

DEUS TERRA: THE LAND OF THE GODS



FANTASY



Volume 1

A Country Bumpkin Goes to the City.

Prologue – The Strongest in the Kingdom.

Why are there people here?

For the gods, why are there people in this forest in the dead of night!?

Samuel, a 20-year-old knight captain and 4 of his most trusted men rode their horses out of the capital the moment news reached them. A couple of powerful monsters had been sighted close to a nearby village. They urged their horses to run as fast as they could, each knight praying to whatever god they believed in that the guards be able to hold out long enough.

Just one monster sighting was a rare occurrence, but two at the same time even more so. Thankfully, the report said the monsters were fighting each other, so the main dangers were collateral damage and whatever the surviving monster would do after its victory.

The smiles of the guards of Planta Village when they arrived added some pressure to Samuel's shoulders. He and his men wore the distinct armor of the kingdom's knights, and Samuel was one of the few knights allowed to wear full-plate armor. Just seeing its engravings and silver-like glimmer gave these people hope. They trust them to keep them safe, and he would always put his life on the line to answer to that trust.

They pointed them southeast, in the direction both monsters had disappeared, deep into the Noble Woods. In the best-case scenario, one of the monsters would be dead and the other deeply wounded, but they had to be prepared for anything.

Samuel and his knights rode into the forest with haste. Their torches, lit with Samuel's unique fire magic, pierced through the darkness like sunlight. It was only thanks to said torches that they were able to see them in the distance, roughly 70 meters ahead.

Why is there someone here now of all times!?

There is a person there, face to face with one of the reported monsters, with their back against a tree and holding a sword in front of them. The creature is an enormous snake, easily five meters long and with a body as thick as the biggest big oak tree in this very forest and with dark green skin. The intense light of their torches reflects on the monster's huge fangs, just as big as a man's arm.

Samuel urges his horse to run faster, but the poor creature is already giving it its all. The horses of Samuel's brigade are some of the best in the kingdom. They're strong, resilient and fast, yet with a person in danger in front of him at this very moment, they feel painfully slow.

In less than five seconds they cross over half the distance, but Samuel still feels powerless. He could kill the monster now with a spell, but there is a chance he will also hurt that person.

The knight captain's chest tightens painfully when he sees the snake lunge, its fangs looking as sharp as the swords his men have already unsheathed. Then he sees it. A desperate swing of the sword that slices cleanly through one of those fangs and even a part of the snake's mouth. The monster recoils in pain, its hiss traveling through every corner of the forest.

That strike gives him hope, because desperation was not all that carried it. Samuel could practically see the years of practice and experience that gave birth to a swing like that, coupled with an expert control of the magic inside the body to enhance natural physical abilities.

This person is no amateur. No, now that he's closer, he can see clearly. The person with the sword is an adult woman with fiery red hair arranged into a long braid. She's definitely equipped to expect combat in her travels, wearing a long dark gambeson. There's a thin line of blood running down from her forehead through her face, and a quick scan of the surroundings lets him find a leather helmet some distance away, the protective equipment torn as if damaged by claws. He also notices that the snake monster has several other cuts along its underside.

Everything else happens way too quickly.

The eyes of the woman scour her surroundings with extreme urgency, yet the light coming from their torches and the loud steps of their horses make her turn to them. That's when the second monster leaps.

The intense lights cast shadows just as strong from the surrounding trees, a perfect hiding place for a monster with deep black fur. It looks like a big, ferocious cat. Its body, however, is almost bulging with muscle, not to mention it stands on six legs. Its fangs, while big and sharp-looking, pale in comparison to the claws on its forelegs, as big and as dangerous as daggers.

In its leap, the feline monster manages to scratch the woman's stomach. No, it tore through the gambeson, but the woman is unscathed. For its troubles, the black cat receives a powerful kick on its own stomach as a trade, sending it flying against a tree.

Samuel is almost there. He stands on the stirrups and draws his longsword in a swift motion, intending to slice the head of the snake. He allows the magic within his soul to flow through his veins, feeding power to every single corner of his body.

But he's still too slow.

In its rage, the snake monster disregards all thought for self-preservation and lunges again, catching the woman in the middle of returning to position after the kick. She puts up her right arm to guard, but the remaining sharp fang pierces through her upper arm.

"AAAAAH!!"

The woman screams in agony, letting go of her sword just as Samuel finally slices the head of the snake in one, clean swing. Blood spurts into the grass and trees. Separated, the body falls to the ground with a loud thud, and the monster manages a final hiss.

With even his senses enhanced by the magic, it only takes him one look around to notice the feline monster is gone.

"Look for the other one! Be wary of the shadows and cover each other's back!" Samuel shouts his orders to his men, who unmount their horses for better mobility in the forest.

Samuel unmounts as well, immediately getting closer to the injured woman. The head of the snake is still stuck to her arm by the fang. To make matters worse, he notices drops of a clear liquid falling to the ground from the tip of said fang.

"Cut my arm!" She woman shouts even before he can say anything. "The poison's gonna spread if you don't! This arm is useless now anyway..." Despite all, the woman smirks. She's exhausted and in incredible pain, but she still smirks.

"Are you sure?" Samuel asks, but still raises his word above his head.

"Just fucking do it!" The woman yells and bites her left sleeve with all her remaining strength as she stops the flow of magic within her body.

One swift slash slices through skin, muscle and bone. It would be presumptuous to say, but he's confident no other warrior in the kingdom could've performed a cleaner cut. Hopefully he made it as painless as possible.

The woman groans loudly, her face twisted and sweaty. Samuel throws the head of the snake aside to get a better look at the woman's arm. The poison might not be a problem anymore, but she'll still die of blood loss if nothing is done.

"I can cauterize the wound, but it'll hurt." He tells her, earning himself glare.

"As if I'm having the time of my life here. Stop fucking talking and do it!" She growls.

Samuel quickly gets a potion from the pouch attached to his horse's saddle. It won't solve everything, but it should help prevent and remove infections as well as serve as a painkiller. He pours it unceremoniously all over the wound before putting his own hand over it.

"I'm doing it." He announces, watching the woman grit her teeth.

The knight focuses on his magic again. This time, instead of focusing in making it flow through his body, he lets it seep outside of it. He controls it, molds it to the exact form he needs and then combusts it.

The flame he creates in his hand is not like normal fire. It shines brighter than any other flame, almost golden. It burns hotter as well, sealing the wound in mere seconds.

The woman groans again, but releases a heavy breath she'd been holding. She pants heavily, but still looks at him with urgency. "My son is behind this tree..." She says. "He's sick...! Take him to the capital!"

Her son? No wonder she stood her ground so valiantly.

Samuel nods and looks behind the tree. There is indeed a boy there, resting against the tree and wrapped in thick clothing. His young face is covered slightly by his semi-short black hair, he can't be older than 15. He's sweating and his face is twisted in pain. He thrashes around and groans as if his whole body hurt. Touching his forehead reveals a very high fever.

"We'll get you two to the capital. My men should take care of the remaining monster soon enough and we'll head there as fast as our horses can take us. I promise."

"Thank you..." The woman smiles, allowing herself some relief.

Yet Samuel can do nothing but blame himself for what just happened to her. If he'd been a second faster; if he had better long-range spells at his disposal; if they had ridden out the capital a minute earlier. Countless situations where he could've, and should've, performed better and this woman would still have her health and her arm.

A sudden pain in his chest and a dark feeling interrupts his thoughts.

That's the best way to describe it. He feels it deep within his soul and it shakes him to his very core. Something like a dark aura passing through him. Not inherently evil, but definitely unnatural and... wrong. The pain it left as it passed fades quickly, leaving only confusion.

He's... sweating, he realizes. And shaking. What was that? Where did it come from?

"What the fuck...?" He hears the woman mutter and sees her holding a hand to her chest. Did she feel that as well?

A loud growl resounds through the forest, and the voices of Samuel's men follow. They shout information at each other and commands to remain alert and close together.

That distracted him from the attack that came his way. No, there was no way he ever would've expected an attack to come from the sick boy.

He swipes his arm in front of him, and Samuel manages to put his arms in front of himself right on time. The strike is far stronger than it should be, however. It pushes him back slightly, and even makes a small dent in his gauntlet.

"A-Arthur...!?" The boy's mother speaks, noticing movement behind her. No, not just movement. There's magical energy coursing through the boy's body, the intensity of which is rarely ever present in a human.

Having pushed him aside, the boy called Arthur shoots into a dash. With a body powered by powerful energy, he covers almost five meters with his startup alone.

The lingering light of a torch reflects on an object in Arthur's hand. Just when did he pick his mother's sword? And where is he even going?

Samuel runs magic through his own body and follows after the boy immediately. He won't allow anything to happen to him while he's here.

Out of the shadows and right in front of the boy leaps the feline monster. Its eyes have become the color of its fur and an aura just as dark envelops it. It crashes with Arthur, and the two roll around for several meters, the sword dropping from the boy's hand.

They stop, and the monster finds itself with a small human on top of it. That doesn't make it defenseless in any way. Samuel manages to reach them in time. He grabs the daring kid from the back of his thick coat and pulls him away before two of the monster's claws can even put a scratch on him. Without a moment's delay, the knight captain pierces through the feline's throat with his sword. He sends a current of magic that travels through his hand and sword and reaches the creature, lighting it up on the same golden fire as before.

The monster thrashes on the ground and lets out loud cries of pain, but Samuel has it pinned. In only a few second, the black cat is dead. The body is charred and the strong, terrible smell of burnt flesh permeates the air. Both threats are taken care of, but in his relief, he almost forgets he is still holding the woman's son. He is quick to remind him.

The kid swats away the arm holding him from the back of his collar, freeing himself. Samuel blinks a couple of times, trying to make sense of what's going on.

Not only is the boy about as strong as an adult male, perhaps more, but the magic coursing through him is powerful. He has to do a double take when his eyes focus on him again. He could've sworn Arthur's hair was black a minute ago, but now it's deep red, as if stained by the blood spilled here. And his eyes. They're yellow and almost... reptilian, in a way. His glare studies him carefully, and his body language, with a hunched back and arms spread in an almost animalistic way, tell of obvious hostility.

The boy's charge against him stops his thoughts. He jumps at him with unnatural leg strength and makes a wide swing to punch him. It poses no threat, however. Samuel can easily sidestep that and all of his next attempts at violence.

"Arthur...! Stop that, you idiot! What's gotten into you!?" His mother cries, her voice barely coming out.

The sound of heavy steps and armor rattling tells Samuel that his men are close.

"Grab the kid!" One of the knights yells.

"Stay where you are." Samuel orders, evading another incoming blow. "Let him tire himself out."

The captain lets the boy try and try to punch him, and just as he expected, he soon tires out. His movements become more and more sluggish until he collapses on the grass. Interestingly, his red hair and yellow eyes go back to normal just as that happens.

Slowly and sluggishly, his mother crawls next to him. She touches his forehead and looks at Samuel. "His fever has gone down, but..."

"Has this happened before?"

"No! He was never able to use Prana before! I don't understand!"

"..." Samuel already has a few theories, but they can wait. "Get her and the boy on the horses. We're taking them back to capital immediately!"

"Sir. What about the monsters?"

"Joseph, Manuel. Ride to the village and help the guards with the corpses. There shouldn't be any more danger but protect them if necessary. Make sure they're sent to Clock Tower. The mages will want to have a look at them."

"Yes sir!" The knights answer, unhesitant.

People call Samuel the strongest man in the kingdom, a title he takes as a heavy responsibility. But his men are the best the knights have to offer. Even if he wasn't here, they would've been able to take care of the monsters. Joseph and Maanuel will be fine on their own.

"Roland. We'll return to the capital. Help the lady to your horse. I'll take the boy in case he goes wild again."

"Yes sir." The third man answer quickly.

Both the woman and her son have completely passed out. Their conditions seem stable at a first glance, but Samuel is no doctor. He needs to take them back to Radiant City and have them healed.

> **What's next?**

> **Chapter 1: Journey to the capital.**

Today is the day. Her son is still in his bedroom, packing the last of his things. He'll finally leave this house and go to the capital. He's waited three years for this day.

Scarlett looks down at her missing right arm and remembers the night that set things in motion. The night her boy started... changing.

Scarlett had been a courier for most her life. A dangerous job, but she loved it. When her husband died, she started taking Arthur, only 10 years old at the time, with her on her travels from town to town. And while Scarlett was more than strong enough to be considered one of the most reliable couriers in the kingdom, she was a terrible businesswoman.

Most of the time she made deliveries for the minimum payment, and more than once for absolutely free. She wasn't in it for the money, after all. She did it because she loved traveling and seeing people. Money was never the goal.

She spent all of Arthur's life teaching him just that, and he had learned well. Her boy was happy to go with her on month-long trips from one end of the country to the other, even if it meant little recompense. He developed a liking for adventure.

But things changed that night.

"I'm ready, mom."

Arthur comes out of his room in the small, wooden cabin they've come to call home for the last three years. Ever the quiet boy even at 18 years old, he stands at 1.72 meters tall. His semi-short black hair is a bit messy, but it always has been. His frame has also muscled up over the years due to the training she's given him and all the farm work he's done while staying mostly lean.

"You sure you're not forgetting anything?" She asks him.

"If I am, you'll deliver it yourself, won't you?" He says, his face twisting in annoyance, but that only makes her grin.

"You can't stop me from going back to my old job now that I don't have to worry about you." She says, resting her only hand on her hip.

"I'll start sending money from now on. You don't have to work."

"You know full well it was never about the money. Why does that matter to you so much now?"

"..." Her son grimaces, and she knows it's only because he can't find the answer himself.

Ever since that night, Arthur started changing. He became capable of using the magical energy from within his body, and she spent the last three years teaching him how to control it. But with the power came undesired consequences.

One of the being that her son became... greedy, to an extent.

He slowly started taking an interest in money when he'd never cared before. He started wanting the best meals, the best house and the best clothes. But they could never afford much of that. They earn only enough to keep a decent living.

That's part of why he's going to the capital. There's a chance at a high-paying job waiting for him there. He wants to take the chance, and Scarlett wants to let him experience the world again with fresh eyes.

"Alright then. I get it. Just be mindful of yourself, alright? If I get word you got in any stupid troubles I'll go knock some sense into you myself." Scarlett nods to herself, making her son flinch and wince. "Now. Show me [Prana Flow] one last time."

Arthur nods and closes his eyes. It only takes a second. She can feel [Prana] flowing within him, coursing through his body and enhancing every facet of his physical abilities.

[Prana Flow] was the only technique she was able to teach him in these three years, but absolutely the most important. Any warrior who wishes to survive out there should at least know this skill, but it doubly important for him.

"Remember. If the symptoms return, make as much Prana as you can flow through your body." She sighs. "I hope you can find a definitive cure in the capital."

"I don't think that will be a priority, but I'll try." He nods in agreement.

"Alright then! Time to go. Don't keep everyone waiting!"

Magic stops coursing through him, and he walks up and gives her a powerful hug. She returns it, letting her head rest on her son's shoulder for a moment. Neither of them say anything else. They knew this day was coming. They've made their peace with it.

"You have the letter, right?" The mother asks.

"I just put it on my bag." He nods towards his leather backpack.

"Good. Now go." She nods.

Arthur grabs his bag and hangs it over his shoulder before stepping out the door. With a final wave of his hand, he leaves home. He leaves to become a knight of the kingdom.

Or at least try to.

He joins up with the people he'll be traveling with at the outskirts of town. It's a group of five people gathered around a big, four-wheel wooden cart which is being loaded with sacks and boxes. There are two horses at one of its ends to pull it.

It takes about 7 days to get from Yellowseed Village to the capital if all goes smoothly, and to ensure it does, people usually travel in groups. For this trip, Arthur managed to score a job as a bodyguard with a caravan of traders.

It's very simple. Arthur joins the three other guards and fights off any bandits or monsters that appear and he gets the added security of traveling in a group, food and shelter from the cold nights and some extra money to spend in the capital. That last one will be useful, because the young man has a small pouch with 90 gold pieces he's saved very carefully and diligently for the last three years and are meant for something VERY specific.

"Arthur, right?" The gruff voice of a man wakes Arthur from his thoughts. He looks at the tall man speaking to him. He's well-built and with short brown hair and neatly trimmed beard. "I'm Donald, the co-owner of this caravan. I want to be clear that we only accepted you because your mother recommended you. I owe Scarlett a couple of favors, but that doesn't mean you can get away with doing nothing. I expect you to pull your weight."

"I'll do my job, Mr. Donald." Arthur nods, trying to sound professional. "Thank you for the opportunity. You won't regret having me around."

"I hope so. Get acquainted with the other guards. We leave in ten minutes." After saying that, he goes to talk to one of his companions, a shorter man of lanky build.

'I guess that's my other boss?'

"You're the new guy, right?" Another man, this one much more muscular than Donald, or even Arthur, approaches with a friendly smile. He and the two other men walking up behind him are very well armored, wearing simple leather helms, brigandines over gambeson and each one with a spear resting on their shoulder. "We heard about you from Donald. It'll be nice to have the son of the famed Scarlett as our backup."

"She did train you, right?" One of the guards asks skeptically.

"Brutally so, yes." Arthur's face twists in pain. "If you call beating me up in sparing 'training'."

"Here, put this on. See if it fits." The friendly guard offers him a brigandine, same as the ones they're wearing. "You have to return it after the job is done, so try not to get too many scratches on it."

"...I won't have to pay for it if it gets ruined, will I?" Arthur asks with a raised eyebrow.

"Nah. It's deducted from your pay already."

Arthur grimaces, and he notices all three guards grumbling as well. It keeps them alive, so it's not like they can complain, but it still hurts knowing it comes from their pay.

'I'd almost rather have the extra money, but...'

Groaning once more, Arthur puts the brigandine on. It fits perfectly, sadly enough.

“Alright boys. We’re leaving!” Donald announces, and the three guards start moving immediately.

Arthur’s heart starts thumping wildly. He looks towards the road and licks his lips.

‘This is it.’

He’s finally stepping out of Yellowseed Village again and into the world. But now his mother is not here to protect him. He needs to take care of himself. With one look to his current companions, he reminds himself that there’s also a job he needs to see through.

After deciding their fate through rock-paper-scissors, Arthur and the other guards take turns riding on the back of the cart. He and the friendly guard, whose name he soon learned is Aryn, got the first turn.

Donald is sitting at the front, with his partner, Melvin, handling the reigns. The other two guards walk beside the cart.

Arthur leaves his backpack among all the guards’ equipment and gives Aryn a quick glance.

‘I better get myself acquainted with these people. This guy seems friendly enough.’

Nodding internally to himself, he resolves to start socializing.

“You guys seem like you’ve been doing this for a long time.” He says.

“6 years.” Aryn nods. “We usually just fight off bandits, and very few of them are strong enough to be a threat these days. We’ve fought monsters and even killed some of them, but as a general rule we try to scare them off. If it runs away, it’s a win for us.”

“Got it. Good to know. Does that mean you can use Prana?”

“We wouldn’t have survived with long if we couldn’t.” Aryn grins. “We don’t hold a candle to the knights, be we’re not pushovers.”

[Prana]. That’s the name given to magic that’s born from the soul. At least, that’s how his mother put it. If you want to survive as a fighter in this world, then you better make sure you learn to control Prana and hope you’re lucky enough to have been born with a powerful soul.

Prana is what allows humans to achieve feats normally impossible and be able to stand up to monsters. There are people who can control Prana to such an extent they can go beyond simple super-human feats and perform outright magic. Arthur has only seen healers do magic, and he’s so glad it exists. His mother’s life was saved due to magic when she lost her arm.

As he rides on the back of the cart, Arthur allows himself to breathe the fresh air and scan his surroundings with an excited smile. He used to travel the country all the time when he was younger, yet the memories are somewhat foggy. The vast, green plains are still a familiar sight, as are the hills around the land. The sight of the Noble Woods to the north of the village starts disappearing behind said hills as they cross the river through a humble stone bridge.

Their first stop will be the town of St. Fiona, one of the two major towns in the country and the biggest commercial hub this far from the capital. But they’ll only be staying there to sleep and let Donald take care of some small business. They have seven days of travel ahead of them, after all.

>What happens next?

>Intermission: Dark deals.

St. Fiona is one of the liveliest towns in the kingdom due to its huge market and ideal location. It serves as a trading hub to four different villages, as well as being the place the soldiers from Fort Zaphiel come to restock their supplies and being the closest big town to the capital. In the middle of the day at the market plaza, where the town is at its busiest, is the perfect place to make a deal you don't want anyone to notice.

Melvin, Donald's long-time partner in the caravan business, navigates through the mass of people and the dozens of wooden stalls and tents without anyone giving him a second glance. Donald is currently securing a deal with a new partner while two guards are with him and the other two look after the cargo. It was easy to make an excuse, saying he wanted to check out if the local prices had changed since last time.

He disappears into one of the alleys, going between two stone buildings and away from the stalls and the loud haggling. With the noise and activity going on outside, this place is the perfect spot. They should already- Ah, yes, there they are.

There are two rough looking men leaning against opposite walls. They're lightly armored and with short swords at their hips. A third figure stands in further back, unmoving and cloaked from head to toes.

"Melvin. Good to see you. Do you have them?" One of the men asks with a raspy voice, getting straight to business.

The merchant procures two small pouches from inside his coat and gives them to the man. He wastes no time confirming its contents, but at this point it's all just a formality.

Inside the pouches are seeds. Small, black-colored seeds that make the man smile.

"Good. What about the grown products? You delivering them right now?"

"Yes. They're hidden in a box with other supplies going into Clock Tower. Everything's going well, as always."

Melvin eyes the cloaked figure, uncomfortable. It's almost like a statue. It doesn't move and one can barely notice the human features on their face under the cloak. It seems to be a woman, but he can't be sure.

"Who is this?" He asks, nodding towards her.

"She's new. Some sort of secret weapon the boss found. He said to take her with us, help her familiarize herself with the job." The rough man speak with annoyance in his voice, rubbing the back of his neck. "Damn woman doesn't even speak a word. Not to mention she gets violent when you try to touch her."

"Worst kind of woman, if you ask me." The other guy adds.

"She's also strong as an orc, but enough of that. Watch the road, Melvin. We've heard that the prince has his nose on our profitable business and has people looking into it."

"He got the knights!?"

"No, he doesn't have the authority. He got some mercenaries, but some damn good ones. All they need is to confirm you're carrying [ulzer] to become a suspect. And we don't need to tell you what will happen if you say a word about us."

"I-I won't! But what if they find out!?" Melvin asks. His chest starts to tighten and sweat starts to slowly form on his forehead.

"We'll see."

Melvin swallows hard. Getting into business with these guys is profitable and safe, so long as you're on their good side. He knows it's better to keep his mouth shut and not even think of mentioning their involvement.

>What's next?

>First contact.

Fourth day on the road, and things have been very peaceful. Just like Aryn wanted. Maybe the sight of four, well-armed guards is enough to scare most common bandits away? The scenery doesn't change that much. It's still mostly green plains, hills and the dirt road. Some say it gets a little boring after a while, but Arthur likes it. It means the land is full of life. The forest to the east is getting thicker, however, and that's something to pay attention to.

"Mr. Donald, armed men ahead! Three of them!" Aryn announces as he walks slightly ahead of the caravan.

"Bandits?" Donald asks.

"Unlikely. They're standing in the middle of the road. It... seems like they're waiting for us."

"Everyone get ready." Donald calls. "We'll hear them out first, but be ready for a scrap if they want one."

Arthur and another guard jump out of the back of the cart. The black-haired youth taps the pommel of his mother's sword and takes a deep breath to calm down. This could be his first taste of truly deathly combat.

'Mom was ruthless, but she was never going to kill me. Just... make it seem like she would. This is different.'

They approach and see indeed three people standing in the middle of the road, and one of them catches Arthur's attention. It's a woman. She looks young. Silver colored eyes; black, long straight hair that almost reaches her hips; thin eyebrows; a slender, yet athletic figure hidden under a purple tunic, a leather cuirass and thick linen pants.

She is... unbelievably cute.

Arthur swallows, but forces himself to shake off those thoughts. Not only are the two other armed guys behind her, the woman herself has a shortsword strapped at both sides of her narrow waist.

"It's not polite to stand there in the middle of the road, you know?" Donald shouts from a distance, stopping about 10 meters before reaching them. "Someone might mistake you for bandits."

"I assure you, sir, we are not bandits." The woman says, taking a sheet of paper from one of her companions and raising it. "We're from the Dusty Hall. We would like a word with you."

'The Dusty Hall? What's that?'

"Aryn, Arthur, go to them. You two, get your bows ready." Donald orders before looking to the side at his partner. "What's wrong, Melvin? Worried?"

"They could be faking it." The second boss says, swallowing hard. "I say we get the guys up on the cart and make a run for it. They can't follow us on foot."

"We could lose some cargo in the process, though. Let's hear them out. Our boys are strong enough and even outnumber them."

"There could be more in hiding!"

“Where? Look around you, Melvin. It’s mostly plains here.”

“The woods are nearby.”

“About 10 minutes away.”

Melvin starts sweating, but it’s reassuring for Arthur to see that those two make a balanced pair. Donald seems more daring while Melvin is more cautious. No wonder they’ve been in business for over 7 years.

“...Fine, but let’s make it quick.” Melvin gives up.

“Alright Arthur, on me.” Aryn says. “Let me do the talking. You watch for sudden movements. Don’t be afraid to cut some hands off if they try anything funny.”

Arthur swallows, but nods. He’s going to the capital to become a knight. He knows he will eventually need to kill people. Hopefully bandits and criminals, and even then he hopes it won’t be many.

“Yes.” He answers. This is reality. He knows even his mother’s hands are stained with human blood. That’s the kind of world they live in.

The two guards walk up to the three strangers. On the way, Aryn speaks.

“Donald didn’t tell you this, but I should. If worse comes to worse, they’ll run away and leave us here.”

The young man’s head snaps to look at the older guard “W-What!?”

“That’s one of the dangers of being a guard. Cargo is more important than our lives. Of course, that’s just standard protocol for caravans. I wouldn’t be working with the guy for 6 years if he followed standard protocol.” He snickers.

“So that means...?”

“For him, worst case scenario is we already have a sword through the chest.”

That helps Arthur relax a bit. “That means we can expect the others to give us back up.”

“Yes. Watch out you’re not in the path for arrows. They’re good shots, but not THAT good.”

“Noted.”

Stopping about five steps away from the strangers, Aryn addresses them. “Well, who are you and what do you want?”

“My name’s Marina.” The woman says, pointing her thumb to herself. “Like I said, we’re here on behalf of a client. We’re mercenaries from the Dusty Hall.”

‘There it is again. Mercenaries? Is the Dusty Hall some kind of mercenary group?’

The girl, Marina, steps forward and leaves the sheet of paper on the ground before stepping back. No one has drawn their weapons, so Aryn is mostly safe to walk up and take the paper and back away.

“This is your contract, right?” He asks, reading through it.

“Yes. We’re currently on a job for a man named Eliot Fandal.”

Both Arthur and Aryn flinch at that name, and the older guard immediately confirms that name is indeed in the contract.

Eliot Fandal. The second prince of the Radiant Kingdom.

'Why is the prince hiring mercenaries? What's going on here?'

"So? What do you want?" Aryn asks.

"We only ask you let us inspect your cargo. We won't take anything. We just need to know what you're carrying."

"I'll ask the bosses if they let you see the paperwork."

"No, we need to see the cargo itself." Marina insists, making Aryn raise an eyebrow.

"You think we're smuggling something?"

The girl doesn't speak. She just closes her eyes and lets her silence do the talking.

"Whatever. I'll still ask the boss." Aryn shrugs.

"Thank you." She gives both him and Arthur an honest smile, and Arthur can't help but stare back. There's something about her that interests him. Not only is she beautiful, but she seems... strong.

'She can't be carrying two swords just for show.'

The two guards go back to Donald and explain everything.

"We can't let them get close!" Melvin insists. "We have no obligation to accept their request. It could be a trap!"

"Doesn't seem like it. The paperwork is legitimate." Donald says. "And it's a request from the prince himself."

"That boy has no real authority! He won't even be the next king!"

"Calm down, Melvin. All we have to do is let them inspect the cargo. If they mess with it, we take care of them and issue a formal complain to the Dusty Hall. We could even profit from it."

"It's not worth the risk, Donald!"

"Why are you so nervous?" Donald asks, sounding suspicious. "It's not like this is the first time we come across something like this."

"I-I heard it in St. Fiona. B-Bandits are impersonating guild mercenaries to steal caravans."

"Did you now? Why tell us now?"

"I-I didn't think it was true."

"We can ask only one of them to inspect the cargo while the others stay away. They're the ones with the request, so we can put as many conditions as we want."

It goes on for a few more minutes, but eventually Melvin runs out of arguments.

They allow the mercenaries to get closer, but only one of the two men goes to inspect the boxes while being watched closely by two guards. Arthur and Aryn are tasked with watching the girl and the second guy, and Arthur still can't keep his eyes off Marina.

The girl notices this, of course, and crosses her arms and smirks. "What? Do I look so strong that that you have to keep your eyes on me so much?"

"Y-Yeah." Her addressing him takes Arthur by surprise, so he answers and nods hastily.

"...I've seen people carrying two swords, but usually the second one is a backup. That doesn't seem the case with you." He explains.

“Huh. You actually have a good eye. And here I thought you were another idiot about to throw a pick up line or something.” She says with a grin.

“I’m not good at those. You’re very pretty, though.” Arthur says, smiling honestly. This causes Aryn besides him to cover his mouth to hold his laughter, making the boy realize what he just said and he starts blushing madly and shifting in place.

“Never mind.” Marina shakes her head, disappointed. “Yeah, I use both swords at the same time.”

“D-Does it work?” He asks, clinging desperately to the chance to change the topic. Besides, he’s seen travelers around Yellowseed Village before who try to use two swords, but they all end up just flailing them around.

“I make it work.” Marina smiles confidently and proudly. “It’s a family style.”

But when she looks past Arthur, her smile falls. Then they hear it.

>What do they hear?

>Screams of pain.

The sound of a commotion and pained screams break the conversation. Everyone turns to the back of the cart to see one extra person standing there, the corpses of the one mercenary and the two other guards laying at their feet. The moss green cloak that covers the assassin’s whole body is stained with blood.

‘How!? Where did they come from and how did they kill three people in so little time!?’

Arthur’s body tenses. His blood runs cold and his thoughts stop for but a second, more than enough to die in battle.

“Dammit!” Marina screams and unsheathes both swords, holding one at each hand.

With an enraged scream and the flow of magic enhancing his body, Aryn charges with his spear towards the cloaked figure, leaving Arthur to deal with the two mercenaries in front of him... if they truly are mercenaries.

His body is stiff, but he quickly draws his mother’s sword. The blade is duller, heavier and thicker than a usual one, but he’s familiar with it. He holds it in front of himself, his stance practiced and ready as he covers Aryn’s back.

Cold sweat runs down his forehead and the back of his neck. He thought he was ready for anything. Just now he realizes how stupid it was to think that.

“What the hell happened!?” Donald’s pained question lingers in the air.

“Get out of the way! They’re not with us!” Marina shouts at Arthur, her face twisting in anger.

The one other mercenary feels something behind him and turns, but two crossbow bolts hit him in the left shoulder and in the right leg, making him fall to his knee in pain.

Where did those come from? Arthur follows the trajectory and sees a faint glint of steel coming from the grass, 10 meters away. That blew their cover.

Two men stand up from their hiding spot, the grass itself. Their clothes, as green as the grass they laid on, starts to discolor. No, it would be best to say they’re returning to their normal black color, as if some green, gooey substance was sliding off of them.

“You fucking BASTARDS!” Marina shouts at the top of her lungs, and the familiar sensation of flowing prana can be felt oozing from her. She’s using Prana Flow, too.

...No. There's something more to it. She lunges forward, covering the same as five steps in a single instant, swords at the ready.

Arthur shakes his head and snaps himself out of his surprise and hesitance. The people who already know conflict moved immediately while the rookie still doesn't know what to do. His mind start running again, and he knows that the first thing is to secure Donald and Melvin, his bosses. As much as he wants to help Aryn, he has to do his job, first.

Besides, the senior guard is actually holding his own. The thrusts of his spear are sharp and precise. He keeps his distance from the unfamiliar foe while they step back further and dodge the attacks.

Arthur takes advantage of the commotion and secures the caravan owners, pushing himself through his shaking legs to lead them to crouch behind the cart, safe from the crossbow fire. They follow, and poor Melvin is looking absolutely miserable. He's shaking and his face is pale. Arthur doesn't blame him. It turned out he was right.

Once they're both secure, Donald shouts. "Go help Aryn! That girl is keeping the other two busy!"

It only takes a glance to confirm he's right.

The two bandits had to throw their crossbows aside and draw their swords to fight Marina. Even in a two against one, the girl is holding her own, using her two swords to parry their attacks and keep them at safe distance. Her movements are swift and precise, but Arthur has no time to watch.

Prana runs through his body, and he allows himself to build some confidence. Prana can be felt by those who can use it, almost like a faint heat signal. Right now, he can feel 5 people using it: Marina, Aryn, the two bandits and the cloaked figure. They're all more experienced than him. They know how to fight, so Arthur has to press his only current advantage.

He grits his teeth, kicks off the ground and raises his sword. He doesn't bother with some sort of sneak attack, because there's no way people aren't noticing him.

If the heat signals from the five veterans are like candles, then Arthur's is a flaming torch. His Prana burns with a higher intensity, giving him the simple, yet effective advantage of raw power.

He can't do fancy moves like Marina's quick lounge, so he dashes as fast as his legs can carry him, covering five meters in a second. The speed and power of his charge manages to take the assassin by surprise.

The young guard brings his sword down. It's a practiced, fast and heavy strike, form nailed into his body by brute force by his mother so he could do it in his sleep if he needed to. Yet the sword is stopped.

Naked arms come out of the obscuring cloak and stop the blade, putting both forearms in front of their face. Not only that, but the loud clang of metal hitting metal echoes across the plains. Despite his strike carrying enough power to push the assassin back and make them drag their feet, their arms are completely unharmed.

Arthur doesn't have the time to be surprised. He notices a knee coming his way, directed at his stomach. But the blow never reaches him. The tip of Aryn's spear finds their enemy's head, making it recoil with the sound of metal on metal once more.

The spear's blade did pierce through the cloth of the cloak, however, catching it. Aryn yanks it with all his might, hoping to bring the assassin down with it, but they slip out of their covering garments in a simple, fluid motion before stepping back.

Both Arthur and Aryn are shocked by what they see. It's a woman. A... lightly dressed woman. She has an athletic body which they can see it because the only thing covering the upper half of her body is half of a black leather breastplate that only protects her ample chest. Her toned stomach, arms, shoulders, neck and head are completely exposed. She's wearing thick black linen pants and matching boots.

'Hot. Wait, no! Why would I focus on that!? Is it a tactic to distract men, perhaps? If so, it almost worked on me.'

Arthur swallows and curses himself mentally for letting the thought of how attractive she is even cross his mind. Her long, black hair is tied up in a high, wild ponytail. Her small, dark eyes look at them... expressionless, almost dead.

Even as Aryn and him are gritting their teeth and tightly holding onto their weapons, the woman in front of them shows... nothing. She killed three people and she feels... nothing?

Aryn takes a quick glance back. It lasts less than a second.

"The girl is still fighting the other two. Her partner is wounded on the ground." He informs. "Donald and Melvin are still hiding."

"Do we charge her?" Arthur asks with a whisper.

"Yes. Try to pin her down."

"Got it."

>With that decided...

>They charge.

Arthur runs as fast as he can, holding his sword underneath his left arm and leaving Aryn slightly behind. She might have been able to stop their attacks like they were nothing, but she was dodging before. That means whatever she's doing to protect herself must have a limit.

He swings his sword from below with one hand, but this time the blade slices the air. In a show of extraordinary acrobatic skill, the woman jumps high into the air, spinning as she practically flies over him and Aryn and lands... right next to the cart.

'NO!'

"No, no, no, no, NO!" Aryn shouts as he runs back, and Arthur follows in an instant.

"Wha-!? What are you doing!? Stay away!" Melvin screams in panic, flailing his arms at the assassin. Yet a chop on the nape of his neck silences him and makes him drop limply to the ground, unconscious.

The assassin looks down at Donald, who is growling and rising as he aims a punch to the woman's stomach. It lands, but she doesn't flinch. The woman then raises her hand as if it were a blade and brings it down. But Aryn makes it in time. He jumps forward, throwing his body on top of Donald to protect him.

Arthur's eyes widen when he sees blood spilled. Why? Why would Aryn be hurt from an unarmed attack!? But he saw it. He saw the tip of her fingers slice through all of Aryn's armor and cut into his right shoulder, not unlike an extremely sharp sword.

Arthur reaches them and swings his sword again. However, the woman blocks with her bare arms again. Once more, she's unharmed yet the strength behind the blow pushes her back.

Her expression never changes, even with her breathing getting heavier. She's has that blank expression on her beaut- err... damned face.

Arthur clicks his tongue in annoyance and prepares to charge again, but stops when he sees the woman hold her hands together, as if she was holding a small ball in front of her. His eyes widen. He can see something forming in her hands. He knows it's something very difficult to do, but this woman is expelling Prana out of her body and gathering it between her hands extremely quickly.

She pushes the sphere of colorless, concentrated magic energy with her fingertips, and it shoots forward towards Arthur. It's fast, but still slower than an arrow. He tries to swat it away with his sword, but it meets a strange resistance. Even though the ball of Prana is floating, as if weightless, Arthur can't just push it. What's more, it's like he's clashing against another sword. No, it's more like there are countless, small blades rotating around the sphere and they're chipping away at his sword.

Arthur grits his teeth and focuses. He changes the flow of Prana in his body, giving priority to his arms. They burn with power, giving him the strength to push through.

"Aaaaaah!" With a scream, he destroys the odd projectile. The sphere vanishes with the sound shattering metal, but his own sword didn't go unscathed. A part of the blade is chipped, but it resisted due to already being duller and thicker than a normal sword. To contrast, the projectile was like an extremely sharp blade, but made more fragile because of it.

The assassin didn't just watch him, though. In the two seconds it took to meet and destroy her attack, she threw Melvin over her shoulder with ease and started running away.

"Dammit!" The young man curses. His first instinct is to follow her, but hearing Aryn's grunts as he gets off of Donald make him remember the whole picture.

The other girl, Marina, seems to have wounded one of her opponents and is trying to neutralize the other.

"Mr. Donald...!" Arthur starts.

"Go after her!" The man yells. "You're the only one who can catch up to her! You can't let her take Melvin!"

"Go, kid!" Aryn shouts in agreement. He's holding his injured shoulder as he stands up. "This hurts like hell, but I can still fight. I'll help the girl over there and we'll catch up to you. Hurry!"

'Shit! Fine!'

Arthur nods firmly, his expression resolute. He turns around and runs after the stoic woman. His dash is fast enough to make the wind rush past his face. The terrain is all green plains around, so he can still see her running east.

It's a full minute of full-speed running. Maybe they'd be matched in speed, but due to the woman having to carry Melvin over her shoulder, Arthur is slowly catching up. But things aren't looking good.

Soon, the western edge of the kingdom's biggest forest comes into view. The Noble Woods are known for holding the highest concentration of monsters in the country. Enough that people theorize they all come from there and then spread out.

If he loses her there, not only will it become more dangerous to look for them, it would put Melvin in even more peril. Thankfully, his mother did say that there's a river that crosses the forest, making the western side the smallest and least dangerous.

The moment they step into the woods, the woman leaps high into the air, smoothly landing on one of the top branches of a tree. It's a powerful jump, a testament to her precise control of the Prana in her body.

Arthur clicks his tongue. It's not something he can do yet. To be more accurate, he could jump that high, perhaps even higher. But to accurately measure the strength needed to follow her and land precisely where he wants requires a lot of practice. Therefore, he follows them on the ground, his eyes having to shift between his path and the woman leaping from tree to tree.

She takes advantage of that, hurling another sharp sphere towards him when his eyes are on the path. It's so sudden that he can't meet it with his sword, instead having to rely on reflexes to dodge.

He turns his body, and while the spinning blades around the deathly ball shred through the armor on his shoulder, the small metal sheets inside the brigandine let his body escape unscathed.

He grunts.

'Fine. I'll play.'

>What's next?

>The dual-wielding warrior.

These guys are professionals. No doubt about it. They were pressing their numbers advantage quite well, but Marina's dual-wielding style is a good match for fighting two opponents at once. Normally, a person trying for this style would use a longer sword in their dominant hand and a shorter one in the other, but Marina, being ambidextrous, prefers to use two short swords. They're light enough to allow a lot of freedom during combat.

When one of her opponents swings at her, she blocks by catching the blade with her two swords. That prompts the other to attack her from behind. Just as expected.

Swiftly, Marina lets go of the sword in her left hand, letting it fall. She immediately catches it in a reverse grip at the same time she pushes the enemy's blade away with her right. She turns her body and stabs with her left sword, catching the bandit unaware and on the leg.

That should make her work easier.

One of her partners is dead, and the other is wounded. Honestly, she didn't know them very well at all. They are fairly new to the guild, so she was instructed to take them along in this job to let them gain some field experience. But that doesn't mean she feels nothing. They still were/are her comrades.

Ideally, she would incapacitate these bandits and leave them alive to be brought back to the capital for interrogation and trial. However, killing them now is fine too.

She clicks her tongue.

Killing them WOULD be fine, but that would also make her job more difficult later.

She finishes turning with a high kick to the wounded bandit's head that slams him into the ground. An accurate kick like that would normally be enough to knock out a normal person. But this bandit had enhanced his body through the use of Prana. He should be more resistant. That's why that wasn't a normal kick. It was a Prana Flow enhanced kick. There is zero chance that man is conscious right now.

Without wasting any time, knowing she has another guy behind her, she immediately lowers her stance and swings back blindly, her right sword parrying the stab coming her way. A couple steps back and she's stable again, with only one enemy remaining.

"Who are you? Why did you attack the caravan?" She asks.

The bandit doesn't answer, instead pulling a small throwing knife from his pocket and hurling it at her in a well-practiced motion.

The flow of Prana in her body changes. What she's doing now isn't as simple as Prana Flow. The magic concentrates and builds in one of her arms, like loading a crossbow. The heat she feels in them is extremely familiar by now. Then, she pulls the metaphorical crossbow trigger and swings her sword.

"!?" The bandit gasps. His flying blade was repelled in the literal blink of an eye.

[Martial Arts]. By means of constant practice, a person proficient enough in the control of Prana can perform techniques that have come to be called [Martial Arts]. They focus on concentrating Prana in the body and releasing it in one go to unleash a very specific action.

In this case, Marina focused the magic on her arm to create a slashing attack that was far faster than any attack before. Her arm moved as if with a will of its own, following a predetermined path and pushing beyond physical limits to swing the sword, intercepting the knife in the air. The person who taught her this technique called it [Quick Slash]. Not very creative, but it does the job.

She takes advantage of the enemy's surprise and lunges forward with another [Martial Art]. This time, focusing Prana on her legs, she lunges. This [Martial Art] is called, well... [Lunge]. By kicking off the ground with more strength than usual, she's launched forward at near-blinding speed for a short distance.

Once she's close enough, she slashes at him with both swords, her arms only boosted by the normal flow of Prana. However, her attacks miss. The bandit pulled away, as if being grabbed by the back of his clothes and pulled with great force.

The smug smirk on his face tells her it was intentional. If she has to guess, she'll say that it is a type of defensive Martial Art that focuses Prana on the back of the user and launches it to forcefully pull them away. It's a kind of move the body can't normally do, but becomes possible if you use Prana to force it.

Marina has to stop and catch her breath. It's not terrible, but she has a chance now, so it's better to take it. She used two Martial Arts in a row. That's taxing both in the body and the [Soul]. After all, you're asking the body to do things it can't accomplish normally. That's why they call [Martial Arts] 'the magic of warriors'. You need to have a strong body to perform these kinds of techniques.

There's a short stare down between Marina and the bandit. And as soon as she prepares to engage again, the bandit's eyes go wide. She hears a strange sound, then his face twists in agonizing pain and he screams at the top of his lungs.

He falls to one knee on the ground, allowing her to see the reason for his pain. A spear is lodged in his back. So the sound she heard was the spear piercing through his armor and flesh.

She doesn't miss a beat and quickly runs up to the bandit and gives him a kick on the head, just like his friend. His body drops unconscious on the ground and she lets herself breathe for a moment, but then remembers there's a third bandit around. That assassin.

She turns her head in the direction the spear came, and sees one of the guards. The one that spoke to her first is running towards her. There's blood running down his right shoulder, which is limply hanging at his side.

"Where's the other?" Marina asks, deciding that there's not time to worry about his condition. If he can run and throw a spear this accurately, he's fine.

"She kidnapped one of our bosses. My partner is chasing her down." He informs quickly, giving her an urgent look that she understands all too well.

"I'll go back him up. You stay here, tie these two up and try to keep them alive if possible. Also, check the goods you're carrying again. I bet you'll find something you didn't know you had."

"..." The guard bites his lip and grits his teeth in frustration. Fortunately, he understands that he can't very well leave these two who could wake up at any minute alone with his boss. "This is that kid's first real fight. Please, back him up."

"..." She sighs mentally. She's no bodyguard or caretaker. However, this request does come from a guy that just helped her. "Sure." She answers.

She starts running as fast as she can in the direction the guard points out.

>What's next?

>Battle at the forest's edge.

She's nearing the western edge of the Noble Woods. If the assassin wants to lose them, coming here is a good idea, but dangerous nevertheless. There's always a chance they'll encounter a monster stronger than them.

The trees of the Noble Woods are big. They're tall and have thick trunks. At this time of the year, during summer, the leaves are green and plentiful, letting very little sunlight in. The mix of heat and shadows make the place somewhat humid.

After her first steps into what could be considered the "inside" of the forest, she hears the sound of metal clashing, then shattering. She hurries up in the directing of the sound, only to find the younger guard with his back against a tree and trying to peek behind it.

His shoulders rise and fall with his breath. Has he been fighting? For how long? Why did she hear the clash of blades when the assassin is nowhere to be seen?

"Where are they?" Marina asks, needing to be informed of the situation if the guy wants help. However, she doesn't get a response. Instead, the guard just looks at her with wide eyes, shocked to see her. He then clicks his tongue and runs toward her, holding his sword at the ready.

"Hold it, you fool! I'm here to help!" She yells, but still readies her own weapons to defend herself. She wonders what to do. She can feel the flow of Prana inside him. It's ridiculous. If she compares it to flowing water, he's like a river when most people are a gentle stream. This might be his first real fight, but that power and form still say he can be a threat. The true problem is that, with her eyes on that guy, she doesn't feel the true danger until it's right next to her.

She turns her head and sees a sphere of magical energy coming directly at her face. Her whole body screams for her to run away, but there's no time to move. That thing's going to hit her... and it will kill her.

Again, the sound of metal hitting metal echoes through the woods. From her point of view, all she sees is a sword striking the magic projectile from above, creating sparks as they clash before the magic shatters like cheap iron.

She sees the boy smirk and turn his head up to the trees.

“There you are, lady.” He mutters with excitement. “How many more of those can you shoot, I wonder?” He then backs away from her and hides behind another tree. “Hide!” He yells at her, his smile vanishing. “The woman has my boss and is hiding at the top of the trees, shooting those things.”

Marina curses herself and hides. She’s always been aware that death in battle can be swift, unannounced and without glory, but she still can’t help the feeling of disgust that settles in her throat. Everything she’s worked for could’ve ended right there. She feels her senses sharpening. This assassin is not like the two previous bandits.

“How many times has she shot that?” She asks with urgency. There’s not even time to thank him for saving her life.

The guard starts counting in his head before he answers. “Five.”

Five.

Marina clicks her tongue. They’re dealing with someone truly skilled here. She still doesn’t fully understand the theory behind it, but what the assassin doing could be called the halfway point between [Martial Arts] and [Magic Spells]. In other words, an [Arcane Art]. Giving form to the Prana inside the body and throwing it outwards.

Should they also stop Prana Flow and hide? No. If they did, not only would they be defenseless against a surprise attack, the assassin could very well take the opportunity and escape.

How can they get her?

“She’s... throwing it outwards...” She hears the guard mutter. Does he know what an Arcane Art is? There’s something about the glint in his eyes that warns her of something, but... She can’t really say she dislikes that look.

She sees the guard lick his lips. She watches in confusion as he comes out of hiding and points his left arm in the direction they last felt the assassin’s presence. With his palm open, she can feel the huge amount of Prana flowing through his arm and into his hand.

Is he trying to shoot Prana, just like their opponent!? Does he know how to do it? He has to, right? He couldn’t be so stupid as to try it for the first time mid-fight, right?

The magic is forced out of his arm, but instead of being shot like a projectile, it bursts the moment it’s out. The idiot lets out a pained scream as the Prana practically explodes in his arm. She can’t see the wounds because of the gambeson he’s wearing, but blood is dripping from his hand. Did he just tear off his skin? Or was it worse and he completely ruined his arm?

“Fuck!” The guy curses, letting his arm hang limply as his eyes are still focused on the last known location of the assassin.

“Are you an idiot!? Did you just try that out without knowing how to do it!?”

“You tell me how we’re supposed to get her, then.” He answers back through gritted teeth.

The guy really is a daring idiot, but he has a point. While they're here tiring themselves by keeping a constant flow of Prana, the enemy is resting and conserving her strength. They need to do something quickly.

>What's the plan?

>Arthur is the bait.

Fine, that was not his brightest moment, but he thought he understood what the assassin was doing and could do something similar. It didn't work, and now he has to fight with a useless arm. Would his mother laugh at him or kick his teeth in?

'Probably one after the other. In that order.'

It hurts. It doesn't feel like he broke any bones, but he's sure his skin is in tatters, as if the unwieldy magic had tried to escape by making holes in his arm. He would love to throw a potion on it to numb the pain and start the healing, but those are all back in the cart. He's just gonna have to suck it up. It's not like he hasn't felt worse.

They need to end this quickly. For now, he has no choice but to assume Aryn and Donald are safe and focus on rescuing Melvin. That's his mission. The enemy is hidden and attacking from a distance no more than 8 to 10 meters away and on top of a tree. He has backup, but it doesn't seem like Marina has some sort of long range attack than can help.

There's also the matter of Melvin's safety. If he stops to think about it, there has to be a reason they want him alive. Is he just a hostage? Unlikely. Arthur is only pursuing because the woman has his boss. It would be the worse-case scenario, but if Melvin were to drop dead from one of the trees and the assassin escaped, Arthur wouldn't have a reason to follow her unless he was sure he could catch her.

Is she playing the waiting game? Is she waiting for them to get tired? Neither he nor Marina have stopped using Prana to boost their physical abilities in case the assassin jumps out of nowhere, but she has been resting. No, that's not quite right. She's been trying to kill them, that's why she's still attacking. Those projectiles can't be easy on her Prana.

The reason is unknown, but it may be safe to assume that the assassin needs both Melvin alive and everyone else dead. But then why did she run away? Was she counting on her friends to do the rest of the job?

Arthur clicks his tongue. He doesn't have enough information to go on. What they need now is either catch or kill that woman.

"If she had to jump out of that tree," He starts speaking to Marina. "Would you be able to catch her?"

"I'm confident I can jump high enough to catch her before she hides again." Marina nods.

Arthur looks back at his injured arm. That burst of energy was painful, but...

...

"I'll be the bait. I'll get her to jump out of the tree. You catch her when she does." Arthur says, nodding to himself. "Unless you have a better plan, of course."

"Hey, go right ahead. I only promised to back you up, not keep you alive by any means."

He snickers.

'What a nice lady.'

Arthur takes a deep breath and turns off the flow of Prana. Right now, he's nothing more than a human of above average strength. The assassin must've noticed that. The moment Arthur steps out of his hiding spot, she starts gathering Prana again. Just like he thought, another sharp projectile is coming his way.

He runs as fast as he can with an unenhanced body to meet the attack, Prana Flow taking a couple of seconds before taking full effect. By the time he and the energy ball meet half-way, he's forced to jump out of the way. Again, he escapes with only the side of his armor being torn to shreds.

He stands up, now fully powered up and dashes to the tree he's now sure the woman is at. He won't jump, though. He wants to keep her guessing what he'll do.

As he runs, he starts gathering Prana in his right arm, holding it like a spring. No other attacks come. She really can't throw them back to back, huh? He reaches the base of the tree and allows himself a smirk.

'This time it will work.'

When he tried to copy the assassin last time, he was trying to shoot Prana from his hand. Yes, he was way over his head, but it wasn't useless. The feeling is still in his head. With the way the magic burst out, if he changed what he wanted to do, then...

He slaps the trunk of the tree, pushing against it as she prepares to let the Prana free.

"Burst!" He yells.

And something clicks. He yelled only due to adrenaline, but doing so helped. It's like his mind, body and soul are now in the same wavelength, knowing exactly that Arthur wants to 'let the Prana explode'.

He lets go of the spring, and the same burst of energy as before comes out of his hand. However, this time it's concentrated, directed and harmless to his own body. The powerful shockwave crushes a big chunk of the thick tree trunk as planned, but Arthur still clicks his tongue in frustration.

It's not enough. The idea was to completely blow away the lower part of the tree and make it fall, but this isn't enough! There's no time to do the same thing again, so Arthur bashes the tree with his shoulder, using Prana Flow to make his body heavier. After the second bash, the tree cracks, and it only needs one more push to start falling down.

It plays out as expected. From the corner of his eye, Arthur catches the assassin jumping from the falling tree to another and looks back just in time to see Marina leaping high into the air to meet her. Melvin is still unconscious on the woman's shoulder.

The exchange in the air is fast. Marina's swords meet the enemy's steel-like arm, stopping her advance. As the two start falling, Marina turns her body in the air and gives Melvin a strong kick, releasing him from the assassin's grasp and sending him flying over to Arthur, who manages to cushion his fall with his own body.

It's only when they land and both jump back that Arthur notices the blood dripping from Marina's left shoulder. It must have happened when she kicked Melvin. The grip on her left sword is weak.

'She can't swing that way. If I can tell, so can the assassin.'

"Both of your friends are dead!" Marina says to the woman, getting a reaction from her for the first time. Her eyes widen ever so slightly. "Besides, we recovered the hostage and we have one more person as backup. You're done!"

What is she playing? If the assassin escapes, is that considered their victory? What are the chances of her attempting a second ambush later?

It's too late to ponder on that. The words are already out and the woman attacks Marina with yet another projectile. Arthur holds Melvin in his arms and jumps behind a tree while his temporary ally jumps to the right to avoid the attack. The assassin uses that time to jump back in the trees, not even hiding her presence as she jumps from one to another, running away deeper into the forest.

Arthur only relaxes when he sees Marina doing the same. Both of them stop the flow of Prana and Arthur comes out of hiding.

“Good thing we managed to keep him alive.” Marina says with a tired, pained smile. She sheathes her swords and holds her injured shoulder. “I hope we can get some answers out of him.”

“Are Aryn and Donald alive?” Arthur asks.

“They are. The other two guys were also taken care of.” She nods.

“Then let's go back. We have potions back at the cart.” He says, looking at her injury.

“Don't worry. I wouldn't be a proper mercenary if I didn't carry my own. Besides, you did worse to yourself.” She smirks, making him grimace in shame. “But you're right. Let's go back to the cart. I guess I have some explaining to do.”

>What's next?

>Rushing to the capital.

Arthur, Donald, Aryn, a still unconscious Melvin, Marina and her surviving friend are all rushing to the capital on the cart, even if they have to sit uncomfortably on top of vegetable sacks or boxes. The two captured bandits are tied as tightly as they can be with thick rope and with a rag on their mouths. Every fighter here, injured or not, has their eyes on them. At the mere idea of trying something, Aryn is going to start cutting fingers.

Arthur's second boss, Melvin, is unconscious and doesn't seem like he'll wake up any time soon. According to Marina, she smells something like a sleeping potion on him. She theorizes it was something to keep him from struggling or talking, effectively just making him luggage to the assassin. She says he might be asleep for the rest of the trip.

The dead are also being carried with them at the front of the cart, right besides Donald, who is driving. They have yet to start smelling, but it should be soon. It's been 12 hours since the attack. Donald refused to leave their bodies there and insisted they deserve a proper burial.

Fortunately, since the mercenaries did bring their own healing potions, there were enough to heal everyone's wounds. With the way they work, after applying the liquid directly to the wounds, they begin a slow healing process. They should be fine by the end of the day and hopefully they won't even leave scars.

The attack happened closer to the capital than any other town, so in the end, it was decided that they should better just rush there, taking turns driving the cart and keeping guard. They would not be setting up camp, just in case the assassin comes back with reinforcements.

Turns out there was a clear reason for the attack, although they can't confirm anything until Melvin wakes up. When they inspected the cargo, they found something Donald swears he didn't know was there, smuggled with the box of ingredients for the mages at Clock Tower.

Marina called it [ulzer]. It's like a fruit, almost like a tomato, only far smaller, red like wine and very dry. She says the job she got from Prince Eliot was to confirm if any caravans were

smuggling this specific fruit into the city, since not only is it poisonous, but it's apparently the key component for some kind of drug.

The theory is that, if Donald is being honest, Melvin was the one in league with the bandits, which is why they tried to kidnap him while killing everyone else. It helps that Donald is willing to cooperate and will go with Marina to talk with all relevant authorities once they get to the capital.

That's the gist of the situation. They ride towards the capital as fast as they can, taking turns to drive the cart and watch over the bandits. But when it's finally Arthur's turn to sleep, he can't take advantage of it.

Only minutes after he got comfortable, sitting and resting his back against a big box, his body starts burning from the inside. He wakes up with a scream. The pain surging from the core of his soul and spreading throughout his body. His muscles tense to the extreme and feel like they're about to tear, his chest tightens painfully and feels like it's on fire. His head feels like it's going to split open and he starts sweating, drenching his clothes.

'Fuck! Why now of all times!?'

"Arthur!" Aryn calls to him, holding him by the shoulders. "What's wrong!?"

Marina's eyes immediately land on the bandits, but there's no Prana oozing from them.

"Not... them...!" Arthur manages to say as he grits his teeth.

No, it isn't them doing this to him. This has been happening to him for three years already. He knows how to deal with it by now.

He starts the flow of Prana through his body, but this isn't what he'd normally do in a fight. Sparing no expenses, he lets the magical energy run through his body like a violent river. It enhances his body to withstand the pain, but it burns through his Prana at an extremely accelerated rate.

"What the hell...?" Marina mutters, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Arthur! Stop! If you keep doing that...!"

"I know!" Arthur yells in response to Aryn's warnings.

He knows the risks of doing this. He knows them very well.

Every person has a limit to the amount of Prana they can use before they need to rest. However, it's not as simple as that. When they reach their limit, it's not like they can't keep using Prana, but forcing the soul to keep producing magical energy can have lasting damaging effects on the body AND the soul itself, leading even to the loss of one's life. People have described it as squeezing the soul so hard it stops producing Prana and starts taking your life force.

But Arthur doesn't have time to worry about that. He knows full well this pain won't stop until he runs dry of Prana. Unlike before, where he'd compared himself to a burning torch, he would now have to say he's like a bonfire.

"What's going on!?" Donald yells from the front seat of the cart.

"We don't know!" Marina replies hastily.

"It's fine!" Arthur yells again but doesn't elaborate. He doesn't have the energy to.

Every inch of his body hurts and he's trying to run magical energy throughout it until he runs dry. Over the three years since this started, this couldn't have happened more than 8 times. Yet it's like every time is more agonizing than the last.

His output of Prana starts to dwindle, and breathing is only getting harder. But he has no choice but to keep going, or the pain will never go away. His vision starts to blur and his mouth is dry. In barely two minutes, he's reached past the limits of his Prana.

"He's STILL going? How much Prana does he have?" Marina mutters to herself.

The tension in his muscles finally begins to diminish and his chest starts to calm down. However, Arthur is absolutely exhausted. He's lightheaded, dizzy and can't see straight. It doesn't take long for him to fall unconscious.

He doesn't know how long he was out, but when he wakes up he can still feel an uncomfortable sensation deep within his chest. It doesn't hurt anymore, but it'll make it difficult to use Prana for a while. Everyone's still in the cart as they ride towards the capital. The sun is high up in the sky, so it must be afternoon already.

'Shit. I slept for longer than I should've. I missed my shift.'

"You alright, kid?" He hears Aryn's voice from above him. The man is sitting on top of one of the boxes and looking down at him. Arthur nods to his question. The senior guard then holds a waterskin next to his face and gives it a shake as he grins. "Thirsty?"

Arthur immediately reaches for it, and Aryn doesn't even try to deny it from him.

Only when he's drank almost half of the water inside does he realize he shouldn't have done it.

'Please let this be my share of it! I don't want to pay for drinking extra!'

"Sorry. I drank too much." He apologizes, passing the waterskin back to Aryn.

"Don't worry. We're fairly close to the capital now. We won't have to worry about our water supply." He gives him a reassuring smile.

Relieved, Arthur looks around and sees Donald sleeping against another one of the boxes. Marina's friend is driving the cart, and the woman herself is also looking at him from her seat on top of a stack of sacks of grain.

"How long was I out?" He asks, rotating his stiff neck and rubbing it with his hand.

"About twelve hours." Marina tells him. "Would you mind explaining what the fuck happened?" She asks with a scowl and arms crossed.

"You almost ran yourself dry. You could've died." Aryn says.

"I know, but if I hadn't done that, the pain wouldn't have stopped." Arthur sighs.

"What pain?" Marina insists.

"I don't quite understand it myself. The first time this happened to me was three years ago. Since then, it's happened about three times a year, though it's not like it follows a calendar. It's annoyingly unpredictable." He groans.

"And does running Prana through your body help?"

"It does." He nods. "Again, I don't understand why, but every time this happens, I have to use Prana beyond my limits and it goes away. It's not like a healing spell or anything. Those don't work."

“Well, that’s quite a limit you have, then.” Aryn says, raising his eyebrows. “Two whole minutes of an output as wild as that... Man, I would’ve died in 20 seconds.”

“No kidding. Who the hell are you?” Marina asks with suspicion.

“Me? My name’s Arthur. I’m the son of a courier.” He answers plainly. “Not much more than that, sadly.”

‘Hopefully I’ll be able to say I’m a knight in the near future, though.’

“Don’t give me that. You’re definitely not normal.” Marina keeps her scowl.

“Gee, thanks.” Arthur says, unamused. “I told you. I wish I knew why this happens, but I don’t. Besides, me having a high Prana capacity can’t be that special, can it? Isn’t it mostly down to luck how strong the soul you’re born with is?”

“For the common folk like us, yeah.” Aryn answers. “I hear nobles keep a lineage of strong souls to ensure the prosperity of their families, though.”

“Fine. You’re pretty damn lucky, then, Arthur.” Marina says, leaning back. She then coughs to clear her throat and looks at Arthur in what he believes, from how little he knows her, is an uncharacteristically bashful way. “Also... Well, thank you for saving my life back at the forest.”

“I did that? Oh yeah, I did!” He laughs. “You came out of nowhere and almost gave me a heart attack.” He then shakes his head and smiles at her. “Well, you’re welcome. Thanks for helping us out, too.”

“If you don’t mind... there’s more stuff I’d like to talk to you about. When we’re alone.” She says, giving the tied-up bandits a look. They’re awake, but tied up so tightly and uncomfortably that they’re not really a threat. Still, they’re dead if they move. “Would you be up for a drink when we reach the capital? Well, and after I take care of everything else, too.”

Before answering that incredible invitation, Arthur looks up at Aryn with an excited, yet restrained expression and whispers.

“Aryn! I’m not good with this sort of thing! Is... is she asking me out!?” He asks, trying to control his eagerness.

“She is, you lucky bastard.” Aryn smirks and gives Arthur a playful kick on the face. It’s less of a kick and more of a push to annoy him.

“I’m not asking him out! I just have some things to talk to him about, and we might as well do it over drinks.” Marina assures, yet her cheeks turn a light shade of red that gives Arthur hope.

“That sounds like a date to me, boss!” Her friend calls out from the front seat as he laughs.

“You shut up! I’m telling your sergeant of your performance here! She’ll have you training until you drop!” Despite her harsh words, her face is turning redder and redder.

‘She’s really cute.’

When the silence finally settles amongst them, Arthur allows himself to reflect on something. It might sound heartless, but because he barely knew the guys who died, he can’t feel much more than pity at their deaths. Sure, he would’ve loved to be strong enough to prevent it, but he doesn’t feel a heavy loss.

What about Aryn and Marina, who did lose people they knew? His eyes turn to the senior guard, and it seems he can easily read the pity in them.

“Worried about me? Don’t be.” Aryn shakes his head. His expression solemn. “These are not the first companions I’ve lost. They won’t be the last, either, so long as I continue this line of

work. Hell, maybe I'll be the one to go after them." He chuckles, but there's no humor in it. "We're all ready for it. We know it comes with the territory. Be sure you're ready to lose friends, too, if you continue fighting."

Arthur swallows. That's... heavy, but he thinks he understands. He just doesn't know if he'll ever be ready to lose people dear to him.

In only a few more hours, they finally reach the walls of the capital, Radiant City.