,” Bridget cursed, “what was that?”

“Bad news,” I said. “The Naga are here.”

“*Start carving our way out the back?*” Kami asked, waddling over. “*I can dig a tunnel.*”

“I guess you can try. See how much you can get done,” I said.

Kami nodded, more of a dip of her head than a true nod, and walked over to the small hole we’d already made. Her claws glowed with Earth, Metal, and Stone Aether. When she stabbed them into the stone, it seemed to melt away from her claws. With a grunt, she ripped backward and a chunk the size of one of the cabinets peeled off the wall.

Vaya leapt to it, picking up the stone and jogging toward the front. “We will never hide a tunnel,” she said. “So we should make a wall in front of the vault’s door. Strengthen it as much as we can to delay the Naga.” The door rang again, even louder than the last time.

“The Perfect Core Naga has to be out there,” I said, wincing at the sound.

“We do not know that,” Vaya said. “Now help me.”

I nodded, then ripped apart another cabinet, carrying the metal pieces to the door. Jon followed me, dropping a pile and then creating yet more pieces from the cabinets around us. Another attack on the vault door left echoes banging around inside the vault. With a thought, I put a thin barrier of Sound Aether around my ears, blocking out the ringing before my ears started to bleed.

I took a strip of the metal from the cabinet and laid it across the edge of the vault door. My finger made a blowtorch again, and I carefully welded the metal to the doorway. Over and over again, I bridged the gap between the door and its frame, creating a bond that would take yet more force to overcome.

Every two minutes or so, the vault would ring with an attack. I could feel the Aether in the door reacting to each one. Each time, it flared the tiniest bit more weakly, and I knew that the door would fail eventually.

It took me nearly an hour to finish going up the side of the vault door. I worried the entire time that Aleks or Jamila would be hurt while we were trapped in here. Kami was making good progress on creating the tunnel, though she had to rest fairly frequently to recover her Aether. I had dropped another crate, full of Beast Cores this time, from my ring so she could use them to refuel. I envied the Bond's ability to just eat a Beast Core to absorb its Aether, rather than using the limited resource of the Dungeon Cores.

While I was standing on Air and welding plates to the top of the door, Vaya was creating a sloping wall using the stone pieces that Kami was creating, along with extra metal from the cabinets. Bridget was helping Kami by feeding her Cores and Aether, throwing the stone out of her way, and helping to cut apart other obstructions. Just after I finished welding, they cleared the foundation of the bank and started to move through dirt.

*"I can hear Lampart again,"* Sia said. *"They are hiding in some of the nearby buildings. She says they have had a few scares, but have gotten away without being detected so far. Wait, the Alghul are moving. They are starting to examine the ground behind the bank. I believe they can sense us. Kami, how quickly could you go straight up?"*

*"One minute,"* she said. *"It would take me one minute to reach ground level."*

"We need to be ready to move," I said. "Kami, go up. I'll hold the staff. Sia, tell the others that, when we emerge, we're going to fight our way out. Have them hide until they can get good strikes on the Naga."

*“Knight Kaminski agrees with your plan,”* Sia said. *“She will be ready to intervene and take out the Perfect Core Naga as soon as she shows herself.”*

*“Excellent,”* I said, then I looked at the welding job I’d done. *“Weld, that was worthless.”* I grinned, and Vaya groaned, but the tension broke slightly, enough to get us back to maximum capability.

*“The Alghul are digging now, directly over where Kami is,”* Sia said.

*“Kami, be ready to fight,”* I said. *“Sia, I want you to stay small and hidden if you can. I doubt they will be expecting you, so wait a minute after we all rush out before joining in. Unless, of course, we’re getting overwhelmed.”*

*“Will do,”* he replied, and I felt his power bank to the point that I could barely tell he was nearby.

*“Alghul!”* Kami exclaimed, and I sensed an explosion of Earth Aether. *“The hole is open!”*

*“Go, go, go!”* I shouted, sprinting up the tunnel. The staff was wrapped with a set of spare clothing I had and strapped to my back, keeping it out of the way and not touching my skin. I reached the end after only three steps, then leapt upward. An angled Air step launched me up the end of the tunnel. A Gallu was looking down, about to jump, when I hit it with an uppercut enhanced with Forceful Punch. The undead disintegrated.

I turned the impact into a spin, using the movement to get a good look at the alleyway we’d ended up in. There were nearly a hundred undead just starting to look up from digging at the ground. At the corner I saw two Naga, one male, one female, gazing at me in shock.

Kami was laying waste to several Gallu as I spun, and another three were about to jump on her. I swept them, and another five, back into death with a massive Metal Aether Slash. *“Thanks,”* Kami said, then she swiped forward, creating a dozen Earth Spikes to impale the same number of Gallu.

I landed, then stomped my foot, mimicking Kami with Metal Aether. A wave of my Aether shot out of my foot and ten Metal

Spires slammed out, stabbing through eight Alghul. Two shuffled out of the way, though it didn't seem intentional.

The Gallu's auras varied wildly, from Fog Gathering to Seed Core. The two that inexplicably dodged were both Seed Core, and they moved with a bit more intelligence than the others.

Jon landed next to me, planted his shield, and formed a large Ice Wall. "I am clearing the field," he shouted, then slammed the To Hold the World on High shield into the Ice Wall. It transformed into nearly a hundred Icicles that blew through the Gallu like a giant shotgun blast.

The Core undead were the only ones still standing after Jon's attack. They both had a few Icicles stabbed into them, but they just ignored the damage as they charged at us.

A wave of Aether behind me let me know that Vaya and Bridget were watching our backs. Jon stepped forward and met the leap of the closest Gallu with a Shield Bash, Force, Air, and Water Aether forming into a coating on his shield to blast the undead away from him.

I met the charge of the other Seed Core Gallu by enhancing myself with the Myriad Elements Enhancement Technique. The creature's movements seemed to slow down as my perception and reflexes surged upward. *The Gallu are dangerous to those under them in power, I thought as I ducked a slow-moving haymaker from the undead, but they do not seem to be able to use techniques anymore. Their only threat is from their bodily strength and inability to feel pain.* I sliced its leg off at the knee, then turned and stabbed my trisula through its brain stem. The impact shattered its skull, returning it to death.

"Kalon's Staff is here," the female Naga screamed. "Entu, it is here!"

"Retrieve it!" a voice bellowed.

"Yes, Entu," she said, then chanted while swinging her staff in a spiral in front of her. The male Naga slung a shield off his back, Metal Aether surging into it to create a technique. Jon blasted a large Icicle at the chanting snake girl, but the technique drifted into the

male's shield. He grunted, his shield slightly deforming from the impact of the Icicle, but holding.

"Death's Skull!" the Naga priestess shouted, her staff pointing toward us, only for her to grunt and collapse forward. Milenna stood behind her with her spear held out.

"There are more here!" Milenna shouted, turning back onto the main roadway and letting loose an Aether Slash.

Jon and I exploded forward. Just as I cleared the edge of the alley, a Foundation Core Naga streaked into view, slashing down at Milenna. She jumped backward at the same time he attacked, her spear coming up to block like a staff. His sword broke through her weapon, but was diverted just enough to miss.

I growled, trisula snapping together as I sailed through the air, and I quickly formed the Pride of the Plasma Herald Technique. All of the practice had gotten me to the point where I needed only a second to fully create it, and a beam of Plasma picked up the Naga and threw him into and through the wall of the building across from the alley.

I reached into my ring and grabbed the halberd from the display case. Whatever Inscriptions were on the case were not up to preventing the power of an artifact at the peak of Soul Strengthening from ripping right through them. "Here!" I shouted, and it dropped into her hands.

Three more Naga and an absolute horde of undead Beasts streamed down the road. The Naga, all females, stopped about a hundred meters away, slammed their staves into the ground, and shouted "Death's Embrace" together. A wave of Death Aether surged into the Beast Gallu.

The undead doubled in size in an instant, and the massive wave of Beasts threatened to drown us.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Jon stepped forward to defend, creating an Ice Wall to blunt the Beasts' advance while throwing a Snowflake Storm on the other side to damage the enemy. The front row slammed into it and cracks formed throughout. I knew the second grouping to hit would break it. Milenna spun her new halberd, Air Aether streaming through it, and created a twister that landed just beyond it, enhancing Jon's technique. The lighter Beasts—foxes, snakes, and birds mostly—were pulled into the sky as the cyclone roared.

The larger Beasts, including a rhinoceros-like creature with three horns, made it through the Air technique and broke Jon's Ice Wall. Aleks landed from an Air-assisted leap just in front of them, then sent a wave of Metal Spears in a crescent. The rhinoceros and hippopotamus in front impaled themselves then crashed to the ground.

Three undead bears rumbled over the newly re-dead bodies. I met the first with a triple-charged Forceful Punch while fully channeling the Myriad Elements Enhancement Technique, putting every bit of tempered strength, technique improvements, and my trisula's Inscription into the attack. The undead, sitting near the top of Seed Core in power, met my punch with a claw swipe. Our hands collided, and my technique detonated through the Beast.

It roared, a gurgling sound as its vocal cords were partially dissolved, and then was thrown back. Its paw, leg, shoulder, and a third of its torso disintegrated as my Aether surged through it. The remains of its body slammed into and through another Beast, re-killing it as well.

Aleks sliced apart the second one, her sword a blur as she used her body enhancement technique to raise her strength to be my equal, even with the tempers I had over her. That was the benefit of being the Princess, though I was sure that once I got my Myriad

Elements Enhancement Technique to a better level of understanding I'd jump ahead yet again.

The third bear was met by Jon, while Milenna kept her tornado going to keep the riffraff out of our hair. "Where are the others?" I asked, ducking under a Jungle Jaguar's lunge.

"Other side," Aleks said. "There are more Alghul and Naga there!" She growled and stabbed her sword forward. An arrow of Metal, Earth, and Fire Aether formed and shot out, blowing apart four more Gallu Beasts as they rushed toward us.

I caught a Giant Swamp Beetle's mandibles on my trisula, straining against a Beast that was nearing the power of a level seven, or Constructed Core, Beast. My Aether drained as I struggled against it, holding it in place while I formed a dozen Metal Arrows that then stabbed into its thorax. Earth Aether surged upward, and then the Arrows exploded into a porcupine of Stone Spikes, ripping apart the bug's body. *Thank goodness these things have no brains!*

"We have got to deal with the Naga!" Jon shouted, smashing an undead Spotted Skimmer Dragonfly away then swinging his sword into a Brine Mallard. The bird died, again, as it spewed a sludge of Brine and Acid, burning away at Jon's Aether Shield.

I sent a set of Metal Spears forward, blunting the advance of yet more undead Beasts. "Did the Naga empty the entire Light-blinded swamp to create their zombies?!" I screamed, frustration oozing from my voice.

"The Naga are enhancing them. You have got to stop them," Jon yelled again. "I will protect Aleks and Milenna. They will kill the Alghul. You go kill the Darkness-shrouded Naga!"

"Language!" I yelled, then stepped on the next Beast's head. I leapt into the air, sending a deluge of Metal Aether Slashes into the tornado that Milenna had been maintaining for the last two minutes. Each of my attacks killed tens of the weaker undead Beasts as they struggled against the Air currents.

Behind the Beast horde, the three Naga priestesses had multiplied to an even dozen, all of them chanting and sending bursts of Death Aether into the undead Beasts, enhancing their power and prowess.

I kept rising, wrapping myself in Air Aether to blast forward, trisula extended to spear the forward-most Naga on the tips. A shield of Death Aether tried to stop me, but my focused Metal, Earth, and Sturdiness Aether, channeled into my weapons, punched straight through. We'd spent a few days working on new Aether combinations during the trip. My Aether Shield, the base technique that Azyl Academy had taught me to cover myself in my own power, dimmed as the Death Aether tried to corrupt it away, but I was through before it could finish burning it.

The Naga grunted, her chant disrupted, when I slammed into her point first. Her armor, a chainmail equivalent, split apart in the wake of my attack. I rolled off the collapsing body to send two descending Metal Aether Slashes, cutting into two more of the Naga enhancing the Gallu. Both of them staggered back, their techniques stopping, but they were still standing.

The one on my left hissed, "He is mine," then darted toward me. Death, Water, and something that was a mix swirled around her. The other leapt into the air, Air and Ice coating her scales as she started the chant up again.

"That was not smart of you," I said, unleashing my aura and focusing it on her. She did the same. Even though she was a stage above me, I was able to restrict her control to only a tiny area around her. With a thought, I created a dozen orbs of Lightning and sent them streaking into her.

The shield she'd created blocked the attacks with only a small decrease in the mixed Aether to show for it. I frowned, then snapped my trisula up to block her staff. The Aether construct covered her weapon as well as herself, and it tried to run down into me. I rejected it, my aura and willpower pushing against hers, and found hers wanting.

I slammed my foot into the spot where her snake tail merged into her human-like torso, Plasma Edge coating my boot. The Death and Water Aether stripped most of my technique away, but what was left was enough to put another hole in her armor and send a stream of blood down her side.

A blast of Death Aether exploded out of her staff into my face. My circlet's shield absorbed it all, but I knew it couldn't take another hit like that. I growled at her, engaging Iron Bones, Granite Skin and yanking on her weapon. I turned the momentum of her forward stumble into a bear hug. My defensive technique started to degrade, though I bet she thought it would fail much faster. With my new strengthening technique running with my absurd Aether reserves flowing into it, my physical might magnified exponentially, and I crushed my arms together.

The Naga made a squawking sound, then her spine snapped. I threw her into the wall nearest us, and the stone shattered and collapsed onto my enemy. The other Naga dropped beside me, a Metal Spike sticking out of her side. I spun a kick into her head, using Plasma Edge again, and this time it disintegrated everything over her shoulders.

I turned around to find the Gallu mostly gone, Jon, Aleks, and Milenna having taken care of them while I took out their enhancers. More Naga were coming up the street, but were still at least five hundred meters away.

I started to form my new Stormcloud attack, enhancing it so that it would reach the Naga before they were able to attack us. Two seconds later, I was putting the last dozen runes into the technique when the bank's wall next to me exploded outward.

"I will do it myself!" shouted a female Naga as she emerged from the collapsing building. She wore black plate mail armor and carried a much larger staff than the others. Her staff glowed with a black light, and everything around it seemed dimmer. The staff on my back seemed to vibrate in time with the pulsing of the Naga's staff. The Perfect Core Naga could feel it as well. She turned to me and tried to freeze me in place with her aura while forming a technique to kill me.

Her aura was slightly weaker than Knight Kaminski's, and thus I was able to move while under it, though the backlash of my failed technique was making my head spin. A beam of Death Aether shot at me, and I was able to dive out of the way only by the skin of my teeth. A snap of the Naga's tail sent a line of Force and Air

Aether that picked me up and sent me shooting across the road into the same building I'd thrown the other Naga.

I smashed through three walls before coming to an abrupt stop on the fourth. Knight Kaminski's aura soared into the area as she shot forward to prevent the Entu from squashing me like a bug. Her spear slithered forward, spiraling around the Naga's staff to slash at her neck. The Naga tilted back on her tail in a move that the human body couldn't reproduce, then used her tail like a whip again. Knight Kaminski lifted her right leg to catch the side of the tail on her shin guards, then yelled at us, "Keep the little ones off me and I will take care of this one!"

"Yes, Knight Kaminski," Aleks called, then danced across the roadway toward the oncoming Naga. A whirlwind of Fire formed around her as she twirled, then continued down the street.

Jon sprinted in front and to the side, out of the way of her technique but in a position so that he could intercept the Death Skulls two of the Naga sent screaming at her. Milenna took the other side, Aether Slashes meeting a group of Death and Air techniques that looked like bats flapping their way toward us.

I dug my way out of the collapsed rubble, my side screaming where my ribs had broken. Aether surged in me to coat the damaged areas, numbing the pain and increasing my natural healing factor, but I didn't take any more time than that. Air Aether enveloped me, and I blasted into the sky.

When I'd been hit, Sia had surged out of the hole to defend me, but a dozen flying undead Beasts met him in the air. Zimnodlot and Sia were weaving through the crowd, Fire and Ice blasting around them. I shot toward them, landing on the back of an eagle with a ten-meter wingspan. Its body cracked as I landed, and I hit it with a massive Fire Arrow, channeled like all of my Fire techniques through my Bond mark, immediately afterward.

The undead bird cried out, then started to tumble toward the ground. My power swept me back into the sky, and I sent two Metal Aether Slashes into the path of a vulture before it could pounce on Zimnodlot. Sia's flames, tinged with Metal and Lightning, burned the

wings off a giant sparrow, leaving us with only five more undead to clear out.

The other side of the bank was a massive melee, Ming, Xiao, Vaya, Lilianna, and Lea clashing with dozens of Gallu and male Naga. Bridget was leaning against a wall, Jamila next to her with her hands glowing green in my Aether Sight. Hanna stood in front of them, shielding the injured from the Gallu while occasionally throwing out her hands to conjure a barrier that prevented an attack from hitting one of her compatriots. *Wow, she's got impressive battlefield awareness*, I thought while dodging a snake with wings attempting to bite me.

I slashed upward as the Beast tried to turn, slicing it in half diagonally right where its wings connected. The pieces tumbled toward the ground, the head still hissing at me. I snorted, then turned through the air to zoom toward where Aleks, Milenna, and Jon were fighting. It seemed like they were up against the rest of the Core-level Naga, while the larger scrum was those at the peak of Condensation. Ming and my other friends were outnumbered enough that it wasn't an immediate win, but they weren't in any major danger.

The Fire Cyclone from Aleks had been dispersed at some point. Most of the Naga had burns, but none were serious enough to impede their combat capability. Others had cuts and stab wounds from Icicles and Air Blades. Milenna's left arm hung loosely at her side, a gray pallor visible in it as I slammed into a superhero landing next to her. "Here," I said, tossing her a healing pill.

"Thanks," she said, a burst of Air Aether redirecting it into her mouth where she immediately gulped it down. She ducked under another Death Skull, then sent an Aether Slash into the second one, blowing it apart into a cloud of gray Aether.

A shockwave from behind us sent myself and Aleks sprawling. Jon was pushed into an Ice Wall he'd erected earlier, and Milenna skipped forward, Air swirling around her ankles as she hurriedly stepped to avoid a Death Bat. I glanced back quickly to see Knight Kaminski floating in midair, Aether surrounding her upraised hand as she glared at a new crater in the roadway. She brought her

hand down, and a globe of Wood, Earth, and Metal exploded downward to grind through the dirt.

The Perfect Core Naga's aura wavered for a second, then strengthened again. A scythe of Death Aether slashed out of the crater at Knight Kaminski, who shattered it with a swipe of her spear. A hint of blood was at the corner of her mouth, and a rent in her armor showed she wasn't untouched in their duel.

A Skull detonating less than a meter from me caused me to pull my attention back to my part of the battle. Jon threw an Icicle in return at the Naga who'd sent it. Somehow, we'd created a battle of techniques. There were six Naga sitting ten meters down the road. Two were focused entirely on defending against the attacks Jon, Milenna, and Aleks were shooting at them, while the other four pelted us with Death Skulls, Death Bats, beams, and bursts of Aether.

Jon deflected most of the attacks with Ice Walls, Shields of Air, Ice, and Density Aether, which he made out of Ice and Metal, and well-placed attacks. Milenna helped as well, her Air Blades specialized at disrupting other techniques. Aleks sent blasts and whirlwinds of Fire, Metal Spears, and Exploding Boulders back, matching in output the same as three of the higher-level gatherers.

I joined in, stepping forward and creating a Metal Spear, then wrapping the back with a modification of the Forceful Punch. When the Spear hit something, the Punch would go off and slam it forward again. Two seconds of work, and I flared Lightning Aether to accelerate it forward like a railgun. The Spear cracked the sound barrier, its travel time infinitesimal to even my enhanced senses.

The nearest Naga blocked it with her shield, an evil grin on her face. Then the Forceful Punch blew the Metal Spear straight through her shield and arm, stabbing into her chest. The gap created by the impact let a Fire Blast from Aleks slam into the Naga directly behind her. The Fire scorched her face and right arm. The Death Skull she was creating dissolved as she shrieked in pain.

I spun my hands over my head, creating a hundred runes in a second to throw a Wrath of the Lightning Herald into the other Naga with a shield. She caught my attack and was rocked backward,

only for Milenna to slide an Air Blade underneath her upraised shield. “Nice shot!” I shouted.

“Aiden,” Aleks yelled, rushing up to me, “where is the staff?”

“It’s on my back,” I said, reaching over to where I could feel it resting. There was nothing there. I flexed my Aether, and shattered whatever it had done to make it feel like it was still on me. “Light blind it, the staff tricked me!”

Ahead, the Perfect Core Naga appeared behind her sistren, bloody and battered, but carrying the staff from where it had fallen. “Sisters,” she said, “for Inanna and Tiamat, we give ourselves. Return this world to Chaos, to Death!” The staff dimmed in her hands, actively drinking in the light around it. Each of the Naga shouted “To Death!” and then sundered their Cores.

With each death, the staff grew darker, until only the Perfect Core Naga was left. In common, she snarled, “You will pay for interfering.” She then stabbed the star of the staff through her neck, dying instantly.



# CHAPTER THIRTY

“That’s not good!” I shouted, looking around for Knight Kaminski. The area around the staff vanished into pure blackness, a deeper void than Darkness created.

Knight Kaminski flew over and landed next to me, streamers of Death still stuck on her right wrist and ankle. “No, it is not,” she said, gazing at the aftermath. “Go, check on your friends. I will monitor this situation.”

I nodded, then shot over to Jon. “I am fine,” he said, “as is Princess Aleksandra and Milenna. Go, check on Vaya and Jamila.” I gave him a grateful grin, then blasted up into the sky and back down in a quick triangle. The last male Naga fell to Ming’s blade as I set down.

“Aiden,” Vaya said happily, staggering over to me and nearly falling into my arms.

“Are you okay?” I asked hurriedly, giving her a quick glance over.

“We are just tired,” Jamila said. “The fight was exhausting, but we were not in any danger.”

“There were just too many undead,” Xiao said, sitting and leaning against a wall. “It only took a small effort to kill each one, but it added up.”

I glanced down the road to see the pieces of at least a thousand zombified Beasts and nearly the same number of Gallu. They’d all come from the west, away from where we’d entered the city. “Wow,” I said, then frowned. “Rest quickly. The other Naga did something with the staff, and it will probably turn out poorly.”

“We are coming with you,” Ming said, striding over. His black hair, normally kept in a neat ponytail, was frayed and plastered to him with sweat. “Show us what they did.”

“Okay,” I said, my face tight. “Take a refill powder or pill, then a gathering pill. If you don’t have one, come to me. Otherwise, Knight Kaminski is on the next road over. Come on.” I turned and started walking.

Vaya poked me, then threw her arm around my shoulders. “May I have a Wood refill pill, please?” she asked while batting her eyelids at me. She was only able to hold a straight face for a second before cracking a grin.

I laughed, then pulled one out of my belt. I had a series of compartments that each held five refill pills, one for each Element. I passed out a couple more to Lilianna, Xiao, and Lea before we reached the others. The black sphere had grown to nearly three meters in diameter by the time we arrived.

“That feels like... emptiness,” Sam said. She was the most pristine out of anyone, having been left in the back. She’d managed to do some supporting with the Inscriptions she’d created, mostly by creating small walls to blunt the Gallu’s charges and gusts of Air and Wind to deflect attacks.

“The Naga priestesses sacrificed themselves to the staff we found,” I said, “and that is the result.”

“We should destroy it,” Xiao said, then launched an Air Aether Slash at the black zone. It broke apart at the edges without any visible result.

A massive welling of Aether made my head turn, and I saw Knight Kaminski holding her hand out. She stated simply, “Spear,” and a Wooden Spear two meters in diameter formed just in front of her and stabbed into the void. Again, the technique seemed to shatter, only this time I felt the pieces go somewhere deeper, in a dimension that wasn’t x, y, or z. She frowned, her face severe, then she gestured at the ground around it.

Immediately, stone rose up behind the sphere, creating a wall that nearly encircled it. Only a one-meter-wide gap was left directly between us and it. Knight Kaminski paled a bit, and I tapped her on the shoulder. “Here,” I said, handing her an Earth and a Wood refill pill.

“Thank you,” she said, throwing them back without hesitation. In that, I knew she was more worried than she let on. “Miss Samantha, do you have any Shock Touch Inscriptions left?”

“Uh, yes, ma’am,” Sam said, dropping her backpack and digging into it. She pulled out four sheets of parchment.

“Apply them to the wall I just created, then make some more. I will imbue them if we have time,” Knight Kaminski said. “I believe that the staff is making a portal to somewhere, and we must be ready for it.”

“I have some trap Inscriptions that I did not get to use earlier,” Lilianna said. “We should probably put them inside of the circle, though.” She held out one of three metal plates, each covered in runes. I recognized Fire, Explosion, and Force among them.

Knight Kaminski laughed. “Good, Fiery Step Traps.” She reached out and took them, then a wave of vines directed each of them into the hemisphere of stone.

“Uh, ma’am,” Jon asked. “Can you put these in a place where they would fall into the circle if we want them too?” He had two of his Volatile Explosion Potions in his hand. “Aiden, I have another five in my room still.”

I looked into the ring, found the potions, and then carefully extracted them. It took us another ten minutes to finish setting up. Whatever came out of the blackness would find itself met with explosions, stabbings, restrictions, and whatever else we could think of.

Of course, none of us believed it would be enough. Everyone gathered quickly, keeping one eye open, getting back to full capability. Pills were consumed to heal, refill, and speed up gathering. “I really want to get the recipe to the Metal Muscle Empowerment Pill,” Jon muttered while stretching, a cut on his leg having just healed that left him a little stiff.

“The what?” I asked, sitting nearby and cleaning off my trisula.

“A pill that temporarily enhances your strength,” he answered, bending back far enough to touch the ground. Along with superhuman strength, we’d gained superhuman flexibility.

“How does that work with enhancement techniques?”

“I do not know,” he said. “But the information I read on it said that it would continue to work if you used one.”

“That would be pretty neat,” I said, then a crack like thunder echoed through the roadway. I leapt to my feet, turning to face the exit from the dome Knight Kaminski had made.

The blackness receded from the spherical shape it'd taken, condensing down to a flat oval, hovering a few centimeters over the ground. It was three meters tall and two wide at its thickest point. The surface started to shimmer, then it solidified. Over the next ten seconds, the black of the surface faded to reveal a starry sky over a rocky surface. What looked like a canyon extended beyond the portal's landing, leading into the distance beyond what I could see.

The background was of secondary importance, though, to the absolute horrors that stood on the floor of the canyon: dozens of Beasts that looked like mutated gorillas, lacking all fur and standing two and a half meters tall, with large hands tipped with wicked claws. Their faces were extended slightly, a muzzle more like a squashed wolf's than an ape's dominating it, with four pointy canines extending out of both the top and bottom.

That wasn't the extent of their wrongness. Their skin was broken in places, showing muscle underneath, but no blood came out of the wounds. Several of them were standing unnaturally still, only to suddenly dart to the side. The worst part, though, was that they did not seem to be breathing at all.

“They are undead,” Knight Kaminski said. “Be wary, they will probably spread the same curse the Alghul did.”

The surface of the portal, which was what the oval had to be, cracked apart with no visible damage. The first of the undead, Ghouls I decided to call them, leapt out of it into the enclosed area. It was immediately destroyed as an explosive Inscription combined with an Air Blade one to rip it apart.

One after another, Ghouls ran out of the portal into our world, only to be destroyed by Inscriptions, potions, or techniques. Ming stood near the opening, having won a quick game of straws to be first. Every few seconds, he would slash his sword in front of his

body, the Ethereal Slash Technique leaping from it to bisect whatever was in front of him. The technique was amazing in that it used Air, Sharpness, and Avoidance Aether to bypass any armor or shields in front of it, though it lost in power somewhat to standard attack techniques. I was able to nearly ignore the attacks, my innate defense enough to result in only scratches, but using the Granite Skin, Iron Bones Technique did absolutely nothing to prevent the damage. Against those who had not tempered to an extent that their bodies were the equivalent of forged armor, the attack would be devastating.

Against the undead, it was perfect. It sliced them apart as if they had no defenses at all. The creatures collapsed to the ground in two or more pieces, then more explosions from the Inscriptions would blow them apart further. For a few minutes, it looked like we were winning.

*“One of the undead has broken the wall to the rear of the fortification!”* Sia said. The Ghouls had been coming out of both sides of the portal, but we could only see the one. Our preparations were sufficient for a little while, but eventually the Inscriptions ran out of Aether or were used up. After that, the Ghouls started carving through the stone of the wall in a frantic need to get out.

“Ming, Xiao, Jamila, Fluffy, Lea, Milenna, Hanna, Lilianna, Aleks, Sam, stay here. Jon, Bridget, Vaya, Sia, Zim, Lampart, Kami, follow me to the other side. Knight Kaminski, please be ready to support any group being overwhelmed!” I shouted, shooting into the air and zooming around the containment sphere to see a Ghoul halfway through the wall, clawing at the stone near its waist. I twisted in midair to stab my trisula into its skull, then sent a pulse of Aether into it to blow its head apart.

The body collapsed, then continued to claw at the wall. Even without a head, it continued to fight. *Light save us all*, I thought, then sent a wave of Fire Aether into the sphere of stone to burn away everything within. “They are easy to destroy, but you have to destroy them utterly or they will keep fighting!” I shouted, Air enhancing my bellow to make sure everyone heard.

The flow of Ghouls seemed endless. Every few seconds, more jumped out of the portal and were disintegrated by techniques. All of the Inscriptions had faded by this point, and now it was only us fighting. The Ghouls had been joined by an undead wolf-like Beast. Again they had no fur, and cracks in their skin showed muscle without blood. I realized shortly after attacking the first one that they didn't have blood, but instead a type of Death Aether, corrupted beyond my understanding into something abhorrent, flowed through them to power their being.

Whatever they used to live, they didn't use it to fight. Only their body, barely at the extent of a Threshold Condensation Gatherer, was their weapon. Their true danger was their unending numbers, and the fact that we had to completely obliterate them to remove them from the fight. Cutting them into pieces just left annoying fingers that curled to try and cut us, legs that kicked at nothing, and mouths that bit the air. The Corrupted Aether made me wary, and I was sure that getting injured would not be good.

"Aiden, we have to close the portal," Vaya said, twenty minutes after we'd split apart. "We are being ground down, and will run out of Aether or Geist before our enemies run out of bodies!"

"I know!" I shouted back, Aether Slashes ripping apart a Ghoul and a Warg, as I'd decided to call the undead wolves, before they could reach the hole in the stone sphere. "Strengthen the rest of the sphere. We need to make sure they are only coming out one of two ways!"

"Aiden, rest for a minute, gather and recover!" Jon yelled, then he slammed his shield into the ground and created a field of Ice Spikes that impaled a dozen undead. "You have been killing them all. Now it is my turn." The Ice grew, freezing even the evil Aether in the Ghoul's bodies. When they shattered, the pieces didn't continue to fight.

I could tell the toll that took on him, but Jon was right; he was much fresher than I was, even with my gathering meridians giving me superior Aether regeneration to everyone else. "Knight Kaminski, I don't know what to do," I called out.

“Can you see anything? Your Aether Sight has been a trump card many times, can you use it now?” she asked, appearing next to me. Stone flowed up over the sphere, reinforcing and compressing it to make it stronger. I could tell that she, Vaya, Hanna, and Kami were all working to do so. The Ghouls obliged, trying to get at the living beings at the current openings more than trying to create a new opening. They were mindless beings, and I despaired at the thought that the Naga might have been able to control the utterly, ridiculously resilient creatures. The thought terrified me.

I looked, my Divine Senses Technique activated to the utmost, pushing more Aether into my eyes and brain than I was capable of holding in the middle of Condensation. The portal swirled in front of me with corrupted Death Aether—a deeper-gray Aether and an off-white, bluish Aether combined to create it. With some effort, I looked through the opening, and saw a ribbon of Aether connecting it to something that reached up to the top of the canyon visible within.

“The staff, if it still exists, is through the portal,” I said. “Regardless, something inside is connected to it.”

“Go. Siarczysty, take your Bond and find the source of the portal. Find it and bring it back here,” Knight Kaminski said. “Do not destroy it unless you are right next to the portal. I do not want to lose you to whatever realm that is.”

“Yes, *Knight Kaminski*,” Sia said, dropping in front of me from where he had been burninating the Ghouls. “*Get on!*”

I jumped onto his back, even though he was barely bigger than me, and we shot forward with an explosion of Fire and Air Aether. Sia’s wings folded against his body and together we burned through a Warg as we took its place and passed through the portal.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The air through the portal felt empty, the world hollow. There was still Aether, but when I absorbed it through my meridians it seemed to shrink in on itself. My gathering efficiency had dropped off a cliff, making it maybe five percent of what it should be. *“Sia, did your gathering drop as soon as we arrived?”* I asked as he flew into the sky. Below us, a few Ghouls had tried to jump and grab Sia as he flew through the portal, but only succeeded in getting their limbs burnt away.

Off in the distance, I could see flying creatures, looking like the Wargs only with bat-like wings. Air Aether buoyed them up, letting the ungainly things fly, but it was a hollow Aether, pale, a shadow of what it should have been. *“Yes. The Aether here is devoid of Truth, and nearly worthless to us. At least you still have a very large quantity of refill powders and pills,”* Sia said.

*“True. Alright, we need to head that way,”* I told him, indicating where I saw the ribbon of Aether leading.

Sia turned to the left and then dove sharply. A Bat Warg shot through the spot where he'd been, its skin color shifting from the dark blue of the sky to the gray of the stone. I pulled one hand off Sia's back to throw a quick Fireball at it. While I could use techniques without hand gestures, I was still better at hitting my targets if I did, and I could hold onto Sia regardless of whatever maneuvers he was doing.

The Fire washed over the flying thing and scorched through its wings. With a shriek, it plummeted to the ground. Answering shrieks above us told me there were many, many more that I hadn't seen before. My Aether senses swept around me, causing me to look down rather than up. We were still above the canyon, which extended for kilometers from the portal. A steady stream of Ghouls and Wargs were sprinting down it, still in uncountable numbers. The



problem was that one in every ten of the undead below me felt like they were level six Beasts. “*Oh no,*” I told Sia. “*Core-level Ghouls.*”

Sia dropped lower in the sky and said, “*Keep my back clear. I will burn through the ones below us as we fly.*”

“*Got it,*” I said, rolling over and wrapping my legs around his torso just below where his wings connected. Above us, high level five Bat Wargs were dive-bombing toward my face. Unlike the rest of the undead, though, these seemed to be able to use some sort of technique, as a wave of hazy Aether exploded out of their mouths.

I grunted as a wash of flame beneath me heated the air, then quickly formed a few Air Shields above us. I forced the Shields to continue moving, adapting the technique on the fly, *heh*, to keep them in front of the Bats. The first one’s technique hit and seemed to rebound off my Shield, only to bounce back from the Bat toward it. The second impact was harder, but there wasn’t time for a third before the Bat splattered onto the Shield.

My Shield broke, but so did the undead creature. With a quick twist of the runes, the second Shield was rimmed with Fire and Lightning, burning the zombie Bat that ran into it.

The third bat, though, slowed down its dive enough to let the Sound technique bounce thrice, and with the third impact shattered the Air structure of my Shield. The Sound technique then returned to the flying Warg and bounced again. This time, the undead staggered from the impact of its own technique. *That’s got to not be pleasant,* I thought, then formed two Lightning Bolts. I focused on the incoming wave, then slammed both bolts forward, hitting it right in the center.

The first bolt broke the Sound attack into four pieces. The pieces continued forward and out, spreading away from us in such a way that they’d miss on all sides. Instead, they impacted the canyon’s walls and splattered some of the Ghouls below. The second bolt seized the muscles of the Warg Bat, burning away at its torso for a few seconds, before it recovered and shrieked at us again.

I could feel a massive rush of Essence from below, as Sia burnt away the majority of the Ghouls. This was the first time he’d had to go truly all out, without having to worry about hurting anyone

else, since he'd gotten his power back. This Essence was gross, wrong in a way that I couldn't really articulate. I knew I didn't want to keep it that way, but I wasn't sure how to make it better. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to deal with it, as more of the Bat Wargs were coming.

I fired a steady stream of Lightning Bolts at them. The majority died again to the first or second one, but a few continued through my barrage. I was trying to conserve Aether, as Lightning Bolts were the cheapest attack that wasn't a simple Aether Blast, and it was mostly working. As the first flying zombie got close, I built up a Wrath of the Lightning Herald and let it loose.

It did barely more damage than a Lightning Bolt did. "*Sia, area techniques are nearly worthless here!*" I shouted, building up a Fireball with a huge heaping of Aether in it. The Bat belted its Sound attack at us, so I broke it with an Air Blade before the Fireball would be disrupted. The Beast hit the Fireball and was blasted into pieces, the cumulative damage enough to break through whatever defenses the Bat had.

The swarm of Bats following behind started to strain my ability to multitask, as I threw Lightning Bolts, Fireballs, Air Blades, Metal and Earth Spikes, and even Wood Stakes and Icicles, cycling through the Elements to preserve the Aether balance in my Core. I was rapidly draining, though, while the Bats seemed never ending.

"*Look ahead,*" Sia said. "*Are we close?*"

I glanced to the side and up, to find the ribbon of Aether connecting the gate to whatever was powering it was starting to drop toward the ground. Ahead, the canyon walls opened up, and I saw a castle in the middle of a valley. There was still no greenery anywhere. "*The castle. Whatever is causing this is coming from the castle!*"

"*Understood,*" Sia said, then we were enveloped in his Fire and Lightning Aether. With a jerk of acceleration, we covered the half kilometer to the castle in a second, where his wings flared open and we slammed onto the top of the keep. A Warg that had been standing there was flattened, even its Core-level body unable to deal with Sia's flames. Aether attacks from Core-level Ghouls shot into

the sky behind us, beams of Death like the Nagas' along with globes of Acid and Corrosion Aether that sought to dissolve whatever they hit.

I leapt off Sia's back and met a Ghoul's charge with a Forceful Punch, my aura reaching out to deflect the Acid Ball that it tried to create. It was the first time I'd used my aura to actively fight against a technique, and I felt the strain on my Geist as I pushed it beyond what I'd been trained to do. The Acid didn't form, its Aether disrupted before it could, and the creature barreled into my fist and exploded.

There were no more undead on the top of the keep, though I could feel some moving below us. Sia jumped into the air, a wave of Fire reaching out at the oncoming Bat Wargs. *"I will keep the riffraff from entering the keep,"* he said before diving below where I could see.

*"Burninate,"* I told him, then sprinted for the doorway and the stairs down. I knew the staff, if that was what I was sensing, was at most two floors down. Its presence washed out everything around it, so I couldn't tell if there was anyone else in the same room as it, but I didn't expect to grab it without a fight.

The first level down was a barracks for guards, and it held a dozen Ghouls. They were already rushing toward the doorway up, with the first at the base of the stairs. I met its rush with my trisula, Aether enhancing both my body and my attack, a Forceful Punch and a Fire Bolt merged into one to splatter and burn the too-resilient Beast. My left hand was crafting a Fireball that I threw through the top of the doorway to explode in the middle of the room, killing several of the undead Beasts.

The detonation wave tossed another two Ghouls onto the floor in front of me, giving me a perfect attack at the back of their heads. I dropped to a knee and smashed their skulls apart, stilling the undead, permanently I hoped. My Aether senses screamed at me, and I dove into a roll while flexing the Iron Bones, Granite Skin Technique to cover my body with Stone Aether. It was slightly weaker against physical attacks, but much stronger against Aether, especially Water and its derivatives.

The Acid Ball splattered on the wall behind me, and a few drops burned into my armor. *I really need new armor. Stupid armorer saying it would take three weeks to make what I wanted, when we only had a few days before leaving. Definitely getting a set made wherever Aleks or Lilianna can point me to as the best,* I thought, my skin burning for a second before my Aether finished countering the Ghoul's technique.

By that time, I'd already crossed half the room's width as I rolled to my feet. With a swipe, I kicked the strongest Ghoul's legs out from under it, blasting them with a Metal Aether Blast, though I took a blow to the chest to do so. There were only three left after my Fireball, all at a power level equivalent to my own. Well, equivalent to a normal person at Seed Core anyway. Bruno the Dungeon had shown us the gap between a Complete Condensation and Seed Core, but on the trip across the ocean, Knight Kaminski had made sure to emphasize that we were not normal gatherers and were instead truly elite.

That fact left the Seed Core Ghouls in front of me as barely better than the lower-level fodder I'd obliterated with a single technique. The closest one had a haze of gray Death Aether around its fists as it dropped a hammer blow toward my head. The second one was rushing in, I guessed to tackle me to the ground, while the last was creating another Acid Ball.

My left trisula came up, Plasma Edge lining the blade, and sliced off the first Ghoul's arms at the elbow while I stepped forward. Its fists dropped behind me as my right trisula extended to pierce the tackling Ghoul's shoulder and detonate an Aether Blast inside. The explosion broke its arm off and threw its body far enough off its path to miss me. I rotated my left shoulder forward at the same time, checking the now arm-less undead into the third's Acid Ball. A quick burst of Air Aether blew the Acid splatter away from me.

I created a Fire Wall, based loosely on Jon's Ice Wall technique, behind the two undead as they were knocked by my throw. The two creatures fell into it, bellowing as the Fire cleansed them.

I was slammed forward and had to jerk myself into a dive over my own Fire. I used the wall before the stairway to turn myself around. I immediately had to create an Air Platform and shove myself sideways as a beam of Death blasted the wall beside me. The strongest undead had gotten back to its feet, even with half the flesh on its right thigh gone from my kick.

*Stupid undead and not really needing bodies*, I grumbled, sending an Aether Slash at the Ghoul that it blocked with a raised forearm covered in Corruption Aether. That same arm then punched out and blasted a beam at me. Trusting my technique, even as I reinforced it, I let the beam hit me in the chest as I rushed at it.

The Ghoul wailed at me, the first instance of one using Sound as an attack. The reverberations struck and tried to break apart the Stone Aether of my technique. Granite Skin, Iron Bones resisted the attack, though, as the multiple layers changed the necessary Sound frequency to truly damage it, as each layer needed a different one.

The Ghoul struck just as I would have gotten in range, as I'd expected from something with so little ability to think and plan. I stutter-stepped, taking a single instant longer to reach it. Its hand blurred past my face. My trisula stabbed into its torso. Its Death Aether tried to flow up them, a defensive technique I hadn't seen before, but the pressure of my Lightning Aether vastly overpowered it. Less than a second later, the Ghoul exploded.

I stood over the pieces of the undead, panting from the eruption of effort needed to defeat them quickly. I pulled out a Lightning and a Fire refill pill—I'd forgotten the flowery names for them—and tossed them down.

"I am surprised one such as you could survive here," a grating voice said. Eerie maniacal laughter echoed up the stairs following the statement.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I jumped, turning toward the stairs then hesitating.

“Well, come on down. Speak to me. Let me see you before I kill you,” the voice said.

I took a deep breath, then covered myself in my Forgotten Mists technique and started to slip down the stairs. “*Sia, are you okay?*” I asked.

“*Yes. I am getting tired, but I can fight for an hour or more still,*” he said.

“*Be ready to send Fire into the second level from the top of the keep. I might need help soon,*” I told him, and felt his affirmation.

Unlike the stairs to the top, these ones extended multiple levels down. The feeling of the staff was on this floor, so I knew it was the correct one. I stored my left trisula in my belt, shaking my head as my belt nearly came off due to slices in it, before pulling a handheld mirror out of my ring. I extended it at the very bottom of the stairway to look beyond, keeping my stealth technique running full blast to try and hide from whatever made that horrible laughter.

Through the mirror, I saw a sitting room with an open door leading into a larger area. The staff was floating in midair through the doorway, glowing in a deeper gray than the Death Aether I’d been seeing. A crystal just like the one we’d cracked in the Dungeon was connected to the top of the staff, giving off the same light that made my stomach turn. It was worse, a combination of Corruption, Death, and Chaos, trying to change everything around into a facsimile of life, corrupting where death stood in the cycle of life. The part of me that held the blessing of Darkness seemed to roar at me to destroy it.

A shadow moved through the gray light, only to resolve into someone that could have been Spirit’s twin, if Spirit had never eaten anything and had no eyeballs. It gave off the feeling of a Foundation

Core gatherer, but its aura was increasing with every breath I took. The lich, for it could be nothing else, laughed again and looked directly at me, though my techniques should have hidden me. “Come, now, speak with me.”

I saw a window behind it, and grinned. *At least Sia is a trump card in this fight*, I thought, before forming a Lightning Bolt and throwing it at the lich. A shield of gray-green Aether appeared in front of my attack and blocked it. My Fireball was deflected by a plane of dim purple Aether, Stillness, through which the explosion didn’t progress.

“Really, I did say I wanted to speak first,” the undead elf said, staring at where I stood with weapons raised.

“You also said you were going to kill me,” I said.

“Well, of course,” the lich said, grinning a terrible grin. “You are worthy to be like me, and the first step is to die. Death is not the end. You could gain immense power by joining me.”

“And let you kill and enslave everyone on my world? Join with Chaos in destroying the order which life requires?” I demanded.

“Bah, if a weakling cannot resist my change, why should you care about it?” the lich asked.

“Not everything has to be about strength,” I said. “The strong protect and raise up the weak. By doing so, society is improved and more people will become strong.”

“But you are still ruled by the strong,” they said. “Is your emperor not the strongest being in your nation? What if I could make you stronger than they are, right now?”

“The King rules because it was he who brought our people to safety,” I said. “He protected everyone weaker than him, and created a society where he could grow stronger as well. His children are protected, not just because he is the strongest, but because he created a society where people do not prey on each other.” Aether flared through my body, the Myriad Elements Enhancement Technique massively increasing my capabilities, as I channeled Aether to the tip of both of my trisula, one getting a Metal Spike and the other a Lightning Bolt. “Now, my friends are fighting Ghouls right now, preventing the influx of dangerous beings into my world. Give

me the staff, teach me how to shut down the portal, or die, again.” The last part I growled, releasing my aura and concentrating it around the lich.

“How rude,” they said, then they obliterated my aura with their own. They were stronger than I was, at least at Foundation if not Constructed Core. They weren’t at Perfect Core, I knew, or else I’d already be dead. Each second, however, their power rose as Aether and something else streamed in from the portal. “I guess I will just have to ask my questions once I have captured your soul.”

I threw the spike at them, mentally guiding it to go for their leg, assuming they would defend less against a lower attack than one targeting their center of mass. I pushed on my aura, trying to force it to pierce theirs, only to feel like I just threw my face against a wall. The Metal Spike was blocked by a shield, piercing into the ground only a few centimeters from their foot, so I blasted the Lightning Bolt into it, getting it to arc into them.

“Ow,” the lich said, a frown forming on their skeletal face. “Congratulations, you have hurt me. That makes you the first in a century to do so.”

“That’s kinda pathetic,” I said, dodging a beam of Disease Aether, what I’d finally realized the gray-green Aether was. I had the feeling they were playing with me. “I’m only fifteen years old, and nearly strong enough to defeat you. How old are you? How pathetic is your gathering capability? Shouldn’t you have opened your soul by now?”

“And I will, with access to your world and its untainted Aether supply,” the lich said, its face stretching into a facsimile of a grin.

“Nope,” I said, then released a pulse of Force Aether. The lich was knocked backward, its body still frail due to the absence of flesh. “*Now Sia, this one!*” I told Sia, creating a flash of light to signal which window. I threw two more Lightning Bolts at the undead elf, trying to hold its attention. It worked, as two more shields appeared to block my attacks and they glared at me behind their techniques.

A wall of Flame entered from behind the lich, catching it by surprise. It screamed, turning around and blasting a series of techniques out the window. I used the distraction to rush forward,



realizing I probably wouldn't be able to defeat the lich, so I grabbed the staff. It burned me, trying to prevent me from taking hold of it, but I ignored the damage.

It pulsed with Aether, and the lich growled, turning back toward me. I was only a meter away from it, and slid underneath the attack it tried to shoot at me. A Forceful Punch blew my enemy out of my way, even though it blocked all of the actual damage from the technique.

I dove out of the window, screaming, "*Sia, catch me!*" as I fell. Behind me, I channeled as much Lightning, Fire, and Air Aether as I could, filling the window with a barrage of attacks to keep the lich's head down.

The staff continued to burn me, throwing its Aether against mine. My aura shut it down, though, as it wasn't able to resist the willpower I sent at it. The thing had a personality, but no true will behind its attempts to force me to drop it. "Back to the portal," I shouted. "As fast as you can. Do not spare Aether!"

"*Refill,*" Sia said, and I connected my meridians to his, throwing all of my Aether into him. As I ran low, my meridians screaming in protest, I chugged down another eight refill pills and a gathering powder. I could feel the impurities the pills were leaving in me, and knew I would have to either take special pills to clean them out, or waste extra time gathering to purge the damage they created. It was better to pollute my system than to die, though, so I threw down another set when it wasn't enough.

My senses screamed in warning, and Sia must have felt the same as he shunted himself sideways with Air and Water. I threw the strongest Air Shield I could behind us, and wrapped Sia and myself with Granite Skin, Iron Bones. Our connection allowed me to use my own enhancement and defense techniques as if we were one body. Sia himself covered us with Flameskin, which would burn away Aether attacking us.

All together, our techniques were barely enough to save us, as a pillar of Disease and Corruption Aether smashed down on the canyon. The attack utterly obliterated every single Ghoul and Warg visible. The shockwaves from the impact were enhanced with

Aether, shattering both of our shields and sending Sia into a barrel roll as he tried to control himself.

We were only a few hundred meters from the portal, but the way back was now partially covered in shattered stone and dirt. Craters filled the canyon from my friend's attacks, making the Ghoul's slower. *At least that gives the others a good break*, I thought.

The Aether cylinder was still present when Sia finally righted himself. Just as he was steadying out, the pillar grew thinner, but spikes formed along the entire side pointing toward us. "Die!" the lich screamed, their voice echoing with Sound Aether and something else. Their power had increased all the way to Complete Core, beyond what I could hope to defeat. I could see the unknown Aether, but the color seemed off. It was a pale purple, but washed out, dingy, and twisted in a way that made my stomach turn.

The Sound pounded on our Aether Shields, while the pale Aether tried to worm its way into our minds, focusing on our heads. I pulsed out Plasma Aether, burning away the attack, only for Sia to dive toward the ground as the spikes of Disease and Corruption exploded out of the pillar. They curved in the sky, arcing toward us.

I quickly formed a dozen Fireballs, commanding them mentally to explode while near the spikes. Each explosion wiped out at least four spikes, but there were hundreds still coming. "*Clear a spot here*," Sia told me, picturing a location up and to the left.

I nodded, then threw out a set of Fireballs while stuffing another batch of refill pills into my mouth. My attack wiped away the spikes in the area Sia wanted, while also blowing apart a few from behind and to our right. Sia curved upward, pulling on my Air Aether extensively to throw himself through the gap created in the encirclement.

The lich screamed in anger, and the spikes exploded. Disease Aether splashed over us, only for Sia to burn it away. I could feel he was starting to flag and was running low on Aether even as I fed mine into him. "Just go for the portal. Straight shot, we can take a single hit if needed," I shouted. "Jamila and Vaya will fix us up."

"*Last gasp*," Sia said. Fire, Lightning, and Metal enveloped us, and I felt him use the knowledge of magnetic fields I'd told

everyone about to accelerate us toward the portal.

A straight line was predictable, and the lich, who even with their power was still too slow to catch us, used it to send a beam of Corruption five meters in diameter.

I covered us with a series of Aether Shields: Air, Water, Metal, Wood, Earth, Ice, Fire, and lastly Lightning. My Geist gushed out, quickly enough that I would run out in only seconds as my Aether drained as fast as I could possibly use it. My projection meridians burned and my skin flaked off as I overloaded all three skin meridians.

The cleanest Essence in my center gushed out as well, flowing into the Shields. Some of the corrupted Essence did as well, and it hurt in a way deeper than I could express. Thoughts of abandoning Sia and leaping ahead tried to worm themselves into my brain, but I rejected them categorically.

The beam of Corruption hit and burned through my Shields, one after another, but the impact threw us even faster through the portal. The last Shield shattered just as we crossed the line, and I shoved Aether into the staff and slashed it at the portal.

The Corruption burned, sloughing off the skin and muscle of my right arm, only to be cut off as the portal snapped shut. Sia slammed into and through the stone wall that the others had reinforced in front of the portal, and I went spinning off him as I struggled to hold onto consciousness.

# CHAPTER THIRTY- THREE

“Aiden, you have to let go of the staff!” Vaya screamed.

*I don't have a staff*, I thought, but was unable to speak. I hurt too much. A moan was the only sound I could make.

“Just cut his hand off,” Ming said. “He is dying. Hold it straight!” A sharp pain cleared my mind.

I opened my eyes to find Vaya and Jamila both kneeling by my head. I lifted my right arm to see that it now ended just below my elbow. The area above my elbow didn't look good either, with muscle and bone visible. A stream of soothing Aether shot into me, wrapping my arm in Wood and Water while Life and Healing Aether searched through my internals.

“What happened?” Vaya asked, looking to where Sia, in his smallest form, stood near my head.

*“There was an intelligent undead that was nearing Perfect Core in strength,”* Sia said. *“They used Disease and Corruption Aether, I think. To make it back, Aiden took a full-powered blow from them.”*

“Corruption and Disease, that is what that feeling is,” Jamila whispered to herself.

I tried to speak, but Vaya just shushed me. “We need to concentrate,” she said. “The enemy's Aether is fighting back. Rest, gather if you can, but rest.”

I nodded, a tiny movement that was the most I could do, then dropped into my center. “Wow, no wonder I'm not very functional,” I said with a gasp. My center and Core were empty of Aether, and the only Essence left was the corrupted stuff from the Gallu.

Aether was starting to pour in, though it only came in fits and starts rather than a steady stream like it should. “Gather, if you can.”

Jamila's voice echoed through her Aether as it wrapped around my center. Tingles of pain flared through me as she fixed tiny pieces of my center where the Corruption Aether had, well, corrupted my physical and metaphysical flesh.

I couldn't form any runes, so I was limited to gathering like I had when I first started, before I had any techniques. My mind reached out to the space around me, visualizing the Aether as motes. My mental hand wavered as my focus drifted, then sharpened again at another flare of pain, and I grabbed every mote that was within my body and pulled.

Every drop of Aether that wasn't mine, the atmospheric or natural Aether that permeated the world and drove life here, within my grasp was sucked into my Core with no discernible effort. The Aether condensed into a single drop, which whisked itself up my life meridian to my brain, clearing the fog completely. "Huh," I said, then reached beyond myself, mentally enlarging the net I'd imagined to cover a meter in all directions. With a jerk, my Core received all of it again. It felt like the first time I'd ever gathered, the tiny strain of grabbing only a few motes, then a result unimaginably greater.

I spent a few minutes just grabbing the Aether in that meter-radius sphere, letting my system get used to it and recovering more of my faculties, before I finally had enough Aether to create the Spiral Gathering Technique. The Aether structures formed, and immediately my gathering meridians screamed in pain. I grunted and strained, Vaya's hand pressing on my head as she tried to soothe me.

I shattered my technique, then rebuilt it with only three spirals, vastly reducing the speed. It was enough to create a tiny strain, pain that was barely noticeable among the other aches and pains that covered me. I moved my mind along the gathering meridians, and found dozens of spots where the Corruption, Disease, and Death Aether that had damaged my body had impacted them.

Each second, the damage was healed a miniscule amount as the environmental Aether became my own, flowing into the meridians and cleansing them of the injury. At the rate it was going,

though, I wouldn't be fully healed for months. *And that's why we do not rely only on natural healing*, I thought as I pulled a stream of Aether out of my Core. It wasn't much, as I was basically just redirecting the input of my gathering technique into healing.

I formed the runes of my self-healing technique around the first spot of Diseased flesh, and let the Aether crush the infection. "Light, he is Diseased," Vaya said. "Jon, Ming, I need you to hold his legs! Keep him still!"

Confused, I let my perspective move to my full body, only to discover it was mid-seizure. The joining left me confused, my brain suddenly affecting my consciousness exponentially more than it had been only seconds ago. I struggled for a minute while the others healed me, then I managed to separate my mind from my body again. "Light and Darkness, I'm way more hurt than I expected," I sighed. "*Sia, can you hear me?*"

"Yes," Sia answered. "*You idiot. You were supposed to share the damage with me, leaving us both injured but not crippled. Instead, you took it on yourself, and now Jamila is panicking that you are going to die on her.*"

"*Can you tell her I'll be fine, please? I can't talk right now,*" I asked.

"*If you cannot talk, why do you think you will be fine? Hold on,*" he said, and I felt a push on my stomach, vaguely connecting my mental body with my physical one. Sia's Aether jumped into me, connecting through my meridians and flooding into my center. "*Now, heal and recover. We will talk later about your idiocy.*"

"*Fine,*" I told him, dragging out the middle syllable, then laughed at the exasperation I felt through our Bond. The massive influx of Aether was hugely beneficial, though. I immediately grabbed a handful and fueled my healing technique more, trying to fix my gathering meridians.

After a few minutes, I scanned my body again, and found Jamila was working on fixing my arm, or what was left of it, while Vaya continued to support my heart, lungs, and center. "Wow," I told myself after I scanned my body. "How am I alive?"

“Your ridiculous amount of tempering, the strength of a Seed Core gatherer, our Bond, and two miraculous healers,” Sia said, appearing in my center as a bird made of pure Fire.

“Hey, welcome to, uh, me,” I said.

He shook his head, mirroring one of my mannerisms, then sighed. “Come on. Show me the healing technique you use, and I will direct some of our Aether.”

“Thanks, really,” I said.

His projection flapped over to mine, landing on my shoulder, then he slapped my head with his wing. “We are Bonded, now and forever. I will not lose you to stupidity.”

“Fine, fine,” I said, fending off his wing with a laugh. I grabbed Aether and flew up my lower gathering meridian. “So, I’ve been focusing more on the Disease than the Corruption and Death injuries. It seems like they are more aggressive at trying to spread, and fixing them is giving Vaya some breathing room.”

“I can work on that,” Sia said.

I demonstrated the healing technique, talking through each rune and how they connected along with the process of applying the Aether to the damaged sections. After two injured spots, skipping another three of the other two types, Sia hopped off my shoulder and pecked my ear. “I will work on your upper gathering meridian, and will inform you when I finish cleansing it.”

“Thanks,” I said, nearly tearing up at the fact that three people, no more, since Jon and Ming were both holding my body still so that Vaya and Jamila could work, were pouring their everything into keeping me alive. I vaguely felt Aleks hovering nearby as well, powders and pills sitting in a neatly organized pile next to her. Vaya was directing Aleks and she would grab a healing powder and pour it gently onto my chest. I realized then that I was barely decent, a cloth over my waist the only clothing I wore.

The blush that I felt internally was apparently visible on my physical body, as I heard Vaya laugh. “He is awake enough to realize he is not wearing anything,” she said, a smile in her voice.

“He will make it,” Jamila said, the relief audible. I felt Aleks lose some of the tension that was keeping her up. “We still have a lot

of work to do to make sure he is not crippled. Come on.”

*Crippled!* I thought. My embarrassment was gone in an instant, and I dove into clearing away the Disease in my meridians with a renewed will. *Nope, no, no way, I will be fine. I will fix everything. I will not be weak!* The series of thoughts seemed to explode through me like a mantra.

“Aiden, take your time,” Sia told me, his mental projection appearing before mine to stop me from throwing a surge of Aether into another Disease spot.

“I cannot be crippled,” I said. “I have to be able to protect everyone.”

“Aiden,” Sia yelled, and I stopped, shocked by his tone. “You are incredible, smart, talented, and strong. You are not indispensable, however, and if you died we would move on. We would be sad, but you have taught me much, and I will continue your crusade to have everyone in Craesti grow stronger. Even if you were unable to fight, your knowledge and drive would infect everyone around you to get better. Stop flagellating yourself, and take your time, Fire burn it! If you make a mistake healing yourself, it would take ten times longer to fix it, and that might be what cripples you forever!”

My projection took a deep breath, symbolic though it was. “Thanks, Sia,” I said. “I was locked in a panic spiral there.”

“Good. Now I do not have to slap you silly,” he said. “Work on healing, but do not lose yourself in it.”

“Hold on,” I said, then brought myself back into contact with my body. I found that I could move, a bit at least, with only a small amount of brain fog to push my thoughts through. I extended my right hand and surged my Aether. The Skysurfer formed under it, just past Vaya, and then I put the Portable Home on top of it. “Get home,” I ground out. “Don’t touch the staff or crystal with bare flesh.”

“Rest,” Vaya said. She turned away from me. “Okay, put the poles under him. We can bring Xiao, Lilianna, and Aiden in comfort to Oddali.”

“I will speak with the City Lord and get a detachment of the army to investigate these ruins further,” Aleks said.



“Xiao and Lilianna?” I asked Sia from my center.

“They are both injured, though not to the extent you are,” he said.

“Light blind us.” I was jerked upwards, and found myself resting on a stretcher formed of Stone and Wood, manipulated with Aether to carry me without bouncing. I floated forward and Vaya guided me into my room. *Good thing I gave all of my girls permission to enter my room without me, I thought. I'd hate to be relegated to bean bag cushions for now.*

“On three,” Jamila said, then she counted. I was floated off the stretcher with Air Aether, and laid gently into my bed. Vaya lay next to me, keeping her focus on my center and organs and maintaining my life by doing so. Jamila pulled a chair over, leaning over the back and holding my arm. I felt her continuing to block off the Disease and Corruption that was trying to spread up my arm and infect the rest of my body. My arm still ended just below my elbow. I knew she needed to cleanse it from the evil Aether before she could work on regrowing it.

I dove back into my gathering meridian. I knew that increasing how much Aether I had inside me would make both of their jobs easier. “Sia, where is Hanna?” I asked.

“Tending to Xiao, Lilianna, and Knight Kaminski,” he answered from my upper gathering meridian. I found that we could talk even though I couldn't see his projection. “Xiao and Lilianna were both severely injured by the Ghouls, and have a similar Corruption trying to spread throughout their bodies. Knight Kaminski overstrained her meridians and was injured during the fight, so Hanna is helping her recover as well. Hanna knows that she can scream for assistance and Jamila will help her, but so far they are much less needy than you are.”

“Were we not fast enough?” I asked, my face falling.

“If we had taken longer, more of our friends might have been injured,” Sia said. “As it stands, no one died, so yes, we were fast enough. Everyone's injuries can be healed. You do not have to beat yourself up over your perceived failures. No one else could have returned the staff and the crystal attached to it, not unless Knight

Kaminski herself abandoned protecting the Craesti. Without her there, everyone would be injured, if not worse. You were the right choice, you succeeded, now move on. If you must berate yourself, do so by growing stronger, so you do not have to make this choice again.”

“So, like I keep saying, I gotta get stronger,” I said, then I sighed. “Light, it's easier when I'm the one hurt.”

“We will be going to war soon,” Sia said. “Others are already on their way. In war, people die... Beasts die... Bonds die. If you cannot deal with that, you will be a weakness instead of a strength. Now, focus on healing. Knight Kaminski said it will be two days before we reach Oddali.”

“Aye aye, captain,” I said, snapping into a facsimile of attention and throwing him a sloppy salute. I turned back to the meridian I had been working on, took a chunk of Aether that Sia had given me, and got back to work.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The next day drug on, and on, and on. Gathering was always a fairly boring prospect, though the level of focus required did help to distract from it, and healing internal injuries was worse. Once I got to a large burn on my lower gathering meridian, all I had to do was set up the healing runic structure, then hold it in place while feeding Aether into it. I didn't have to concentrate on it, which left me entirely too much time to think.

Sia was a lifesaver, even if he did berate me for the depression spirals I'd get into. After a few hours of travel, Vaya was able to reduce her support of my heart. They had figured out that healing slowly was better, as the Disease Aether especially seemed to react poorly to quick Aether applications. Several times, it tried to split apart and seek out new hiding spots from which to spread.

"Whoa, careful," Jamila said, and a streamer of Life Aether reached out and covered some Water Aether from Vaya. "That Corruption really likes to change Water."

"Thanks," she responded. "This is the first time I have had to use advanced Aether types to heal."

"It does take getting used to." Jamila's Aether sank into the Corruption Aether while Vaya mixed Wood into the Water to make Healing Aether, her movements a little clumsy to start but quickly becoming adept.

They were quiet again for a little while, and I finally finished the first gathering meridian. Sia was still only a third of the way through his efforts on my upper gathering meridian. It had been closer to the damage and the bleed off of the Disease, Corruption, and Death Aether had affected it more. The rush of Aether through the repaired meridian made muscles relax that I hadn't even realized were tense.

A few hours later, I vaguely heard Aleks timidly ask, “How is he?”

“Recovering well,” Vaya answered. “Very little chance he will die now.”

She slumped forward a little. “Oh, good.” She sat next to where Vaya still lay and put her left hand on Vaya’s shoulder. “And how are you two?”

“Tired,” Jamila said, “but I can continue for hours still. How are Xiao and Lilianna?”

“Knight Kaminski and Hanna have them stable,” Aleks responded. “The others are watching for more Naga while flying the Skysurfer. Jon is barely holding it together.”

“What about you?” Vaya asked, and I felt one of her hands let go of me to grab Aleks’s hand. “You know we are here for you.”

She smiled, a fragile, small one but still real. “Yeah, I know. I will need to speak to City Lord Wojcik when we arrive at Oddali. I do not know how much of her forces are available to scour this area of the Zabojs for more Naga presence. She needs to be warned about the Gallu and the plague they can spread as well. I do not know how this is going to go over on top of the war with the Illyrian Empire.”

“The world is getting more dangerous,” Jamila said.

“We will face it together and triumph,” Vaya said, gripping Aleks’s hand and reaching over to squeeze Jamila’s shoulder. “Aleks, can you bring some broth for Aiden? I think a bit of Aether-rich liquid will help.”

“Of course,” she said, hopping off the bed and rushing out of the room.

A few minutes later, she came back with a bowl and spoon and sat just next to my head. “All you need to do is swallow,” she whispered to me, gently stroking my hair. “Please be okay. Please.” I got the feeling I wasn’t supposed to hear the last bit. She carefully dribbled a spoonful of broth into my mouth, and I reflexively gulped it down.

That was how the next hour went, with Aleks channeling a tiny stream of Heat Aether, created from Fire and Air, to keep it steaming. Even if it was boiling, it wouldn’t hurt me now, but the taste

was best just below that temperature. We'd figured out a workaround to my inability to speak, and had Sia relay anything I had to say, though he was very annoyed by it.

As the day turned into night, Vaya started to nod off on my chest. She'd been able to gradually shift from supporting my heart and lungs, keeping me alive, to healing them and the surrounding tissues. I'd probably have been able to support myself, but that would have prevented me from working on my gathering meridians. Once they were all fixed, progress sped up on healing everything. Using my Aether as a supplementary source of energy let Jamila and Vaya both relax their draconian control of their own.

"You... should... sleep," I said aloud, each word taking a new breath.

Jamila jolted. "What? Don't speak, save your energy."

"*Sia, can you tell them to take a break and sleep?*" I asked. "*They're both drooping and need the rest.*"

"*And what about you?*"

"*I'll be fine. I may not make any progress healing, but I won't regress or die, and they are going to pass out soon. Even with the advance to Core making us need less rest, they've had a really stressful and busy day.*"

"*I will tell them, but you know they will disregard it.*"

"*Gotta try.*" I felt Sia talking with both girls, Aleks having gone to train once she was done feeding me and didn't have anything else she could do to help. I could tell that not being able to help heal was eating her up inside, so I had Sia tell her to work on tempering.

Vaya yawned, then nodded. "Fine, I will rest. Right here, though, just in case." She snuggled up tighter against my side and laid her head on my chest before nearly instantly falling asleep.

Jamila frowned. "There is still so much work to do," she said.

"Rest," I breathed out.

She climbed all the way into the bed and pulled a pillow over. "Okay. Sia, you will wake me if anything changes." Her voice grew tight at the end.

Sia nodded. "*Of course. I will not allow him to get worse anyway.*"

“You better,” she said, though the last word drowned itself in a yawn.

Again, she was asleep in seconds. *“You need rest as well,”* Sia told me.

*“I will sleep when they wake up,”* I told him. *“You can rest though. I will scream if I need you.”*

I felt his eye roll. The next three hours passed even slower, until Vaya stirred. “Why are you still awake?” she asked, her voice holding a dangerous edge.

*“Now it is my turn to sleep.”* I stretched and managed a smile.

“Yup,” she said, and a twist of Water and Wood Aether seemed to slam into my mind. *What, no!* I was asleep in seconds.

I woke when the entire Portable Home seemed to shake. Vaya jumped off the bed. “I will find out what is happening,” she told Jamila, who nodded. I was still covered in injuries, Disease, and Corruption, but was getting close to where I could get up and walk around, at least.

*“How long?”* I asked Sia.

*“One and a half days,”* he told me. *“Vaya and Jamila have taken turns keeping you asleep and healing. We have just arrived at Oddali.”*

*“I need to be able to stand and talk,”* I said, diving into my center and rushing down along my legs. There were a few places where Corruption was disrupting my nerves, keeping my legs from responding to my commands, so I focused on the first of those. Jamila and Vaya hadn’t been too concerned about those and were trying to make sure that my major organs, brain, and center were safe before moving outward.

Sia felt my urgency, and threw his own focus into my other leg.

Jamila smacked me lightly on my head. “Do not make me put you back to sleep. You are not ready to meet with the City Lord.”

*“The lich that was on the other side of the portal might be able to open it again,”* I told Sia. *“We need to make sure they send a strong presence, at least one Perfect Core but preferably two, along*

*with a full century of troops. The Naga seem to want to give this world to a deity associated with Death and Chaos, which seems worse than Chaos directly. Whoever Inanna is, she seems to be allied with Chaos anyway, and any weakness will lead to our destruction.”*

*“I will tell Aleks, Jamila, and Knight Kaminski,” Sia said, “but I doubt Vaya and Jamila will let you get up anyway. So rest, heal, and I will answer questions for you.”*

*“Oh, fine,” I growled at him, then dove back into healing.*

*“This is remarkable.” A voice I didn’t recognize said sometime later. An older woman walked into my room, then bowed to me. It was a slight bow, only a bit deeper than just a nod, but it was telling from someone at the peak of Perfect Core. “I apologize for intruding, Kupiec Aiden, but I had to see that you were truly laid low.” Her short, black hair framed her thin face, an arrogant smirk revealing her opinion of me.*

*“Will... you... send... troops?” I asked, each word difficult.*

*“A decurion has already departed, with a Complete Core leader,” she said dismissively. “Any more would weaken Oddali’s defense too much. I do not know what you children saw, but I will not risk my people on your word.”*

*“Even with my order?” Aleks said, stomping into the room.*

*“You are a child,” City Lord Wolcik said, waving her hand dismissively.*

*“Sia, tell her this,” I told him, rage welling up inside me. “You will send at least one Perfect Core to watch over the portal’s location, or your city will drown in its dead and our nation will be lost to your hubris! Do it now, or King Craesti will force your hand and you will lose political power and influence.”*

*“Who are you to speak to me that way?” she growled.*

*“I am Knight Kupiec Aiden, hero of Craesti City, champion of the International Tournament of Champions, Munqiz of the Ashkhas, chosen bearer of the Legacy of the M’Zee, betrothed to Princess Aleksandra, and the youngest Seed Core gatherer in history. I can and will see to your destruction if your own actions do not lead you there anyway!”*

I saw Aether collecting around her hands as her face twisted into a hateful glare, only for Knight Kaminski to arrive next to her. “Do not make me kill you,” she said quietly, her voice full of malice.

“Fine,” City Lord Wocik spat. “Centurion Wozniak will take his century to the ruins. You will regret this.” She blurred away and Knight Kaminski vanished after her.

“Wow, Aiden,” Vaya said, squeezing into the room. “You put her in her place.”

I laughed, a wheezing sound that made me grimace, but they seemed to recognize it. *“I wish she had done what is right without the threats, but I will not regret making an enemy if it prevents a zombie apocalypse.”*

Five minutes later, Knight Kaminski came back. “She did as she said, and a Perfect Core centurion has departed with his troops toward the ruins. We can leave for Craesti City. We will stop ten kilometers from the city, and I will take Princess Aleksandra to speak with King Craesti. I believe that he will want to hold a parade welcoming you back.” She paused for a second, then nodded. “You have three days. Do your best to get well enough to fake health, please.”

“Of... course,” I said with a grin.

“Good,” Knight Kaminski said, then she stepped forward and put her hand on Jamila’s back. The flood of Aether between them was easily visible, and my Aether senses told me that Jamila went from nearly empty to completely full of Aether in only a few seconds. Knight Kaminski drooped a bit afterwards, but winked and then vanished, rushing back into the common room.

The bed shuddered when the Skysurfer rose into the sky again, and we continued our journey back home.

I worked at healing my legs more, and noticed that, after removing the Disease and Corruption, the remaining tissue was stronger. *It’s like the damage is tempering my body to it, I thought, but it’s limited to the areas where the damage is greatest. How can I spread this out? Increasing my strength and decreasing my vulnerability to Corruption and Disease seems like it would be highly useful. Hmm, maybe if I push the Corruption around?*



I smashed a hammer of Wood Aether into the ball of Corruption blocking the nerves headed deeper into my right leg. This time, I let the pieces left over spread around and grow for a few minutes before breaking them apart again. Over and over, I traced the damage down my leg. Each bit healed afterwards let the benefits encroach on a larger area, though to a lesser extent. I growled at it, then tried feeding unsuspected Aether into the growth to encourage it.

The Aether just burned it away, instead of fueling its growth. "Light blind it," I growled. "I was hoping to get more tempering out of the stupid Corruption, but it looks like that won't work."

"You should just focus on healing," Sia said. "We can figure out how to temper more evenly to Corruption, Disease, and Death later. For now, you need to be able to walk, run, and fight. Without that ability, being slightly stronger against Death Aether will mean nothing."

"Fine," I sighed, then gave up on spreading the Corruption Aether out, and focused on just obliterating it where I could.

This continued for another two days, with Jamila and Vaya enforcing a three-hour nap every day on me. I reciprocated, making them sleep as well. Halfway through the third day, the Skysurfer set down again. *Finally, we're home*, I thought as my flying surfboard settled.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Two hours later, Aleks strode into my room. “Can he walk?” she asked Jamila.

“For a bit,” she said, looking at me. “What do you think?”

“I... will... stand,” I said. Talking was still difficult.

Aleks frowned but nodded. “Okay. We will have you hold on to two of our arms to support you without looking like you need it. Would that work?” She looked at Jamila instead of me.

“It is... fine,” I growled.

“That should be okay,” Jamila said, reaching over to grip my bicep. “We just want you to be safe. You know that.”

“I know,” I sighed. “Still annoying.”

“Sorry,” Aleks said. “I am just worried. You were severely injured in a way I have never seen before. Looking weak in front of the city would be a poor idea as well, especially since you...” She trailed off, blushing.

“I...?”

“You declared we were engaged to City Lord Wocik. I do not know if Dad will be okay with that.”

“Well, we could have a meeting before we enter the city. It has been a month, I think,” Vaya said, walking in. “Aiden, can you check the Connecting panel?”

With a thought, I pulled it out of my ring. The sheet of metal, absolutely covered in minute Inscriptions well beyond my ability to see, even with the enhancement that Seed Core had given my senses, appeared in my hand. I sent a tiny stream of Aether into it, probing at the connection and checking Connecting the Myriad People’s charge. “It’s ready,” I said.

Aleks held up her medallion. “Well, let us have another meeting. The last one was short and did not demonstrate the true power of your equipment.”

“Does King Craesti expect us to start walking in a parade soon?”

“No, we are still a day out from Craesti,” Vaya said. “Knight Kaminski had us set down for everyone to rest and recover before we cross the final distance. She said she was going to speak with King Craesti before we arrived.”

“Thanks,” I said, then surged Aether into the plate. Immediately, I felt a ping explode across the world, my mind seeming to stretch with the Aether surge. After a second, I felt a response to my southwest. Another few seconds passed, and three different points activated to the northwest. Two more triggered even farther north and to the east, then a final response came.

Immediately, I found myself standing in an area enclosed by fog. Aleks appeared to my left, then rushed to my side. “You still look like chum,” she said, wrapping my arm around her shoulder. I relaxed down onto her, letting her Seed Core strength hold me up as I sagged in relief.

“So, is this why you called a meeting?” King Craesti asked. “Or were you just hoping to get frisky with my daughter in a mind space?”

“Daaaaad,” Aleks whined.

Boisterous laughter echoed, and Prince Gunther appeared. “King Craesti,” he said, laughing, “I am Prince Gunther of the Weltreich.”

“Prince Gunther, it is a pleasure.” King Craesti walked over and gave him a head nod.

Gunther gave a much deeper bow. “The pleasure is my own. Unfortunately, I cannot give any updates on the front lines. My retainers and I are still on a ship headed for the Illyrian coast.”

“Nor can we,” Shehzada Maayari, the Topraki heir, said, materializing out of the mists. “We still journey toward home, to speak with my mother and collect our troops.” The Topraki Soul Strengthening representative, Librarian Narwan’s equivalent in the tournament, appeared, then bowed deeply to King Craesti, Prince Gunther, Princess Aleksandra, and then me, in that order. He was

missing a hand, which made my eyes widen when I noticed it. He gave me a grin and a nod.

“Princess Aleksandra, Prince Gunther. Oh, King Craesti,” said Sezhade Iswat, the Ashkhas heir, surprised. “I apologize, sire, I did not realize that the medallion had made its way to you already.”

“Good!” Sultah Aleahil said. “The last meeting was worthless, only these silly children playing around. Gunther, Felix, have you reached your parents yet?”

“No, Sultah,” Gunther said. “We are still sailing. Ritter Felix met up with me after the Dungeon attack rather than journey home. He is still recuperating from his injuries.” Felix Ritter nodded, the burns on his face still red and puffy.

“I may have to admonish him,” King Craesti said, appearing in front of me. “What happened to you?”

I looked around, then nodded. “The Naga were at the ruins we discovered on our trip to the Ashkhas Baqiya,” I said. “Looking for a staff that radiated evil. We found it first, only to have to fight superior forces. We were successfully repelling them when the Perfect Core Naga leader sacrificed the rest of her people and then herself on the staff and opened a portal to a dead realm. They were referencing deities named Inanna and Tiamat, who I believe is Chaos. Inanna should be Death or something like that.”

I shivered slightly then continued. “The staff disappeared into the other realm, and during our fight against an undead enemy, my Bond and I rushed into the portal to try and find the staff and close the incursion. An intelligent undead, a lich, was in possession of the staff. They were only at the power level of a Constructed Core gatherer to start, but quickly grew. Sia was able to surprise them, and I took advantage to grab the staff and run. We managed to dodge all of the lich’s attacks until just before we crossed the portal again, but they managed to hit me with a blast of a uniquely deadly Aether combination. Once through, I closed the portal, but my friends were forced to cut my hand off to prevent the corruption of the attack from spreading. I am still recovering.”

Of course, this opened the floodgates, and dozens of questions flew at me. I spent the next few minutes answering them,

before finally I waved my hands. “I need to speak to King Craesti, as we are only a night’s travel away from Craesti City. Uh, can the rest of you speak among yourselves? There should be another thirty minutes of time left.”

“Rest well and recover,” Sultah Aleahil said. “We will look for the Naga around the Baqiya, as well as warn the merchant captains as they sail. Thank you again for your proactive defense of my people.” The leader of the Ashkhas in all but name bowed to me.

“Uh,” I stammered. “You are welcome.”

He laughed, then turned and scooped up the Ashkhas heir with a wall of Air Aether. We’d discovered during the last meeting that you could manipulate Aether as if you were truly here, and the stronger people were able to do more, as would be expected.

“Hmm, would you prefer to just fly your treasure into the city with little fanfare?” King Craesti asked.

I looked over at Aleks, then sighed. “Yeah, I would, but it would be a disservice to my friends and colleagues.”

“Hmm. Do you need a stronger healer?”

“Uh, I don’t think so.” I shrugged. “I think I just need time to recover. Jamila and Vaya both have been pausing and letting my body rest between healings for the last day or so, and I’ve drunk at least six liters of broth today.”

“I will have chariots await your group. You will land just outside the eastern gate of the city, and then only have to transition to the chariot,” King Craesti said, then his face grew stern. “Each one will only hold two people. You will ride with my daughter, then your other two paramours will ride in the next vehicle. Behind will come the rest of your party, except Knight Kaminski. She will know what to do. Once you arrive at the keep, we will have a long discussion about why you thought you could declare yourself my daughter’s betrothed.” His face grew increasingly stern. Near the end of his rant, his aura started to crush me into the ground, and I gulped in terror.

“Daddy,” Aleks said, stepping in front of me. “We chose each other. You and Mom said you would support any choice I made if it was acceptable to the Kingdom. Aiden is the champion of the International Tournament, the holder of the Legacy of the M’Zee, and

the youngest Seed Core gatherer ever. Are you going to say he is not a good choice?”

The aura that King Craesti was projecting popped like a balloon. “Of course not, minnow,” he said, and I felt Aleks’s blush. “I just hoped you would talk to your mother and I before pledging yourself.”

“Uh, I, uh, didn’t mean, uh,” I stammered. “I was—”

“Just trying to put City Lord Wocik in her place? Create a new political problem for me while I was pushing through war ordinances and tax increases?”

“Yeah, uh, no,” I gulped. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“It is fine.” He laughed, then scooped me into a hug. “I was hoping you would come to see my Aleksandra as a woman and a friend, instead of one or the other. The Volkov will be a mite difficult, but not too much. I am sure the Naanva will be more than delighted to have their daughter as a subsidiary wife to a Prince of the land. Now, I have to figure out what the best rewards are for you. Hmm, you are already a Knight, so a Barony! That would make sense, and would give you a taste of leadership. I cannot wait to see what you do with it.”

“Dad, really?” Aleks asked.

“Of course, you will get to participate as well. I will think on this. How to keep you two together?” he mumbled, seeming to withdraw into himself. “I have time to decide. Now.” He turned to the others. “I only yesterday received a report from the advance forces. The assault on Borgby was successful! The hated fortress city of the Illyrians has fallen, and the defenses turned against them. Initial forays into the interior of the Illyrians’ land have gained footholds, but our forces have found another series of strongholds that we will need to capture.”

Cheers echoed from the others, who’d taken the opportunity to speak among themselves. “Aiden! I wish to spar,” Gunther said.

“Unfortunately, my friend, I am still recovering, and even here I feel it.”

“Bah. Can you demonstrate for us anything from the Legacy?”

“Can we trade items? Did you try that last time?” Ritter Felix asked.

I summoned the stone with the Core runes in it, then handed it to Gunther. “I can feel it. It is tenuous though.” He put the stone to his head, and I saw the line of Aether that connected them. Somehow, it arched out from the knowledge stone through me and back to Gunther.

With a flex of my own Aether, I found that I could tell what he was looking at. *Water, Ice, and Air rune, enhances temperature regulation and Ice creation capabilities. Neat,* I thought as he examined a rune I could not see, due to my slightly insufficient Ice Affinity. After another few seconds, I pulled away, not wanting to invade his privacy like that. Well, not too much.

I looked through the Legacy, then pulled out three of the lowest-level stones. One was on gathering techniques, one on techniques using Air through Metal, and the last techniques using Earth through Ice. “Ritter Felix, look through this and see if you find anything helpful for your people,” I said, handing him the Air stone. I turned to Sultah Aleahil and gave him the Earth stone, repeating myself. The last one I gave to Altan, the Topraki representative.

I found more stones, all Aether Gathering level, which I was willing to just give away for free, and handed them out to everyone else. I turned to Aleks. “What would you like to see?”

“Inscriptions. They have some interesting ideas that I want to see if I can combine with some of my lessons.”

“As you wish,” I said with a cheeky grin, then I pulled out the Condensation- and Core-level stones, and gave them to her.

“Aiden?” she asked softly.

“You are my betrothed. It has some perks.”

“Speaking of...” King Craesti said, turning away from the Aether Gathering-level stone on Smithing he’d gotten. “Another announcement, this one of a happier note. I am sure you all overheard, but I wish to make it official. Knight Kupiec Aiden has asked for my daughter’s hand in marriage, and she has agreed. Cheer for the future couple!”

“Uh, what about Headmaster Glav’s rule?” I asked.

“You have reached Seed Core, and are a first tier no longer,” he said. “Plus, it is not like you will be married anytime soon. There are proprieties to maintain, of course, and a few surprises awaiting you in Craesti City. Now, let us use this time wisely, for we have only twenty more minutes before the Inscription will fade.”

“Uh, sire. How is Master Narwan?” I asked.

“He is well, and arrived in Craesti City last night,” King Craesti answered. “They destroyed the Dungeon, and all survived, thankfully. Unfortunately, he will not be back at his peak strength for a few months. Go train for a bit, I will speak with the others.”

I nodded, then pulled out the Core-level Alchemy stone, and went back to work, learning their methods of creating Affinity Pills.



# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Just before the time was up, I approached King Craesti. “Sir, we still have the staff. Knight Kaminski was unable to damage it. Can you, Master Narwan, or another of similar power, meet us outside Craesti City to attempt to destroy it?”

He looked at me concernedly for a second, then nodded. “I will speak with Casmir. At least one of us will be there.”

“Thank you, sire,” I said with a deep bow.

He snorted, then smiled. “Soon you will be as irreverent as my daughter. We will speak again soon.”

With that, Connecting the Myriad Peoples ran out of Aether, and I opened my real eyes. Vaya was still sitting next to me, and I could feel a thin thread of Growth Aether carefully massaging my left iliotibial band. Microscopic tears in the tendon healed, and I knew she was being careful to maintain full functionality of my leg.

“Thank you,” I said. “King Craesti or Librarian Narwan should be on their way. Help me outside?”

She gave me a once-over with her Aether then nodded. “Of course.”

I grabbed onto her extended arm and she lifted me one handed out of the bed. It was yet another example of how utterly strong we had all gotten. I tentatively put weight on my legs before wrapping my arm around her shoulders. She reciprocated with an arm around my waist, and we three-leggedly walked out of my room.

Aleks walked behind us, a frown on her face as she shook off the lingering effects of the medallion. We’d noticed last time that it took everyone else a few seconds to recover from sending their consciousnesses to another place, at least those below Soul Strengthening in power. “Hopefully Dad comes,” she said. “I would like to talk to him.”

“Everyone, either King Craesti or Librarian Narwan should be here shortly,” I announced, breaking everyone out of their gathering trances.

“Woo, we can finally take a break!” Jon said cheekily.

I just shook my head. “Come on, outside!” Vaya helped me to the door.

Once the door was fully open, Librarian Narwan appeared in front of us. I blinked while Vaya let out a little *eep* of surprise. He snorted, a grin on his face, while I heard King Craesti chuckle off to my right. Part of Librarian Narwan’s hair had been burned away, and his left eye was bloodshot. A bruise covered the same side of his neck, extending to reach below his shirt. “Master Narwan, King Craesti,” I said calmly. “I apologize for not bowing, but I doubt I would be able to without falling.”

“No need,” King Craesti said. “Alright, Casmir, you had your fun. Let them out.”

Librarian Narwan laughed, then gestured with one hand. A film of Air Aether wrapped around me and pulled me out of Vaya’s grasp. He moved backward just as fast as I moved forward, and I found myself standing in front of King Craesti, Knight Kaminski, himself, and a third, older man with graying blond hair, blue eyes, and a sharp nose wearing a shining red hauberk over a black tunic. The red was replicated in the greaves and vambraces he also wore, which made me think of the bracer I’d outgrown a while ago. *I really should get a better set of armor, I thought. Something to protect and empower me. Add that to my list of tasks in the city.*

“Champion Krigare,” Aleks said, walking up behind me with the others.

“Princess,” he responded, his voice a bit higher than his built frame made me expect.

“Where is the staff?” King Craesti asked.

“At the front of the Skysurfer, Aiden’s flying device,” Aleks answered. “We were unwilling to bring it inside the shack. It is tied to the device and wrapped in several layers of blankets, so that none of us would accidentally touch it with our hands if we had to move it.”

Librarian Narwan pulled the bundle to us the same way that he had me. It floated about a meter away. The Air Aether formed a tiny hand and unwrapped the blankets from around it, until it floated in its malevolent glory. After a second, it dropped to the ground as Librarian Narwan hissed in pain. The edges of the Air Aether had corroded green, and he severed them with a burst of white Fire. *Purity Aether*, I thought. “Never have I seen anything as foul as this,” Librarian Narwan said. “I can sense the Aether inside it. You are right, we must destroy it. Krigare, protect the children.”

A wall of Fire formed in front of us, reinforced by molten Metal and Lava. After a second, the wall became see-through, though it took me another five before I could get my Aether Sight to focus beyond the blaze of Soul Strengthening Aether. Champion Krigare stepped forward, while King Craesti and Librarian Narwan vanished on the other side.

They reappeared about a hundred meters farther down the plain we were in. A blanket held the staff which was placed directly between them. They both unfurled their auras, letting them use their power to its fullest extent.

Even through the protection of the Champion, I could feel the aura try to crush me. I pushed against it with my own, and saw Champion Krigare nod. *Of course they're using this as a training opportunity*, I thought. *I'm one hundred percent certain that Librarian Narwan is behind that. Light and Darkness!* The last exclamation came when runes started to form around the strongest people in the Kingdom. Millions of runes, more Aether than I could express in a year right now, bloomed out of both of them. It was bright enough in my Aether Sight, already repressed to see through Champion Krigare's wall, that I had to blink away an afterimage as I turned it down.

The blanket wrapped around the staff as it floated ten meters straight up, into the middle of a sphere of runes. All eight Elements flowed into the construct, a carefully choreographed display of power and control. Streamers of each Element separated and joined into others, with dozens of secondary Elements forming. All of them had something to do with destruction or a means of breaking things, such

as Flame, Forge, Decay, Rot, Erosion, Abrasion, and others that I only vaguely recognized or could only guess at what they were from the way they felt.

The massive sphere, over fifty meters in radius, slowly started to contract. As the outer edges collapsed inward, they picked up speed. Every second, it doubled, until they flared with breathtaking power as every bit of the Aether surged onto the staff at the same time.

An explosion of light and sound pounded on the shield in front of us, causing it to shake. Cracks formed even as Champion Krigare poured more Aether into it. He grunted and curved the shield. The bend let it shed the force still pounding onto the Aether construct. Finally, thirty seconds later, the wave passed.

The shield now ended on the lip of a hundred-meter-wide crater, dipping into the ground just under ten meters at the center. Dirt, rocks, and plant roots were visible on the edges, until the very middle of it. Librarian Narwan and King Craesti both floated a few meters apart, and they both were looking down with nearly identical frowns on their faces.

The staff stood proudly, its tip plunged into the ground. I looked closely and saw that it bore no damage from the attack, though the crystal stuck to it was gone.

Glancing around, I found it. The crystal that had adorned the staff was now embedded in the side of the crater just below us. Its color had changed from the black of the pit to a sky blue, though as I watched it seemed to shimmer and turn forest green. I got the impression it was undecided about what it should look like.

The shield of Aether vanished as Champion Krigare relaxed. Immediately, I felt the crystal calling me. Something within my heart, my Core, cried out for me to take the crystal, to recover it before the staff could consume it again.

I didn't even notice myself moving before the gem was in my hand. A surge of knowledge blasted into me, freezing me in place. Information dumped into my mind, demanding an answer.

"Aiden!" Aleks screamed, slamming her arm into mine and making me drop the crystal.

I staggered to the side, slipping on the slope of the crater, and fell to one knee. Unconsciously, I raised a tiny platform of Earth to catch my slide. Aleks was at my side in an instant. I blinked a couple of times, then looked up at Aleks. “Thanks, but it wasn’t hurting me. I wasn’t sure how to not make a decision, though, since this isn’t a good location for it. Dropping it worked, so that’s good.”

“Make what decision?” Vaya asked, sliding down next to me. Jamila and Jon were looking over the side.

I glanced back to see Librarian Narwan and King Craesti standing near the implanted staff, examining it with frowns of concentration on their faces. Master Narwan looked over at me and nodded before turning back to it, so I knew they were listening as well. “Uh, the crystal is a Dungeon Seed, or at least it can be. Someone can plant the Seed and channel Aether into it to create a new Dungeon. I got the feeling that doing so would make you the Dungeon Spirit, so you might lose your body entirely, so I do not want to be the one to do that. Maybe someone who was already dying could use it? Not the best option anyway, I think.”

“Options?” Aleks asked.

I nodded and continued. “The Seed could also be given to an already open Dungeon, strengthening it immensely. If we gave it to Bruno, for example, I think he’d be able to open two or more new instances, and make the highest-power one stronger too. If he was nearby, I’d be advocating for that one. However, the last option is the most interesting, and unique. Somehow, the Seed searched my memories and saw the design for the portal to the Divine Territory. It could be merged into a portal like that to create a link to a known Dungeon, the Jungle Arena in this case, from anywhere in the world! Not entirely sure what that would mean, exactly, but it would be awesome to link together Craesti and the Ashkhas Baqiya like that. Maybe we’d be able to exit there even if we entered here!”

“So, if you wanted to do that, why were you having trouble not making a decision?” Aleks asked again.

“Uh, when I tried it rejected my decision because there wasn’t a portal already built,” I said with a frown. “Not sure why, but we should decide where to put it without touching it again, just in case.”

“Interesting,” King Craesti said, his voice carried over to us on a gust of Wind Aether. Another line of Aether created a shell of Stone around the crystal and floated it over to the king. “I will make a decision about this soon. You will be rewarded for the crystal, on top of everything else you will be receiving.”

I nodded. “Of course, sire.”

Aleks and Vaya both reached in and grabbed my arms. “On three,” Aleks said, then counted up. At three, they leapt into the air, dragging me with them, and landed in front of Jamila and Champion Krigare. Jamila looked at me questioningly, seeing as I was nearly dangling from the arms of the other two young women, so I gave her a reassuring grin.

“I do not believe that pure brute force will destroy the staff,” Librarian Narwan said after nearly an hour of examining it. We’d sat down and started a meal while he and King Craesti had conferred. “I will explore some of the older tomes in Azyl’s library, as it is still better than yours, Markus.”

“Yes, yes, though Aiden’s printing press will let us create more of them now,” King Craesti said. “Still, it is time for us to go to Craesti. Per, Casmir, assist the youngsters with their travel. I will be waiting at the square for you.” He leapt into the sky, then blurred away.

“All right, everyone, onto the Skysurfer,” Librarian Narwan said. We all piled onto the front. “Aiden, shrink the shack please.”

I nodded, then reached out to touch the doorway. With a thought, it shrank down. We’d decided that hiding the Portable Home completely wasn’t really feasible. So we were pretending it was just a six-by-six room that shrank down for transport. Nothing beyond that was told to anyone but King Craesti and Librarian Narwan. Of course, City Lord Wolcik knew something about it, which worried me, but that was fish overboard. I was also to hide my ring’s abilities as best I could, so I had a large Inscribed storage bag sitting obviously on my waist.

With the Portable Home out of the way, we were able to spread out. “Aiden, control the Skysurfer to float twenty meters off the ground,” Librarian Narwan commanded once we were situated.

I reached out with my Aether, sinking it into the control Inscriptions. The Skysurfer smoothly ascended into the air. Once we hit twenty meters, I held us steady. Librarian Narwan and Champion Krigare moved to either side, and a bubble of Air, Speed, and Stability Aether encompassed the entire thing. Without so much as a lurch, we shot off at nearly a hundred times the speed we could normally have achieved.

Of course, the massive Aether investment made it so that was a short-range boost, but it was enough to shave the half-a-day journey into only ten minutes. Both Soul Strengthening gatherers were winded by the end of our shortened trip, revealing why we didn't just use that to get from the Ashkhas Baqiya back here.

Once we could see the walls of the city, Champion Krigare stopped adding his Aether to the structure, and we slowed down. Librarian Narwan deftly brought us to a near halt, then told me, "Land us by the gate."

I nodded, and we descended as smoothly as we'd ascended. The little traffic that had occupied the road was stopped nearly fifty meters away from the gate, the Craesti City Guard holding the merchants to allow us clear space. Five meters from the massive gates leading into the city from the road heading toward Oddali was a single Guard waving at us and indicating the spot to land. Just as we set down, the gates opened.

A stream of chariots, guided by more of the City Guard, rushed out and turned to allow us to enter in an obviously choreographed display. It was awesome. Most of the chariots were plain, used for training and war, but three of them were ostentatiously decorated with silver, gold, and the two-headed lion on a shield that was the Craesti symbol.

"Princess Aleksandra, Knight Aiden, you are on the closest chariot," Champion Krigare said, which was only the second time I'd heard him speak. "Miss Vaya, Miss Jamila, you are on the second. Mister Ming, Mister Xaio, you are on the third..." He detailed the rest of everyone's positions. "Knight Aiden, be careful to show strength, not weakness."

“Thank you, Champion Krigare,” I said, bowing my head and offering my arm to Aleks. “Uh, is someone going to collect the Skysurfer?”

“I will bring it,” Champion Krigare said.

I nodded. “Thank you again. Shall we, my dear?”

Aleks giggled, then took my arm. Most people wouldn't be able to tell that she was effectively holding me up, but I did my best to walk anyway. My Aether flowed through me, and I basically used it to manipulate my legs and keep my body straight, with Aleks's support keeping me stable.

Thankfully, it was only a few meters to the chariot. The driver, a captain of the Guard, reached out to help Aleks first, and then myself. I put one hand on the side of the chariot, and the other looped through Aleks's. Through the open gate, I could see thousands of people lining the roadway, cheering for us.

“King Craesti instructed me to tell you, you are still human,” the captain said with a frown. “Not sure why.”

I nodded. “So we do not let the cheers go to our heads, and we stay vigilant and humble. Thank you, Captain...?”

“Menghao,” he said with a grin. “I am Captain Menghao. Thank you for asking.” I nodded, and a horn sounded from the end of the chariots. “We are ready. Hold on, and be sure to wave to the citizens!”

The horses pulling the chariot, sleek fifth level Beasts with an Air Element, took off at a slow trot when Captain Menghao flicked the reins. A few seconds later, he pulled gently, and they slowed to a walk, letting the people cheering see us.

I carefully pulled my left hand off the side of the chariot and raised it to wave at the crowds. At my gesture, the cheering redoubled. I saw young boys jumping and waving at us from the front while younger women flashed smiles and kisses, trying to attract attention. Families stood, little children waving on the shoulders of their parents.

The vast majority of people I saw were only in the Aether Gathering stage, even the parents and grandparents in the crowd. I kept the frown off my face, but I redoubled my desire to help



everyone advance. “A nation of Condensation Gatherers,” I said. “That is my and Librarian Narwan’s goal.”

“We can do it,” Aleks said, gripping my arm tighter with one hand and waving with her other one. I saw young men trying to get her attention too, which was somewhat comforting. *At least it's not just the girls, I thought, though the power dynamics still need work in this Kingdom. We can fix it, it will just take time.*

“Only with your support,” I said aloud, dismissing my concern for now. *Something to think about later, and act upon. I know I'll have Aleks's support.* We continued through the city until we arrived at the same square where I'd been knighted, only it was even more crowded than it had been then.

# CHAPTER THIRTY- SEVEN

A stage was erected, Stone, Wood, and Metal Aether woven together to elevate a speaking position three meters up. This way, everyone could see it, from every road leading into the square. The only clear space was a path just wide enough for the chariots to move down, and the base of the stage where parking was available.

Captain Menghao jumped over the side of the chariot once he stopped us, directly in front of the stairway up. He rushed around and helped Aleks then me down.

I thanked him, then took Aleks's arm and walked to the stairs. "Ladies first," I said.

"Thank you," she said, then winked. "Even if you just want to look at my butt."

I blushed, and she laughed. She stepped in front and walked up the stairs, emphasizing her stride to draw my eyes. I blushed again, then reached out for the handrail. My Aether flared throughout my body, and I moved up the stairs. Each step was agony, but I didn't show it on my face. I kept a smooth stride up, not too quick, but not too slow either.

I paused at the landing, facing the crowd and waving. I made it seem like I wanted to wave to them, instead of taking a break to let my meridians rest for a few seconds. I gave a wink to the crowd, then turned around and walked all the way up. Aleks was waiting for me at the top, and I smoothly took her arm. The crowd yelled louder at that, and hoots, the equivalent to a wolf whistle in Craesti, echoed from the people.

King and Queen Craesti were waiting along with everyone's parents and a few advisors. Vaya's mom gave me a bright grin while Pa and Jon's dad both gave me proud nods. I had to scrub my eyes

with Aether to clear the tears out of them. We marched over to the King, who stood near the front with a single podium raised off the surface of the stage. I recognized a few of the runes Inscribed on it from the Message Inscription I learned almost a year ago now.

King Craesti waved for us to stop just on the other side of the podium. Everyone else filed in behind us, forming a line across the front of the stage. Once we were all present, King Craesti stepped to the podium. "Citizens of Craesti City," he announced, the Inscriptions projecting his voice evenly across the crowd. "Here I present to you the Craesti Condensation competitors from the International Tournament of Champions! They stand before you victorious!"

He paused here, and the cheering redoubled as people screamed themselves hoarse, vicariously celebrating our achievements as their own. King Craesti let them cheer for nearly a minute, then said, "I could not be prouder of my daughter, your Princess Aleksandra! She won first place in the individual tournament, and came in second overall. Three cheers for your future ruler!"

More screaming, dozens of people jumping and waving at the stage as they showed their support for the beautiful woman standing next to me. King Craesti allowed it to continue for another minute, before finishing his speech. "She was not the overall winner of the tournament, though. That honor belongs to Knight Kupiec Aiden, who you witnessed earning a noble title only six months ago. He was instrumental in saving our beloved city from the Primordial Jellyfish. His team won first place in the team portion of the Tournament of Champions, and he came in second, losing only to Princess Aleksandra because he willingly took injuries to permanently remove the Illyrian heir! Later that day, he then proved instrumental in saving the Ashkhas Baqiya from the Illyrian plot, directing our forces to destroy the Chaos-summoning ritual they had erected. The Ashkhas name him Munqiz, hero in our tongue, and we do as well!"

More cheering exploded through the crowd. King Craesti let it continue for longer than he did the cheering for Aleks before he raised his hand. The crowd quieted. "His exploits continued, as he

earned yet more accolades from the Ashkhas from discovering the secrets of the Divine Territory of Alilahat Nuwr. All told, I could stand up here for an hour just recounting his deeds. For this, he has earned significant glory for himself, our Kingdom, and our people!” King Craesti paused for more cheering. “Of course, he will be rewarded accordingly!”

He turned to me and smiled. “I name you Baron Kupiec Aiden, and give to you land and a charge. Develop a new town, build up a people, and strengthen our land. I reward you five platinum for constructing your new dwelling and creating your new domain. For the reward for great success is yet more opportunities for additional accolades.”

“I... uh... I...” I swallowed, then bowed deeply to him. Thankfully, Aleks kept a tight grip on my bicep, so I didn’t faceplant. I straightened up. “I will endeavor to strengthen our Kingdom and build up my town to the best of my ability.”

“Of course,” he said with a nod, then he turned back to the people. “Of course,” he repeated. “That is not his only success. As you can see in front of you, my daughter is standing arm in arm with him. She has chosen Baron Kupiec as her future partner, and together they will eventually rule Craesti Kingdom!”

At this, the cheers seemed to explode off the crowd. I saw dozens of techniques designed to enhance sound appear throughout the mass of people, and the cheers of approval and acceptance echoed louder than anything I’d heard besides the roar of a Primordial. “Because of this, I now announce the betrothal of Princess Craesti Aleksandra to Baron Kupiec Aiden. In one year’s time, he will become Prince Kupiec Aiden. May they have a long, love-filled marriage, and together work to strengthen our Kingdom!”

I was pretty certain at this point that everyone cheering was trying to see if they could break the stage around us with just sound. I knew it was partially because they knew I had just been a commoner before King Craesti knighted me. I had grown up like them, they thought, and they saw me achieve the ultimate dream. Winning the International Tournament and the Princess’s hand at the same time was beyond most people’s dreams. Even if their approval

was only because they could live vicariously through me, I basked in it.

King Craesti gestured for Vaya and Jamila to step forward. He announced their standings in the tournament, and extolled their virtues before presenting them as Knights in their own right. Everyone else was knighted for their parts in the Tournament, the Divine Territory, and their efforts in stopping the Illyrian attack on the Ashkhas. Jamila, Bridget, and Lea were the most flabbergasted with their elevation to nobility. Jon almost seemed like he'd been expecting it, only winking at me when his knighthood was finished. The others knew they would become nobility eventually, if only because of their families, but earning it on their own made it worth more, as I could see from their beaming smiles.

"In honor of the amazing achievements of our next generation, I declare today and tomorrow a feast day! Celebrate the success of your youth! You are dismissed!" King Craesti declared, then stood back and let the cheers die out. It took nearly five minutes before the last cheer stopped. The crowd milled about for a few seconds, before starting to disperse.

King Craesti walked over to me. "Take care of my daughter," he said.

I clutched at her arm, entwined with mine, and bowed my head to him. "With every bit of my body, mind, and soul. She will be safe, loved, and cared for," I promised. I turned to her. "I love you, more than I can ever really express." I looked over at Vaya and Jamila, standing arm in arm only a meter from us. "And I love you both beyond words. I don't know how I will ever really show it, but I promise I will do my best. I am incredibly lucky to have you in my life."

Vaya beamed at me, but Jamila had a pensive look on her face. I knew that I had to talk to her, just the two of us, soon, or I might lose her completely.

"Baron Aiden," King Craesti said, "return to the chariots. We will speak more over lunch."

A shimmering curtain of Aether blocked the view of the last few people still lingering in the square. "Oh good," I said, slumping

as my legs gave out.

Aleks grinned for a second, then scooped me into a princess carry.

“Hey!” Laughter was the only response to my exclamation.

Aleks leapt off the top of the stage, landing with barely any bend in her knees even as she gently set me down, keeping her right arm around my waist.

I mock glared at her, then grinned. “Thanks,” I said.

“Come on,” Jon whined as he slammed into the ground behind us. “I am hungry.”

We hurriedly got into the chariots. Captain Menghao nodded at me. “From what I have heard, you are a good man,” he said as Aleks helped me up. “If you hurt our Princess, the whole Kingdom will hate you.”

“I have no intention of hurting her,” I said, “though I am sure I will, sometime. However, we will work through it, and come out the other side stronger for it.”

Aleks hugged my side. “That is sweet,” she said.

“Good!” Captain Menghao laughed. “Now, the King has summoned you.” With a snap of his reins, the chariot leapt forward.

We only took another five minutes to arrive at the King’s palace. Here, I again faked being strong, as dozens of servants worked to put away the horses and chariots. Again, Captain Menghao jumped over the side of the chariot to help us both down.

A young page, an eleven-year-old boy wearing a gold-lined black tunic with green pants, waited at the doorway. “Princess Craesti, Baron Kupiec, Knight Volkov, Knight Naanva,” he said, bowing each time he said one of our names. “Please, follow me to the reception hall. Knight Lo, Knight Lo...” He turned to the others and gestured at another page. “Edward will guide you to a separate dining area. King Craesti has requested the others for a private meal to discuss Baron Kupiec’s Barony.”

“Thank you,” Aleks said.

He gave her a happy grin, then turned and walked steadily down the hall. A dozen turns led us to somewhere I’d never been, and there was a low murmur of voices through the doorway.

Two guards stood on either side of the hall. When we approached, they turned and opened both doors. “King Craesti,” the woman on the left announced, “Princess Aleksandra and her guests are here.” Inside was a moderately sized dining room, with a fire burning merrily in a fireplace just past a table that could seat up to twelve. King and Queen Craesti were talking, with Queen Craesti holding Aleks’s younger brother Tomasz in her arms. I grinned to see that Pa was there too, talking with Liam, Jamila’s dad, and Baroness Volkov Amalia, Vaya’s mom. I looked around the room but didn’t see anyone else.

“Aleks, Aiden, Vaya, Jamila, come in,” King Craesti said, turning with the announcement.

We filed in. Pa stepped away from his conversation to walk over to me. “I am so proud of you,” he said, pulling me into a hug.

I grinned, then he stumbled as my legs decided to give out again. “Sorry, still recovering,” I said as he held me up.

“I can see that.” Pa changed his position so that my arm was over his shoulder while Jamila checked on me with her Aether. We walked over to the table, and everyone was seated. I was placed next to Aleks, with King Craesti on her left and Vaya directly across from me. Next to her was Jamila, sitting next to the King. She looked intimidated to be there, but I was sure King Craesti would be able to make her feel at ease soon.

Queen Craesti sat at the other end of the table, a highchair set up beside her to hold Tomasz off to one side. Beside her at the table was Amalia and Liam, then Pa who sat next to me. He leaned in. “So, Prince?”

“I didn’t plan that,” I said.

“He really did not.” Aleks laughed from beside me. “He fought against it for longer than I thought he would.”

“Why him?”

Aleks leaned into me. “He was the only guy my age who treated me like a person, instead of a target or a prize.”

“He is a good boy,” Pa said.

“Yes, he is,” Vaya agreed, giving me a smile.

I smiled back, then turned to Pa. “Where is Ma?”

“Champion Krigare could only carry three on his flying device,” he said. “And Ma needed to take care of Nadia.”

“Nadia!?! I have a sister!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, Nadia, our little hope, because of the hope you have brought to our lives,” Pa said.

“To all of us,” King Craesti said. “I need to thank you for the hope and joy that your successes have brought. The people needed a good announcement to distract from the war and the Beast waves.”

“Beast waves?” I asked.

“As before you discovered that first Dungeon,” King Craesti said. “Dozens of Beast waves have hit the population from both the Great Western Forest and ZaboJ Swamp. I have rangers searching to see if they can discover why, but so far, Light has not revealed it.”

“Dad,” Aleks said. “What can we do to help?”

“Learn and grow,” he said, giving her a grin. “You, all of you, are the future of our Kingdom. We will need you soon, I think. Make yourselves the strongest gatherers you can.” He turned to me. “Become the best noble you can. Aiden, as a Baron, you will be tasked with building up a new town. For that purpose, you will be given one thousand square kilometers of land just to the east of Woodfell.”

“That is Bridget’s home town,” Jamila said.

King Craesti paused, looking over at her, then nodded with a smile. “Woodfell is the northeast-most town on the border of the Great Western Forest. Baron Zuguo will be your neighbor to the west and he will be available for advice on constructing a town on the Forest’s borders. Your town will quickly draw people, however, because you will have the only link to a beneficial Dungeon in our lands.”

“Sire, you mean—” I started, only to be interrupted.

“I will provide resources to construct the portal beside the town hall you build, so that you may link it to the Jungle Arena with the crystal you discovered,” King Craesti said. “It is only a day’s travel for most outside Azyl City. You will be connected to them, as you must still work on your education and training, even if you have



advanced from first tier to third tier faster than anyone else in the history of our academies. There is much for you to learn.”

“Of course,” I said. “Uh, will I have to leave Azyl Academy to lead the town immediately?”

“No.” He shook his head, and Aleks squeezed my arm thankfully. “Though one of your first tasks will be to appoint a mayor to govern in your stead.”

I turned to Pa, but frowned sadly. “I am perfectly happy leading the printing press and gem creation businesses,” he said. “I cannot take on another task on top of those.”

“Well, I guess that will be something to work on in a few days,” I said.

“Of course, you need to recover still. Healer Saoirse will be available to you after dinner,” Queen Craesti said. I felt a phantom grip on my shoulder as a stream of Wood Aether left her. “We also have a list of candidates for you to look over. We will help as much as you wish.”

“The whole Kingdom is behind you,” King Craesti said, gesturing at the window, where I could still hear the sounds of the festival he’d declared. “None of this would be possible if not for you. Without you, we would have potentially lost a key trading partner, no one would know of the Legacy, and the Illyrians would be free to continue their raiding. You, all of you young adults, are the future of our nation, and I cannot wait to see what you do with it!”

Pa patted my back in pride, Aleks gripped my hand, and Vaya reached over and gripped my other. I saw that Jamila was holding Vaya’s hand and beaming at me, while the others looked on proudly. I laughed, happier than I’d been in a long time, and thought back to the cheers of the crowd. I knew, then, that I was truly home, and I would fight to my last breath to protect it.

**TO BE CONTINUED IN AIDEN’S NEXT  
ADVENTURE**

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Aiden and his team have finally made it home, uncovering, and preventing, new crisis while gaining power and prestige. Join us next time as Aiden discovers how Craesti has changed, how to be a leader, returns to school, and truly learns what it means to hold political and martial power in Zemias.

Thanks for sticking with me and following on Aiden's journey! Please let me know how this book was by leaving a [review](#). Reviews are incredibly important for self-published authors, and help other readers find the series. Reviews on Reddit or Goodreads are also really helpful. I'll see you again when Aiden returns in Elemental Gatherers Book Seven!

If you want to know the progress on the next book, or others I am working on, join me on my Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/authorchrisvines/>. I'd love to hear from you, whether to say how good this was, or point out errors. You could even give suggestions on Beasts or techniques! To read ahead, join me at my Patreon at <https://www.patreon.com/authorchrisvines>! Also check out the first book in my new Post-Apocalyptic LitRGP series, Mana Daemons, on [Amazon](#)!

If you liked the magic system, it was based somewhat on modern Wuxia and Xianxia books, also known as Progression Fantasy nowadays. To find more novels like this, check out the Western Cultivation Facebook group at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/WesternWuxia/>, and definitely read Ryan Debrun's Starred Tower or Nathan Thompson's Soul Ship. Especially check out Beware of Chicken for an amazing deconstruction of the tropes of this genre and a fun story. For a more eastern flare, check

out <https://www.facebook.com/groups/cultivationnovels/> and read Reborn by D.I. Freed.

If the application of levels to the magic system tickled your fancy, but you wish there were more hard numbers and math, look no further than the GameLit Society group on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/LitRPGsociety/>. One of my favorite series in this genre is Challenger's Call by Nathan Thompson. Check it out! Another LitRPG group is <https://www.facebook.com/groups/LitRPG.books/>. Yet another (I like LitRPG, what can I say?) is

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/litrpgforum>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/TheFantasyNation/> is another great place to find new authors in the fantasy genre.

Find all the new releases for LitRPG (and Progression Fantasy in general) at

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/LitRPGReleases>, where I may be found obsessively looking for new books to read.

# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

## Craesti Students

Kupiec Aiden – The Main Character and Chosen of Darkness

Noptep Jonathan – Aiden’s best friend

Lo Xiao – Younger son of the Lo clan Head

Lo Ming – Elder son of the Lo clan Head, heir to Lo clan

Volkov Vaya – younger daughter of Volkov clan Head

Naanva Jamila – daughter of a baker, very high talent

Weber Lea – minor noble

Falconer Bridget – daughter of a Beast hunter clan

Princess Craesti Aleksandra (Aleks) - Daughter of King Craesti, heir of the throne

Posel Milenna - Teammate of Aleks, daughter of Posel Szymon

Wyslannik Hanna - Teammate of Aleks, daughter of Wyslannik

Alexander, healer of their team

Kourier Lilianna - teammate of Aleks, daughter of Kourier Ania

## Craesti Adults

Librarian Narwan Casmir – mentor for Condensation and Core Tier teams, Soul Tier gatherer

Knight Kaminski Zofia - mentor of Condensation Tier teams, Perfect Core gatherer

King Craesti Markus - King of the Craesti Kingdom, Aleks’s father

Champion Krigare Per - Champion of the King, head of the King’s Guard

Captain Menghao - A captain in the Craesti City Guard

Baron Zuguo - Baron of Woodfell, neighbor town to Aiden’s Barony and Bridget’s hometown

Naanva Liam - Jamila’s father

Baroness Volkov Amalia - Vaya's mother  
Lindsay - Head servant of the Murih Khamara  
Samantha - another chosen from Earth, captured by Illyrians and freed by Aiden

### Bonds

Siarczysty (Sia) - Aiden's Soul Bond, an Elemental Zarorzal  
Sowa Zimnodlot (Zim) – Jon's Soul Bond, a Snowy Owl  
Las Lampart – Vaya's Soul Bond, a Skog Jaguar  
Kami – Bridget's Soul Bond, a Brud Lusckowiec (pangolin)  
Fluffy - Jamila's Soul Bond, a Woodland Flying Squirrel

### Ashkhas

Sultah Aleahil Qaq - head of the Ashkha army, Soul Tier gatherer  
Shirin – apprentice Alchemist  
Alchemist Michal – owner of The Alchemist's Treasures  
Caretaker Zana – member of Sayaad Guild  
Ashtaq Qaq - head of top Ashkhas Condensation Tier team  
Head Sayaad Jumana - leader of the Sayaad Guild  
Proprietor Klara – owner of The Dungeoneer's Delight  
Kamran - head of the Blue Dolphin trading family, candidate for Merchant Council's Summit  
Mansour - the oldest son of the head of the Alchemist Cartel, candidate for Merchant Council's Summit  
Matvei - Condensation Tier competitor  
Sezhade Iswat – heir to Sultah Aleahil  
Counselor Darius - advisor to Sultah Aleahil, different faction

### Volk

Prince Gunther - heir to the Weltreich throne, Condensation Tier competitor  
Ritter Felix - Perfect Body-level gatherer, mentor to Weltreich Condensation Tier competitors  
Baldwin Meyer (Baldy) - Condensation Tier competitor  
Mathilda – Condensation Tier competitor, betrothed of Prince Gunther

### Topraki

Bayartsetseg (Baya) - Condensation Tier competitor

Yatback – Condensation Tier competitor

Emperor Futuh - emperor of Topraki Empire

Shehzada Maayari - Heir to the Topraki Empire

Altan - Soul Strengthening, guardian to Maayari

### Primordials

Ezekiel - a gryphon Primordial

Behemoth - a manticore Primordial

### Other

Spirit – spirit of the Tower of Trials

Bruno - spirit of the Jungle Arena Dungeon

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[\[A1\]](#)Echo.