

THE FELL^{flame} WAR

Megan
'celticxpanda'
Atkison



THE FELL WAR

Megan Atkison

Cover Art by Akira

**COPYRIGHT © 2023 MEGAN ATKISON
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

Chapter One

Alfre, if you had asked her all those months ago, would not have said 'Yeah, in a year I see myself leading an army of MMORPG players in a war against other MMORPG players and that's not a metaphor for anything.' Though, technically, she was not yet leading an army into war, but instead a nation into a refugee crisis.

But first the refugees had to get here. And none of that was going to happen until her engineers finished those steamboats, which were behind schedule. They'd originally planned to be finished in two weeks, or a month at most. They were already well into their second month. There had been...hiccups. Their first engine design did not work nearly as well as they'd all hoped, and ended up exploding during the endurance test. Then again, at the time she couldn't be sure what they'd expected of an engine they'd built and designed in only three months time.

Maldrom, frustrated with himself about the whole thing, pushed his guild members harder than was probably necessary to finish the redesign and construction. They had yet to finish the frame of the ship, but at least their new engine was, at least in theory, in working order.

Alfre, alongside Elias and Spica, walked the long, metal catwalk atop the assembly line, Maldrom waddling just ahead of them. The dwarf was in a particularly happy mood – all because of their sudden breakthrough on the engine. They'd finally figured out a power source.

"So, what is this thing?" Alfre asked, poking the jagged red crystal that lay on the worktable.

"A mana crystal," Maldrom said, grinning underneath his bushy beard. "It produces mana that magic users can draw upon if they find them in the wild. They're rare most other places in the world, but they're in abundance in our mountains. It's one of the reasons you find so many magic users on Siniy."

"So you're going to mine our mana crystals out and stuff them in an engine?" Spica reiterated, sounding absolutely stunned. "That's mad!"

"They regrow anyway," Maldrom said, brushing off her worries. "But this is a energy source that we literally never have to mine again. We put one in a ship, and it'll run even after the ship itself breaks down. We'll just move it to another ship at that point!"

"That sounds almost too good to be true," Alfre muttered, staring at the crystal as it pulsed with an almost calming red light.

Elias shrugged. "Call it a glitch in the game system. They were never meant to be used this way, but this is the best use for them. People aren't really dungeoning anymore, so the crystals are just going to waste otherwise."

Alfre frowned, still unsure. There was no way this wasn't going to backfire on them later.

"What will the other continents use for power, then, if they don't have these?" she asked instead.

“We don’t know yet,” Maldrom admitted. “Likelihood is we’ll have to send crystals over to them. Unless other continents have similar mana restoring items like the crystals.”

“They’re exceedingly rare elsewhere,” Elias reminded, “Not nonexistent. They’ll have a harder time finding them, but they can be found. I remember coming across one in Berdea all those years ago.”

“How does it work then?” Alfre asked. “Does it work similarly to how coal would? Does it heat the water into steam?”

“In a way,” Maldrom nodded. “You see, the engine has a fire spell glyph carved into the bottom of the water cauldron. You put the mana crystal under the glyph and activate it and poof! Infinite fire spell.”

Alfre whistled. “Impressive. And you’re sure it’ll work?”

Maldrom frowned, looking a bit embarrassed. “Well, that’s the thing, we still need to test it. Volpe seems pretty damn certain it’ll work. But you know what they say about trusting a fox.”

“I get your meaning,” Alfre muttered. Ludovico Volpe, leader of the only scholarly guild in the City of Spade, was not what one would call a trustworthy character. Though Alfre had very little evidence pointing to otherwise. Ludovico had been upfront and helpful so far, but rumors had been going around for a long time that the fox familiar was never truly honest with his plans for anything. If he was being so helpful, then he was probably seeing some sort of advantage for himself that the others were not.

“Ludovico is a scheming, underhanded son of a biscuit,” Elias agreed. He sighed, crossing his arms as his long, white rabbit ears drooped. “But he also knows the most about the magic system in Wonderland and how to manipulate it to his own ends. If he says the crystal-glyph combination will work, then I believe him.”

“Aye, and that’s the thing, isn’t it,” Maldrom grumbled.

Alfre shook her head, long white hair flying just about everywhere. “As long as nothing blows up on us, then it’s fine. Do the tests as soon as you can, Maldrom, I want these boats on the sea before things get any worse for the folks on Ahmar.”

Maldrom nodded, his face solemn. “Of course, General.”

Alfre waved off the title. “Don’t call me that, there can’t be a general if there’s no army. Unless it actually comes to fighting, we’re just good Samaritans.”

She turned and walked away, Elias and Spica hurrying after her as Maldrom barked orders to the magic users and engineers nearest to him. Alfre sighed, running her hand through her hair. In all the months she and the rest of her new friends had been stuck in Wonderland, her hair had never grown a single centimeter. None of them had changed, really. All of them perpetually stuck in the image of the avatar they’d created when joining the game. Such stagnation was what had driven her to leave Ren’s Crystal Moon Kingdom, and now it was a part of her very being.

“They’re making good progress, at least,” Elias said quietly. “I heard Doremi say how they were hoping to have the engines finalized by the end of the month.”

“Where does that put us for making the vessels sea-worthy?” Alfre asked over her shoulder.

Elias gave her a helpless shrug. “Somewhere in the next month, month and a half. The unfortunate thing about a first run is that no one is ever sure of anything. Especially since none of this would have been possible in the game.”

And that was the thing, wasn't it. Even after all this time, everyone who'd played the game before still thought of Wonderland in game terms. It took them forever to remember that there were solutions to problems right in front of their noses if they could only think of Wonderland like they would the Real World. But for people like Alfre and Izo, the Dragonling Druid she and her two friends used to adventure with, Wonderland had never really been a game.

Alfre, Elias, and Spica wandered through the busy cobblestone streets of Spade, greeting Fell and Wonderlander alike as they passed. Doremi, deputy guild master for the Sweet Summer Children, passed by with only the briefest of 'hello's as she raced towards the shipyard, arms full of blueprints and heavy looking tomes. A patrol of Knights of the Burning Oak passed without a word, all of them grim-faced and serious, as one would expect from a guild with that grand of a name – though Alfre supposed she couldn't be too harsh on them; she had named her guild 'The Alliance of Frozen Stars' after all.

She was happy to see Wallace, the young Wonderlander who she'd saved from goblins some five months back, waiting for them at the front door of the guildhall. His young, freckly face was marred with worry. Alfre wished to smooth them away, but knew nothing she could say would make the poor lad feel any better. There was little one could say to someone when possible war loomed over the horizon.

“Welcome home, Miss Alfre, Miss Spica, Mister Elias,” he greeted warmly, his voice's cheer failing to reach his face. “I hope the visit with Mister Maldrom went well.”

“As well as it could,” Alfre replied, stepping around Wallace and into the warmth on the guildhall. “They're close to finishing work on the engine, which is good. But that doesn't mean we're any closer to getting boats in the water. I don't know how long Canus' wolves can keep everyone safe and fed in Ahmar.”

“As long as they need to.” Alfre turned to see Canus stepping out from the sitting room, his wild brown hair catching the early evening sunlight and turning almost red.

“Canus,” Alfre greeted with a smile, “it's good to see you. What are you doing here?”

“Seeing my favorite snow bird, that's all,” Canus replied with a wolfish grin, his elongated canines glittering in the light.

“One of these days you're going to become the god of the City of Spade instead of the God of the Wilds,” Alfre warned good-naturedly.

Canus' grin fell a little, but did not leave his face. “Would that be so bad?”

“Perhaps not for me,” Alfre admitted. “But I'm sure the wolves in all your dungeons would miss you.”

“Haaa, I suppose you're right, snow bird,” Canus agreed with a sigh. “So, not nearly as close to your little rescue mission as you hoped?”

Elias shook his head as he stepped more fully into the guildhall. "Unfortunately not. They're closer than I would have thought they'd be at this point, but this is new for everyone."

Wallace frowned. "Are we sure there's nothing we can do in the meantime?"

"Unless we can get to Ahmar, we can't help anyone," Spica said, her face a mask of calm despite the worry that Alfre knew was eating at her as well. "The boats are our best bet right now, especially if we're trying to smuggle who knows how many people out of there."

"Several thousand," Canus informed them. "My wolves are hiding several thousand Fell in the dungeon. They are safe and warm and well fed, and will be as long as needed."

"That's good to hear, at least," Wallace said, trying to sound hopeful.

"Yes, that, at least, is good to hear," Alfre agreed. She rubbed at her neck, feeling a stiffness growing there, along with a headache. This was all far more than she ever expected to do, even after literally falling into the world of Wonderland. A world, she was fairly certain, they'd all since given up trying to leave.

There was a sudden shiver down her spine, one not caused by whatever cold had seeped into the building from the open door. She turned to the doorway into the kitchen to find Abital stepping out from the shadows.

"Hello, Abital," she greeted as warmly as she could. "Decided to give the dead a holiday, have ye?"

Abital – tall, dark, imposing Abital – smiled only slightly. "Hardly. I am here to visit."

"You're always here to visit," Canus snipped, wolf ears flattening against his head.

"So are you," Abital retorted, sweeping into the room in a swirl of red and black cloaks.

"Boys, boys, please, you're both pretty," Alfre appeased with a roll of her eyes. "Was there a reason for the visit, Abital?"

"Not particularly," he admitted, looking far more sheepish than a god of the underworld probably should. "But I wanted to hear about the progress your mission has taken since last we'd seen each other."

"Engine is close to completion," Alfre said, giving him an extremely truncated version of the story. "But we're not sure if that means the ship is almost ready."

"I see," Abital said with a frown. "I understand your frustration."

Alfre nodded. "That's one word for it."

"There is nothing you can do, for now," Elias insisted. "The best thing you can do is rest and be prepared for when the ship is ready. They'll want you to lead them when they finally launch."

"I'm no sea captain," Alfre argued mildly. "I'm not a general, either, no matter what that grump of a dwarf likes to call me."

“He’s not that grumpy,” Elias said, though he sounded like he didn’t actually want to get into an argument about it.

“Enough,” Spica said, jumping in before anything else could be said about the matter. “It’s been a long day for all of us. And I, for one, would like to sit down to whatever meal our wonderful Wally has prepared for us, and a nice glass of wine. Now, come on, shoo, into the dining room you all get.”

Alfre went without fuss, and she could feel Abital and Canus coming just behind her. It was likely that the two deities would not actually be eating with them – she was almost certain that Wally had not made enough food for more than the actual members of the guild (plus himself). Not that they needed to eat. They did seem to enjoy dining with her though...actually they seemed to enjoy just sitting at the table with her even when they didn’t eat. She still wasn’t entirely sure why they were so attached to her. Sure, she’d helped Canus avenge the death and skinning of one of his direwolves. And, yes, she had shown Abital kindness when she refused to fight him when he looked so miserable. But neither of those things seemed like they would endear her to them so thoroughly. But maybe all Wonderlanders were like that. Wallace had decided to near throw himself at her feet after she’d saved him from goblins. Maybe it was in a Wonderlander’s nature to be so generous to those who were kind to them. Alfre couldn’t be sure.

Chapter Two

Alfre sat in the lounge's most comfortable leather chair, staring unseeingly at the fire that crackled before her. She absentmindedly swirled the scotch in her glass. She hadn't taken a sip in almost ten minutes, too focused on all the thoughts spinning about her head. She couldn't quiet her mind, not with everything that was going on. The Sweet Summer Children guild was busy clearing out spaces for the refugees from Ahmar. The Knights of the Burning Oak and the Fell of Duty were busy training for a war Alfre honestly hoped wouldn't come but had no doubts that it would. Ludovico Volpe's Ouroboros guild and Maldrom's Wall Street Spade were working round the clock to finish the steam engine before it was too late (though what was meant by 'too late' no one could be sure at this point). And Alfre...

Alfre was sitting on her ass, unable to really contribute anything. She'd been named leader of the rescue efforts, and supposedly as general of whatever army they'd need to amass when it came time to fight, but in all honestly she'd done nothing of any real merit. Everything truly meaningful was already being done by someone with far more skill and experience than her.

She sighed aloud, catching the attention of Abital as he ghosted through the room. The ruler of the underworld frowned – though he was always frowning so that was nothing really new – and moved closer. Feeling bold, he reached down to brush some of Alfre's snowy white hair away from her face, catching her attention.

"What's wrong, Alfre?" he asked, voice soft in the near silence of the room.

"I feel...unhelpful," she answered, having some difficulty finding the proper words. "I am supposed to be the leader, and yet all I do is walk around telling others what a good job they're doing. The only thing I'm good at is fighting, and even that is already being taken care of by people who have far more skill and experience than I do. I can't help but feel useless."

Abital stared at her with deep, red eyes. Alfre could understand how some would find such a gaze unnerving, but there was something comforting in Abital's eyes. Some strange empathy that Alfre wasn't sure a human being was capable of.

"Your time to be of use will come," Abital assured. "You are more than just a fighter, Alfre. You are kind, and empathetic, and worth more than you give yourself credit for even if you were never able to contribute to this endeavor you Fell have set yourself on."

Icy blue met garnet red, and Alfre smiled. "Thank you, Abital. I'm lucky to have a friend like you."

There was a sadness that passed through Abital's eyes that she couldn't quite understand. But in mere seconds it was gone, replaced with a smile that didn't quite seem as genuine as the god hoped. "And I am lucky to have a friend like you."

There was a heaviness to his words that concerned her. She reached out to grasp his arm through far too many layers of clothing.

"Abital?"

He smiled again, and if felt a little more real. "I am fine, Alfre."

She swallowed thickly, unsure of whether to press the issue or not. It had been a long while since she'd seen Abital so sad...not since she'd first met him all those months ago, sat atop his lonely throne deep in the mountains.

"You'll tell me when you're not, right?" she pleaded. "I hate to see you so sad."

He didn't reply. Instead, he swept more hair behind her ear in a gesture that felt strangely intimate. He smiled once more, fondness and sorrow mixing in a way that broke her heart, before slipping away.

"Abital," she called after him as he opened a portal of smoke and shadow, "I mean it."

He glanced over his shoulder at her, his smile falling away. "I know."

She watched him disappear, a heaviness in her heart that she couldn't quite explain. Footsteps caught her attention, and she turned to see Spica enter the room, a half-empty glass of reddish-purple wine in her hand.

"You, my dear, are painfully naïve," the assassin said plainly.

Alfre glared at her friend. "The bloody hell does that mean?"

Spica rolled her eyes, draping herself over the couch – somehow doing it with a strange grace that Alfre had never seen in anyone else – never spilling a drop of her wine. "There's a reason we call them your boyfriends."

Alfre frowned in confusion. Spica had been calling Abital, Canus, and Wallace her 'boyfriends' for a while now, somehow convincing others like June and Doremi and Cherry to join her. She'd never quite understood why. Yes, the three Wonderlanders were fond of her, and were kind to her, but that didn't make someone romantically invested in you.

Did it?

"You think they're actually in love with me?" Alfre asked cautiously.

"Abital and Canus, most certainly," Spica agreed. "Wally's is more of an infatuation, like a crush, but I'm sure he'd say he's in love with you if asked."

"I don't know why," Alfre admitted. "It's not like I've done anything to deserve it."

Spica's eyes glowed with fondness. "Oh, darling, no one ever deserves love. It just happens to them."

"You were kind to them, Alfre." The two women turned to see Elias slip into the room. He settled beside Spica on the couch, letting her settle her legs across his lap without fuss. "You helped Canus find his vengeance. You saved Wally from a horde of goblins when no one else was around to help. You showed Abital mercy when any other player would have ignored everything you saw and killed him anyway. I wouldn't say you've done nothing."

Alfre said nothing to that, her eyes settling on the amber color of her scotch as if it were the most interesting thing in the world at that moment. It was...strange to know you were the object of affection for someone. Even more so when it was three someones.

“So, I suppose the only question now,” Spica mused, taking a sip of her wine, “is which one you have feelings for.”

Alfre’s gaze snapped to her two friends, brows furrowed in confusion. “I beg your pardon?”

“Well, surely you have feelings for at least one of them,” Spica reasoned. “The question is which one.”

Alfre frowned thoughtfully. Did she have to have feelings for them? She leaned back in her chair, her eyes shifting to stare at the low fire. She certainly liked each of them. Wally was down-to-earth and hardworking and eager to please. Canus was wild and affectionate and loyal. Abital was quiet and thoughtful and listened carefully to everyone. And Alfre would be lying if she didn’t love their smiles. Wally’s sweet grin, Canus’ crooked smirk full of confidence and the promise of adventure, Abital’s sweet, shy smile that he only ever seemed to show her. There was something to love about each of them.

“Do I have to choose?” she asked, more of the universe than anyone in the room.

Spica and Elias blinked at her owlishly. They shared a look, Spica clearly amused and Elias more than a little curious.

“I suppose not?” Elias said cautiously. “I mean, if they’re all okay with it. This is a new society. Who says we necessarily have to follow the same rules of romance and courting as we did back in the Real World?”

“Darling, you do whatever makes you happy,” Spica said, a knowing smile on her face. “But that is most certainly a discussion you should be having with your boys, and not with us.”

Alfre glared at her. “You’re the one who brought it up.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, darling.”

Chapter Three

Alfre pushed the question of her so-called 'boyfriends' out of her mind. There were more important things to worry about, like how Maldrom and Ludovico finally managed to get an engine running. They called Alfre in a week after her last visit, the two of them grinning like madmen.

"We've done it!" Maldrom exclaimed. "We've got an engine that won't explode on us. The blasted thing has been running all week without a care in the world."

"Now we just need to place it within the ship," Ludovico informed her, fox ears twitching excitedly atop his head. "Which, according to our measurements and input from Atticus, should hold about three thousand people in the hidden passages."

"That's not bad," Alfre agreed. "What input did Atticus have?"

"He used to be a firefighter," Maldrom explained. "We brought him in for safety consultations throughout the project."

It made so much sense to Alfre that Atticus had been a firefighter. "I see. But we won't be able to get everyone out."

Ludovico shook his head, looking honestly saddened by it. "No, unfortunately not. Canus said something like twenty thousand people in Sandfur's Den. Getting them out three thousand at a time would take weeks if not months."

Alfre frowned. "We need to get these blueprints and mana crystals to Berdea and Kowhai as soon as possible. And start production on more ships."

Maldrom nodded. "We're already on it. The moment we figured the engine would work we started on another one. We're hoping to have two more finished before we get back with the first batch of refugees."

Alfre nodded. "Our first priority should be those too weak to defend themselves from the Granato Empire and their followers, and those without guilds." She paused for a moment, a thought coming to her. "Do we know how many players are still in the city?"

Ludovico turned and picked up a small leather bound journal. "According to Canus' scouts, there's maybe five thousand left. Out of those, only about three hundred are the actual aggressors. The rest are people who holed up in their inner city guild halls because they realized they couldn't get out in time."

"Hopefully those still trapped in the city can hold out for a while longer," Alfre said, crossing her arms over her chest. "Who knows how long it'll be before we can actually make an attack."

"If they even want us to make an attack," Ludovico added. "They might think fighting the Granato will make things worse."

Alfre frowned at that. "But it won't get any better until we do something about it."

Ludovico shrugged helplessly. "There's no easy solution to this, snowflake."

Alfre glared at the fox familiar. "Only Ren gets to call me that, and I'm only just barely okay with her doing it."

"Noted."

Alfre turned to leave. "Let me know when everything is set and ready to go."

Maldrom huffed, the red-brown hairs of his beard ruffling. "Aye, lass, we will."

Alfre left, passing by a forge where craftsmen were already carving glyphs into more engines. She smirked, pleased. Things were actually starting to look up. The ship itself was mostly build already. All Maldrom and his crew had to do was fit the engine into the shell and weld the whole thing shut. Once the first ship was seaworthy, she'd alert Alessio, and they'd sail off to Ahmar. Three thousand was a large number; if they got a whole fleet of ships together they'd be able to move the refugees to safer shores in no time.

At least, that was the hope. And Alfre would hang onto hope until someone pried it from her cold, dead hands.

Chapter Four

“You need me to do what?”

Maldrom didn't even look up from his ledger. “Just escort my miners into the mountains and get me some more mana crystals. It'll only take a few days.”

Alfre raised a skeptical brow at the dwarf. “And why can't your guild escort itself?”

“Because everyone else is working on that darn boat of yours,” Maldrom snapped, still not looking up from whatever he was writing.

“Technically, you were already building the boat before I'd even gotten back from Crystal Moon Kingdom,” Alfre reminded him, feeling a little smug.

Maldrom sighed heavily, finally looking up at her with a scowl. “Look, we just need more mana crystals. My miners are fairly low level; I just need you and your laughably small guild to look after them. Most surface level mana crystals are in fairly high level places and I'd rather they not die in the process. It'd be a setback I'd rather not deal with.”

Alfre wasn't sure she'd ever get used to a world where death was considered an inconvenience at worst. “Yeah, alright, whatever. I hope you realize you're going to have to pay for this, though. Standard escort quest rate and not a coin less.”

Maldrom's scowl deepened. Clearly, he was unhappy at being charged for such a thing.

Alfre shrugged. “My guild has to make money some how, and I'm sure you've got plenty to spare.”

“Fine, fine,” he agreed grumpily. “But just the standard rate. I'm already losing money on this endeavor, so don't expect me to pay you extra should things go rough.”

Alfre and her friends met with Maldrom's miners the next day. The dragonling girl that Alfre remembered from the first meeting she'd been to as guild master was their, along with three other low-level players – a dog familiar cleric, a human summoner, and a dwarf knight. They'd already procured elk for the seven of them, and were itching to go.

“Guild master Alfre,” the dragonling greeted cheerfully, “it's good to see you again. You probably don't remember me. I'm Basil, Maldrom's third in command and leader of the mining forces. Thank you for agreeing to come along with us.”

“No worries,” Alfre said in return, running her hand through her direwolf companion's white fur. “Beira was getting stir crazy anyway.”

“Where are we off to?” Spica asked, mounting her elk with little effort.

“The Stormbreaker Mountains,” Basil said, checking her saddle before hauling herself up onto her mount. “It's only about a day's ride away, but the tunnels there are full of mana crystals.”

“And full of monsters,” Elias reminded, looking worried already.

“That’s why we’re here,” Alfre said, getting Beira to boost her up so she could clamber aboard her elk. It looked terribly undignified, she was sure. The curse of being short followed her everywhere.

They took off without much fanfare, careful not to push their elk too hard right out the gate. The Stormbreaker Mountains were no joke, and the elk would have to navigate very narrow paths in order to get to the entrance of the mines. Best to save their energy for that endeavor.

Siniy, the continent they all currently inhabited, was the farthest north, and therefore the coldest of the four continents of Wonderland. Despite the fact it was currently well into early summer, the air was still rather cold, especially once the mountain winds started whipping about. Alfre pulled her cloak tighter around her, the direwolf fur of her coat staving off the cold. There was no real reason for her to be wearing the Cloak of Night’s Shadow, save for the fact the high magical defense it afforded her made her nigh invincible against the lower level mobs that flooded the tundra-esque grasslands of that surrounded the mountains.

Stormbreaker was hardly the most intimidating mountain dungeon in Wonderland, that honor belonged to the Gates of Death, which Alfre and company ‘conquered’ back in April. She had to mentally put quotes around that, seeing as she never actually defeated the boss, just talked to him.

And now months later, Abital spent more time in her guildhall than he did on his own throne. Supposedly because he was in love with her or something. Stupid Spica, making her think so hard about all this.

Alfre shook her head to clear it, her hair whipping about in the blistering mountain wind. They were just starting to make their way up the mountain, their elk moving cautiously along the narrow paths. These paths were almost half the danger, fall off and you were pretty much guaranteed to end up dying. It was quite the deterrent for all but the most stubborn of players.

Eventually, the party reached the landing just outside the mine entrance what felt like hours later. It wasn’t nearly as intimidating as the Gates of Hell, with its spiky maw leading down into the dark. The structure was held open with wooden beams, and Alfre could see torchlight flickering down in the tunnels. She couldn’t let herself be lulled into a false sense of security, though. Stormbreaker was still a difficult series of dungeons, the mobs reaching well past level 40. Of course, Alfre and her friends were all above level 50, so they were probably fine.

Basil tied off their elk to one of the beams just inside the cave, leaving an open bag of feed on the ground near them. “We shouldn’t be gone long, mana crystals are pretty easy to find down here.”

Alfre nodded, letting the dragonling girl lead the way. Beira, her direwolf companion, and Elias and Spica followed along just behind her, the rest of the mining party clustered between them.

“Have you had issues with the mobs in the cave before?” Elias asked, his voice bouncing off the cave walls.

“A few,” the dwarven knight admitted. “Folks don’t tend to come down here much, so when they do, the mobs notice. It’s hard to mine when you have to fight off a small army of ghouls and goblins.”

“Well, you just worry about the mining,” Spica assured them. “We’ll take care of the rest.”

Basil led them down further into the tunnels, their way lit by a small fire spirit their summoner had conjured. Alfre could hear the growling and groaning of the mobs, always just around the corner. It was unnerving, to say the least, to know something was there without being able to see it – the danger always just around the corner.

They found their first patch of mana crystals without much issue. The members of Wall Street Spade went to work, quickly digging out the crystal with such focus, it was no surprise they didn't notice the danger when it appeared.

A small army of goblins, all level 47, meandered into view. The moment they caught sight of the mining party, the leader shrieked and the troop charged. Alfre, pulse pounding in her ears, shot forward, rapier drawn and Beira at her heels. She could see the purplish glow of Elias' debuffs on the goblins. She grinned wildly, her face twisting into something almost terrifying, and thrust her rapier forward. A storm of icy needles flew towards the goblins, their thin cloth armor unable to defend them from Alfre's wintery magic. Beira jumped into the fray, biting at goblins' throats with her fangs and swiping at their bellies with her claws. Goblins fell to them with ease, helped along by Spica's poisons and Elias' spells. Alfre hadn't fought like this in ages it seemed. She'd missed the excitement of it.

"That's enough," Basil announced, stuffing the mana crystals into her satchel. "Let's move on. We shouldn't take everything from one spot. Winnie, no, leave some. Otherwise it won't grow back."

The dog familiar huffed a little, but scooted away from the mana crystals that still remained buried in the wall.

"How many did you get?" Elias asked, reaching for the mana crystals in the wall for a small pick me up.

"A half dozen small ones," Basil said, "but I'd like to get a few more. Let's go."

Spica looked up from where she was looting the goblins, a frown on her face as the party passed her. She pouted, but abandoned her looting nonetheless. It wouldn't be good for her to lose the others, even if she could theoretically make it through the tunnels just fine on her own.

They continued marching down farther into the mines. It was perhaps another hour or so before they found another cluster of crystals big enough that Basil felt comfortable mining from it. Again, not long after they started mining, a group of mobs wandered into the picture – this time it was a trio of high-level ghouls and a handful of lower leveled skeletons. Alfre scowled she hated fighting skeletons. Her rapier was a thrusting weapon, and there wasn't exactly anything to thrust into when it came to skeletons.

Then, she remembered her halberd. She'd carried it with her in her satchel, despite being sure she wouldn't use it. She sheathed her rapier, and reached into her inventory satchel for her halberd. The blade sang with her winter, a cold fog coming off it in wisps.

Alfre swung, the axe head of her weapon cutting the air with a wholly satisfying sound and it slammed into the spine of one of the skeletons, shattering the bones and effectively cutting the thing in half. Spica was right up in the fight with her, her poisons useless against the undead. She stabbed a dagger into the eye of one of the skeletons, pulling upwards to remove its head from its body. The rest of the skeleton fell apart as a result. Elias threw several small fireballs at the mobs, skeletons exploding into fragmented bone pieces upon impact.

The skeletons taken care of, the trio turned their attention to the ghouls. They'd fought ghouls before; Abital's dungeon had been crawling with them. Alfre thrust forward with the spearhead of her halberd, planting the first ghoul with a see of ice. A few seconds later, the seed exploded, the icy spikes piercing the ghoul's flesh and protruding from their paper-thin skin. She turned to the next ghoul, only to have Spica beat her to it, having severed the ghoul's spine at his neck with a quick slash of her daggers. Together, feeling the warmth of Elias' buffs just under their skin, they attacked the final ghoul. Spica plunged her daggers into its eyes. Alfre flickered into position behind the monster and severed its spine with a well-placed hit with the blade of her halberd.

"Are we done?" Spica asked, panting ever so slightly. It wasn't often she had to get into the middle of the fray like that. Her assassin class was more suited to long distance fighting, hiding in the shadows and whittling down her opponents with poisons and debuffs.

"I think so," Basil said, tucking a few more crystals into her inventory. "We've got ten, which is probably enough for now, especially since the last three were very large, all things considered."

"Good," Elias said with a sigh. "Let's get out of here."

Chapter Five

Two weeks later, Alfre found herself staring at the massive, manmade marvel of steel and copper and whatever other metals Maldrom and his worker bees had scrounged up and welded together. It looked like someone had frankenstiened the thing together from a dozen or more other ships, but it was floating. And really, that was all that mattered.

"It's brilliant," June whispered, clasping her hands like she was praying.

"It's ugly," Hunter grumbled. "You expect us to sail on that thing?"

"Who says you're going anywhere?" Alfre challenged. "You're staying right here, Mr. Fight Me. We can't have your short temper and experience thirst ruining this mission."

Hunter looked like he was going to argue, but stopped when he realized that would only prove her point. Alessio, prince of the neighboring Wonderlander kingdom of Saphir and good friend of Alfre's, whistled appreciatively at the ship.

"I'm still unsure what it is you expect me to do, though," he admitted, turning his attention from the ship to Alfre.

"You're the face of the operation," Ludovico explained before Alfre had the chance to speak. "Should any agent of the Granato empire ask what it is you're doing, you tell them you're on a trade mission to Berdea and have simply stopped to allow your crew time to 'stretch their legs.' Or whatever other excuse you want to come up with, it really doesn't matter."

"I see," Alessio murmured. "And should they not believe me?"

"Then I step in to make sure they don't stick around," Alfre said plainly, her expression stony.

Alessio swallowed thickly. "Indeed. Well, when do we set off?"

"Now."

'Now' had been a bit of an exaggeration on Alfre's part. The party did not set off on their voyage until the next day, after the ship had been stocked with food and those going along had equipped themselves with their best items. Alfre, Spica, and Elias were all going along, much to Wally's nervousness. Lance from the Knights of the Burning Oak was along for the ride as well, along with both June and Doremi from Sweet Summer Children. Basil came as a representative of Wall Street Spade, since Maldrom had to stay behind to continue building more ships. Ludovico expressed interest in coming along as well, but he too had to stay behind to help with the ships. Hunter sent along a trio of players from the Fell of Duty guild as well, though Alfre did not know their names. Canus was with them as well, though he did not look forward to crossing the water. And finally, Ran and Izo came along.

Alfre had not seen Ran or Izo in a long time – Ran not since they'd all started on this mission and Izo not since she left the Crystal Moon Kingdom a few months before that. She'd missed him dearly. Izo had been one of her constant companions early on, the two of them both being newbies when the game had

become real. They'd grown together, from newbies who could barely kill boars to stone-cold badasses. She'd been sad to leave him behind in the Crystal Moon Kingdom, but he'd fallen in love with Ran and Alfre couldn't bear to force him to choose.

"Ready to kick some ass?" she asked him, unable to hide her grin.

Izo laughed, and in that moment Alfre realized how much she missed the sound. "Let's hope we won't have to."

Ran, a new rifle that reminded Alfre of one another former companion of hers used to carry strapped to his back, wrapped an arm around Izo's waist. "Even if we do, I won't let anyone lay a hand on you."

Alfre rolled her eyes. "You two are so saccharine, stop it."

Ran grinned wickedly at her. "Never."

Alfre walked away as Ran proceeded to kiss Izo's face with far more enthusiasm than was necessary.

Basil sat in the captain's wheelhouse, steering wheel in hand as she gently guided the massive ship out of the sound and into Open Ocean. Alessio stood beside her, compass in hand as he mapped out their route. Neither turned when Alfre stepped into the room, her eyes on the water that lay before her.

"How long, do you think, before we reach Ahmar?" Alfre asked, her own eyes on the seemingly endless expanse of ocean.

"A few days," Basil guessed. "No longer than two weeks, I should think. We're heading out at a fairly good pace. If we keep this up we won't have a problem."

"I see," Alfre murmured.

"I don't predict we'll run into much trouble," Alessio assured her. "The seas have always been pretty calm this time of year. It's when autumn comes that you have to worry."

"Is the...cargo hold ready?" Alfre asked.

Alessio nodded. "We made sure to have plenty of blankets and beds and hammocks prepared. We're equipped for three thousand when it comes to beds, but we have many more blankets, just in case. And we have food to last us a year at least, hopefully that will be enough to last everyone else until we get back to Siniy."

"The voyage back should be quicker than the voyage there," Basil said, her eyes darting down to the map before she returned her gaze to the sea. "We're against current right now. When we return, we'll have the current on our side. Plus, we've received word that Berdea has already finished their first ship, and is going to launch her tomorrow. We have more help than you realize."

Alfre gave a small sigh of relief. "Good, we might need it."

Chapter Six

The trip didn't take as long as Alfre had feared. And the dawn of the fifth day, Basil shouted down into the barracks about having spotted land. They'd be within docking distance in less than an hour.

"I'll let Sandfur know," Canus told them. "I'll be on the shore when you arrive."

"How will you get there?" one of the Fell of Duty players asked. "Can you swim?"

Canus grinned a wolfish grin. "I have my ways." He slipped behind a piece of pipe and was gone.

"Stinking Wonderlander magic," another Fell of Duty grumbled. "We'd save a hell of a lot of time and resources saving these people if we could do that."

"Where's the fun in that?" Basil teased, heading back up to the wheelhouse. "Best get into place everyone."

Alfre watched as Alessio's Wonderlander sailors lowered landing vessels into the water. She could see Canus on the shore, along with a handful of Fell, all of them crowding around to see the ocean liner.

"Miss Alfre." She turned to see a young sailor smiling down at her. "His Royal Highness has asked that I take you to shore with me. He felt it best that one of you Fell explain what's going on to the refugees."

That wasn't part of the plan, but Alfre had to admit it was a good idea. The Fell in Sandfur's Den were unlikely to trust Wonderlanders after what'd happened to them.

"Very well," she agreed. She stepped into the last landing vessel, the sailor climbing aboard with her. The boat jerked a bit as it began being lowered into the water below, nearly knocking Alfre into her shipmate.

They led the other vessels to shore, their little engines pattering along. Now Alfre understood why they needed to gather so many mana crystals. If every engine needed them...well, it was a good thing they grew back.

Canus came out into the warm water, as her boat grew closer, holding his hand out to her. "Welcome to Ahmar, snowbird."

She took his hand, and it took all her willpower not to squeak as he lifted her from the boat, one hand in hers and his other arm under her thighs. He carried her to shore, where the Fell stared in confusion as the god of the Wilds held a tiny Fell in his arms like she was something precious and delicate.

"That was wholly unnecessary," Alfre grumbled the moment Canus set her back on the ground, her cheeks tinged pink.

"Didn't want your boots getting wet," Canus said, though it sounded like he was teasing her."

“Shush,” she hissed, face only turning pinker. She turned to the players before her, clearing her throat. “My name is Alfre, guild master of the Alliance of Frozen Stars. Ran has told me your plight. We’re here to rescue you.”

The foremost player, an elven man with golden-brown skin and piercing green eyes, smiled brilliantly at her. “Thank you. My name is Hadi, I’m a guild master as well.” He extended a hand to her, which Alfre readily took.

“We can only carry about three thousand of you,” Alfre explained, her voice carrying an apology with it. “But we are building more ships as we speak. The rest of you will hopefully not have to wait long.”

“Berdea and Kowhai are also building ships,” Alessio assured them. “Berdea has already launched one. They will be coming to help you soon.”

Hadi nodded, his face impassive. He turned to the other players with him. “We should get the youngest players and those with the lowest levels out of here first. The rest of us can defend ourselves if need be. Let’s get moving.”

“Hadi,” a middle-aged dwarven woman called, grabbing Hadi’s arm. “You should go with them to Siniy. Be the guild masters’ voice there. The little ones will need someone they can look to. As much as I appreciate the winter blade’s efforts, we cannot leave our most venerable to strangers alone.”

Hadi glanced over his shoulder at Alfre, attempting to read her. “I agree. Very well. Then you should go to Berdea, Einmora. And Makoto to Kowhai.” He looked to a human samurai woman. “Hopefully, we can meet back in Heart again, when the days are brighter.”

The Fell moved quickly, gathering up the young and the weak and herding them onto the landing craft. The youngest ones, some of them no older than twelve it seemed, clung to each other, sniffing softly. Alfre reassured them when she could with a soft smile or a gentle hand helping them into the boats.

There was the sound of hooves on sand, and Alfre turned to see a ornately armored knight riding towards the group, more than a dozen other riders just behind him. The players shouted in fear, clamoring onto the boats.

“Stay calm, Alfre ordered them. “I’ll take care of it.” She marched forward to meet the rider, leaving Hadi and Alessio to continue overseeing the evacuation.

“Can I help you?” she asked, her expression impassive as she faced down the much larger knight. He was a player, she could tell from the way his steed carried no armor, like so many of the horses of Wonderlander knights did. The riders behind him, however, were knights of Granato.

“Who are you, and what are you doing here?” the knight demanded, pointing threateningly down at her with his lance.

“I am here as an envoy of Alessio of the Kingdom of Saphir,” Alfre said, lying through her teeth. “We are on a trade mission to Berdea, and are simply stopping to let our sailors rest.”

The knight looked beyond her to see the landing vessels full of players as they pushed off from the shore. His eyes narrowed into a cold glare. “Those are not Wonderlanders.”

Alfre let loose her winter, frost cascading out from her in swirling, flowery patterns. “No. They are people, who deserve to be treated with respect. Who deserve to live in their city without fear! We’re saving them. Fuck you if you think you can stop us!”

Alfre drew her rapier, letting out an explosion of cold. She could hear commotion on the boat as her friends saw the confrontation begin. Not a moment later, a small top hat appeared on the ground beside her. From it, jumped Elias, along with Spica and Lance.

“Pulling yourself from a hat?” Spica asked incredulously. “Isn’t that a bit on the nose?”

Elias didn’t have time to respond with anything witty, as the knights came charging in. There was a thunderous cracking sound, and one of the knights flew back off his horse, a smoldering dent in his armor. Alfre glanced over her shoulder to see Ran laying atop one of the sandy dunes, rifle pointed at the oncoming patrol.

June and Doremi flew over them, carried on some magical wind that danced along to Doremi’s song. June hadn’t even set a foot on the ground before she fired her first arrow. It flew through the air, finding its mark in the neck of one of the oncoming knights.

Canus and Beira darted about, nipping at the horses’ legs in an attempt to knock the knights off their steeds. It worked well for the most part; the Fell knight Alfre had spoken to tumbled off his steed and landed with a great clanging sound. Alfre’s eyes focused on him as the right raged around her. She stalked towards him, Cloak of Night’s Shadows billowing around her. She must have looked like an emissary of Abital himself. The knight scrambled back, barely able to get on his feet before Alfre reached him, stabbing at the point where he’d been lying just a moment before – ice exploding from the ground.

“What the hell is your problem?” the knight demanded, holding up his lance in an attempt to keep some distance between the two of them.

“What’s my problem?” Alfre shouted. “What’s your problem? Who the bloody hell thinks it’s okay to drive people from their homes? Who the hell thinks it’s okay to destroy the city they live in? Who the hell thinks it’s okay to attack people for no goddamn reason?”

“It’s just a quest, brah!” The knight shouted in return, sounding desperate and frightened. “It’s just a quest! Just for fun!”

“Oh, so it’s fun to oppress people?” Alfre demanded, parrying the knight’s lance and flickering closer. “It’s fun to destroy their homes and hurt them and terrorize them?”

“Lighten up, man, it’s just a game!”

“Wrong!” Alfre roared, a frigid wind howling along with her. “It’s not a game. This is life. If I’m wrong..”

“Then why are you scared I’ll hurt you?”

The knight shouted unintelligibly, thrusting his lance towards Alfre’s chest. She dodged out of the way, her movements untraceable. She swung upwards with her rapier, leaving a long, thin cut on the knight’s face. The man screamed in horror as frost began to creep along his skin.

“Tell your friends that Spade, Clover, and Diamond have heard of your crimes,” Alfre hissed, stalking forward and nicking at whatever exposed flesh she could find – the frost spreading slowly over the man’s body as she did. “And we are livid.”

She thrust forward with her blade, piercing the small patch of throat exposed just above the knight’s heavy armor, cutting off his screams. There was a heavy silence, a pause that seemed to drag on forever, before the man shattered into a hundred tiny, shining shards of light and disappeared. Only his lance was left behind. Alfre took it, lest one of the Wonderlander knights pick it up. Her winter hummed along the shaft, but Alfre tucked it into her inventory instead. She’d rather not use an oppressor’s weapon.

She turned to the rest of the fray. Izo had ensnared the army in vines. Spica had riddled each knight with poison needles. Elias’s fireballs had scorched the ground around them. Doremi whisked the refugees away from shore with her wind song. The Fell of Duty knights hung back, one final line of defense between the Wonderlanders and the escaping Fell. June and Ran picked off the knights one by one from a distance. There were less than half of the knights left.

With a furious shout, Alfre stabbed her rapier into the ground. The knights gave a cry of fear as ice irrupted from beneath them, spires of frost and frigid cold piercing them through their armor. The last five knights vanished into smoke.

Alfre didn’t feel nearly as satisfied as she’d hoped.

“They know what’s going on now,” Elias said with a tired sigh. “This is going to be a hell of a lot harder.”

“If they actually try to stop us,” Spica reasoned. “Who says they even want these people? What would they use them for?”

“Slave labor,” Alfre guessed. “And if not for that, then for their money. Or to bolster their army forces. There’s any number of things a malevolent empire could do with twenty-odd thousand people.”

The sailor that’d escorted Alfre to shore ran up to them. “We’re just about full. We need to get you lot back onto the ship. After that we can maybe get twenty more. We’ve received word that a Clover ship is about half a day away. They’ll be able to get another three thousand out of here by midnight.”

“Any news from Diamond?” Alfre asked.

“They’ll be launching their first ship tomorrow morning,” the sailor told her, running a hand through strawberry blonde hair. “They hope to be here in about four days.”

Alfre nodded. “And with any luck, Maldrom will have two more ships launched before we get back with those we’ve gotten out so far.”

The sailor nodded. “But first we need to get you lot back on the ship. His Royal Highness will have my head if I forget you.”

Hadi greeted them on the ship. “This is a marvel. How did they realize they could do this? There was never anything like it in the game.”

“Maybe not,” Alfre agreed. “But this isn’t a game anymore. The possibilities are endless once you realize that.” She paused. “Are your people alright? That was quite the scare.”

Hadi nodded. “Yes, they’re fine and well hidden below deck. Luckily no one was injured. None of the knights could touch us thanks to you. I can only hope the fleet from Clover and Diamond are this well protected.”

“I’m sure they will be,” she assured him. “Now, let’s get you below deck. I’m sure everyone is anxious to get out of here.”

Hadi nodded, allowing himself to be led below. A stack of empty crates hid behind them the door into the refugee’s quarters. It was a little crowded, but not uncomfortably so. Small groups huddled together, whispering reassurances to one another through sniffles and teary hiccups. Hadi frowned at the sound.

“How will you house us?” he asked, turning to Alfre. “Once we get to Siniy, where will we go?”

“There’s plenty of empty guild halls to house all of you,” Elias insisted. “Spade was built for far more people than were ever there. We have the room, don’t worry.”

Hadi seemed relieved. “Thank you. I can’t thank you enough for what you and the other cities are doing for us.”

Alfre smiled, gentle and reassuring. “Well, I could only hope you would do the same for us.”

Chapter Seven

Basil was right. It did not take nearly as long to return to Spade as it did to get to Ahmar. Along the way, they passed two other Spade boats heading south. Alfre's heart sang when she saw them sail by. Maldrom and Ludovico had kept their promise.

The ship was met with a cheering crowd as they docked in the shipyard. Many in the crowd had brought freshly made food and warm blankets. Alfre couldn't help but laugh at how flabbergasted the refugees looked when they were met with such open kindness.

"The poor things," Spica murmured, hiding her smile behind her hand. "They're so overwhelmed."

"They've been hiding out in a dungeon for months," Lance said. "I'd be surprised if they weren't overwhelmed."

"This is more than we could ever hope for," Hadi said, a soft smile on his face as he watched his people disembark. He shivered a bit, rubbing at his arms. "But goodness me, is it cold. How do you stand it?"

"Warm cider and heavy cloaks, my friend," Lance joked, smacking Hadi a bit forcefully on the back.

"Heavy cloaks in summer time?" he gasped dramatically, a joking smile on his lips. "That's sacrilegious."

"If you think that's sacrilegious, then don't come over to our place for dinner," Spica warned. "Our dear guild master is a little too friendly with the local gods."

Hadi laughed. "I can tell. I saw the way Canus carried her to shore."

"Oh, shush, all of you," Alfre snapped. "Let's get you settled. We'll figure out our next move once the rest of the refugees have been evacuated."

"How many are still left in Sandfur's Den?" Alfre asked one month later, sitting at the council's round table.

"Clover has sent one last ship for the last fifteen hundred people," June said, rolling out a letter she'd received. "It left port two days ago, according to my sources. It should arrive on Ahmar's shore within the next day or so."

Atticus stared at the map on the table, and at all the small chess pieces they'd been using to represent the movements of the ships. "Have there been any more problems?"

"Raids are near constant," Ludovico announced with a tired sigh. "The Granato have long since realized they cannot get into the dungeon, so they wait until the ships arrive and attack them. Luckily, Diamond and Clover have sent only their best, so no one has gotten hurt or captured so far. Interestingly enough, they seem to be refusing to send more than one Fell in at a time."

“Fell lose their items if they die,” Cherry, the rabbit familiar guild master, reminded them. “Likelihood is they just don’t want to lose their best items, especially since they’d have to carry them into battle with any other Fell.”

“I think they just don’t want to actually spend the resources on stopping the evacuation,” Hunter interjected. “They’re probably waiting for an attack on the city. What was it that tiny over there said to them? ‘We’ve seen your crimes and we’re livid?’ Obviously they think we’re going to send in an all out attack.”

There was wave of murmurs as many of those in attendance agreed with him. That would be a logical assumption for anyone to make.

“Are we going to make an all out assault?” Ran asked. He and Izo were basically permanent residents of Spade by this point, despite the fact they technically belonged to Ran’s sister’s guild kingdom. But with the operation in full swing, and communication among all parties crucial, the two of them had taken up residence in the city to facilitate such things.

Everyone turned to Alfre, who paused in her petty of Beira’s head. That was something she’d been considering for a long while now. The actions of the Fell in the City of Heart had angered her. She wanted the Granato Empire out of the city, and their pet Fell thrown out with them. Still, she didn’t think the players in Spade alone could thoroughly drive the enemy from Heart.

“I suppose that depends on what everyone else wants to do,” she said eventually. “I agree that the Granato Empire and their pet Fell need to be driven out of the city. But I think we’d need the help of Diamond and Clover and the refugees from Heart to achieve that.”

“What do you suggest?” Maldrom asked, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

“We need a general council meeting, with leaders from Diamond, Clover, and Heart in attendance,” Alfre answered. “Letters are all well and good, but they are too slow for something as important as this.”

“I agree,” Ran said. “We need everyone here. Or if not here than in the same room.”

“We’ll get the message sent,” June assured everyone. “We’ll reach a consensus of where they want to meet and when. Hopefully they all understand the gravity of the situation and act quickly.”

The group disbursed, Ran going off with June and Maldrom to contact their allies. Hunter and Atticus left with their entourages, already discussing battle plans. Alfre sighed, running her hands over her face.

“Do you think they’ll do it?”

She turned to look at Hadi, who stared down at the map like it’d kicked his dog or something. It took her a minute to realize what he was talking about. “It depends, I think, on how well you and your friends argue that it’s needed.”

Hadi’s angry expression fell into something more somber. “Why must it fall to me?”

Alfre shrugged. “I ask myself that everyday. But I think it falls to you because it’s your city. You are the one who was driven away. The rest of us...don’t really understand how that feels. But if you can show us,

or explain it well enough, that might be enough. But first you have to decide if fighting is really what you want. You could just live here, with us. Spade could be your home. Or Clover, or Diamond. It doesn't matter really."

Hadi shook his head, dark hair fly about his face. "No. Heart is my home. And I want it back."

Alfre stood from the table. She turned to leave, taking a moment to reach out and squeeze his shoulder. "Then the fight for it starts here."

"You've been spending a lot of time with Mister Hadi lately," Wally said out of nowhere later that evening.

Spica and Elias were out...somewhere. Alfre didn't know where. It wasn't any of her business what her friends did when she wasn't around. That left her and Wally alone in the guildhall – save for Beira, who was lying in front of the fireplace, one curious eye opening at Wally's words.

"Am I?" Alfre asked. She hadn't noticed if she had been. It was possible, but mainly because Hadi was something of a leader among the players from Heart, and Alfre was the so-called leader of the Spade players.

Wally hummed in confirmation, continuing to wash dishes as if nothing was bothering him. Not that he could fool Alfre, she'd long since learned how to read him like a book – which wasn't terribly hard, the young Wonderlander wore his heart on his sleeve. Alfre let the book she was reading drop to her chest, contemplating Wally's words.

"Well, he does have a big hand in this whole mess," Alfre said, referring to the refugee crisis and the war that loomed on the horizon. "And I'm up to my chest in it. We're bound to deal with each other a lot, all things considered."

"Do you...like him?" Wallace asked carefully.

Alfre sat up from where she'd been lounging on the couch, looking over the back of it into the kitchen. She watched him silently for a long moment; the young man never stopping in his quest to scrub the dishes spotless.

"No," she said finally. "Not in the way you're thinking at any rate. He's nice enough, though, and a good ally. But no, I don't *like* him."

Wally gave a tiny sigh of what Alfre could only assume was relief. "I see."

The next question was Alfre's. "Would it bother you if I did?"

Wally twitched, his hands finally stopping, simply laying still in the warm, soapy water. "I suppose it would."

"Why?"

Wallace pulled his hands from the water, drying them on the towel he'd laid over his shoulder. He wandered into the lounge, his expression contemplative. Beira sat up more fully, watching the Wonderlander carefully.

Wally came to a stop just on the other side of the couch, resting his hands along the back of it. When he spoke, there was a playful, and yet almost sad smile on his face.

"I suppose, Miss Alfre, it's because *I* like you."

Alfre swallowed thickly, unsure of how to respond to that. "I...see."

"Yeah," Wally sighed. He stepped away, still smiling, though this one seemed far less sincere. "I know you don't see me that way, Miss Alfre, and that's okay. I just...wanted to be clear."

"You don't know that," Alfre argued. "I don't even know that, so how could you!"

He blinked owlishly at her, confusion evident on his face. "I...what?"

"I'm still figuring out how I feel about this whole thing," she said, trying to be clearer. "You and Abital and Canus and me. This whole mess. I'm still trying to figure out my own feelings about it. So don't go assuming them. It's rude."

Wally blushed, unable to keep himself from stuttering when he spoke. "Y-yes, ma'am."

"And stop calling me that," Alfre ordered, standing from the couch and abandoning her book on the cushions. "If you like me, act like it, instead of hiding behind some formality that only you insist upon. You're not my servant; you're a member of the guild. Act like it."

"O-okay. I'll try."

Alfre nodded approvingly. "That's all I can ask for, I guess."

Wally nodded, glancing over his shoulder at the kitchen sink in an attempt to find an escape. "I'm just gonna...gonna finish the dishes."

He nearly sprinted out of the room, closing the door behind him harder than he probably meant to. Alfre sighed, looking to Beira with a tired expression.

"How is it I'm the only reasonable one in this whole mess, and I didn't even know it existed until recently?" she asked the direwolf.

Beira simply huffed, settling her head back down onto her paws. Alfre sighed again. What she wouldn't give to be able to ignore the human drama like Beira did. But, she supposed that was impossible, given she was at the epicenter of it.

Chapter Eight

Alfre waited impatiently for word to arrive back from Diamond and Clover. While ships could travel the seas with relative ease now that the engines had been designed and the building process had been improved, it still took at least a week for messages to get sent across the seas. Alfre still wasn't sure how Ran and the Crystal Moon Kingdom were sending messages – something to do with summons and teleportation or whatever. It was all heavily rooted in game mechanics that Alfre had no knowledge of or interest in.

She tried her best to keep from bothering Ran and the others who were in on the whole communications project. She kept herself busy as best she could, meeting with Hadi and other players from Heart to get their opinion on the idea of war. She wandered out in to the Wilds on her own; though still not entirely on her own as Beira rarely left her side. Cutting down low-level mobs wasn't nearly as cathartic as she'd hoped for, but it was better than doing nothing.

Spica and Elias kept themselves busy as well, running about the city helping where they could. Mostly they helped with training the low-level players that had come over with that first wave of refugees. Many of them were sick of being weak. They were the ones who wanted vengeance the most, Alfre noticed. The stronger players seemed content to simply settle down in Spade, or most of them were at least. Some, guild masters in particular, had planted roots in Heart that could not be replaced. Guildhalls had been smashed and livelihoods ruined. Mid-level players that had no personal attachments to Heart cared the least about the city itself. They were more upset that fellow players had turned against them. They wanted to settle in Spade and forget the whole thing.

None of them wanted war, per say, but they all wanted the aggressors to pay for what they'd done. But without moderators or the ability to ban a player, war seemed like the only option.

"You are worried," Abital observed, watching her with ruby eyes.

"I'd be surprised if she wasn't," Canus muttered, his head in Alfre's lap as he lounged about in wolf form. "War is no laughing matter."

"No," Abital agreed. "It isn't."

"I'm still having a hard time figuring out what it is they want," Alfre admitted. "I've gotten so many mixed answers. Most of them want reparations, but if I bring up the idea of fighting, they shy away. Except the little ones. They don't quite seem to understand what war might actually entail."

"You wouldn't actually send them out to fight, would you?" Spica asked from the other side of the room where she snuggled up against Elias' side on the couch.

"God, no!" Alfre insisted. "I'd probably only feel comfortable bringing players over level forty-five with me."

"You would go fight on the front lines?" Abital's eyes went wide at the idea, as if it frightened him.

"Of course," Alfre said, conviction evident in her voice. "I'd never just send people in to fight for me. This was my idea, and I'm going to see it through personally."

"You're nuts, snowbird," Canus said flatly.

Alfre couldn't help but agree. "Probably. But what else can I do?"

"Not fight?" Elias suggested.

"Too late for that, darling," Spica reminded him. "We've been fighting the whole way through. Since the day we set foot on Ahmar."

"We've gotten everyone out though, haven't we?" Elias asked, sounding a little bit desperate.

"No," Alfre said with a sad shake of her head. "There's still thousands still trapped in the city itself, holed up in the inner districts and their guildhalls. Do you expect them to stay like that the rest of their lives?"

Elias' ears drooped. "No. I suppose not."

"We still need to wait to see what Clover and Diamond say," Spica reminded them. "If we don't have their support, going to war may very well be suicide. Or as close as we can get in Wonderland."

Chapter Nine

They came, finally, about a week after agreeing to meet in Spade. They came by boat, smaller ones that those sent to rescue the players on Ahmar, but impressive ones none the less. Hadi's friends led the way, the samurai Makoto with the delegation from Diamond, and Einmora with the delegation from Clover. Each had brought half a dozen delegates, all of them high leveled and well known among the more experienced players.

"Welcome, all of you," Alfre greeted them at the dock. "Thank you for coming. I can't begin to express the gravity of the situation, but I think you all recognize that."

"Wait a moment," one of the delegates from Diamond interrupted. They were a tall, elven woman in glittering, silvery-white armor, her hair tied back in a cascade of red-gold braids. "Who is this? She's only level fifty-six!"

Alfre stepped forward, drawing herself up to full height. Beira growled beside her, baring her teeth at the elven woman. "My name is Alfre, I lead the forces in Spade."

"What?" another player, a kitsune man in ornate leather armor with a belt full of daggers, shout in disbelief. "No way am I following some near-noob into war against Granato. No way. I'm out of here."

"You will stay where you are, Briar Fox, if you know what's good for you," Einmora growled, hand going to the handle of the axe by her side.

Briar Fox turned to snarl at her, tail twitching wildly beneath his dark brown cloak. "Are you threatening me, dwarf?"

Einmora's grip on her axe tightened. "I will not have our chances of victory jeopardized by your prejudices. If it wasn't for this woman and her companions, my people would still be wandering about Ahmar, unable to find shelter. Because of her and Canus, we had a place to hide until we could be rescued. Because of her and Maldrom and Ludovico, you lot can travel the seas with ease. Look at her! She's got a direwolf companion! She wears the Cloak of Night's Shadow! Clearly the gods favor her. Now, you will be a good boy and listen to what she has to say. You will *all* listen to what she has to say!"

Briar Fox and the elven woman turned away in shame, their eyes falling to the sea-worn wood of the dock.

Alfre was near speechless. "Thank you, Einmora. I cannot tell you what your faith means to me."

Einmora turned to her with a careless shrug. "All I know is that you're the one who wants to fight to get our city back. Which means you have my support. And Makoto's too, probably."

Makoto nodded, her dark eyes shining.

Alfre bounced excited on the balls of her feet. "Then perhaps we should take this somewhere better equipped for this kind of conversation. Come on, we have a lot to talk about."

Alfre and company led them through the city, pausing often as players from Heart rushed out to greet Einmora and Makoto. The two of them seemed well known and well loved. Alfre was grateful to have them and Hadi on her side. Convincing the rest of the Heart Fell to go to war would be easy with them speaking on her behalf.

Abital and Canus were waiting for them when they arrived at the council room. Briar Fox, the elven woman, and several other guild masters stumbled back in shock upon seeing them.

Canus grinned wolfishly at Alfre as she strode into the room without flinching. "Quite the entourage you got there, snowbird."

"Be nice, wolf blood, we need to convince them to ally with us in the war," Abital cautioned.

"What the actual hell?" the elven woman shouted. "Why are they here?"

"Calm down, Selphie," June soothed. "They're friends. Well, friends of Alfre's."

"Friends?" a siren man from Clover echoed. "How the hell do you make friends with a Wonderlander god?"

"By helping one get revenge on a man who skinned a direwolf and sitting down and telling the other a nice story," Alfre summarized with a wicked grin. "Now sit down, and call yourselves. We have more important things to talk about than whatever relationship I have with Canus and Abital."

Cautiously, the delegations from Clover and Diamond took seats around the table, the more paranoid ones refusing to take their eyes off of Canus and Abital. Abital remained unperturbed by this, his face impassive, while Canus grinned roguishly at those who he caught staring.

Alfre waited until everyone was seated at the table, the attendees having split themselves naturally by which city they hailed from. Hadi, Einmora, and Makoto were joined by two other guild masters from Heart, those who had arrived in Spade along with the second and third waves of refugees. The table was fairly evenly split, save for Spade, which had one more representative – Ran, representing his sister and the Crystal Moon Kingdom.

"Alright, I'd rather not beat around the bush or get caught up in formalities," Alfre said, her voice echoing in the chamber. "Players from the city of Heart have turned against their fellow players and sided with Granato. In this, they have razed the city's outer districts and driven the vast majority of their people out. There are still four thousand seven hundred non-aggressors trapped in the city. We are uncertain how many members of the Granato Empire are within the city walls, but the likelihood is that they vastly outnumber the Fell. The only solution I can think of is to drive the Granato out, along with their pet Fell, if possible. To do that, we'd have to go to war."

"Is there no way we can negotiate with them?" a human monk from Clover asked cautiously.

"There is nothing they want from us," Makoto argued. "Save only for our elimination from the continent of Ahmar. And I refuse to abandon my home."

"What about the other Fell?" the elven woman from before, Selphie, suggested. "Surely we can negotiate with them."

“Have you actually spoken with any of the Fell when they attacked your rescue operations?” Alfre asked.

Selphie shook her head.

“They don’t realize that they’ve done anything wrong,” she explained. “They view the whole thing as a quest. They still think of this world in terms of a game. They don’t understand how traumatizing this whole thing is. They just know they’re getting paid, and they’re getting quests to put in their logs. They need to be taught just how real this place is.”

“What, by killing them?” Briar Fox scoffed, folding his arms over his chest. “They won’t actually die you know, it’s hard to teach them a lesson when there’s no actual consequences.”

“We could make there be consequences,” Atticus interjected. “We could trap them in the cathedral. You can’t teleport out of a cathedral.”

“That’d only work for so long,” Einmora said, a hand rubbing at her thick braids. “And what happens when one of our forces die? Wouldn’t they end up trapped in the cathedral as well?”

“No, they wouldn’t!” June said excitedly. “They’d end up back in their home city cathedral! They wouldn’t end up trapped at all.”

“Well, that’s good,” a siren from Diamond agreed. “But what do we do with them after? Throw them in jail?”

“I mean, we could?” Maldrom said with a shrug. “We could designate a build to be a jail. Set door privileges to a select few. It could work.”

“More than that, though, they need to be forced to help rebuild the city,” Hadi insisted. “They need to take responsibility for the damage they’ve done.”

“I agree with you, Hadi,” Alfre said soothingly. “But before we figure out punishments, we have to defeat them first.”

“Now wait a minute,” Selphie interrupted. “We never actually agreed we were going to war.”

“Have we not?” Alfre questioned, her tone edging on sarcastic. “Very well. All those in favor of kicking some ass, say ‘aye.’”

There was a deafening chorus of ‘aye.’ Alfre smirked.

“All those against?”

Silence. Alfre’s smirk grew.

“Excellent, then we are in agreement. Now, we should probably talk about what exactly it is we’re going to do.”

“There are two points we have to be aware of,” Ran said, leaning over the map that took up the majority of the table. He set two black castle chess pieces on the map. “That’s the City of Heart, and the capital of the Granato Empire – Rubino. If we take down the Emperor in the capital as well as seize control of the city, we’ve basically won the war.”

“Which means we basically have to split our forces in two,” Briar Fox summarized. “Which isn’t exactly ideal.”

“There are thousands of us against three hundred Fell in Heart,” Spica said, hands steeped before her in a way that made her look like an evil mastermind. “We should focus on Heart first. After that, if need be, we can march on Rubino...hopefully with some reinforcements from those non-aggressors still holed up in the city.”

“And if Granato marches on us instead?” Hunter demanded.

“The two innermost districts have walls three meters thick,” Makoto explained. “If need be, we can evacuate the noncombatants there and use home field advantage to wipe out the advancing forces.”

“Or – ” Atticus held up his hand as an idea came to him. “We can leave a smaller force to defend the two districts while a larger force goes to invade Rubino.”

“Try the other way around,” Spica suggested. “Leave the main force in Heart to defend it, specifically leave behind the knights, the hunters, gunners, and a good majority of your healers. The heavy hitters and the ones that can take a hit. The force that invades Rubino should be stealthy – assassins, bards, monks, a few magicians.” Her too-blue eyes glanced Alfre’s way. “And any Element Blades that we might happen to have.”

Alfre wasn’t entirely sure there were any other element blades. There weren’t any in Spade; that was for sure. She probably would have run into them by now...or Doremi would have introduced them. But Spica obviously thought Alfre would be leading the actual invasion force into Rubino.

Eyes locked onto Alfre, jaws falling open at the realization of what she was.

“So that’s what she is,” Briar Fox whispered.

“Am I really that rare?” Alfre muttered aloud.

“Alfre, you won the expansion pack – with an early access code, mind you – before anyone else had the chance to install it,” Elias reminded her. “And when it went live, that’s when we all got dropped here. No one had the time to make a new character to try out the element blade class.”

Alfre blinked owlishly at the realization. “Oh...”

“What about reclassing?” Ludovico queried. “Surely someone has reclassified into an element blade.”

Selphie shook her head. “Reclassing is expensive, and resets your level back down to one. No one in their right mind would have reclassified right after the Incident. That’d be suicide.”

“That said,” Einmora interrupted, “it’d be hard for us to tell who is or isn’t an element blade without seeing them in action. It’s not like unusually colored hair is all that unusual around here. We could have seen them in passing without realizing it.”

A heavy silence settled over the table, many of the delegates deep in thought. Makoto’s eyes narrowed in thought, possibly realizing something.

“You know,” she said slowly, “there were rumors about a Fell running about with a blazing sword the night Granato attacked.”

“Fight against the Granato or with them?” Atticus asked carefully.

Makoto’s face paled. “With.”

Canus leaned against the back of Alfre’s seat to whisper in her ear. “Sounds like you’ve found yourself a rival, snowbird.”

“Are blazing swords really that rare?” Alfre asked. “Surely just because their sword was on fire doesn’t mean they were an element blade. Hell, I’m pretty sure Atticus has some kind of fire sword.”

“No, this was different,” Makoto insisted. “It was like their whole body was on fire, they said. It was like their very essence was fire.”

Elias glanced at Alfre. “Like how you exude cold when you get angry.”

Alfre frowned. “If they are an element blade, then I’ll deal with it.”

“You’re insane,” Briar Fox snapped. “What could someone as low level as you do against a living embodiment of fire?”

Alfre eyed the kitsune, letting her winter leak into the air. Frost crawled along the floor and up the walls, the ambient temperature of the room dropping several degrees. She smiled, all teeth and warning.

“I’ll freeze them. After all, summer always gives itself over to winter eventually.”

Chapter Ten

The meeting broke soon after that, the delegations leaving to return to their boats. They had armies to build, after all, and they had no time to waste.

“How are we doing this?” Atticus inquired, the guild council wandering down the main thoroughfare of the city. “We need an army, but how are we going to get one?”

“Volunteers, I hope,” June said. “I feel uneasy about the idea of a draft.”

“No draft,” Alfre agreed. “Though I doubt we’d need one. Our people have heard first hand what Granato has done to Heart. We Fell are proud people, probably more so than we should be. An attack against any of us is an attack against all of us.

“That said, there should definitely be some restrictions,” she continued. “I’d rather no one under level twenty-five come along unless they’re going to be backline healers. We don’t need stupidly brave cannon fodder.”

“There aren’t a whole lot of Fell around here who are lower than level twenty-five anyway,” Maldrom said. “Though, a lot of the little ones from Heart are that weak. Shame, they’re the ones who want to fight the most.”

“I can understand their desire for justice...or revenge, which ever it is,” Alfre said. “But I’d rather them not die and end up trapped in the Cathedral.”

“Speaking of,” Cherry spoke up. “How are we going to trap the Fell in there? We’d have to reach the city first.”

“Send ahead a squad of rogues and monks,” Hunter suggested. “Have them infiltrate the city with a few clerics and have them bar the Cathedral doors.”

“It’s as good a plan as any,” Spica agreed. “Perhaps while they’re there, someone could galvanize the people still trapped in the City.”

“You should take Ren with you, if that’s your goal,” Ran said. “She’s good at the whole ‘galvanizing’ thing.”

“She is,” Elias agreed. “If anyone can incite a revolution, it’s Ren.”

“Izo and I will go back to the Kingdom and tell her what’s been decided,” Ran offered. “I can promise you, we’ll come back with the whole guild in tow.”

Alfre smiled at him. “Thank you, my friend.”

Ran nodded and he and Izo broke off from the group, heading in the direction of the stables. They’d be taking off within the hour, Alfre knew, pushing their elk to the breaking point if it meant getting back to the Crystal Moon Kingdom as quickly as possible. Ren would be excited. It’d been forever since the queen had done much of anything this dangerous. She was probably itching for a fight.

Alfre and her guild mates broke off from the procession, having reached their guildhall. Wally was waiting for them, as he always was. He didn't even blink at Canus and Abital's presence anymore.

"What did they decide?" he asked, wringing his hands nervously. His face was paler than usual, his freckles standing out all the more for it.

"They agreed," Alfre announced. "We're going to war. They're already on their way back to their cities to raise armies. Ran and Izo have taken off to rally their guild."

"I see," Wally murmured. His gaze fell to the floor. "I wish I could go with you; wish I could be of some use. But I'm not a fighter, nor am I any good as a healer. I'm just a farmhand, and a housekeeper."

Alfre frowned. She didn't want Wallace getting into danger, but at the same time she didn't want to leave him behind. The guildhall was far too big for one person. He was bound to get lonely. Surely there was something he could do.

"Well, you may not be a fighter," Elias interjected. "But I'm sure the fighters would be grateful for comforting food. And I'm sure they'll need someone to remind them that Wonderlanders can be kind."

Wallace's eyes shined with newfound determination. "You're right, Mister Elias. An army can't fight on an empty stomach, now, can it?"

"Speaking of Wonderlanders," Spica said. "Do you think Alessio would be willing to come fight with us?"

"Definitely," Alfre agreed. "He still insists that he owes us. And if he was willing to help with the evacuation, surely he'd be willing to help with the fighting."

"Best send him a letter, then," Elias suggested. "He needs to know what we're doing before he agrees to throw himself headfirst in to the cause."

Alfre agreed, already marching off to her private chambers on the fourth floor. Time was of the essence, and she couldn't waste time. She sat herself down at her desk, blank parchment before her, but found herself unable to find the right words. Surely, one must be delicate when it came to announcing war. She had to make sure she didn't make it seem like they expected Alessio to join them. It was entirely his choice after all, and he had much more to lose than they did. Wonderlanders actually died, supposedly. Mobs respawned, yes, but she couldn't be sure that someone like Alessio would.

She must have spent hours staring at that blank page of parchment, for when she finally broke her train of thought, Wally was bringing her supper.

"How's the letter writing going?" he asked, and Alfre couldn't help but notice he avoided calling her 'Miss Alfre' when he did so.

"Poorly," she sighed. "I can't seem to find the right words."

Wally set the tray of food down beside her on the desk, the smell of fresh bread and warm soup filling her nose. "I wouldn't think too much about it. His Royal Highness knows you too well to expect anything fancy or overly delicate. You're his friend, Alfre, write to him as a friend. He'll understand any intentions well enough."

Alfre said nothing, simply humming in acknowledgement. Her eyes returned to the parchment on the desk, spinning her pen idly in her hand. Perhaps Wally was right. She was overthinking things. Alessio was her friend, and the best way to talk with a friend was honestly.

She set pen to paper and began to write.

Chapter Eleven

She brought down her tray of empty plates not long after, having sent off the letter with a messenger bird the moment she'd finished it. She found Abital and Canus sitting awake in the lounge, despite the late hour having chased the others off to bed. Upon seeing them, a question came to mind.

"Is it really alright for the two of you to be interfering so much in the world?" she asked, setting her dishes in the sink to wash later. "You've not given any indication that you aren't going to be fighting with us. And Canus has already done so much by letting the players hide in one of his dungeons. Is it really okay?"

Abital gazed into the fire contemplatively. When he spoke, it was soft, but purposeful. "Even if Orli and Koseret were against it, there is little they could do. There is no one god that is more powerful than the others. While Orli sees herself as a leader, we do not bow to her demands nor her whims. Even if she asked, we could easily ignore her. We were created opposites, and equals. Death and Life. The Wilds and the Wonderlanders. There is no one to tell us that we cannot, so we will."

"I doubt Koseret would try to stop us anyway," Canus mused. "She weeps for you Fell just as much as she weeps for the Wonderlanders. The destruction of Heart hurt her, snowbird. She has not stopped weeping since the first wall crumbled against the Granato army. If she knew you, she would fight alongside you as well."

"Would Orli try?" she asked, settling on the couch beside Abital, curling tiredly into his side. Finger combed through her hair in long, soothing strokes.

"Perhaps," Abital admitted as he played with her hair. "She prefers not to take sides in conflicts between Fell and Wonderlanders. She worries it would cut into her number of worshipers."

"I thought only the Wonderlanders worshiped you," Alfre admitted.

Abital shrugged. "Some of your clerics do as well, it is how they get their power. Otherwise, I'm sure Orli would side with the Wonderlanders each time."

"If she tried to stop us," Alfre said slowly, "could we defeat her?"

"You Fell are stronger than you realize," Canus said. "I'm sure if you all turned on her, she would fall easily. But you won't have to. If she tries anything, gloomy and I will do something about it."

Alfre smiled, feeling herself grow sleepy with each pass of Abital's fingers through her hair. "You two are too kind to me."

"I have heard it is customary to be kind to those you love," Abital said, surprisingly candid.

"Oh, so Spica was right," Alfre murmured.

"About what?" Canus asked, morphing into wolf form and jumping onto the couch to lie across the sleepy girl's lap.

Alfre blinked slowly, only barely keeping her eyes open. "She said you loved me. Both of you, and Wally, too."

There was a pregnant pause before Canus spoke up again. "Aye, she's not wrong."

"And what do you think of that, Alfre?" Abital asked cautiously.

"Idunno," she admitted. "But, I think I might love you, too."

Canus lifted his head, his words hopefully when he spoke. "Love who, snowbird?"

"All of you," Alfre whispered. "Is that bad?"

Canus and Abital exchanged looks over her. Canus grinned a wolfish grin, letting out a soft bark of a laugh. "Nah, I don't think so, snowbird."

"I think I would be happy to receive any affection from you," Abital confessed quietly. "Even if it meant sharing you."

"Mmm, good," Alfre hummed. "I'd hate to lose any of you."

Canus chuckled once more, laying his head back down in Alfre's laugh. "Just go to sleep, snowbird. And hope you remember this in the morning."

Chapter Twelve

Alfre awoke with a stiff neck and very warm legs. Her eyes blinked sluggishly against the bright light that filtered in through the high windows of the lounge. She took in her situation carefully. She was leaning against Abital, who has drifted off into slumber sometime after her, because she distinctly remembered him being awake when she fell asleep. Canus was still curled up on her legs, which explained why they were so warm. When did he fall asleep? Did gods even really need sleep? Such were the half-awake questions that flittered through her mind – closely followed by the memories of the night before crashing into her like a speeding truck.

She groaned, pressing the heels of her palms against her eyes. Had she really said that? Good lord, why had she done that? That was so stupid.

“Good morning, snowbird.” Alfre pulled her hands away from her eyes to peer down at a grinning Canus. “Seems your memory hasn’t failed you.”

“Shut up,” Alfre groaned, wanting nothing more than for the world to open up and swallow her whole.

Abital shifted beside her, catching her attention. Soothing fingers ran through her hair once more. “Do you regret your words?”

Did she? That was the million-dollar question, wasn’t it? The problem was she wasn’t sure of anything. She had no idea what she was doing, or if it was even okay. Hell, she hadn’t even broached the subject with Wallace, and he was just as entangled in this mess as the rest of them.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I’m not really sure of anything. I’m sorry.”

Alfre stiffened as Abital leaned down to nuzzle at her hair, unused to this much blatant affection from anyone, let alone the God of the Underworld. “No need to apologize.”

“Take all the time you need to figure things out,” Canus added. “The worst thing you can do is act on feelings you aren’t even sure are there.”

Alfre sighed, grateful for their understanding. “Thank you.”

Canus grinned. “Anytime, snowbird.”

The others wandered down some time later, all looking like they slept far better than Alfre did. Wally eyed the way Alfre lounged between the two gods with interest, a sadness hidden behind his curiosity. Alfre would have to speak with him eventually, when she figured everything out. She joined them at the kitchen table, where a letter awaited her.

“Alessio sure got back to you quick,” Elias commented, taking a sip of his coffee.

“If you think Alessio didn’t jump from his bed to compose his response, you obviously don’t know him that well,” Spica teased. “He’s eager to prove himself and uphold his end of the alliance, however unofficial that alliance may be. I assume he’ll be joining us.”

“Yes,” Alfre replied, scanning the letter. “He’ll be marching our way by the end of the day, he says, with two thousand soldiers and five hundred healers.”

Elias choked on a sip of coffee at the numbers. “That’s enough to fill a whole ship on their own,” he wheezed.

“He’ll also send another five hundred sailors to help with the maintenance and sailing of the ships,” Alfre continued. “The same crew as before, plus some. Good gods, Alessio is insane.”

“To be fair, two thousand soldiers is only a fraction of his actual standing army,” Spica reminded them over her cup of tea. “It’s not like he’s leaving his kingdom undefended.”

“I suppose,” Elias conceded. “But still, you know he’ll come along himself. The boy is going to get himself killed. And then what will happen to his kingdom?”

“He’s older than you are, Elias, so I wouldn’t call him a boy,” Spica warned. “And we’d be happy to have him along as a tactical advisor. The man knows fighting; he was trained to command large armies since he was a child. We’re lucky to have him along.”

Elias sighed, already looking very tired. “Alright. If you say so, starlight.”

Alfre blinked, shocked by the pet name. Was that new? The way Elias immediately went paler than normal and the near murderous look Spica gave him said that Alfre wasn’t supposed to hear that.

“Starlight?” she echoed, smirking at Spica. She couldn’t help but call this karma for all the times the assassin teased her.

“Dammit, magician, we weren’t going to tell her yet,” Spica outright growled.

Elias flushed a brilliant pink. “I’m sorry! It just slipped out! I don’t know why we haven’t just told her already, anyway. She’s our friend.”

“I wasn’t ready!” Spica exclaimed, only the faintest dusting of pink on her high cheekbones.

Alfre rolled her eyes. “It’s whatever. I don’t really care anyway. I probably would have noticed something was going on if it wasn’t for all the shite with the war effort and such.”

“It’s not whatever!” Spica insisted. “We didn’t want you to feel like a third wheel.”

“I’m fine,” Alfre maintained. “No hurt feelings or anything. Besides, it’s hard to feel like a third wheel when there are six of us, don’t you think?”

Spica and Elias shared an unsure look over the table.

“Just don’t let me catch you snogging on the couch, and we’ll be fine,” Alfre said, taking an offered plate of eggs and sausage from Wally.

Spica's eyes narrowed, and Alfre immediately regretted saying anything. "You mean like you and your god boyfriends were?"

"We were most certainly *not* snogging," Alfre retorted firmly. "We were just coming to a mutual understanding."

"Is that what the kids are calling it these days?" Elias muttered, taking a sip of coffee.

Alfre glared at him. "Don't you start. Nothing untoward happened last night."

"Would you admit to it if it did?" Spica challenged, pointing her fork at the shorter woman.

"If anything happened, it wouldn't have been on the couch," Alfre said plainly.

Spica almost pouted. "You're absolutely no fun, darling."

Alfre rolled her eyes. "I'm so sorry to hear that, *starlight*."

Alfre picked up her plate and escaped into the guildhall to avoid the steak knife Spica hurled at her head.

Chapter Thirteen

Alessio arrived just as the players received word that Clover and Diamond had already launched their invasion fleet. They were to meet on the same shore where they'd evacuated the refugees, the irony of the plan not lost on Alfre. It would take players from Diamond the longest to get there, Clover the quickest. Which left Alfre and her army just enough time to load the boats and launch without worrying about being the last to arrive. Maldrom had set aside a boat exclusively for the Saphir army, the royal insignia painted on the steam funnels. Alessio was delighted by the whole thing, and insisted on paying for it once the war was over so he could keep it. Maldrom wasn't exactly arguing once he heard the price Alessio was willing to pay for it.

Alessio, while enamored with the ship Maldrom had set aside for him, boarded the same ship as Alfre and company, his second-in-command joining the rest of his army aboard the other ship.

"What is the plan?" he asked, wandering into the map room where the other guild masters had gathered.

"We will land on Sandfur's shore," Ren stated, wholly in her element as she placed a white castle piece on the map. "The Clover army should already be there when we arrive, building a base camp. Diamond will arrive a day or so behind us. From there, a group of twenty or so operatives, mostly rogues and monks, will sneak into Heart ahead of the rest of the army to lock down the Cathedral and, hopefully, rally the people still trapped in the City. A day or so behind them will be the rest of the army."

"You, Your Highness, will remain at base camp with the other tacticians like Ludovico," Ran continued where his sister left off. "You will move into the City after we have taken it. Your main job is to maintain a line of communication among the different commanders and keep track of where everyone is. Is that alright with you?"

Alessio frowned. "It is. Though I would like to fight, I can understand your thinking. I will do my best."

"Ren will be in charge of the initial infiltration mission," Alfre said, taking a knight piece made of a deep blue gemstone and moving it towards the castle piece that represented the City of Heart. "We hope that her ridiculously high charisma stat will help rouse the people into action."

Ren nodded solemnly, no sign of her trademark wild grin in sight. "Spica will come along as my lieutenant."

Alfre gripped the edge of the table at that. She hadn't even considered that her friends would be separated from her. She'd only been able to face the idea of war head on because she'd assumed her friends – her two very best friends – would be by her side the whole way. But, of course, Spica was perfect for the infiltration mission. It would be a waste if she didn't go. Alfre swallowed back that sudden flash of self-doubt and anger.

"And once we take the city?" Alessio asked.

"Then you will move base camp to the innermost district of the city," Alfre said. "And while the majority of the army will remain there to fight off any siege force Granato sends our way, a small contingent, lead by myself, will infiltrate their capital and eliminate the Emperor." She moved a brilliant white marble queen piece towards the castle piece that represented Rubino.

“That’s terribly risky,” Alessio warned.

“No risk, no reward,” Ren countered, her grin returning – and Alfre couldn’t help but feel comforted by it. “You can’t kill a hydra by cutting off its heads. You have to go for the heart. No pun intended.”

“You know damn well that pun was intended,” Ran accused.

The sound of horns caught their attention. Alfre stepped away from the map in the center of the room to look out one of the large windows. They’d successfully cleared the bay, home behind and the ocean before them.

“Ladies, Gentlemen, and others,” she smiled to herself. “We’re off to war.”

Chapter Fourteen

Four days at sea – and by extension four days in extremely close quarters with three thousand other people – was difficult for anyone. Alfre found little privacy aboard the ship, even when she went desperately seeking it out and clambered down into the small spaces of the engine room. She could never stay there long, though. It was claustrophobic down there in a way that she didn't understand how anyone could stand. The top deck was fine and dandy for privacy depending on the time of day – night time was the best for that – but was often crowded with those who were seasick and barfing over the sides. Which was hardly pleasant, but Alfre wasn't going to complain too much. The sea breeze kept the smell from hanging about too long.

They spotted the landing sight late in the afternoon, the ships from Clover already crowding the bay. Alfre could see the smoke from campfires dotting the beach, clenching her hands on the railing nervously. These were people she was about to lead into war. These were people who were willing to stand their ground and fight injustice in the most literal way possible. These were people who were her responsibility. The realization made her feel a bit sick.

“Alfre.” She turned at the sound of Elias' voice, her eyes finding him standing among her friends and the rest of the council. “It's time to go. The landing craft are ready.”

She took a deep shuddering breath to calm her nerves and stepped away from the railing. “Right. Let's go.”

The council crowded into a boat alongside Alessio, Hadi, Wally, Abital, and Canus, hardly as crowded as many of the other boats, but the others didn't have to share with a nervous direwolf that desperately wanted to pace.

Einmora and Briar Fox met them at the shore, surrounded by curious Fell from both Heart and Clover who'd not yet met the woman who was going to lead them into war.

“Welcome to hell,” Einmora greeted gruffly.

“How is everyone doing?” Alfre asked, letting Canus scoop her up from the boat and carry her to shore like he'd done before.

“Well enough,” Briar Fox answered. “They're getting restless. Most of them can't wait to actually start fighting.”

“They're going to have to,” Ren stated plainly, stepping onto land with the others. “We have to wait for Diamond to get here first. And then after that they'll have to wait until after the infiltration mission is already underway.”

“Have their been any problems?” Spica asked, eyeing Wally as he rushed off towards a supply boat that had just landed.

“Not so far,” Einmora said as she led them through the base camp and towards the entrance to Sandfur's Den. “I think Granato and their pet Fell have decided that no one would dare come back after we got the last of the refugees, 'cause they haven't shown up yet, and we've been here a good two days.”

"That's good," Alfre said with a sigh of relief. "We'll need that element of surprise."

"How many do we have for the infiltration mission?" Ren asked as the group gathered around a map of the continent, far more detailed than the world map back in Spade.

"You've got ten volunteers from our contingent," Briar Fox informed her. "Five assassins, three clerics, and two monks."

"Plus a magician and a summoner from my guild," Einmora added. "More will be coming with Selphie and Makoto."

"Plus you should have at least five from Spade," Alfre said. "Spica and June will be going with you I know. I'm not sure about the others."

"Silver is coming with me," Ren said, because of course Silver was going with her. "Hunter is lending me one of his druids, and Maldrom's dragonling girl is coming along as well, Sage or whatever her name is."

"Basil," Alfre corrected. "She's a sorcerer, I think."

"Her, yeah," Ren muttered, obviously distracted. "Do we know how many I'll have from Diamond?"

"Not nearly as many as from the others," Briar said. "Diamond's pretty heavily populated with the clunky armored type."

"Makoto will be with you," Hadi said. "That much I know. As for any others, I couldn't tell you."

Ren dismissed him with a casual wave of her hand. "It's fine. It's just good to know. I don't think we'll need much more than twenty people for this anyway, otherwise we run too many risks."

"This is true," Einmora agreed. "Too few and you won't have the impact necessary. Too many, and it's too easy to get caught before you can get the job done."

Ren nodded, her foot tapping impatiently on the sandstone below. "I'm almost tempted to just forget the guys from Diamond and go."

"Don't you dare," Alfre warned. "We need to wait for Diamond to get here before we do anything. I can't have you taking off while we're stuck here missing a third of our army. We wouldn't be able to come after you like we need to."

Ren sighed in frustration. "Fine. Fine, I'll stay put. But only until everyone I need is here, and then I'm out. You hear me, snowflake?"

"Aye, I hear you," Alfre shot back.

Alessio raised a curious brow at the interaction, unused to seeing Alfre interact with Ren. "Should you not be referring to Alfre as your commander?" he asked. "That is what she is, after all."

Alfre blanched at the idea. "Please don't."

Spica smirked. "No, no. It's a good idea. Best to be clear who's in charge of what. Can't have a dozen people running around claiming to be in charge. The army would fall apart that way."

Alfre hated how much sense that made. She really didn't want to be addressed in any specific way, but if doing so kept every together and on the same page, well she was going to have to.

"Fine," she groaned. "I'm 'Commander' or whatever."

Ren grinned. "Would that make me Lieutenant Commander?"

"Sure," Alfre agreed casually. "Spica and Elias too. And Alessio, since he's going to be running the behind the scenes portion of this whole mess."

"For something you keep calling a mess, we're honestly not that unorganized," Elias argued mildly.

Alfre rolled her eyes at him. "It's still a mess. A huge mess. War can only ever be a mess."

"I suppose you're right," Elias sighed, his ears drooping. The perked up again at the same time Briar Fox's twitched, the two of them picking up a sound.

They turned, causing the others to as well. Down the tunnel came a rather flustered looking bard. "Um, excuse me, I'm sorry, but there's someone here to see Abital and Canus...and 'whoever else is in charge of this'. That's what they said, I'm sorry, I'm just repeating what they told me."

Alfre shared a concerned look with the two gods. They led the way back out of the tunnel, Alfre blinking against the near blinding sunlight. When she could finally see again, she found two women standing before them. The first, an elven woman with dark skin and earthy brown curls. She was dressed in earthy tones, a crown of summer flowers in her hair. She clutched her cream colored skirt with shaking hands. The other woman was smaller, her skin lighter in shade but still darker than Alfre's had ever been. She was human, supposedly, though something about her seemed more than that. Her hair was white and short; her sharp, lavender eyes cut right through any she leveled with her gaze.

"Koseret," Canus said by way of greeting. "Orli."

Alfre felt her heart stop. These...these were the last two gods of Wonderland. Were they here to stop us? Would Abital and Canus actually fight them if they tried? Could the players actually defeat them if we fought them?

"Canus, Abital," Orli said, her voice deeper than expected, "it is good to see you. But I must admit, Abital, it is strange that you're so far from your throne. Perhaps you should return before the dead all get loose."

That definitely sounded like a threat, Alfre decided. Her hand twitched towards her rapier.

"Don't even try it, little Fell," Orli snapped, her eyes locking on Alfre. "You could never defeat me."

"Wanna bet?" Alfre hissed, reckless and angry.

Orli took one small step forward. The next thing any of them knew, Canus had pounced on her, the fur of his wolf form bristling in rage, his jaw hovering over her throat.

“Keep your threats to yourself, brat,” he warned. “Lay one hand on snowbird and Gloomy and I will make sure you don’t get it back.”

“Canus, please, enough,” Koseret pleaded, her voice wavering. “Orli, do not antagonize them, we did not come here to fight.”

“Perhaps you did not, Koseret,” Abital said. “But she most certainly did.”

“You’d really kill me over a Fell?” Orli demanded, offended and angry at the turn of events. “A Fell?”

“Not just this Fell,” Abital informed her coldly. “The Fell who have been run out of their home. The Fell who are trapped. The Fell who want their city back. If you try to interfere with this, we will end you.”

“But yeah, we’d also kill you over snowbird specifically,” Canus added, his voice sharp and mocking.

“The Wonderlanders are our people,” Orli reminded them sharply. “It is our duty to protect them.”

“Even when they are selfish and cruel?” Canus demanded. “The Fell are our people just as much as the Wonderlanders are, or have you forgotten your clerics?”

Orli did not react. Koseret, on the other hand, seemed shocked by the reminder, maybe she had forgotten about the clerics. Her green eyes scanned the gathered crowd, growing wide with some emotion Alfre couldn’t place.

“These people deserve our protection just as much as any Wonderlander,” Abital said, gesturing at the gathered players with a grand sweep of his arm. “Those who say otherwise do not deserve the position they hold.” He glared at Orli, still trapped beneath Canus.

“It is not our place to interfere,” she said, voice surprisingly calm despite the position she was in, her words contradicting what she’d said just moments before. “This is between the Wonderlanders and the Fell. Let them fight it out without sullyng our hands.”

“I beg to differ.” All eyes were on Alfre as she stepped forward, hands clenched at her sides. “If these are your people as you claim they are, is it not your duty to lead them back to the proper path? Is it not the duty of gods to make their feelings known? If they have done wrong, how will they know unless you tell them? If you are displeased with them, then you must show them. Yeah?”

Koseret, at least, seemed to ponder her words.

“Canus, get off her,” Alfre ordered. “If you were actually going to do anything, you would have by now.”

“You dare give a god orders?” Orli hissed. Her anger gave way to shock, however, when Canus actually did as he was told, trotting back to Alfre’s side without complaint. “Who are you?”

Before Alfre could say anything, Alessio stepped forward to answer for her. "She is Alfre, the Winter Blade, Commander of the Fell Army, Favored One of the Wilds, Death's Chosen Champion, and Guild Master of the Alliance of the Frozen Stars."

"And a stubborn as hell Scotswoman," Alfre added with a wicked grin.

Orli picked herself up, a scowl marring her pretty face. She was taller than Alfre, not that that was hard, but not nearly as tall as Alfre had imagined. Abital and Canus were near giants, and Koseret also seemed extraordinarily tall. Orli just looked like a normal person, save for the unusual color of her eyes. But, in Wonderland, even those weren't that unusual. She didn't honestly seem like a god, perhaps that was why she tried so hard to control everything.

"Do what you want," Orli hissed, dusting herself off. "Since you obviously love this Fell more than your own people."

Abital frowned, more so than usual, his eyes growing sad. "She was kind to me, Orli. You know how rare it is for anyone to show me kindness, even Wonderlanders."

Orli's eyes widened, insulted. "You'd threaten family over a Fell who showed you kindness? Is that all it takes to buy your loyalty?"

"We are *not* Family!" Abital shouted, his voice reaching a volume Alfre had never heard from him before. It boomed like thunder, shaking the dunes around them. The Wonderlanders cowered in fear. "You came up with that narrative all on your own. We share no parentage, no history, no blood. And if we were family, then why do I spend all my days trapped underground while you float about the world on the sun and stars? Why is it that the only company I have are the Fell who come to fight me? You'd think family would visit. You care not for anyone but yourself, Orli. Do not play at the idea of family."

Orli stumbled back as if struck. Koseret stared in awe at Abital, as if seeing him in a new light. Canus smirked as well as he could in wolf form. Alfre stepped towards him, taking his hand in her own, desperate to show him some comfort. Her heart ached for him. She wanted so terribly to take that pain away from him. To shield him and Canus both from Orli's anger. Orli's eyes widened in astonishment at the display, and then narrowed in disgust.

"Do you love him, little Fell?" she asked mockingly. "Is that why you showed him your 'kindness?' To tempt him away from his post because of some misguided infatuation?"

"Aye, I love him," Alfre admitted, finally coming to terms with her feelings and feeling a weight come off her shoulders that she hadn't realized was there. "But that is not why I showed him kindness. I did it because he just seemed so sad and lonely. I wanted to understand him, to help him feel better, even if just for a short while. I grew to love him over time, like I grew to love Canus...and Wally."

She heard a gasp from the crowd, glancing out of the corner of her eye to see Wally standing at the edge of the circle beside Spica and Elias. Spica looked far too smug for Alfre's comfort, but that she could ignore. She turned back to Orli, who looked visibly shaken by her confession.

Alfre released Abital's hand and moved to grip the hilt of her rapier. "So if you think you can hurt them anymore, you've got another thing coming!"

"You'd fight me for them?" Orli looked about ready to laugh.

"Aye," Alfre agreed. "I'd fight you. I'd fight anyone who hurt them."

Orli looked like she was going to say something, but was cut off when Koseret stepped forward. She walked forward, footsteps strangely silent on the sand, eyes fixed on Alfre. Alfre gripped her weapon tighter, reading herself for a much more physical confrontation.

Instead, Koseret threw her arms around Alfre, pulling her into a hug. Alfre looked to Abital and Canus, thoroughly confused by the turn of events. The two gods merely smiled, the tenseness in their bodies gone.

"Thank you," the goddess whispered. "Thank you for being so kind to them. Canus has told me what you did for his wolves. I should have known you would have extended the same kindness to Abital. Thank you."

"Don't worry about it," Alfre muttered, unable to help but notice the scent of cinnamon and earthy spices that permeated the air around Koseret. "I was just being a decent human being, is all."

Koseret released her, a soft smile on her full lips. She turned to Orli, who looked well and truly abandoned on the other side of the clearing. "Orli, I think we should leave."

Orli scowled. "So you've abandoned me as well, Koseret? I thought you loved the Wonderlanders. What happened? Did you fall for this Fell's honeyed words as well?"

Koseret threw her shoulders back, her green eyes hardening. "I do love the Wonderlanders, Orli. But, unlike you, I am not blind to their cruelties. I came with you because I'd hoped to find some way to resolve this conflict between you and the others peacefully. But it seems your bitter stubbornness cannot be reasoned with."

Canus stared at the goddess with wide eyes. "You mean, you weren't here to stop us from helping the Fell fight?"

Koseret shook her head. "I know the Granato have been cruel to the Fell. I will not defend them, nor will I stop you. These are the consequences they must face for their actions. I am happy, I must say, that you have not let their cruelty taint your perception of Wonderlanders as a whole. I see many of them here, and I am grateful to that."

Alfre shrugged. "Alessio is my friend. I never asked him to fight with us; he came of his own volition. Besides, Wonderlanders and Fell are the exact same. There are good people and bad people. The Granato just happen to be some of the bad, just like the Fell that work for them."

Koseret nodded with a smile. "That is something that people tend to forget." Alfre got the feeling she meant Orli. She flinched when Koseret hugged her once more, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

"You have my blessing, little one," she whispered. "May it keep you and your people safe."

"Thank you," Alfre whispered back, her cheeks growing pink.

Koseret released her, smiling fondly at Alfre in a way that seemed almost motherly. She then turned to Orli, her smile falling away. "I am leaving, Orli. Whether you come along peacefully or stay and attempt to fight is your choice."

Orli scowled, watching as Koseret walked passed her and disappeared in a swirl of leaves. Her lavender eyes returned to Alfre, who met her gaze head on without flinching. She turned away sharply, taking a few steps before vanishing in a blinding flash of light, leaving a circle of jagged glass where she'd stood.

"Canus," Alfre said, "I don't think 'a bit up her own ass' was the right way to describe her."

Canus laughed, morphing back into his human form. "Yeah, I guess not. You did good, though. I've never seen a Fell stand up to her like that."

"I think," Alessio spoke up suddenly. "That I'm going to replace the shrine to Orli in my city to one of Abital. After today, that seems like an appropriate response, I think."

Alfre grinned. "Sounds like a wonderful idea, Your Highness."

Chapter Fifteen

The players from Diamond arrived the next evening, and were quickly informed of the confrontation between the Commander and the Goddess of Light. Alfre was followed around camp by looks of awe and barely concealed whispers. Not that she minded too terribly. At least these whispers weren't particularly nasty. Though they had needed to break up a few fights between clerics. Some who'd chosen Orli as their patron upon character creation were being harassed by other clerics. Alfre and the others had to make it clear that such things were not welcome, especially since that decision was made before any Fell understood what kind of person Orli was. And it wasn't something that could be changed now.

"Perhaps if they come across a temple to another god, they could," Elias explained after one such altercation. "But it doesn't matter. They're with us, and we will respect them for that alone."

Ren and her squad were leaving soon. Just after sunset, they'd take off in the direction of Heart. The rest of the army would move out one day later at dawn. Alfre was still uneasy about going into battle without Spica. She'd gotten far too used to her two best friends being right by her side every step of the way. The idea of fighting without either of them made her stomach turn.

"You'll be fine, darling," Spica assured her. "We'll see each other again soon enough."

Alfre nodded solemnly. Suddenly, she unclasped her Cloak of Night's Shadow. She thrust it towards her friend. "Here. Take it. You need it more than I do, since you're actively trying to be sneaky and all that."

Spica smiled softly, taking the cloak without complaint. "Thank you, Alfre."

"Don't you dare die," Alfre warned her. "Elias will cry for days and I'd really rather not deal with that."

The assassin laughed, a pretty, ringing sound. "I'll do my best."

They took off into the sunset, their summoned steeds carrying them over sand and yellow-green grass. Ren rode at the head, Spica and Silver right behind her. They rode well into the night, until their steeds refused to carry them any farther. After that, they walked with only moonlight to guide them. It took them the whole night and well into the next morning to even get close enough to see the City.

It was well and truly ruined, they discovered. Three of the original seven walls that ringed the city were completely gone. A fourth was damaged beyond repair. The final three walls still stood, if only because they were the thickest and interwoven with magical barriers. Buildings in the outer four districts were still smoking from the fires that had ravaged the city. None of the original city banners still flew.

"It looks awful," Silver whispered, his fists shaking with rage.

Makoto nodded sadly. "It looks even worse than when we left it. At least the fourth wall had still been standing then."

Ren scowled. "C'mon. We have to get in there. Remember the plan."

They snuck towards the city, protected by the assassin's stealth spells. They kept to the shadows of the ruined city, holding their breaths every time a Granato patrol passed them by. Other than the Granato and their Fell, the city seemed completely abandoned. No other players dared walk the streets of the ruined districts.

The insurgents made their way through the winding streets of Heart, ducking between ruined houses and smoldering chunks of the former walls. There was very little activity from the Granato in the lower districts, lucky for them.

"Where is the cathedral anyway?" Basil asked quietly as they slipped through an opening in the fourth wall.

"Third district," Makoto informed them. "Just beyond the wall. We're lucky that one is still standing. I know of a small side gate that I can almost guarantee won't be guarded."

"Lead the way," Ren ordered.

Makoto ran a few paces ahead of the group, keeping her head down as she peeked around corners and down streets. Ren would wait for the signal to move before leading the rest of the squad to the samurai's position. They followed this pattern for several city blocks, moving quickly through the not totally destroyed fourth district.

They all froze when someone tripped over a brick, yelping loudly. They scrambled into an abandoned house just as a Granato knight passed by, eyeing the spot they'd all formerly occupied. They barely dared to breath as the knight walked closer to the house, looking over the area. Spica watched throw a broken window, hidden by Alfre's cloak, as the knight finally – *finally*—left.

"Everyone okay?" Silver whispered.

He waited until he got a nod from every person present before letting Makoto lead them all out of the building. The trek towards the supposedly unguarded gate was long and nerve wracking, taking them well into the evening hours. True, there were very few patrols in the fourth district, especially given it's huge size, but that didn't stop them from going as slowly and stealthily as possible. Better safe than sorry, they agreed.

"There it is," Makoto hissed, stopping everyone. Before them was a small door, no bigger than the average household door. It looked terribly out of place, being set into the giant wall that surrounded the third district like it was. And, luckily for all of them, it was unguarded like Makoto had predicted.

"Let's go then," Ren urged. "We've taken too long already, Alfre and the others are sure to be on their way in a few hours, and we still need to get to the cathedral itself and lock it down."

Makoto took one more wary glance about the streets before running towards the door, the rest of the squad close behind her. She gripped the handle and turned, finding it unlocked. She peeked through the door into the passage that led through the wall. It was dimly lit, but even with the low light she could see the two guards at the end of the corridor.

"Two guards," she whispered to her comrades. "We need to take them out before they can call for help or alert anyone else."

"I thought you said the gate would be unguarded!" The druid from the Fell of Duty guild hissed accusingly.

"Why would the inside gate be guarded but not the outside?" June wondered aloud.

"Because they're trying to keep people from getting out," Ren whispered darkly. "They couldn't even fathom someone wanting to get in."

"Whatever their reason, I'll take care of it," Spica said, leaving no room for argument. "Alfre's cloak will keep me hidden until I strike."

"Be careful, Spica," Ren warned. "I'd rather not have an angry Alfre murdering me for getting you killed."

Spica smirked confidently. "There's no way I'd die now. I've got a guild to represent."

Ren smiled softly. Spica had never said such a thing about the Crystal Moon Kingdom during her time there. To hear her say that about the guild she'd founded with Alfre and Elias...it warmed her heart in ways she couldn't quite explain. "Good luck."

Spica threw up the hood of the cloak, hiding her vivid red hair and all but disappearing into the shadows. She slipped through the door, using her assassin's skills to melt into the shadows and slink along the corridor. She observed the two guards at the inner door. Neither of them were Granato knights, but Fell. One was a monk, with little to no armor to speak of. The other was a summoner, clutching his staff tightly. Neither of them were particularly high level, which made Spica wonder.

She didn't dwell on it long, sending out a pair of needles dipped in sleeping potion in their direction. The two immediately slumped to the ground, needles sticking out of their necks. Spica hand slipped down to one of her daggers, the highest level one she had – the one she and the others found in the Gates of Death dungeon. She quickly slit the guards throats, watching as they shattered like brilliantly colored glass. They'd respawn in the cathedral in a few minutes, Spica knew, which meant she and the others had to move quickly.

She whistled for the others, who came running down the corridor.

"We've got maybe five minutes before they respawn at the cathedral and warn everyone," Spica warned them. "We need to move fast."

Makoto nodded. "The cathedral is just a few blocks north of here. C'mon."

They took the briefest of moments to make sure there were no nearby guards before bolting from the door. Makoto led them north, sticking to back allies as well as she could to keep them moving quickly, but undetected.

The cathedral stood at the far end of an empty square, its tall, white stone bell tower could be seen from miles around. There was a single, large double door made of dark wood and several stain glass windows lined the sides of the building.

"What do we do now?" Einmora's magician asked in a hushed whisper.

“You, druid,” Ren snapped over her shoulder. “Grow me some vines all over the building or something. Cover every door and window.”

The druid nodded, raising his oaken staff to cast his spell. Just as ordered, roots or branches or some other woody growth erupted from the ground around the cathedral, blocking every conceivable exit. The woody branches converged atop the cathedral, covering the roof with brilliant green-blue leaves. It looked as if the Wilds had taken back the city.

“How long will that last?” Silver asked.

“As long as my mana does,” the druid said confidently. “I’ll have to renew the spell once every hour or so, but it’s a fairly low level spell and doesn’t take up much mana. The issue will be dealing with the folks on the outside trying to stop us.”

Ren nodded, stepping out into the empty square. Confused, the others followed her. She strode across the open space, shoulders thrown back and royal armor gleaming in the moonlight. She looked like the warrior queen she’d always hoped she could be.

“Surround the building,” she ordered. “Climb up high into the tree if you can. We will hold this position until Alfre and the others get here. No one gets in, no one gets out. We don’t quit until we die, is that understood?”

Silver stared in awe. He’d known Ren for so long, since even before he’d started playing Wonderland. He’d never seen her take charge so thoroughly before, never seen her so righteously angry and determined. In that moment, she truly was a queen.

He grinned wildly sharing a look with the others in the squad. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

The others grinned at his words, and echoed them with vigor that echoed in the abandoned square.

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

Chapter Sixteen

Alfre woke just before dawn. Her sleep had been restless, even with Beira's warmth at her side. There was so much riding on what happened next. They'd received word in the middle of the night that Ren and the others had successfully taken the Cathedral. They'd already successfully fought off one patrol of guards. Ren insisted they could fight off as many as needed.

Alfre hoped it wouldn't come to that.

She stood atop Sandfur's Den, watching as the camp came to life, the smell of Wally's breakfast rousing those still sleeping. They would march just as the sun finished rising over the horizon. They needed to prepare.

"Are you nervous?" Alfre did not turn at the sound of Elias' voice.

"If I wasn't, you'd call me crazy," Alfre said, her voice refusing to give away just how terrified she actually was.

"You're right," Elias agreed, coming to stand beside her. "I definitely would." There was a pause, and then he asked, "You are nervous then?"

"Of course I am," Alfre snapped. "I'm about to lead a literal army into literal war – without one of my best friends by my side."

"Would you be less nervous if Spica was here?" Elias asked.

Alfre shot him a wry smile. "Wouldn't you?"

Elias gave a short huff of a laugh. "Yes, I suppose I would. But we'll see her soon enough."

"If none of us die before then," Alfre muttered, her hands clenching behind her back.

"We won't die," Elias assured her vehemently. "We've got too much at stake. Besides, you've got the gods on your side."

"Well, three out of four isn't bad, I suppose," Alfre joked.

"Whatever blessing Orli has given the Granato will be nothing compared to the three of them," Elias said, and Alfre could almost believe him.

"Commander," the two turned to see one of Alessio's soldiers coming up the dune. "It's almost time. His Highness has requested your presence. Yours as well, Lieutenant Commander."

Alfre nodded, jumping down from the top of the dune, landing in the soft sand below. Elias rolled his eyes at and followed suit. They entered the cave together, finding Alessio and the other leaders gathered around a map of the City of Heart.

“Queen Ren has informed me of the side gate they used to enter the third district,” Alessio said, marking the spot with a bishop piece. “Should the enemy bunker down for a siege, I would suggest sending a few platoons through this side gate and using them to distract the Granato soldiers so that the rest of the army can more easily break down the main gate. Or, they can open the main gate themselves, which ever option ends up being the best for the situation.”

“That’s assuming they will bunker down for a siege,” Hadi said. “The Granato Army is not built for fighting off sieges. They are almost entirely knights, there are very few range fighters that can pick off attackers from a distance. And they have very few magic users, only clerics for healing. Now, those clerics are very high level, which makes fighting them a pain, but not impossible.”

“That’s good to know,” Alfre said, pleased. “If we can kill off the cleric first, we’ll have a better time at it.”

“Yes, that seems to be the case,” Alessio agreed. “Queen Ren says the outer four districts are in ruins. The outer three walls are completely gone. The fourth wall is almost as bad. There are plenty of places for assassins and hunters to hide and pick off soldiers while the rest of your forces deal with their army head on.”

“The main goal should be to get into the third district and relieve Ren and the others,” Ran added. “Once we’re there, hopefully we’ll be reinforced by the Fell still there. Hopefully Ren’s been able to get through to some of them.”

“We’ll just have to see,” Alfre said, not wanting to say anything that would give anyone false hope. There were only about three hundred Fell they would be fighting, yes, but the Granato Empire was large and their army reflected that.

The sound of footsteps caught their attention, and they turned to see Wally and a handful of lower leveled clerics coming in with plates of food.

“No use going into battle on an empty stomach,” he said with a forced smile. “You’ll need all the energy you can get.”

Alfre smiled at him as she took her plate. “Thank you, Wally.”

He nodded, hesitating a moment before pressing a gentle kiss to the top of her head. “Stay safe...please.”

Alfre’s smile turned sad. “I’m going into war, Wally.”

He nodded, lips pressed into a thin line of worry. “Then...came back alive.”

Alfre reached out to squeeze his hand. “I’ll do my best.”

His brown eyes rose to meet Abital and Canus’ gaze. “You protect her. She’s the best thing we’ve ever had.”

Canus barked out a harsh laugh. “You don’t have to tell us that, boy. We know.”

Abital rolled his eyes. “I’m fairly certain Alfre would like to tell us that she’s perfectly capable of taking care of herself...”

“I am,” she grumbled around a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

“But we will do what we can,” Abital promised.

“What are we?” Hunter groused, “Chopped liver?”

“We will do what we can to protect everyone,” Abital amended. “Is that better?”

Hunter muttered something unintelligible under his breath.

“It’ll do,” Ran assured them with a grin, looking very much like his sister in that moment.

They ate quickly, and moved on to preparing their steeds. Summoners called forth all manner of beasts of burden, be they horses, or elk, or even large, ostrich like birds supposedly native to the more desert-like regions of Ahmar. Alfre, unlike the others, settled herself across Beira’s back. She’d only done this once before, to try and prove that she could not actually ride her direwolf companion. She’d been thoroughly embarrassed to find out she could indeed ride Beira, and could do so rather comfortably. Today, however, the distinct steed made it easy for people to recognize that she was the one to look to.

“They’ll want a speech,” Atticus said, eyeing the army as the army watched and waited.

“This isn’t a movie,” Alfre argued.

“No, but they’ll want one anyway.”

Alfre sighed. She gazed at the army that had gathered before her. Gathering her thoughts, she spoke, her voice carrying in the open air. “Thank you. Thank you for being here. Thank you for being willing to fight for what’s right. Thank you for being willing to stand up for your fellow players even though you might not think it’s needed. Thank you for putting your faith in me, I’ll try to make it so it wasn’t wasted. This won’t be easy, war never is. This isn’t a quest. This isn’t a game. It hasn’t been for months. This is life, and I thank you for being willing to put yours on the line to help others. Now, who’s ready to kick some ass?!”

The army cheered uproariously, waving their weapons in the air and pounding their armor in some strange mockery of applause.

Alfre grinned, wild and manic and full of barely hidden fear. “Let’s fucking go, then!” She turned Beira towards the city and spurred her on, the direwolf bolting off into the plains. She could hear the pounding of hoof beats behind her.

They were going to war.

Chapter Seventeen

There were times when Ren wished she'd picked a class with a bit of range to it. As a monk, she basically had two options: punch something or kick something. True, she had her monk abilities, but those still required her to get up in someone's face to hurt them.

Which, in the end, was why she was stuck down in the middle of the square, facing down a dozen Granato knights who all wanted to cut her down and get to the cathedral.

But she wasn't about to let that happen.

The knights rushed her, lances out and dangerously sharp. Ren smirked. Like they were going to be able to hurt her with those. Three knights fell before they could reach her; necks pierced with arrows and poisoned needles. Another was taken down by a water elemental pulled from some unknown plane of existence by the summoner.

Ren charged the rest, fists clenched and ready to strike, her royal armor light as a feather against her skin. She slammed mithril covered knuckles into a knight's nose, sending him prone before turning and sweeping the legs out from another. She gathered her mana in her hands, sending out two energy strikes with quick jabbing motions. She ducked out of the way of a lance, using the opportunity to uppercut the knight in the jaw. One knight was smart enough to abandon his lance and charge at her with his short sword. His armor, however, made him far too slow to get any good hits on Ren. A nick to her cheek, a strike to her abdomen that was completely absorbed by her armor, the man grew more frustrated by the second.

"How the actual hell did you chumps manage to ravage this city so thoroughly?" Ren mocked. "You guys suck."

"They're like ants, Ren," June called down from the cathedral roof, sniping the knight Ren was engaging with an arrow. "They may be weak, but if they have superior numbers that often doesn't matter. They just keep throwing bodies at the problem until it goes away."

"Plus, we haven't faced any of their pet Fell," Silver reminded her. "Those are a much bigger problem."

Ren took note of Spica uncomfortable frown at that. "Spica? Were those two guards Fell?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," she answered, flinging a dagger at a knight. "They were only level thirty, hardly what I would call a problem."

"Gotcha," Ren acknowledged, sending a knight flying with a well placed jump kick. "Good to know."

The sun was rising high over the city, by this point. Citizens, Fell and Wonderlander alike, peeked through their windows and gathered on balconies to watch the skirmish. Wonderlanders murmured amongst themselves while Fell cheered from the safety of their balconies, urging Ren and her squad on. Ren could even feel the warm tingling of a low-level healing spell that she was fairly certain had come from a young cleric from one of the lower balconies.

“Citizens of Heart!” Ren shouted to the crowd even as she continued to fight. “This is your city! This is your home! These bastards have taken it from you. They’ve forced you to hide away while they tear down your walls and burn your city to the ground. But don’t you worry. The Fell of Spade, Diamond, and Clover are with you! We’re going to fight to get your city back. We’re going to drive out these bastards and show them what happens when you mess with the players! My only question is, are you going to fight with us?”

“Your Majesty, watch out!”

Ren dropped into a crouch, a blade that surely would have taken off her arm instead skimming across the top of her shoulder. Ren hissed at the pain, feeling the wet, sluggish warmth of blood spilling over her shoulder. She rolled away, clutching at her wound. ‘That’s what you get for not paying attention,’ she scolded herself.

All of a sudden, the small, high voice of a child rang out over the din. “Leave her alone, you big bully!”

With a crack, a thunderbolt cascaded down from one of the Fell balconies, striking the knight that’d just injured Ren and turning him into smoke. Ren turned to look up, catching the gaze of the same little cleric she swore had healed her earlier, along with the older sorcerer that clutched at her shoulder protectively. The sorcerer smiled down at her, nodding. The little cleric girl raised her staff, and Ren could feel the healing magic pool in her shoulder.

Ren grinned, wild and triumphant, at the two of them. She grinned even wider when their actions seemed to spur on the other Fell, and even some of the Wonderlanders, gathered to watch. Hunters notched their arrows. Magicians rained fireballs upon the knights. Clerics and other healers nursed the wounds of Ren and her fighters. Those without range shouted down encouragements and threw whatever trash they had on hand down at the knights.

In the distance, there was an explosion and suddenly everyone went silent. Ren’s head snapped in the direction of the noise, a battle cry carrying into the eerie silence.

“Bide and Fecht! Bide and Fecht! *An Gòrdonach!*”

Chapter Eighteen

Alfre gripped Beira's fur as they neared the city. There was no way whoever patrolled the top of the wall, if there was anyone, hadn't seen them coming. There was no way anyone who patrolled the abandoned districts hadn't heard the thundering of their steeds. They had to strike hard and they had to strike fast if they were going to get into the third district to break the army and relieve Ren and the others.

She turned to Ran, catching his attention. "I need the gunners to all fire on the gate at the same time. We need to knock it down. We need into the third district."

Ran nodded, snapping his reigns and steering his elk back into the crowd to gather the gunners. But first, they had to make it through the stragglers in the outer districts.

They'd already gathered, standing together in an attempt to break their advance. Alfre watched as several Fell abandoned their steeds, leaping over the line of shields to attack them from behind. Druids summoned roots and vines to capture the enemy forces and bind them or throw them around like ragdolls. Assassins slipped into the shadows only to reappear on the other side of the wall of knights and bring them down with a well-aimed dagger. Magician buffed and bards debuffed. Knights and samurai clashed head on with the enemy. Alfre caught the briefest glimpse of Canus in wolf form tearing out someone's throat.

"Alfre!" Ran rode up to her, a contingent of some thirty gunners just behind him. "We're ready."

Alfre nodded, urging Beira onwards towards the gate. Those not already engaged with the Granato knights followed behind her. Hunters fired upon the people patrolling the top of the wall, keeping them distracted as the gunners lined up to take their shot.

"Ready!" Alfre shouted. "Fire!"

The sound was deafening – cracking, roaring, ringing in Alfre's ears. Smoke billowed from the gate, and as it cleared, Alfre could see that they'd blown a giant, gaping opening in the wall.

Silence hung in the air as everyone waited to see what would happen next. In that silence, Alfre drew her rapier with a shaking hand, holding it aloft above her head, and shouted a battle cry in the manner of her ancestors.

"Bide and Fecht! Bide and Fecht! *An Gàrdonach!*"

Beira charged ahead, howling. A cacophonous roar sounded from the rest of the Fell as they rushed in after her. The city streets swarmed with Granato knights, making it almost impossible to advance. Or, it would have, if it weren't for the barrage of area of effect spells that fell upon the knights from the staves of magicians and sorcerers and druids.

Alfre could see hunters and assassins climbing to the top of buildings, raining arrows and daggers and all other manner of throwing weapons down on the Granato soldiers. Alfre strained her eyes to find any Fell among the soldiers, but she'd yet to see any.

She broke through the wall of knights with a flurry of ice spears, Beira bounding up the street towards the Cathedral tower in the distance – and the massive tree that covered it. Canus loped along beside her, Elias on the other side atop his elk. She could feel Abital's presence in her shadow, a strange weight to it that felt surprisingly comforting.

They burst into the square, and Alfre finally found the Fell she had been looking for. Ren was engaged in hand to hand combat with another monk – a hulking man with wild hair and what looked like a bear skin draped around his shoulders. Silver dodged and weaved around the spells of a sorcerer. Spica rained needles down upon an enemy cleric, obviously frustrated by the lack of effect her poisons had on the so-called holy woman. There was another dozen enemy Fell in the square. A near feral looking assassin chased June all through the branches of the druid tree. Makoto was fighting off three other samurai all on her own.

“Enough!” Alfre shouted; her exclamation punctuated by a sudden burst of arctic wind.

She leapt off of Beira and charged into the square on her own, her footsteps leaving swirling, flowery patters of frost behind. She thrust her rapier out towards the cleric Spica was fighting, the blade elongated by a thin spear of frost. The cleric turned to stop her, but Alfre had always been far too fast. The ice pierced the cleric's chest, spreading frost over her torso before the woman shattered like all defeated Fell do.

Spica jumped down from the low hanging branched shed been perched upon, a smile on her face for the first time in days. “It's good to see you, Alfre.”

Alfre met her smile in kind. “You, too.”

The assassin turned to the rest of the fighting, her smile morphing into a confident smirk. “Shall we take care of the rest?”

Alfre flicked her blade through the air, reveling in the sound it made. “Of course.”

Abital chose this time to emerge from her shadow, covering the ground in thick, swirling, black smoke, his form much larger than usual. When he spoke, his voice boomed like thunder. “Be warned, cruel ones. You face Alfre, Commander of the Fell Army, Guild Master of the Alliance of Frozen Stars, The Winter Blade, Favored One of the Wilds, She Whom the Great Druid has Blessed, and Death's Chosen Champion. In her, you face your doom.”

The three samurai Makoto had been facing stumbled back, scrambling away from Abital's giant form. Ren's opponent paused to stare in awe, giving Ren the opportunity to use some monk ability Alfre didn't recognize to shatter him.

The hunter that'd been chasing June laughed maniacally. “I don't care who you are. You're just another animal waiting for me to hunt you down and skin you.”

He jumped from the tree, rolling through the landing and rushing for Alfre, dagger at the ready. Alfre took a single step forward, ice erupting from the ground and trapping the hunter. His eyes went wide as Alfre continued to stride forward, freezing rapier blade misting at her side.

“Woah, hold on, man,” the hunter shouted. “It was just a joke. It’s just roleplay, you know? I was just having fun. Don’t kill me, man! C’mon!”

“You think it’s fun to hurt people?” Alfre demanded, her blood boiling even as the air around her froze. “You think it’s fun to drive them from their homes? You think it’s fun to terrorize people?”

“It was just a quest, man,” the hunter insisted. “They got out fine, yeah? You took them in. They were fine!”

“No! They were not fine!” Alfre roared. “They were frightened, and worried, and heartbroken that their fellow players had turned against them! They’d lost everything they’d worked for. You destroyed your own city! For what? For money? For a quest to put in your log? Does human life mean so little to you?”

“It’s just a game, man!”

Alfre lashed out, her rapier leaving a long, thin cut along the hunter’s cheek. “No! This stopped being a game the moment we all got dragged here. It hasn’t been a game in months. It’s real life now. And even if it was a game, you still have a responsibility to treat every person with dignity and respect. If you don’t, you lose your right to be treated like anything other than the absolute wanker you are. Suffer the consequences of your actions.”

The hunter screamed as Alfre’s blade pierced his chest, shattering into a million iridescent pieces.

Alfre whirled on the other enemy Fell in the square, eyes glowing an eerie pale blue. “Anyone else?”

The three samurai Makoto had been dueling ran off, yelping in fear. The others seemed to hesitate, unsure of whether to stay and fight or run off like their comrades to regroup. The moment Canus morphed back into his human form, however, they realized just how screwed they were. No way they were going to take on two gods at once. They scrambled out of the plaza, turning tail like the cowards they were.

Cheers erupted from the balconies and windows around them, even the Wonderlanders joined in the celebration. Alfre raised a hand in acknowledgement, too embarrassed at the praise to do much else. She turned to her fighters, shouting to be heard over the cheers.

“Clear them out of the city,” Alfre ordered. “Then we’ll tend to our wounded and figure out if anyone died and got sent back to their home city.”

Those present took off to inform the rest of the forces of Alfre’s orders. Ren and Spica stayed behind, along with Ran, Silver, Makoto, and Elias.

“Where is Hadi?” Makoto asked.

Alfre had to shrug. “In the city somewhere. I lost him in the streets, I’m sorry.”

Makoto shook her head. “It’s fine. I’m sure I’ll find him later.”

Alfre turned to the cathedral, eyeing in appreciatively. “Will it hold?”

"It should," the druid said. "And it's not like they can teleport out or anything. Abilities don't work in the cathedrals."

Alfre nodded. "Thank you. I'm afraid I don't know your name. You're one of Hunter's, right?"

The druid nodded. "My username was something stupid like 'asskicker420.' Just call me Henry."

"Henry," Alfre repeated with a smile. "An old schoolmate of mine was named Henry. He was a good lad, even if he was losing all his brain cells to rugby."

Henry shrugged sheepishly. "I'm just glad to help. You know, to make up for the shit our guild pulled in the beginning."

Alfre reached out and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You're doing more than enough."

"Excuse me?" the group turned at the sound of a tiny voice to see the young cleric who'd helped Ren before standing there, clutching at her staff. Her sorcerer guardian was just behind her.

Ren stepped forward, kneeling to be eye level with the young cleric. "Hi, there. You're the one who helped me earlier, aren't you? Thanks for that, you really saved my butt."

"U-um," the girl stuttered, seemingly unable to meet Ren's gaze. "Thank you for coming to fight for us. I-I was wondering if anyone else needed healing?"

"You're very welcome," Ren said gently. "I don't need any more healing, but the others might. My name is Ren. What's yours?"

"Olivia," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "My big sister says you're wearing the royal armor. Does that mean you're a princess?"

The sorcerer behind her chuckled a little. "Sorry, she really likes princesses."

"I do, too," Ren assured. "My favorite is Mulan. Who's yours?"

Olivia beamed. "Merida! And I like Rapunzel, too! I wanted to heal people like she does! So Tori said I should be a cleric."

Her sister, Tori, scratched at her neck in embarrassment.

"That's great!" Ren said. "But I'm not a princess. I'm a queen."

Olivia gasped in awe, and whispered, "That's even better than a princess!"

"Heck yeah, it is!" Ren shouted, grabbing the little girl about the waist and twirling her around. "But it's not nearly as cool as being Commander. Right, Alfre?"

Alfre laughed, feeling her cheeks heat up as Olivia turned to stare at her. "Nah, being queen is way better."

"Just shut up and let the little girl idolize you," Ren teased.

Oliva approached her shyly. "Um, do you need healing?"

"Mmm..." Alfre made a show of thinking about it, patting herself on the arms and torso as if to check for wounds. "No, I don't think so. But do you think you could check Beira for me? I think she might have gotten a cut or two."

"Beira?" she echoed.

Alfre pulled out her direwolf pipe, despite the fact that Beira was just on the far side of the plaza, and blew. Beira bounded over, nearly knocking Alfre over with how excited she was. "This is Beira. Canus gave her to me. Don't let her size fool you, she's very gentle."

Oliva held out her hand for Beira to sniff, apparently having been taught how to deal with strange dogs. Beira sniffed her hand briefly before plopping her head down in it, expecting scratches. Oliva giggled, scratching at the underside of Beira's chin. She held out her staff, casting a low-level healing spell, just enough to top off the direwolf's hit points.

"She's awful young to be playing this game," Ren whispered to Tori. True, she'd met young players before – June's guild was full of teenagers – but most of them were at least fifteen.

The sorcerer sighed, leaning on her staff as she watched her younger sister pet at the direwolf that was at least twice her size. "She saw how much fun I was having with it and wanted to join in. My folks thought it'd be alright as long as I partied with her and kept her out of trouble. None of us could have expected this to happen."

"There are lots of young players on Ahmar," Makoto said, stepping closer. "It was considered a good starting continent for younger kids. Most of the players that ran from the Granato were younger than eighteen. I know Hadi's only seventeen, himself, and most of his guild are young teenagers."

"That's insane," Ren muttered. "They were attacking *kids!*"

Tori nodded. "It was one of the really high level raiding guilds, The White Knights, or something like that. They were the ones who teamed up with Granato. Most of the kids had no chance against them. Pretty sure some of them had been hackers before the Incident."

Ren turned her gaze back on Alfre, who was watching Oliva's interactions with Beira closely. "Alfre's gonna be pissed when she finds out."

"Like she's not already?" Makoto asked sarcastically.

"Okay, more pissed," Ren corrected.

"Should we tell her now?"

Ren shook her head. "We'll do it after we've cleared out the city. Speaking of which... Oi! Alfre! Isn't it about time we get to kicking more Granato butt?"

Alfre's content smile fell. "Aye, you're probably right. Beira, let's go." She climbed aboard her direwolf companion once more, startling Olivia. "C'mon everyone, there's more work to be done."

Chapter Nineteen

It took three days to clear out the rest of the Granato Empire's forces. They'd ended up having to do it in shifts, so that each person got significant rest. Alfre had to be dragged back to the cathedral square several times at the end of her shift, or she would push herself too hard. Ren seemed to be the same way, as she'd been spotted many-a-time being dragged back to base by the collar of her shirt by Silver.

"You'll be no use to anyone if you've collapse from exhaustion," Abital chided Alfre on the third day just as they were pushing the last of Granato's forces out of the city.

"Come on, we're almost done!" Alfre complained, shifting to get more comfortable in her position atop of Abital's shoulder, seeing as the god had decided to toss her over his shoulder like a bag of rice. "It'll only take another hour at the most. Let me finish what I started."

"You'll finish what you started when you kill the Emperor," Abital reminded her. "And that won't be for several more days now. Calm down. Rest. Get your mana back. You've run yourself ragged these past few days. I'm sure you don't want Wally seeing you like this. You know how he worries."

"Like a mother hen," Alfre muttered, knowing very well how much of a worrywart Wally was. She sighed. "Fine. But someone needs to let Alessio know it's time to move into the city."

"He's already been informed," he assured her. "Elias is on top of things."

"If Ren were here, she'd say something like, 'You mean how Alfre's on top of you?' or something to that effect," Alfre said mildly.

"Hmm, she probably would," Abital agreed. "But that isn't going to make me put you down."

"Dammit."

"I know you'll just take off if I do," he said. "And I'm not going to take that chance."

Alfre pouted. "Can't blame a lass for trying."

"I suppose not."

He did eventually put her down, once they were back in the square, surrounded by their temporary camp and about two dozen people who could easily stop Alfre if she tried to make a break for it.

"I hate you," she grumbled, crossing her arms over her chest.

Abital smirked a little, looking all the world like he learned it from Spica. "That is not what you told Orli."

"Changed my mind."

Abital leaned down to place a kiss to Alfre's temple. "Are you sure?"

She flushed a pale pink, having not expected the open and obvious affection. “Sh-shut up!”

Abital chuckled deep in his throat. “Keep that up, and I’ll have to steal you away to the underworld so I won’t have to share with the others.”

“The hell you will,” Canus interrupted, trotting up to the pair of them. “Welcome back, snowbird, I see you had to be dragged back again.”

“I was only going to be out there for another hour,” Alfre insisted. “We’re almost done!”

“We are done, actually,” Canus corrected. “Just got word from the front lines. The druids and clerics are setting up barriers as we speak. You’ve done good, snowbird. The first part is over.”

Some of the tension left Alfre’s body. They were right, the first part – the difficult part, she hoped – was done. They’d liberated the city...for now at least. There was no guarantee that Granato wouldn’t come back and try this all over again. The best she could really hope for would be that they couldn’t come back with the same Fell and destroy the city all over again. Or, if they did, the citizens would be better equipped to fight back. Her best bet would be to drive home the idea that fighting Fell was more trouble than it was worth. She doubted she could change the empire’s feeling towards players, especially not if she was going to be killing their emperor, but she could convince them that fighting wasn’t worth it.

“You’re thinking too hard about something,” Canus said. “I can tell.”

“I’m just...wondering if this is enough,” Alfre admitted. “What if Granato comes back? Will what we’ve done be enough to convince them that fighting us isn’t worth it? Or that it was wrong? Who’s to say they won’t sweep right back in once we leave and take over once more?”

Abital and Canus shared a concerned look. There really wasn’t anything they could say to that. They couldn’t promise her that what they were doing was enough. They couldn’t reassure her that Granato wouldn’t come back and ruin everything they were working for.

“All we can do is our best,” Abital said gently. “And the people of Heart will do the same.”

Alfre nodded, but was obviously unsatisfied with that answer. She realized that no answer would have satisfied her, not even if Abital had just said what she wanted to hear: that everything would be fine. There was no way to promise that.

“What do we do now?” Canus asked suddenly, desperate to move Alfre’s thoughts from the dark path they were going down.

“We’ll need to repair the gate we destroyed, first off,” Alfre said, returning to her Commander mindset. “And then we need to wait for Alessio and the others to arrive so we can regroup. I doubt the Granato will be gone for long. They won’t give up the city that easily. But with our ranged fighters, we have the advantage. We’ll be more easily able to defend the city. I’ll also need to gather a squad to go with me to Rubino. If we’re going to end this war, we have to get to the heart of it, pun not intended.”

“I’m going to pretend it was, anyway,” Canus said with a grin.

They wandered further into the square, picking up listeners as Alfre continued to ramble on about what they needed to do – Ren, Elias, Spica, and Hadi wandering closer.

“We need to locate what farmable land we have here, and get some food growing,” Alfre continued. “That shouldn’t be terribly hard with our druids, but we need to get the city prepared for a long siege. Our greatest enemies in that case aren’t the soldiers outside our door, but hunger and thirst. What’s the water supply like around here?”

“Mostly wells, Commander,” Hadi said. “The city was built on top of a very large, very deep reservoir. Too deep for the Granato to dig to and poison, probably.”

“Even if they did,” Oliva said, appearing at Hadi’s side. “We clerics can purify it!”

“Yes, and that will be a very important skill during the siege,” Alfre agreed. “You’ll need to check the water every few hours, just in case.”

Olivia nodded seriously. “I’ll go tell the other clerics!” She rushed off, grabbing her sister on the way.

Alfre watched her go, fondness and sorrow warring in her eyes. “I feel bad, dragging the wee ones into this.”

“Olivia would have jumped in no matter what,” Hadi said. “She’s a brave girl, and almost as stubborn as you are. It’s good that she has found a way to get involved. It brings the people hope.”

“Did you know her, before the Granato showed up?” Elias asked from Alfre’s other side.

“A little,” Hadi admitted. “She and her sister were well known in the city. She’s the youngest one here, you know. Many of us felt sort of responsible for her. We all offered her and Tori places in our guilds. I know she didn’t take up my offer, but I was never sure about the others until we evacuated from the city. We were all terrified for her when we realized she and her sister hadn’t come with us. I’m glad to see she’s safe.”

Alfre nodded. “Still, I can’t imagine what this whole thing must have been like for her.”

“She may be the youngest, but Heart is full of kids,” Ren said. “Tori mentioned that Ahmar was seen as a good starting place for younger players, so a good chunk of the city’s population was kids.”

Alfre froze in place, hands clenching into fists by her side. “You’re joking.”

Hadi shook his head. “Unfortunately, she’s telling the truth. Most of my guild members are around fifteen. And that’s not terribly unusual in Heart.”

“Those bastards...were attacking kids?!” Alfre hissed. “Those stupid wankers were hurting kids...for fun?! What the actual hell?!”

“Alfre. Alfre!” Spica set a hand down on the girl’s shaking shoulder. “I know you’re angry. Believe me, I am too. But now is not the time to do anything rash. You need to focus. We’re going to make them pay, I promise you, but you need to save that anger for when you’re fighting the emperor. Okay?”

No. Not okay. Alfre wanted to scream. Wanted to hurt something. Wanted to rip out the foundations of the Granato Empire and watch it burn to the ground. She was starting to regret not choosing the summer blade class instead. Couldn't burn an empire to the ground if you didn't have fire magic.

"Alfre..." Spica repeated her name, concern more obvious in her voice.

Alfre inhaled deeply, exhaling frost and frigid air. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

"No, you're not." Canus said bluntly, tail twitching worriedly.

Alfre sighed harder. "You're right. I'm not fine. But I'm going to have to be. I can't lead an army if I'm blinded by anger...and I hope none of you would let me." She looked to Ren, to Hadi, to Abital and Canus, to Spica, and finally to Elias.

"Never," Elias promised her.

"Good," Alfre said. "Now, there's still more to do. I wasn't kidding about that farmland. Nor about the gate. We need that repaired as soon as possible. We'll also need better places for folks to sleep than in tents in the abandoned districts."

"I'll see who has rooms to spare," Hadi volunteered, already breaking off from the group.

"I'll go round up some druid and find some farmable land," Elias said, waiting for a nod from Alfre before running off.

"Ren and I will round up some craftsmen and get them started on the door," Spica offered with a nod from Ren.

"Thank you," Alfre said, probably only barely heard as they rushed off to start their quest. Once again, Alfre was left with Abital and Canus.

"And you," Canus chided, "still need rest. Come on, we know you have a cot around here somewhere."

Alfre frowned. "But the cot is so uncomfortable. There's more than one reason I've been trying to avoid resting."

"Suck it up, buttercup," Canus growled playfully. "It's as good as it's going to get until Hadi comes back with news about better rooms. C'mon."

Alfre yelped as Canus scooped her up and tossed her over his shoulder, much like how Abital had done earlier. Alfre squirmed, but the two gods had learned. It was much harder for her to escape if they carried her like a sack of potatoes.

"I hate you both," she grumbled. Beira wuffed with laughter. Alfre glared at her direwolf. "Don't you start. You're on thin ice as well, you mangy mutt."

Beira rolled her eyes, ultimately deciding to ignore her little master's threats. She never really meant them anyway.

Chapter Twenty

Hadi came back about three hours later with news that several guilds were more than happy to allow the army to rest in their spare rooms. He'd also found his own guildhall, which had luckily been mostly untouched. The commanding officers could set up shop there, with him and his guild mates. Alfre was more than happy to abandon her cot for a softer bed.

Einmora also arrived with news from Alessio and the others. They were moving out, though it was rather slow going for them. They had no summoners to speak of, and therefore needed to travel on foot. It'd take them twice as long to reach the city as it had the others. It would be a full two days before they reached the walls.

"That's disappointing," Elias said. "But not surprising. Hopefully they'll make it back safe and sound."

"Perhaps we could send out a small contingent to meet them?" Ran suggested. "Make sure they have as much protection as they need. We can't be certain that all the Granato forces ran back to Rubino and didn't just camp out in the countryside."

"Ran has a good point," Alfre agreed. "Anyone willing to take a small force of twenty to thirty fighters out to find and escort them to the city?"

"I'll do it," Einmora offered. "Besides, I don't have a place to stay in the city anymore. My guild hall was in the fifth district."

Hadi frowned. "You know you're more than welcome to stay with me, Mora."

The dwarf shook her head. "Don't worry about me, boy. Worry about your own guild mates first. They're your priority. I've found my lot places to stay. I can find somewhere after the princeling gets here."

Alfre frowned at Einmora's reasoning but didn't argue. "Thank you, Einmora. I appreciate it."

Einmora laughed, a harsh, barking sound. "Of course, you do, Commander, your Wonderlander boy toy is among Alessio's lot."

Alfre blushed a furious pink. "Don't call him that! He's not a toy!"

Einmora's wicked grin softened. "Relax, snowball, I'm only joking. I know how much the guy means to you."

Alfre's blush only darkened. "Just go, you nasty old woman."

She laughed again. "Better a nasty old woman, than a young one in denial."

Alfre scowled after her as she marched out of the room. "She's a menace."

Hadi shrugged. "She's at that age where she doesn't really care to sensor herself anymore."

“How old is she?” Ran asked curiously. “Her hair is grey, but that’s not necessarily an indicator of anything around here.”

“I’m not sure,” Hadi admitted. “But she’s mentioned her grandchildren getting her into the game. They’re part of her guild, you know. Apparently they were meeting up with her for a minor raid when the Incident happened. They’re the whole reason she’s been fighting so hard.”

“I can understand that,” Alfre murmured. If her grandmother were here, that woman would take down Granato itself armed only with a frying pan and a pair of knitting needles.

Einmora returned with Alessio and company a day and a half later, having left with a couple of summoners to aide with transportation. There’d been no trouble, she said, seemed Granato had called back their soldiers after finding out what happened at Heart.

“That said, I can’t imagine they’d let this place go so easily,” Einmora said, grunting a little as she helped unload a horse. “They’re bound to be back, and soon.”

“I agree,” Alessio said. “We should send out scouts to see if they can find out where they’re amassing their army and how soon they’ll be ready to march on Heart.”

“Already done,” Alfre assured him. “We sent out scouts not long after Einmora left to get you. Spica and a few assassins located them just a few miles away, in an abandoned temple here.” She pointed to a black pawn already on their map, about halfway between Heart and the river that divided Fell territory from Granato lands.

“How many soldiers?” Alessio asked.

“About three thousand Wonderlanders and two hundred and fifteen Fell,” Spica informed him. “Which makes sense given the seventy Fell we’ve got in custody right now.”

“What did you lot end up doing with them, anyway?” Hadi asked.

Spica smirked. “Ren used Crystal Moon Kingdom funds to purchase the rights to a building in the fourth district that had yet to be destroyed and trapped them in there with admin commands. No one other than guild members are allowed to open the outside door, no abilities allowed, no pvp combat allowed. They can’t kill their captives, nor can they kill each other to escape. And even if they did, they’d just end up back in the cathedral, where they’d still be trapped. We’ve got Henry and a group of druids, bards, and clerics watching over the place. Oddly enough, they’ve not had to recast the spell in days.”

Canus grinned. “You can thank Koseret for that.”

Alfre blinked owlshly at the comment. “Really? How so?”

“Koseret is known as the Great Druid for a reason,” Canus explained. “She’s put her blessing on this campaign. She’s likely using her own magic to keep the tree from withering like it would normally.”

“Oh. Well, next time we see her, I’ll have to thank her,” Alfre said with a smile.

“Think nothing of it.”

Alfre and the others whirled on the new voice, finding Koseret standing in the doorway of Hadi’s guildhall, smiling serenely.

“I simply wished to help where I could,” she said, stepping forward to join the group. “I am not as much of a fighter as the others, but I can certainly keep a druid tree from withering and make land fertile.”

“That’s more than I could ever ask for,” Alfre told her. “Thank you.”

“If you wish to thank me, then perhaps you would be willing to consider an idea I have,” Koseret said, her smile turning into a pleased smirk.

“What sort of idea?” Alfre asked cautiously.

“A way of keeping this sort of thing from happening again,” the goddess explained. “And a way to keep us gods from forgetting that we are here for all the people of Wonderland.”

A single, snowy brow rose on Alfre’s face. “I’m listening.”

“There are four Fell cities and four gods of Wonderland,” Koseret reasoned. “Perhaps, if we were to dedicate each city to one of the gods, they would be more inclined to protect it. And if a city were to have the protection of a god, others would be less inclined to attack it, for fear of angering that god.”

“Do you think Orli would be willing to agree to such a thing?” Alessio asked. “She did not seem too fond of the Fell last time we met.”

“Orli only ever wants to be worshiped,” Abital stated, scowling. “If we told her a city was hers by divine right, she would care for that city as if it were her own child, if only to keep those within the city worshipping her.”

“And how delightfully ironic would it be, if she were to reside over the city of Heart?” Koseret added, giggling a little at her own cleverness.

“Ironic, definitely,” Alfre agreed. “Delightful, I’m not so sure about.”

“Oh, Orli is an absolute darling to her worshipers,” Canus assured her. “She’d give this city everything it could ever need, and more if she thought it would suit her.”

“Would it not make sense for Koseret to reside over Heart, though?” Hadi questioned. “You are already doing so much.”

“Yes, but that is not the point,” Koseret said. “The point is to change Orli’s attitude, since I’m sure I can’t change her mind. And like I said, I’m not a fighter. Should Granato attack Heart again, there’s not much I can do. No, it would be better for me to be Diamond’s guardian deity. It is a far more peaceful continent, with much more room for me to play around with.”

“And what about us?” Canus demanded. “Where does that leave us?”

“Clover is the perfect city for you, Canus,” Koseret assured. “It is surrounded by the wilds. Berdea is wilder than any other continent. And Abital’s dungeon is already on Siniy, it only makes sense for him to watch over Spade.”

“But Canus can’t watch over Clover if he’s with Alfre all the time, can he?” Ren argued.

Koseret smiled blithely. “You shouldn’t doubt the power of the gods, Your Majesty. We are far more powerful than you Fell like to give us credit for. Just because you fight us on a regular basis does not mean there is more to our power than you know.”

“Canus can see through his direwolves, can’t he?” Alfre guessed. “That’s how he knows when someone steps into the Wilds. His wolves are everywhere.”

Canus grinned roguishly. “Aye, and that’s only part of my power. Clover, Diamond, Heart, it doesn’t matter how far from snowbird my city is, I can watch over it and still remain at her side.”

There was a long silence as Alfre pondered the idea. The idea of using the gods the Wonderlanders feared and respected so much as a way of guarding the Fell from attack was a good idea, she had to admit. The Wonderlanders maybe a lot of things, but atheists they were not. If a city was given protection from a deity, there was no way a Wonderlander kingdom was going to just ignore that.

“We’ll try it,” Alfre agreed finally. “I have to admit, the irony is too good to ignore.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Before they could worry about Orli, however, they had to worry about the Granato. The gate was quickly rebuilt; players from every city working together to scrounge up enough wood to cover the hole Alfre's gunners had blown in it. Druids and those with the farmer subclass spent the next few days tirelessly working to bolster the city's food supply. They were all grateful for Koseret's help. Alfre was honestly surprised that the goddess hadn't left after revealing her intentions to the guild leaders, but she wasn't about to complain.

"You need to leave before the Granato army gets here," Alessio said plainly, some three days into their preparations. "They've finally amassed all their soldiers. They're going to be moving in soon. You need to decide who you're taking with you."

"I've already decided that," Alfre said. It wasn't like she had to give it a lot of thought. "Spica and Elias are coming with me, of course, I'm hoping Ren will lend me Ran and Izo as well. I'd like to ask Hadi to join us as well; having a cleric along would be a lifesaver. Abital and Canus will come as well. I don't even need to ask them, honestly. June and Lance are coming along too."

"Will that be enough, even with Abital and Canus? Eight Fell against the Granato Empire?" Alessio questioned, disbelief in his voice.

"It'll have to be," Alfre said solemnly. "The rest need to be here in case the gate doesn't hold. Besides, I trust that my friends will help me carry this through to the end. They're strong, Alessio."

"All Fell are strong," Alessio argued. "But are they strong enough?"

Alfre grinned at him, wild and confident. "Of course they are."

The prince shook his head. "You're all insane."

"If you didn't believe in us, you wouldn't have come along," she reminded him. "Trust me, we'll win the day in the end."

Alessio watched her for a moment, before asking, "And what will you do, in the end? When this is over?"

Alfre paused, thinking for a moment. "I think I want to go back and find that little cabin in the Wilds that gave me shelter my first night after the Incident. I'd like to fix it up and make a life there."

He blinked owlishly at the response. "That's all? No grand quests in mind, just to find contentment in a tiny, lonely cottage?"

Alfre simply smiled. "Isn't finding contentment in life a grand quest all its own?"

Alessio stared at her, taking in her words. "I suppose it is."

Chapter Twenty-Two

They left early in the morning, before the sun could peek over the horizon. Alfre, dressed once more in the Cloak of Night's Shadows, slipped through the side gate that Ren's infiltrators had used atop Beira. Behind her, atop their own steeds, came Spica, Elias, Ran, Izo, and Hadi. Abital settled in her shadow, his presence warm and heavy in the back of her mind. Canus trotted beside her in wolf form. They seemed like such a non-entity that they rode straight past the still sleeping Granato army, now camped just a mile outside of the city walls, without alerting the watchmen of their presence.

Alfre clutched at Beira's fur as they passed. There were fifteen Fell unaccounted for. Two hundred and fifteen slept with the main Granato fighting force. Seventy were trapped in the building Ren had commandeered to use as a makeshift jail. That had to mean that the remaining fifteen were still in Rubino with the Emperor. Those concerned her the most. Wonderlanders they could handle no problem. Fell...Fell were stronger than Wonderlanders to a fault. They had more abilities and more hit points and more weapons they could use. If the Emperor had kept back the fifteen strongest of the White Knights or whatever the hell the guild called itself, they might actually be in trouble.

Rubino was not a large city, not in the way the Fell cities were. It was compact, narrow houses clustered together along uniformly laid out streets. Towering walls kept the citizens in and invading armies out, especially with the gates closed as they were.

"Okay, this wall we can't just sneak through," Spica observed from where they perched atop a hill some distance away from the city itself.

Elias glanced at her, an almost out-of-place smirk on his lips. "Maybe you can't. But we magicians have a few tricks up our sleeves that might help in this situation."

Alfre looked blatantly eager at the idea. "Are you going to pull us out of your hat?"

Elias tipped his top hat at her. "I'm going to pull us out of my hat. As long as I have a visual on our destination, I can pull it off. I can land us on the top of the wall and then, once the spell has cooled down, I can plop us down in the city itself."

Spica shot Elias a proud smile. "I knew you had your uses, dear."

"Anything to impress you, starlight."

Canus rolled his eyes. "You two are disgusting."

"And you are a hypocrite," Elias retorted. He flipped his hat over his hand, the brim of it growing impossibly wide. "Hop in everyone. Best leave the steeds here, they won't be much use to us on top of a wall." Beira whined at him, and Elias quickly amended his statement. "Except you, Beira. You can always come with us."

Beira didn't bother waiting long after that to dive headfirst into the portal Elias' hat made, dragging Alfre along with her. It was a strange sensation, traveling hundreds of feet in a second. It made Alfre a little nauseous, but not enough to slow her down. She and Beira pressed themselves low against the top of the

wall, so as not to be seen by any patrols, be they atop the wall or below. Spica came through next, doing much the same the moment she was through. Hadi was next, followed by Canus, then Ran and Izo, and finally Elias.

“Everyone good?” He asked, replacing his hat. “We’ll have to wait a solid minute for the spell to come back. Unless someone has another way we can get down.”

Alfre rolled her eyes, hopping down from Beira. “Why have cool down time, when you can be cool and get down in no time.”

“Alfre that was awful, and I want you to never do it again,” Abital said flatly from her shadow.

Alfre laughed, already building an ice slide down the side of the wall. “Just get ready to go fast.”

The moment the slide was complete, she jumped on, sliding down at extraordinary speeds. She could hear the whoops and hollers of her friends as they came behind her.

“That’s the most fun I’ve had in a while,” Izo gasped as he skidded across the cobblestones at the bottom of the slide, only barely able to keep his balance.

“Don’t let Ran know, he might get jealous,” Spica teased.

“Jealous of what?” Ran asked, coming off the slide mere moments later.

Izo shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. Worry about the fact we were very loud just then, and the city doesn’t seem...noisy in the slightest.”

“That is concerning,” Hadi murmured. And he was right, the city, despite how crowded it seemed, was quiet. There were footsteps in the distance, but the loud chattering that seemed to emanate from cities was absent.

“They may not recognize what the noise meant, even if they did hear it,” Alfre said, melting her ice slide into vapor. She could only hope she was right.

There were few alleyways in Rubino, and those that existed were terribly narrow and dark. Alfre led her friends through one tiny backstreet to the next, desperate to keep her team unnoticed and safe until they reached the palace grounds. Much of the palace grounds had been made into something of a public park, it being the only real green space in the city other than tiny flower boxes and small rooftop gardens. They kept to the shadows, unnoticed thanks to Spica and Abital’s interference. There was a distressing lack of guards along the castles outer wall.

“This feels like a trap,” Ran whispered.

“It probably is,” Alfre agreed. “But we’ve come too far now. We need to at least make an attempt. If it goes well, then all the better.”

Elias teleported them inside the fence using his hat.

“We could have hopped the fence,” Hadi pointed out.

Alfre shot him an offended look. "Beira couldn't."

Hadi looked like he was trying very hard not to roll his eyes.

They crossed the open courtyard, each and every one of them feeling like eyes were on them. Alfre kept a tense hand on the hilt of her rapier. This was a trap. She was leading her friends into a trap. But she had to! Or the war between Granato and the Fell in the city of Heart might never end. She had to end it. She had to. For Hadi. For Einmora and Makoto. For the little ones who'd been forced to leave their homes. For the ones who'd been trapped there. For Olivia and Tori. For herself.

There were two Wonderlander guards at a small side door they found. Spica made quick work of the two of them with well-thrown needles. The party slipped through the door, finding themselves in a small kitchen. It was empty, save for the kitchen equipment. It looked like it was rarely used, a thin layer of dust covering the counter tops and the stove.

"What's this for, I wonder?" Elias whispered.

"Probably to cook in during the winter," Hadi replied. "Often times, in places as large as this, there will be multiple smaller kitchens alongside the main one. When it is cold, those who live and work in this wing will have their meals cooked here, so that they don't grow cold before they are brought to whoever's going to eat it."

"Seems like a terrible indulgence," Izo murmured.

"Doesn't matter how indulgent it is," Alfre hissed. She cracked open the door, peeking out into the hallway. No one was guarding the kitchen. But then again, who would think to guard a kitchen? "Let's go."

They stepped out into the hallway. They were in the belly of the beast now; there was no real way they were going to be able to sneak their way through this one. Alfre led them down the seemingly never-ending corridor, passed identical door after identical door.

"This doesn't feel right," Elias said. "There's no way this hallway should be this long."

"An illusion?" Spica speculated.

Elias nodded. "That's the only thing I can think of."

"Great," Ran grumbled. "How do we break it?"

Alfre drew her rapier. "Like this." She thrust the blade into the nearest door, shards of ice exploding out from the point in every direction. Her vision swam and warped, fighting against her. She stabbed again, and the illusion broke, shattering much like Wonderlanders did.

Standing before them was a small army of Fell, fourteen in all. Standing at the very front, the apparent leader of the band, was a dragonling gunner, bronze scales running up his neck to cover his jaw and cheekbones.

“Well, well,” he purred, “looks like Summer was right. They did send a bunch of rats to infest our kingdom.”

“*Your* kingdom?” Ran echoed incredulously. “This is the Granato capital, it belongs to the Wonderlanders.”

“*Did* belong to the Wonderlanders,” the dragonling corrected smugly. “Summer kicked the emperor’s ass about a week back. It’s ours now. And soon the whole continent will be ours. Just gotta take care of those upstart kids in Heart first.”

“So you did know they were kids,” Alfie snarled. “You knew about it, and you still attacked them! What kind of messed up, bullshit excuse do you have for that, huh?”

The dragonling shrugged. “No excuse, really. We just wanted to. Now that it’s not a game anymore, we don’t have to follow any of those stupid rules. We can take over the whole continent. And we should. We’re the White Knights! We were the first guild ever made on Ahmar. This place is ours by right. The rest of those wannabe losers can shove right off.”

“Hey, Kilrakas,” an elven sorcerer spoke up. “Shouldn’t we just kill these guys and be done with it? I don’t think Summer would be too happy if we accidentally let them go.”

“We’ll be fine,” the dragonling, Kilrakas, laughed. “There’s no way these losers can beat us. We’re the highest level players in Ahmar.”

“Are you now?” a strangely familiar voice asked mockingly. “And what level would that be?”

“Seventy-five,” Kilrakas proclaimed proudly.

A figure stepped out of the shadows; a recognizable elemental rifle held loosely at their side. Traveler lifted her weapon, pointing it right at the dragonling’s heart. “That’s nice.”

A burst of flame erupted from the end of the barrel, a bullet of glowing red crystal flying out and striking Kilrakas right dead center in his chest. The dragonling flew back, his resistance to fire the only thing that saved him.

Alfie stopped Kilrakas’ trip across the polished marble floor with her foot and a rapier through the throat. “Traveler! What are you doing here?”

“Well, you see, after I left the Crystal Moon Kingdom, I traveled around for a bit. You know, had to live up to my name,” Traveler explained blithely as fighting broke out between the two groups. “And I caught wind of what was going on here in Ahmar, rumors of another element blade rising in the ranks of the White Knights and ousting the previous guild master. Then the war broke loose, and I couldn’t just leave, you know. Had to do something about the whole thing. So, I’ve been playing spy for the last few months. I’ve learned so much. Like, did you know the leader these jokers have been half worshipping this whole time is only level forty-five? They started at the same time as you, Alfie. The reason they’re so strong is because the developers accidentally made the element blade class super over-powered. And since there’s no longer any developers to fix things, they stayed that way.”

“That explains why you’re so strong despite your level,” Elias commented, debuffing half the enemy party.

“Sod off, I’m level sixty,” Alfre shot back, bringing down a rain of icy needles.

“How is it that Alfre’s at such a high level compared to this other element blade?” Izo asked, wrapping the elven sorcerer in vines and slamming him back and forth between the ceiling and floor.

“Ahmar is considered the starting continent for a reason,” Ran explained, shooting down an oncoming knight with ease. “Most of the mobs here are weak as hell and don’t give much in the way of experience points. Siniy, by comparison, is a much more difficult continent and gives out experience to match. Alfre’s been on Siniy from the beginning and has reaped the benefits of the higher experience loads most of the mobs there carry.”

“Also, we’ve been going on mostly small party raids,” Spica added, stabbing a fellow assassin in the back. “You get a lot more experience if you’re raiding with two or three partners than you do if you go with ten.”

“Plus, she’s been fighting mobs, not fellow players,” Hadi said, smacking a dwarven hunter away with his staff. “You don’t get experience points in pvp combat unless it’s a sanctioned duel.”

“So, basically, whoever this Summer person is has been shooting themselves in the foot experience wise the whole time,” Canus surmised right before biting a knight’s throat out.

“Pretty much!” Traveler agreed breezily. “At least, last time I checked they were only level fifty. That was at the beginning of the war. If they’ve killed the Mad Emperor boss, they’re likely much higher now.”

“Oh, trust me,” a new voice cooed. “I’ve always been much higher.”

The soft click-clack sound of boots on marble echoed in the hallway as those remaining White Knights fell silent. Alfre gripped the hilt of her rapier with a trembling hand, the other reaching out and finding Beira’s fur. Out of the shadows of the dimly lit hallway came a woman dressed in black and gold. She stood far taller than Alfre, her heels only adding to her impressive stature. Her flaming golden-red hair fell like molten metal down her back. She held the hilt of a katana made of some unknowable black metal loosely in her hand. Her eyes were golden embers, staring Alfre and company down with nothing more than mild curiosity.

“You’ve only ever known my summer blade level, Hero,” the woman said, her voice smooth and unworried. “I’ve been playing the game far longer than you realize. I just reclassified right after the Incident. How could I not? The class shares my name.”

“So you’re Summer?” Alfre challenged. “You’re the one who torched down half the fourth district? You’re the one who sent children running, scared for their lives? For what? What’s your excuse? Do you think this is just a game, like your stupid followers?”

“Oh, no, this is definitely not a game,” Summer agreed. “A game doesn’t let you feel the heat of fire. A game doesn’t let you smell the burning wood. A game doesn’t let you feel the flesh of a man give under your blade. No, little girl, this is definitely not a game. This is real life.”

Alfre felt at a loss for words. This woman was perfectly aware of what she was doing, didn't bother to hide it behind a weak excuse like the others. And yet, she did it anyway. "Then why...?"

"Because I can," Summer replied with a shrug. "Because I have the power to shape the world as I choose. And I choose to create a world where the strong, the fast, the *better* are rewarded for being what they are. The rest can fuck off somewhere else."

"You sound like a bleedin' Nazi, you know that, right?" Alfre shouted, unable to fully grasp her opponent's motivation. How could someone actually think like this? Who on earth thought that this sort of thing was a good idea?

"I sound like a Nazi because I don't agree in coddling the weak?" Summer challenged. "That term is thrown around far too loosely nowadays. I'm just saying, in a world like this, it has to be survival of the fittest. And if you're not fit, then you don't deserve to take up space on my continent."

"It's not your continent!" Alfre argued. "You can't lay claim to a whole continent! It belongs to the Wonderlanders who were here before you. It belongs to the Fell who explore it and call it home. It belongs to everyone."

"Maybe it's not mine yet," Summer agreed. "But it will be soon enough. Granato Empire is the largest nation on the continent. If I can defeat it, then the other Wonderlander kingdoms will fall in due time. And once I have their armies on my side, the city of Heart will be a thing of the past."

"I don't get it," Elias admitted. "I thought the Granato wanted the Fell gone and put up a quest. Are you saying you were behind this all along?"

"Oh, no, not all along," Summer corrected smoothly. "Granato did indeed create a quest to expel the players from Heart. I just took advantage of the situation to further my own agenda."

"You realize there is no way to spin this to make you the good guy," Alfre argued. "You will never be seen as the hero. You're the villain here."

Summer smiled, all teeth and warning. "The villains always were my favorites."

"That does it!" Alfre roared, launching herself forward, rapier pointed directly at Summer's throat.

A gasp tore from her throat when Summer actually managed to dodge, Alfre blade singing through the air. Alfre tumbled forward, rolling along the polished marble floors. She'd missed. How had she missed, no one was fast enough to dodge her attacks. No one! Her shocked blue eyes rose to meet Summer's smug golden gaze.

"Like I said, I've been playing this game far longer than you think I have." She said, voice calm and confident. "You see; I was a monk up until the Incident. Level seventy-two. While my abilities reset when I reclassified into a summer blade, by stats all stayed the same. Yeah, I'm level forty-five, but I have the stats of someone who not only hit the level one hundred cap, but went beyond it. A nice little glitch in the reclassing system no one bothered to report to the admins, because why would you?"

Alfre cursed under her breath as she righted herself, the point of her blade digging into the soft marble of the floor.

Summer smirked. "I am so beyond anything you weaklings can handle. I probably don't even need an army to take down Heart. But that wouldn't be nearly as fun. I always did like playing chess."

"Shove off!" Alfre shouted, readying herself for another attack. Her opponent's smirk only widened, readying her own blade.

Alfre launched herself forward, pushing her speed to the absolute limit. She clashed with Summer, katana meeting rapier, sparks and frost flying. She ducked, letting Summer's katana fly over her head. She thrust upwards with her blade, Summer dodging it, but not completely. Summer scowled as a thin, red cut formed on her cheek.

"Are you proud of yourself?" Summer seethed. "Think this little cut means anything?"

"It means you're not invincible," Alfre stated, regaining just a bit of her confidence. "Means I can beat you, even if it takes forever. I'll whittle you down, hit point by hit point."

Summer smirked. "You think so, huh? How do you expect to 'whittle me down' when you're dead?"

Alfre readied herself for the next attack, blade ready to parry.

But the clash never came. She blinked and Summer was gone. She blinked again, the reality of that sinking in, and she felt a burning, stabbing pain in her gut. Summer's face was right beside hers, and her blade was through Alfre's stomach.

Her friends were shouting, unintelligible over the sound of blood pounding in her ears. She reached down, her hand grasping desperately at the blade, as if she could pull it out.

"Goodbye, little winter," Summer whispered, her breath against Alfre's ear. "Don't worry. Your friends will join you soon enough."

Alfre screamed as the katana blade was pulled from her gut, her voice lost in the sound of her own shattering.

Chapter Twenty-Three

It was warm. Usually, Alfre didn't like to be warm but this was almost comforting. She blinked, seemingly waking from a long slumber, only to be met with darkness. Her body felt heavy, her limbs uncooperative as she tried to move them. Where was she? She was floating, but she could feel no water. The sky above her seemed to twinkle with distant stars. They looked like the stars over Siniy, but impossibly far away – even more so than stars usually were.

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came forth. She felt like she should be panicking, but her body refused to do even that.

"I am sorry, Alfre."

Alfre blinked, her body feeling lighter than it had just a moment before. She turned her head, her eyes catching sight of Abital floating beside her as if sitting on some invisible chair.

"What for?" she asked, her voice echoing in the empty space around her. And then she remembered. "Oh...I'm dead aren't I?"

Abital nodded, his eyes full of regret.

"I won't be for long, though, right?" Alfre questioned. "I'll be back in a bit. Oh, but I'll be in Siniy. That's not good."

Abital said nothing, only watching her with his sorrowful eyes.

"I won't be able to get back and save my friends," Alfre whispered, because saying it too loud would mean her friends would die. Saying it too loud would make it true. "I failed them, didn't I?"

"You couldn't have known," Abital said, his voice wavering slightly as he tried to hold something back – probably tears.

"I knew it was a trap," Alfre argued, turning back to stare up at the too-far sky. "I knew it and I led them right into it."

"You couldn't have known about the summer blade," Abital amended. "It's not your fault."

Alfre couldn't bear to meet his eyes. While that was technically true, she still felt responsible. Her friends were going to die, and it was because they'd trusted her. She never should have been put in charge of the army. She never should have been allowed to lead them into such danger. Summer would march on Heart and destroy it and there was nothing they could do to stop her. Just like Alfre could do nothing to stop the tears that spilled over her cheeks.

"I wish I was stronger," she sobbed. "I wish I was strong enough to protect them. All of them. Spica and Elias and Izo and Ran and Hadi and Canus and Wally and Beira and Traveler and Ran and Silver and June and Lance and Atticus and Alessio and Olivia and you! I promised I'd protect them and here I am, floating in the void while I wait to respawn back in bloody Spade because I *wasn't strong enough!*"

“Is that why you want to be strong?” A voice asked. “To protect them?”

Alfre felt an invisible hand push her up into a sitting position. Facing her, much to her shock, was Orli. Abital floated towards her, confusion evident on his face.

“What are you doing here, Orli?” he demanded. “You never come to the Fell’s waiting place.”

Orli’s lavender eyes flickered to Abital for a moment before returning to Alfre. “I am not unaware of what is going on in Wonderland, Abital. I may favor the Wonderlanders, but that does not mean I don’t recognize a worthy Fell when I see one.”

Alfre clutched at her cloak, pulling it tighter around her in an attempt to hide from those eyes that seem to lay her bare. “What do you mean?”

Orli frowned, looking ashamed. “I was... foolish...to think that I had no stake in this fight. This woman you fight, she very well means to slaughter my people if they do not flee from her. I cannot allow someone like her to destroy everything my people...and yours...have built.”

Suddenly, Alfre found herself sitting in a wide field of soft grass and the pastel-colored blossoms. Orli still stood before her, Abital having been forcefully and suddenly moved to her right side. A surprised sound made Alfre turn, finding Koseret behind her and Canus to her left.

“Orli...” Koseret’s voice held a barely hidden warning.

“Peace, Koseret,” Orli assured her with upheld palms. “I am not here to fight, but to grant a wish.”

“A wish?” Canus echoed.

Orli nodded sagely, her eyes softening to something almost fond. “This little one wishes to be strong enough to protect her loved ones and the people of Ahmar. I think we can grant her that wish.”

Koseret gasped, eyes wide. “You mean – !”

“Yes,” Orli said. “It’s been a while since the Vorpall Blade was wielded by a Fell.”

“Vorpall Blade?” Alfre repeated. “Like the poem? Does that make Summer the jabberwocky?”

One perfectly shaped white brow rose on Orli’s face. “I don’t know what you mean. The last jabberwocky was slain by the Fell Queen generations ago.”

“You mean Alessio’s ancestor,” Alfre clarified. “Alice.”

Canus nodded. “She was the last one to ever wield the Vorpall Blade. Orli took it when she passed and split its magic between the four of us. I never did understand why.”

“To keep ones like this burning one from finding it,” Orli explained, her voice growing harsh at the mention of Summer. “Only one who is worthy of the blade may have it. Only one who would use it to protect others.”

“And you say I’m worthy?” Alfre questioned cautiously.

Orli simply nodded.

“I can’t think of anyone better,” Koseret agreed.

Alfre groaned, letting her head fall into her hands. “This is insane.”

“What is it the old god used to say?” Canus wondered aloud. “‘We’re all mad here?’ Something like that.”

Wait, Alfre paused. Did that mean that the Cheshire Cat was the original god of Wonderland? That seemed to be what Canus was implying. And it certainly made sense. The Cheshire Cat always did seem to know more than he was letting on and could do far more than was seen. How very fitting that he’d be some Old God in a fantasy role-playing version of Wonderland.

“What happened to him?” Alfre asked cautiously, unsure if she wanted to know. “The old god?”

“He made us,” Koseret said, her voice dreamy with reminiscing. “He carved us from the universe itself. Orli he made from a dying star, made to burn anew. Abital he carved from the deepest, darkest obsidian he could find. Canus he carved from the most ancient trees in the Wilds. And I... he formed me from the earth and planted flowers in my chest. And when he felt we were ready, he faded into the land itself. His fur became the grass, and his bones the mountains and his veins the mana crystals.”

“This is way more lore than I ever expected to get,” Alfre muttered to herself, on the verge of rocking back and forth like a madwoman.

“Enough talk!” Orli interrupted, her voice firm, almost edging on angry. “We don’t have much time left. The blade must be given before Wonderland spits her spirit back up into those blasted cathedrals of theirs. Quickly!”

The four of them stepped towards Alfre, who scrambled to her feet. Orli held out her right hand, palm upward, and the others mirrored her in turn.

“Blade which slayed the Damned Beast,” Orli sang, her voice carrying through the air like bird song. “Blade which Light split in four. Blade of Justice. Blade of Honor. We call you forth. Let this girl be your new Master. Fight for her.”

“Blade which served the Fell Queen,” Abital chanted, his voice rolling like thunder echoing in a cave. “Blade which Death held in Secret. Blade of Vengeance. Blade of War. We call you forth. Let this girl be your new Master. Slay for her.”

“Blade which saved the Old Wonderland,” Koseret recited, her voice steady like the pulse of the earth itself. “Blade which Harvest hid away. Blade of Kindness. Blade of Humility. We call you forth. Let this girl be your new Master. Protect for her.”

“Blade which will defend the New Wonderland,” Canus intoned, his voice wild and rough like the beasts he cared for. “Blade of which the Wilds sang. Blade of Courage. Blade of Diligence. We call you forth. Let this girl be your new Master. Gleam for her.”

They spoke as one, their voice harmonizing in a way that Alfre could not even begin to understand or describe. It at once felt ancient and brand new, as far away as the stars and as close as the grass beneath her feet.

“Vorpall Blade, born first of the Cat’s fangs, be born again for this Child of Winter – ”

“ – Favored One of the Wilds – ”

“ – Blessed by the Great Druid – ”

“—Death’s Chosen Champion – ”

“—Light Touched! May she Wield You Well.”

Alfre doubled over, pain far worse than what Summer’s katana had inflicted on her running through her veins, starting at her heart and spreading out over her body. She was at one burning hot and freezing cold, her body fighting against whatever was happening, threatening to tear her apart. She screamed, but no sound escaped. She clawed at her chest, desperate to remove what was causing this pain.

She felt something burst from her chest, something hard and leathery. She grasped at it frenziedly, pulling it from her body. She pulled and pulled, the pain only growing more unbearable with each inch. Then, suddenly, it was gone. The object finally broke free. In her hands was a sword unlike any she’d ever seen. Impossibly long and thin, the blade itself was a brilliant blue color. A rapier-like basket of silvery white metal and pearlescent white stone covered the hilt, swirling and weaving over it in a deceptively delicate fashion. The hilt was covered in supple black leather, seemingly made to fit in her hand.

“This is...” Alfre couldn’t find the words.

“The Vorpall Blade,” Orli finished for her. “Remade for you to wield.” She eyed it curiously. “It looked different last time. Bigger.”

“Snowbird can’t use something as big as that old claymore,” Canus argued mildly. “This fits her better.”

“I agree,” Koseret said, floating over to eye the blade more closely, flowers blooming under her feet. “It suits her very well.”

“Enough!” Abital warned. “We have to move quickly. Otherwise, Alfre will be returned to Siniy instead of Rubino.”

“Calm yourself, Soul Keeper,” Orli soothed. “We will not let this be in vain. Come, let us send her back where she is needed.”

Each deity placed a hand upon Alfre, their magic glowing softly. “Go, little winter. Go and show that woman what it means to be a Fell.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Elias tried desperately to fight through the pain and the tears. When Alfre shattered, he'd flown into a rage, sending thunderbolt after fireball after dark beam at the woman who killed her. Spica reacted much the same way, her face cold and unreadable as she rushed their enemy, daggers in hand. Ran and Traveler had not let up the volley of magical projectiles since the fight had begun, and it was all Hadi and Izo could do to keep them all from dying. Beira had disappeared some time ago, unable to remain there without Alfre's bond. They had no idea where Canus and Abital went, only that they'd vanished at the same time Alfre had.

They all knew, logically, that Alfre wasn't truly dead. Not in the way Wonderlanders were when they were killed, not in the way she would be in the Real World. But what you knew, and how you felt were often at odds with each other. And right now, all they felt was rage. Rage and sorrow and hopelessness and the driving need to avenge their friend.

Summer didn't even seem all that phased. Fire magic did seemingly nothing against her. The cuts on her skin looked minimal at best. She was fast. She was strong. She was nearly invulnerable. And, a small army of Fell whose levels either matched or exceeded Elias' and the others flanked her.

"This is impossible!" Izo sobbed, clutching at a bleeding wound in his side. "We need Ren and the others. We can't beat her on our own, not with her friends with her!"

"It can't be impossible!" Ran shouted over his gunfire. "Nothing in this world is impossible!"

"Nothing except your victory," Summer mocked, slicing through the air with her sword and sending a wave of fire towards them. Hadi threw up a shield, but it soon broke under the pressure of Summer's power. The damage was halved, at best, and Hadi couldn't be sure he could keep up with the damage being dealt.

"We're not giving up!" Spica snarled. "We're not surrendering. If we fall, we fall like Alfre did. Fighting until the last."

"That's right!" Elias agreed. "Remember what Alfre said. Bide and Fecht."

"The hell does that even mean?" Traveler shouted, desperately reloading her rifle.

"It means," a familiar voice echoed in the hallway. "Stand and fight!"

Reemerging from the aether as if being pieced back together, Alfre stood in the middle of the hall. Beside her stood the four gods, and in her hand was a new weapon.

"What the hell?!" Summer demanded, whirling on the reborn winter blade. "You can't be here! I killed you! You should be back in Spade right now! How are you here? What the hell is that sword?"

"That sword is your doom, burning one," Orli announced, her voice steady and cold. "For that is the Vorpal Blade, legendary weapon of the Fell Queen."

"The what?!"

“A weapon given only to those Fell who are worthy,” Koseret stated. “Given only to those who would protect not only the Fell, but all of Wonderland with its use.”

“A weapon given only to those who are blessed by all four of the gods,” Canus added, wolfish grin back where it belonged.

“And before you stands that very Fell,” Abital said. He smiled down at Alfre. “Why don’t you introduce yourself, love?”

Alfre grinned wildly, holding the Vorpall Blade out. “I am Alfre the Winter Blade, Commander of the Fell Army, Guild Master of the Alliance of the Frozen Stars, Favored One of the Wilds, Death’s Chosen Champion, Blessed by the Great Druid, Light Touched, Master of the Vorpall Blade. Who the hell are you?”

Summer’s hair erupted into flames, licking at the air wildly. “You know who I am, you stupid bitch!”

“So, I know you say this sword can beat her,” Alfre whispered to the deities that surrounded her. “But I’d really rather fight her someplace where the rest of the gang can hop in and kick her ass...and also someplace where we have more than two healers.”

“The city?” Orli questioned, sounding like she clearly believed Alfre was crazy. “Is that wise?”

“Probably not,” Alfre admitted. “But if I die, we’ll need all of our strongest to beat her, and we left most of them in the city.”

Orli nodded. “Very well. Abital, if you could.”

Summer charged, and in that moment Abital summoned a storm of dark smoke. It swallowed them all – Alfre, her comrades, the gods, and Summer. Alfre clutched at the hilt of the Vorpall Blade, her chest squeezing as the darkness swallowed her. It was too dark. It reminded her too much of her all too recent death. She could feel herself begin to tremble. Her breath caught in her throat.

A warm, comforting hand settled on the small of her back. It reminded her of the weight she felt when Abital hid in her shadow. Another hand wrapped around her shoulder, slightly larger and with a harsher, more protective grip. It calmed her, helped her breathe a little easier, to feel these hands. And when the shadows faded and she found herself standing in the cathedral plaza back in Heart, she was unsurprised to find it was Abital’s hand on her back and Canus’ around her shoulder.

The plaza was mostly empty, the vast majority of the players would be defending the wall...if the Granato army hadn’t broken through the gate yet. There was, however, a small medic station set up along the cathedral’s side of the plaza, where Alfre could see Olivia and several other clerics jump in surprise at their sudden entrance.

“Olivia, dear, my friends are in a bit of a bad way,” Alfre shouted across the square. “If you and your fellow clerics could give them a bit of attention, I’d appreciate it.”

“Yes, Commander!” Olivia said, jumping from her seat and rushing over with two other clerics and a druid to help mend the wounds Hadi and Izo had been unable to deal with in the heat of battle.

Summer's eyes scanned the plaza, amusement tugging at her lips. "You brought me here? Are you stupid? Now that I'm here, once I beat you I can just burn the rest of it down."

"If you beat me," Alfre corrected, pointing the Vorpall Blade at her opponent threateningly. "And even if you do, I have a hell of a lot more friends here to help kick your arse than I did in Rubino. As a matter of fact." She reached into her pocket and pulled out the direwolf whistle Canus had given her so long ago. She blew, the sound too high for any human ear.

Not a moment later, Beira came bounding into the plaza, a full-blown pack of other direwolves beside her.

She reached down, running her fingers through Beira's soft fur. "Beira, darling, be a dear and get the rest of my friends for me. I may need them."

Beira wuffed and then howled, the other wolves joining in before the lot of them took off into the city proper.

"Ha!" Summer laughed cruelly. "You know you can't beat me so you have to call on your pathetic friends. Are they all weakling children like this one?"

Her blade whirled about to point at Olivia, and Alfre immediately tensed up.

Summer grinned manically, a cruel parody of Ren's signature wild grin. "Let's see if she puts up a better fight than you did."

The woman with blazing hair turned to charge Olivia, who was still busy tending to Spica's burns. Alfre felt her heart stop as she bolted forward to stop her. Time seemed to stop along with her heart as she raced across the plaza, each step of hers covering the ground of five. She flew across the cobblestones, begging to be fast enough, desperate to get there before Summer did.

Summer swung down with her black-bladed katana, expecting to cut through the soft flesh of a low-level cleric. Instead, black metal met cobalt blue as Alfre flickered into her path. The look of shock in her golden eyes, in Alfre's opinion, was priceless.

"I don't think so, Summer," Alfre warned. "If you want to get to them, you have to go through me. And I'm not about to let that happen again."

"What the hell?!" Summer screeched. "You weren't this fast before!"

"What part about that big ol' long list of titles did you not get?" Alfre mocked. "I've got the gods on my side, ya numpty."

"Why would they give a shit about you?" Summer demanded, drawing back to swing again. "They've never given a damn about the Fell before. Why start now?"

"Well, it all started with Canus," Alfre explained blithely, blocking Summer's second swing. "This asshole going by Lokki killed and skinned one of his direwolves. I helped him, and he grew fond of me and did me many kindnesses in return." She parried another strike, leaving Summer open to attack. She thrust forward with the Vorpall Blade, the sword cutting through the air with a 'snicker-snack' sound. The point of the sword burring itself in Summer's shoulder.

“Then there was Abital,” Alfre continued over Summer’s pained screaming. “We went to his dungeon, seeking adventure as all Fell do. But he just seemed so sad and lonely on his throne that I couldn’t bear to fight him. So instead I told him a story, and he was so moved by such a simple kindness that he followed me home.”

Summer drew back, the Vorpall Blade coming loose from her shoulder. She swung, both hand grasping the hilt of her blade as she fought to ignore the pain. Her swing was met by Alfre’s blade once more, the frustration obvious on Summer’s face. Her hair blaze with more intensity even as the air around Alfre became more and more frigid.

“Koseret came not long after we landed on the shores of Ahmar, preparing for war.” Alfre just kept talking, as if she were having a normal conversation instead of a duel for the fate of the continent. “She saw what we were trying to do, what we aimed to accomplish by kicking Granato out of Heart. She knew we were doing it all for the right reason, and she gave us her blessing.”

She ducked out of the way of a wild swing of Summer’s flaming blade, loosing a few strands of hair in the process. She slashed at Summer’s legs, cutting through the fine leather of her boots. The wounds themselves were shallow, but the frost crawling over Summer’s flesh would mean serious problems for her in a moment.

“Orli was a hard sell,” she went on. “She didn’t want us to fight the Wonderlanders, and she didn’t want to side with us for fear she’d lose her worshipers. But when she realized what you had done, and the kind of threat you presented, even she came around.”

Summer screamed unintelligibly, trying to push Alfre back closer to her friends, perhaps in hopes of putting them in the crossfire. Alfre wasn’t having it, and pushed back just as hard. She thrust forward with a spear of ice, Summer’s fire magic giving her just enough time to dodge the frozen weapon.

“Alfre!”

Everyone’s attention was pulled to the entrance of the plaza, where Ren, Atticus, Lance, June, Hunter, Einmora, Makoto, Briar Fox, Selphie, and the rest of the guild masters stood watching in shocked silence.

“Hey, Makoto, was this the player who was burning everything?” Alfre shouted across the plaza.

“She sure looks like she could be,” Makoto agreed.

“Cool! The gods gave me a cool sword to beat her. But incase I don’t...” Alfre flashed them a wicked grin. “Giver her hell for me, yeah?”

No one moved, save for Ren, who simply nodded, hands clenched by her sides.

“Wicked!” Alfre cheered before turning her attention back to Summer. “So, yeah, basically you don’t stand a chance.”

“Shut the hell up!” Summer roared. “I’m more powerful than you’ll ever be! My level is twice as high as yours! I’ve taken one cities and won! I am the Fell that the game was made for! You’re just a stupid noob bitch who got by on hacks!”

“Wrong,” Alfre argued, her voice cold as her eyes began to glow. “Because this isn’t a game anymore, Summer. It hasn’t been in forever, and I know you know that. I didn’t hack anything. I was kind and true and I was rewarded – no, I was given a responsibility because of that.”

She held up the Vorpall Blade, the sunlight gleaming off the edge of the sword. “This is the Vorpall Blade, given only to those who would use it to protect all of Wonderland. The last person to use it was the first Fell, Alice. She killed the Jabberwocky with it. And, because you pose such a threat to the people of Wonderland, native and Fell alike, the gods saw fit to bestow it upon me.”

“So, what, you’re the *chosen one*?” The way Summer said ‘chosen one’ was clearly mocking, even over her anger.

“No,” Alfre said, shaking her head. “I’m just a person. A person who saw something wrong and wanted to fix it. I’m sure any of my comrades could have wielded the Blade. Any of them are worthy. Hell, if any one asked me, I would have said Ren is far more ‘chosen one’ than I am.”

“Then what makes you so damn special?” Summer demanded, her anger scorching the cobblestones under her feet.

Alfre simply shrugged. “Nothing. I don’t have to be special. I don’t have to be the strongest Fell in Wonderland. I don’t have to be the chosen one of some prophecy from centuries ago. I’m just...me.”

“THEN WHY DID THE GODS GIVE YOU THE VORPALL BLADE?”

“Because she died standing up for the people of Wonderland,” Ren stated, sounding all the world like she knew the answer. “Because she died protecting the people she cared about. Because she stood up against impossible odds and fought anyway. Because that’s what a good person does.”

“News flash, princess,” Summer spat. “The world doesn’t give out prizes for being a nice person. Or did the real world teach you nothing?”

Ren stepped forward. “The old world didn’t, you’re right. Often times the worst people got rewarded. People got power they didn’t deserve and the world suffered for it. But this world...maybe in this world the good people do get recognized. Wonderland sees them and says, ‘you have done good things, and I have seen you’. Maybe, in that way, Wonderland is better than the old world.”

“God, all you people do is preach,” Summer groaned, rolling her eyes. “No one gives a shit around here if you’re good or bad or whatever. All it cares about is how strong you are. And I’m the strongest Fell in Wonderland! I’ll prove it to you!”

She rushed at Ren, Alfre not two steps behind her. Ren’s golden eyes watched carefully, her fists rising to a defensive position in front of her face. Summer’s blade slashed through the air, aiming to cleave Ren in half.

Alfre eyes widened at Ren started to glow a deep forest green. She dipped under Summer’s attack, righting herself faster than Alfre had ever seen. She struck, her mithril covered fist colliding with Summer’s jaw. Summer’s head snapped back, her footing lost as she tumbled to the ground.

Ren paused, staring disbelievingly at her fists. "What the..."

Canus barked with laughter, drawing all eyes to him. "Did you honestly think snowbird was the only one I like? Let's face it, sea hawk, you're just as wild as I am."

Summer scrambled back from Ren, rage and confusion warring on her face. "Now who the hell are you!?"

Ren tore her eyes from Canus, gold meeting gold as she grinned wildly down at the red head. "I'm Ren, Siren Monk, Queen of the Crystal Moon Kingdom, Lieutenant Commander of the Fell Army, Sea Hawk and –" she looked to Canus once more "– Favored One of the Wilds?"

Canus matched her grin. "Not as much as snowbird here, but yeah."

"Are all of you some kind of pet Fell?" Summer snapped, face flushed with anger and embarrassment.

"Hardly," Traveler huffed. "Most of us just have gods who like us."

Orli chuckled. "You say that like you're not one of them."

Traveler blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Orli smiled, holding out an open palm. "Traveler, World Walker, Hero of an Older Age, what makes you think you are not also Light Touched?"

Traveler stared at she too began to glow, a pale lavender light enveloping her. "I..."

Orli's smiled turned wistful. "I always did like you heroes best."

Spica shot Traveler a knowing look, only to flinch back in surprise when she too began glowing a deep red color. She looked to Abital, who smiled.

"You're kidding me," she said.

"Spica, She the Stars Favor, can Death not have more than one Chosen Champion?" Abital queried, his voice light and teasing.

"I mean, usually not," Spica argued mildly, though she looked far too pleased with herself to truly argue. "But, I suppose it does make sense. I'm an assassin after all."

Elias smiled at her, and didn't even look surprised when he too began to glow a pale blue color. His eyes met Koseret's, who smiled at him in turn.

However, he asked, "Why me?"

"I live to support the people of Wonderland with fertile soil and healthy harvests," Koseret explained. "Does it not make sense, White Rabbit, that the one I bless also lives to support others?"

One by one, all those gathered in the plaza began to glow one of four colors: deep red, forest green, pale lavender, and soothing blue. Izo blushed as he began to glow with Koseret's blessing. Hadi looked at Orli

in a new light as he received her blessing. Ran's forest green glow meshed well with Izo's soft blue as he reached for the dragonling's hand. Atticus seemed wholly unsurprised to receive Abital's blessing, and bowed slightly to the God of the Dead, who seemed surprised by the reverence he was shown. Even sweet little Olivia was blessed by Koseret, who welcomed the tiny cleric's ecstatic hug warmly. All the Fell shown with soft, comforting light.

All the Fell, except Summer. She stared, her confidence fading into fear, her anger only growing as she found herself the only one without the blessing of the gods.

"This...this isn't possible!" she shouted. "If any one should be blessed, it's me! I'm the strongest Fell there is! I've lead armies to destroy those too weak to belong in this world! I conquered the largest empire in Wonderland! If anyone deserves a blessing, it's me! The rest of you aren't good enough!"

"Oh, lass," Alfre sighed, and Summer scowled at the pity in her voice. "Nobody's gonna bless a rotten apple."

Summer roared, the insult breaking whatever patience she had left. She charged at Alfre, blade at the ready. The Vorpall Blade flew through the air with a snicker-snack sound, sparks and frost flying as the two swords met. Alfre pushed back against Summer's reckless attack, the point of her rapier dragging across the thick leather armor the red head wore.

Summer pulled a small dagger out from seemingly nowhere, hurling it at Alfre's leg. The shorter woman cried out at the pain as the blade embedded itself in her thigh, flinching down and away from Summer's second attack with her katana. She pulled the dagger from her leg, tossing it aside. She could feel the warm, comforting feeling of healing magic, catching a glance of Olivia's raised staff out of the corner of her eye.

Alfre ducked under another potential decapitation from Summer, twirling around her to cut at the back of Summer's legs. Summer shrieked, feeling the cold creep up from her new wounds. Alfre frowned; disappointed with herself that she hadn't managed to cut Summer's hamstrings. Summer's eyes flew open wide, snapping towards those still watching.

"Who's debuffing me?" She demanded furiously. "Who the hell is debuffing me?"

Elias tipped his hat towards her with a small smirk.

"Stay the hell out of this!" Summer shrieked. "This has nothing to do with you!"

"I think you'll find it has everything to do with all of us," Elias argued calmly, and his lack of anger only seemed to anger Summer more.

"You know what, he's right!" Ren said cheerfully. "So why don't we all get involved. I'd quite like to punch her again."

"We could," June agreed, her forest green glow flickering as she tossed her hair over her shoulder. "But watching her fall apart under Alfre is very entertaining."

"Save your energy for the rest of her friends," Atticus ordered. "Best let Alfre take care of this. It wouldn't be right to steal her spotlight after she got such a cool sword."

Ren groaned dramatically. "Ugh, fine. You're right."

Alfre mostly ignored the conversation going on around her, her focus on dodging and parrying Summer's wild attacks. She managed to get a few hits in on Summer, whittling her health down. Summer didn't seem to notice, her rage blinding her to everything else.

"I'm going to kill you!" she screeched. "I'm going to kill you, take your precious Vorpall Blade, and burn this town to the ground! I'll kill your precious gods too! See how much their blessing is worth when they're dead!"

"You know you can't actually kill any of us," Alfre reminded her coolly. "We'll be back eventually. And the gods don't actually die. Or did you forget that Abital is literally a dungeon boss? You can't win, Summer. We'll keep coming. We'll keep fighting you. Eventually you will lose. But I think I'd rather you lose here and now."

With that, Alfre pour her magic into the Vorpall Blade, elongating the blade with a fierce shard of ice. Summer bellowed, her blade slashing through the air in yet another attempt to take Alfre's head. Alfre ducked under the attack, thrusting out with her blade.

This time, it pierced through Summer's armor, straight through her chest.

Summer froze, staring down in disbelief. "I... I..."

Alfre withdrew her blade. "You know what they say. Off with her head."

The Vorpall Blade went snicker-snack, and Summer's head rolled across the cobblestones before shattering along with the rest of her body. The only thing left behind was her black-bladed katana.

A heavy silence fell over the plaza, no one quite sure what to do. Finally, little Olivia spoke up, clinging to Koseret's skirts.

"Is...is it over?" she asked in a tiny voice.

Alfre shook her head. "Not yet. We still have the rest of the army to deal with." She looked to the tree-covered cathedral. "Will that hold her?"

Koseret nodded firmly. "Of course it will."

She nodded and turned to the entrance of the plaza. "Good, because we have other problems to deal with. Let's go!"

She leapt atop Beira, the direwolf howling as it took off towards the gate. There were hoops and hollers behind her as the others followed, some hoping atop the other direwolves and others simply letting their feet carry them.

As they neared the wall, Alfre shouted up to the players and Wonderlanders atop the ramparts. "Open the gates!"

Alessio turned at the shouting and looked down to see Alfre riding towards him. "Alfre! You're back!"

"Open the gates!" she shouted again, and Alessio could see the small army of guild masters and their lieutenants just behind her.

Alessio nodded, turning to his soldiers. "You heard the Commander! Open the gates."

The soldiers scrambled to obey, and the gates slowly swung open. Alfre and Beira charged the opening, Spica, Elias, Traveler, and Ren just behind her on their own direwolf steeds.

"One, two! One, two! And through and through," Alfre sang as she rode towards the oncoming army of Fell and Granato knights, her voice carrying farther than expected. "The Vorpall Blade went snicker-snack! She left them dead, and with their heads, she went galumphing back!"

Her words held true, the Vorpall Blade beheading the first Granato soldier she encountered. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ren leap from the back of her direwolf and into the fray, her fist slamming into the face of an enemy gunner. Druid trees sprung from the broken cobblestone streets, tossing the enemy army into the air as Koseret and Izo unleashed their magic. June and Spica darted into the trees, shooting down opponents with arrows and poisoned needles. Alfre could feel the warmth of Elias buffs even as the magician sent several Granato clerics running with a series of fireballs. Shots rang out as Traveler and Ran fired upon the enemy from the ramparts, clearing the way for Atticus, Einmora, Makoto, and Silver to cut down the survivors. Canus ran through in wolf form, tearing at ankles and throats in equal measure, his pack following his lead. Abital swooped in with a cloud of black smoke, bolts of dark energy flying this way and that. Orli came in just behind him on blazing phoenix wings, the white holy fire burning all who neared her.

"What the actual hell?" one of the enemy Fell shouted. "I thought Summer was supposed to kill you!"

"Didn't you hear me?" Alfre shouted, her grin wild and dangerous. "The Vorpall Blade went snicker-snack! I left her dead, and with her head, I went galumphing back!"

"You...you killed Summer?" the Fell, a samurai, gasped at her. "But you can't kill Summer! She's the strongest Fell in Wonderland."

"She's been ousted," Alfre replied shortly, stabbing the samurai through with a spear of ice.

"I'm gonna say this only once!" Alfre shouted over the din. "Your leader, Summer, has been defeated. Those of you who surrender peacefully will be treated with dignity and respect. Those who continue to fight will be shattered."

At the news their leader had been shattered, several Fell dropped their weapons. The Granato knights, however, who had no real loyalty to Summer, continued to fight, as did many of the Fell.

"Koseret!" Alfre called. "Get those who have surrendered out of here! Tell Alessio what I said about them being treated fairly."

Koseret nodded, gathering up the surrendering Fell with vines and carting them off the battlefield.

"And the rest?" Canus asked, coming up beside her.

“You heard me,” Alfre stated coldly. “The rest we shatter. Let them see Summer in the cathedral, and know she fell before me.”

Canus barked with laughter. “Ha, ‘fell.’ I like it.”

Alfre made to smack him on the flank, but he took off and her hand just barely missed him. She shook her head and turned to an oncoming Fell knight. She dodged his lance, stabbing at the wooden shaft and allowing ice to splinter and break the wood. With his weapon all but useless, Alfre went for the knight’s weak spots. She stabbed at the joints in his armor at his elbows and the gaps between his torso and his legs at the hips. Frost crawled over his body, slowing his movements and eating away at his hit points.

“There’s no way you beat Summer!” he screamed at her. “Summer is the strongest! She’s gonna make this continent for us! The ones who have played Wonderland since it launched! We were here first, all you others who got into it only because it was popular are just posers! You will not replace us!”

“Listen, you bampot, I didn’t want to play the game in the first place,” Alfre argued. “I won it in a dumb little contest. But even if I had gone out and bought it for myself, I don’t understand the notion that more people playing is a bad thing? That means the thing is good and it’s drawing in more people who want to have fun with it. You mean to tell me you joined a Social Darwinist army because you didn’t want other people enjoying the thing you enjoy? What kinda logic is that? You’re all daft.”

Before he could argue with her, she removed his head from his shoulders and let him shatter.

She sighed. “Daft idiots.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“What do we do now?” Izo asked, and wasn’t that the question of the hour.

They had a more people in the cathedral than they could reasonably hold, and Alfre didn’t trust Summer and her more ardent supporters to play nice while being transferred from the cathedral to the building Ren had turned into a makeshift prison. And they couldn’t possibly hold them there indefinitely. They needed to pay for their crimes, everyone agreed about that, but how to do so was the issue.

“They should rebuild the city,” Einmora said, and that seemed to make a lot of sense to a lot of people.

“How exactly do we expect to make them do that?” Ren questioned. “There’s a good chance that they’ll just attack us all over again the moment they step out of the restricted area. It’s fairly obvious that the cities are no longer pvp-free.”

That’s when Silver spoke up. “Well, we alchemist do have a potion that could be useful.”

“Silver, I love you, but please don’t be vague,” Ren chided.

“Once someone maxes their alchemy skill, which isn’t terribly hard, they’re able to craft a level-reset potion,” Silver explained. “If we can brew enough of the potions, we could administer it to Summer’s gang and leave them all at level one, with all of their stats brought down accordingly. “

“That seems terribly unethical,” Ludovico pointed out, having finally made his way to Ahmar after the fighting had finished.

“We don’t have a whole lot of other options,” Silver argued.

“What was the original point of the potion anyway?” Alfre asked, arms crossed thoughtfully over her chest.

“Mainly it was for people who didn’t like the build they’d made of their character. It was a way for them to start over and rebuild their stats to better fit their play style or the class they chose,” Silver clarified.

“As unethical as it may be,” Alfre said thoughtfully, “And we can have a whole ‘nother discussion about that later, it does dole out the most poetic justice. These assholes held up their level and stats as the end all be all of the game. It was a point of pride for them, the only thing they could lord over the new players coming in after them. To strip them of that...well, I can think of no better punishment.”

“What about the others?” Hadi demanded. “The ones who surrendered.”

“Let them keep their levels, they can rebuild the city,” Alfre decided after some thought. “I have a feeling that most of them who surrendered were less in the fight because of their beliefs and more because it was their guild, and they didn’t want to be left behind. That doesn’t make what they did okay, but I think the hard labor will be punishment enough.”

Briar turned to Silver. “How quickly can you brew up that potion?”

Silver shrugged. "If I have all the ingredients and equipment on hand? About a day to make three doses. I'll be able to get the required amount ready faster if I had others helping me, including folks to get me the necessary ingredients. They're not necessarily hard to get, but some of them do require a dungeon raid."

Alfre turned to June and Hunter. "Do you think you two could help with that part?"

The two of them nodded.

"My guild has many maxed-level alchemists," Ludovico added. "I'm sure they'd be more than happy to help with the brewing process."

"Good," Alfre said with a nod. "Now the question is, will we be able to distribute potions in the cathedral?"

"Should be able to," Ren figured. "Potions aren't considered an ability, so the cathedral shouldn't block their use."

"Seems we've found our solution," Alfre said, ending that discussion. "Now...to address the four elephants in the room."

All eyes locked on Orli, Abital, Koseret, and Canus. Orli looked a little surly at the sudden attention.

"What?" she snapped.

"Koseret came to us a few days ago with an idea," Alfre said calmly, hoping not to ruffle Orli's feathers if she could avoid it. "We thought...it would be a good idea if each of you were given a patron city...so that this sort of thing didn't happen again."

Orli looked intrigued. "Patron city? Explain."

"In exchange for your protect, the people of the city of Heart would...honor you," Alfre explained, choosing her words carefully. "A temple could be built, and festivals could be held, things like that."

"I'd only have Heart?" Orli queried. "What of the other three cities?"

"We figured Abital would be more suitable to watch over Spade, seeing as his dungeon is on Siniy," Elias said.

"And Koseret would watch over Diamond," Spica added.

"And Canus would watch over Clover," Ren finished for them. "Four gods, four cities."

Orli stared them down, expression contemplative and edging on scheming. "Why would you give me a Fell city to care for when I've made my feelings about Fell perfectly clear."

"Honestly, you really haven't," Alfre argued. "You made a big deal about not wanting us to fight the Wonderlanders cause you cared too much about losing your worshipers, then you turn around and give me the Vorpel Sword and bless a good third of the guild masters who were present for my duel with Summer. Your signals are mixed at best and contradictory at worst."

“Summer was a greater threat than you were at that point in time,” Orli explained, brushing off Alfre’s concerned with a dismissive wave of her hand. “That was all.”

“Or,” Traveler drawled, her voice carrying a teasing lilt. “You care about the Fell more than you say you do.”

Orli glared at the hero, lavender eyes icy. “Don’t push your luck, World Walker.”

Traveler simply smiled. “I quite like that title, you know. It’s very apt.”

Orli turned to Alfre. “I will protect the city as long as she leaves it.”

Alfre shot Traveler a grin. “You heard her, lass, time to come back to Spade.”

Traveler sighed dramatically. “I suppose if I must. I hear there’s a lovely new guild there in need of members.”

Orli’s expression fell into something softer, more sympathetic as she addressed Alfre once more. “You know, by doing this, Canus will not be able to remain at your side anymore. You will lose him.”

“Hardly,” Canus barked. “The Wilds are mine, Orli, I can go anywhere I please. Besides, my pack sees all, I can be anywhere and know where I am needed next.”

Orli snorted. “You always were one to shirk your duties.”

“Come now, we were just starting to get along,” Koseret chided, reminding Alfre a bit too much of her aunt when scolding her cousins.

“Shall we be off then?” Alfre said, louder than necessary to stop any bickering that was about to occur. “I think Silver needs to get started on those potions.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Some two days into the process of producing enough potions to level down all of the prisoners, a procession of knights from Granato came riding up, led by a young woman with silvery-blond hair dressed in what was obviously ceremonial armor.

"May I ask why the Granato Empire thinks it's a good idea to ride up to the walls of a city it just got its ass kicked by?" Ren shouted down from the ramparts, Alfre and Hadi at her side.

"To negotiate a peace," the woman called back up, gripping the reins on her horse tightly.

Ren exchanged a look of piqued interest with her two companions. "Stay there, we'll be down in a hot second." She turned to Doremi. "If everything goes south, tell the gunners to shoot."

The three guild masters made their way down the ramparts and through the more thoroughly rebuilt gate. The woman dismounted as they approached, and Alfre could see the silvery circlet upon her brow.

"And you are?" Ren demanded, royal armor gleaming in the early sunset.

"Cassandra, Grand Duchess of the Granato Empire, Heir Apparent," she introduced, dipping her head. "And soon I shall be Empress, now that my father has fallen to his paranoia and ambition."

"You seem...unsurprised by the turn of events," Hadi said carefully.

"I knew it would happen sooner or later," Cassandra said with a sigh. "My father always felt threatened by the prosperity of the Fell city and the few Fell kingdoms that dot the land, as if their success somehow lessened his. When he turned to that woman to help him conquer the city...I knew it would end badly. But by that point he would not believe me. I can only hope that I can lead my people better."

"Seeking peace is a good place to start," Alfre acknowledged. "Many would want to avenge their fallen king."

"He fell long before this war," Cassandra admitted. She shook her head. "Please, I would like to know with whom I speak."

"You speak to Her Royal Majesty, Ren, Queen of the Crystal Moon Kingdom," Ren announced, sounding like she'd been waiting all her life to introduce herself in such a way. "Lieutenant Commander of the Fell Army, Sea Hawk, and Favored One of the Wilds."

"I see," Cassandra murmured with a more obvious bow. "Greetings, Your Majesty." Her eyes settled on Hadi. "And you are?"

"Just...Hadi," he admitted. "I lead a local guild. If you want more titles, you need to talk to Alfre."

A slender, silvery brow rose as Cassandra's attention turned to Alfre. "Oh?"

Alfre inhaled deeply as she prepared to recite her ever-growing list of titles. "Alfre Gordon, Your Highness. Guild Master of the Alliance of Frozen Stars, Commander of the Fell Army, Favored One of the

Wilds, Blessed by the Great Druid, Death's Chosen Champion, Light Touched, and Master of the Vorpall Blade."

Cassandra's eyes went wide. "The Vorpall Blade? As in the legendary blade of the Fell Queen Alice?"

"Uh...yeah."

Cassandra shook her head. "Then truly, we would be foolish to fight you now."

"Hadi here acts like he isn't also Light Touched," Ren joked. "Half the guild masters are blessed by one god or another. So, yeah, fighting us would be a very stupid thing to do. Especially now that Orli is watching over our city."

Cassandra nodded slowly. "I see. Perhaps we should discuss the terms of peace, then?"

Ren grinned, wild and full of teeth. "Let's."

Alfre was surprised at how few demands Hadi and the other guild masters made against Cassandra and the Granato Empire. Mostly they just wanted help to rebuild their city and to be mostly left alone. Quests could still be offered, but had to go through new, official channels that Einmora was developing with a few other guild masters that Alfre never really got to know. Cassandra, in turn, only demanded that the woman who killed her father be punished, and was perfectly content to let the Fell handle that nasty business.

"I do hope you would not be opposed to letting me kill her on sight should she near my palace again," Cassandra said coldly, her legs crossed at the knee and fingers laced together atop her knee.

Einmora laughed uproariously. "Lass, if she comes within a mile of your precious capital you can do whatever you want with her."

Cassandra smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes. "Excellent. I'm glad we've come to agreement. I don't know what my father was so worried about, you Fell have been nothing but reasonable."

Makoto shrugged. "Fear of the unknown can push us to do many terrible things. I am glad you have decided to embrace the unknown instead of fear it."

"Oh, let there be no mistake, samurai, I feared you," Cassandra refuted. "There is a reason I came dressed in armor, no matter how ceremonial it may be. You slaughtered my men, and are perfectly capable of slaughtering thousands more. This peace is not because I suddenly love you, or even trust you. It's to keep you from whipping my people off the map. The fact you have no interest in doing so is simply a pleasant surprise."

"Of course, that does leave the question of what your intentions actually are left unanswered."

"I intend to return to Siniy and find a tiny little cottage out in the Wilds that gave me shelter my first night in Wonderland and live out the rest of my days in relative peace," Alfre stated plainly.

Cassandra blinked owlishly at her before bursting into laughter.

“Did I say something funny?” Alfre asked the other guild masters, who all seemed terribly amused by her admission.

“No, no, I apologize,” Cassandra said, whipping away a tear. “It just seems so...domestic? That’s not the right word, but I can’t seem to find the word I’m looking for right now. A war hero, blessed by all the gods, just wants to run off into the woods and live in a cabin. It’s not what one usually pictures.”

Alfre shrugged. “I don’t really care what ‘one usually pictures.’ I want to live in peace. I think that’s what most people want. Maybe a little adventure on the side.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Cassandra agreed. She stood from her chair. “Still, I must thank you all for being so open to negotiation. I will inform my people that the fighting is over. I do hope your punishment does as it is supposed to.”

“So do we, Your Highness,” Alfre agreed. “So do we.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It took many, many weeks to brew all the potions necessary. During that time, Alfre found herself inundated with things to do, most of them involving the reconstruction of the city. She found herself in charge of a large number of former architects, all of them vying for the chance to redesign the city, or, in some cases, design the new temple to Orli. Alfre sent each and every bid to Hadi and the others, unsure as to why anyone thought a random guild master from Spade had anyway in what happened to the city of Heart.

“It’s because they’ve come to see you as the leader,” Spica explained, looking amused that Alfre hadn’t realized this already. “You led the charge, darling, of course they’d look to you to guide them farther.”

“But that doesn’t mean I have any say in what happens in Heart. It’s not my city.”

“They’ve been asking Ren, as well,” Spica said, as if that made things any better. “They don’t care what city you’re from, Alfre, they care that you’re the strong leader they were missing.”

“I don’t want to be the strong leader they were missing,” Alfre grumbled, letting her head fall back against the back of the couch she was sitting on. “I just want to go back to Siniy and escape into the woods.”

Spica eyed her contemplatively. “And what about the guild?”

Alfre sat up straighter, catching Spica’s gaze just before the vampire turned her attention back to whatever book she’d stolen from Hadi’s library. Spica didn’t generally wear her emotions on her sleeve, but Alfre had learned to read her well enough to know when she was concerned about something.

“I’m not saying I’d disband the guild,” Alfre assured her gently. “I just...I don’t really know how to explain it. I love the guildhall – its fireplace and the kitchen and the rooftop garden. I don’t want to abandon it or anything. But I want...I want to go back to that little cabin. I want to fix it up; you know...thank it for giving me shelter all those nights ago. I want to find a place where I can be content to sit in front of a fire by myself and think about things. A place to escape to when nothing’s really going on in the city. I still want to be a part of the guild. I still want to go on adventures with you and Elias and, hell, maybe even Traveler if she does come back with us. But I also want a place to just be. You know what I mean?”

Spica sighed, and smiled at her. “The sad thing is, I do. I totally understand what you mean. Living together is fun and all, but if I had the choice, I’d also want to run away with Elias and live on our own somewhere with two cats and a dog and just be. I think war does that to you. It makes you want to escape to somewhere where nothing is required of you.”

“Maybe we can find a spot to build the two of you a cabin as well,” Alfre offered. “A little cottage out in the Wilds for you and whatever pets you manage to find that resemble normal cats and dogs. Leave the guildhall to Traveler.”

“She’d go insane having that huge place all to herself and you know it,” Spica argued playfully.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Alfre agreed with a small laugh.

"I like the guildhall too much to just leave it, anyway," Spica admitted, twirling a few strands of hair around her finger. "I'd get lonely out in the Wilds, even if Elias was with me. I need to be in the city. We can just collect our pets in the guildhall."

Alfre simply smiled. "I suppose you could. As long as the dogs don't mistake Elias for a real rabbit."

Spica's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Now you know that would be terribly funny."

"Or just terrible, if you asked Elias."

"Must you ruin my fun?"

"Only because I love you."

"So, uh...how are we going to do this?" June asked, peering into the crates upon crates of potion bottles Silver and his alchemist compatriots had brought to the cathedral. "We can't exactly force them to drink it...can we? Is that a thing we can do?"

"Physically? Yeah, technically," Atticus said with a shrug. "But the thought makes me very uncomfortable."

"If you give me another few days, I can make them into splash potions," Silver offered. "I probably should have thought about that before hand."

"Well, here's the thing," Alfre thought aloud. "Either they drink the potion, or they stay in the cathedral forever. That's basically their two choices. We've been bringing them food, correct?"

Briar Fox nodded, looking displeased. "Not that they've been grateful for it."

"If we stop bringing them food, they'll have to rely on whatever food they have in their inventory. Eventually that will run out. We all know someone can't be killed, but that doesn't necessarily mean they can't *die*."

"What do you mean?" Hunter asked, arms crossed as they always were.

"A Fell cannot be killed for real by a monster, another player, or by a Wonderlander," Alfre explained, ticking off the list on her fingers. "But we have no proof that they won't die by more natural causes like starvation, dehydration, or whatever. Unless someone else has done an experiment."

None of the guild masters from Clover, Heart, or Diamond said anything.

"Which I guess means they're not sure either," she continued, gesturing towards the cathedral. "The threat of legitimately dying is probably enough to scare them into taking the potion."

"And if push comes to shove, I could always try to incorporate the potion into a rain storm spell," Selphie offered. "It requires a nearby source of liquid. Normally that means water, but I bet I could make it rain potion in the cathedral if necessary. We'd just have to make sure we don't get hit by any."

"We'll try the threat of death first," Ren decided. "If they don't take it, we'll make it rain. Sound fair."

"As fair as it's going to get," Hadi agreed with a sigh.

They entered the cathedral, Izo moving the roots of the druid tree to allow them to enter.

Summer looked up from where she sat on the altar, golden eyes wild and no less furious than they had been when Alfre shattered her. Upon seeing Alfre, she leapt from her seat, screaming furiously and catching the attention of the rest of the captives.

"YOU!" she screeched, marching towards Alfre, hands scrabbling at her side for a katana that wasn't there. Her eyes flew to Spica, who'd long since strapped Summer's katana to her back. Sea blue met molten gold, Summer's eyes widening even further as her fury mounted.

"How *dare* you!" she seethed. "Give me back my sword you hussy!"

Spica did not smirk. She did not frown. Nor did she smile. Her facial expression remained almost disturbingly neutral. "No."

Summer reached out to snatch at Spica's collar, only to have her hand smacked away by Elias' cane. "Don't touch her. You have no power here. And no weapons. Give up, and maybe we'll be kind about our offer."

"Offer?" Summer echoed, interest piqued even as she stared them down like a wild animal backed into a corner.

"Your punishment has been decided," Alfre told her, hand coming up to rest on the hilt of the Vorpall Blade. "We have a few hundred bottles of leveling down potions. You are each to drink one. Upon that time, you will be released from the cathedral and allowed to spend the rest of your sentence helping to rebuild the city you destroyed. After that, I don't really care what you do."

Summer scowled, eyes narrowing to glare at the guild masters. "And if we don't take your stupid potion?"

"Then you will remain in this cathedral," Alfre explained plainly. "And the meals we have been providing you with will stop. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure that starvation still does the same thing here as it does in the old world."

Summer's eyes widened once more, her fear and shock obvious. "You wouldn't dare!"

Alfre smirked. "Try me."

Summer took a step back, trying to find her balance. She found it quickly, spitting at Alfre's feet before turning around to stomp back towards the altar. "Take your potions and stick them up your ass. You won't get me to drink them. And you don't have the balls to starve us."

Alfre turned to the other Fell gathered about the cathedral. "Does she speak for all of you?"

Kilrakas, the dragonling Traveler killed in Rubino, stood from where he'd been sitting against a pillar. He looked tired. Most of the Fell the crowded around the floor did. "Nah, she don't speak for me."

Summer whipped around, hair slapping her in the face and killing whatever intimidation she'd had. "Kilrakas, you traitor!"

"Look, Summer," Kilrakas sighed heavily, rubbing at the bronze scales of his neck. "I liked the idea of having a continent just for us for a while, but if I have to keep fighting these guys, it just isn't worth it. And I really don't want to sit in here starving just to make you happy." He strode up to Traveler, holding out a hand. "Give me a potion."

Traveler carefully pulled a glass bottle from the crates and handed it over, her eyes never leaving the silvery-green liquid as it sloshed about in the glass. Kilrakas popped the cork, the smell of mint filling the air, and downed the potion. Alfre pulled out her little leather book, watching as Kilrakas' stats fell, slowly and then all at once, until they reached level one status.

Kilrakas wiped his chin, handing back the bottle. "There someone out there I should talk to about the whole rebuilding thing?"

Einmora stepped forward, "Come with me, I'll get you on the right track." She looked to Alfre and the others. "I'll stay out in the plaza and point the lambs in the right direction as you send them out."

"Thank you," Alfre said, nodding to Einmora.

The dwarven woman led Kilrakas out into the sunlight, the taller man shielding his eyes from the sun.

"Anyone else want to do this the easy way?" Ren called into the room.

The elven sorcerer that had been with Kilrakas in Rubino stepped forward to take a potion. He downed it and followed his friend outside. One by one, then four by four, until there was a sea of players coming forth to take a potion. Several lines formed, each of them taking a potion from one guild master or their lieutenants. Alfre found herself handing a potion over to the knight she'd killed in the final battle, who looked deeply ashamed. As he should, Alfre decided.

Eventually, only Summer and a small handful of her guild mates remained, apparently her most ardent supporters.

"So, you're going to sit here and starve?" Alfre demanded as the last of those who took the potions slipped through the door.

"You don't have the balls to leave us to starve," Summer accused.

Alfre just shrugged. "See for yourself." She turned to her friends. "Let's go."

"What about the rain spell?" Selphie asked quietly.

"We'll do that after a few days," Alfre said. "Let them have a taste of how serious we are before we do anything."

“That’s a bit cruel, don’t you think?” Hunter muttered.

“Nothing compared to what they did to the people here in Heart,” Alfre stated, her voice full of conviction.

Hunter shrugged. “Alright, that’s fair.”

Alfre and Selphie waited three days before they did anything. They strode into the cathedral, three bottles of potion between them. Summer’s gaze snapped towards them as the door slammed shut behind them, her eyes dull with hunger.

“You little bitch,” she rasped, the strength gone out of her voice even if the fight was still there. “You actually mean to starve us!”

“Only for a while,” Alfre admitted, uncorking the two bottles in her hands as Selphie began to mutter a spell under her breath. “In truth, you never had a choice to begin with. You were always going to have your levels taken away. I just wanted to let you have a chance to redeem yourselves, even if it was in a small way. Wanted to see if you were really as much of an arse as you appeared, or if you’d just gotten swept up in the propaganda you were spewing from your gob. Seems you and those buddies of yours really are as nasty as expected. The rest at least understood that they needed to own up to their actions. Now, the same will be forced onto you. Ready, Selphie?”

Selphie beamed like she was giving out candy to children. “Ready, Commander!”

A small, dark raincloud formed in the air above Summer and her three cohorts. Summer hissed as the potion hit her skin, but found herself too weak to move out of the rain. Alfre watched in her book as Summer’s levels disappeared before her eyes.

“Good thing Spica never gave you back your katana,” Alfre joked. “You wouldn’t be able to use it now anyway.”

“Shut your mouth, you bitch,” Summer hissed. “You think this will stop me? I’ll get my levels back eventually.”

“Yeah, probably,” Alfre agreed, striding towards the altar. “But you’ll hit the level cap just like everyone else. You’ll never be as strong as you used to be. And if you every try this bullshit again –” Alfre patted the hilt of the Vorpall Blade “—then your head is mine. And next time, you’re not getting out of this cathedral.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Alfre stood next to Orli as a series of magicians worked together to raise a marble pillar into place. The construction of Orli's temple was well on the way, several clerics ran about with blessed oil, painting it onto every viable surface to cleanse the building for proper use once it was done. Little Olivia led the charge, carrying a bowl of burning sage.

"I must admit," Orli said, sounding like she was honestly impressed, "I am pleased. So far anyway. You Fell know how to build, I'll give you that."

"There are many temples like this in the old world," Alfre explained. "They're all in disrepair by this point, since they're all ancient, but pretty much everyone knows about them. It was pretty easy to draw inspiration from them. Still, I'm glad you like it."

"I suppose I'm not allowed to demand sacrifices," Orli grumbled, but Alfre was fairly certain (or at least very hopeful) that she was kidding.

"No blood sacrifices, at least," Alfre agreed. "But they might be willing to leave you some wine, if that's your sort of thing."

"Wine is more of Abital's thing," Orli corrected. "Needs the booze to deal with his day job. Sweet fruits will be sufficient. That, and a well-kept temple. That's all I ask."

"You're being far less demanding than I expected," Alfre admitted, stuffing her hands into the pockets of her pants, direwolf coat buried deep in her inventory with how warm it was on Ahmar.

"My clerics will be fully informed of my preferences," Orli stated, sounding about as snooty as Alfre expected. "That little one Koseret blessed is doing fairly well, considering she wasn't originally my devotee."

"You protect her city now," Alfre said. "Even if she wasn't yours before, I think she loves her city enough to convert."

Orli nodded stiffly. "Good. I'd rather not lose such a dedicated cleric."

Alfre gave a casual shrug, not bothering to hide her amused smile. "As long as you hold up your end of the bargain, I think you'll find that the City of Heart will embrace you with open arms."

It was early winter before Alfre and the others managed to board their ships to leave for home. With rebuilding well under way, and Hadi and the other guild masters able to restore their authority, Alfre and the other guild masters of Spade, Clover, and Diamond felt that Heart was secure enough in its future to leave behind. Alfre had been more than happy to watch the people who had once flocked to her for guidance steadily turn their gazes towards Hadi, Einmora, Makoto, and the other guild masters from Heart. Even little Olivia was being sought after, having some how stumbled into Head Priestess status at the temple of Orli through sheer tenacity. Tori was both very proud and very concerned.

“You should let me bless your voyage,” Olivia had insisted not a day before the Spade army was to leave Ahmar. “Winter seas are rough, especially heading north. Canus told me so.”

Alfre had never once heard of such a thing from the Wonderlanders who sailed about on their fishing boats – and Canus’ snickering in the background of the conversation made her even less inclined to believe him – but Olivia seemed so damn determined to bless their voyage that Alfre couldn’t bring herself to refuse.

Olivia had arrived with four other clerics, all of them at least five years older than she was, and a whole entourage of other Fell and Wonderlanders from the city and beyond. Even Cassandra showed up to see them off, the imperial crown upon her head and far fewer guards at her side.

Olivia smeared holy oil on the hull of the ship as her fellow clerics burned sweet-smelling incense. She chanted in a language Alfre didn’t recognize (but assumed was Latin or something equally ancient), her whole body glowing pale lavender. Alfre had to admit the color looked better on her than Koseret’s blue did. She tapped the side of the ship with her staff, the sound far louder than Alfre expected.

“May these vessels be Light Touched,” Olivia incanted, her voice echoing with the same ancient power Alfre’s did when she used her spells. “May their passage over the Great Sea be safe and unhurried. May Orli watch over them until they reach shore.”

She slammed her staff down into the sandy ground, and a light breeze that had not been blowing before swept over those gathered. Alfre could practically feel Orli’s smirk in the wind.

Alfre and the others left shortly after, not wanting to overstay their welcome. It was time enough for the Fell from Heart to take their future into their own hands. Besides, Alfre thought, they’d been gone from home far too long. The plants in Wally’s garden would need a serious watering. The guildhall was likely full of dust. And who knew what sort of trouble those left behind had gotten up to. Cherry could only do so much on her own.

She stood up on top deck, staring out into the blue-grey ocean, the wind much colder than it had been when they left. Her direwolf coat whipped around her knees. She ran a hand through her hair in a half-hearted attempt to keep the wind from blowing it in her face.

“Miss Alfre?”

Alfre didn’t even bother to turn around. “You know, if we’re actually going to date, you really should drop the ‘miss’.”

Wally laughed, only a little embarrassed at being called out. “Sorry, it’s habit by now.”

Alfre smiled as he moved to stand beside her, linking arms with him the moment he was close enough.

“Are you happy to be going home?” he asked casually, though Alfre could tell there was something more on his mind.

“Yes,” she answered. “I’ll be more than happy to get back where I belong. Heart was nice, don’t get me wrong, but it was far too warm for little old me. Besides, I’m tired of being Commander. It’ll be nice to go back to just being Alfre.”

Wallace stared at her, and Alfre noticed how the sun made his eyes seem almost amber-colored. How had she not noticed before?

“But you’ll never be Just Alfre, you know,” he mused. “You can’t ever shake the title of Commander. If anything like this happens again, the people will turn to you, especially now that everyone knows how special you are.”

“I’m not special,” Alfre argued mildly, turning her gaze back out to the sea.

“Alfre Gordon, Guild Master of the Alliance of Frozen Stars,” Wally recited, his tone far too serious for Alfre’s comfort. “Commander of the Fell Army, Favored One of the Wilds, Blessed by the Great Druid, Death’s Chosen Champion, Light Touched...Master of the Vorpall Blade.” His eyes fell to the sword at Alfre’s hip. “The others may have received blessings as well, but none of them are blessed by all the gods. None of them wield the most important sword in the history of Wonderland. You’re special, Alfre, whether you want to believe it or not.”

Alfre sighed heavily, feeling the weight fall back on her shoulders. “And Spica wonders why I want to run away to the Wilds and live like a hermit in a little cottage.”

“And leave me behind?” Wallace asked in mock horror. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Alfre smiled. “No, I’d steal you away and make you plant a new garden. Make you help me repair the cottage; maybe add onto it. There’s no way I could fit all three of you in there with me otherwise.”

“All three of us?” he echoed curiously. He quickly realized what she meant. “Oh, Canus, Abital, and me. Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Alfre agreed. She squeezed his arm a little tighter. “Are you okay with that?”

“Honestly, I don’t know if I am,” Wally admitted, turning his eyes out to the sea. “Is that the only way I can be with you?”

Alfre pulled away, leaning her arms against the deck railing. “I don’t think I’m capable of choosing just one of you, as selfish as that may seem. Canus and Abital have already agreed that they are willing to share. And...I have to admit...if it was between just you and just the two of them, I think I’d chose the two of them. I’m sorry.”

Wally shook his head, red hair whipping in the wind. “It’s fine. I knew from the beginning that my affection for you could never really be more than a crush. I am...happy that you loved me back. But if you can’t love only me...then I just don’t think it could work.”

“I understand.” Alfre inhaled deeply in an attempt to fight off the tears that threatened to fall. “If you ever change your mind...”

“Thank you,” he cut her off before she could finish her thought. “Really, thank you. For everything.”

“It sounds like you’re going to leave us,” Alfre whispered. “The guild, I mean.”

“No, no, I could never leave the guild,” Wally assured her. “I may not be able to share you in that way, Miss Alfre, but I would never throw away our friendship, or the friendship I have with Miss Spica and Mister Elias. Nor could I abandon the garden. I worked way too hard on it.”

Alfre laughed, and that made ignoring her tears a little easier.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Alfre was never so happy to see the snowy, cloudy skies over Spade. Nor had she ever been so excited to approach the grimy, smelly docks, absolutely crowded with the lower-level Fell that had been left behind. They parted like the Red Sea as the gangplank was lowered and Atticus led the way off the ship and into the roars of the celebratory crowd.

Alfre stepped up to follow the stream of players down the rickety wooden plank, jumping when two sets of hands wrapped around her elbows.

“Okay,” Spica said into her ear as she and Elias practically carried Alfre down the gangplank. “You’ve been kinda mopey for the past two days. What happened?”

“Nothing you need to worry about, I’m fine,” Alfre insisted.

Elias eyed her dubiously. “Al, I can tell when you’re lying.”

“I never said you can call me Al,” Alfre grumbled, ignoring Spica as she began humming the song Alfre had inadvertently referenced.

“Just tell us,” Elias pleaded as they set foot on the far less rickety wood of the docks.

Alfre sighed. “Wally has decided that he’d rather not be in a relationship with me if it involves Canus and Abital.”

Spica faltered in her stride, her shock far more obvious than her emotions tended to be. “Oh. I’m sorry to hear that, darling.”

Elias frowned deeply. “You’re certain? We were so sure he’d follow you to the ends of the earth.”

“I’m certain,” Alfre said with a small nod, letting her friends steer her in the direction of the guildhall. “Really, I’m alright. I’ll be mopey for a few days, but I think most people are after a rejection like that. Besides, I still have Abital and Canus. Two out of three isn’t bad.”

“He’s not going to leave the guild, is he?” Elias asked, worry evident in the way his ears drooped.

“No, no,” Alfre assured him. “He’s more than willing to stay in the guild. He said he didn’t want to abandon his friendships. Or the garden.”

“Him and that garden,” Spica muttered. “Where is he, anyway?”

“Probably helping Traveler find her way to the hall,” Alfre grouched. “Seeing as we left her behind.”

Elias flushed pink at the realization. “Oh! Well, I feel bad now.”

“Should we turn back?” Spica asked, turning to look over her shoulder at the swarm of people disembarking.

“Maybe just wait for them at the end of the docks,” Alfre suggested. “So we’re out of the way, you know.”

They paused where the wood of the dock met the cobblestones of the streets, waiting patiently for Traveler and Wally to make their way through the adoring crowd. June and Doremi passed them as they waited, hugging each of them in turn. Hunter gave them a nod as he marched by with his guild, Henry waving a bit more enthusiastically to Spica as they went. Lance passed by with some stragglers from the Knights of the Burning Oak, clasping hands with Alfre for a moment before moving on. Even Ludovico and Maldrom greeted them as they passed.

Eventually, Traveler and Wallace made their way towards them, Traveler leading Wally by the hand like one would a child. By that point, Abital and Canus had joined Alfre and the others in their waiting.

“Quite the welcome!” Traveler exclaimed with a laugh. “Never thought I’d see the day when someone greeted me like that!”

“It’s very overwhelming,” Wally said, his voice a little shaky.

Alfre smiled gently. “Then we should head home. It’s bound to be quieter there.”

“Do we have enough linens for Traveler’s bed?” Elias asked as they turned to wander up the familiar streets.

“Oh, probably, we bought far more than we ever expected to need,” Spica assured blithely, linking hands with him as they went.

Traveler released Wally’s hand to trot up beside them, humming contently as she took in the sights of the city. It’d been far too long since she’d been in Spade. Wallace followed close behind, content to listen to the conversation.

Alfre found herself walking a little slower, watching her friends as they made their way up the street. She found herself suddenly very glad she’s won that little writing contest what felt like so long ago. How many people could claim they met their best friends by falling into a video game world? How many people could claim that their friends followed them into battle with an evil empire without a shred of hesitation? She couldn’t think it was many.

She felt Abital’s comforting hand settle on the small of her back and Canus’ firm grip wrap around her shoulders. She smiled. Yes, even though she’d lost Wally, she could be content with this. Perhaps it was better this way, it was much easier to hold two hands than three.

It took Traveler five seconds to find the guild’s ledger and another two seconds to sign her name to it. It took the four of them thirty minutes to make her bed, breaking out into a pillow fight mere seconds after the first sheet was set. It took them another ten minutes to calm down enough to wander back down stairs to eat. It took them hours of simply sitting in front of the fireplace and talking before they felt ready to even think about sleeping.

And once she was settled in bed – Abital on one side, Canus on the other, and Beira at her feet – it took Alfre no time at all to fall asleep.

Epilogue

“So, you’re really leaving us,” Spica said, hands on her hips and a frown on her red lips.

It was spring again, or the Siniy equivalent of it – barely melted snow allowing what few flowers grew in Siniy’s taiga soil to sprout.

“Not really,” Alfre admitted. “Just going to find myself a weekend home, really. Trust me, you’re not getting rid of me that easily. Besides...I really want to find that cottage again. It’s important to me.”

“We can go with you, if you’d like,” Elias offered. “Help you find it.”

Alfre shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve got it marked on my map. Might come back and grab you to help fix it though.”

“We could just go with you,” Traveler said. “Save you the trip.”

“The trip is half the fun though!” Canus reasoned, tail wagging happily behind him.

“Well, when you do want us to come, I’ll bring you a few plants to help start your garden,” Wally offered, smiling gently.

Alfre returned his smile with one of her own. “I’d appreciate that.”

Elias, Spica, Traveler, and Wally bid her a safe journey, watching her until they could no longer see her shape on the horizon. Canus walked beside her, hand in hers like it belonged there. They passed by the ebony doors of Abital’s new temple, Alfre’s shadow taking on a new weight as they did.

“Welcome aboard, Abital,” Alfre greeted in jest. “You gonna stay in there the whole time or are you going to greet me properly?”

She felt the weight in her shadow disappear, replaced with a hand on her back and a soft kiss to her cheek.

“Hello, beloved,” Abital whispered, dark, smoky shadows swirling about their feet as he came into physical form.

“And here I thought you didn’t do nicknames,” Canus teased. “Don’t tell me you’ve been lying to snowbird all this time.”

“Hardly,” Abital sniffed. “I was simply waiting for a more appropriate time in our relationship.”

“Whatever you say, gloomy,” Canus said with a roll of his eyes.

“Boys, we haven’t even left the city yet,” Alfre chided lightly. “At least wait until there’s no one around to hear before you start bickering.”

Alfre waited until they reached the city gate before mounting Beira. Canus slipped into wolf form and Abital once again settled into her shadow. She pulled out her map, finding the dot of blue that marked the location of her cottage. She lowered the map for Beira and Canus to see.

“Can you take us there?” she asked. Beira wuffed confidently, taking off into the open farmland the moment Alfre had tucked the map away, nearly sending her rider flying back.

They rode throughout the whole day and well into the night. Alfre couldn’t remember how long the journey took them the first time, when Alfre was but a newbie and Elias spent the whole trek training her. Days, probably, a week even. With Beira’s help, the Wilds gave way like grass to fire.

“This is the place you’ve been so obsessed with?” Canus asked incredulously as he sniffed about the clearing. “Snowbird, it’s a wreck.”

“I told you we’d have to fix it up,” she reminded, slipping off of Beira’s back. She walked towards the cottage, her boots crunching in the thin layer of snow that still covered the ground. There were no flowers yet, but she was sure that by the time they were done fixing up the tiny house, the whole clearing would be covered in them. “This place means a lot to me. It saved me from all the nasty things out here my first night. I guess I want to pay it back for that.”

Abital slipped from her shadow, his arms settling around her shoulders as he hugged her loosely from behind. “I’m sure you’ll make it lovely.”

“That’s the goal,” Alfre agreed. “Might need to add on to it. Don’t think there’s enough room for the three of us as it is.”

“Probably not,” Abital mused, eyeing the cottage like a real estate agent.

“Well, it doesn’t do us any good to stand around talking about it,” Canus said, morphing back into his human form. “Let’s get to work, yeah?”

Alfre beamed. “Yeah!”

They set to work dusting the whole place while they still had daylight. Once night came, they set up a small sleeping area of bedrolls and warm blankets they’d ‘stolen’ from the guildhall (they had no memory of packing them, and Alfre suspected Wallace of stuffing them into their packs before they left). The next morning, they found a set of old rags in a kitchen cabinet and set about scrubbing down every surface of the cottage, removing furniture from the space as they went and depositing it outside.

“Hey, what are these?” Alfre asked, running her hand along a line of unfamiliar markings she’d uncovered while scrubbing the outside of the copper bathtub.

“Looks like that’s how they get away with not having any running water in the house,” Abital said, taking a close look at the markings. “It’s a spell. It summons and heats water when you turn the tab. And then it removes it when you turn the tab off.”

“Wouldn’t that make the water overflow the tub?” Alfre asked, continuing with her scrubbing.

"I assume it stops filling the tub once it reaches the inscription," Abital said, peaking inside the tub. "Ah, yes, that seems to be correct. The runes are inside as well."

"We'll have to test it out later," Alfre decided. "I'll certainly need a bath when this is all over. Check the kitchen sink to see if it has the same spell on it too."

Abital drifted off, leaving Alfre to her cleaning. She wasn't left for very long, however.

"Oi, Alfre!" Elias' voice drifted in through the open window. "The cavalry has arrived!"

Alfre stuck her head out the window, grinning at the small army of people arriving in the clearing. Elias, Spica, Traveler, and Wally were all expected faces (though she hadn't expected them so soon), but she hadn't even begun to imagine that the others would show up as well. June, Doremi, Atticus, Lance, Ren, Ran, Silver, Izo, even Hunter, Maldrom, Ludovico, and Cherry had come to lend a hand. Maldrom had even brought along a small cart piled high with building materials.

"Hey, hey!" she greeted. "How the bloody hell did you manage to drag this lot out here?"

"We didn't drag them anywhere, darling," Spica corrected. "They simply realized you were gone and asked where you had run off to. The moment they learned about your little project, they offered to help."

"Really?" Alfre was more than a little surprised. "Even Hunter and Ludovico?"

"You make it sound like we hate you," Hunter grumbled, crossing his arms like he always did.

"To be fair, I'm pretty certain that you did for a while," Alfre admitted.

"Yeah, well, times change," Hunter said with a shrug. "Do you want our help or not?"

Alfre made a show of thinking about it. "Yeah, sure, why the hell not? Grab a rag and start scrubbing, you lot!"

Rags were grabbed until there were no more rags to grab. Those without went about other tasks, such as removing the cracked and broken windows. Izo went about gathering up what linens there were in the house and carting them off towards the nearest river with June for a good washing. Ren and Silver set up a clothesline using some old fishing line they had from their early days and a random pole from Maldrom's cart. Spica and Wally went about making a list of housewares the cottage was missing – things like silverware and plates and better dishtowels (seeing as the old ones would never be truly clean again after being used to scrub down the house). Maldrom and Cherry, who Alfre quickly learned had once been going to college for interior design, gave the whole place a once over before sequestering themselves off in corner to pour over blueprints and rough sketches.

"Alfre," Cherry called sometime later, waving her over. "We've been doing some thinking, about how to best add on to the cottage to make it work for the three of you, I mean. And we wanted your opinion."

"I would hope so, it's my place," Alfre joked, crouching down to look over the drawings. "Whatcha got for me?"

“Well...” Cherry shuffled through the papers. “The easiest thing to do would be to simply add a bedroom onto the side here, have that be a separate space with a large bed. That would give you all this space as normal living space. We also thought about raising the roof and adding a loft up there instead. Or, we could leave the bed alone and simply extend the living area, move the kitchen back a few feet, you know. Which do you like?”

Alfre stared at the concept art, absentmindedly noting that Cherry really did have a knack for drawing. “Hmmm, well. Could we not do all three? I think the separate bedroom is important, of course. But I also really like the idea of a little loft up top, maybe have a guest bed up there or a small reading nook. And honestly, I’d like to have a larger kitchen space. I’ve only got two counters here, you know.”

Cherry and Maldrom exchanged a look. “That’s a lot of work,” Maldrom warned her. “It’ll take a long while to get it all done. Are you sure that’s what you want?”

Alfre smiled. “I think it’ll be worth it.”

“It’ll look very different from how it does now if we do all three,” Cherry said. “Are you okay with that?”

“I think it’ll be fine,” Alfre replied, looking about the cottage. “It’s not like we’re gonna be tearing it down. The old space will still be there. Besides, what’s the point of changing something, if you’re not gonna make it the best thing you can make it?”

Maldrom and Cherry shared another look, this one far more confident than the last.

“I suppose you’re right,” Cherry agreed.

“Best be ready to work your arse off, lass,” Maldrom said, shaking his pencil at her.

Alfre beamed. “If I wasn’t prepared for that, I wouldn’t have come out here.”

“Fair enough,” Maldrom grunted as he stood. “I’ll have to go back to Spade for more supplies, and probably more workers. Ones that actually know what they’re doing.”

“Rude, but fair enough,” Alfre said, sticking out her tongue at the dwarf. “I look forward to it.”

Maldrom and Cherry left that very night, along with Hunter and Ludovico. Elias, Spica, Wally, Traveler, Ren, Ran, Izo, Silver, June, Doremi, Atticus, and Lance all crowded together on the cottage floor, only barely fitting. Alfre couldn’t help but laugh to herself. Even when she went out into the Wilds to find some time to herself, she ended up surrounded by friends. Not that she minded terribly. It was good to have people you could count on.

Maldrom and Cherry returned two days later with an actual elk-drawn wagon full of supplies and a good dozen or so builders from their guilds. They set to work, half of them starting on the extensions to the cottage while the others went about making new furniture.

“But I liked the old table,” Alfre insisted as she watched one of Maldrom’s guild members cart off the table she’d spent so long scrubbing down.

“That table was going to give you splinters, darling,” Spica informed her tartly. “Let the nice young man build you a new one.”

Alfre didn’t pout, she promised. “Can I at least pick out what wood they build it out of?”

“If you ask nicely, I’m sure they’ll let you,” Spica agreed.

Alfre glared at her friend half-heartedly before stomping off to talk to Maldrom about how much control she had in the project.

With the roof being raised, no one was allowed to sleep inside the cottage. Instead, Cherry had brought along several unusually large tents.

“Is this a tent, or the Taj Mahal?” Traveler joked as they set out their bedrolls.

“It’s the Tent Mahal,” Ren replied with a tooth grin, earning a groan from Silver and most of the others even as Traveler gave her a high five.

“Don’t encourage her,” Ran pleaded, burying his face in the travel pillow he’d brought as best he could.

“Are you sure you can fit a bed up there?” Ren asked as she, Alfre, and Maldrom watched one of Maldrom’s guild members lay down the flooring for the loft.

“Well, it’ll be more like just a mattress on the floor,” Maldrom admitted. “But it’ll be plenty comfortable. You’ll be able to stand up there, probably. Dragonlings like Atticus probably won’t, but Alfre here won’t have an issue.”

“It’s perfect,” Alfre assured him. “Just what I imagined.”

“That’s what we’re aiming for,” Maldrom agreed. “Now, about paint...”

It was the first day of summer before the project was finished, the sky blue flowers that Alfre loved so much already spreading over the clearing. Two years since Alfre had fallen into Wonderland and spent her first night holed up in a tiny, broken down cottage, and now she was back where she started. Only, they were both far better now than when they’d started, she and this little cottage she’d decided to call home. Moss still grew a bit on the rough stone that made up the base of the cottage’s walls, but the windows were new and clean, no cracks in sight. The dust and cobwebs were gone, and so was Alfre’s fear of the Wilds. They’d both been alone that first night, but now they were both surrounded by friends.

“It’s lovely, Alfre,” Elias said, his voice soft and little bit in awe.

“Thank you,” Alfre replied, smiling softly. “You’re welcome to visit anytime, as long as I’m here anyway. But, I’ll have to admit...I miss the city right now.”

“Really?!” Ren said incredulously, her voice louder than strictly necessary. “You spent all this time and effort on this place and now you want to go gallivanting off to the city?”

“Well, not right now!” Alfre shot back playfully. “Maybe in a day or two. My guild needs me, you know. I can’t spend all my time out here.”

“What? Are me and Abital not enough for you?” Canus teased, ears twitching playfully.

“I’m hurt, beloved,” Abital added, his expression completely deadpan even as his eyes sparkled with mirth.

“Oh shush, both of you,” Alfre chided.

“I’ll keep your bed made and your room clean at the guildhall,” Wally offered. “Whenever you need to come back.”

“Thank you,” Alfre said, smiling gently.

“Don’t forget, you have a duty to the Guild Council,” June reminded her. “Can’t have you escaping to the woods too often, you know.”

“I know,” Alfre agreed.

“And you’re still our commander,” Atticus said, a hint of reverence in his voice. “We will call upon you when we need you.”

“Oh, I doubt you’ll need me for that.”

“I do expect you to come along when we ask your guild for a quest,” Ludovico insisted. “It’s not really the Alliance of Frozen Stars if there’s no one to freeze anything.”

“See, now you’re just being selfish,” Alfre grumbled, causing a ripple of laughter to run through her friends and comrades.

“We’ll miss you when you’re out here,” Traveler admitted easily. “The guildhall just won’t be the same without you and your adoring fans.” She eyed Abital and Canus she spoke.

“I’m taking that as a compliment, by the way,” Canus drawled, grinning wolfishly at the hero.

“Good,” Spica spoke up before Traveler could. “If you didn’t, I’d be concerned you didn’t love Alfre nearly as much as she deserved.”

“Don’t worry, Champion,” Abital assured her. “You never have to worry about that.”

“Champion,” Spica echoed, tasting the word on her tongue. “I quiet like that. Did you hear that, dear? He called me Champion.”

“I’m not going to call you that, starlight,” Elias said, stopping that train before it even left the station.

Spica pouted. “You’re just no fun.”

“That’s not what you said last night.”

“I know for a fact you two didn’t do anything last night,” Alfre snapped. “Because you were in my bloody loft and if you did do anything, your heads would be mine.”

Spica smirked. “Oh?”

Alfre hand went to the hilt of the Vorpall Blade. “I swear to God, Spica, if you two did anything...”

“Alright, everyone calm down,” Silver sighed even as Ren chanted ‘Fight! Fight! Fight!’

“All of ye, get outta here.” Alfre shoed with a wave of her hand. “Me and my boys would like to have some peace and quiet. You know, the thing I came out here for.”

Elias laughed, reaching out to hug Alfre, lifting her right off the ground. “We’ll miss you, Alfre.”

Alfre rolled her eyes even as she wrapped her arms around her oldest, dearest friend. “I know, you sap. I’ll miss ye, too.”

Elias set her down, only for her to be scooped up once more by Traveler.

“Don’t be a stranger,” she said. “Or like me. I’ve learned the hard way that disappearing on your friends is probably the worst thing you could do.”

“Aye. And if you pulled that shite on our guild like you did on Ren, I’ll hunt you down myself,” Alfre warned.”

Traveler pulled away with a mischievous smile. “Noted.”

Each of her friends hugged her in turn, Atticus and Lance lifting her easily from the ground, and Ren full out spinning her about. The last to do so was Spica, who waited until everyone save her guild mates had left.

“You know,” she said, her voice soft and almost a bit shy. “You’re my very best friend. I’m very glad I met you all those months ago.”

Alfre smiled, taking Spica’s hands into her own. “And you’re mine. I’m grateful to you and Elias both. You gave me the confidence to lead an army. I hated it when you ran off with Ren to take the cathedral. It felt like a part of me left with you. You’re both so important to me. Thank you.”

Spica took a deep, shaky breath. “Oh, stop it. You’re going to make me cry, and then what will happen to my reputation.”

“I don’t give a damn about your reputation,” Alfre said with a laugh. She pulled Spica into a hug, honestly delighted when she hugged back despite her protests about her ‘reputation.’

“You come back as often as possible, you hear me, darling,” Spica demanded, her voice wavering and Alfre thought she could feel drops of wetness soak into her shirt. “We’ll all be terribly lonely without you.”

“Of course,” Alfre agreed, pulling away. “But you have to leave before I can actually visit. Go on, Elias is waiting for you. And I’m sure his shoulders are much better to cry on than mine. They better match your height.”

Spica inhaled deeply once more, dabbing at her eyes with her black scarf. “I suppose you’re right.” She turned her sharp gaze on Abital and Canus. “You take care of her, you hear me. If I hear one bad thing about either of you, I’m going to make you pay.”

“Aye, we hear you, girlie,” Canus agreed. Abital simply nodded, a reassuring look in his eyes.

Spica nodded stiffly. “Good.” And with that she turned on her heel and marched out of the clearing, taking Elias’ hand tightly in hers as she reached him.

Alfre stood in the middle of the silent clearing for a long moment, taking in the smell of the blossoms on the crisp wind. The silence, after so much talking, both weighed heavily on her shoulders and felt like a relief.

“Beloved.” Alfre turned to see Abital waiting for her even as Canus was already trotting towards the open cottage door where Beira stood watching them expectantly. “Shall we retire?”

Alfre breathed deeply, taking in the air of the Wilds, letting it fill her lungs and renew her. “Aye. Let’s.”

She took Abital’s offered hand in her own, and went home.