A Narrative of Power

by Lodke

Summary

Zym is returned, but things did not go the way Callum and Rayla had hoped.

Part I: Waiting - Complete
Part II: The Lunarium - Complete
Part III - Blades and Bone - Complete
Part IV - The Calm - In Progress

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Gale

Upon the rock plateau there lay a massive bone corpse, here on the peak of the highest mountain of Xadia where Thunder had made his home. The skull of the ancient Storm dragon devoid of flesh and sinew from being buffeted by the constant winds and unending storms of the sky Nexus. Upon the skull, feeling the torrent around him, Zym stood, leaning into the wind, letting his hair and wings ride the small changes. He glistened like silver in the rain, illuminated by the magic orbs that surrounded the plateau. Lightning often would flash in the distance, and on one side of the plateau a large cave holding the ancient wyrm and bride of Thunder, Gale, reclined. On the opposite side of the plateau, a doorway of stone carved out of the mountain itself where the elves who served her resided, the Dragon Guard.

The door opened slowly and an entourage emerged, the members of her, and now Zym's, honorary Dragon Guard entered, surrounding two individuals, both in shackles, both lead in by metal poles ended with snares about their neck. The elves of the guard, faceless in their armor, made of two representative combatant from each of the six elven races making a total of twelve. These two individuals had come so far through Xadia, bringing with them Azymondius, hiding, plotting, twisting, and though it had been a reunion that warmed at least one of her two cold hearts, Gale could not think of what to do with the two.

As the two, the human and the Moonshadow were led into the open air, Gale stood and walked over in a matter of steps, stretching her wings and making a display of her claws. In the end she sat before the two, one of her claws snatching Zym and placing him upon her shoulder where he climbed and sat, craning his head around her neck to see his two protectors, a smile plain on his face, not understanding the gravity of the situation. Her other claw rested on the crown of Thunder's skull. This human had brought her Azymondius to her, but it was his blood and his ilk that took Thunder. It was the Elf's blood that lost the egg in the first place, their cowardice a mar on her family, if not her race.

Lighting forked across the sky, the thunder causing little pebbles that had somehow managed to avoid the gale force winds, rumble and rattle. Rayla and Callum were forced to their knees before the queen of the skies.

The dragon's large cyan eyes assessed them, and then spoke. A voice like thunder in their heads. No words came from her lips, but the flashes of imagery that went through their minds, scents, tastes, visions, all assembled to form a picture, a thought, an accusation.

Moonshadow. Human. Gale addressed them, looking at each in turn, *I cannot thank you enough for returning Azymondius to me. In his presence I have a little piece of the love which I have lost in this world once again.*
The images flooded through Callum's mind, forceful and undeniable. It was nearly impossible to think straight as the torrent continued. It hurt his head to comprehend, feeling like thunder through his mind.

*But good deeds do not wash away the sins which stain you both.*

"This isn't right," Rayla shouted over the winds, her voice diminutive and distant to Callum's ears, "He brough' the wee one ta stop the war. A human to undo the sin a' humans."

Emerald eyes focused on Rayla, *You were not given leave to speak. Speak out of turn again and I will have your tongue.* The gravity of the dragons intent was made abundantly clear, the image of a Moonshadow elf with bleeding mouth howling in pain ran through their minds. *Do not diminish my gratitude, but that which you have done does not begin to undo the sins of others. Rayla, you are the blood of your parents, their cowardice lead to the death of Thunder and the loss of Azymondius. Though he is regained does not bring back Thunder, does not undo their cowardice, their deed is as shameful as it ever was, his death stings just as much. True to your bloodline you abandoned your mission, and again brought shame to your house. In my disgust, I abstain from dirtying my hands with your crimes, you shall instead be turned over to the Lunarium for judgement. Your own people can muck about the filth of your failures and pass judgement. What say you, child?*

Callum looked at the dragon before, might and storm incarnate. It was hard to believe little Zym would one day be a beast that dwarfed this monstrous being. Rayla had been nothing but kindness and protection. She had done everything all with the hope of stopping the war, all with the hope of stopping the war between her and Callum's people. Callum opened his mouth to defend her, but her voice stilled him.

"Aye, it be fair." Her voice was small, her head sunken as she looked at her bound hands. Shock went through the young mage.

"Rayla, how ca-"

She cut him off, "Callum," She lamented, "I-I abandoned my mission." she didn't meet his eyes, but kept going, "I still think what I di' was righ'. I ne'er want to kill, not an'more. But I still failed, and my people lost their lives for it. They paid the price for my actions."

How long had she been harboring that burden? Callum wondered. He knew, about six weeks, but he had thought that they had grown close, that she had shared her secrets with him. Seeing her now, her sorrow so deep, she was a stranger to him, had she known the whole time that this is what
awaited her? She was the one who always went on about how so much would change.

You can take her now. I want this insect gone from my sight. Gale motioned with a claw as Azymondius watched, an absurdly happy grin on his face, tongue lolling to one side. Callum thought that the little creature likely didn't have a perception of what was going on. The two Moonshadow Dragon Guards came and lead Rayla away. Callum could only watch in dumbfounded confusion. He watched as the assassin that refused to kill, the woman who had fostered hope of a new Xadia in him, the one who had pledged to journey with him all around this magical land after the war, disappeared into the stone fortress.

Gale turned her malicious eyes to Callum, And you, brother of the now king, what am I to do with you?

"How could you do that to Rayla?" Callum demanded over her thundering voice in his head. He stood up, defiant, the Dragon Guard holding his noose forced him back to his knees in a quick struggle, before Gale waved the elf's efforts away. Callum stood once more, "Azymondius wouldn't be here if not for her, she risked her life time and again for him, risked our lives for him. All she wanted was a world where elves and humans could be at peace."

There was a long pause before Gale continued, Finished? Good. She lowered her head so that one cyan eye the size of Callum's head gazed directly at him, studying. Understand me when I say these words: Nothing. Has. Changed. Callum felt as though the floor fell out from beneath him. The struggle over the last month and a half, the loss of King Harrow, his father, the price Rayla knew she would have to pay, but bore so silently, all of it was for nothing. Still humanity is a bloodthirsty race that devours and corrodes everything they touch, they seek the blood of the peoples I have been sworn to protect, the People of the Primums. Their mere existence is a threat to the Primums. Thunder, forever may he rest, though it would be enough to separate the humans and the elves, take the humans from Xadia to a land where their infestation could be controlled, but that exile, which was meant to be a gift, meant to bring peace, only brought ire, brought jealousy, and brought Thunder's death.

Callum, still confused, could only mutter, "I-I don't understand."

Dragons live for a long time, Storm Dragons longer than most, and Thunder and I both witnessed the rise and fall of your sickening race. Ten thousand years and everyone forgets, the origin of humanity lost to the ages, but I remember. I remember when the first human was born.

"H-how can that be?" Callum tried to make sense of the words the great Wyrm spouted.
I will share with you, so that you may understand, a memory. You will understand why humans cannot do primal magic, why it is you are kept separate from the elves, and why it is that we detest you so.

Callum had no time to react, to question, before his vision went black and he felt his body drift away.
A Forgotten Past

What is it? Gale asked, her voice strangely devoid of the force and wisdom it had held when she spoke to Callum and Rayla. She looked at the strange tan thing before her. Callum was seeing through her eyes, seeing the world through the eyes of a dragon. It took Callum a moment to adjust to the different spectrum of light, blues being brighter, strange sources of light from unrecognizable objects. Gale looked to Thunder who stood beside her, then at the two elves before her: a Moonshadow elf, and a Sunfire elf. They were the children of the leadership of their tribes, wed to forge peace between them. In their arms a naked babe with tan skin and no horns, rounded ears, and of all things, a fifth finger.

"It is our son." the Sunfire elf said proudly, simply, placing his hand on his bride's shoulder. Callum saw an amber glow surround the Sunfire elf, then a silver one surround the Moonshadow elf. Gale's gaze turned to Thunder, seeing the blue glow of the sky arcanum around her beloved. No glow, no hue of the arcanum, surrounded the mewling babe. This was unprecedented, everything in the ancient land of Xadia, as far as Gale knew had to be attached to a primal source to live, and yet, this new creature bore no such attachment.

The Moonshadow elf spoke, her voice wavering before their lord and lady, "Every healer we take him to say that he is healthy, that we should be happy, but that they had never seen such a thing. Every mage says they cannot find his source. What is wrong with my baby? What is wrong with my Xander?" Hysteria crept into her voice at the end of her words.

Fair lady of the moon, Thunder spoke softly, I know not what is wrong with your child, or that there is something wrong. He is healthy, he is happy, and strange things occur in Xadia throughout the eons. Mayhap he is a new type of elf. No union of sun and moon has happened in my long memory and hue - less critter may just be the burgeoning of something new. I have no solutions now, but please, I bid you both, return here every year so that I may come to understand Xander and his gifts, whatever they may be.

The image died in Callum's mind and new ones flooded past faster. In moments he watched Xander grow from babe, to toddling, to child and finally to adult. It was when Xander brought his wife. An elf species that Callum couldn't name, but a female who bore flecks of light in her fair purple skin. Their three children bore none of the mother's markings, all had five fingers, rounded ears, ranging from pale to tan to brown skin with no horns atop their head.

Images flashed through Callum. Generations continued, and these hue-less elves continued to be watched closely by Thunder and Gale. It wasn't until they had formed their own meager tribe of a few hundred that the first revelation came. The humans were not like the other elves, they consumed and built and remade. The other tribes worked with the natural magics of the land and the arcanums to remake that which would be their homesteads. The humans however scoured the land, remade it with the sweat of their backs and strength of their hands. Unable to touch the primal
sources they changed the face of the land they resided upon. As they did this the magical creatures of the west of Xadia began to flit away from their homesteads, the magical plants dying away in their absence. Thunder watched this thoughtfully. Surely they could not persist, the land would retake what they had made and the magical creatures would return and there would be peace in the land.

Then the second revelation. Among this tribe of young humans, a lone woman felt called to magic. She travelled to Thunder and Gale and asked for their blessing to learn that which seemed so strange and alien to her. It took her years to connect to the first arcanum. Callum was amused to see it was also the sky arcanum. Thunder watched, concerned.

*You have touched the Primal Source.* He said to the young human as she sat on the plateau of the sky nexus.

Her voice was confident, strong, triumphant, "I have, I understand it, it's a part of me as much as I am a part of the world." She drew another glowing blue rune in the air and lightning struck where she pointed. She laughed happily. Thunder was concerned though, there was something strange in the way she tapped into the arcanum. He could feel the strength of the sky nexus and with each rune she cast it began to feel unstable, as part of it, admittedly small, had suddenly vanished and the rest was swirling and swarming in an effort to make up the difference. It brought chaos to the natural order of the nexus, and it pained him.

Thunder shared his revelation with Gale, and thus Callum knew, it wasn't that humans can't learn primal magic. It was that they were refused to be taught because the arcanum can't tolerate the changes they make. Where the elves are able to link to the arcanum and channel the natural forces, humans would plunge their fist into the arcanum and force it to take the path they wanted, disrupting the natural flow of the magical energy causing it to deteriorate.

Callum saw the crestfallen young mage have her heart break as Thunder tutored her. They spent years trying to find a way to change how she interacted with the arcanums, but in the end of her life the patient mage died without ever being able to find a sustainable way to interact with the arcanums other than through Thunder's gift, the Primal Stones.

All that Thunder had realized about humans was that though they could be well intentioned, though they could be kind, he feared their jealousy of the other elves would bring them to blood shed. It was their penchant for consumption, destruction, and the inability to live peaceably with the land that eventually led Thunder to encourage them to move West, and stay west. Simultaneously, the intermarriage of elven kind was forbidden, lest another human mutation occur. Primal stones were forged by mages to give humans some sort of control of the elements, but in the end, though this preserved the arcanums and prevented the humans from perverting it, they coveted the items. They killed for the items. What was a gift was again perverted by the touch of humanity.
Eons passed, the land changed. And then the seventh source was discovered. The Breach was made and Thunder took up his guard, guarding the elves from the malice and jealousy of the humans, guarding the land of Xadia from their spreading disease.

And with that, Callum came sliding back to the present, still seeing through Gale's eyes. He could see no glow, no hue, surrounding him. And he could feel how she regarded him. There was no hate, just pity for a lost and injured animal. And with that, the connection was lost.
"Is that what we are to you?" Callum asked, still reeling, "Beasts? Unruly cattle?" He wasn't sure what he felt, how to deal with this new information. When he connected to the sky arcanum he felt as though he had been special, accomplished something grand, but instead he was only propagating the perversion of the sky primum with each spell he cast.

Be at peace, youngling, Gale brushed off his question, Your sins are not as grievous as your companions, my judgement on you will be metered by the pity Thunder felt for your kind. Though you are the prince to the king that took my Thunder from me, you are not of his blood. You returned my son to me, and I shall return you to your home. But hear me well, would-be mage, the path you set yourself down from here may have dire consequences. If you continue to practice your magic, either dark or primal, you will leave naught but chaos and tumult in your wake.

Callum wanted to rebuff her assertion, defy her, but he could not deny what he had seen transpire through her eyes. His mind reeled, what he had thought defined him, made him special, in fact was the one thing he could no longer pursue. He didn't understand, "It's not fair." He stated.

Zym hopped off of his mother's shoulders and trotted over to Callum, cooing as he comforted his friend. Callum rubbed his head trying to comfort the little beast, letting him know everything would be alright, even though nothing was.

Callum spoke again, "I will go, I will leave Xadia behind, but please, let me talk to Rayla one more time."

Gale scoffed, a terrifying sound from the giant wyrm, What you do is of no concern to me, you may speak to her, in the morning the Moonshadow elves will take her to the court of the Lunarium, and I will fly you to the Breach.
Farewells

The Dragon Guard threw Callum unceremoniously into the locked, windowless room of the mountain fortress that served as their prison cell ever since they arrived. Rayla was there, sitting on the less than comfortable bed that they had taken turns sleeping on as they rested, awaiting their audience with the Queen of Dragons. This place was not meant to be a prison, but it did well enough in the absence of true cells. Aside from the bed and rough hewn blankets the room was devoid of furniture and their belongings. They had searched them both thoroughly and took their weapons, leaving them their clothes which were already stiff and filthy from the travel that brought them all the way across the land of Xadia.

Callum stumbled in and righted himself. He was hesitant to approach Rayla, but in the end, took only seconds to overcome his nervousness and went to her. Her spirit was broken, he could tell by the way her shoulders slumped, the bend of her neck, and her gaze stayed fixed upon the floor. He sat next to her, the comfort he felt around her now second nature after spending everyday for six weeks together. The silence stretched on only broken by the occasional soft patter of a tear hitting the growing damp spot on her leggings.

"I was childish." She began, when Callum didn't ask her to explain herself, she continued anyway, looking up at him. Her eyes were red and puffy, damp trails run down her cheeks, "I dun' knoo what I was thinkin'." She sniffled, "That maybe we could stop the war, that maybe I nain't have to kill, that returnin' Zym would be enuff. But there's no escapin' what I di'."

Callum placed his hand on her back, "It's ok, Rayla, serve your sentence, pay the price, then come to Katolis, come stay with Ezran and I. This didn't stop the war, but maybe with your help, we could find a diplomatic end to this all and there might be peace."

"How do yoo do it, Callum?" She asked with a ferocity and anger that made him pause, concerned, "Always tryin' ta find the good in a problem, the way out."

The memory of Gale and the origin of his people ran through his mind, the forbidden magic and the strange interaction that humans had with it. He stared off, trying to remain present. That was a problem for another day, right now, his one and only friend needed him, "It's a gift."

"Some birthday gift." She muttered.

Callum turned her to face him, "Wait, today?"
"It's July 31, right?"

"Yea." Callum affirmed.

"Then aye, its mah birthday." She moped.

Callum ran a hand through his brown locks, "Wow, this has been…a terrible birthday."

They passed the night not sleeping, only speaking when necessary, there was not much else to say. They had no way to gauge the passing of time without windows. But as the hours stretched on and they held each other close, taking comfort in the only friendly presence for miles.

Rayla finally spoke again, "Callum?" Her voice was soft, scared, so unlike her.

"Hm?" He roused from his not-sleep daze.

"Don't come after me. Promise." She was firm.

"Rayla, I don't know that I can say that."

"They won't hurt me, Callum, and, troo, I don't know the punishment that is coming, but let me come to you. When it is all over, I will come ta you in Katolis."

Before he could muster more questions he heard the stomp of armored Dragon Guard boots outside the door. As the latch clicked open and the lock was opened, he spoke. He wanted to say more, to tell her that he wanted her to come with him, that he would come find her, that he wouldn't keep that promise, but in the end he just lied softly, "Alright, I promise."

The two Moonshadow elf Dragon Guard entered, one holding the snare at the end of the polearm.

"Ugh, is that rellae necessary?" She bemoaned. They didn't answer her, only placed the snare
around her neck and led her out the door. She cast a final defiant look through the door as they closed it, leaving Callum by himself.

He wanted to cry, wanted to wail. But he didn't. He couldn't bring it to the surface in this place. So he just waited.

Within minutes, more Dragon Guard came and took him, snare about his neck to Gale atop the Plateau.

The wind was as fierce as it ever was, the unending storm arcing lightning. Zym bounced happily among the lightning bolts. The great wyrm Gale stood before Callum as they undid the snare about his neck.

_We fly to the Breach._ She held out her massive claw and Callum stepped into it. Feeling her claw contract around him he braced himself. He could see through the cracks between her claws, but only a little. Within moments they were airborne, the land lurching away as they ascended under the great force of her powerful wings. The air seeping through the cracks of her claws was cold and damp. Callum watched the world fall away below him as they ascended higher and higher.

With sudden urgency he noted that he was starting to breathe faster and faster. He couldn't catch his breath, though he wasn't working hard he felt like he just couldn’t get a good breath in. He tried to cry out, to tell Gale that something was wrong, but her voice pervaded his mind.

_Sleep._ She commanded

The world went black and he crumbled.
A Child's Wisdom

Five days. Rayla had counted. Five days since she left the Sky Nexus and the Nest of the Dragon Queen. She had seen Gale take off towards Katolis, assuming Callum in hand, well, claw. It was good that he would be safe, that he could keep practicing his magic. And maybe, one day, she could join him in Katolis. But there was something she had to do first. She couldn't go to Katolis and go on with her life until all the debts she had were paid off: for Runaan and the others. Their death was on her head, though she tried to dissuade them. Five days on foot and she found herself passed off from Dragon Guard to a Moonshadow warden. She had hoped that the reunion with her people would be a happy one, no more funny human accents, no more unappreciated sarcasm, but the more she tried to talk with the other Moonshadow elves in their troop or the warden, the more they met her attempts with silence. Callum was the last person to have spoken to her. She cherished his words, she would remember that amazing human for as long as she lived.

In time they arrived at the central hub of Moonshadow elf culture, Lunaflowne, a city of twisting marble constructs and beautiful shimmering statues that gleamed brightly in the sun, and even more brilliantly in the moonlight. It had been months since she had been here, and then it had only been to visit with her uncle Elyas while she and the other assassins received their orders and formulated their infiltration into Katolis.

This time, though, she arrived in the dark of night and marched through empty streets. There would be no friendly family meetings, no friendly tea and scones. No, now she marched directly towards a structure of towering marble arches left open to the night sky. The Lunarium.

Her Moonshadow escort, a man of thick build more than muscle who wore the non-descript typical armor of a member of the Moonshadow's league of assassins, layers of teal and navy intermingling, an appropriate camouflage for the forests of Xadia. The warden shoved her ahead of him through the white marble halls illuminated by magical glass orbs of light that swelled to bright as they approached and faded to dim as they passed, illuminating the way through the ancient structure of the Lunarium.

Without warning, the tunnel gave way to a large amphitheater and she was led to the center where her silver metal shackles were latched to an anchor in the center. Surrounding her on eight separate pedestals were thrones to mark the phases of the moon. On each there sat a representative of the Moonshadow peoples. An assassin, an illusionist, a silversmith, an alchemist, a healer, a father, a child, and a mother. Each represented one of the 8 aspects of her people, and it would be they who would judge her actions. Each wore a mask to hide the face, it is not the privilege of the judged to know that which judges them.

The assassin stood, the other lights of the amphitheater dimmed and a spotlight shone on the assassin that spoke. The voice was unrecognizable, "Rayla," she began, "You have confessed ta being responsible for the death of your band, the chosen few who were sent ta Katolis ta end the
life of King Harrow. You have confessed to not completing your mission when it was right before you. You confessed to removing the Lunar Promise after you were bound that you shared with your band, shirking the price to be paid for failure. Are these statements true?"

Rayla tried to find some recognizable features in the assassin, but the light that shone on her silver robes hid her figure in the gleaming, "Yes, bu-"

She could not continue before the light vanished, and another stood, the spotlight coming on over the illusionist, "You confess that their loss of life was due to your failure? You confess that you did not kill King Ezran when he was right before you?" The voice of the illusionist became incredulous, "You confess that you lead a human to the nest of the Dragon Queen herself?"

"Aye, but there's so much mo-"

The light again winked out, and a third came on. The scientist stood, "By your confession you admit your failures. By the blood you carry, for the failures of your parents, and for the failure of your heart, we condemn you, Rayla. We thought that taking you from them we could save their line, but you have shown weakness. Though your muscles are strong, your feet are quick, and your hands agile and dexterous, your heart is frail. Your compassion not only damned you, but damned the others who crossed into Katolis at your side."

The silversmith now, "Though we exiled your parents, they pay a price for their cowardice, you are worse than this, shirking your responsibility, denying it even. The war could be over, Katolis in tumult, but due to your selfish compassion, your squeamishness over bloodshed, your care for these less than elvenkind, you have bought yourself this punishment."

Rayla couldn't get a word in edgewise, they continued right on over her with every rebuttal, not willing to hear her words. They were already made up. The accusations and insults continued. Every few sentences the congregation of the Lunarium switching its speaker, but all speaking with unified voice. Only the child remained silent, until finally, all accusations had been heard, and silence was held. Rayla couldn't speak, her throat was dry with the severity of their words. Tears welled in her eyes. She had fought so hard for something she knew in her heart was right. Humans weren't as terrible as they all believed, as they had been taught for generations. Rayla felt that they could have made peace, that things could've been ok, but now, her heart a tumultuous landscape of guilt and angst, her head a tumble of racing thoughts and old lessons learned to be false through her own experiences.

The child stood, last among all, but the most important. It approached her, leaping casually down to the floor from the pedestal. It would be the child that chose the punishment. The wisdom of youth, the most fair, the most cruel. Having heard all things, the wisdom of the child's whimsy would be trusted above all others who might be tempted to show compassion.
The voice was a little elven boy, strangely well spoken with the exception of a lisp, "Rayla," he began, the voice light and lilting, "For each life you spent, you shall pay a lifetime in return. For every year lost under the moon, you shall lose sight of the moon. You will not know her caress or her soft glow, you will be kept in darkness. You have lost their lives, and for that we will take yours, year by year, until you can give no more."

Tears welled in her eyes, she tried to scream, tried to shout, but the horror of this sentence stilled her throat, paralyzed her words. She was going to pay the price and go to Callum, they were going to be together, they were going to fight to make the humans and the elves get along peaceably. They just wanted peace, no more blood, no more war. Her knees collapsed beneath her, she sucked in air, hyperventilating. Eyes wide and panicked.

Finally, as the warden took her shackles from the anchor to which she was tied, she spoke, "No," she croaked, gaining force, "Please, no, not that, anything but that." For the briefest moment, she wished for death, but the squelched it down, voice gaining fury and ferocity, "No!" She refused to stand, but the warden walked on dragging her shackles with him, and she was dragged across the marble floor screaming and kicking the whole time, her defiance echoed as the lights of the glowing bulbs grew dim in her absence.
There was a pounding on the door outside of the Keep at the Breach. A sharp repetitive forceful knock that exploded through the main Hall. General Amaya could feel the reverberations in her bones. She strode confidently into the anteroom and looked at the guards on watch.

They looked bewildered.

//What is it?// she signed, confused by their faces.

"There's nothing there." her soldier spoke and signed simultaneously. His face was that of befuddlement, his signals were sloppy, but improving.

With a series of rapid hand signals, the majority of the Breach Guard formed up around the door, she stood center, drawing her blade and hefting her shield in the other hand.

The knocking came again, a sharp crack repeated three times, undeniable. She watched the doors rattle on their hinges, but not budge. They all looked to her. She nodded. The doors swung open.

And there was nothing there.

Confused, she stepped forward, as she reached the threshold, peering out into the hot open air of the Breach. There was a flash of silver light, arcing through the air as though a large bubble popped and before her stood a Moonshadow elf in regal robes, staff glowing in hand, and a Sunfire elf, the one she had so often sparred with but never learned the name of. Between them was a sight to make her gasp.

Prince Callum, bound hands and barely standing on weary feet. He looked worn and torn, but she saw no blood, fresh or otherwise, his eyes were tired with dark circles and looked dazed. He breathed heaving breaths, she could see the muscles of his neck pulling as he struggled for breath. She wanted to run to him, to rush him back to safety and out of their hands. She poised to strike when the Sunfire elf pushed Callum forward. He stumbled, falling to his knees and the Moonshadow elf spoke.

"A peace offering, from Gale, the Dragon Queen." His voice was stern, "Fer returnin' her prince, we return yurs."

Fighting every urge to rush to Callum as they coursed through her, she signaled one of her guard to go to him. They picked him up and pulled him back to safety behind her. The Sunfire and Moonshadow watched, defensive, alert, but not moving to strike. As Callum moved to safety they began to walk backwards. Amaya followed them with her gaze. With the tap of the Moonshadow's staff there was a flash of silver light and the two vanished. In the distance, stretching it's wings, a great storm dragon took flight, it's massive body taking to the air and vanishing swiftly over the horizon with the great beats of its wings.

//Close the gate// She signaled her men. None spoke, none knew what to make of what had just happened, it was unprecedented. The Sunfire and the Moonshadow working together to bring Callum back? It was a problem for another time. She turned, rushing to Callum's side as soon as the great doors of the main hall were shut. Her men had already summoned the physician of the keep and he rushed to Callum's side, beating her to his side. A bookish man with square spectacles. She knew better than to interrupt his ministrations, though every matronly urge she had pulled at her heart to take his hand in hers. Explanations would come. She watched her nephew, one of the few
vestiges of her sister, Sarai, that remained in this sad and sorry world. Time stretched on as the physician checked Callum's pulse, listened to his lungs, peeled his eyelids open. The young man groaned under his examination, a good sign.

Knowing his commander was waiting, the physician half-mindedly signed, //Pulse good, wheezing, good color, eyes fine. Stable.// It was quick and left much to be desired from a report, but it was something. Callum writhed and heaved under his ministrations, not due to any painful stimulation, but a panicked look in his eyes as his lungs burned for air. She could see that familiar panic in his eyes. He saw the soldiers without seeing them. The physician placed a hand on his shoulder, holding his hand, trying to soothe him. It took several minutes, but Callum's breathing slowed and he lay back down on the black stone floor.

A little time on, after a more thorough evaluation, the physician signed and spoke with her.

"I suspect exposure." His signals were practiced, carefully selected, "He's dehydrated, he's been eating poorly, but I see no major injuries or signs for concern. I would like to continue to monitor him. I suspect if we take care of his basic needs, let him rest, he'll become a little more aware. It looks like delirium to me."

//Thank you.// General Amaya smiled, feeling a weight lift from her heart, //Do as you will, I will come see him soon.// She scanned her men, //No one send word of this yet. There is much we don't know. I would have words with King Ezran first.// They saluted her. She did not question their loyalty.

Hearing of her desire, the Crow Keeper brought her a quill and parchment. She began heating wax over a candle so it was ready for her when General Amaya was finished. A crow was perched on the shoulder of her brown robes, ready to be dispatched. She slight woman stood off to the side as Amaya scrawled quick words on the parchment, stabilizing her script on one of the stone walls, pausing in frustration when the quill punctured the parchment. She forged on. When she was finished she rolled up the parchment and sealed it with her signet, a shield emblazoned with the two towers of Katolis, using the sealing wax the Crow Keeper provided.

"To King Ezran, without delay." The Crow Keeper spoke then bowed. She was new, didn't know the hand signs yet.

//Thank you.// She signed. A nearby soldier interpreted for the Crow Keeper.

Amaya had to stop herself from running to Callum's side.
Rayla had screamed herself hoarse, now her defiance was in the form of weak struggles of her arms and the scratching scream. She had no idea how deep into the earth they had gone, she only remembered the endless decline. The Moonshadow Warden and his legion of cruel guards passing her between them as they descended. None spoke, that was part of her punishment.

It was already broaching on maddening. But she wasn't going to just give up, wasn't just going to cave. She'd find a way out.

The first sign of anything different was the loss of white marble as they descended, turning to rough hewn stone. Then, further into the abyss of blackness, they opened a wooden door which showed a iron bound table and walls strewn with various instruments of dark purpose. As an assassin she had been trained to resist torture techniques and methods from an early age, but she still felt her stomach drop out at the vision of all those rusted and rough metal spikes and pliers of various intentions.

The guard that dragged her now shoved her roughly in front of him. She smacked into the table, catching herself with her bound hands. She turned, raising her manacled hands to protect herself. She saw him move, clenching his fist, but could not stop the blow that drove the wind out of her. She coughed and gasped, "Eh, ya worthless sack of shite." She taunted hoarsely, defiantly, "Beatin' a defenseless elf."

They didn't rise to her taunting, but instead the one that had punched her in the stomach shoved her backwards onto the table, grasping her about the neck. He roughly pulled her neck, forcing her to lay on the table lengthwise. She could feel the large splinters embed themselves in her back and cried out in pain, stifling it quickly. She refused to give them the satisfaction. Rough, strong hands grabbed her ankles and her wrists. She looked about her, fear creeping into the edges of her eyes, she bit off a slew of insults that went unanswered. The warden placed manacles on her ankles, they bit her skin and squeezed tightly. They fixed her feet right next to one another with no range to move, then they removed the manacles on her wrists and put her in full forearm bindings. A torturous contraption, they forced her hands to grab a metal bar and locked the full metal contraption that encased her entire forearms shut. The metal was so tight about her hands that she couldn't even open them.

They released her arms and legs, she immediately tried to sit up, only to be slammed back down onto the table, knocking her head. By which guard she was unsure, she was dazed and the room spun about her. Waves of nausea hit her, but she kept herself together, in all of this she would not show herself as weak, she would not backdown.
She felt a sharp jerk as a new leash was lashed to the forearm bindings and the manacles at her feet. She was harshly dragged off the table. She hit the stone floor with a grunt. She was again dragged out of the room. She lost the direction they went, still dazed, but within moments they had hitched her legs to an anchor on the floor of a large cavernous cell. Then they attached a second chain to the bindings on her arms and began to winch her up. The jerks of the chain slowly forced her arms up over her head and then hoisted her into the air so that only her toes could touch the floor.

Once she stopped swinging, the Warden signaled all but a female guard to file out, and when only she remained he gestured, she saluted, and he followed the others out.

The female guard approached Rayla, pulling a knife from her belt and cut the leggings, boots, gauntlets, and cuirass of her assassins attire away, leaving her in only her small clothes. Rayla sneered at the female guard who worked dispassionately. She began patting Rayla's body up and down, it was rude, brusque, and all together wholly unpleasant, "Shove off, I ain't hidin' nothin' I came here willin'ly."

Once the armor was removed and the final inspection for stored and hidden blades or lockpicks was completed the female guard draped Rayla in a loose canvas garb that bound around the back, arms, and legs with ties and did nothing for the keeping one warm.

Once dressed the female guard went to the door, pounded twice and it was opened. The warden walked in, face stern. She burned his face into her mind. Dark amethyst eyes and almost tan skin for a Moonshadow elf lay the plane for a pinched nose and small almond shaped eyes. His lips were thin, but marred by a scar that crossed from his left over both lips and ended on the right chin. He walked up to her and met her gaze, unabashed.

She spit in his face. Smiling all the while.

He flinched, then smirked. He wiped the spittle flecked with blood off his face and flicked his wrist, the fluid splattering against the cold stone floor. He cracked his knuckles and Rayla could see his muscles tighten.

"Oh, shi-"

Her head swam as she drifted down into unconsciousness.
Little Lamb

General Amaya sat at Callum's bedside, it had been almost a day since he had arrived at the Breach and he had only awoken to ferociously devour food and guzzle water. Amaya had thought he would choke, but in his altered state, he would just eat and slip back into sleep. She could see him mouthing something over and over again, but without the context she couldn't place the word. Ale-a? All? Did he want ale? That made no sense. Neither did just repeating 'all'.

When the physician came by she asked him //What is he saying? I don't understand.// She hated admitting her limitation.

He spelled it out for her, understanding, //R-ae-l-a//

//What is that?//

//It is an old word meaning 'female sheep'. One of the ancient tongues long left unused. Only some still speak it for religious purposes.//

//That makes even less sense than 'ale'//

//Come again?//

//Nevermind.// Turning back to her nephew, she looked at Sarai's son once more. His breathing was much easier, she didn't see his breath hitch. His skin looked fuller, softer, than when he had come here, amazing what some water and food will buy you in 24 hours. He tossed fitfully, Amaya placed a hand on his, her gauntlet removed, feeling the warmth of his skin. He was her favorite of the two boys, she would admit to herself and no one else. He carried all of his mother's sense and none of her prowess, but still fought on. It was his father's stubbornness shining through. Amaya had loved that foolish man like a brother, she had mourned him with Sarai when he passed. She could see them both in his face, but as time went on she saw less of them and more of Callum, his personality both an amalgamation of his parents, and wholly and completely unique at the same time.

She broke her reverie when she felt a hand on the back of hers, she was shocked to see Callum's other hand on the back of hers. She looked to his face and saw that he was awake, truly awake. There was no delirium in his eyes, no confusion. The goofy smile she had known for so long was absent though.
In the relief of the moment she embraced him roughly, fighting off the tears at the corner of her eyes. Caving, she wiped the lone tear from each eye and helped Callum to sit.

"Aunt Amaya," he said, looking around the private infirmary. Black stone, arrow slits for windows, militant spartan décor, he began signing as he spoke, "We are at the Breach?" He had to say it out loud, to hear the question before he could accept it as true, the last thing he remembered was the rapid ascent and then...darkness. Darkness for days that stretched on and on with his arms stretched up above him and his feet tied down. Pain and aches all over. It made no sense, "Where is Rayla?"

//Yes// she signed quickly, //The Breach. Better yet, 'what' is Rayla?//

He blinked at her, confused, then realization dawning, "She's the elf. You know. The one that kidnapped Ezran and I." He watched the confusion wash across her face and she began to sign something, stopped, attempted to start again, then stopped, at a complete loss for words. Callum ran a hand through his hair, "Yea, it's real messed up." And in the private room of the Breach, Callum began recounting the whole story for Aunt Amaya, sprinkling in important tidbits about how amazing Rayla was here and there, and about how he owed her his life one hundred fold, if not more.

//Wait, you can do magic without a primal stone?//

"It's rude to interrupt, but yes." Callum continued, the words flowing through his mouth and hands in rapid succession, the flood gates opening.
Rayla didn't know if it was night or day, they had come and gone in such rapid succession or stretched on. They had come in and forced some strange tea down her throat and she had attempted to not swallow, but they covered her nose, forcing her to swallow to breathe. The concoction could've used a lil sweetener, but it wasn't as bad as she was expecting, considering, y'know, torture. Not long after she swallowed it though the world began to swim and dip, when she awoke she was no longer suspended, still had her hands bound, but her feet were free.

Every so often she would hear the winch start ratcheting and the chain on her manacles became taught. She would be hoisted into the air so that her feet couldn't touch the floor. A panel of metal on the door would slide open and a plate of water and bread would be slid into the room. Then the winch would release and she would get to eat, clumcily maneuvering the food to her mouth without being able to pick it up. Or sometimes it wouldn't and she would just dangle there for hours or days, however long it was until they brought her more rations.

She had tried to break the silence with singing, with banging her manacles on the cold stone walls, she had even attempted to climb the chain, only getting to about ten foot off the ground before her feet slipped and she spun, slamming into the stone floor. That one had hurt.

And still, the last voice she had heard in all this was Callum's.

"Alright, I promise."

That foolish human, she thought fondly from the corner of her cell. She felt as though she could still see his face, those soft green eyes and brown hair. How he was always drawing in that cursed book of his. She recalled the times she had caught him sneaking surreptitious glances at her as he drew.
A Kingdom

Ezran sat in a chair in his too large dining hall. To his left sat General Amaya. To his right, Callum. He had never seen him look so broken and defeated. It worried him. Through Zym's eyes and the connection he shared he had seen the judgement of Rayla, he had seen Gale take Callum into the sky.

Callum sat, his hands before him on the table, twitching out of sync, not quite knowing what to do with his hands or his words. They twitched, not touching the plate or the silverware, what had been a rambunctious appetite two weeks prior had faded and now he was barely picking at food. No matter how much he ate, he always felt hungry. A maddening gnawing sensation in his gut. Whenever he dreamed, it was only of darkness. His waking hours at the Breach and now at the castle of Katolis were filled with drawing. Sketches of things he'd seen, sketches of Rayla, sketches of other elves, elves he never saw but they were filling his mind and filling his dreams in dark ways.

"So, " Ezran broke the silence, "You aren't going to do magic anymore?"

Callum looked at his brother. The crown was still too big for his head and sat lopsided on his hair, "That's not what I'm saying…"

"Not dark magic?!" Ezran interjected worriedly.

Before Callum could answer, General Amaya signed an emphatic //No!!//

His answer was hesitant, the temptation was there, but even with all the ways his world had been turned on its head in the last three weeks since handing Zym over to Gale, he did not yet feel pulled to Dark Magic, "…No, not Dark Magic." He answered, looking away from his brother, "I can study runes and ancient books, I can try to connect to the Primal Sources, but knowing what I know now, can I really use that?" He heaved a sigh and fell back against the chair back, sliding low in his chair, "But if I had six primal stones, then I would be able to…"

Ezran looked at his older brother, a young man so lost, "Callum," Ezran began, "I know you want to study magic, I know you want to be a mage. But I need you here, I need you to help me. I've been barely keeping the castle together for the last few months, let alone moving forward. I need you to help me." The confession of need had been weighing on Ezran more than the nine year old king realized. Now that it was out in the open though, he felt only guilt. He was asking his brother to give up the pursuit of the thing he loved most so that he could help him run a kingdom that wasn't even his birthright.
Callum looked at Ezran, his face flat and unreadable at first, but then it softened, "Ezran, of course I am going to help you. Dad would have wanted it that way. I will always help you, you're my brother."

General Amaya watched the sad exchange with dry eyes. Watched as the two orphan princes took on the challenge of running the single largest human military force in the land and the kingdom along with it. The last three months had been the hardest of their life. General Amaya prayed that it would be easier from here.
Three years pass in relative peace. Ezran spent the majority of his time trying to have peaceful summits with the pentarchy and representatives beyond the Breach. No easy task with the Moonshadow assassin visages still fresh in the minds of every human ruler, but doable. Little progress was made. At time there are border skirmishes, disputes over land and trade, but a tentative peace is obtained with trade across the Breach with the approval of Gale, overseen by Sol Regen. General Amaya became his primary advisor, using the loyalty of family to help secure his place and his hold on the kingdom, even if in the taverns they mock him for his cowardice, not wanting to go to war with those that murdered his father. And not to be mistaken, the child king harbors great rage for the murder of his father, it festers in him, but Callum is by his side to temper the rage and encourage peace.

Callum continued his studies, spending more time in the library and requesting old books and scrolls trying to make sense of them than he did sleeping. He filled sketchbook after sketchbook with runes and complex transcriptions of Primal Magic Theory. He moved into Lord Viren's old lab and stayed there late into the night when his obligations allowed it. In the catacombs of the castle, where the Dragon prince had been hidden, he experimented. The walls became covered with his scrawling as he tried to piece together the place of humans in primal magic and to find away around using a primal stone. He even tried to connect to the other Arcanums aside from Sky, but couldn't quite attain any of them. Always as though so integral aspect was slipping through his grasp like so many grains of sand. When he wasn't working in his workshop he wrote letters, some to foreign diplomats of the pentarchy, other times to the elves. He even wrote to Rayla, but with no way of sending it to her, he just tucked those letters away in a desk drawer. The nightmares continued but had become persistent darkness. Callum's reputation changed. No longer the goofy step prince, he was still viewed as kind, and witty, but distant, as though his mind was miles away. However, whenever Ezran felt his older brother wasn't listening, there would often be a witty quip, putting Ezran back in his place.

What was the new normal seemed to drag on, and with every rumored elven visitor, always a diplomat, Callum was seen at the gate to the Capital. He felt himself the natural ambassador to elven kind knowing the most about their people, their lands, their plants and animals, and always with curious questions. Some greeted him coldly, but the returning ambassadors had their chill demeanor broken down over time. Some could be downright cordial with the absent minded young prince.

Rayla knew only darkness.
"Listen here you fucking Glow Toad," Callum glared into the permanently grumpy visage of Bait. He had been spending his efforts this past summer focusing on the primum of the sun, and felt now that summer was beginning to dwindle and nights grow longer into autumn that he was losing his chance to grasp it once again, "You will divulge the secrets of the Sun Arcanum to me or so help me I will find out just how delicious Glow Toads can be." Callum laid out on the floor of Ezran's reading room while his brother king dozed in a lush red leather chair. A fire burning in the hearth offered light more than warmth to the cooling summer night. It had been a scorching summer in Katolis, but the Breach had been more or less quiet. The relationship with the elven nations remained tenuous, but peaceful for the moment, some trade had struck up, so exchange of words, if not ideas. One thousand years of anger and hate, and a child king was on the forefront of changing times.

Bait stared back at Callum, unabashed. His tongue whipped over his left eye and he croaked, "Bhowowoww." The fire and the Glow Toad offering the only light to the sandstone private library. What had been their play room in the Castle of Katolis growing up had been rapidly invaded by charts and figure, toy soldiers and figures lined up on scrolls of maps now mirrored the soldiers and figures in the war room.

Callum swept the little creature up in his arms and tossed him in the air, his stubby legs flying out as he peaked and then began to fall. As Callum caught him the little beast began to pant happily, "Are you ready to talk yet?" Callum demanded playfully.

"Bowowoh," Bait groaned contentedly.

Ezran stirred slightly and Callum paused his game of Throw the Glow Toad and looked at his thirteen year old brother. He had grown taller, leaner, but still carried that baby fat that Callum himself was only now beginning to lose. He could see their mother's eyes in him, her compassion, but Harrow's jaw and dead set determination. Callum had no idea where he got all that thoughtful wisdom that guided his hands and words day to day. Were it Callum, he likely would have gone mad and the Pentarchy would be the Quad by now. In the past three years Ezran had expertly dealt with discontented members of the Pentarchy, getting them to back down from arms and bristling weapons at the border of the Breach by being there ahead of them, unarmed and unarmored. Queen Aanya and Ezran had become fast friends and even faster allies. The lands of Duren and Katolis now benefiting from two generations of cooperation.

Callum was there at the most recent skirmish, some nonsense about a human trader that had been detained on the other side of the Breach and had his wares stolen. The Katolian men at arms were certain that the elves had stolen from the man, the elves persisted that the man had lost it gambling with them. It was such a small thing, but it set the guards of both sides on edge, what had been a night of fun had turned into a border dispute that required the Kings attention at the Elven
Commander's request. Ezran asked that the merchant be housed until his arrival, went and heard his story, heard the elves retelling of it, and in the end, asked the merchant's pet dog what had happened. When Ezran confronted the lying party, they confessed immediately. End of the day the merchant had gotten drunk on a too potent Elven vintage and gambled his wares in comradery and then turned around and accused the elves. If the mistrust that was already there wasn't enough to make this tentative peace fall apart at the seems, then the lying nature of greedy men may just be enough. Callum scoffed recalling the event. So many small things like that through the years and everyone remained on edge.

Ezran grumbled something in his sleep, bringing Callum back to the present, broken from his reverie, the Glow Toad, still held aloft was gazing at him, panting happily. He set the Glow Toad down, who let out a discontented grumble before wobbling over to lay next to Ezran's red leather chair. Callum rolled over and picked himself up off the floor, stretching. He brushed off his grey pants and looked at the candle bearing hour markings, it had gotten late, the fire had been small to start with and was still going decently strong, but he could see that it was turning more into hot coals than really a burning fire.

He walked to his brother, his king, his lord of Jelly Tarts, and shook his shoulder, "Ez, time to get to bed."

Ezran's eyes sleepily opened. He looked confused for a moment, looking around, then settled back into his chair, "I had another dream." He said simply.

"Lemme guess. Taffy hippo? Taffy Ezran? Taffy Aanya?"

The drowsy adolescent king laughed at his brother's ludicrous suggestions, "No, nothing so juvenile."

"The last dream you told me about had all three! And you were distressed that the hippo was sweeter than you!" Callum laughed, accusingly.

"No, it was Zym." Ezran stood laughing and stretched. He walked to the window, a tall plate glass structure that went the entire height of the high ceiling-ed room, "He was flying through Xadia, flying free, feeling the wind beneath his wings, but he was so big, Callum. Oh, it was a beautiful dream."

"I know you miss him," Callum went to join his brother at the window, "There's a lot from that time that I miss too."
"Do you still dream of Rayla?" Ezran asked, an innocent question.

"I haven't dreamed of Rayla much, occasionally I'll hear her voice in a dream, but it's always so dark." Callum looked out the window, gazing into the distance without seeing.

They had spoken of Rayla a number of times through the years, initially Callum couldn't have a conversation without getting heated. The injustice that she had made him promise to bear still twisted like a knife. He had tried so hard to find news of her, but as far as any of the Moonshadow elves were concerned, they had thought all the assassins in the assault of Katolis that ended Harrows life had died. It was like she was stricken from their record, their time together travelling through Xadia a fevered dream. He didn't even know of any family he could reach to, her parents in hiding after the death of Thunder. The knife twisted a little with each dream of darkness, making the old wound split open and spilled hot and sour blood. Rather than sleeping soundly, rather than tormenting himself over her, he poured over the old tomes of magic, learning draconic. He had even read the tomes of Viren and Claudia regarding Dark Magic. He understood it, though he would never practice it. Afterall, as High Mage of Katolis, it was his duty to know these things, no matter how distasteful. Viren's private journal had fallen into his possession after his passing and Callum had true insight into just how conflicted the man had been. Somewhere along the line, his desire to protect Katolis had bubbled into a thirst for power.

Ezran watched the dark thoughts flit across his brother's face, an all too common occurrence, and changed the subject closing his eyes, "This dream was so real, Callum." Ezran continued on, "I could feel the wind, it felt like back then, felt like he and I were together, flying over the Breach and out of Xadia and out into the wilds." He was reliving the dream in his head, and Callum looked out the window.

The stars were clearly seen, the clouds only obscuring some of the night sky with their haphazard tufts, the moon was absent, it was a new Moon and the sky was dark. Outside the walls of the Capital and outside the Castle the street lamps burned with their dim yellow flames like so many little yellow stars reflecting the beautiful scattering of the celestial bodies above. He watched the stars as Ezran reminisced, finally saying, "Come on, your highness, it's time for bed."

"Yes, High Mage." Ezran responded drolly.

Callum looked back out the window as his brother marched on tired feet, examining his reflection. It held his attention only briefly, Still shaggy brown hair, just slightly longer than in his youth, not due to planning or some grand fashion statement, more absently forgetting that it was well past time to visit the barber. He grimaced, reminding himself he had to look presentable and play the part, when he saw some of the stars beyond his reflected visage wink out of existence for a moment, then flicker back to life. Odd. He paused in leading Ezran away and went back to the window, opening it. In the black night above, the stars would flicker, as though some great shadow passed before it. Two great wings and a long tail trailing behind it. What had Ezran said, flying
over the Breach?

Too excited to explain, Callum took off running, beckoning Ezran to come with him. They burst through the doors to the antechamber and the guards were startled to attention, and rapidly gathered their belongings and began to follow. Callum shouted over his shoulder, "No need to worry, everything's fine. We're just going to-uh."

"The bathroom!" Ezran shouted over his shoulder, confused, but catching his older brother's cues.

"Yea, the bathroom!" Callum agreed, "We ate some bad lamb!" Callum turned down a hallway and began ascending a set of stone stairs.

Ezran paused before the turn and looked at the two guards with deadly seriousness, "Terrible diarrhea." his face grave, and then vanished at a full tilt.

The one guard turned to the other, "What a strange king."

The other could only laugh, "You don't know the half of it, Balal." and went back to manicuring his nails with a dagger.
Callum and Ezran slid to a halt under the trap door leading to the surface of the highest tower of the Castle. Callum opened it slowly, still catching his breath from his race up all those flights of stairs. It wasn't as hard as it had been when he was younger, longer legs he supposed. When his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the night and he saw none of the guards atop the tower, he opened the trap door fully and climbed out, Ezran right on his heels.

As though whatever Callum had seen had been waiting for some sign, there was a strong gust of wind that buffeted the two brothers, causing them to shield their faces in mirror image poses. When they looked up, Ezran shouted in joy.

"Zym!" He ran forward and threw his arms around the Prince of Dragons.

Callum had to take a moment to take in this new creature, if this was Zym, he had surely changed. This was no little dragon. Callum had ridden on his shoulders and hopped upon his head more than once in the playful moments years ago, now such a thing would have surely killed Callum. Zym's neck was much longer now, serpentine in nature as it craned above the two boys from a low chest the size of a horse's, what had been adorable little eyes now appeared more narrow, more discerning, as the dragon had grown into their size. Head to tail he was four or five times as long as Callum was tall.

In response to Ezran's joy, Zym's tail whipped back and forth happily.

"My word, you've grown." Callum said, approaching the almost familiar dragon, placing a hand on his white-silver scales. While so much was different, so much was the same. That mischievous glint, the lolling tongue from parted scaly lips, a blast of white wind blown hair framed by six horns of varying sizes.

You too! The sentiment echoed excitedly bounced around Callum's mind, reminiscent of Gale and her forceful voice. Callum couldn't place the quality of the voice, so hard to tie meanings to these reverberating feelings and images in his head, but it was wholly recognizable as something uniquely Zym. There was innocence, mischief, laughter, and youth in the tone of what came across.

"If this is how big you get in three years.." Callum trailed off. Zym was going to be massive, but then he supposed all the dragons were, he had just never associated that scaly ball of fur with the great beasts that dominated the sky of Xadia, "That's so unfair, I've only grown, like," Callum put a
hand in front of him and then another a slight bit apart, "two inches! And Ezran grew, like, five! Am I doomed to be the shortest High Mage of Katolis?" His hands pressed in on his head in frustration, dragging them down is face and pulling the skin with them.

Ezran pulled away from Zym, "I always told you that you would be a great dragon," He said proudly.

_Obviously._ Zym laughed and lolled, the little giant dragon still very much a child. He pressed his forehead to Ezran's chest, his entire head the size of the adolescent's chest, and purred, a deep rumbling that Callum could feel reverberating in the air over a foot away from their old friend.

The reverie continued as the boys looked on their old friend and Zym played happily telling stories of the last three years, but it was Callum who finally thought to ask the question, "What brings you here, Zym? Why now?" Surely if this were just a meeting amongst friends it could've happened at any time, but now? On a moonless night? Zym was hiding, he didn't want to be seen. Ezran had dreamed of his coming, meaning that their connection was not lost, just silent. Why did it reawaken now?

The joy partially slid away from Ezran's face as he considered the question, too. But for Ezran, Zym didn't have to speak. He knew it already.

"There's danger coming." And like that the joy wilted from his voice and Callum's heart ached for his brother, so few were times where he could be a little boy and not the king Katolis needed, "When the elves came for father, they had two targets. King Harrow for the King of Dragons, Thunder, and me for their lost Prince, Zym."

Zym did not confirm or deny this, merely watched. The mischief faded to pondering, the joy slipped from his features as well, being replaced with concern.

"That doesn't make sense though." Callum argued,  Zym is fine, we got him back to Gale. Things have been progressing towards peace." There was a long pause, he rounded on the Ezran, "And how do you know this."

Ezran touched his head, distant, "I get…fragments…pieces of thoughts sometimes. Sometimes their dreams, but with Zym being here, it's like I can see them clearly. They're his memories. Things he's seen." His voice was sad too, now, "Their prince was returned, but their people, their assassins, Viren perverted their spirits and souls, tormented them. Their families curse their names because of their failure. Their guild bears the curse of a broken promise. The promise to end my life. It is a contract left incomplete. Gale finally conceded to letting them complete the contract."
Rage boiled in Callum. He knew how Gale viewed humans, how that ancient creature let elves and humans dance and twist to her musings, but cared not for the quality of lives they led. What was the purpose of these royal lizards, what was the value of a life to them, human, elf, or otherwise. They seemed ready to dispassionately throw them away at a moment's notice. Callum had left this puzzle alone, often revisiting it over the years, but the question of the Dragon's purpose always left him struggling to find an answer.

"Zym," Callum huffed, "I hate to say it, but your mother is a bitch." He pinched his nose.

Ezran let out an astounded gasp, "Callum! He's still a baby!" and tried to cover Zym's ears with his hands, realizing he had no idea where Zym's ears actually were. He looked to his hands, confused.

Callum looked to Zym again, ignoring his brother's concerns, "What can you tell us Zym." His voice was matter of fact, down to business, the goofy Callum quieting down.

Callum heard Ezran gasp as the world again began to swim with black and recede. Callum had been through this once before, though it was interesting to see the world through Zym's eyes. The Dragon Guard stood on an all too familiar plateau surrounding an entourage of Assassins. Gale stood before them and Zym lay a short distance off, curled up on himself, feigning sleep. Callum and Ezran watched through slitted eyes. Gales words were lost, but Zym could hear the words of the elves.

A Moonshadow elf with short cropped white hair and one crooked horn that grew slanted and to the right almost touching the other. He bore the same eye markings that Rayla had, two sharp crescents descending from either eye. He was the tallest among them, and his slight armor hid little of his lean figure. As he interacted with Gale, he bounced on his toes, shifting his weight constantly.

The conversation picked up mid sentence, "They've grown too bold, and every opportunity we have to deal with these vermin is quelled by the Murderer's son. This rat, this insect, this intolerable influence has the audacity to impose his requests upon the elven peoples, never acknowledging their own failures and perversions. His continued existence and influence is direct disrespect to the memory of Thunder and the young king Azymondius. I have spoken with the ambassadors that have travelled the human kingdoms about the reproachful treatment of our honored representatives. This parasitic race has naught a care for it's own, letting their ill and poor fester within the streets like and endless cannibalistic cycle." There was a long pause, Callum could tell based on the shifting expressions of the assassins that Gale was responding.

"By your order the murderer and his son were to be given the gift of death. Because of the failure
of our kin and our guild, the boy king persists and manages to cool the blood of his human vassals preventing any progress towards the final solution, their eradication. The longer they placate our people with feints of peaceful lives, the further they will lull us into a false sense of security, and then they will strike. It is known that, like all humans, this young king is mischievous, but added to that due to his very survival, his mere existence, is enough to earn the ire of all elven kind, his life continues in direct defiance of the edict you passed down and undermines the authority of the Regina Dracones. 

More thoughtful gazes from the group of assassins, the Dragon Guard remained expressionless, watching.

"We seek only to grant old wishes and give old gifts, my Queen," The leader with his crooked horn bowed low, "We will leave the High Mage out of this as long as he stays out of my way."

As he listened to Gale's words, a smile spread across his crooked lips, "That is the beauty, my queen. None of the human kingdoms will know of this attempt, there will be no ire from them, only disarray of the strongest human military. We will use this." He pulled a vial from his leather belt pouch, "Bloodlock poison. A single cut from a dagger with this poison applied is enough to bear out its effects. It causes a cascade reaction in the blood, fueled by lunar magic and lost alchemical secrets, it causes the blood to clot. A clot in and of itself is enough to disrupt the vital flows of a body, man, or elf. Death is assured. To the unsuspecting eye it would appear from natural causes. A freak accident of blood that happens to the unfortunate. And the beautiful thing is there is only one antidote."

There was more questions from Gale, Rage burned in Callum as he watched this Moonshadow elf talk so nonchalantly about the poison that would end his brother's life.

"Bloodlock is derived from Moonshadow blood, a creation of our alchemists using secrets of the Moon Primum." The crooked elf continued, "The only way to reverse the agent is ingestion of the blood that created it. This particular batch," he held the vial aloft, it was a sickly silver concoction only barely opaque, "Was formed from the blood of the prisoner, Rayla, while she remains contained in the catacombs of cut into the stone beneath the Lunarium."

There was a long and pregnant pause as Gale considered, but when the murmuring began along with the clapping of backs Callum knew that she had approved the murder of his brother. The world slammed back and suddenly Callum was on the rooftop with Zym and Ezran once more. Ezran had fallen to his hands and knees, Callum watched him wretch and heave. One did not often see their own death warrant signed. He could see the bewilderment plain on his face. The boy king began to cry as his nausea subsided.

"Three years," He sobbed, "I spent three years trying to make this peace work. I've bent over
backwards, made trades that benefitted only other kingdoms all to buy patience and tense tolerance. Trying to get elves and humans to be tolerant if not cordial, and this is what it leads to? Some emotionless lizard leagues away calls for my head because of my father's mistakes?” Callum went to his brother, kneeling beside him, Zym rested his large head just beside the brothers on the other side of Ezran.

"I won't let any of them hurt you.” Callum promised him, soothing, remembering how their mother, Sarai, soothed him when he couldn't breathe or was panicked. He ran his hand in small circles of Ezran's back, "Just take a deep breath." Ezran continued to cry for a minute, his face twisted. The mounting frustrations of the boy king and now seeing his own death agreed to with no ceremony after fighting so hard for peace just too much for him to bear. Tears ran down his cheeks and snot leaked from his nose. But Ezran had Harrow's steel and Sarai's compassion, of his own will, he stilled the tears, and cleared his vision with a deep inhalation, sitting back on his feet in a resting kneeling stance. He grabbed his own thighs, tightly at first, but then his grip loosened. His tears dried and the little boy died a little more as the king emerged once more.

"How long, Zym," how could such a young voice hold such cold steel?

The imagery of a full moon flashed through their minds, Two weeks.

"Callum," Ezran moved to the trapdoor, "Bring General Amaya to the War Room. No one else. We need a plan."

"Yes, my king."
General Amaya saw the stern look in Callum's eyes when she opened the door, Commander Gren having heard the pounding on the door and awakening his consort and commander. It was odd to see the woman who was warrior incarnate out of her armor, wearing a sleeping gown tightly wrapped around her swollen belly.

//What is it, Callum?// she blinked sleep from her eyes.

//Assassins in two weeks.// He signed, //War Room, thirty minutes.//

Gren watched the exchange, eyes widening, as Callum vanished into the shadows of the sleeping castle he signed to her, //Do I wake the guards and alert them?//

She watched her nephew, the young man he had become, and signed back, //Not yet, let those who can be rested, be rested.// She signed with one hand, resting the other on her swollen belly. She had hoped to bring this child into a world of peace, but by Sarai she would be sure that if it was born into a world of war, it would be on the winning side.
Empires and Marbles

Ezran finished filling General Amaya in on what they knew and how they knew, pointing her gaze to the sky where Zym flew silently over the castle, awaiting the plan, when Callum stumbled into the room, "Sorry, thanks. Sorry again." He called over his shoulder, spinning, as he approached the council room table.

Commander Gren took some liberties translating the general's words, but her point came across just as well, "I'm going to…connect that dragons…oh my…um…I intend to reorganize it's…ahem…effing..." he continued timidly, "Digestive tract?" Commander Gren looked a little green at trying to translate his General's words. She could see her growing agitation with his paraphrasing.

General Amaya shut her eyes forcefully, ///I will take it from here, darling.///

Commander Gren looked at her red face and nudged the steaming tea cup towards her, ///Your blood pressure, dear./// She scowled at him, but she visibly tried to calm herself. She picked up the tea cup and began to drink, having to stop as momentary waves of nausea pervaded her. She let out an exasperated breath and continued to drink the medicinal brew.

After draining the cup of tea, which Callum presumed was bitter given her grimace, General Amaya placed the tea cup aside and signed, ///I'm going to kill that Dragon.///

Ezran reclined in a hard wood chair, and signed absentmindedly, "We cannot do that. That will not solve the problem. They will still come after me, their guild has been insulted, they will continue to pursue me until I die or am killed."

///But killing Gale would be oh so satisfying and it would bring an end to their regime,/// Amaya signed angrily, her mouth twisted in anger, ///The end of the Storm Dragon Dynasty. The end of our troubles.///

"You don't even believe that." Ezran said, sitting up and gripping the edges of the table, "For three years I fought for peace, I staid the blade of man and elf alike. I have been mocked, I have been chastised, but I have kept the peace. If there is one thing I will not jeopardize, it is that peace. If they come for me, we will deal with that retaliation, but I will not condone the shedding of blood outside of self defense."

///Why martyr yourself for a people that killed your father, a race of beasts that killed your mother,
and now pursue your head.// Amaya demanded of her king.

Ezran looked to his brother, "Callum," he said tiredly acknowledging his High Mage, noting the maps and bags in his hands, "Do you have something to add to this circular conversation? Please say yes." He ended in a defeated tone. Callum could tell that Ezran was having a hard time sticking to his goals of peace. Callum had seen that fire flare in him so many times in the last three years, only to be tempered and calmed by his own force of will.

"I'm going to break Rayla out of jail." Callum said triumphantly.

There was a long pause.

//Your solution to our assassin issue…is to bring an assassin?// General Amaya signaled, //Callum, you don't even know where she is, you don't know that she will be in any condition to help.// She looked at him with sad eyes. The loss of his friend had definitely taken a toll on the young man. He had changed so much since the little boy she had trailed across the lands of Katolis. He was still a goof, still full of witty remarks, but she saw that cold distant gaze when no one was watching. His thoughts somewhere else entirely. He still drew, he had filled sketchbooks with strange machinations and runes. She had seen him once, drawing Rayla though. The care of the charcoal pencil strokes, the tenderness in which he shaded the line of her jaw, spoke volumes.

He continued confidently, "Gren, I will need my hands, please sign for me." He threw the scrolls and bags out on the large round council room table and stood across from both Amaya and Ezran. Gren took up a stance behind him, dutifully ready to sign, "The Lunarium is…here," Callum gestured to the far east of the map, near the Sky Nexus where he had last seen Rayla, "The distance between the two, Zym tells me, can be covered in five days if we only fly at night. We have 14 days before the full moon, when the assassins are coming to strike. So travel time there and back will take ten days. That means that I have four days, plenty of time, to infiltrate the Lunarium, find the catacombs, and get Rayla out. We fly back, and even if Ezran does get nicked by these poisonous blades, we have the antidote, Rayla's blood on hand."

//But even with that// Amaya cut in, //They are still lethal assassins, if they learn that we have Rayla here they may pursue lethal means.//

"Right." Callum said, scratching his head, "For whatever reason, it appears as though Gale does not want obviously lethal means accomplished to," Callum cut his finger across his neck and gestured at his brother, "Y'know. This tells me that at least some of the elven factions, obviously not the Moonshadow assassins, are as encouraged by the burgeoning peace as much as we are. Ezran's work has not gone unnoticed." He smiled encouragingly at his brother, "This also tells me that the Dragon Queens hold on power is not as absolute as they would have us believe. She fears it getting out that Ezran was slain by Moonshadow elves, she fears what type of discord it will sew. So
unless she can perfectly fake his death to look like natural causes then it will be disruptive to her hold and she would not allow it.”

//You seem to know a lot about how the Dragon Queen thinks.// General Amaya stated, pondering.

Callum scratched his head, "I may have spent some time in her head." He chuckles at Amaya's confused gaze, "But," Callum continued soberly, "Their power has not always been so absolute, back in time immemorial, or so it would seem, even humans bowed to the dragons reign. But just like any human kingdom, their hold on power is as tenuous as any king or queens. This is all endorsed by…” He starts pulling titles out of a bag with ear marks and notes stuffed between the pages. The books were thick and laborious volumes: A Study of Elven Tribe Interactions and Trade Routes, Valuable Commodities of the Xadian Empire, The Rise and Fall of the Summer Dragons. He opens to specific pages and shows Ezran and Amaya, "According to these details, one of which written by the Elven author Demetr Trel of the Sun Fire Scholars, this empire is a tenuous relationship with Dragons at the head and elves living peaceably beneath them gifting vital resources. The tribes of elves are all kept separate, in disarray, they cannot unify because the dragons demand that they only unify for warfare against the humans, without us as a common enemy the entire system in which the Storm Dragons have put themselves at the head to be catered to and have grown fat on for centuries falls apart. The made up barriers between tribes and their races is no longer rigorously regimented by their military system. The dragons used to just be scholars and sages of the primum, according to…” Callum reached over to the dusty copy from Demetr and flipped half the book, "this passage here. Only in the current era have they grown so bold as to claim dominion."

The three around the table looked at Callum, not really knowing what to say.

"So at the end of all this, I am sitting and waiting for them to come and kill me?"

"No," Callum said, pulling a blood eagle arrow out of one of his bags, "You're going to take this and on the tenth day from my departure, I should be well en route back to Katolis. That's where you tell me where to meet you. In the mean time, tomorrow you prepare to leave on a diplomatic visit to each of the other four kingdoms with your honor guard, all the kingdoms are west of here, and I would recommend Duren, contacting Queen Anya to ask for safe house. Have a prolonged meeting there, take advantage of the rumors whispering about the two regents and their future nuptials."

"What?" Ezran asked, confused.

"King Ezran, so out of touch with your people," Callum tsked
"What?!" Ezran persisted.

Amaya laughed as well, //People do love a royal wedding.//

"What?!" Ezran croaked.

"So that will be all the buzz, right? And the people will leave the King and Queen to their devices, but in reality you sneak out of Duren and into a safe house of her providing. Misdirection." Callum flashes his hands, shaking them, "How can they kill you if you're not where you're supposed to be? And then we just wait out until they are killed, taken out of commission by those Moonshadow bands they love so much. Rayla and I meet you at the safe house, the location of which you share with me via this arrow." He hefted the magic item, "Then we head over to the Winchester, have a pint, and wait for this whole thing to blow over."

Amaya was impressed, //How long did it take you come up with this?//

"About thirty minutes." Callum said, "Give or take fifteen minutes."

//Fifteen minutes?//

"Well I had to stop at a toilet," Callum said, patting his stomach, "Bad lamb."

Ezran snorted.

"But if all else fails," Callum continued, "If the assassins succeed in their mission." He sobered, "I-I don't know. It's haphazard, it's half-assed, but honestly, it's the best I can think of with all the moving parts. We get the antidote, we hide, we avoid confrontation as long as possible, and then that buys us more time to deal with the Storm Dragon Regime."

//And you get your elf back.// Amaya smirked. Callum flashed crimson, Amaya noted that would be a problem for another day. //It will be just you going? There is no one that can go with you and still not be overburdened with Rayla on the return trip.//

"Somebody, well, something, will be going with me, actually." Callum laughed, "I present to you,
the master of distraction, the fiend of light, Bait!" He lifted the grumpy Glow Toad onto the table who Callum had outfitted with goggles of metal and glass and a harness of leather straps with a handle over its yellow green bulbous back.

"Bowooooow." He grumped excitedly, flickering red, green, blue, and yellow.

//So Bait will serve as your distraction, but you never explained how you are going to break her out. You're not exactly known for your battle prowess.// Amaya chided.

"Ah," Callum rested his hand on the final bag, "I have spent my resources over the last three years tirelessly trying to learn a way for me to interact with the primal sources." He pulled the Key of Aaravos out of the bag and balanced it on it's corner, "In so doing, I have managed to create, at great self expense, some...interesting items." He began pulling marble sized glass balls out of the bag and placing them around the key. As he placed a swirling black marble before it, the sky rune lit up, a vibrant glowing red orb and the sun rune lit up, he kept going careful not to have all six runes light up at once, "Miniature primal stones, each contains enough primal essence to let me cast one spell."

"How many of those do you have?" Ezran asked, amazed at his brother's secret.

Callum lifted the bag after placing the miniature Primal Stones in them, and hefted the bag, the glass orbs clinking together, "Fifty or so."
Departure

Ezran stood on the top of the highest tower in Katolis, Zym, Bait, and Callum there with him. General Amaya was about preparing things for the morning which was only a few hours away. With just less than half the night left, Callum had gathered supplies quickly and added them to the assortment of his things he might need for this venture back into the depths of Xadia. He met the two friends atop the tower. Callum buttoned his coat waist length coat over a plain navy shirt and slung his pack over his shoulder, his sketchbook hanging at his side, his constant companion.

Ezran was rubbing Zym's nose affectionately as they exchanged thoughts without having to communicate aloud. Ezran turned to his older brother, "High Mage." His tone oddly formal, "Your king has a command that you are to follow to the letter."

Suddenly Callum was back to the last time he spoke with their father in person, Harrow stiff and awkward as he bade goodbye to the son that was his, though they shared no blood. Even their voice sounded the same, though Callum would never mistake Ezran's mass of wild hair for Harrows intricately braided locks. Callum bowed, playing along, mockimg all seriousness, "Anything, King Ezran."

"Bring Bait back safely." The voice wavered ever so slightly at the end. All jokes aside, all mastercrafted plans aside, Callum was plunging into hostile territory and there were assassins coming for Ezran. Death did not want to give respite to the royalty of Katolis. Callum hugged his king, holding his brother close. Aside from General Amaya, they were the only family left. Ezran had already escaped death one time, how many times could he cheat it?

The embrace was long and drawn out, neither brother wanting to let go, and tears formed in each of their eyes. When the embrace broke, they looked each other in the eye and smiled mirror smiles, laughing at their tears. It was sad and joyous and strained all at once. Callum felt the hitch in his throat, feeling strangled, but swallowed past it.

Zym bowed, allowing Callum to climb over his wings and find a place to settle between his shoulder blades. He settled his belongings, trying to get comfortable. There were nights of hard riding ahead and days of short sleep. Bait scrambled up the dragon's short front legs and took up residence in Callum's lap, grunting contentedly.

Ezran looked thoughtfully at his brother, "You told me you promised her you would let her pay her sentence out. Did you ever have any intention of letting that happen?"

Callum laughed and looked away from his brother, "Ez, I would've walked across the Breach
barefoot and naked if I had to. They managed to hide her location from me for three years, no matter how I plied and asked and pleaded. They took the diplomatic option away. She's our friend, Ez, and the best elf we've ever met. She was the one who saw Zym's egg and was immediately ready to seek redemption not just for herself and her family, but for humanity as well. She was trained to kill, and when the moment came she decided to break the cycle. She's not going to suffer a moment longer than she has to for doing the right thing." Callum was ready to go, he felt the energy in his feet, that twisting coil in his gut ready to spring forth, ready to get out and get moving, he was anxious to get started.

Zym started to flap his wings, but stilled as Ezran held up a hand, begging his friend and brother to hold a moment. He finally spoke, "I never looked up to Dad." Ezran said, changing the topic, feeling their time growing short, "I've learned that he was a good king, I know he was a loving father, but Callum, I've walked in your shadow all my life. You are who taught me to be patient, taught me to be kind, it's you who made me into the King I am. Katolis needs you, Callum, I need you. I only ever wanted to be just like you."

Callum didn't know what to say, he felt the tears well in his eyes once more after they had just begun to subside. He smiled proudly at his brother, "Don't be stupid." He said fondly, "You could never be anything other than great." He knew the moment had come, the last words spoken, if they let things drag on they would be here until daylight, "Let's go, Zym, I'm ready."

The Storm dragon beat his silvery white wings and took to the sky, the wind naturally coming behind him to lift him higher in the air, the wind bending to the will of the dragon. Callum quickly squashed the envy of control over the Sky Primus deep down. They took to the air and rapidly flew east, and the lights of the Capital of Katolis faded behind him into the distance with only starlight above.
Five Days

Five days of flying at night.

Five days of indistinguishable terrain passing underneath in the dark. Only the occasional cluster of lights indicating a passing town.

Five days of sleeping during the day in caves and hidden in mountain passes.

They passed the Breach on the second night, a stream of glowing red passing in moments. He nearly laughed at the ease of it.

Xadia passing beneath him, the land that he longed to explore, still kept so distant due to his exile at the command of Gale.

Bait as grumpy as ever slept nearly round the clock, and the days and nights seemed to blend together.

Callum tried to plan, to anticipate, but how do you prepare for an alien nation? He was going to be a stranger in an even stranger land.

Five days and the mountains of Zym's home, the Sky Nexus, loomed in the distance. As dawn broke on the fifth day they made a welcome silhouette against the morning sky.

Five days gone, nine remain until the elves would reach Katolis. Callum could feel the clock winding down as the tension inside of him wound tighter and tighter setting him on edge.
"What will you do?" Callum asked Zym after they set down.

_Home to mom._ The child dragon said simply, _Hunting too long._ The thoughts carried the overtones of being caught. Zym knew he wasn’t supposed to be out this long, his mother would worry, he would need to find a kill before returning, mask the scent of Callum and Bait as well as to feed himself. It has been too long without a proper meal.

"Thank you, Zym," Callum scratched the spot that Zym loved to have attention paid, an area on his neck just out of range of his short claw arms, "Tomorrow night, we'll be here, waiting." The dragon frisked underneath his touch.

Zym took to the air, staying low in the early morning sky. These were his hunting grounds, he was expected to be sighted this close to the Sky Nexus. Callum watched him fade into the distance before turning to his task. He had seen the Lunarium from the sky, an open amphitheater beneath the moon, glowing silver amongst the trees. The ancient structure itself surrounded by a city of arcing silver and white marble. What he had read about the structure in old tomes, ones obtained from Lujanne at the Moon Nexus, he knew that it was a construct as old as the Moon Nexus itself. Theorized to be another hub where the Moonshadow elves used to be able to interact and talk with the other world from which they felt pulled. This one had not fallen on the human side of the Breach, so it had remained standing. It was not part of any one sect of Moonshadow elf society, but had become a central aspect of their civilizations capital city.

Callum opened the backpack that he had brought to house Bait, allowing the fat Glow Toad to scramble in. Callum closed the latch after the toda had arranged himself. Callum saw one large grumpy eye peering out. He slung the now much heavier bag over his shoulder and fished what he had taken to calling a 'Moon Marble' out of the pouch. Callum had forged them through blood, sweat, and a whole fingernail once. He had come up with a concoction that stored the lunar energy of the moon, soon after coming up with one that housed the awesome power of the sky. Callum was quite proud of himself, it was a good way to distract himself. As though being bathed in moonlight, he let the cool feeling wash through him. His hackles rose. A strange liquid sensation that was both cold and rough coursed through his palm, into his hand, and through him. He could feel the cold neon pump through his heart. He raised a finger tip, drew a three part rune in the air, and breathed, "Dissimulo."

The air around them wavered and shimmered briefly as the spell settled on Callum's shoulders. He placed the Moon Marble in the pocket of his coat, he would have to keep it close, else the spell would waver, and then once released, the marble would be spent: nothing but a glass ball.

Callum looked at his arms, assessing the change, as much as he could without a looking glass. His
skin was paler, pinker, his arms which still felt as though covered by a coat, were bare. He flexed his fingers on his now four-fingered hand, testing what happened when he moved his pinky, nothing. Interesting. His garb was that of a Moonshadow elf, no assassin, no scholar, but a trapper. Just a trapper coming to the city to trade. They would never realize it. Stifling a yawn, Callum set off for the city Lunaflowne, where the Lunarium, and Rayla, were waiting.
Fond Acquaintances

Ezran sat on the throne, debating with General Amaya and Corvus.

//Ezran, I implore you, let us go to meet Aanya of Duren.// his aunt begged him.

Ezran sat on his throne stubbornly, he had made up his mind, "General Amaya," he said mustering the best 'King Harrow' voice he could, but then, softer, "Aunt Amaya, I have made up my mind. I will not endanger the people of another kingdom by running from this threat on my life. I will not jeopardize the regent of another kingdom for my benefit. I will stay here and meet the assassin's on my own turf."

"My lord," Corvus cut in, he had long ago proved himself to be a level-headed and trusted advisor, "I mean no disrespect, but you are not battle tested, though your training goes well, I worry that you are over confident in your skills."

Ezran laughed, "No, I am not. I am but a child who sits more than he trains. Who thinks more than he practices. I do not mean to throw myself into some valiant battle for my life. That is not my way."

"Then what will you do?" Corvus asked as General Amaya shook her head disapprovingly.

"We will clear the castle of guards, save for my personal guard, my two most trusted, and we capture any assassin that comes through the door, the window, the ceiling, or walks through the bloody walls."

"Again, King Ezran, with what skills, with what army, do you plan to stop a group of Moonshadow Elves on a full moon?"

"Tell me, Corvus," Ezran said, pulling a book from a pile by his throne, "Have you ever read the works of Kevin McCallister?"

One of the guards entered the throne room and approached, bowing.
Ezran waved his hand, "Be at ease, Quin, what can I do for you." He chose his words carefully, intentionally emphasizing his role as a servant to his people.

Quin was uncomfortable, "I-well-You have visitors sir, from Neolandia. Well, Prince Callum does."

Ezran looked to Corvus and Amaya, "Does Callum have friends in Neolandia?"

"Does the High Mage have friends?" Corvus asked, wryly.

Confused, intrigued Ezran spoke, "Show them in, then."

Quin bowed, and returned to the entrance of the throne room, opening the doors for two individuals, a man and a woman of Mom-ish and Dad-ish age. Their clothes were simple black and white much like the rest of Neolandia. Their skin was dark much like Harrow's and Ezran's, the people of Neolandia having adapted to the harsh sun and dessert over the years.

Quin and Topher, two of Ezran's Crown Guard took up positions behind the visitors.

"Welcome," King Ezran said, "I hear you are looking for my brother, unfortunately the High Mage is away on business, hopefully you will be satisfied with the king?" He finished, amused with himself.

The man and woman, obviously a pair by the way they held hands, looked to each other for strength, mustering something up from between them. The woman stepped forward and bowed low, her voice was strong, yet soft, feminine, something quirked his ears with her words, "Mi'lord, we come seeking Lord Callum that we mae speak with 'im regarding our daughter."

Amaya watched the exchange, Corvus bore the same confused expression as Ezran.

"That is no Neolandian accent." Ezran said, rising from his throne.

In a show of no ill intent, they both placed their hands up above their head, there was a shimmering of light and the two Neolandians disappeared, leaving only two Moonshadow Elves in their stead,
wearing the same Neolandian attire.

"Please, mi'lord," The man said, "We only want to know if your brother has of our Rayla."
Lunaflowne

Callum walked the streets of Lunaflowne it had taken him most of the day to get to the city, and the rest of it he had spent trying to find his way around, munching on scavenged berries and dried meats he had brought with him. It was a beautiful city made of white marble intertwined with wood, the strange formation of stone and wood weaving together to make a pristinely natural and simultaneously hauntingly otherworldly appearance. Marble twisted around wood structures, lending strength and beauty while the twisted spiraling wood seemed as much a part of the stone structures of walls and buildings. Circular windows lined with silver and marked with green gems at different points offered quick glances into what the life of a Moonshadow elf was like, children playing, couples stealing kisses, an old man staring out the window and just watching the world pass by. Despite the people and their horned heads, despite the architecture, despite the location and intermittent magical glowing plants tied into nature inextricably, it reminded him of Katolis. Merchants calling out their wares, children playing in the street and running about. A stray animal darting from alley to alley. Elves sitting at tables outside of café's drinking different teas or eating strange alien dishes that smelled both spicy and sweet at the same time. It was a picture of the elven world away from the Breach. In Katolis, it was a fact of life that the Breach was right there, the threat of war, ever present, but this far east, it was almost as though there was no dispute going on, no great human sin, no slander or derision, no men and women armed to the teeth ready to die for whatever cause their commander deemed worth their lives.

Callum meandered, taking in the sights, but not forgetting the mission that brought him here, ever moving closer to the arcing amphitheater at the heart of the city, it's decorative structures and arches projecting high into the sky above so that it was visible even above the winding streets and flanking structures of the city.

He noted that few people took notice of him, the illusion holding, though it did not rid him of the feeling that he didn't belong here. He walked around the entirety of the amphitheater three times trying to find entrances and exits, before venturing in. The entire theater was a circular floor surrounded by rows upon rows of benches, with eight pedestals upon which sat empty thrones. Callum walked about with others, it seemed, that when not functioning in its intended function, the area was used as a place of congregation. In the tunnels that went into the structure, almost the size of the Castle at the Capital of Katolis, guards stood posted outside a single door that bore the scratching that Callum recognized as Moonstone runic.

'Barracks,' He translated in his head as he passed, trying not to focus too long.

He had a very bad idea.

Within the open amphitheater of the Lunarium there were several food carts, each selling their own
array of meals to treats. Callum took his time assessing the different varieties of food. There was something that looked vaguely like a squirrel, but made of bread and syrup, on a stick, then a what appeared to be pink meat served in a swirl on a plate with thick opaque green liquid that was fairly reminiscent of that time he had a sinus infection, but in the end he settled on a cart that had balls of some red and yellow steaming assortment that was being served dangling from a simple wire chain. He watched a mother buy one for a small Moonshadow elf girl, excitement blossoming on her face as she took hold of the handle to hold the food aloft. Callum watched her attempt to eat the dangling orb of steaming food by moving her head towards it, but her nose would knock it away and she would be unable to get a decent portion. She giggled with her mother as the red and yellow covered her little face more and more with each attempt.

That looks...problematic. Callum thought to himself. But in the end he thought that it would be worth his time trying. He approached the cart and said in his best Moonshadow accent, "Wun, please."

"Comin' righ' up, sir." The Moonshadow elf was an older woman, not quite middle aged. Slight wrinkles at the corner of her eyes and she bore three violet marks across the tanned pale skin under her right eye of her face. She handed him the hook that held the globe of yellow and red aloft, "That'll be fiv-Oye!"

Callum started walking away almost as soon as he had his hand on the handle.

"Oye, ya gotta pay!" The woods voice was angry. Callum felt the panic of suddenly having so many eyes on him. He had to remind himself that it was all part of the plan.

"Naw, I'm good." Callum said, continuing to walk. He turned waving casually. More people were taking notice. Not good…but good. He felt that winding tension in his stomach continue to grow as he began to sweat.

"C'mon man, just pay tha lady." Callum felt a hand rest squarely on his shoulder, holding firm, "You don't want this sort of trouble." Callum looked to the new voice, coarse but not unkind, it fit an elven man that was at least a head taller than him, horns and all. He was a broad chested man with an attire and build that hid his muscles, his calves twice as thick as Callums, arms almost as large as Callum's head. Hard features of his face were marked by a violet X crossing his face. A thick growth of white beard hid his chin from view and emphasized his dark foreboding look.

Callum looked around, people were watching, the guards just lounged against the wall, amused. He had to keep pushing this. Why did it have to be the biggest, brawniest elf in Lunaflowne that felt compelled to intervene. Not some bookish scrawny alchemist or something?
"Listen," Callum said, "I'm sorry."

"Yea? Just pay the nice lady an-" Callum's fist connected with the man's jaw. Pain exploded through his hand and shot up his forearm. Callum winced in pain. The man's face was a mix of surprise and genuine hurt.

"Is your face made of stone?" Callum spat nursing his wrist.

"Now, when mi Astrid daed, I promist 'er I would stahp the brallin'. You ain't about ta-" The second punch that Callum threw, the elf caught his fist in his own. But, Callum justified to himself, he was at a disadvantage, being held and all, if they had been on equal footing and he had been able to square off properly, he was pretty sure the outcome would be the exact same. The hurt turned to amusement, "Oh-ho, Boyo," The elven giant looked at Callum's small fist in his own and began to squeeze.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow." Callum protested as the man twisted Callum's arm and forced him to his knees.

"Guardswoman." The elven man beckoned to one of the guards, "Take this scrawnae thang, let 'im cool off or somethin' before I do somethin' Astrid wun't be proud of."

A woman in green and silver armor sauntered over to where Callum now lay kneeling on the ground. Her face was handsome, made pretty by the amused smile on her lips, "As always, Elyas, thanks for keepin' the peace. Astrid would be proud of ya I don' doubt." She deftly wrapped some silver chain around Callum's wrist, "C'mon you mangy little toad."

Callum sighed mock defeated, trying to hide his smirk of triumph, "I'm mangy? And a toad? You're breaking my heart."

"Oh, pookie, keep talking like tha and yur heart ain't all I'll be breaking." her voice dripped with mock sweetness as she pushed him lazily ahead of her toward the Guard chambers. Callum wondered if Rayla's sense of humor had been more of a cultural influence than her own brand of plucky threatening sarcasm.

The crowd applauded as he went into the guard barracks, a little bell hanging on the door meant to announce visitors ringing above their heads as he passed. Callum could hear the people shouting Elyas' name over a little applause, their voices cut short as the door closed behind him, latching shut. Elyas was a good man. If there was ever a way, he would have to make it up to him, but he
thanked the Sun, Moon, and Stars that Astrid, may she rest peacefully, made him a better man, else Callum might not have had all the teeth he went into the exchange with when he was turned over to the guard. He'd have to make it up to the vendor as well. He tested his wrist in the binds, the pain was fading, he could bend and twist, so not broken, but there was still a deep ache there. Sprained or splintered. He'd dealt with worse over the years.

The Guardswoman lead him into a holding cell, pushing him in, not unkindly, and locked the door behind him, hands still bound. She rested her elbows on the bars, "Tell me, little one."

"What?" Callum asked, still assessing the cell and the rest of the room. It was a narrow hallway with three other cells of iron bars. Past where the two had entered there was a small door that led into a small office, at the end of the hall at the bottom of a flight of stairs was a door made of wood and iron that had a heavy silver lock on it. He could hear the shouts and ramblings, the raillery of more people. The things the shouted barely audible. Could Rayla be through there?

"Why is it tha' all the tastee ones have to have such a bad streak?" Her tone was odd, sweet and sad all at the same time.

Callum stopped his assessment of the cell and looked directly at her, flatly responding, "Tasty?"

The Amazonian elf chuckled and walked away, "Best you start strippin' down little one. My favorite part is next." She headed towards the office.

"Favorite part?" Callum croaked, confused but alarmed.

She paused about to walk through the doorway, "Aye, pookie," her smirk was flirtatious, her eyes mischievous, "Cavity search."
Amaya stood, sword in hand, between King Ezran and the elven couple. Corvus stood before the General and her consort, his flail spinning lazily, ready to act. Quin and Topher stood behind the two Moonshadow elves, surprise quickly dying down into anger as they drew their own weapons slowly, leather scraping steel.

Reading the room, gazing at them proudly, "We are unarmed, your grace." The man knelt before them, arms still up in the air. The woman followed suit, though the displeasure was evident upon their faces.

Ezran stood from his throne, his lanky body sliding between Amaya and Corvus. His pregnant general reached out to stop him, but when he held up his hand she faltered, doubt rising in her. She settled for steeling her gaze and furrowing her brow. Behind Commander Gren thought better of reminding her of her blood pressure.

"If you are Rayla's parents," Ezran began a smile on his face that was some mixture playfulness and unease, "Tell me something embarrassing about her."

Corvus interjected, "Your grace I hardly see how that's relevant." Ezran ignored him, watching the man and the woman each in turn.

The woman claiming to be Rayla's mother spoke, "As an infant, she had crossed eyes. She had to wear an eye patch until she started her first years of training."

On the heels of her words, the man claiming to be Rayla's father spoke, "She used to claim it was because she was the lost pirate princess and she was destined to rule the Xadian seas."

Her mother chuckled sadly, "Which makes no sense because the little thing was so terrified of water we had to wrestle her into the bath."

Ezran smirked, "She does hate the water."

The two Moonshadow elves smiled, relieved.
"This does not buy my trust, however," Ezran continued, "You have come at a most inopportune time. Callum is out of the state on business."

"I had hoped, we hoped," the woman began, "to speak with him. A common acquaintance told us that she had seen Callum much more recently, but that there was a time the three of you were travelling companions."

"Yes, that is true," Ezran spoke cautiously, "Near on three years ago. And you just now are coming to us?"

"It is not easy to ascend the visit the Moon Nexus, after Thunder fell to King Harrow and Lord Viren, we took to hiding in Neolandia. It is no easy pilgrimage to make, thus it was our first time. Imagine our surprise when the keeper told us the last visitors she had were human." The woman went on.

"Ah, so you spoke with Lujanne?" Ezran said, pieces falling into place.

The longer they all talked the less they played their cards close to their chest and spoke plainly, the man now spoke, "She told us that Rayla was traveling to take the Dragon Prince back to the Dragon Queen and hopefully stop the war. Lujanne said that after you all left Callum returned a time and again, but he said that she was taken to the Lunarium to be judged by the light of the moon. That neither had her of her since that time."

Ezran's face fell, saddened, "That is true, prior to now, we had no news of her. It was as though she vanished from the face of Xadia. Not a traveling elven merchant nor elven diplomat knew of her."

The woman and man dropped their hands, the elven woman absentmindedly searching for her husbands hand with her right and clutching at her throat with the left, "Does she live? Do you know if shes..." Her voice caught in her throat, unable to utter the last words.

"I am led to believe that she lives, but other than that I cannot say more," Ezran offered the frightened woman.

"Then," the woman began hopefully, "I know we are strangers, and elves, but may we stay in Katolis until High Mage Callum's return?"
"I'm afraid I am going to have to insist upon it." Ezran said simply, "Bind them."

"What?!" the man and woman shouted in unison, their relief washed away by waves of surprised anger.

"You cannot be serious!" The man's voice was steel, Ezran could see the cords of muscle in his neck and on his arms, reminding himself that they were both Dragon Guard.

"I am." Ezran said coolly, he turned to Corvus, "Corvus, take our guests to the Cartesian Bedroom. Unbind them there." Corvus moved and began tying the wrists of the man and woman who did not resist, only looked on angry and confused, "This is a bad time for you to be coming to Katolis in peace. Though I have fought and debated for three years of the virtue of elves and the common ground we share, the Dragon Queen has agreed that my life is to be taken, to fulfill the contract that was originally taken out by the league of your blood's assassins. By Rayla and Runaan. You will be treated as honored guests, because that is what Rayla deserves, but I cannot know your true allegiances at this time. Maybe in time, I will. When Callum returns, we will address your presence." Corvus lead the two with Topher and Quin behind him, as they walked away, Ezran spoke, "Be sure that Alayza and Praid have everything they need, and take them some carrots for the Frobbbit they carry with them."

The two, presumably Alayza and Praid, turned back, confused, "How could you know our names?" but Ezran was already returning to his throne, flashing rapid hand signals with his General.
Callum hated dentists. He had only had one cavity in all his life and since then he had been arduous about his oral health. Brushed after every meal. Something in the guards mischievous flirt made him think that it was a different kind of cavity she would be searching.

As soon as she was out of sight, he twisted his hands, working his finger tips through the knot at the top of belt pouch. The drawstrings loosened and he was able to pinch several marbles between his fingertips, drawing them out. Holding three between his index and middle finger with another three between his ring and middle finger of his left hand he assessed the miniature primal stones: Moon, Sea, Stars, Sky, Earth, and Sky. His minds raced, a plan forming quicker than he could put into words: Shift, push, pull, hide, rust. He wouldn’t need the Sea stone and only needed one Sky stone.

He let the former illusion drop after holding it for hours, the Moonshadow elf trapper was suddenly a young man with shaggy brown hair and an embarrassingly small amount of stubble for what should have been five days growth. He began his task quickly.

Star, the rune glowed black outlined in starlight in the air as icy chills ran through his veins and the sounds of the world momentarily dropped away. He breathed, "Trafero." The door to the guard house unlatched.

Sky, like a strong wind filling his lungs, and sparks dancing across his fingertips, he formed the familiar cyan, "Aspiro." The blue rune glowed aloft. A gust of wind blew the door open, the bell jangling loudly.

"By the Moon?" He heard the guardswoman exclaim from the small office.

Quickly now. Callum thought to himself.

He began drawing the third rune in the air. Moon, that cold neon in his heart, "Dissimulo." This time, rather than donning the mantle of the Moonshadow trapper, Callum brought the illusion of empty space where he stood, harder to maintain, Callum wouldn't be able to move while he held this spell.

The Amazonian woman burst into the holding cell room and took a quick glance around, "Shite." She rushed to the cage, looked for him within. She crouched low, peering under the bed. Callum
stood as still as he could, focusing on holding his breath, on not moving. Her gauntleted fists slammed into the iron frame of the metal. Callum jumped at the force of it, he could see the iron bars slightly distorted under the force of her frustration. She pounded through the still open door of the barracks, slamming the door behind her in frustration.

Callum had to let the invisibility falter.

He focused on the lock of his cell. Earth, "Rubigo." The green rune appeared before him and disappeared. The metal iron of the lock quickly became red and flaky, rusting right before his eyes. The wear of centuries over in seconds.

He placed the used stones in his jacket pocket with the marble from earlier. Dropping the unused sea and sky stone back into the pouch on his belt. He had packed fifty four stones, he was already down to forty-nine. Callum would need to be more careful moving forward from here.

"Get low, Bait." Callum whispered to his bag, then backed up, giving himself as much running room as he could, and sprinted the short distance. He threw his weight into the rusted lock. It burst open under the force of all his weight, the mechanism of the lock rattling as it cracked apart.

A muffled, but triumphant sound came from the pack on his back, "Booowowowow." 

Callum brushed the dust off of himself, satisfied with his work, and made his way to the door leading down into the Lunarium's structure. The shouting from the other side grew louder and louder. Callum opened the door silently, opening it enough that just a ray of light could make it through. He peered through the opening. It wasn't prison cells like he had hoped. It was the guard barracks itself.

He closed the door, and mumbled, "That is immensely inconvenient."

He unslung the pack with Bait in it, helping the fat toad out of the leather. The goggles of leather, metal, and glass fogged from his heavy breathing, clearing with each grumpy breath. Callum had never seen the little guy look so happy.

"Well, I'm glad you have a thirst for danger."

Bait quick panting and quirked his head to the side, "Bowow?"
"Here's the plan, little guy," Callum started explaining, "I run in, draw attention to us. There was another door on far side of the room that looked like it went deeper still. We go in, you flash, while everyone is covering their eyes, we go invisible again. While they run past, I'm going to try to get a key ring off of one of them. Ready."

The Glow Toad stomped his feet and squared his bulbous shoulders, "Bow-Bow."

"Oh man, this is gonna be just... just awful." Callum said, standing and taking hold of the door latch. He fished another moon stone out of his pouch. He regretted how fast he was burning through these stones, but expediency was no friend of efficiency. He swung the door open and shouted, "Hey!"

There was a stunned silence as every eye in the room suddenly turned to him freezing. He could see the guards in various states of dress, some had been gathered around a fountain of water, talking, others eating in a dining nook, one had even been laying in bed reading a book, a small dark leather book with golden scrawl, The Lusty Argonian Maid. He remembered that being one of King Harrow's favorite books, though Callum never read it himself. Strange, the things that stuck out when you could hear your pounding heart in your ears.

"Have any of you seen a human around here?" He shouted, not quite sure how he managed to not squawk and croak on his words. There were no shouts, just a slow turning of everyone, staring at him with startled and angry eyes. The guards started to move towards him, and he was sure that they were all looking directly at him, he hefted Bait on the leather straps, holding the forty-plus pound fleshy beast aloft, "What about a Glow Toad? Say 'hello' to my little friend!"

Callum didn't cover his eyes, but blindly drew the rune for hiding again, his command word lost amongst the cries of surprise and shouts of the guards, "Dissimulo." And then he waited. Slamming as his eyes began to adjust again, he slammed the door shut behind him and slid along the wall keeping a safe distance from all of the guards.

"What are you waitin' for, ya slugs," A masculine voice rose as Callum's vision returned to him, "After him!"

He heard the passing guards comment to eachother, "How did a human get this far East?"

"I call dibs on da Glo Tood."
"No, halvsies!"

"Oh, grow a pinko."

Callum watched no less than ten guards stumble past, the last one still donning her pauldron as they filed through the door. Callum watched excitedly as his plan came to fruition. Only too late did he realize he hadn't seen a key ring to take off of any of the guards. In the absence of the guards though, Callum looked about, moving through the room, having to drop the enchantment that kept him hidden. There were a number of doors off the large common area, but only one that caught his eye, one that was secured and locked. He approached the door on the opposite side of the room, skirting the walls, checking for any other elves.

He could hear off key notes coming from a washroom of sorts, steam apparent under the door, the notes were faint. Somebody left relaxing in the sauna as everyone else pursued the runaway human. He continued on by, it was better to avoid conflict at this point.

A Star Stone to open the lock and leave it preserved, though he did not lock it behind him. Once through the door, though, it was as though memory took over. Before him, a dark and cramped stairwell spun downwards, carved into the very foundations of the Lunarium they stretched downwards. There was no light here, no glowing bulbs or torch lights flickered, it was utter darkness. Bait lit up a warm amber glow and Callum let him take the lead, the fat Glow Toad going one step at a time.

As he saw the curvature of the stairwell and traced a hand familiarly over the stone, with absolute certainty, Callum knew that Rayla was down there in that dark abyss, "Let's go, Bait."
Descent

They descended.

They continued to descend.

They were still descending.

This was going to be a huge pain to come back the other way.
Boil

This why all the guards had calves like tree trunks and looked like they dined on only the leanest of meats.

The pathway often twisted out of view, at times there would be forks in the descent, transitioning from steps to sloping ramp and back to steps hewn from the stone. Callum picked paths without choosing, knowing instinctively which way to go, bubbling up from some old dream, it was as though he had walked these halls before, a familiarity to them that he couldn't place. Doors of cells he passed, some of iron, some of solid steel.

Callum paused long enough to look into a cell with iron bars. Skeletal remains lay strewn about the floor, beady red eyes peered at him from the shadows. Necrats, disgusting rodents with black fur amidst sickly green scales and worm like appendages that allowed them to flop around and swim through sewers.

How long had that elf in there been dead? With necrats being here, they could devour a corpse in days if not a week. How long had Rayla been down here?

Callum swallowed past the knot in his throat and forged onwards, "C'mon, Bait, let's keep moving."

Bait was obviously growing tired, his tail dragged behind him rather than swishing back and forth with his pace. Callum lifted the Glow Toad by the harness he had made him and Bait just hung there limply, drooling, still trying to glow.

"That's alright, bud, you did good." Callum put Bait back into his bag, "Take a nap, you earned it." Hoisting the toad back onto his back he fished another marble from his pouch. It glowed softly, giving off it's own amber light, "Lux." Callum carved the three part rune into the air, jagged lines reminiscent of a tongue of flame. His palm began to glow the same soft amber that Bait was able to maintain. He directed it ahead of him.

The next door he passed, pausing. There was a level mechanism outside the door, a form of ratchet that fed a chain through the wall. He remembered his darker dreams of Rayla dangling from a stone ceiling. He saw the port for food trays to be passed through. He crouched low, kneeling and slid it open. His breath caught in his throat.
With renewed urgency he fumbled at the opening mechanism of the steel door, and couldn't find it, his fingers tracing frantically over the metal but finding no place for him to gain purchase to open the door. Panic swelled in his heart, but worse than that, anger, he felt it burning through him, raging through him. He seethed and all his thoughts, his logical thinking was consumed. Rayla was right there, after three years, three terrible long years she was right there in front of him, just feet away and this metal door had the audacity to stand in his way.

Not caring for silence he roared at the door, he couldn't form words, he couldn't grasp them. His purchase on reality slipping through lost in the burning rage of the moment. He buried his fingertips in the metal door, it hurt him as he clawed at the metal, but this just fueled the flame of his anger.

He didn't notice the glowing red lines race across his eyes, he didn't feel the cracks they formed in his skin as they raced along his arms, he didn't notice the steam from his burning hot blood pour into the air.

He didn't notice Bait curl deeper into the bag on his back, frightened.

What Callum could perceive through the blood red haze of his rage was that he found something to grip. He strained and howled, muscles screaming as they pulled at the door, and slowly, so agonizingly slowly, it gave way.
Sun

Zym sat in an open field chewing on the haunch of a deer, white fur splashed with blood, silver scales stained brilliant red. He crunched a femur happily and began to lick the marrow. He paused, looking up to the setting sun on the horizon momentarily.

The sun was more…dim… than usual. The colors splashed across the heavens of Xadia were less vibrant than usual.

He whipped his tail back and forth happily, returning to his meal.
Lost Light

Gale sat watching the sunset on her plateau at the sky nexus, the skies calm for a change. Her head rested on the stone next to the giant bone skull of her beloved. And then it happened. The sun dimmed as she watched. Just for a second, a barely noticeable flicker of light.

She sat back, neck craning, she rose uneasily. A human had touched the Sun Arcanum.

She hissed, rearing her head.
Rayla blinked through bleary eyes at the light pouring into her cell. It wasn't the first light she had hallucinated in all this time of darkness. There had been a good many hallucinations over the unrecognizable passage of time. Each day the same as each night, with nothing to see and nothing to change, sleeping and waking blurred together. For a time she had tried to clutch to her sanity, but after the first hallucination she had given over to insanity. With no foreseeable change on the horizon she twisted in deeper upon herself embracing the threads of insanity as they wove themselves into the mesh of her mind.

She had been a queen, a child. Even once a child queen. She had been a mother, a father, a goddess and a dragon. She had lived a thousand lives all trapped inside her head trapped beneath the Lunarium, but her favorite hallucinations were the ones of Callum. She had been a human, a wife, a mother, or sometimes just a close friend. At other times a pet. Sometimes he was kind, other times he was not, but they were still her favorite visions. All of lives never lived and that she would never live. All the lifespans, not a lick of the commitment, wasn't all bad, this insanity thing.

This was how they all started, some light pouring into her cell would envelop her and she would be transported across time and space to a different life. Sometimes they would take place in the cell, sometimes she would be taken to strange alien worlds. So when Callum walked into her cell, wreathed in light and eye's glowing red, his skin a circuitry of red steaming lines, she wasn't very surprised to say the least.

He approached her, the light dimming. He was taller, she thought, so this hallucination would probably have him teasing her about being shorter than him now. Her eyes adjusted back to the dark, an amber glow emanating from his hand illuminating the cell.

The chain had been left to keep her hands at eye level last time she had been fed and she had to peer out from behind the metal binds, wincing at the intensity of the light. The binds had been her hands' faithful companion for since coming to this dark hole. She sometimes forgot that she had hands, locked away inside this terrible contraption.

She looked up at him, her neck straining to lift her heavy head. Those beautiful green eyes, like grass, or leaves, like the height of spring awash in light looked at her. She could see a mixture of emotions from beneath his tousled brown hair. It was longer than she remembered, but just as much of a mess as the last day she had seen him. He had gotten thinner too, and his cheeks and neck were covered in what looked like pepper. He still wore that red scarf, a different coat than before, still fine blue cloth that made his shoulders seem broader than they were. She drank in the sight of him as he approached, tired eyes welcoming the reprieve of insanity.

"Rayla?" Callum asked, concern splashed across his face.
"You were 'spectin' somebody else?" she dangled from her binds, swaying back and forth on tired feet. How many days had it been since they let her sit down?

"What have they done to you?" this wasn’t Callum, she could tell by the way his voice bubbled and rolled with rage that this was one of the fantasies. A broken mind hallucinating in the dark. Her sweet human never had the capacity for such anger.

She smiled weakly at Callum, playing along, "Oye, ain't done nothin' to me I din' deserve." That’s what she told herself, had to tell herself. If she didn't she would trip over the line of insanity and fall into madness. Her vision faded again. She didn't want to wake up yet, the hallucination was just starting, but she could tell it was fading already. But she couldn't fight it as she swam back towards consciousness following the bubble of her thoughts down, down, down into the void of her mind.
"Rayla?" Callum asked, concern creeping into him. The rage he had felt moments before doused with the vision of the young Moonshadow elf. Her hands were held aloft by some terrible metal binds. He couldn't see her hands in them. From the binds frail fore arms emerged from two gaping holes that at one time would have been tight on her. Her skin paler than he had ever seen, almost translucent, he could seen the veins and arteries beneath the flesh that clung loosely to her, drooping towards the floor. She wore a canvas apparel that was stained with her bodily fluids; sweat, urine, blood. Her thighs were twigs and her knees knobbly, almost no muscle there to help her stand, her toenails long, jagged and yellow from. Her neck was a work of muscle and bone, the vessels in her neck obvious with their pulsations, her neck bobbing with the effort of each breath.

"You were 'spectin' somebody else?" Her voice, he had wished to hear it so often in the last three years, it had haunted him in his sleepless nights, her chastising sarcasm, her wit and ridicule always delivered with a smile, but this hoarse rendition of her vocals was an atrocity. Her neck quivered, her head shook as she looked at him. Her cheek bones were prominent and her lips were pulled tight in a strained cachectic grimace. Her lips were chapped and cracked. Her hair was spindly and wiry, falling out in places leaving patches of scalp.

She looked so frail, so broken, like a strong wind would blow her away. Callum took hesitant steps towards her, "What have they done to you?"

"Oye, ain't done nothin' to me I dinnae deserve." her eyes flickered and those beautiful violet eyes closed again. Callum cupped her fragile jaw in both hands, letting the light spell die, leaving them alone in the darkness.

"How?" Callum asked, beginning to sob, " How have you endured this for so long?" He felt the tears run down his cheeks, pressing his forehead to hers in the darkness. She was so strong. She had dragged him, an untrained, unskilled little boy, across the wild and ferocious terrain of Xadia, she had braved the hostile lands of Katolis with the goal of killing his Dad and brother, and at the end of it, took the high road. She had been trained her whole life to be a killer, cold and dispassionate, but when the time came she chose to preserve life. And for that she felt she deserved this hell smelling of rottenflesh and excrement. To him she was a saint, she was willing to lose her hand and carry him, Zym, and Ezran across the world, she had stepped between him and so many deadly endings. And after all that sacrifice, she still didn't think it was enough to pay for the misguided actions of others. Because she had the heart and the audacity to hope for something better, she was chained and left to starve, slowly dying, just given enough to stay alive.

His tears hot on his cheeks, his nose running, he sobbed as he held her face in his hands. What kind of society would enact such a terrible price, such a cost.
He knew the answer: the same that would kill Ezran for the crime of continuing to breathe.

He felt it again, that terrible burning rage in his heart. Darkness gave way to red illumination, lines tracing across his skin at right angles. He knew he was touching the Sun Arcanum, he could understand it through his rage and hatred. That was it, that was its secret. The Sun was hot and terrible, and untampered would wilt and burn away the crops of the earth, it was an unforgiving orb of liquid fire. The same liquid fire that coursed through his veins, burning away emotion until it alone raged inside. But it was also necessary for life, light and warmth. Something so cruel and harsh at the same time peaceful and life giving. The liquid fire pumped through his heart and seared his mind. With the power of the sun in his hands he yearned for days of future peace and he finally understood the paradigm, that if one wanted peace, they must prepare for war.

A white hot hand reached above Rayla and grasped the metal silver chain which she dangled from. He pulled and felt the metal groan, as it heated beneath his touch, starting to warp and give way. With a final tug he broke the chain binding Rayla, and without the chain to keep her standing, she crumpled. Callum caught her, carefully. He could feel the heat pouring off of him, worriedly, he examined her. His touch was not burning her, not burning his clothes, but waves of heat caused the dark hewn stone cell to shimmer to his eyes.

He lifted her into his arms, cradling her in both of them. She hung there limply in his arms. She was impossibly light, made of almost nothing. He let the rage course through him, fueling it with his passions, pouring in his anger with Gale for restarting this war, with the elves for allowing it to happen in their society, with Rayla for letting herself be treated this way, and at himself for letting it go on so terribly long. Holding her as he was, he moved past the warped and twisted cell door and looked upwards, up the long and winding descent which he and Bait had traversed. Callum howled the anguished cry of his heart, hearing it echo up and up and up.
Glow

A second long drawn out wail emanated from the caverns beneath the Lunarium. The dungeons guarded by the elite of the elite soldiers, dungeons kept for enemies of the Regina Draconis herself.

A sober looking elf man looked at the closed and locked door knowingly. He was walking by having finished a nice steam in the showers, wearing a towel. He went and stood by another elf guard, a number of years the other's junior looked at the closed door too, but fear evident in his wide eyes.

"I told you it was haunted, Timot." the other guard smirked, holding open his palm, waiting.

The junior guardsman placed a gold coin in his seniors palm with a shaking hand.

The edges and cracks of the door began to glow brilliant red.

Timot and the senior officer took a cautious step back.
Callum took one marching step after the other, his breath ragged and teeth clenched, dark murder in his heart. His footprints burned into the stone pathway as he climbed. He kept throwing the fuel of his animosity onto the fire until he reached the door that had brought him to this dark and twisted hole, "I'll kill them all." He promised her, "I'll kill them all for doing this to you." He breathed those words the entire ascent, the vehemence growing with each step.

A frail skeletal hand stroked his chest, toying with his scarf. Rayla's cachectic figure nuzzled comfortingly into his navy coat, "I knoo you weren't really Callum, he wouldn' have it in him. He couldn't hurt a Frobbit lest he had ta."

And with her words, the rage swept out of him, the red glow dying and plunging them into darkness again with only the light from the cracks beneath the door filtering through.

"You're right." Callum deflated, he looked at the minimally conscious elf in his arms, now with the fire of hatred doused so suddenly, feeling stunned. He wanted to hurt the Moonshadow elves so badly that every fiber of his body was straining like a rabid dog on a rusted chain. All he had to do was keep dangling the prospect of retribution in front of himself and eventually that chain would snap. Now, in the brief period of lucidity, he examined Rayla. A creature so strong, a woman both proud and fierce, lain low, and she had born that mantle willingly. Part of her, no matter how she suffered, felt she deserved it all.

"I'll get you home." Callum said, his resolve hardening, "I'll find a way to make those responsible for this pay." Not every one was at fault, he reasoned, some people were just doing their jobs, following orders. Having watched King Harrow and King Ezran bear the weight of the decisions he made for their kingdoms, Callum knew that he could not put the blame of Rayla's imprisonment on all of their shoulders. No, when time allowed, he would come back to Lunaflowne, banished or not, and he would find the court that could do this to somebody with such a compassionate and pure heart, "I'm sorry, Rayla." Callum shifted her, placing her over his shoulder so she was draped over him. Her weight didn't even feel like a burden to him.

With his free hand, he grabbed a handful of marbles from his pouch and opened the door, walking into the barracks once more.

Callum emerged from the shadows to find a scrawny elf man and a guard a number of years his senior. The older elf was bare chested, a towel wrapped around his shoulders and wrapped around his waist, a belly made large from many nights on watch without activity hung over the tucked white cotton fabric. His face was a mask of triumph with a single scar running along the right side of his face from the eye down to the lips, giving him a twisted smirk. That smirk fell away and turned to startled at the sight of Callum. The scrawny Moonshadow man was shaking when Callum...
first emerged, but the jitters quickly subsided into confusion. He was adorned in the teal and navy of Moonshadow warriors, but his lean build left the uniform some room to be filled. Next to his senior, who still clutched a small gold coin, he raised a hand and pointed.

"Hey," The quiver in his voice shaking, "You can't take that, that's a prisoner."

"You must be the lead detective." Callum snapped, acid on his tongue.

"Never mind the prisoner, Timot," The man in his towel, broadened his stance, the cotton straining to maintain integrity. His large arms spread out to block Callum's way, "That's a human."

"Ugh," Callum rolled his eyes, "Where were you two, like three hours ago?" A thought crossed his mind, "Better yet, how have you still not gotten dressed when you were in the sauna three hours ago?!"

The older man's look of determination changed to surprise, he stood a little straighter, "What, I like to be au naturale."

"See, Omni," Timot said turning to the other guard, "Even the human think's its weird!"

"Not helping, Timot." The scarred face spoke from the side of his mouth and glared at his companion.

"Listen," Callum said, cutting in, "I don't want trouble. I am walking out of here."

"We can't let you do that." Timot said, becoming bolder, "You just show up in the dungeons of the Lunarium and expect to walk out with a prisoner?" He reached for a something at his belt that wasn't there.

"Though I admit, human," Omni said, rubbing his jaw, "It takes some major testicles walking in here."

Callum dragged his hand over his face, "Omni. Can you not talk about testicles when yours are obviously about to dangle out of your towel?!"
"Yea, boss," Timot agreed.

"By the moon! So I like being nude, awash with lunar glow." Omni protested. Turning his head imagining the moons caress over his gratuitous curves.

"Boss, I don't need the imagery." Timot commented. Timot's skin began to remind Callum of the particular sickly hue Rayla had when on a boat.

"Imagery? What's wrong with my body, Timot? I'll have you know I have had all manner of suitors that appreciate my physique." Omni roared, rushing Timot and pressing an accusatory finger into the man's armor. He mocked, "I'm sorry my body doesn't fit your taste."

"Uh, boss?"

"What?!"

"Where'd the human go?" Timot and Omni looked at the open dungeon door, now devoid of the intruder and his freed prisoner. The door behind them, leading out into the interview cells and main office of the barracks slammed shut. They turned in unison.

Very matter-o-factly Timot turned, "I'll sound the alarm." No urgency in his voice.

Omni turned the other way, "And I'll get dressed."
"So," Ezran began, "Just a day after I get word from my contacts in Xadia that there is to be an attempt on my life by Moonshadow elves, two Moonsnadow elves with admitted affiliation with a known Moonshadow assassin arrive under cover of illusion to my throne room. You understand the precautions I am sure."

Alayza looked at her hands, tied with soft ropes to the table in the Cartesian Bedroom that she and Praid had shared over the last five days. This had been the first opportunity the King had come to talk to them, Corvus, his manservant and protector had knocked on the door, with guards at his back and asked them politely to be seated. They were then frisked and tied to their chairs by their ankles and to the table by their hands. Despite the defensive hostility, they were very kind about it. Corvus was a very polite man.

"I do," Praid said gruffly, "And I do appreciate the kindness of the room. It has been interesting to see how Katolan Mathematics have influenced design choices, both here and throughout the lands of Man."

Ezran smirked, "So you found the books."

"We have had to wait…patiently." Praid chose his words carefully.

"And I appreciate it. I have been busy with certain preparations."

"Mi'lord," Praid moved, shifting his weight, the guards stationed around the room flashed their hands to the hilt of their blades, some over the shoulder, others at their hip. Only General Amaya, standing behind and to the right of her Nephew King didn't move. She merely rested her hands atop her pregnant belly and stared with an interested in anything but the conversation gaze. She raised a hand and the men all eased. Praid coughed nervously, "Mi'lord, one of the barriers at this time to our cooperation is your lack of trust in me, in us. Is there some way we can prove ourselves to you that we bear no ill intent. My wife is the most skilled illusionist in Xadia, second only to Lujanne, who guards the Moon Nexus, and I am no push over, I have been trained in warfare, close combat, politics. I am at your disposal, your highness."

Ezran stood, his face turning from jolly, with the hidden vestiges of his youth, to ponderous. He turned his back, not wanting to reveal too much to his men, but at the same time, needing more information, "Tell me about Blood Lock."
Alayza hissed, "Where did you hear of that?"

Ezran turned, raising an eyebrow, "Your response makes me think that this is some closely guarded secret."

Praid looked to his wife, also confused, "What is it?"

The Moonshadow woman looked to her husband, then King Ezran, not wanted to go on, but then acquiesced without protest, "It is…the closest thing the Moonshadow elves have to Dark magic."

"Elves do dark magic too?" Ezran accused.

"No." Alayza answered adamantly, then, "Just, it's very close. Blood Lock, I mean." When there was continued silence, she went on, "Using the blood of a Moonshadow Elf, harnessing the innate connection to the Arcanum of the Moon that courses through us a poison is made. This poison is imbued with the cold potential of the moon and when cut with a coated blade or if ingested it will lead to the rapid coagulation of one's blood. It doesn't take much, but even a small little clot can go coursing through ones veins or arteries and disrupt the natural flow of your body's vital energy."

"Yes, I've spoken with the royal physician about the potential." That outlook was grim indeed, "We inferred as much and I will be the first to say that it is not the way I wish to die. My intent is to die due to over ingestion of jelly tarts surrounded by my great, great, great grand children." His voice still managed an amused edge, "Tell me about how to reverse it."

"Impossible." Alayza continued, "You would need to know the elf from which they harvested the Moon Arcanum from. Without that information then we cannot hope to concoct a cure. It is a twisted combination of alchemy, lunar magic, and dark intent. Even if you had the elf there with you, you would need somebody able to cast the spell in inverse to undo the effects and return to lost essence to the elf."

"Could you make this poison?" Captain Gren interpreted for General Amaya's hand signals.

"I will do no such thing!" She protested.

Praid only watched Ezran, measuring him, "You know the elf that had their blood desecrated, don't you. And now somebody that knows the poison curse and how it works has been delivered to your
doorstep. Waltzed in hoping to find her daughter. You are a conniving little king." The last was not spoken with distaste or mistrust, but respect, if hesitant.

Ezran smiled, "Praid, my good elf, you don't know the half of it."

"You want me to reverse the poison?" Alayza asked, realization dawning, "But where is the elf whose blood was taken?"

Ezran didn't see a need to worry them with the identity of the desecrated, his own dark thoughts amused him, "My brother has gone to fetch them. He should be returning in a few more days, and in the meantime, I prepare to be murdered."
All of Lunaflowne was on high alert. The guards were watching everything and everyone with renewed fervor. They had been sitting on their haunches for too long, the relative peace between Xadia and the Pentarchy lulling them into comfort, they had become less a militant force and more a policing force. It likely happened here quicker than other places given the distance from the kingdoms. Six weeks by foot and five days by dragon.

As Callum dashed out of the guard's barracks door, he cursed as the bell loudly announced his presence to the two guards standing outside, if it wasn't enough that the door burst open right after the alarm bells began letting out their knolls through the city. It was dark now, at least. He was thankful that the majority of guards appeared to have gone out to the city in search of the human infiltrator, but now that was problematic for him.

He stood warily, a guard to either side of him, one blocking the way to the amphitheater, another blocking the covered hallway that lead to the majority of the rest of the city.

"Easy, Human," One of them said, widening his stance to block his path.

"He's a scrawny one." The guard behind Callum said, taunting.

"Wha'cha got," The first one continued, "A little play thing for ya to take home? Not en mi wutch."

Callum shifted, crouching low, trying to keep an eye on both guards, but finding it impossible. He cursed that he had put the marbles back in his pouch, and made a mental note that if he got a breather to at least keep one somewhere.

"Sirs," Callum said holding up a peaceful hand, hoping to placate them.

"Ma'am." The guardswoman said.

"Really?" Callum asked, perplexed, looking at her hair covered lip, "Well, nice…umm, mustache?"
She roared. Callum swallowed hard.

"Oh no."

She barreled at him, he lithely stepped out of her way, and she went crashing by. The other guard behind him moved to pursue, but the large guardswoman's arms flailed as she tried to correct her trajectory, but wound up knocking herself and the other guard off balance. Callum planted his foot hard and took off down the hallway, emerging into the almost empty streets of the nighttime Lunaflowne. The shadows of the glass glow bulbs cast long shadows. As he chose a direction through the city, picking winding pathways that took him past statues and green spaces that glowed in the light of the waxing crescent moon. The more windows he ran past though, the more he noted the faces pressed to glass, looking out into the world. The city wasn't sleeping, just watching, waiting for him. Men and women saw him and would rush to their door, lighting a lantern and shouting. The guards would rally to their calls.

"Here! Here's the human!"

One elf threw stones at Callum as he passed.

If this kept up he would have a whole city after him.

Scanning for a way out, he turned sharply down an alley way that didn't look to have any windows. The road became narrow, the cobblestone road turning to hard packed dirt, and he pressed on wards, mindful of the weight of Rayla and Bait bobbing on his back. A stitch pulled at his side, why did he think it was a good idea to bring a forty pound Glow Toad into the heart of a hostile Xadian city?

Now was his chance, he saw the illumination of portable lanterns and enchanted glow bulbs begin to come down the alley, their illumination spread across the the hard packed dirt and marble stone walls he had just left. He dropped Rayla down, gentle with her head, she was so still, he watched, breath caught in his throat. She took a sharp and ragged breath suddenly, "Hold on, Rayla," Callum brushed some of that formerly lustrous white hair now wiry and brittle out of her face. Not bothering to turn he grabbed a handful of marbles from the pouch, held them up to his eyes in the dark, looking for the hallmark silver flickering of a Moon Marble, "Dissimulo." He whispered into the night. He could see the bubble take place over him, encompassing Rayla and the sides of the buildings. Where the guards would look to see their culprit they would see only a non-descript alley. Sighing triumphantly, he turned, and his heart fell.

Before him in the doorway of one of the buildings, inside the bubble of illusion that would hide
him from view, was a Moonshadow elf. His form partially obscured in the moonlight. He was shirtless, an unlit pipe in his mouth, and loose breeches of brown laced at the waste. He didn’t wear boots. Seems as though he had stumbled upon a Moonshadow elf out for a late evening, or really early morning, smoke.

Callum held his hands up, one hand to his lips, begging silently, pleading as he tried to maintain the spell with the rest of his focus.

At that moment the guards reached the alley in which Callum crouched behind the illusion. They cast a glance down the alley. The man raised a hand, but then paused, looking back to Callum, and then Rayla.

Callum waited, his heart pounding in his throat. As he watched the elf watch the guards run by he took stock of the marbles in his hand, Star, Sun, Earth, Sky, and the Moon he was using.

The large elf stepped out from under the awning leading into what Callum assumed was his home, "Did ya say that is Rayla?" His voice was a whisper, a hush sound in the night, "That's Praid's li'l wun?" Callum was confused by the tears welling in the Moonshadow elf's eyes. He recognized him, now that he stepped further out of the shadows, those unmistakable arms and legs made of thick cords of muscle. That deft hand that grabbed Callum's punch straight out of the air.

"Elyas?" Callum questioned.

The elf didn't spare him a look, he kneeled next to Rayla, hands hovering over her, her wasted body, the binds on her hands and feet, "Is she…" Callum watched him struggle with the words.

"She lives." Callum said, barely audible, placing a hand on the man's shoulder, "You know her?"

The large elf only nodded, the tears running into his thick mass of coarse white hair on his face.

"Then help me." Callum begged, "Help us." Emerald eyes met indigo, pleading met sorrowful. With quivering hands Elyas lifted Rayla in his arms, a soft sob parting his lips as her legs dangled helplessly.

Elyas lead Callum into his home, closing the door behind them, Callum let the illusion falter.
"What did this?" The warden asked, crouching over the bent metal door, examining the ten different holes melted directly into the steel. Some strange contraption had punctured the door then bent the three inch thick steel, contorting it and ripping it from the hinges. He looked at the inch thick pins of the hinges. The steel anchors in the stone wall fit seamlessly with the round hinges of the door. Whatever this was had sheared directly through the steel pins that fitted them together.

"The only thing we've seen out of the ordinary is the human."

"Ah, yes," The warden grimaced, "The human who you let escape with mi pris'ner, captain."

"I can only apologize so many times, sir," Captain Omni bowed in full Moonshadow elf regalia and armor. Plates of teal and navy that melded together offering a near full plate protection. His helmet was held under his arm.

"Too true," The warden rolled the sheared inch thick steel bolt in his hands, the pieces clinking together, "The tales of a human in the city was greatly disconcerting, let alone that he was here to break this prisoner out. Reason stands that it is one very specific human." He sucked his teeth, parting scarred lips.

The silence stretched on.

Omni spoke up as the warden pondered, "I know that we keep enemies of the Regina Dracones this deep, but now that this prisoner is loose, can you tell me anything more about the prisoner, about the human that freed her?"

The warden stood, throwing the sheered bolt down to scatter across the filthy stone floor. Black boot marks left imprints across the stone, the cell smelled of filth with an overpowering scent of char. He looked at the partially melted chain, dangling from the ceiling, "The human is a mage, a deceptive creature of dark deeds. His guile is like that of no other. The elf, an assassin of the highest order, one of those tasked with killing King Harrow of Katolis." The Warden let this sink in to Captain Omni's thick skull, "The human persuaded her to abandon her mission, causing the death of her comrades, they then forged across Xadia in an effort for revenge against the queen of dragons herself. They carried with them the unbroken egg of the Dragon Prince, and the mage was to use it to slay it's mother with a deed of dark magic. Were it not for the bravery of the Dragon Guard and her majesty's command of the Sky Nexus, our empire would be in tumult, and the line of Storm Dragons gone from Xadia, and perhaps gone from the world. Your empress and queen subdued them, the mage escaping through dark magics, and the elf was mercifully allowed to serve
Omni listened quietly, amazed that those under his command had survived the infiltration of the dark mage. He stood straighter. They had lost the mage in the pursuit last night. He was still at large, and it was Captain Omni's responsibility to ensure the safety of the public. In the three years of relative peace he had become lenient, lazy. The role of serve taking precedent over militant ideals in the absence of a threat to protect from. Years of training, however, was not forgotten, only buried, rusted. All it took was a little bit of digging and polishing, and it was back.

"Then sir, if this is the threat the people of Lunaflowne face," Omni began confidently, shoulders squared, "We should make haste to my personal office, I have maps of the city, the structures and of the lesser known pathways."

The warden could tell the difference in the elf, he looked at him, approvingly, "Very good." He mused.

"Also," Omni continued, "If this mage is as manipulative as you say, we should begin quietly searching homes, going door to door, trying to not alert too many people, and search. Our people would not willfully withhold somebody that is an enemy of the state, but people can be manipulated."

"Wonderful," The warden rounded on him, "I'll make the tea, you assemble your teams."
No words had passed between Elyas and Callum. They had crossed the threshold into his home and the man immediately took Rayla up a set of winding stairs. Callum moved to follow, but stopped when Elyas glared at him silently. When it was apparent Callum wouldn't follow, Elyas continued up the stairs, the human could hear rustling and settling in the rooms above them, but didn't hear other noises.

A muffled grump came from his bag. He had completely forgotten that Bait was with him. He unslung the bag and unlatched the clasps, allowing the Glow Toad to meander out. Great round eyes took in the elven home, looked to Callum, who was obviously not concerned at the strange surroundings, then turned in a circle, testing the floor, before going rigid and slumping over to one side.

"What is tha'?" Elyas' voice was deep, but soft.

"Oh, Bait?" Callum laughed, "He's my brother's Glow Toad."

Elyas walked into the kitchen, his horns nearly scraping along the door frame as he passed through, having to duck beneath it. He did so absentmindedly as though he had caught them on it a thousand times and the movements were practiced beyond muscle memory.

Callum was only now getting a chance the look about the room, it was a small kitchen that had a wood stove in one corner, not lit given the season and the heat that still pervaded the nights. Decorative spins of silver and depictions of leafless trees were everywhere. The room was crowded with the cabinetry and stove alone, but there was a small table with two chairs crowding it further. With Elyas now in the room, Callum and Bait barely had room to maneuver about.

Elyas sat in one of the two chairs and gestured to the one opposite him. Callum took it.

Bait lay still, snoring.

"Yer a mage then." Elyas spoke simply.
"And you know Rayla." Callum said, just as simply.

"What kin' of mage are ya, then?" Elyas said, trying to get a conversation going.

"What kin' of…Rayla knower…are you, then?" Callum answered, squinting his eyes as he looked at the large elf.

Elyas slammed his fist into the tabletop, Callum jumped, Bait snored, the Moonshadow elf growled, "Dammit, human, I have half a mind ta drag you out by yer scrawny li'l neck and march ya over ta tha barracks meself."

Callum watched the large elf, "You're right," Callum visible eased, "Sorry, I have a habit of being…" He searched for the right word.

"Annoyin'?” Elyas offered.

Callum considered, "Sure, yea, let's go with that."

"Never mind what kind of mage you are, I don't rightly care, what I want to know is why ya had my niece slung over your shoulder and how, by the bloody moon, did she end up looking like she is?"

Rayla's family? He had known her mother and father were Dragon Guard, elite warriors of the Moonshadow elf people, but what was this elf? Callum searched the kitchen, the touch of femininity obvious, "Is there anyone else here?"

"Quit changing tha topic, human."

"Callum."

"Callum?” Elyas paused.

"My name is Callum," He stuck out his hand, "Of Katolis." He remembered what Elyas had said,
back in the Lunarium, back when he wore the illusion of being a trapper with Moonshadow skin. Elyas' Astrid. She was gone. He let the topic go, understanding the raw pain of loss. He understood the feminine touch to the homestead, he still kept the scarf his mother gave him, wore it almost every day, even in summer.

Elyas didn't take his hand or offer his name up.

"I take it that is a human custom then."

"Nae." Elyas countered, "I just dinnae trust ya."

"Fair." Callum laughed, dropping his hands to the table. His eyes continued to dart around the kitchen, taking everything in.

"Focus, Callum," Elyas growled at him, "Rayla. What happened to her? What are ya doin' here?"

"Sorry." The young mage offered, "Just still a little amped up." he took in a deep breath and then let it all out. "Three years ago Rayla came to my home to kill my brother and my father with her troupe of assassins led by the Moonshadow elf, Runaan, and while trying to find my brother, the now King Ezran, we haphazardly came upon the egg of the Dragon prince, which in Rayla's opinion changed everything, so in league with her and my brother we set off for the Dragon Queen to return the egg and hopefully forestall the war, however returning the egg did not have the desired effect, after six weeks traveling together..." his voice trailed off, becoming more high pitched as he ran out of air in his lungs, took in a massive breath and continued, "...we delivered Zym, the now hatched dragon which I hatched by shattering a primal stone of sky and summoning a storm, to his mother, which she wasn't really happy to see us. She was happy to see Zym, but not so much Rayla and I, she turned Rayla over to the Lunarium for sentencing and I was transported back to Katolis where I've been for the last three years." Another massive breath, "But now the queen of dragons has approved the assassination of my little brother, the king, with the use of Blood Lock, some magic poison formulated from using the blood of Rayla, whom has been captive and wasting in a cell for the last three years as best as I can tell. Only recently did I become aware of that she was here and came to get her out and take her back to Katolis. Also I need her blood to reverse the poison that could be used to kill my brother." The last came out slightly strangled and Callum gasped for breath, "That was a lot, was it too much?"

Elyas was hard pressed to suppress his surprise. This wheezy little human had trekked across Xadia not once, but twice? Once marching up to the dragon queen, then the other time breaking somebody out of the Lunarium. He shook his head for the paltry skills of his people, "I can'nae believe it." He grew angry, "And how many elves had ta die to make that possible, eh?"
Callum, not catching on to his anger, shrugged nonchalantly, "Zero."

"What?" Elyas laughed, "How is tha' poss'ble?"

"We just never had to." Callum offered.

"You," Elyas laughed, it was ludicrous, "You're barely battle tested, ya got nearly nothing to ya but skin and a lil meat. You just waltzsed passed two armies of battle hardened soldiers all the way across Xadia. Not once." He chuckled, "But twice?"

His answer was drawn out, uneasy, seeing the cords stand out in Elyas' neck as he wheezed in laughter, "Yes..." he turned to Bait, "I think I broke him."

It took a minute for Elyas to calm, but with the dire thought of the wasting girl upstairs, he came back to his senses. Still laughing, "And now you've seen her. She's in no condition to travel. She has to stay." Elyas was firm in his statement.

Callum looked at the elf, appraising him, before settling on his answer, "No." He said it flatly, brooking no argument, no trace of amusement in his voice, "I don't know how you know Rayla," Elyas opened his mouth tell, but Callum spoke right over him, "Nor do I care."

"Ya gah some nerve, ya pink skinned little shite." Elyas whispered darkly, "This is my niece, my flesh and blood, and I'll be cold in tha ground before I let her leave with ya."

"Elyas," Callum said, a bargaining tone in his voice.

"H-I never told ya mah name." Elyas backed up, "What kind 'a dark magic yoo be practicing."

"Let me be clear, Elyas." Callum stood, leaning over the table, his hands pressed into the woodwork. It creaked under the strain of the pressure he applied, but Callum payed it no mind. He lowered his eyes so that he was gazing directly into Elyas' indigo eyes, "I have spent the last three years reading every hint of elvish literature I could get my hands on, I've searched every library in the pentarchy, bought books from elvish dealers through mutual friends of politicians that came to the Court of Katolis in peaceful negotiations. I know of the Lunarium, the place it holds in the heart of the Moonshadow elf people. It is a place of love, of unions, people being wed there. It is a place of justice, people sentenced under the light of the moon at the judgement of the 8 Phases. It
is a place of negotiation, of revelation, of mourning, and redemption. I recognize the cultural importance of this place. Today I was a hairs breadth away from turning it into a mass of twisted magma and fire and killing everyone in it."

How could such a small and scrawny thing make chills run down his back?

Callum folded eased his grip on the tables edge, "But I didn't." Callum let out a breath, "The only reason I didn't do any of those things, the only reason that I am running from those guards instead of leaving their scorched ash amidst a fiery waste of your entire culture, is because of Rayla. I'm not taking her for her benefit alone. I'm taking her so that I don't walk out the door and do my best to end this tired and wasteful war for good tonight."

Elyas saw the dark look in the human's eyes, and, was that a hint of fire? No, likely just some reflected lantern light. This…Callum… had seemed so carefree, so haphazard, a scrawny waste of space, just a moment before. But looking into those cold green eyes, Elyas didn't just feel uneasy, he believed him, he believed he'd do it. His mouth had gone dry, he worked some saliva into his mouth and spoke, he couldn't just let his Rayla go with this monster, "I'll go with you, too, then."

"You can't." Callum eased, "Though I am sure she would appreciate your concern. I need to move quickly, and you would slow me significantly. I aim to be gone at the next eve."

"And how will you manage that with the entire Guard of Lunaflowne on high alert?" Elyas found the most distressing thing about this human wasn't that black streak running through his soul, but that it was so easily hidden beneath a carefree smirk.

"I'll carry her out the front gate, the same way I came to the city, completely unnoticed." Callum patted the pouch at his belt that now held forty-five miniature primal stones.

There was a thud from the room above. Callum was on his feet and moving before Elyas could tell him to sit back down. He cursed as he scrambled after the spry young man. He rounded the spiral steps just in time to see Callum pause and look down the hall that split off in three separate, but short, hallways before choosing the pathway to the left. Elyas had to admit it, the boy was perceptive. He watched Callum cautiously approach the door, trying the latch on he simple wood then listening, his face intent on the sounds coming from beyond.

"She's mumbling something." Callum commented.
Elyas didn't know that Callum was aware of him until he spoke to him directly.

"Sounds okay." He pushed into the room, slowly, the ungreased door hinges protested loudly, but Callum pushed past. Daylight was just beginning to lighten the sky in the dark grey painted wood, all the furniture white, floor dark wood. The room was small, a bed just big enough for two laying side by side in one of the corners of the small room, a stand next to the bed made of white wood and twisting ornamentation reminiscent of water flowing upwards. On the floor next to it was a large wooden figure, hand carved, of a Moonshadow elf woman face down. Rayla lay on the bed on her back, breathing shallowly, the blankets were a mess beneath her and her arm bindings rested atop the white side table, where the statue had stood.

Callum approached Rayla on the bed, kneeling next to her. Delicately, he took her arms, her hands still in the cruel metal binds, and placed them on her lap. Her arms were so light, he felt he may break them just by moving her. She winced and let out a gasp of pain, Callum nearly recoiled as though burned, dropping the heavy metal binds on her arms, catching them barely at the last second. He saw Elyas out of the corner of his eye back away, realizing Callum had caught her arms. He lay them in her lap and Callum's stomach twisted, she looked like a corpse at a funeral.

Hiding the tears welling in his eyes, Callum knelt and picked up the wooden statue, placing it back on the side table. It was a woman caught in the wind, one hand reaching out and up, a coy smile played upon her lips. The statue was small and delicate. He noted that one of the horns and her other arm had cracked and splintered, but her voluptuous hourglass figure was hinted at throughout the pose, hidden by wisps of cloth that looked caught in a gust of wind despite being made of wood. He turned to Elyas, "I'm sorry," He proffered the pieces, "She knocked it down, I could fix it for you."

Elyas took the pieces, the breaking of his Astrid's figure hurting him more than he would like to admit, the wood statue in his hands so small, but the weight of the figure was exactly the weight of her hand. How many nights had he spent here alone, just holding the figurine, pretending it was her hand? Elyas steeled himself, "'s'fine" He put the pieces on the shelf, "I don't want your dark magic touching my things."

Callum opened his mouth, then closed it, "Fine." was all he said, bitterly. He looked to Rayla, "Will you let me stay here for the day. I need to tend to her wounds and get these binds off of her." He was already hiding Callum from the guards, what was a little more imposition.

"Fine," Elyas begrudged, "I'll get ya both some food and watah. I got bandages and tha like galore."

Callum examined the binds on Rayla's hands after Elyas left, forcing himself to ignore the pungent smell. It was a singular steel contraption attached to a chain which Callum examined, the ends of
the final link burnt and partially melted. The steel of the contraption was marred and dented, areas where the metal had known a less than kind touch. How long had she smashed that binding against a rock or some other outcropping trying to get it off? How long had she been in it? Two locked latches at the bottom where her wrists emerged were all that needed to be undone to get her hands out.

He thought, mulling over ways to go about freeing her hands. Star Primum for shifting the locking mechanism? That would take two stones, he had time to breathe now, he needed to conserve efforts. He couldn’t just use a hammer and wedge, the device and locks were too sturdy, he would risk harming her. He could freeze it with an Moon Primum or melt it with a Sun Primum, but that might hurt Rayla too. If she had been the same vibrant elf he had known so many years ago, he might have considered it, she was, after-all, a total badass.

Callum set the pouch of marbles next to Rayla, letting it open enough so that in the morning light he could see them clearly. He removed an ugly brown muddy looking marble, drew four lines in the air and added the accents with a glowing green finger tip, channeling the Primum through the marble, "Scido, " he commanded. There was a great screech as the metal of the binds split in half down the center. The metal parted, and Callum could see almost translucent skin inside the crack. He grabbed the metal and began trying to extricate her hands from the device.

Rayla didn't move, but bright red blood began spilling out the cracks in the torture device.

In a panic, Callum cursed, "Shit, shit, shit, shit." As blood soaked into her already stained canvas clothing and spread to the bed beneath her, Callum shouted for Elyas.

The large elf shouldered into the room and looked about, noting Callum's panic, "What, what happened?" He carried a basket that was full of bandages and ointments.

"She's bleeding, I was trying to the shackles off and split it, and then she just started bleeding, I can't see a wound, there's too much blood."

"Idiot boy." Elyas stomped out of the room, shouting, "Just put pressure on what ye can and I'll be right back."

Callum continued to cuss a storm of curses that would have made even General Amaya take pause. He did his best, but couldn't really seen any flesh on which to apply pressure. His hands scrambled amidst the contraction, now slick with hot red blood, trying to the ply the thing further apart. He managed to take off what he thought of as the front cover of the contraption and he could see her hands. He remembered her slender fingers, dexterous and nimble. He had watched them dance
across her blades, caring for them. He remembered the first time she had touched his lips, deep in the bowels of the Castle of Katolis, he had just cast his first spell and she called him a mage. In his excitement he had shouted, echoing down the halls. She had placed a single finger on his lips, the scent salty, the touch soft, "Nobody likes a' loud mage." she had chided, smirking. These hands were so different. Her thumb and three fingers were wrapped around a metal rod through the center of the binding, they were knobby and skeletal, just like elsewhere, the tendons and none seemed to be all that remained, almost no muscle or fat left.

Most horrifying of all, however, was that between the slick visage of her blood Callum could see that the flesh had somehow fused with the metal rod. He sat and watched the blood leak over him, stunned.

"What tha hail, Callum," Elyas said, returning to the room, he carried two carafes filled with clear liquid.

"Her hands look like they've melted." Callum swallowed hard, feeling the rage burn in him again, he could feel the blood begin to boil.

"So, heal her, mage." Elyas commanded.

"H-how?" Callum stammered.

Elyas shook his head, "All that fire and blood in ye b'fore an now where's it at? What good are you if you cannae even fix a li'l bleeding?" He examined the bar that Callum had extricated from the binding, looking how the iron bar seemed to be covered in a layer of skin that steadily increased to the paper think skin of the rest of her hand, "She nae melted to it, her skin fused to it."

"Fused?" Callum asked, "How? Is that some torture technique?"

Elyas shook his head, "Ain't nothing otha than neglect." He dug in the basket full of bandages and ointments and fished out a dagger. Callum didn't feel threatened as the man brandished it. It was a slight piece of metal with a fine edge and finer tip, "When ya removed the binding, you tore some of her skin is all, she's got nothing to her is all so it was easy to make her bleed." Callum watched the large elf bowed over the slight frame of Rayla, her hands in his as he manipulated and examined. He looked at Callum out of the corner of his eye, "Ye never had to deal with much blood, have ye?"
Callum didn't answer the question, "How do you know about this?"

Elyas laughed, "Bed sores." he said simply, he nodded to the broken statue, "Mi wife, Astrid, she was a woman with a heart that bled for everyone and everything, but she didn't have the constitution to deal with much. She sickened early and would stay sick long. Over time it wasted her, she became thin and worn. Eventually unable to get outta bed. Bed sores became an issue and I didn't know then how to deal with them, so I learned." Elyas shoved a roll of gauze into Callum's hand, "Get these ready, a strip ta wrap each finger and then a bunch more for her hands."

Callum went about the task, tearing the gauze in careful strips and then setting them aside. Elyas clumsily went about cutting the flesh that had fused to the metal bar in Rayla's hands, cursing under his breath with each new bead of blood. Every so often he would grab the carafe of water and pour it over her hands, washing away the blood, and Callum could see flaps of skin wash away as well. Elyas did not care where it splashed, leaving the bed, Rayla, and Elyas a mass of bloody water marks slowly seeping.

After what seemed like forever, though Callum could see the sun just now cresting the horizon through the round window, the metal bar pulled free from one of her hands. Elyas grabbed the other carafe of water, though the one was still full, and took a big swig of it, then handed it to Callum. Callum looked at his strange new ally and then drank himself, taking a big pull, not realizing before then just how thirsty he was.

Callum almost gagged as the clear liquid, which was definitely not water, burned on the way down, searing through his throat and leaving his chest feeling flushed, "What th-?" Callum croaked.

Elyas chuckled at him, "Good, now poor it on her hand, don't be shy with it. It'll clean it, help keep it from getting cursed." Callum did as he was told, he could feel his head begin to swim a little bit, but steeled himself, forcing his mind to calm and focus on the task at hand like Elyas. Callum watched Rayla's skeletal features contort in pain as he poured the alcohol, he looked to the broad shouldered elf, who scratched his beard absentmindedly, not noting the damp blood marks that his fingertips left behind, "Aye, that's a good sign. She's not so deep that she cannae feel."

Elyas reached into the basket and pulled out a tub, "Unscrew this and slather it on tha wounds. No such thing as too little. Then wrap her fingers, tight." Elyas turned his attention back to the other hand, pouring more water over the wounds, washing more of the blossoming blood away.

Callum began to weave the bandages around her fingers, careful not to take too close of a look at the flaps of skin that hung, dangling. When Elyas was finished he did the same as Callum, wrapping her other hand in gauze after dousing it with the alcohol and slathering on the same balm. When Callum had finished Elyas looked at the bandages and nodded approvingly.
The ordeal now over, Callum sat upon the floor observing Rayla. Her breathing was steady, flushed in the morning light. Callum could see that there was already some blood staining the gauze, like hazy red shadows among the snow.

"You're wondering what's next." Elyas said, watching Callum, calculating, observing.

Callum looked to him quizzically.

"I can see the look upon ye face," Elyas gestured to his own face, "That distant gaze in your eyes. I saw it when I was at the Breach, men and elf both, caught in the meat grinder, not really knowing where to go or how to react to the bloodshed they'd taken part in."

Callum chuckled, "Yea, that's pretty spot on. Not nearly as gruesome, but valid, nonetheless."

Elyas looked to the door and sighed, "By the moon I cannae believe I'm helping a human. Do you know how many humans killed friends o' mine..."

"Well, elves killed both of my fathers. A dragon killed my mother. Elves are in the process of trying to kill my brother." Callum answered nonchalantly, "Seems like we both have things to be pissed about, but rather than focusing on that, how about we just figure out how to get Rayla back on her feet."

Elyas touched his niece's shoulder, she stirred slightly at his touch, "It's not going to be easy goin' lad. Look at her, there's nothing there. She's got no muscle. She's not going to have the energy to trek across Xadia with ya ta get to Katolis."

"We're going, Elyas," Callum said firmly, "I may not know what to do, but I know we need to get to Katolis, I'm open to ideas, but that is our destination."

Elyas visibly struggled, trying to the find the right words, opening and shutting his mouth, trying to work the idea over and finally said, "Alright, listen," He absentmindedly scratched his beard, "You mention your leavin' tonigh'. You look exhausted, your toad is exhausted, Rayla hasn't done a thing and she's exhausted. Just where in da fuck do you think you're going to. You've got nothing left in you at the fight. Take the day, rest, care for Rayla, I'll go out I'll get some supplies, you're going to be needing them if you're going to be caring for her and on the run, I would feel a lot better if I were going with you."
"You can't be carried, if we're going to get back to Katolis by when we need to get back, my ride cannot take you."

"Then you stay and stay in hiding and I'll go to Katolis and I will take care of her." Elyas offered.

"I'm not going to trust you to get back to Katolis in time you don't understand she needs to be back there for my brother."

"Listen here you, scrawny little piss, I've been going about this the wrong way I've been trying to be lenient on you and trying to be understanding but at the end of the day you're just trying to use Rayla." Elyas voice turned to a growl again, "For all I know you could be some elfnapper or just after her blood to save your brother, to save your human King of which I would add she would have no part. You humans are just as disgusting as the rumors say willing to sacrifice anyone and anything for your own benefit."

There's a long-drawn-out silence as Callum watched Elias through narrowed eyes. It was obvious they were at an impasse, he hung his head and absentmindedly traced his finger across the spine of his SketchBook, the one that had been with him for so long. The one that had been with him since he was little. The one that had been with him when he and Rayla travelled together. An idea crossed his mind, "You don't think she trusts me? You don't think that I know her, that I've been across the Breach and fought by her side? That I haven't been left bruised and bleeding to keep her safe? Well I have, and she's done the same for me. I haven't seen this elf in 3 years! She's been starved near to death! If this is what her people have to offer her, some judgment at the court of the Lunarium and a lifetime in darkness, then by the name of the Sun and Moon, believe me when I say that we are not only companions, not only did we travel into Xadia together, she kept my brother and I, us 'humans' alive when her own people came after us, trying to kill us, she protected us from elf and human alike!" Rayla stirred next to him making him quiet down. The next words coming from his mouth in a severe hushed tone, he took the book off of his shoulder and threw it at Elyas, commanding him, "Look, look and see what this kidnapper has seen. Look and see what I've done over the years."

Elyas didn't have anything to say to the tirade that Callum have unleashed on him, all he could do was take the sketchbook in his thick and calloused hands and flip through the pages. Pictures of a little boy and the Glow Toad downstairs. Pictures of a woman in dark clothes with dark hair. Pictures of a king wearing the crown of Katolis standing proudly, imposingly. A three-legged wolf in a young girl. All the types of elves drawn with such vivid imagery that they could not be concocted or construed these were people that this young man had encountered, but among all of them the one that kept recurring: Rayla. Rayla laughing, truly happy, Rayla glaring, Rayla practicing with her blades, Rayla holding a flower. The pictures were drawn with such exquisite detail that it looked as though Elias was looking at her himself. Not knowing what to say he slammed the book shut having reached the end, and threw it at Calum, who caught it clumsily.
"Stay here," Elyas commanded, "I'm going to go get you supplies, we're going to need a wagon to get you out of here, unless you have a way of hiding that you're carrying a Moon Shadow elf that's almost dead."

Elyas slammed the door behind him on his way out.

Chapter End Notes

Unfortunately, this marks the end of my outstanding update rate. I will continue to write, but I apologize that it will be at a slower pace.
Elyas walked down the street stopping at various vendors throughout Lunafowne. Dried goods here, some meat there. He made small talk with various vendors saying nothing about nothing then moving on to the next. As he went about this something troubled his mind. In the court of the Lunarium people were supposed to be tried before the public. The weekly trials had become a meeting place for people to come together and learn from the mistakes of others. The trials were to make an example of the degenerate if not always the destitute. Rarely there was corrupt guards, or a militant that failed a mission or abandoned his post, but they still had to be tried. How else were they to teach the children of the Moonshadow elves the finer points of the ethics, how would they learn to question and quest for answers if their society kept such things behind closed doors.

Elyas had lived in Lunafowne for the last twenty years, and in the five years since Astrid's passing, he had made a point of going to the Lunarium trials. He took up her mantle as an advocate for the poor and an advocate for mercy. In her absence, he fulfilled the role she had played for him, so long ago. He would have known Rayla by sight had she come before the Lunarium. He would have stood up to speak on her behalf. Was there no one who defended her? And better yet, where was he, what had he been doing that he had not been able to attend when she was tried. He wracked his brain trying to remember three years ago, but it was for naught. He supposed he could have missed one, but found it unlikely.

"Elyas, why the sour expression my friend?" it was Alter, a food vendor that Elyas was well acquainted with. He was always ready to serve one the spicy vegetable stew full of beans and roots that could keep an elf full from dawn until dusk even if he works himself into a sweat. Elyas had come to him often since Astrid passed looking for the camaraderie of the old elf as well as partaking of his delicious concoction. Alter was a rotund elf, retired from a life as an assassin but still finding a way to contribute to the way Lunafowne operated. In his older years he had retired to a small apartment but not wanting to live out the rest of his years watching the trees grow, he had taken to perfecting his stew which had oft fed him and his troupe on missions. Now a lesser known cornerstone of the city, he would ask for payment on a sliding scale so that if you could not pay, you didn't, but if you could, give extra you did. It was his little way of balancing the injustices in the world, his little way of making this corner of Lunafowne a little better. He saw the world as that which you had dominion over, and that which you don't You can control yourself and minor things around you, and it was one's responsibility to put the best into what you could control.

"I was just passing through, something on my mind is all." Elyas conversed with the man, he had been going to walk past the elf and his stew. He didn't feel the hunger for the mixture of carrots and roots and calmelune, he didn't need it today. But, he thought, maybe Rayla would. If a single bowl could keep you full all day it must contain enough to at least give her some energy. Elias tried to brighten as he continued to talk to Alter saying, "My friend. Good to see you again it looks as though you are well. You're certainly eating well." He gestured to the elf's round belly, "Testing a little too much of your chili?"
"We can't all be carved from Stone, Elyas, some of us need to be carved from pudding. Shall I get you a bowl? " The raillery was well appreciated, Alter was proud of his bulk being so different from the typical elf.

"If you don't mind, Alter, I have family visiting and we were going to go out of the city tonight to visit a relative prefers the quiet life of the forests. One of Astrid's relatives." He answered the unasked question as Alter raised an eyebrow, "Oh, it's been years since I've seen them, but they were kind enough to think of me when they came to Lunaflowne. As I was doing nothing else when they invited me to come see Mimi Pilye I was not about to refuse."

"Well that certainly sounds like a grand time," The fat elf said sarcastically his eyebrows furrowing as he tried to cover just how awful that sounded to him, "But with your family in town best you be prepared! I should warn you that the guards are coming door to door. Seems as though last night near dawn there was a commotion!" The man gossiped as his chins waggled, "I had heard rumors but you always hear rumors. To actually see it true is something else entirely. Apparently there was a human running through the streets with the corpse of an elf. My grandson said he saw it with his own two eyes of course my grandson is full of shite. Just on principle, it's coming out of his ears so I didn't believe him when he said it. It took me seeing the guards going door-to-door. They're being polite enough but you can tell that they're insistent." He served up the three bowls and covered them allowing them to be carried easily. Elyas took them thankfully, "No cost for you my friend I know how things have been since Astrid passed."

"As I tell you every time," Elyas rebutted with a smile, "Take your damned coins."

"I only keep offering to give it to you for free because you keep paying. Quit paying and you will find my generosity dries up quickly." Alter whispered behind a hand conspiratorially.

With a gracious nod Elias headed back to his task, procuring a pull cart and a load of three a pack rolls, blankets, and the assorted other goods he had procured. He threw everything into the cart and headed home.

Right as he was heading into the home which he used to share with his Astrid, in the summer of his life, he noted his neighbor was paying special attention to him. Offering him a friendly wave. He spoke up, "Well met Gershom, how do you fare this day?"

Always a cranky bitch, Gershom spoke up, ignoring the pleasantries, "Do you have visitors, Elyas?" How did a simple question sound like an accusation? "I feel like in your absence I've heard noises coming from your house. Nothing sounded broken and I saw nobody leave. I was hoping to see you to ensure that you weren't being robbed."
Elyas had to try hard not to roll his eyes at the nosey busy body, "Yes, I'm afraid my niece and a friend of hers are in the city, they are just stopping by in Lunaflowne briefly before heading on. You know young elves, frequently bit by wanderlust. This was just a way for me to keep an eye on them while they were in town. Y'know, keepin' family safe."

Gershom nodded and walked off deciding that was preferable to any further interaction with Elyas.

Elyas made a rude gesture to his back and took the pull cart round back to the alleyway where he had first run in to Callum.

As he was settling his things and bringing things into the small kitchenette, a shrill scream pierced the air. Elias dropped the majority of his things on the floor and went pounding up the steps, calling Rayla's name.

Chapter End Notes

Elyas: https://imgur.com/gallery/s5Qhu09
Knock Knock Knock

Knock Knock Knock

Callum sat on the floor, dozing lightly. It had been a number of hours since Elyas left. He kept slipping in and out of sleep. Traversing Xadia and Katolis in 5 days, going right into a day of exploring a city and then a night of breaking Rayla out of the catacombs of the Lunarium. And though he had only cast a few spells, the strain and the tension had worn on him. He fought so long and so hard to get here, to get to Rayla. Now the destination was so close, he had fought half the battle, and now it was just the sprint home. He couldn't flag now, but he knew his body needed rest, his mind needed rest. He had to stay sharp. He wondered how long it would be before something tried to take this success away from him. but he chastised himself, he was getting too far ahead worrying about things outside of his control, he had to be present in the here and now he had to focus on what the next steps were. Just because she was out of prison doesn't mean that everything was better.

He looked at her through tired eyes. Then once they were home, once this new band of assassins was dealt with, then they could work on her recovery. It wouldn't be an overnight improvement. She would have to work long and hard to get better, get back the skills that had been left untouched for three years, let alone to get the muscles back that she had lost. And even then, what of her hands? Who knew how long those would take to heal, and even then, her flesh had been in ribbons when he put them in the bandages, would her sensation be intact? That they were getting ready to head back to the safety of Katolis meant very little, he realized. The weight of it rested heavily on his shoulders and it was a task he didn't even know how to begin to address. Callum realized he was getting overwhelmed when his breathing became ragged.

His mother's words cut through his muddied, sleepy thoughts, Sarai patting his back and encouraging him, "Breathe, Callum, just breathe."

His breathing evened, and he offered a small prayer of thanks to his mother. He heard his mother's voice again in his head, speaking for Amaya, he always imagined they had the same voice. Every time he signed with his aunt, he could hear his mother's voice speaking her words for him, "You can only deal with the foe in front of you. You cannot be worried about what your comrades are doing, or what your other opponents are about, you can only deal with and act upon what is before. There can be a plan, but it is better to have a goal. Armies are organized, but battles are chaos and when you take a plan into battle, it will all fall apart. Know your goal, know your opponent, and when you are done with that one, you move on to the next, you do not relent. You keep fighting until you're beaten, until your bloodied, until there is nothing left to you until you complete that goal."

Amaya's battle prowess was something of legend, even among the elves. Her advice showed the fire in her heart and blood. He had never really understood it before. To want something so bad. But then he had seen Rayla, beaten down, desiccated and starved. He had been ready to do such terrible things. He was oddly okay with what he had almost done. He had worked with Ezran for
three years on peace and trade laws, trying to avoid skirmishes, bloodshed. There had been the occasional loss of life through the years, but the powers that be were always willing to work through it, apologies made.

But for this? For what they had done to Rayla? And then there was the dragon queen. They had come bringing her child and heir to her with the hope of...of what? The hope of peace? The hope that maybe after one thousand years of tension finally burgeoning in Thunder killing Sarai, and then Harrow killing Thunder, then Gale ordering the murder of Harrow and Ezran. After Ezran, willing to forget the attempt on his life, had set out to return the egg that Gale had thought destroyed, the great heartless queen wanted him dead. Was the world perpetually set on the edge of war? Was there always some unforgiving soul that would push and push until something gave way? Was that the mantle he was contemplating taking on? There was no apologizing for another attempt on Ezran's life, no way of giving Rayla back three years of her life. And he knew he couldn't take it out on every elf. Elyas seemed to have no idea that Rayla was even in the city, and Callum had seen how much the elf cared for his niece. Each elf, just like each person, was a complex intricate web of life that interacted with so many others as infinitely complex as the one before it. How could he look and consider taking a node out of that delicately balanced web. You cannot burn away a single strand of that complex weave without some other strand being damaged.

Callum's head rocked forwards and he could hear himself begin to snore. He would have stayed that way while longer to if it weren't for the shrill scream that pierced his ears.

In a rush, he stood up, hand going to the pouch of marbles as he scanned the room quickly. Rayla was screaming and pointing. Pointing at something past him, something there in the room with them. He couldn't make sense of it he turned and there was nothing behind him he scanned the room again, hard to make sense of things with the elf woman screaming at him.

"Rayla what is it what do you see?"

"Human! she rasped, panicked, "Help! Human!"

Callum took a moment to be baffled and then saw in her eyes that she didn't recognize him that something was off. Her eyes were wide and frantic darting around the room, great confused white and violet orbs in a skeletal face.

Callum raised a hand, approaching her, "What did you do to me?" she sobbed looking at her hands, "Argh, it hurts so bad."

"Rayla, Rayla it's okay," Callum continued to approach her, hands raised to calm her, "I know you.
"I-I-" she looked around the room, panting, Callum could see the confusion watch out of her, "I could never be friends with a disgusting human. You things are vile taking from the world and never giving back only looking out for yourselves. Murderer! Slayer of the Dragon King!" Not one to stay down for long, Rayla stood. She had no muscle to her, no meat, but that manic fire in her eyes scared Callum.

Elyas' voice came from the hall, "Rayla?! Rayla are you all right?!"

"Help me! He's in here with me!" She shouted, fire in her voice, "The human! He's hurt me." The accusation hurt more than Callum thought it should. This must be how she felt when he had referred to elves as 'bloodthirsty'. He had come to protect this elf, and here she was slinging insults at him, when all he wanted was what was going to help her.

Elyas bound into the room pushed to the bed, "What's wrong, dearie, what's wrong?"

"Do ya not see a human standin' there plain as day?" she placing her hands Elyas' chest, looking at Callum over her frail shoulders, not willing to take her eyes off of Callum, "He hurt my hands."

Elyas held her close to his chest, shushing her, and wrapped her thin frame in his bulky arms, "It's okay, dearie, it's okay. He won't hurt you. I won't let 'im."

Callum gave a confused startled look at Elyas. Did he really think that Callum could hurt her after he had been so protective? He had gone to the ends of the earth to get her out of the Lunarium and then listened attentively to how to care for her wounded hands. But Callum caught Elyas' eyes, caught the implored words there.

Something was up. That much Elyas understood, though Callum might not, so he waited patiently, wanting to comfort and hold this broken little elf, to wipe away her tears, but knowing that he couldn't, if he got too close she would go into fits again. And so he was caught standing still doing nothing, yearning to be there and not being able to. This was just another burden to bear. He ran a hand through his hair as he tried to piece the tasks and barriers together.

"I just want Callum," Rayla sobbed into her uncle's chest, "Where is he?"
"He's right here, Rayla" Elyas pointed to Callum, "He's standing right there." Callum stood still, nervousness like sharp pins across his skin, afraid to Hope but she might recognize him this time.

She looked at Elyas, confused, "Callum's a human? How long has he been a human for?"

"All my life I suppose." Callum mumbled.

Despite herself, Rayla snorted, then spoke, "Your voice. I… No, that can't be righ'." Rayla pushed off of her uncle, turning towards Callum, less concern and fright in her features, ebbing again into confusion, "What would mothur and fathur think?"

"Rayla, I know you're confused right now, ye've been away a long while and the world probably doesn't make sense like you thought it might, but I need to know something." Elyas took her damaged hands in his softly, "I've seen this human care for you with gentle hands and gentle touch." He looked to Callum, "But I have seen darkness in him too. He means to take you to Katolis, you are frail and weak and I think you need to stay. But I am not your master, you are."

"Ezran's in trouble, Rayla." Callum offered, his worry coming to the surface.

Rayla looked at Callum, staring at his head where horns weren't where pointed ears weren't, but then she came to rest on his eyes. They lingered there a long time as the two males waited, "I'm not about to let my biggest fan get in trouble if I can help it." Rayla said finally. She sat on the bed, trying to make sense of things.

Elyas knelt before her, rubbing her knees comfortably, "It's okay, dearie, I'll get you something to eat if you can get some rest. I think you have a long journey ahead of you."

Rayla nodded and Elyas left the room slowly.

While Elyas went to fetch whatever it was for Rayla to eat, Rayla and Callum just stared at one another. She watched him suspiciously and he merely stood there awkwardly. He didn't like how he looked like a stranger to her, she didn't have a spark of recognition in their eyes. Three years gone and he still felt as though he could read her thoughts and emotions. The way eyes darted about the room, but continuously came back to him, as though she was unwilling to keep her eyes off of him, not trusting him. She drew up into herself, pulling her knees to sit curled into a ball. Callum worked his mouth trying to find something to say but at the end settled on nothing.
"Callum was a mage." Rayla broke the silence, "A mage of impossible power. You look like a prince to me."

"Oh, I'm a mage," Callum said assuredly.

"But you're human, that means you're a dark mage." Rayla answered his assurances, "Callum would never be a dark mage."

Callum began to walk over to the bed, but Rayla scurried further away, into the corner. He frowned, "May I sit?"

Another long pause, a conversation of long uneasy pauses.

"You and I, we traveled together. Ezran and I, we were princes of Katolis. Now he's king." Callum smirked, sadly, "And I am High Mage of Katolis. But I don't do dark magic." He pulled the belt pouch away from his belt and showed it to her, opening it so the marbles could be seen, "I use these to do primal magic. Though I have managed to connect to the Sky Arcanum while we traveled."

Elyas walked in to the room, holding the stew and a plain silver spoon. He went to hand it to her, then remembered her hands.

"That smells, ah-mazing," Rayla again broke the awkward silence. Edging closer to the bed, closer to Callum, and to Elyas, who offered her a small little spoonful, "Oh, it's heav'ny." She savored the bite.

Callum watched her eat the food, happy to see her taking something that would give her some semblance of body mass back, "May I, Elyas? Rayla?" He offered his empty hands, hoping they would trust him enough with this simple task.

Elyas looked to Rayla, who, though still uneasy, nodded. Elyas handed Callum the bowl, and he began to feed Rayla small bites.

Now feeling out of place and, oddly enough, as though he was the one intruding on them, Elyas grumbled something about needing to set up the wagon and get supplies packed appropriately, and left the room.
"So cast a spell, Mister Mage." Rayla challenged him between bites, still not fully believing him.

"What, here?" Callum asked, getting a strange bulbous green and purple vegetable onto the spoon.

"No, out in tha hall. Yes, here, ya dummy." She chastised him, why did that make him so happy?

"Alright," Callum said nervously, he picked a green and brown marble from the bag. Earth. When she finished eating, he set the bowl aside. He knew just what to do with this. He went to the shelf where Elyas had put the wooden statue of Astrid. He had said that he didn't want him using his dark magic on it, which wasn't a problem. He lifted the pieces.

"That's my mother's sistah, Astrid." Rayla said.

"Yea, and you broke it." Callum said.

"Oh no!" Rayla lamented, "Why'd I do tha'?"

"Don't worry," Callum smirked, "I don't think he was mad about it, and I'm going to fix it." Holding the statue in his right hand, and the Earth Marble in the bent fingers of his left hand, carving the rune of the spell into mid air, "Corrigo," he commanded in ancient draconic. The wood itself seemed to twist and spin and reach out to try and find itself, it warped and spun until finally the broken shoulder met and then the little statuette found it's original form.

"You're a mage!" Rayla laughed, rocking excitedly.

Callum laughed, "And nobody likes a loud mage."

She paused in her laughter, "I-I said that."

"You did," Callum smiled.
"But there's so much that don't make sense." Rayla placed a bandaged hand on her head, "Like, I'm an assassin? Why is tha' tumbling around here?"

"Elyas said that it's normal to be confused now, a lot has changed. A lot has happened to you." Callum sat back next to her, handing her the statue, "It's going to be a while before everything makes sense again. But I'm here to help you." He hoped his words were reassuring. He wanted to place a hand on her back, comfort her, but there was still so much ground to cover before they were back to where they had been three years ago.

He was startled when he felt the rough gauze on the back of his hand. He looked and saw the tight wrapping he had done resting there, "Thank you. Callum-whos-not-an-elf." She pushed him away lightly, her weakened muscles not able to muster much of anything else, "Now give a gurl some priv'cy. I smell ranker than a week ol' chamber pot."

"Oh?" Callum chuckled, "I hadn't noticed."

"Get out of here, lest you can muster a spell that will have me smelling proper."

"I'm not a miracle worker, just a very good mage." It felt so good to joke with her again. To hear that spirit back in her voice, "I'll go see if the good Uncle Elyas needs a hand with anything." He walked to the door, and she stood and started going through the dresser, trying to find something other than the blood stained foul rags she wore. Callum could see that she was already tiring. He opened the door and paused looking at her.

"What're ya looking at?" She asked, not looking at him.

"Nothing," Callum said, "I just…I just want to remember your face exactly right."

She turned to look at him, she was still a mess of dirt and grime. Her hair was wiry and there were patches missing. Her face looked as gaunt as her limbs. But, when she smiled, his heart skipped a beat. He nodded and left, heading for the stairs.

When he reached the kitchen, Elyas was there, he had set up three different pack rolls with bags, one of which flopped emptily, Bait sat waiting patiently next to it. When he entered the kitchen, Bait greeted him, shifting from yellow to blue and then back again, "Bowooooooowob."
"You look about ready to leave." Callum said, looking at Elyas, "I told you that we cannot take you with us."

"Aye." Elyas stood, arms bent looking out the wind, but staying in the shadows, eye's intent on something outside.

"What is it, Elyas?" Callum asked nervously.

"I'll tell you what," Elyas growled, "My fuckup of a neighbor is a nosey piece of shite." He gestured Callum to come over. Callum went and followed the large elf's gaze. There, out in the alley, next to the pull cart that Elyas had procured, stood three Moonshadow elf guards, and another pinched little elf with narrow face and narrow jaw. Beady little eyes darting back and forth as he watched Elyas' house, "I've always hated Gershom, ever since he grabbed Astrid's arse back in the day. Womanizing, greedy pissant."

Callum's opinion of this new elf was rapidly deteriorating as well, "I would have loved to see you show him his place."

Elyas scoffed, "Right, it ain't my place to do such things lest asked. No, Astrid did that well enough for herself. I still smile thinking about how she made his ears ring with that righteous slap." He brightened, "Still, best go get Rayla, word on the street is they're going door to door looking for some human and an elf he murdered. They've been searching the houses. They come in here, there's no way I can hide that bloody mess upstairs. Elyas sighed, "I hear the Breach is nice this time of year. Doesn't get as cold there, what with the constant outflow of magma. Maybe I can even get a merchant's pass or be a merchant guard."

Callum watched more guards come and talk to the three, they gestured, planning, and then went around to the front of the house, "One piece at a time, Elyas. Let's get out of the city, then we'll deal with the next step. I'll go get Rayla."

Somebody began to knock on the house's front door.
Rayla dug through an old and relatively untouched armoire, not really caring to find anything more than a new set of clothes. She remembered Astrid, a fair elf with curves gratuitous enough to make other women envious, and a kind charitable nature that was only matched by the ferocity of her heart. A woman of unbowed and unbroken spirit, that despite the illness that took her years too soon, continued to fight and love in the name of the disparaged. One of her mother's many sisters, the youngest of the seven. Rayla was never really close with her, as Rayla was growing up, Astrid had not been in the mindset to be around children. Still, Rayla remembered her as a peaceful soul that was at odds with Alayza's single-minded devotion to the King of Dragons and her brother-in-law Praid's unmatched battle prowess. She had found her own way out to the Breach working as a skilled nurse. Rayla remembered when she had brought Elyas back to meet the whole family, one time, before her assassin training had truly begun. She sighed, envisioning the little Rayla running about his feet, remembered being picked up and carried on his shoulders.

Rayla paused in her perusal of the dresser's clothes, something in the memory catching her attention. For the life of her, she couldn't remember why she recalled the event as an outsider looking in. As though seeing the gathering of people from a distance, and not truly being a part of it. Rayla tried going through other memories, did she always remember things in the third person? Was this a flaw in some hallucination's mind game to help her cope.

Rayla heaved a great breath even as she crouched in front of the armoire, going through the drawers at the bottom. No, she remembered Elyas. He was a beast of a man and had heard of his skills at the Breach from Runaan, who had tried to woo him, unsuccessfully, before he had met his Sunfire boytoy. She could recall Runaan's surprise that he was her uncle and that he had been in settled down. His thirst for battle had been unquenchable, the beastly elf would train until his hands and feet bled and then go offer himself as a challenger in bar fights for money, then spend the money in the bar on elven or human brews.

She settled to allow the memories of Elyas to be true, even if there was the strange perception of one here or there through her mind. Even if they weren't true, Rayla suppressed a shudder thinking of the time she had inspected a hallucination too closely, the entire thing falling apart, her child's face caving in to itself in crumbling ash as she held it close.

Again, Rayla had to pause and re-orient herself. Memories of Umbra, though she had been a beautiful baby, with the sweetest smile. Rayla had to suppress the challenge to the current reality. A wave if sorrow washing over her mind like the tide, she had to grasp the edges of her sanity to prevent herself from falling into heaving sobs. Could a woman that had never been a mother truly feel love for a baby she never held or carried? Rayla could feel the cracks forming in her perception and had to force them back together, feeling as though she was clutching a crumbling foundation with strained hands, trying to cover the cracks so they didn't spread. Her breath caught
in her throat, her chest hitched as she breathed, but she eventually calmed. All the trials and tribulations in her mind eventually quieting.

Not caring what she found in the armoire any longer, Rayla grabbed a pair of black breeches and a teal blouse. She lamented the loss of her assassin's gear. Light armored pads that had been specifically fitted to her. Sorrows mounting, she took the folded clothes out and walked over to a standing looking glass and saw herself for the first time in this replay of reality. She saw the ragged canvas cloth that she was draped in, it hanging loosely over her body. She pulled at the stiff rags, practically nothing, and grimaced.

She pulled the clothes off slowly, not to be delicate, but because she didn't have the energy to move any faster. The meal that Elyas and Callum had helped her eat sat in her empty stomach like a brick. Rayla tried to remember the mixture of sweet and savory that had danced across her tongue, rather than think of what the crusty flecks falling off of her prisoner's canvas attire were. She didn't want to remember. Remembering was hard, it was so much easier to play along. She suppressed another stab as the vision of Umbre's caved in face swam across her vision. She never held Umbre, never clutched her to her breast, never held her as she cried on stormy nights, never giggled over those round cheeks with her father.

Rayla had to put in effort to stay committed to the here and now, or else be swept away again. Ezran needed her here. A constant friend, a human that had been so innocent when she had met him. They only spent a short time together, but she had grown to love the little king. She had seen him at his worst, when he learned that her fellow Moonshadow elves had succeeded in killing King Harrow, and he had shown compassion and tolerance where other humans would have thought to extricate revenge on some racial level. She had seen him at his best, or at least, she had seen a ten year old boy shouldered with the mantle of king and say that he was needed by his people. The makings of a servant king.

Once undressed she stood before the mirror, bare, examining herself.

What a frightful mess you've turned into, girl, she told herself. Her face was a mixture of grime and filth, her unwashed white hair was so dirty it appeared grey and gathered in clumps. She tried not to focus on the barren patches of scalp that peered through the knotted locks. Her neck was an interplay of the complex muscles there hitching to the anchor of her clavicle, she could see each rib where it lay, the flesh of her chest pulling tighter over them as she took each breath in. The edges of her hips poked out rudely where the sides of her abdomen seemed to have been scooped out. She felt a tear well in her eye.

She didn't waste her time looking in the mirror further, no point examining what was just going to change the next time she woke up. She fumbled into the blouse, using her bandaged hands to pull it over her head, catching the adhesive on the long sleeves momentarily before she pulled them free. She'd have to see when her new captor, or was he a companion, would allow her to take a bath. He
had been kind enough to feed her, unlike her last captor, or was he the same person holding the keys in just a new game? Either way, a bath would be downright heavenly. Sitting on the edge of the bed she threaded her toothpick legs into the black leggings and shimmied then up, up over her bony hips. Rayla swam in the black leggings and teal blouse, the clothes bought by a woman to show off a figure that Rayla didn't have. Her hips had always been narrow, her bodice leaving something to be desired, more from her own perspective than from any suitor's. She had never had the time to let a suitor pursue her. Rayla had possessed a whole-hearted devotion to her training as an assassin.

But then why hadn't she been able to kill?

Was that true? Had she never killed before. Had she never had a suitor? What of Umbre then? How could she have been a mother and never had a suitor or a partner, she remembered Umbre's father, his warm hands, his laughter, his cyan eyes.

Rayla had to, again, actively suppress the thoughts of Umbre and her father, and again force herself to be present in the here and now.

And she hated to admit it to herself, but she was short of breath. She could feel the stitch in her side as though she had climbed a cliff side or had run through the woods after her prey. She looked exasperatedly at her bare and knobby feet. She hadn't bothered to find shoes or boots before sitting down. Rayla glared at her feet as though doing so would make shoes appear.

It, in fact, did not.

There was a knock on the door and she could hear Callum whisper her name, "Rayla?"

"Nope, no Rayla here. Just an empty bedroom." She teased in a light hearted voice she didn't feel. Play along with the captor. She didn't know which Callum this was yet.

The latch clicked and the door creeped open, Callum's face coming through the be opening. His green eyes scanned the room, finally settling on her. Forest green eyes in the shadows of the room that were wide with frantic energy, but restrained, tightly controlled. He entered the room, closing the door softly behind him, "We have company. We have to get downstairs and outside before the Lunaflowne guards come up here and investigate. Are you ready?" Callum took a calculated look about the room. Rayla was reminded of the dark streak that Elyas had mentioned ran through this Callum. She tried to place if this Callum was one she had seen before, or at least close to. She had seen him with green eyes, and with black, with long hair, and close cropped, never with a beard, he was never this old. He had been kind, he had been blind, mute, and dumb, he had followed Claudia
down her path of dark arts and took to her bed. Though, she felt herself blush, remembering the times he had found his way to hers instead. He had been a cruel king in his brother's stead, holding her accountable for the death of King Harrow. How could she trust this young human when he wore the face of a man that usurped his brother's throne and held her captive, torturing her, Peeling her skin from her flesh inch by inch.

She examined her arms as he scanned the room, no scars, "Oh, you know me," Rayla laughed, relieved, suppressing the fear, "Always down for a good chase." She played absently with her feet on the floor, trying not to look at Callum. She couldn't look him in the face, not when there were so many different eyes that could be there. "Though I don't rightly know how far I'll get." She was still slightly out of breath from getting dressed and had just started to get it under control, not to mention the emotional roller coaster that his face brought on. Rayla tried her best to cover it, hiding just how frail she felt, "Y'know, without the proper foot attire."

"That's the spirit!" Callum cheered quietly, he held his hand out for hers. Pensively she took it, not understanding the calming affect his touch had on her when her thoughts were running so rampant, but, like all other aspects, she had to accept it and move in the moment, rather than question it too deeply.

"Callum." Rayla answered flatly, encouraged by his lop-sided smile.

"What?" he asked innocently.

"Sarcasm."

"Oh, right, that's your thing," Callum rolled his eyes, there was a long pause before he continued as they both just waited there. Him looking at her swimming in her aunt's clothing, barefoot and unwashed, and her, trying not to meet his eyes or see his face, but taking whatever comfort she could drain from the presence of his hand delicately grasping her frail forearm.

"Anyways", Callum continued, "We gotta move." He pulled her gently to her feet.

"I meant it," Rayla saddened, "I don't think I have it in me to run. I got tired just going through the dresser."

Callum crouched in front of her by where she sat upon the bed, "Do you trust me?"
Rayla looked him over, "Not especially.*

Callum felt his cheek twitch up, "Eh?"

Rayla didn't answer his questioning vocalization. He sighed, and stood in front of her, taking her other forearm in his hands, his thumbs running soothing circles over the pale skin. Rayla tried to hold back the combatting feelings of alarm and peace, trying to make sense of the confusing storm of emotions inside her head.

They could hear the voices downstairs, Elyas was trying his best to deter the guards, but Callum could hear the edge that they're voices were taking, the pleasant words becoming stern and then evolving into shouting before they heard Elyas' placating tone. Callum's voice became rushed.

"There is no way that I can hide everything in here, even if we were to stand still. The room is too small that if they came in here, for the amount of things I would need to hide with magic, just walking in the room they would be in the bubble of the illusion." Callum looked over her shoulder at the blood soaked bed and mass of bandages.

"So what will you do?" She asked. Rayla felt helpless, her hands wounded and painful, but also useless, her skills as an assassin rusted, her muscles weak.

"You stay here, stand in the corner." He gently led her to the corner opposite the window, loosening his grip on her forearms, the feeling of sanctuary leaving her, fear spiking in her stomach. He pulled his other hand away from the small of her back where he had placed it to gently lead her, "I'm going to hide you, make you look like a peace of furniture, but the trick is you need to stay absolutely still." He pulled a silvery white orb no bigger than the tip of her finger out of the pouch at his hip. He forged the rune in mid air, whispering the command word, "Dissimulate." The draconic word echoed in her head, the meaning known to her. 'I disguise you.' The spell seemed to warp reality around her just ever so slightly, but she felt wrapped in the lunar magic like a warm blanket, she felt it soothing her despite the daylight.

Callum grabbed the nearest thing of significant weight, unfortunately, the mended statue of Astrid, he hefted it's weight and muttered aloud, "Sorry, Elyas."

Rayla could hear the voices of the elves downstairs, having made their way past Elyas. Rayla could hear their footsteps on the stairs. Steady and cautious steps. She could hear the structure of the house groan and settle as they searched. It occurred to her that she could call out for help, she could get them to help save her from the human and her obviously deranged Uncle. After all, who would consider working with a human, knowing what they are and what they have done over the
years, over the centuries.

Callum hefted the statue, cocking his arm back, winding up, and he waited. Rayla could hear the soft footsteps as the guardsmen went from room to room. She heard other doors opening and closing softly, straining her ears, making a true effort not to move. In the silence of the room she could hear Callum's measured breaths, the wavering force of his inhalation revealing the worry beneath his calm facade. The silence stretched on deafening in her ears. Her heart pounding in her ears.

Then it came.

The soft scratch of metal on metal as the latch was slowly disengaged.

And Callum waited.

The door moved slightly as it freed itself from the frame.

And Rayla waited, breathing as quietly as she could.

The door swung open slowly, almost imperceptibly so, but over time it did. Rayla saw Callum watching with the same intensity she felt.

Finally it opened enough for her to see through the crack, beyond it a single guard, crouched low, battle axe held high on the shaft for close quarters combat. Rayla could see the blood vessels in the guard's eyes, she was so close. The guard scanned the room slowly, passing over Rayla where she stood, recognizing nothing. The young Moonshadow elf had white hair tied back in a loose bun at the back of her head, no helmet to protect her head. Even Rayla thought that was foolish. This woman was no assassin, but somebody used to clamoring onto the scene and extricating order from chaos. Rayla watched avidly. The young elf female edged her navy armored shoulder into the room, leading with her armor.

When her eyes fell upon the bed splashed with bed, Rayla saw her face twist in disgust. The guard almost called out, but then her eyes fell on Callum, poised in the room.

"He's in her-" Her shout was interrupted by the shattering of glass as Callum launched the figurine of Astrid through the closed window. He was right behind it, leaping through the circular frame,
his arms ahead of him to shield his face.

The guard no longer caring to be cautious, shouldered into the room, "The human, he's here!" She walked right past Rayla where she stood, going to the shattered window. Other guards came barreling by, two in total, leaving three Moonshadow elf guards gazing out the window.

Rayla couldn't see the figure of Callum past their tightly gathered bodies as they all gazed out the window. There were shouted instructions from the street that Rayla couldn't make out before one of the guards in the room with her shouted in a gruff voice, "He's going that way, 'cross the rooftops!" There were more shouted instructions that Rayla couldn't make out before be all three, a male and two females, confirmed they understood their orders with a stark salute. One of the female Moonshadow elves, a lithe thing whose armor was more leather and cloth than metal plates, leaving a not quite hulking guard whose protruding gut was forgivable given the width of his arms and breadth of his chest, and a female that was handsome more than she was pretty with an amazonian physique.

Naturally, the girl with no muscles would be left to contend with the two strongest she had seen.

"I'll go help question the resident with The Warden while the rest of the squadron follows the mage on foot. Examine the room for clues and the prisoner's…" The large elf took a deep snort of the room, twisting his face in distaste, "…the corpse. Smells worse than my grundle in here."

"Yessir, Captain Omni," The woman's voice was rough, but possessed an overtly feminine husk to it. With that the other elf marched out of the room, leaving his subordinate behind. The amazonian hefted her axe and looked again out the window, watching what Rayla could only assume was Callum into the distance.

In a moment, she turned, and her eyes fell on Rayla quickly before passing, sliding on to something else that caught her attention in the room. The amazonian went from piece of furniture to piece of furniture, opening each piece, throwing out clothes and knick knacks that had long been forgotten by Elyas into the center of the room. She tore apart the bed, the sheets, examining the blood stains. It took a few minutes, but as she was moving on to the next portion of the room, her eyes fell on the discarded prisoner's clothing on the ground, then resting on the basket of medical supplies. Confusion filled her face as she mulled over her discovery and what it could mean.

Rayla could speak up now. She could break the illusion, beg for help. Tell them that she was kidnapped by a crazy human and that her uncle was only helping because she was in danger. The thought of safety and the protection of the guards such an inviting thought. She was tired, tired of the fight, and the grind. This iteration of hallucinations too meticulous and cumbersome. Rayla opened her mouth to speak, but the words caught in her throat.
She remembered the care which Callum had taken to feed her. That awkward confident smirk, that green fire in his eyes when his thoughts were racing.

The words died in her, unspoken. She would play this game a while longer.

Realization dawned slowly on the guards face, but when it did, the Amazonian stood up straight and spun heading for the door. Rayla knew this was her moment to seize, she had the jump on the woman, if she was able to knock her out then she wouldn't be able to alarm the others. She might by able to salvage some armor and take a dagger or that axe. It would be a gargantuan effort and she would have to time everything just right. Rayla wouldn't be able to rely on her strength and agility, all of that slowly drained out of her at present.

As the guardswoman rounded the doorframe, Rayla moved, she saw the flash of light as the illusion was broken. The amazonian was part way through the door when Rayla reached her, with frail hands grasped the woman's horns with her bandaged hands, the grip tenuous. The pain was instantaneous, sharp and grating in each of her hands. Rayla wanted to cry out, to buckle, but Runaan had taught her better than that. Mustering everything she had left in her, she pulled the amazonian's horns, the surprise and strange mechanical advantage working to Rayla's benefit.

The falling guard cried out in surprise as she fell, almost slowly. Rayla let go of the elf's horns and spun, taking the few seconds of the fall to get as much force as her body could muster to slam into the door. The first impact resounded with a dull slap of her foot on the wood, she could feel pain bursting to life where her foot had connected with the heavy wooden structure. The second impact was the guard's head meeting the doorframe and the door simultaneously and her cry of surprise turned to a cry of pain that was then cut abruptly short.

Panting, Rayla bent and checked the elf's pulse. Still strong. She would be sporting a sickening bruise in the next few weeks. Rayla considered, possibly a concussion.

Not wasting anymore time, Rayla crouched over the unconscious guard and began stripping her of her weapons. She undid a belt that held a dagger's sheath and bound it around her own narrow waist, hiding the sheath and belt beneath the blouse she wore. She took the elven battle axe out of the guard's hands, haft a work of intricate green and silver metal made with sinuous serpentine lines, at the lethal end a half moon blade with sharp points at each end. She flipped the weapon in her hand, something made to be obviously lethal. Undoing the bandolier type sheath of the axe from the guard also freed a pauldron of light silver metal bent over a leather frame. Rayla took both, strapping the bandolier and pauldron over the same shoulder.

She looked at the boots of the unconscious elf. Boots that were too big were better than no boots.
Tugging them off of the woman was a challenge in and of itself. The weight of the two weapons and her lone piece of armor didn't seem to add much weight, but pulling off and then donning the Navy thigh high boots over the black breeches made for an interesting challenge.

When she had donned her pilfered armor and weapons she stood once more. Despite her clothes and the piece of armor she wore, she still felt exposed, naked, and this feeling of vulnerability coupled with the perversion of the former sanctuary of her uncle's home made for a strange mixture of emotions in an already tumultuous mind. With an unsteady hand she followed the wall towards the stairs that she knew would lead down into the kitchen. A winding short and steep staircase. She descended, avoiding the third step that always creaked.

The kitchen was empty, the cabinets all torn open, with the exception of one. Rayla took a surreptitious scan from the stairwell and began to move towards the back door of the small home when something caught her eye. The one closed cabinet door was outlined in a yellow-white stream of light, she would have missed it had it been any brighter in the little kitchen. She moved to the cabinet and opened the door curiously.

"Booowowoarh," Bait grumped at Rayla excitedly.

"Well, 'ello li'l guy." Rayla said, looking at the grotesque pudge of the yellow glowing toad, "What are yoo?"

Bait quirked his head sadly, confused, and scrambled over to Rayla, out of the cabinet and onto the floor. Rayla noted the strange leather attire the toad had so that it seemed it wore a harness with a leather handle for ease of carrying or lifting, as well as leather, glass, and metal goggles. Rayla let the little beastie round her legs and wait by her side. Taking in the strange accoutrements and the creature's behavior, Rayla spoke, "You mus' be a friend of Callum's."

The toad flashed red in…confirmation…she supposed.

"Well then, grumpy lump," Rayla bent and scratched the now red toad's stomach. It instantly turned yellow again and kicked it's rear leg, "Let's get a move on." She moved towards the door, mindful of the too large boots she wore on her feet, still taking cautious steps.

Rayla approached the door, slinking along the wall with Glow Toad in tow, and carefully peered out the round glass. A small alley with a small horseless wagon sat, unoccupied and unperturbed. The drivers seat and rear made of simple unstained, unfinished wood. In the small alley there were
now guards now. She pressed her face to the floor, peering as far each direction as she could before venturing to open the door, fumbling with her bandaged hands, ignoring the pain and the little bus of blood that were beginning to blossom on the bandages.

Once the door was open enough for Bait and Rayla to pass through, they did, Rayla leading with her armored shoulder. Rayla crept to the wagon, using it for cover as she examined the other structures about her, it was a short alley, flanked on two sides by Elyas' home which blended seamlessly into the third wall made from another home. Almost an alcove more than an alley, but large enough to fit bins for refuse and a small wagon with leaving a little bit of room to maneuver.

The sound of footsteps on cobblestones came, one after the other, fast, somebody was running this way. And another sound that Rayla couldn't quite place, like a repetitive wet slapping on the stone. Rayla ducked low behind the wagon and pushed the Glow Toad back further behind her, she looked at him with a warning gaze, "Don' you dare start glowin'."

The footsteps slowed, and from her vantage point in the shadow of the wagon, she could see Callum's face peer around the corner. When he saw nothing, he turned behind him and pulled something into the alcove with him. A creature three times the size of Callum followed him into the alcove. Great and covered in glistening green and black scales, a lizard like creature followed the mage, with four eyes the size of Rayla's fist that seemed to look about the alcove independently rotating one way, and then another, its narrow head bobbed as it walked on large padded feet. A plume of black feathers sprouted from it's head and along the ridge on it's spine. It wore a harness and tack.

Callum placed a calming hand on the creature's head and pulled a green brown orb out of the pouch. Again, carving a green rune in the air, Callum focused, saying nothing aloud, but as if commanded the beast went and sat by the wagon, waiting, Callum hurriedly started attaching the wagon's leads and reins to the creature.

"Where did you-" Rayla had to immediately try and Callum who nearly leapt out of his skin when she came up behind him. He made the barest squawk of alarm as he rounded on her frantically, raising his hands, prepared to defend himself. As he heaved breaths trying to calm himself, Rayla continued, "Where did you get a Danceleon?" She asked, appreciating the beastie.

Callum was drenched in sweat from the pursuit and was still catching his breath from all the running as well as the scare. He gestured with his hands, "Fell." Callum wheezed, "Fell. In a. Stable. I think."

"You think?" She countered, voice low.
"Yea." His voice was becoming more regular, but she could see him working hard to get a hold of his breath again. In the early evening shadows she could make out the beads of sweat running down his face and running along the curve of his jaw to drip onto the packed dirt of the alcove, "Jumped, slipped. Room full of leather straps. And I think. Saddles. Riding crops, leashes. That sort of thing."

Rayla's eyebrows climbed.

"Never saw a stable with silk walls before, though." Callum finished, commenting on the thing he found strangest.

Danceleon's were exotic creatures, brought in from the northern deserts of another land, often beasts of burden on their home continent, here they were a sign of status and affluence. This creature was worth more than Elyas' home and likely the city block. Rayla approached the creature as Callum went back to securing the the reins and harness to the wagon, she cupped it's large head in her two injured hands, and two of the eyes oriented on her momentarily and then continued their rolling evaluation of the surroundings.

"And this poor thing was just tied up in there?" Rayla used her bandaged hands to scrub the scales under the Danceleon's chin affectionately.

"Yea." Callum said, pausing, "Let's go with that."

Once done with securing the straps and ties to the wagon's tongue, Callum hefted Bait into the driver's seat, where he scrambled to post up, looking over the footrest with his forepaws resting idly. Callum climbed up into the wagon, and turned, offering a hand down to Rayla to help her up.

She eyed it warily, then looked back to the wagon, "Do you even know how to drive a wagon?"

Callum mocked, "Do you even know how to drive a wagon?"

A pause.

"Well?" She persisted.
"No." Callum answered confidently, "No clue."

Rayla climbed up on her own, trying not to show how her arms and legs almost buckled under her own weight. She pushed Callum lightly back as she climbed, "I'll drive."

Callum protested, moving back into the wagon bed at her light push, "But you don't know where to go!"

"Do you? Lunaflowne is a massive city and you think we can just drive a Danceleon towed wagon down any of the streets?" She sat on the ledge for a driver and wrapped the reins clumsily around her forearm, "Give it up, Callum." She could almost feel him pouting behind her and smirked.

"Fine." He conceded, not happily, "Let's go. Elyas is right out front, he's got two guards with him plus a more intimidating looking elf -"

"We're all intimidatin'."

"-who is wearing full plate like it's nothing." Callum continued right over her interjection, "Nasty looking guy with scar going from cheek to chin." Rayla had turned and watched Callum mime the path of the man's scar.

She felt ice creep up her stomach and clutch her heart. She forced her voice to calm, "That's the Warden."

"That's a strange name." Callum missed flippantly. He inspected bags once more, making sure they were appropriately tied down and sighed, "I'm really tired." He ran his hand through his short brown locks, the sweat still drying. He took off his waist length navy coat, tossing it aside and forcing it under the three bags of supplies. His armpits were damp with his exertion and the grime on him was a testament to all he'd help through. He stood quietly, breathing in the air of a Xadian autumn. Rayla watched him.

"it's not his name, dummy." Rayla turned when he caught her be staring at him still catching his breath in the shadows of the bc alley, "It's a title. He's the liaison to the Moonshadow elves and the Dragon queen. He's the one who brought me here."

Callum, not understanding the gravity of the elf's position, shrugged, "Then be sure to wave as we
roll by." He stretched his arms across his chest one after the other, then began flipping through the marble pouch, taking one marble at a time and placing them in his right hand. After a moment he looked up, meeting her violet eyes, and smiled, "Ready to get out of Lunaflowne?"

She tightened the reins about her forearms, getting a feel for their grip and pull. She realized that she had completely thrown in her lot at this point. There was no humans and elves, there was no debauchery and deviance of humanity, no virtue and moral purity of the elves, there was just Callum and she. She looked at him and saw he was human, saw that he was so different from her, the tan skin caught somewhere between Sunfire and Moonshadow, emerald eyes like the Earthblood, and that fifth finger that seemed so unnecessary, and yet so natural, curved ears that heard just as well as hers but offered no insight into thoughts or feelings. She had always been a woman that admired an elf's horns, in addition to other things, but his smooth skull, that unbroken mop of brown hair was strangely fascinating. The Callum she had travelled with had been the purest sort of person, not a human, not an elf, just a person.

Rayla realized that she had already cast her lot in with him, that she was already trusting him. She had met other Callums, and she had been other Raylas, but in this moment, this here, and this now, she would try to trust him.

She smirked and snapped the reins, and smugly declared, "Ezran needs me."

The Danceleon lurched forward, the wagon with it, and Rayla pulled tight on the reins, turning the beast out of the alcove and into the larger alley beyond. She snapped the reins again, "Curre!" She commanded the beast, "Curre!" She no longer tried to hide her voice and her shout scratched at her throat. The wagon started slow, with Callum crouched low, holding to the side rail for support, but as they rounded the alley into the street, the momentum of the Danceleon continued to build. It's passed six toed feet making an almost wet slap on the cobblestones.

Common folk in the street looked at the growing racket as the wagon and beast gained momentum. Rayla could see the curious glances directed down the alley that were followed quickly by people darting out of the well, some ushering children or elderly elves out of the way. She heard a cry go out before emerging into the street.

"Runaway wagon!" Multiple people took up the call as they moved out of the street.

Perfect.

Over the sound of the Danceleon's slapping feet and rumble of the wagon axles, Callum shouted, "Go right!"
Rayla yanked the reins hard right as soon as she saw the setting sun emerge from behind the obscuration of the surrounding buildings, the orange and red glow of it washing the Danceleon's green and black scales causing them to flare orange instead. The Danceleon turned and the wagon followed. With the wind rushing through her hair, she couldn't help but smile, leaning into the turn with the wagon. Rayla felt her stomach drop out as the wagon tilted in its swerve and then came down hard. She could hear Callum laughing behind her.

As elves ran out of the street, more people taking up the call, Rayla could see some of the commoners point and shout at the abnormal duo on their wagon. Rayla snapped the reins, scanning the cobbled road ahead of her. They rounded the curve of street that brought them back to the main road out front of Elyas' house. Rayla could see his bulky frame arguing emphatically with a guard in ornate armor navy and teal armor next to an elf she recognized even at a distance. The Warden. His plate mail shown spectacularly in the setting sun, glinting as he shifted.

Seeing him in person, seeing that scarred visage, pumped ice into her heart. Rayla wanted to be afraid, to turn the cart off the path, to turn it around and flee the other way.

Elyas took notice of the gazes of the two male elves he spoke with and that they were no longer on him. He turned to note the growing racket behind him. Confusion gave way to utter disbelief as he watched the bright orange lizard sprinting towards him, with Rayla at the reins and Callum holding on for dear life behind her.

The Warden placed a hand on Elyas' shoulder and pushed him behind himself, taking a firm stance between the burly elf and the oncoming cart. Even as the call of runaway wagon was going up around them, the Warden and his guard put Elyas protectively behind them, a wall of armor, drawing blades and ready.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw green light flash and Callum's voice reached her ears over the growing cacophony, "Truso!" The command was quick, brusque, and at its end she saw the cobblestone erupt, creating an earthen tide, between the Warden and his guard. Somehow, the Warden kept his footing, but was pushed back to the wall off Elyas home, the other guard, not so lucky, tumbled backwards, head over heels until rolling to a stop, head smacking the wall of the opposite building. Elyas remained where he stood, eyes wide, frozen.

Rayla guided the Danceleon to the left of Elyas, and as they passed him by, he turned with them. She turned her head and saw Callum holding out an arm to the large elf. Rayla could see the blossom of a smile on his lips as Callum grasped the elf's arm with his free hand and heaved. Elyas helped the boy out and leapt, scrambling over sidebar of the wagon that Callum clutched. The earthen ramp flattened out again and left only a little destruction in its wake, the Danceleon navigated it peaceably and its feet slapped on.
Rayla could hear Elyas laughing over the sound of the cart, but dared not look back over her shoulder.

She could hear Callum's voice in her ear, "Go right here again!"

Confused, she obeyed, "This will take us away from the gate?" She asked, shouting over the crowd, wagon, and slapping Danceleon feet.

"You'll see."

Another sharp turn took them down the street and Rayla saw the shattered glass of Elyas bedroom window on the cobblestones.

Black light flashing, "Diruo." She saw Callum mime a pulling action with one hand, and held the other out.

Ahead of her, she saw some debris start to tumble around on the ground before her and then start a slow roll in their direction. As they got closer, the faster it rolled, until it bounced haphazardly into the air and into Callum's open palm.

Rayla turned to see what he held in his hand. The wooden figurine of Astrid sat in his palm, approvingly smiling up at him where he held it. He handed the figure the Elyas who took the unbroken, unmarred figure in his hands with reverence. His stony face was still, but the delicacy with which Elyas tucked the figurine into the bag was enough to tell Rayla that Elyas appreciated this more than he would say.

"Get us out of Lunaflowne, Rayla," Callum commanded, taking up position on the back of the cart, trying to look both backwards and forwards.

"No problem," She laughed. Was this the darkness that Elyas had been worried about in Callum? This streak of bold determination that pushed him to persevere, but he never lost sight of others feelings? This Callum was better than any she remembered, maybe even as good as the original. Her mind was getting innovative. She pulled the reins left followed by a hard right that brought them back onto one of the wider main roads of Lunaflowne.
Around them, the city bells began to toll out their alarm, their ringing deep and reverberating. Rayla could feel it in her fragile bones.

Chapter End Notes

Magic Spells Made Simple:

Aspiro & Fulminis were both derived, I believe from latin. Runaan also refers to the dragon queen as Regina Dracones, which is a latin translation. So for my magic spells, at least as far as primal magic is concerned, have been conjugations of latin verbs. If it ends in 'o' it is the first person version of the spell. Hopefully this explains how I came up with the Primal magic spells and gives some insight into their capabilities.

Truso - to thrust

Diruo- to pull

For those who have not noticed, the dark magic from the show is just a command spoken backwards.

If you like the explanation I will continue to add tidbits at the end of chapters, or if it pulls the veil of the story back too much, I will not include them.

I love the comments guys! I would anticipate at this point more weekly updates.
Elyas packed away the figurine of his Astrid into one of the secured bags and made sure that she was safe. Not only had the young mage mended the broken statue, but he had gone out of his way to get the statue into Elyas' hands once more. As they rounded the streets into one of the main curving roads of Lunaflowne, Elyas sat in the wagon bed, his bulky frame taking up more space than he cared to admit, almost knee to knee with where Callum crouched. He reclined so that he could easily talk to Rayla as the bells started to ring out their deep and sonorous alarm.

"This human friend of yours is an absolute madman." He said it as a compliment. Callum turned at the words. Elyas hadn't tried to hide them. The mage looked the former elven warrior in the eye and smiled, that glint of mischief, or maybe insanity, shining through bright. Elyas was starting to realize that this human understood the world around him, the interactions of people and their connection with the interconnected web of life around them with insight much more profound than Elyas had ever been able to achieve.

Rayla cast a look at her uncle, then back to the road, laughing, "You don' do this type of thing often, ya mean ta tell me?" She continued to use the reins tightly wrapped around her frail forearms to guide the wagon through the streets. For the most part, people made their way to the sides, keeping the foot traffic she had to navigate to a minimum. She waved a bandaged hands at a little elf girl with merely the sprouts of her horns sticking out barely above the crown of her head. They raced through the streets in the dying light of the day.

"You're as looney as he is." Elyas saw the same mad glint in her eye. What was wrong with the youths these days? Not just Rayla and Callum, either, that elf in the Lunarium yesterday evening, stealing from a food vendor, taking a swing at an elder, then these two traipsing across Xadia twice, breaking into and out of one of the most culturally respected institutions, being at odds with the Warden, of all people. How had these two swept him up in this crazed endeavor of theirs?

Elyas, in a passing thought, wondered if she knew about what had transpired between her parents and the Warden back when they were members of the Dragon Guard. Now that their role was over, their name shamed, would the Warden hold up his end of the agreement, or was it forgotten now? An agreement of another age.

With the bells tolling away around them, their sound echoing about the city, people were clearing the streets quickly enough that now there were relatively few elves poking their heads out from doorways, children peaking through drawn blinds. Elyas looked to the cloudless sky, awash with orange light as it was, and sighed. What had happened to his peaceful life? He felt something old stirring in him, something that had long since been sleeping, since Astrid's wiles had soothed the beast within him and he had left the service. He felt the excitement of the chase, the anticipatory joy of a coming fight. He felt like a cornered dog, and he realized something, that he was looking forward to it, and this realization brought hot shame burning in his heart.

Oh Astrid, he thought to himself, What are these young'uns doing to me?

He didn't have time to hear her answer, she never answered, but sometimes he could hear her voice come welling up from the past.
"Guards!" Callum shouted, pointing ahead. A pair of guards stood on the corner of where two major roads intersected, watching diligently. When one shouted, the other raised a silver horn to his lips and let loose a trumpeting blast of three high pitched notes that cut through the low knolling of the bells like a hot knife through butter. As the high pitched trumpet echoed, the bells stopped their deep intonations, Callum straightened, "I do not like that." he grumbled, now not having to shout so loud over the bells.

As they turned down another street, another pair of guards and another three high pitched blasts of a trumpet. As they passed, Elyas could see the elves pull out horses from the alley where they stood and mount them.

So that was their game.

Elyas turned to Callum, "Every time they see us, somebody is going to sound a trumpet." he pointed, gesturing to the two mounted elves, "Then they will try and pursue us. They likely won't come close until we're out of the city." Elyas considered their tactic, this was Omni's work. He knew as much from their time at the Breach together, their training exercises. The Warden's presence in Lunaflowne must have lit a fire under his gratuitous backside. It wasn't a bad plan, but would be limited based on how many soldiers you have at your disposal.

"So, we need to lose them." Callum said simply.

"That would be preferable." Rayla shouted over her shoulder, careful to keep her eyes on the twisting road.

Another triune of trumpet blasts, another pair of riders took up the pursuit, one peeling away at the next alley.

Callum stood in the cart, careful to keep his balance with the constantly changing surface of the cobblestone road.

Elyas watched the boy and continued on, "They'll push us to the edge of the city, get us out into the woods where our maneuverability will be hobbled and they'll have the advantage."

The wind of their pace whipped Callum's open coat about him, his hair dancing erratically in the wind, "Well, let's even the field a bit!" Callum drew a large rune in the air, and with a voice that cracked like thunder, he demanded of the sky, "Inber."

Elyas felt the hair on his arms stand on edge as the air around him took on a charged potential. In all of his years, he had never seen clouds form so quickly. Starting with wisps of white stealing across the orange sky, they bubbled and roiled with moisture turning to obese white before darkening with their pregnant potential. As the wisps coalesced into fat grey monsters, the orange sunset became obscured, the world around Elyas darkened, he watched Callum place a glass ball into his right pocket and fetch another one out of his pouch. At the command of the High Mage, night fell on Lunaflowne. Glowbulbs on lampposts slowly came to life, their green white light casting long shadows in the now sunless night. Echoing the thunder of Callum's voice, the fat clouds began to flash with arcs of brilliant white. Elyas saw the mounted elves look hesitantly at the sky as fat drops of rain began to pound against the cobblestone street, but they pressed on after the wagon.

The call went up on the empty streets, the three elves on horseback shouting, "Mage! Dark Mage! Human Mage!" Every combination of the slur, and Elyas watched the triumph on Callum's face turn to disappointment and sadness.
Because Elyas had known Omni, had been friends of a sort, had been with him at the Breach, he felt some pity for the soldier. He was going to be caught between the unyielding drive of the Warden and this humans unfathomable tenacity. What would happen when that immovable object met this unstoppable force? Elyas was ashamed to admit he looked forward to the confrontation, if it ever came.

The fat rain drops pelted Callum, dark spots appearing on his coat, his face twitching with each hard drop of rain, and it was starting to slick his hair down so that it no longer whipped in the wind as wildly. Elyas was regretting that he hadn't bought a covered wagon as the rain drops began to seep through the single layer of simple clothing he wore. The chill of autumn was in the air tonight and would not be helped by the torrent Callum had brought on. He looked to Rayla, who with fierce determination was watching the road, but he could see the twist of a smile at the corner of her lips. How long had it been since she had seen rain? Had felt the wind in her hair? She was enjoying this.

Amidst the thunder of the skies, there was thundering hooves and four more mounted elves joined the pursuit of the Danceleon, careful not to get too close. There was another trumpet blast, this time from ahead of them. Callum whipped his gaze over his shoulder at the same time Elyas did.

"Callum? Elyas?" Rayla's voice was uneasy in the rainfall, "Any advice?" Somehow, a number of elves had headed them off ahead. Moving towards the trumpet blasts, but throwing together a barricade of wagons, barrels, and food stands, obstructing their path, further down the street and out of the city. Beyond the barricade Elyas could see how the road disappeared into the forest beyond and would eventually bleed into one of the main roads entering, or he supposed, leaving, Lunaflowne. The wagon was well beyond the range of the bows, but that would change fast, "I have to turn."

"No." Callum bit off the word, almost growling. Elyas watched the disappointment meld into anger on the young man's face.

A flash of lightning above illuminated the faces of the soldiers beyond the barricade, arrows knocked, bows ready.

"Tell me you see the arrows," Elyas challenged, turning to face the front of the wagon, crouching low. That tension in his gut spreading now, like tightened cords ready to snap, stretching through all his muscles, he flexed absentmindedly, testing, preparing. There wasn't much he'd be able to do to stop arrows, but he'd be damned if he was going to go down without a fight. Astrid would let him defend himself, he whispered in the back of his conflicted mind.

"Aye, I see them." Callum said darkly, "They want a dark mage. I'll give them a dark mage."

Elyas could read Rayla's concerned expression from where she sat, but did not think Callum could see the worry and stark disapproval that splashed across it.

The wagon was bearing down on the barricade, just outside of the range of their short bows as of yet, and Callum said softly, his voice echoing strangely in itself, "Stop the wagon, Rayla." Elyas watched through the poor light of the glowbulbs and the demanding flashes of white light from the lightning above as Callum underwent a change. His eyes flashing silver then bleeding into purple that began to leak wisps of violet smoke into the air. Callum's skin went grey as though it had been rotting slowly. His hair darkening from brown to grey-black.

Rain continued to fall in heavy drops, the sound of them slapping the cobblestones covering the world in a thick blanket of sound and muted noise. Rayla pulled the reins of the Danceleon hard and the beast slapped all four feet down onto the cobbles, causing the wagon to skid sideways, the
entire thing turning to expose it's broadside to the elves at the barricade. Elyas looked behind and the pursuing force of seven mounted soldiers stopped as well, hands on hilts.

Amidst the sounds of rain, there was a light thrum of a bowstring followed by a shearing of the air and the clatter of an arrowhead scattering across the street. Elyas watched the arrow rattle and come to a stop. He realized that the Warden and his legion were past trying to solve the issue peaceably. Fair, he mused, all things considered: an escaped prisoner, a human mage, running amok in the heart of the Xadian empire, in the heart of Moonshadow civilization.

This grey Callum planted a hand on the side rail of the wagon next to Elyas, who could see his dark touch spread an inky blackness through the wood, rotting at his touch, and leapt over the side. More elves came swarming in from different alley ways. The seven behind on horseback that had stopped with the wagon, keeping their distance, however many elves at the barricade, and, Elyas counted quickly, at least twelve more that had filed in from other alleys. Callum bent in the rain, now drenched, and grabbed the arrow in one hand, examining it, those purple glowing eyes shedding light and disdain. He balanced it on his fingertip, arrowhead lightly balanced on his index finger.

The arrow burst, sending splinters everywhere but towards Callum and the wagon. The arrowhead fell to the ground, useless. With that strange reverberating voice, he called out, the words as disconcerting as the voice, "Meht dne, meht kaerb, meht nrub, nrub dna esir, rednic nehsa."

Shouts from the elves rose even as Callum spoke, "Take him down!"

"Shoot the mage!"

"Don't let him cast!"

Rayla's own protest reached Elyas' ears in the tumult of the rain, sorrow spiking through it like thorns, "No!"

Callum's head twitched, but he didn't look to her. He began to weave his hands in an intricate pattern, red glowing finger tips trailing black smoke in the rainfall. No rune was placed in the air, but as his words finished the red lights, one from each hand, slowly faltered through the air and landed on the stone before slowly fading to nothing.

More arrows scattered on the cobblestone. Callum had been careful to remain out of range.

For a time, nothing happened, Callum stood, grey and drenched in the storm he had summoned. Rayla sat with eyes glued to him, not able to tear her eyes away from the horror of Callum to look towards the other elves. Elyas frantically watched the surrounding force. When one of the elves that had approached from the alleys stepped out into the street, Callum's head twitched towards him, those glowing purple eyes seeing the lone brave elf in full armor, helm hiding his or her face from view.

The earth beneath the wagon began to rumble, shaking and trembling. The horses and Danceleon began to paw nervously at the ground. The horses began to whiny nervously as the Danceleon's four eyes merely darted uncoordinatedly as it croaked uneasily.

This one elf continued forward, first one step, then two, getting braver, he placed a hand on the hilt of his blade, the metal flashing with the light of the lightning above, a rumble of thunder coming quickly on it's heels.

Faster than Elyas could blink, there was a pillar of spiked bone shooting up from the ground where
the elf had approached, impaling the soldier through their head. Blood splashed and spilled, pouring from a stuck open mouth as the elf coughed on its own blood in the rain, the body not realizing it was already dead. The bone articulated independent of muscle and sinew as it emerged further from the cracking ground. There were no screams, just silent fear permeating the gathered troops as they watched.

Rayla held a bandaged hand over her mouth, eyes wide with horror, seeing what Callum had done. Rain running down her cheeks freely.

Elyas cursed humanity, cursed himself for throwing his lot in with this monster of a man. For all the good Callum had done, there was always some dark twist just around the bend.

Around the bony protrusion from the street, more fragments of bone burst their way up from beneath the street, a claw, an arm, a torso the size of the wagon, a reptilian head marked with horns along it's brow and blasting backwards in an unorganized mass of potential pain. And finally, terrible wings of bone. A dragon made of bone without flesh or sinew, bones stained with age that glistened in the rainfall, chipped and cracked, but fearsome in their size. The beast's tail had punctured the elven soldier, the bones groaned as they shifted, bringing the limp elven corpse before two smoking red eyes. The tail whipped around and the body flung hard into the wall of a nearby building, a sickening crunch heard over the rainstorm as blood splashed across the structure. From the open, gaping wound in the helm, the pinkish contents of the elf's head bulged outwards.

Elyas had seen warfare, he had seen traumatic brain injuries take the life of more than one soldier, human and elf alike, but still, he had to force the nausea back down, trying to ignore the burn of bile in his throat.

As the elves were all frozen in fear, Elyas and Rayla included, the dark mage climbed back into the wagon bed, flinging his hand. With a gesture the arrows at his feet levitated off the ground. With a thrusting gesture he cast the arrows through the air sending them flying. The elves behind the barricade took cover with a shout.

Elyas climbed into the wagon once more.

"Move, Rayla," Callum urged her, not unkindly. His voice normalizing again, but the black eyes and grey skin persisted.

Rayla, startled, snapped the reins of the Danceleon, and the beast was all too happy to pound it's way away from the tumult. The bone dragon behind it spun taking stock of the world it had emerged into and let out an other-worldly roar. The corpse that it had flung into the wall, still hung there, it's imprint in the stone of the wall. No elf moved forward until the Danceleon raced out of the makeshift arena. Elyas watched as the elves from the alleys, eleven now remaining, rushed in. The ones on horseback spurred their horses and they began to surround the beast.

They broke from the main street and into an alley off the curved way and both Elyas and Callum continued to watch the fight, one with horrified eyes, the other with dark concentration. As the surrounding buildings began to obscure their view, another elf soldier went rolling across the ground in Elyas' view, their head twisted at an impossible angle and flinging pieces of armor off until it came to rest unmoving against the now distant entrance of the alley.

Another sharp left and the structures obscured the entrance completely, the sounds of battle lost to the incessant rain. Elyas tried to catch his breath, breath he didn't know when he had lost, but it was ragged in his own ears. Every so often, that other worldly roar would shake across the rooftops and reach his ears. Now, out of the battle, with only the sound of rain to obscure her voice, Elyas
could hear his niece whispering to herself, "Please wake up, please wake up, please wake up." These words spilled from her mouth like the raindrops spilled from her eyes. Her focus was dead set on the alley ahead, turning the Danceleon before it came close to any obstacle. Ahead of them the alley melded seamlessly into forest as the structures suddenly stopped and the trees began.

At first the trees were sparse enough to permit the wagon passage, it bumped and protested worse than it had racing over the cobblestones, and their pace slowed significantly. Though, with the forces of Lunaflowne distracted by an undead dragon, without anyone pursuing, they could afford this. The canopy had kept the majority of the rain off the forest floor, but not enough to prevent the ground they passed over from churning to mud and throwing up flecks of filth as the Danceleon's feet splashed and the wagon wheels turned.

Rayla continued to mumble to herself and navigate the woods to the best of her ability until the wagon wedged itself between two trees, a large crack like a tree snapping permeated the woods and then faded. They all lurched to a stop in the darkness, the Danceleon continuing to strain momentarily before giving up. The beast was breathing as hard as any of them, save Callum, in the dark of the forest.

Callum leapt of and whispered a word. A dim light sprouted from his palm. Elyas expected to see the half corpse mage, but the warm light that shone over his face revealed his youthful features unmarred save for a look of concentration as he examined the wagon's axles. Elyas leapt down after him.

"What was tha'?’” Elyas asked, his voice cold, drawing himself up, approaching Callum.

Callum answered, eyes not leaving the axle, "When we got wedged in the trees, I think the axle cracked."

Elyas wrenched the mage off his feet and threw him roughly to the mud by the shoulder. Elyas growled, "Let me rephrase," A thick finger at the end of a massive arm pointed angrily back towards Lunaflowne, "What. Tha. Fuck. Was. Tha’." Each word punctuated with an emphatic thrust of his finger.

Callum tried to get up, but as soon as he did, Elyas shoved him back to the ground, not letting him get his footing.

Rayla sobbed softly in the dark.

Chapter End Notes

Inber - The closest I could find to latin command meaning storm/rain, there was plenty for 'storm the castle' types, but that was the best I could do for storm summoning.

The dark magic spell: Meht dne, meht kaerb, meht nrub, nrub dna esir, rednic nehsa. - Ashen cinder, rise and burn, burn them, break them, end them.
The Warden squatted examining the tracks left by the wagon wheels as it passed from alley into forest. Omni stood behind him at attention.

The Warden's voice was tense, anger barely held in rein, "What do you mean 'zero casualties'?"

Omni didn't flinch at his superiors anger, he had been through this rodeo before, "No casualties, sir." When the Warden didn't speak, Omni continued, "When the dark dragon took to the air and disappeared among the clouds, we went to check the wounded. There weren't any. Any wounded soldier had vanished. Moreover, any of the blood that had been spilled had been washed away by the by rain."

The Warden barked a laugh, harsh and short, "And the names of vanished soldiers?"

Omni answered hesitantly, the rain hammering his armor, "All soldiers are accounted for after a headcount. Twice."

The Warden barked again, this time throwing his head back and letting it carry on in the night air before he let it taper to a stop, "This mage is tenacious, if nothing else." The Warden stood and walked to Omni, his voice was amused, but his face dark beneath his silver helm, "Stealing into the Lunarium, breaking out a deadly assassin, and then trying to terrify the troupes of Lunaflowne. Tell me, what do the troupes say about this beast?"

"Many have realized that it was an illusion, but it has set them on edge." Omni said, "Their discipline is starting to strain, jumping at shadows."

The Warden came and placed a hand on Omni's shoulder, "Despite this failing, you have done well, Omni.

"Thank you, be sir. I apologize that the mage escaped Lunaflowne."

"Yes, well, that cannot be helped, can it?" The Warden offered, "But I a do have another task that
"You are uniquely suited for."

"Anything, sir."

"Good." The Warden clapped him on the shoulder approvingly, his smile apparent beneath his helm. Omni felt the hot blossom of pain in his side, the air rushing out of him in a wheeze. Omni raised a hand to his side, feeling the Warden's hand around the hilt of a knife, slipped between the folds of his own armor. He pounded by weakly on the Warden's hand causing jolts of pain to race through him, red bleeding in at the edges of his awareness. Omni felt burning in his chest as his body tried to keep up with his need to breathe, but unable to get a suitable breath. Each breath causing him to strain, increasing the pain and pressure in one side of his chest. It filled with hot air and blood that began to sear, but he couldn't get that breath he so desperately needed. He tried to shout out, to cry for help. Only a weak and timid miming of words was manageable. Even as he strained, he knew the nearest soldier was out in the woods, pursuing the human and his entourage of traitors.

Omni's resistance, strong at first, faded quickly. His strength finally waned and he slumped to one knee. The Warden went with him down, keeping Omni's gaze at eye level, "It is a great honor, Captain Omni, to be the first martyr of this new war." Confusion twisted Omni's face as he struggled with what was happening, confusion about the why. He felt pain spread through his chest and then something snapped. The red at the edges of his vision turned black and swept in, smothering everything.

Omni was swallowed by the darkness, but he was finally able to answer the question what came after one shuffled their mortal coil.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for short chapter, but I felt that Chapter 38 might need some explaining, and this chapter is meant to do that thematically. For more in depth description of what was done, read below.

The Lich Dragon was an illusion. Hints that it wasn't true dark magic: Callum never sacrificed anything nor did he use a totem like Claudia or Viren do in the show. I've also referred to any illusion as having a flash of silver before initiating or at its end. With that the flash of silver in his eyes was the indication. The only elves that 'died' were ones that came after he 'went dark'. These were illusory elves as well. The illusion in total was the twelve faceless elves and the dragon itself.

Nobody heard the whisper of the command spell or saw the rune because I took advantage of the definition of time and perception. In my mind an illusion directly effects the psychological perception of events, not the reality. The effect of an illusion is instantaneous, and it can take advantage of that brief split of time between physical
world changes and perception by interjecting the illusion in between these two abstract ideas. So, Callum was able to alter the perception of his casting the spell and his appearance even after the fact, albeit immediately.

The reason the storm didn’t dissipate when he cast this illusion (I have made it that he can only sustain one spell at a time in this system) is because it was a full on storm, once present, the forces there will take time to dissipate. Much like spinning a top, the action of spinning it can be undertaken and then when left alone it will continue to spin.

Furthermore, when the illusion ended, is when Callum lit up his hand, and Elyas saw that he was back to himself.
The cold muddy water seeped through Callum's clothes where he sat on the soaked forest floor. He glared at Elyas, "What's wrong with you? Are you insane?" The heat in his voice bubbling forth, "I know they're distracted, but we still have to move!"

"Distracted?" The large elf loomed in the dark, "How 'bout dead?!" Callum could barely make out anything but the imposing silhouette. The elf pulled himself up to his full height, "You humans." He spat, "You're all absoloot shite. Everything I've ever heard 'bout you is true, ain't it?" Elyas raged on, Callum unable to protest over tirade of his accusations, "You five-toed arseholes think you're so great with your...your pinkos! What, because you have an extra finger and toe 'r two gives you tha right to dictate the life and death others? Are your souls so perverse that the only magic ye can perceive is that of death? You're as big an abomination as your filth ever stumbled into! What perversions have you and yours wrought upon the world? Are you so immersed in death that you cannae value life? I ought to..." Elyas finally lost his steam, his silhouette holding his hands up as though he wished to wring the life from Callum's neck. His voice trailed off.

Rayla struggled to stifle her sobbing, drawing Callum's eyes, despite his inability to see in the black.

Warm light began to glow from the passenger seat. Bait sat next to Rayla and the foliage of the canopy above, a thick mixture of branches and leaves, caught the light. In all his glowing splendor, it was obvious he had enjoyed the ride, had enjoyed the rain. The wagging stump of a tail gave that away. This did not do well with the juxtaposition of the sadness of Rayla and rage of Elyas, but Bait glowed on. He confusedly sat close to her, warm and glowing, offering the only comfort a Glow Toad could. His grumpy visage looked bewildered as it glanced between the three gathered bipeds.

"I've seen..." Rayla trailed in, her voice matching her visage, a wracked mess of weak and feeble struggles, "How could you, Callum. I...I don't even know, but I hoped...I hoped this time we could break the cycle."

Callum looked at her, feeling as baffled as Bait, then back to the defeated Elyas, his silhouette lost in the warm glow of the Glow Toad leaving only the sad and conflicted expression of the defeated elf. He knew they had been subjected to the illusion, everyone had to be for it to work appropriately, but he had hoped they knew him better than that. He supposed it made sense that Elyas would be confused, not even knowing each other for a full day, but he had hoped Rayla would have picked up on it, that she would be his support in this. For the first time, he wondered how much of the Rayla he knew three years ago was left in this shell he had procured from the
Saddened, Callum spoke, "I see."

The silence stretched on, he tried to find the right words. He needed to be careful. Their trust in him was so thin.

"When I was a child," Callum began, "I became very good at drawing, in fact, I always carry a sketchbook with me." He removed the sketchbook that Harrow had given him from over his shoulder, offering it up to Elyas, who stared at it like it was a venomous creature.

"Why do I want to see your doodles, boyo?" His curiosity a small drop of water compared to the tempestuous rage that played through his voice just moments before. Callum sensed, hoped, that maybe the fire had burnt the kindling away for a moment, and that he might be able to turn the tide of the conversation. Something in the slight inflection at the end of Elyas' words, the timbre of his voice in the question, a small desire to want answers, no matter how dark, but hoping for light. Callum was reassured that Elyas did not want to believe he was a murderer. To believe this human mage held some scraps of goodness.

"Please." Callum pleaded, offering the sketchbook once more, "I don't practice Dark Magic. You'll understand."

Elyas took the tome, undoing the clasp and leather tie, flipping it open. A random page opened, revealing two opposing sketches, one of a dark haired young woman reading a tome marked of runes garbed in black, sitting beneath a tree. The other, a much more robust looking Rayla from all different angles, some fighting, some sitting, some laughing. The spine had been bent and opened to this page so many times that this was its resting pose, these two opposing women. Elyas looked to Callum, one eyebrow raised, waiting.

"I've always been good at art," Callum continued, letting the cold water seep to his skin and chill him, he felt it, but did not let it touch him. He rested his elbows on his knees, "It came to me as naturally as breathing, the only thing that came easier, was magic. It just always made sense to me how one line should flow into another to give perspective, how to shade and make a doodle leap off of a page. This was especially important when it came to my nightmares." Callum sighed, not really wanting to go on, but recognizing its necessity, "I was always afraid as a child, the creatures that lurked in the dark, be they real or imagined, kept me up on nights when my mother was away. I had no control over them, I would wake up screaming from the vivid dreams. Ezran does the same, but for me, I learned how to tame the monsters. In my own way." He gestured for Elyas to flip towards the front of the book, "I kept the drawings of particular influence. That," Callum said, gesturing towards the way they had come, out into the forest, back up the narrow alley's of Lunaflowne to the public streets where twelve imaginary elves had fallen to an imaginary beast,
"was Mr. Jangly Bones."

Elyas paused, flipping through the pictures, looking at the fearsome mage, "Mr. Jangly Bones.”

"I was seven." Callum said defensively.

Elyas shook his head and continued to flip until he came to an aged page that had been frayed at the edges, multiple streaks of charcoal about the page, the same sketch done over and over again through the years. Elyas could see the iterations, one atop the other, of Mr. Jangly Bones, starting as an almost cartoonish representation of a dragon evolving through time into a mimic of what he had seen terrorizing Lunaflowne. Elyas continued to flip, looking through the sketchbook. Callum became visibly uncomfortable, knowing what all was in there, the tome a reflection of his heart and mind laid out on parchment for any to see. Every nightmare that kept him awake at night that had any semblance of form. Funny how, as one grew older, the nightmares became less monstrous and more everyday, but never any less fearsome. Instead of dragons of bone and ash that would sweep across the land, they became separation and despair, loss and sleepless nights.

Elyas spoke, "So what kind of mage are you then, if you don't practice Dark Magic?" he continued to flip slowly through the sketchbook. So. Slowly.

"A mage of Primal magic." He answered, looking to Rayla. She sat, ear turned towards him, listening guardedly. He could almost feel her not wanting to believe in him again just yet. That was what hurt the most, that he had frightened her, that he was the source of her fear more than anything else. He looked to her, begging her to meet his eyes. When she didn't move, he called her name, softly, a bare whisper, "Rayla."

She turned, finally, haltingly, her head and ears leading her eyes, before those mistrustful violet eyes met his.

"Every time I've done Dark Magic, you were there," Callum reassured her, standing and approaching the wagon where she sat, turned away from him, "I know the cost, and so long as I breathe, I promise you I will never cast such dark things again."

She sniffled, her eyes so hurt and so lost at the same time. But she was strong too, she couldn't be vulnerable if she could help it. So she buried it, buried it beneath her humor and sarcasm, "Oh, like you promised ya not come 'n get me?" Her red eyes were puffy, but the hint of a smirk twitched her lips as she let herself try to believe in him once more. Or that's what Callum took from it, at least.
Callum looked back to Elyas, "There, now can we g-" The words caught in his throat.

Elyas turned another page, both eyebrows climbing in shock. The large elf turned the tome towards where Callum stood between Rayla and her uncle. His look challenging, but the tone of the moment shifting.

"That's enough of the sketchbook, I think!" Callum said taking brisk steps towards Elyas, clamoring to grab the thick bound paper. Elyas let him try, but held the book up out of his reach, with the opposite hand holding the scrawny human at arms length.

Callum's face felt hot enough to heat a kettle to boil.

"I don't know, Callum," Elyas said teasing, "Maybe Rayla ought to see just how good some of your sketches are." Sickly sweet acid dripped from his tongue, "I'm sure there's one or two in here she might apprecia-"

"We need to get moving!" Callum croaked, hands finally latching on the strap of his sketch book and pulling it towards himself. He emphatically slammed the tome shut and hurriedly wrapped the leather cord about knot and clasped the latch, as though his pace would turn back the clock and prevent Elyas from seeing some of Callum's more…imaginative…works.

Elyas chuckled, the mirth of the moment cleaning the slate of what had happened. He knew that Mr. Jangly Bones would revisit him some nights, but like Callum, he had his own way of dealing with the demons of heart and mind.

"Let's get your arms free," Callum changed the subject quickly. He settled the sketchbook at his hip, but when he saw Rayla's suspicious glances, adjusted it so that it hid further behind his back. He put a foot up on the wagon as Bait continued to glow and started to unwrap the reins from Rayla's forearms.

"Thanks," She smiled weakly at him, still cautious, eyes darting from his hands to the sketchbook, and then to his face, before settling again on her own hands.

"Wait a second," Callum said, taking her wrists. He made an effort to be gentle despite his forceful grasp. He could sense her recoil. But he could also feel her fight to relax. Small steps. Small steps were still steps in the right direction, "Your hands are bleeding again."
"It's nothin' I canno' handle." Rayla met his concerned eyes with her own confident ones. Where did she get that fire in her eyes?

"When we land in the morning we'll have to redress these." Callum said, holding them softly, letting her withdraw them.

"Land?" Elyas interjected, "Ya mean ta tell me we're flyin' to Katolis?"

Callum grimaced, half turning to Elyas, "I told you, you cannot come with us."

"We're well past that argument, I should think!" Elyas rebuffed, dumbfounded that Callum continued on with this after everything that had happened. Callum left Elyas' protests ignored, the elf would learn soon enough.

Shaking his head Callum turned back to the Danceleon, then to Rayla, looking at her with squinted eyes, measuring her up.

"What is it?" She asked, irritated at his calculating look.

"When did you get armor, and a dagger," He said calmly, "And an axe?"

"What?" she cajoled, "Do I not fit your tired human narrative of a damsel in distress? Oh save me! I have no way to defend myself, I am so weak and flimsy." She mocked, wrist pressed to forehead in pseudo distress.

There was a long pause, "Remember the first time you met my aunt?" Callum said flatly, "Who wound up tied up and needed the help of a certain prince and his Glow Toad to escape?"

"Oh! That is jus' not fair!" She protested as she climbed down from the wagon next to him, "I only had one working hand! And she had a two whole pinko's over me!"

"Pinky! They're called pinkies!" Callum exasperatedly lamented the constant argument, "Pinky fingers, pinky toes!"
"That doesn't sound right." Elyas offered, all matter-of-fact.

Callum undid the ties on the Danceleon, careful to hold the reins still, then grabbed Bait by his harness, who grunted with the force of being picked up, only protesting slightly. "By the light of the moon and Bait's delicious taste, they are called 'pinkies'. Now c'mon, we got a few miles between here and the clearing."

Elyas quickly undid the ties binding down the three of the satchels, taking two for himself and handing the other one to Callum.

"You want to ride, Rayla?" Callum asked, though it sounded more a command than a question.

Elyas offered a hand to help Rayla up onto the Danceleon's back. She didn't take, but climbed up onto the creature, grabbing onto one of the reins and part of the harness. Callum saw her jaw clench not wanting to admit or give any sign of her fatigue. That she didn't protest to ride hinting at the tiredness that the tumult of the day had worn into her atrophied muscles.

They walked through the forest, the storm continuing on above. Lightning didn't flash as much as it had back in Lunaflowne. The storm was starting to sputter, the deluge now an annoying, but persistent, sprinkling. It would spin itself out over time, maybe by morning, maybe in two days, but it would dissipate on it's own unless something else interrupted. Callum asked Bait to dim, and tucked him into the bag that he had kept with him explicitly for Glow Toad Hauling meaning that he now carried a satchel of supplies, Bait, his sketchpad, the unused thirty two marbles, the twenty two used marbles. He would have to come up with a good name for them, he realized, he couldn't just keep calling them marbles.

Mystic Marbles. Nah. Kind of tropey, like you might open up some children's book or poorly written adventurer's novel and find it.

Primal Pieces. Nah. Still too tropey, but closer.

Callum's Creatively Celestial Combination of Chaotic Crumbs? Nah. Too long.

He ran through several iterations, leading the Danceleon behind him, Elyas flanking the creature where the trees allowed, and Rayla trying to maintain her balance with as little effort as possible. Bait's head protruded from the bag on Callum's back, resting there, and providing the group with a
soft warm glow of light. Callum would look over his shoulder from time to time, scanning the surrounding darkness, trying to find any hint of pursuer. In the dark of the night, Callum could barely see anything, but he forged onwards. It wasn't so much about finding the exact spot, but more about getting far enough out that Zym would be able to find them with his keen alpha predator senses.

"This Danceleon looks familiar." Elyas said finally.

"Let's not explore tha', uncle Elyas." Rayla murmured, cringing.

"No, I mean it!" He said with hushed tones of the night, his voice carrying to just them, "Where did ye find it, Callum."

"In a stable, of course." Callum said confidently.

"In a brothel." Rayla corrected, dismally.

Callum paused in his pace, quirking his head, "Wait…but…oh." The odd stable with it's too small harnesses suddenly making much more sense to him. The chains, the leashes, the silk walls, "Elyas, you have…interesting tastes." Callum continued on.

He could practically feel the heat of Elyas face as he stammered trying to backpedal, "I mean, all Danceleon's look alike, you can barely tell the difference between a Danceleon and a young dragon." He laughed nervously.

"And when uncle," Rayla chastised the elder elf good-naturedly, "Have you ever seen a young dragon." They broke into a small clearing as Elyas continued to pedal his words, Rayla rolling her eyes.

Callum breathed deeply the clean air of the opening, the Canopy falling away behind them, and taking with it the musty scent of the forest and its natural decay. He filled his lungs, feeling the rain drops start to pelt his drying hair and damp clothes. He could feel the small zephyrs of wind, as it bent and twisted about them, touching them, but never impeding. His open coat flapped in the wind and the longing that he had long kept suppressed to again touch the Sky Primal, the run his mind along the path towards that forged Arcanum burst forward. As he coasted along the sensation, feeling it swell in his chest, but never touching, afraid to pervert it's natural beauty with his human touch, he could read the currents almost as easily as runes.
They were not alone.

Almost sensing his recognition, Zym cut through the sky. Like a phantom of the glistening silver dragon lilted to a halt before them, dropping silently out of the air. The Danceleon behind Callum huffed, it's insecurity regarding it's inferiority coming to light. Callum patted the snout comfortingly, "It's okay scaly-wumpkins." The snout nosed Callum's cheek affectionately. Bait merely rolled his eyes.

"Zym!" Rayla shouted, "You've grown so much!" She lifted one leg from her straddle of the Danceleon and slid off it's ridged back to the side. She stumbled as she hurried over to the dragon.

Mom, are you okay? The innocence and love of the question coupled with the playful curiosity echoed through Callum. He could see the tears forming on the tips of Rayla's eyelashes as she wrapped her arms around his massive serpentine neck. Callum took trusty Bait out of his bag to see his old friend once more, the illumination growing with Bait's excitement.

Elyas stood frozen.

"Dragon got your tongue?" Callum asked, looking at the large elf with knowing eyes.

"Oh leave off it." Rayla rolled her eyes, hugging Zym tighter.

Callum could feel the affection radiating off of Zym, reciprocated by Rayla. The images of Rayla from their journey together flashed through Callum's mind as Zym created that ethereal bond of thought and emotion, all of it swirling together to form an idea wrapped with emotion, communicated directly to the soul of another. Affection and love without bounds flowed from the dragon to Rayla, but also concern regarding her appearance, concern about her health, anger about what had been done to her. Even as the dragon comforted the Moonshadow elf with his presence, he bristled and the words took shape in Callum's mind.

What have they done to you?

"I'm jus' fine, Zym," Rayla said, hugging the dragon's serpentine neck, "Jus' fine."
Callum stood back, letting them have their moment. Elyas walked up beside him.

"Tha's a storm dragon."

"Yup." Callum affirmed.

"Tha's the Dragon Prince."

"Well, you're two for two."

"The one that was lost and the Warden returned from the clutches of the dark human mages."

"Yu-no." Callum rounded on Elyas, "What do you mean the one the Warden returned?!"

"Four years ago, the dragon prince was lost, thought destroyed, according to the testimony of two of the Dragon Guard themselves." Elyas nodded, "Her parents. For their failure they were exiled from Xadia, never to be heard from since."

"Yes, I know all that," Callum breathed, "Tell me about the other part. Where the Warden saved the day."

"Well, it's a well known story, the Warden," Elyas continued, "An elf by the name of Nikola, went to Katolis and stole into the castle on the rumor that an assassin who had been there to slay king Harrow in retribution for the murder of Thunder, had seen suspicious magics. Alone, he stole into the castle under the cover of a moonless night, at great risk to himself, and found the egg, defeating the dark mage that hid beneath the castle and bringing it back to our queen to be hatched."

Callum rubbed his temples, "That's not what happened - at all!" He finished with a shout throwing his arms down in an exaggerated tantrum, "That rotten pucker-licking nerfherder!" He shouted into the night. The storm muffled his rage, but could not stop the echo.

"Rayla is the only assassin to have survived that night." Callum corrected, "The rest slain by the king's guard. Runaan dealing the killing blow to the body of King Harrow before being taken by Viren and used for dark magic." He pinched his nose, delaying his reunion with Zym, "There were
none that escaped, save her. She was the one that found the egg, she was the one who brought Zym and I all the way across Xadia so that it could be a human that returned the egg to 'break the cycle of violence.' My father slew a Magma Titan for it's heart to provide for the kingdoms of Katolis and Duren during a harsh winter, in so doing my mother, Sarai, was slain by Thunder in addition to the two Queens of Duren. For years this increased the tension between the lands of Xadia and the Pentarchy. In this setting of war, Rayla was the first one to stay a blade, the first one to rethink the narrative that had been taught to her."

Elyas thought over what Callum was telling him, taking what he knew of the time, and what he had been told to believe. Every question seemed to resolve with Callum's rendition of the tale, every misstep or every flaw of the Warden's perspective made, formerly hidden, now made plain. In the end he settled on only one question, "Why do you say it like that?" Elyas asked.

"Like what?"

"'The body of King Harrow.'" Elyas threw up finger quotations, "Like his spirit lives on in some pet bird or something?"

"Anyways." Callum continued, undeterred, "We were the ones that returned the egg. Why is that so hard to believe?"

"Well, everyone knows that humans are filthy liars." Elyas offered, not seeing a problem with the statement, "The Warden's Testimony was a highly published piece of literature that circulated the empire after the Dragon Prince was returned. It was backed by the only assassin to survive the mission, Tazel, the Warden's own son."

"So there was a seventh assassin?" Callum asked, confused, "Wait, so, Ezran has been telling elven delegates for the last three years that it was a human that returned the dragon prince, it was the whole basis for his peaceful stance. Why didn't the elves say anything about that before this?"

"I bet they just assumed you all were lying. Elves know humans can't help but lie." Elyas shrugged.

"And elves are bloodthirsty monsters!" Callum retorted.

"Well, there you go, just another lie from a lying smoothskull!" Elyas offered, "It's okay though, you're alrigh' I s'pose." He tousled the irritated Callum's wet hair.
Callum hissed indignantly, "I am the High Mage of Katolis! You do not tousle my hair!"

Elyas laughed at the short human, "Aye, your liege, I mus' say, you're as big a' finicky bitch as tha' Tazel."

"Don't say that cretin's name, Uncle." Rayla called, her and Zym still in a comforting embrace, now turning their joint attention to Callum and his shrieking protests.

"Yea!" Callum agreed, "And don't compare me to him!" Turning to Zym, half joking, he asked, "What's a Tazel anyways?" he laughed.

Callum wasn't prepared for the bombardment of disdain and hatred that boiled forth from Zym into his mind. It was like a torrential downpour of unending rain, hateful image after hateful image drenching his mind like so many drops of water from on high. The twisted smile of a Moonshadow elf, two indigo crescent marks beneath violet eyes, shaved sides of his head showing off his long pointed ears, the rest of his hair grown out and swept back between his two horns, one of which was bent so that as it grew it nearly touched the other. A lean muscular elf in assassins garb much like Rayla's, made of fitted metal and leather, but his adorned with the sleeveless robe of an Alpha, the leader of an assassins troupe. Zym's voice reverberated through Callum's mind, Tazel it practically growled.

Callum braced himself on the reverberating musculature of Zym, nearly overwhelmed by the vehement force of pouring into him. He understood it, that desire to pick something apart piece by piece and watch it struggle. Callum knew this elf, it was the one that he had seen in a vision from Zym so long ago. An assassin at the head of a troupe, begging for the opportunity to go and kill his brother, Ezran. It didn't help the Zym's imagery was intermixed with the sense of 'prey'. A mouse struggling in a cat's paw, an elf in a dragons. Callum was lost in thought, trying to override the primal urge that Zym's thoughts brought to the surface, trying to force them back beneath so many layers of restraint and morality.

Callum was trying to catch his breath, calm his heart rate, get the beast within him leashed once more, when Elyas spoke, "I cannæ go with you."

"What do you mean?" Callum asked, "I mean, you can't, because Zym can't carry all of us, but you've been disagreeing the whole time."

"It's all a lie isn't it?" Elyas asked soberly. It was all coming together for him, the presence of these
three here, plus the Glow Toad, the way that the Warden had pushed and come into the highlight of the Dragon Queen's favor over the last three years. It was a very public profile and ascent to power that was endorsed by other figures of power. Earthblood, Sunfire, Skywing, they were all wrapped up in this as well, their own figureheads bowing to the affluence of the Warden of the Moonshadow elves. He looked to Zym curled around Rayla, he had been privy to every exchange here, "The Warden, the Dragon Queen, Tazel. All of it is a lie that we've been spoon fed for...for years."

"If you're willing to trust a human," Callum approached the large elf, trying to soften the realization, and placed a hand on his thick arm.

"Three years of lies, and false peace, all forced behind a façade. The Warden and the Regina Dracones had us looking suspiciously at the Pentarchy so that we didn't look at the falsehoods on our side of the Breach."

"So why stay," Rayla asked her uncle, "Why stay here in this bed of liars?"

"I don't know," Elyas looked off into the night, "Tha two of ya have spoken about 'breaking the cycle'. Maybe this is my chance to try and put a stop to a cycle of lies, one that feeds your cycle."

"Come to Katolis, then," Rayla urged.

"Yes," Callum asked, "Take the Danceleon and just ride west. We'll meet you at the Moonstone path and welcome you with open arms."

"And what of the rest of your people?" Elyas challenged, "You've accepted merchants and diplomats, but even they tell stories of the racism and abuse they endure beyond the Breach."

"That is an unfortunate reality," Callum said sadly, "But not one we have to accept."

Elyas walked over and took the reins of the Danceleon, "We'll see. Now, Rayla," Elyas beckoned her to him, "Come give me a hug before ya go." he held his arms open, waiting.

Rayla didn't keep him waiting for too long, she extricated herself with a smile from Zym's embrace and walked into Elyas strong arms. Like a twig in the arms of a giant, she bent and returned the affection.
"Best not tarry too long." He bent and pat her back delicately, but when he spoke, it was to Callum, "They'll be coming after you with a vengeance if that illusions been gone this long. I need to get a move on, and you need to get to your brother."

As Rayla pulled out of the embrace, Callum held out his hand, "Elyas, it has been a pleasure."

Elyas examined the hand, but rather than taking it, grabbed Callum and pulled him into a tight embrace, whispering in his ear, "You take care of my Rayla, she's 'bout the only family I got left. You let anything happen to her," His words were harsh, but they carried affection in them, "I will find ya, and break ya."

Callum returned the embrace, "Be safe, Elyas, be smart."

*We must go, they approach.* Zym was hesitantly watching beyond the tree line, his senses picking up on things lost to human and elf alike. His horned head turned to Elyas who was already mounting the Danceleon, reins in hand, *Be quick, go north then west for a time, there is a cabin there, unoccupied. Hide there.*

Elyas filtered through the thoughts, the image of a decrepit hunters cabin lost in brush and silt, then nodded his thanks to the small arch dragon and snapped the Danceleon's reins. The beast slapping off through the dirt northwesterly with Elyas' massive figure bouncing comically on its back.

Rayla and Zym watched him vanish into the rainy night, Callum turning and lifting the glowing Glow Toad in his hand by the harness. He placed a hand on her unarmored shoulder, leading her back to Zym, "Let's go."

Rayla's eyes fell on Callum, they were still puffy from her tears, but her smile was richer than any he had seen since coming out of the Lunarium. It was a mixture of sadness and joy tinged with longing. Callum regretted that they had been swept up in this hell, this nightmare that seemed to never end. When was it enough? When was it okay to just give up and let the world deal with it's problems on it's own? When they had ventured to Xadia the first time they had been able to laugh and joke and experience the small joys of life, now it just seemed like an unending push ever forward with some nebulous threat always at their back. Though, it had only been a day since he had found Rayla again, so he supposed this was progress.

He sighed deeply.
Ezran needed him, though he felt that pull to just flit off elsewhere like some wandering dove, he couldn't let the little King bear the burden if Katolis on his own, he had to keep pushing himself just like Ezran did, had to keep fighting for this idea that they had wed themselves to. That humans and elves could get along, that humans and elves could live with peace, and not be forced to war.

He looked to Rayla, she smiled at him, trust mixing with distrust in a strangely vulnerable expression made more so by her currently weak presentation.

Callum led her lead him to Zym, who bowed his forelegs to let Rayla clamber up. She did it without the grace and poise that would have belied her assassin training. It was a clumsy haphazard movement that belied her fatigue and weakness. He handed Bait up to her, Rayla having to grasp his hefty weight in both hands, groaning as she lifted him

"Bait, I think ya need to go un a diet." She coupled her fat-shaming with an affectionate under the chin scratch, earning a half-hearted rumbling purr.

Callum climbed up behind her, resting his hips between the winged shoulder blades of the Storm Dragon, "Okay Zym, let's get a move on." Bait stopped glowing and the world slid calmly into darkness. Callum could feel the current of air that came with the great sweeps of his silver grey wings. Zym built up a breeze that became a whirlwind and the dragon left the ground, struggling into the air at first continuing those great sweeping movements, the rose, haltingly at first. But as Zym rose higher, he dove forward, using the lift of the air and currents of the storm to sweep them higher and higher. The started lazily rising towards the faltering rain clouds above, but gained speed with each stroke, the dragon summoning the winds to propel him forward. Callum felt the moisture of the clouds kiss his face as they passed through, climbing higher and higher. He could feel the air grow thin and flimsy, but he just breathed deeper.

In moments they broke through the cloud cover and the world became a landscape of black clouds beneath them, washed in the orange light of the waxing gibbous moon. It hung, partially lit, reflecting the light of the sun back onto the dark side of the world beneath it. As Callum had felt the Arcanum of the Sky in himself, he watched Rayla feel something deep in herself as well. When they broke the cloud cover and she was washed in that warm orange light of the moon, she turned to look up at the partial celestial body in the sky. Her eyes were wide, not in fear or trepidation, but in wonder. Like a starving woman seeing a feast, she drank in the moonlight. She went through no physical change, but the cognitive effect was visible. Her shoulders squared ever so slightly, her posture was straighter, and some of the confusion washed away from her features.

Rayla spoke over the sound of the wind in their ears, "Luna, oh, how I have missed you." Her eyes watered in joy, not sorrow. She closed her eyes and just enjoyed feeling the moonlight wash over her. And for a time, Callum forgot about the assassin Tazel and the Warden of the Moonshadow
Elves. He forgot about Gale and her injustices. For a time, he was just Callum, riding the currents of the wind.

Chapter End Notes

End Part II

As before, Part III will continue in this same fic title, it's just a way of thematically splitting the narrative for myself.

I must say...this story was intended to be a short fic that was a fluff piece. I haven't even gotten to the scene that inspired my to write the story, so we got...a lot more coming. The pace will be slow, but I thank you all for reading and providing me with your encouraging comments. It really boosts my confidence as an aspiring writer and they honestly make my day. So please (this is me fishing for compliments) comment about what you enjoyed, or (this is me fishing for constructive criticism) comment about what you think could've been written better or something you felt a scene was lacking.

In my initial chapters there wasn't a lot of scene description, I have been trying to fix that, but I am interested to see what you all think!
Ezran awoke in his too large bed, the moon hanging low and brilliant orange in the sky, the stars above Katolis visible over the sleeping city. Small mesas of chimney smoke rose into the night air, joining the cloud cover made of thin wisps striating across the night sky kissed with the orange glow of the moon. This same light cascaded into Ezran's room, the curtains of the window pulled wide, the window panes casting slanted crosshatch shadows across the floor to where they crawled up the bedside and spilled over the bed to where Ezran lay, now much more awake than he had been a moment before. The pile of pillows and sheets, were a chaotic tumble indicative of the tossing and turning he had been about in his sleep. The night still not cool enough for him to invest the time to pull the fall or winter blankets out of storage.

He rolled to his side, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and looked out the window at the celestial body that these days felt more like an hourglass, the fullness of it's celestial body gaining as he plodded ever onward towards the time of his death sentence. He envied his father, Harrow. From what he had learned from the guard after returning to Katolis so long ago, Harrow had only to deal with the death sentence hanging over him for a day, not a fortnight. He sighed, but maybe if his father had two weeks to prepare he would have survived. Forcing himself to be hopeful, he edged to the side of his too large bed and stood in the brilliant light and dark shadows, he stretched up to his full height, arms spread wide, fingers splayed, rising on his toes for a second, enjoying the refreshing strain of each and every muscle as the stiffness of sleep slipped away.

The room was large, befitting the King of Katolis, but for a child barely old enough to fit the regal robes, the room hung loosely on him much the same. There was no regal organization, a writing desk near the room's double doored entrance was a mixture of books, poorly scrawled letters, and doodles done in ink that would have Callum cringing. Coats and shirts were draped across the accompanying chair. A bedside table at each side of the bed against the wall covered with empty plates still bearing crumbs of jelly tarts on one side, another bearing his latest book for leisurely reading. The same book had occupied its place for the last four months, the bookmark unmovign. The four poster bed at the heart of the room, directly visible upon entering the room, had it's own canopy, but arranged in a meticulous disarray. The richness of the burgundy velvet at odds with the angle at which he kept it. The maids of the castle had tried to clean his room for him several times, but he refused emphatically. He was aware of himself enough to recognize what he was doing. This beautiful mess and chaos was his way of fighting back what he was forced to become. The disarray his last vestige of childhood that he clutched to, though he realized it was more a masquerade than a true preservation, it was still what he had left.

Ezran went to his bedside table and retrieved the Eagle Blood arrow out from behind it, where he
had tucked it for safe keeping amongst the chaos of his living quarters. He hefted the magic arrow in his hand, the images of his dream just prior to waking racing through his head.

He had felt it more in the last week and a half than he had ever felt it before, like a thin thread connecting him to something in the distance. All his life he had been different, set apart from other children. When he had started to hear the thoughts and intentions of animals he had thought it some fanciful fabrication, it took him a long time to convince himself that he could talk to animals, but eventually he realized the connection was more substantial than just a child's fancy. Now, that connection felt strained, he didn't feel as in touch with the creatures about him. With the rats that ran through the walls, with the birds that flew overhead. He couldn't place what exactly had changed, but with Zym's return, it was as though he was waiting for something, open to the world, and then Zym's resurgence had lassoed him to something ethereal in the Dragon. He felt a pull in his chest, and knew beyond a doubt that Zym was to the east. He could have spun blindly in the room and stopped, pointing directly to where the dragon was, some everchanging true north in his mind.

And then there were the dreams, like thoughts and memories swimming forward from the depths of his mind, an unending swirl of dark nights and air currents, of ancient thoughts shared across time and space through the sieve of Zym. As Zym learned the history of dragons from his mother, so, too, did Ezran, the old memories of the last three years filtering into his mind, fading with distance, and then now coming more prominently.

How long had it been, Ezran wondered, clutching the arrow and gazing out the window, since he had been a child, since he had truly felt the carefree wanton that allowed him to steal through the castle of Katolis and apprehend offending jelly tarts for the crime of being delicious? How many days in a row had it been that he had been forcing the history and needs of his people down his own throat so that he could carry the burden of the most powerful military civilization of the Pentarchy.

The most powerful human military with a pacifist at it's head.

Ezran slumped, the Eagle Blood arrow falling to his side, and he just stood in the stillness of the night. Trying to salvage what was left of his sanity, he stood in the dark, nothing expected of him, no responsibility, and breathed deeply. He felt the cool of autumn enter his lungs, making each branching alight with the chilled sensation.

He exhaled.

He inhaled.
Ezran grimaced, try as he might for silence, for peace, he could not silence the incessant tugging on his mind, on his heart. Defeated, he went to the door leading out to the balcony. His steps heavy.

He grabbed the letter from the ground next to the door, where he had left it. A diatribe of explanation and profuse requests of forgiveness. Ezran read over the parchment, eyes scanning, ensuring that the words he wrote were the ones he meant. In the end, he crinkled the paper and threw it over his shoulder in frustration, joining the scattering of other half-written versions. In a tantrum that he allowed himself to throw, he dragged his feet over to the writing desk where it held all the necessary accouterments. Ezran slumped into the chair and rolled his head backwards, staring at the non-descript ceiling above.

If the dream were true, he couldn't let Callum bring Rayla here.

Ezran ran through the images still fresh in his mind upon awakening. He had been soaring amidst the clear sky in the setting sun, the wind beneath his wings helping to keep him aloft. He could feel it course over each scale of his body, the eddies and zephyrs almost an extension of himself as they swept along his long and sinuous figure. Then, when the sun kissed the horizon, he began to plummet, falling out of the sky momentarily as the dynamics of the sky changed. Moisture built, rising like a wave in the sky and coming crashing down on him, it coalesced, angry and grey, obscuring the view of the world below, and as the sun disappeared behind the dense cloud cover he knew that Callum was down there, who else could hold such tumultuous rein over the Sky Primal that it dwarfed his own, only brother.

Using his cyan eyes, gifted with a sight beyond that of mortal humans and even mortal dragons, he scanned the forest beneath the obscuring clouds, making ever growing circles around the elven city of Lunaflowne, careful to never get too close to give himself away. He recognized Mr. Jangly Bones from a distance, and terror would have struck him had it not been such a well featured portion of Callum's more frightening tales from their childhood, and the silver glow surrounding it that he had come to learn represented the Moon Primal.

He found them, a trundling carriage in the dark woods that soon rooted itself in the dense trees and they continued on foot. No where was there a place to land, so he followed above, watching the behind as the elves slowly pursued, following the wagon, then following the tracks, but far enough behind. The trio of his brother, his mother, and the burly elf that had somehow found a distant cousin had gained a significant lead on their pursuers. And when they came to the clearing, he dropped out of the sky.

He had been overjoyed to see them all. Callum looked rough and dirty, completely drenched with dark circles beneath his eyes. Mud marred his fine pants and there were even some tears in his
coat. Callum carried that sketchbook at his side and Bait on his back, as well as two other packs, the man seemed overburdened, exhausted, but not yet ready to quit. Rayla on the other hand, was a sight that brought dark thoughts.

The former luster and life had been eroded from her, her skin was loose over her already slight figure, in juxtaposition to her face which was pulled tight over her cheek bones bringing out the more skeletal features and large round violet eyes. Her hair was no longer white, but a chaotic display of filthy grey that hung heavy over her head in a dense mop. But she stood there, tired, defiant, smiling at the sight of him. Black breeches and a green blouse, one of the most feminine things he had ever seen her wear, given lethality by the pauldron over one shoulder, elven dagger at her him, and the sheathed war axe on her back. The steady downpour had done something to cleanse filth from her features, however it only left clear streaks in the dirt covering her face. Bloodstained bandages completely obscured the form of her hands.

Opening his eyes, Ezran was back in his chambers. Anger and confusion tumbled over relief and hope.

He felt his eyes begin to water. Callum had done it. He had gone into the heart of the enemy and found Rayla. If he had to explain what it was he was feeling, it would have been near impossible. Prior to seeing Rayla free through what he knew were Zym's eyes, he had not allowed himself a shred of hope. Ezran had been shuffling about the castle, dealing with the day to day bureaucracies of ruling and trying to prepare his home for the coming assassins, but much as his father had no chance of surviving the Moonshadow threat, he did not allow himself a hope either.

Now, though, his antidote was coming. This thought raised conflicting sensations to wrack his heart. Rayla was his friend, she had been kind to him, cared for him when he was ill, trusted him. And now, the relief wasn't that his friend who had been imprisoned for three years was finally free, but that he had a better chance at living now that she was in his brother's hands. All the internal conflict rose and swelled, but finally settled into a pervasive guilt, and he was forced to sit in the dark, alone, with the shame of it. Part of him wanted them to hurry here, to be his security blanket, to let him take care of Rayla and Callum, to let them take care of him, his pseudo mother and father. He longed for their arms around him, the affection and asinine comments that made up their banter.

Ezran grabbed the pen from it's holder and uncorked the inkpot, dabbing the metal tip of the carved wooden pen as he pulled another piece of parchment to the center of the desk.

Callum,

I miss you and Rayla more than you can know. But in what I write, I ask not as your brother, but command as your
king.

Do not bring Rayla to Katolis, where I have stayed. She is in no condition to help with the task you would set her to. Instead, I will send a small force to aid you in caring for her, they will meet you atop Humdrum Hill.

Your Liege,

Ezran

Ezran read the letter.

Then he wrote it again, careful not to let the teardrops fall on the parchment this time.

How did you tell your Mastermind mage brother that you can weren't going to run from the assassin's blade, but rather were going to wait for them to come to you and fight them on your turf? Was there really any good way? Was he signing his own acquiescence to a death warrant served up three years ago, leagues away? He had done all he could to prepare the castle, he had sent the majority of forces away on training exercises, on ambassador missions to learn from the other military's of the Pentarchy. The entire capital held only the barest minimum force needed to keep order, and the castle itself was quietly reduced to a skeleton crew of servants and guards. It was as inviting an assassin's target he could come up with. He couldn’t decide if he was inviting the fearsome Specter Grim into his home, or if he was digging in his heels out of stubbornness. He left the thought on his desk, heading to the floor to ceiling length balcony doors, his mind made up.

Leaning against the doorframe sat an ornate bow made for a child's hands, made of light and flexible wood. An ornate bow made for the use of a little boys hands, because that's all he was. The responsibilities and crown hanging off of him like the still too large robes. He hefted the bow and opened the balcony doors, letting them clatter and bang against the balcony parapets. He didn't care to keep quiet, this was his kingdom, his castle, he would do as he pleased. If he wanted to storm into the bakers house and demand he make the biggest damn jelly tart Ezran had ever seen, he would.

Ezran let a brief murmur of a chuckle pass through his lips, really only finding the irony the idea of freedom for a king funny. It was the knowledge of royalty that a good ruler bore the most shackles, and a bad ruler did not stay a ruler for long.
Walking into the shadows of the clouds, he approached the end of the parapet and took the parchment with his brief, simple letter and bound it about the Eagle Blood arrow with a simple tie that was taught enough to crinkle and crush the rolled paper. He knocked the arrow in the child's bow, and pulled it taught. A tingling wave originating at the finger tips touching the magical arrow spread up his arm, tracing up and causing the muscles to twitch slightly. Breathing deeply, he knew what to do almost instinctively, as though the arrow itself beckoned a name, "Callum."

He loosed the arrow.

It wasn't the name that sealed the magic, but the connection between Callum and himself, the relationship, existing as an almost tangible bond between brother and brother that allowed the Blood Eagle arrow to track along it's invisible connection, through the night sky, and out of sight. He watched its trail cut through the dark of night and finally dissipate. It was likely gone sooner than he felt it was, but he continued to watch for a moment. He supposed that with that arrow he had sealed his fate. Or had it been just another boulder atop to platform, slowly crushing him.

In frustration he dropped the bow where he stood and turned on his heel. He stomped across the parapet and into his chambers, not bothering to close the doors behind him. As he tore through the room he snagged his robe off the hook where it hung by a sleeve and spun it around as he donned it, not faltering in his pace a step. It settled over his shoulder and hung loosely at the other. He didn't notice. It billowed behind him as he stomped onwards, his loungewear of simple subdued red lined with gold revealed.

When the doors to his chambers banged open, the guard posted there stood at attention, "Good-" the guard fought to stifle a yawn, "-evening, King Ezran. How may I serve?"

Ezran didn't stop his pace, he knew that there was no true urgency about the task he was to set others to, but he didn't feel like sleeping, and by Harrow and Sarai, if he couldn't sleep, well then neither would they. "Summon the royal physician, Tomaz, have him go to the stables, he's going on a trip. Have the stableman saddle up three horses." Ezran didn't hear the guard confirm the command, he was already tearing down the next hallway and out of earshot. He was cutting a path direct and precise. He didn't bother to grab a torch, able to navigate the dark hallways of the castle which he had known for so long even if blindfolded.

If he tarried too long, he would think too deeply about the command he had given his brother, how he had made his own survival that much more difficult.

He pounded on the door he had been looking for.
There was no answer.

He pounded again on the door, mumbling to himself, "Wake up, damn you."

Ezran saw the flicker of lantern light from beneath the heavy mahogany door start up and become brighter as the one behind it approached. The door creeped open and revealed the face of a Moonshadow elf. Slender with pointed chin, and almond eyes the color of the sky on a stormy night, the feminine face peered from the lantern lit room suspiciously, a teal lateral circular facial marking at the corner of her eye, wrinkled slightly by the crow's feet there.

When she saw who it was, she opened the door further, her expression changing from suspicion to surprise. She curtsied with a skirt she did not wear, "Y'ur Highness." Alayza said, opening the door fully and permitting Ezran entrance into their room.

Ezran didn't notice that she only wore the barest of loungewear, soft purple shorts revealing a gratuitous amount of toned legs the same ivory flushed pink tone, her top a baggy chemise of the same color that hung loosely over her chest, but did nothing to hide it. Her bare arms that same ivory kissed pink. Ezran didn't notice, and his eyes definitely didn't linger inappropriately. Her hair was a tousled mess of white curling locks, and her eyes still hung heavy with sleep. He admitted that Alayza did have a certain mature beauty to her.

Ezran walked passed her into the Cartesian Bedroom's antechamber as Praid joined them from the bedroom, cinching the belt about a grey robe, his own short white hair in the same degree of disarray as it ever was. His eyes bore the heaviness of sleep as well, which fit with the hour. He muttered to himself, "Who in the forsaken lands is bothering us at-" His eyes fell on the King of Katolis standing with his wife, and Praid swiped at the lateral eye markings, round and teal like his wives.

"King Ezran." The elf stopped in his grumbles and became the essence of formality in an instant, bowing low, "To wha' do we owe the pleasure of your audience. At this hour?"

He looked between the two of them, "Alayza, Praid, sit, please."

The two shared a concerned look, but sat together on a red cushioned couch made of the same hard lines that adorned the Cartesian Bedroom. He took residence in a chair opposite them.

"There is something that I must tell you," Ezran began, "Something that I have been intentionally
keeping from you, but it has been out of necessity, I hope at the end of this, you understand."

Praid's eye's grew suspicious, his wife's face a mirror of his, markings and all.

"Up until one week ago," Ezran began, "Callum and I had no inclination as to Rayla's whereabouts." He shared with them everything that Callum had told him about their interaction with Gale, how she was to go before the Lunarium and he was to be cast out of Xadia. He went on about Zym's surprise visit and all that was revealed to them then, how he was to be assassinated at the hands of another troupe of moon shadow elves.

Before he had the opportunity to reveal Rayla's fate, Alayza spoke, "They used Rayla's essence for the Blood Lock poison." She said it simply. Frightened.

The word dragged out of him, "Yes."

"How dar' ya keep this from us!" Praid bolted up from the chair, shouting, "She may jus' be anotha 'bloodthirsty elf' to yoo, but this is our daughter! You spoiled little lemmin' of a liege!"

Ezran watched Praid's rage rush at him, numb to it.

Alayza put her hand on Praid's wrist as the elf shook with anger. From the bedchambers, a sleepy looking four-legged creature no larger than a small dog hopped out, the Frobbit.

"There's more." Ezran continued, as the Frobbit approached him and used it's front claws to grasp the edge of the chair where he sat, climbing up and plopping in his lap. He absent-mindedly brushed the ridge of spiny fibers along it's back, "Callum and Zym went to the Lunarium, where Rayla had been kept." There was no interruption this time, "I have received word that Callum has freed your daughter, even now they cut across the sky of Xadia towards Katolis. But Rayla, she is changed, she is not healthy."

This took the wind from Praid's sails and he sat down, his backside barely touching the edge of the couch, waiting for more with a worried expression.

"I am sending the two of you to meet them." Ezran looked out the lone window, the moon not visible from this perspective, the vividness of the light sky lost in the lantern light that they all shared, "As well as my own physician to help care for her."
"Yes, immediately, we will go." Praid said standing, rushing to the bedroom, "Come Alayza, we mus-"

"I'm staying, Praid," Alayza said, her words stopping Praid in his tracks, her expression sad and thoughtful as she looked at Ezran. He opened his mouth to retort, but at the slightest sound from him, her hand came up, staying his words, "Look at this king, Praid." Her eyes never left Ezran, "He sends us away no' for himself, but fer Rayla, fer us. He is no' actin' with his interes' in mind. He knows tha' he needs me here."

Ezran watched her assessing him, doing nothing.

"I can offer Rayla nothing other than a comforting presence, you can at least offer strength and assistance to Prince Callum and our daughter," She continued, "But here, I can help him." She looked to her husband, "Go an prepare your things, I will help you in a moment."

Praig left, an expression of begrudging acknowledgement on his face.

Alayza stood and walked over to Ezran, beckoning him to scoot over in the large chair, and sat next to him. Her generous hips pressing against his as she squeezed in next to him. She wrapped a matronly arm around his shoulders and leaned her head on his, "Ezran," She said, dropping the titles, but none of the respect, "In all of this ya have put my daughter before ya'self, you are a troo friend of hers," she squeezed him tightly, "But know, ya do not have to carry these burdens alone, ya have your family, ya have people you can trust. Ya have us." She reassured him, "It is okay to break down every now an' again. How else are you going to build yourself up stronger?"

Ezran didn't know when the tears began, but they did. Praid came and bid them both ado, kissing his wife, and placing a comforting hand on the little king's back. But Alayza held him close not letting him go. She comforted him, letting him be a little boy again.

Chapter End Notes

This story has turned into a much more lengthy story than I ever intended, but it just flows from my fingers, my only lament is that I wish my own story flowed as easily.

I shared this with my spouse and she told me this, and I wanted to share it with other fanfic writers/writers:

'You're obsessed with Dragon Prince, you cannot write your story because you are not
obsessed with your characters, your world. I think you need to figure out why that is and work on making a something you are just as obsessed, with characters you love just as much, and until then, your story won't flow from you the same way."

Honestly, it shook me, but it cut right to the heart of the problem in such an insightful way that I thought I would share it.

I hope you all enjoy!
Rayla watched Callum go about the task of unwrapping the bloodstained bandages from her hands, carefully applying traction where the blood has scabbed to the gauze, being delicate where he needed to be, being forceful when it was necessary. His entire focus was on the bandages, and she watched him. His eyes darting from surface to surface, bending and studying her hands as he went about his task. There had been almost no words between them since Elyas departed their company the night before. It had not been long until she was lulled into a soft sleep, the rhythmic beating of Zym's wings, the warm presence of the Glow Toad in her lap, and the reassuring presence of the human behind her. She slept readily, exhausted. She awoke when she felt the world start to fall away, and though initially panicked, calmed when she noted Bait, Zym, and Callum all remained. The dragon had landed in an expansive plain of grass that seemed to spread in all directions.

Rayla immediately recognized the grasslands due to two defining features that any traveling elf would know. The tumultuous path of the Loserine River that cut through the plain that bent every which way, tributaries feeding it until at an outcropping of rock, it poured over a short waterfall as the rest of the land about it had a sudden steep drop off. A steep descent, that had it been covered in snow would have offered a tantalizing temptation to any passerby with a flat surface to ride down upon. Much of the minor rock formations about the waterfall had been eroded away so much that they appeared almost natural. The outcroppings made short squat stubs of towers and walls that disappeared naturally into the ground, bending and weaving with the curvature of the landscape, only to re-emerge later, a piece of the landscape, rather than in defiance of it.

Earthblood ruins were so beautiful, and Xadia was littered with the civilizations of the past, stone structures and hidden veils of worlds from a time before dragons, and before elves, remnants of time immemorial.

Zym had landed among the ruins as the sun was just beginning to break the horizon, as they dropped, the sun had vanished from view. The dragon had lead her and Callum to an all but caved in structure beneath one of the squat towers. The stone wet with the moisture of the waterfall and covered with creeping green moss in stark juxtaposition to the white stone. He promptly slid down the sloping entrance and promptly curled up, tucking his head beneath a wind in an almost corner of the round room. The mass of the young arch dragon taking up the majority of the small building left Callum and Rayla only enough room to skirt into the building, Bait trundling along behind them, pausing at the entrance to sit and watch the sunrise.

Rayla sat and Callum flung the two bags they had taken with them from Elyas to the ground, wincing when he remembered there was glass in them, relaxing when he heard nothing break. Callum looked as tired as Zym, the dark circles beneath his eyes telling of the lack of sleep he endured,. Yet, he kept pushing himself forward. Even now, he came and knelt beside Rayla and began to undo the bandages he and Elyas had placed, he cut through the exhaustion to complete his
Finally, fed up with the silent cacophony, a silence made up of the breeze running through the miles of grassland all about, the rushing of the nearby river and its rapid plumet, she asked, concerned, "How much sleep have ya gotten?"

Callum's answer was short, terse, "Enough." He went to begin the next layer of unwrapping of her bloodied hands, but she pulled away.

He met her eyes, annoyed verdant shades catching her unyielding violet.

He sighed, "Sorry. Not a lot, Rayla," She let him continue with her bandages, "It's just been one thing after the other. I mean it's not my first sleepless night, or my first time in danger, but-" He blinked hard, forcing his eyes open, "-I don't know if I ever pushed this hard."

"Well," She said with a firmness she did not feel, "As soon as yer done, I want ya ta sleep. Snoring away like our buddy Zym over there." She nodded towards the slumbering dragon. His bulk rising and falling in a slow steady pace, a sonorous sound originating from his curled mass and reverberating through her.

"You must be feeling pretty rambunctious if you're up to tossing orders around." Callum chuckled, getting to the last layer of bandage. When Callum stopped removing the bandages, she had expected him to keep working, still not feeling the open air. With a sinking realization, she looked at why he had stopped. Wet blood glistened on her hands amidst scabs and broken flesh. Strips of rough skin, kept soft from the saturation of her own oozing blood crossed her palms in odd angles. Here and there her palms were a sickening mix of browns and reds, a mixture of old blood and new. Rayla cringed at the sickening squelch it made as the saturated bandages pulled away. She expected some twinge of pain or ache, but it just felt as though she wore thick mittens covering her palms, any and all sensations were distant, barely noted. Nausea rose up in her and her stomach clenched, it's audible whine echoing through her throat to her ears.

The human mage looked at her, "Don't go vomiting now," he said soothingly, "You need all the food you can keep down to get your strength back. You're barely flesh and bones."

Zym's voice resounded in both their heads, images of corpses, of carrion, of healing waves, Why not use dark magic?
Callum looked at the dragon, the smell of blood must have awoken him, Rayla thought. His nostrils tested the air with great deep snorts.

There was a long pause, Callum met Rayla's eyes, then looked back to Zym, "It is true I know the incantations and the cost-"

"No." Rayla said flatly.

"-not that I would," Callum finished his thought.

_There are no other healing spells from the other Primums?_ Fire and sea flashed through their minds, verdant earth and star filled skies.

"Unfortunately, it would seem," Callum sighed, frustrated, "That healing belongs to Dark Magic only. While each of the other Primal Sources are incredibly powerful in their own right-"

"Especially the moon." Rayla offered sagely, sitting up straighter.

"-but their power, it's too raw." Callum continued, ignoring Rayla's interjections, "I have sat with our royal physicians, tried my best to ply my hand at healing once, but it was for naught. The best I can do is coax a seed to grow into a plant that I can then turn into a healing salve, or provide clean water for washing wounds. Speaking of," Callum reached into his belt pouch and pulled a deep blue marble out that seemed to swirl in the growing light of the day, "Colatus." He used both hands to draw a deep blue rune in the air glowing with a strange dark light. He kept his hands extended on either side of her broken and bloody hands. A strange sensation of moisture sapping from the air, the faint hints of sweat on her face dissipated, her tongue suddenly dry, and slowly, an orb of water coalesced between his hands, surrounding her own. It was cool and pleasant on her wrists and backs of her hands, but her palms felt no change.

Callum's dry tongue licked at his dry lips as he focused, eyes not leaving her hands. He began to rotate his palms slowly, the water within the coalesced orb beginning to swirl with his motion, the momentum of the force keeping it aloft between his hands creating confined currents that the flaps of skin would bend and dance to. The pure, clear water, soon turned to pink to red as her blood rose like wisps of smoke from her flesh. It grew darker and darker until she could barely see the shadow of her hands within. Rayla watched, fascinated, a combination of being impressed with Callum's magical ingenuity, and a twisted interest in watching her own blood leave her body.
Zym snorted, understanding Callum’s point, but continued on, *What is the issue with Dark Magic anyways?*

It was Rayla's turn to be confused, "Do you not see a problem with stealing the essence from other creatures to do magic?" She asked, baffled that she had to explain this to the future King of Dragons. Callum merely worked.

Zym quirked his head at her, *I take what I need. I will take the deer from the forest, the birds from the sky, and I will take their life to feed my own. Their life energy fuels my body, what difference is it to use it to fuel magic?* Deer shredded by talons, a puff of feathers in place of a bird, Zym's teeth splashed with blood.

"It just is." Rayla said defiantly.

"Yea," Callum said absently, "besides, humans, we consume the magic, pollute it. Who is to say what would happen if an elf or dragon would try Dark Magic, maybe it would not twist them as much or maybe the spiritual power could be preserved, but for humanity it always leads to a sort of corruption. It's the reason I studied the primal stones so much, the reason I was able to make the Containment Cubes."

"Containment Cubes?" she mused, "What are those?"

"Y'know, the marbles." Callum nodded to the pouch, hands still twirling the water.

"You know that a marble is not a cube, right?"

"Well do you have a better name?" Callum retorted, defensive, though still spending most of his attention on the spell at hand.

"They're just like miniature Primal Stones right?" Rayla shrugged, "Why not call them Primal Pebbles?"

Callum paused in his ministrations, "Not as intimidating as I would have liked…” He considered the name, "We’ll see if it sticks."
Zym snorted in the corner and tucked his head back beneath his wing, done with the conversation. The orb of clear water was now the color of dark blood. Callum retracted his hands, and the orb left Rayla's hands behind, though they still looked raw and were streaked with pinkish water, the dead and living flesh didn't look as horrendously horrifying as it had moments ago. She flexed them slightly, testing, as Callum took the orb of water out of the small stone building and to the edge of the river that cut directly through the ruins and dropped it there, letting it rush over the waterfall.

Rayla watched Callum return, he went to one of the bags and began pulling its contents out and laying them on a bedroll after spreading it out. Several containers of fruits and nuts looked about as appetizing as a feast when she saw them, "Hey, Callum?" he kept unpacking the vials and flasks.

"Yea?" he uncorked a container of berries and tossed a handful in his mouth.

"Could I trubble ya for a handful of those there nuts?" she asked impishly.

"Deez nuts?" he asked around the mouthful of dried fruit, holding the nuts aloft and shaking the container so they rattled against the glass.

"Or tha dry wrinkled moonberries, either would be nice, yes."

She held her bloodied hands out in front of her, trying carefully not to bleed on her breeches and blouse, "I am quite hungry and don' really have tha capacity to feed mi'self."

"Oh," Callum realized, "Just a sec." He gingerly tumbled some nuts into his palm and went to Rayla's side again, "H-How do you want to do this, just one at a time? Or the whole mouthful?"

She rolled her eyes frustrated, "Just put 'em in mi mouth."

Callum tried to delicately drop the handful of Xadian nuts into her mouth, spilling a few on the floor, but making the majority in. When he was done she began to munch happily, and gestured to her hands with her head for him to get back to work at bandaging them. His face was flushed, but it quickly resolved when he went back to his task, kneeling hurriedly next to her. He opened the salve that Elyas had sent with them and began applying it liberally to her hands. Rayla continued to munch, feeling the gentle touch of his palms on the back of her hands, but only feeling slight twinges across her palms as he applied the gel in copious amounts. When he began to wrap her hands, she swallowed the last of the nuts from her mouth, and asked, "Can you do my fingers..."
separately? So I can at least fumble with something and not be wearing mittens all the time."

He laughed, her question breaking the awkwardness between them, "Sure," He conceded, smiling.

Rayla decided she liked this dream. This Callum was smart, he was goofy, he was entirely awkward. It was almost as if every good memory of him had been rolled into one with sprinkling of some of the dark memories. He looked less like a child, and she had liked the sweet innocence of his boyish face, he looked more of an adult now than she had ever remembered. That playful humor was unchanged though, the hope to do well, to do good, the sarcastic dismissal of his own failures coupled with the unending drive to keep pushing himself. Yes, this dream would do nicely for a time. Though, she had to remind herself that it could end at any point, to not become to invested, to not give herself over entirely. She still had a sentence to serve, this passing entertainment would be a nice reprieve.

Steeling herself, she breathed deeply, the scent of the salve, mint and citrus, momentarily cleansed her sense of smell, and she became aware of something absolutely rank. She twisted her face in disgust.

Callum looked at her, confused, as he finished wrapping the last of the fingers on her left hand, and began on the right, "What? Is it too tight?"

"No," she coughed, "I think some wild animal died near by." She covered her nose with her bandaged hand, breathing in the scent of the medicine.

Callum started laughing, continuing to wrap her other hand. Round and round and he laughed and laughed.

"What's so funny?" Rayla bit, "Could'a been a poor little critter, just up an' died, an' you're laughin' at it."

"It's you." Callum said smiling, tucking the final bandage about her finger and taking them and the salve to place back into the bag, leaving the fruit and nuts out.

"It's me?" She gasped, horrified.

Callum continued to chuckle, bringing the container of fruit and nuts over to her, leaving them
open beside her, "You go ahead and enjoy those, I don't have much of an appetite." He walked back to the other bedroll, undoing it and rolling it out flat on the ground in the shade. He placed his sketchbook at the head and laid down upon it, using it as a pillow.

Bait, who up until this time had been sitting happily soaking in the sun after a long few days of glowing and flying, only one of which was his preferred past time, meandered into the building and plopped down at the foot of Callum's bedroll.

Rayla, who was still coming to terms with the fact that it was her that smelt so awful, took up residence on the other bedroll. Callum chuckled in the background as she tentatively sniffed her arm, and her hands, and her clothes, coming away with the same distorted expression.

"Relax, Rayla," Callum said, stretching out on his bedroll, using Bait to prop up his feet, "So what if you smell like a Nerfewata, so what if my eye's water, and I need to breathe through my mouth, it doesn't make you any less of a Moonshadow Elf, no less of a badass assassin." He smiled, his head far from her, his feet resting atop Bait with his boots still on towards her.

"Its called 'hygiene' Callum, and I tend to think that it is kind of important!" She retorted, clutching herself, trying to cover the scent in futility, "What about you, Bait, do you think I smell?"

The grumpy Glow Toad merely looked at her, moving only his large eyes, then, after seconds of thoughtful consideration, covered his snout with a flabby forepaw.

Rayla groaned, stood, and began stalking back and forth.

"It's not that big of a deal, Rayla," Callum reassured her, closing his eyes and covering them with an arm, "We travelled together for weeks and you never took a bath then."

She stopped in her stalking and pointed an accusing finger at him, "Yoo!" She hissed, "Yoo nevah took a bath, not without being in some sort of place where it was accommodated, where ya could have hot water. I, I on the other hand, woke up early every day and found time to keep myself some semblance of clean." She went back to her pacing, grumbling to herself, "Elf or human, males are disgusting."

"You snuck off to bathe while I slept?" Callum asked, opening an eye, but obviously not participating fully in the conversation.
"I had to do something, lest I start smelling as bad as you did! Why do you think I so often went scouting ahead or behind!" She bit, continuing her stalking, "Besides, I daren't tell ya I was going to wash mi'self. You wouldn't be the first human to be lured in by an elven beauty's wiles."

"Elven beauty?" Callum's eyes were both open now, watching her pace back and forth, an amused smile twisting his lips, "I didn't know the assassin thought so highly of herself."

"Whatevah," she glared daggers and knives and swords, and maybe a club or two, at him, "I'm going to go take a bath."

There was a long pause. She continued to stare.

Callum looked around, "So?"

"So," Rayla demanded, "I'm waiting for your promise that you won't come peeking."

Callum sat up again, his eyes looked her up and down, making her feel filthy in a way that mixed her stomach up, "Like the tales of virtuous heroes from times long gone," Callum said in an embellished monotone, "I promise, I shan't glance at this fair elven maiden visage, her virtue will remain intact and I will safeguard her being."

She drew herself up, crossing her arms, pursed her lips, was about to say something, thought better of it, then stalked away, out into the sunlight.

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A short time after Rayla left the small building of stone, Callum laughed to himself, "Rayla doesn't seem to have read very many stories, Bait. Doesn't she know the hero always peeks?"

Bait merely grumbled as Callum snuck carefully after the assassin.
Colatus - Purified
At the River

Callum ducked around a narrow bend of the stone ruins after scrambling up the steep incline out of their selected residence, the round room of unknown purpose and utility that would now offer them shade from the day while Zym slept. The white porous stone rough on his hand, a playful smile on his lips, he moved as if pulled along by some unseen force. He desperately tried to stay low, not wanting shadows or shifting grass to give Rayla any hint of observer. Rayla had taken a different bend of stone landscaping that separated an overgrown path from an overgrown leveled planter. When she turned, he ducked another way. To his advantage, Zym and he had stopped here the night before reaching Lunaflowne, on the way through Xadia. He had taken some time to explore these ruins then, and knew just the spot to have an unobstructed view of the river while remaining hidden.

Callum found the watchtower entrance, or at least it was entrance to what he thought of as the watchtower, given that he had no idea of the true purpose of these structures or monuments. He went through a doorless archway into one of the stone structures that flanked the falls just to the south and began the climb upwards. The worn and sloping steps giving poor purchase for his boots. Callum steadied himself on the ancient walls.

In a short time Callum emerged atop a carved spiraling staircase at the center of a large circular stone room, the walls and ceiling and floor all joined in seamless curvatures, as though the room had been slowly eroded out of the surrounding stone to give it structures. From where he stood he could feel the wind cutting through the unblocked windows, whistling low in the early morning and carrying the scents of the grasslands, the pollen. He looked out the round openings and across the plains, the sun throwing its yellow rays across the seemingly endless miles of green grass. To the east, green and verdant lands, a sea of green that undulated with the wind. He could read the currents of the wind as it raced over the grass, hinting, like so many things he saw now, at the power of the Sky Primal. To the west, past the cleft of land that the watchtowers rose out from, the grass moved and twisted just as much, but the hues were darker, richer green, not yet spoiled by the kiss of the sun, until it disappeared in the distance. North and south a strict line, cut by the steep hill upon which the watchtower stood, light separated the land. Half of the world just starting it's day, the other ending its night.

Callum breathed in the cool scent of the wind, carrying the essence of the grasslands with it. That would be gone soon, another vestige of summer lost to the march of autumn and the progress of world spinning ever forward. Callum relished it. He was tired, he was worn. More worn out than he had ever been, but in seeing the daylight, in feeling that breeze cut through him with its cool caress, he felt invigorated.

Callum stifled a yawn.

Maybe a little less invigorated than he wanted to admit.
As much as he wanted sleep, as much as his body dragged and eyelids drooped, there was something primal pulling him toward this spot. A juvenile fascination with proving some obscure point. She thought that he couldn't be trusted to not leer at her as she bathed, couldn't primp and preen herself while he was awake. Well, best to prove her wrong by catching a glimpse of that ivory skin, those sleek curves, that hinted, that teased, at femininity he hungered for. What better way to show her how foolish she had been other than by acting the fool?

It made a sort of circular sense, he nodded sagely to himself.

Callum went to the circular opening of the window facing south, finding the lazy falls beneath him, feeling the moisture on his face and the slickness of the damp and moss covered stone on his fingers. He hugged the structure, careful not to let his shadow stick out in the growing light. He was one with the stone, he told himself, trying his best to blend with the construct.

It never occurred to him to use any of the Primal Pebbles, his mind was too focused on his prize, reason clouded by fatigue or desire.

His eyes found the bank of the river, and then they trailed slowly up, looking for signs of Rayla. His mouth dry, Callum licked his lips. He could feel his heart in his chest, the thrumming in his ears. He breathed heavily, feeling the heat in his chest and hunger in his eyes. Callum forced himself to take steadier breaths, his grip on the stone tightening.

The shore was made of eroded stone, the same white porous rock that housed him currently, cut deep by this river, sloping slightly and covered with moss at the edge, the porosity of the rough rock giving purchase for the plant life to take hold. The water was clear, he could see. Rayla had called it the Loserine River, as had Zym, a long and winding path that cut through the Carnivorous Expanse. Callum had yet to learn how the plains had gained that name, but in this moment, his curiosity was muted.

Callum bent out a little further, seeing the bank as it wrapped around the ruins that rose up around the river. There, on the shore, he could see Rayla's procured dagger and pauldron piled neatly atop the teal blouse and black breeches.

He swallowed.

In all the late night fancies that he endured through the years, spanning to even before he had been sent from Xadia, he never thought that his first sight of the elven beauty, and her wiles, would be
like this. The fancies of the two of them being on the road together, huddling together for warmth, one thing leading to another. The dreams of him slipping through the ice and her having to share her body heat with him, leading from need for heat to need for each other. Of stolen moments amidst the trees as they traveled the unbeaten paths of Xadia and the Pentarchy. Of her advising him on elven relations in Katolis during the day, and advising him on the finer points of elven morphology in the night. Those fantasies ran through his head again and again. A different scenario for each of the nights he had slept in the last three years. Or it would be her keeping him up on nights when he couldn't sleep, keeping him company when he was alone.

Excitement creaked and tensed as his approaching vision wound like the strings of a lute. The tension growing tighter and tighter, knowing all the while that if you kept going it would snap, but to reach that perfect note you had to keep turning, turning, tuning. Callum felt the world drop away and he could see her hazy silhouette in the currents of the river, her figure hinted, but never revealed.

Every dream, every fantasy, of her coming to him, of her wanting him as much as he wanted her, always pulling them close. He knew he cared for her in ways that humans and elves would never allow. Knew that the current Dragon Regime would frown upon such a union and the entirety of the elven lands of Xadia would fight it with a religious zeal they didn't understand, but the images of the human and elf intermingling to make families that Gale had shared with him, of families long gone, had fueled his child like infatuation. Those visions had fed the flames for three long years while he waited, never knowing if he would get to see her, touch her, ever again. And even if he did, never knowing how she felt. He wanted them to be close so ferociously that it could over-ride reason. Every dream, every fantasy of them together feeling just a breath away. He closed his eyes, smiling, so many sleepless nights, he never imagined like this though.

His smile fell away.

Never like this.

Every dream, every confabulation of his tired mind had always been them coming together in ways that were orchestrated by need or simple moments shared over time. Never in his mind did he fantasize about this, some perverted little man leering from the shadows to catch a glimpse of a forbidden fruit. Callum derided himself, at war with the disinhibited urges and the yearning he has been coupled with for so many nights. He pressed his head against the stone, frozen as his sleep deprived inebriated reasoning spun in circles on itself.

Never like this.

Always, when they came together, it was one step at a time. No stolen glimpses with lecherous eyes. No threats and warnings. Always hands slowly touching, one finger at a time, maybe hidden
from the world, but together against it.

He grimaced.

Never. Like. This.

Callum slumped slightly, his morality winning over. His exhaustion came in a wave. His desire for reciprocation too strong to be overcome, and it stayed pushing him away from his elevated lookout. Still, he wondered, pondered languidly what sights had been hidden, the image of her distorted by the currents, a spinning silhouette. And still, shame burned hot in his mind, his senses coming to him the further from his abandoned task he went. It was one thing to catch a glance when she bent and twisted, admiring the tone of her legs or the curve of her hips. But to steal what had been explicitly denied? Callum felt filthy at the prospect of what he had almost done, the trust he had almost breached. He made his way to the spiral staircase, intending to be asleep by the time she returned from her aquatic ministrations.

There was a sharp clatter of metal on stone.

Callum cried out at the sudden striking and the unexpected volume of the sound. It had caught him off guard.

Callum clapped a hand over his mouth, eyes going wide.

"Oh no." He hissed. His heart raced. The world had suddenly become a very dangerous place. The dark shadows of the watchtower were no longer as obscuring, adrenaline surging through his body. The hair on his arms stood on end, he breathed deeply. Callum strained his ears.

The silence stretched on.

Nothing.

Callum began to relax, his heart rate slowed, he could feel the new tension unwind, the Lute dropping out of tune.
"Callum!" the distant shout came, echoing on the wind and through the grasslands.

"Oh no." Callum now very much needed to not be there. His heart pounding again, he attempted quiet, but the pounding of his boots down the stone steps did not help his situation, he cursed, 
"Fuck." He cursed again, "Fuck!"

It was a good run, he though to himself. His focus on the his fleeing fading, reflecting on the life he had lived. He had been a hero, he had learned magic. Callum hoped that this most recent event would not be included in his obituary or in the Annals of Katolis. Slain by angry elf maid for peeping while she bathed, and he didn't even see a thing. 

The footing had been poor on the ascent, and it wasn't any better on the way down. Callume raced down the steps, the coarse stone scraping his hands. He took them one then two them three at a time, no longer caring for the racket he made.

His foot caught.

He stumbled.

He caught himself. Sighed.

He continued falling forward.

Shit.

Callum could feel the exact moment his controlled tumble became a full tilt plunge as his head went too far past his feet. The sensation of weightlessness over took him. His hands came up. His body went down. And he fell the remainder of the steps. As the spiral stairs twisted, so did his body, bouncing off one wall, then the other, then a step. Heels over head in a mad rush. Callum cried out as he felt his neck over flex and an electric shock went down his back and limbs, fading quickly. He tumbled out the entrance of the watchtower.
He took a moment to catch his breath and groaned. Everything hurt.

Callum winced in the sunlight as it glared in his eyes, reflected off the half moon blade of Rayla's battle axe, inches from his face.

He tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

Unsuccessfully.

Apart from the gleaming metal, he lay in the shade cast by Rayla standing over him, her figure outlined by white light. Her voice dripped acid, "Well then, Callum, didja enjoy the show?" Each word was emphatically pronounced and harshly pointed. She inched the blade closer to him.

Working moisture into his mouth, finding his voice, his mind raced. He backed away slowly on his elbows, the blade followed.

"This is a trap." He attested. His eyes darting to her then back.

"Come again?" The acid was still there, mixed with curiosity.

"This is a trap. I say I enjoyed it, you use that blade. I say I didn't enjoy it, you use that blade. I say I didn't see anything, you wouldn't believe me, and you use that blade. There's no answer that keeps my skin in one piece." The words spilled from his mouth in a mad rush, he could see nothing by the axe blade, but he could almost feel the lethal, yet justified, rage pouring off his friend.

Her voice was edging away from acid and into mischievous confidence, "Well, you should've thought of that before you went looking at this tasty elf snack, then." Rayla spun the axe in her hand.

Callum thought carefully, amazed at the fact that he was still breathing, still in relatively un-massacred condition, "I won't deny the wisdom in your words." A guard of formality and eloquence in this trying time.

Rayla rounded, coming out from between him and the light and Callum's eyes followed the light as
it danced across the blade, to the axe's haft, across the bandaged hand where she gripped the axe and up her arms. They were thin, but it just made the muscles stand out greater in her tension. He could appreciate each delicate line as the muscles of her forearm gave way to the upper arm and then to shoulder. Her other arm lay across her bare chest tightly, covering her breasts. Her skin was still wet with the water from the river and the drops glistened on her flesh like gems as she moved. His eyes traced along the lines of her neck and down over her in her entirety. She had managed to throw the black breeches on before rushing to end Callum's lecherous ways, but hadn't bothered to dry based upon the wet spots at that helped the almost loose pants cling to her legs. Her feet were bare, answering the question of whether or not elves had four toes as well as four fingers. His eyes ascended again, taking in her abdomen and the curve of her hips as they emerged from the breeches. His eyes trailed upwards, drinking in the soft milky tone of her skin. His eyes traced her again, and again, and again. Up over her chest where she hid herself, and along the sensual curve of her neck, resting on the pale pink of her lips. The flush of her cheeks beneath a wild tangle of white hair. The points of her horns and ears only the crowning touch of her beauty, enhancing it in ways he had not fathomed. Callum fought to stifle a gasp of appreciation at the beauty before him.

Elven wiles indeed.

He realized he was doing exactly what he had set out to avoid in the watchtower, he was leering at Rayla's not quite naked body. Time seemed to stretch on as he drank in the sight.

"Oy." Rayla's coarse command came, "Eye's up here, Callum."

He winced. He hadn't gone through any effort to hide where his gaze travelled, or lingered, hadn't been able to think to. Hadn't been able to think at all.

"S-sorry, Rayla." His eyes snapped to her face. He could see the rage there, the burning anger, the vulnerability, the…self satisfaction? He felt the heat on his face.

"Well, ya pervy human," Rayla said, sauntering closer, nudging him back onto the ground from being up on his elbows with her bare foot. She left it resting there on his chest, "Seems like I was right to not trust you. I know the the elven addage is to never trust a human, but I think females have something similar, never trust a male."

"Rayla, I," Callum swallowed, looking up into the morning sky, "I don't know what I was thinking, I had this thought that…well…in the old stories, the hero always peeks at the maiden while she bathed and-"

"An' you fancied y'ursel tha hero?" She cut him off, a mixture of astonishment and disbelief
touching into her swirling anger.

Callum stopped, mulling the question over.

"And I the maiden in distress?" That tone of hers was too playful.

He paused, not answering immediately, "I don't like where this is heading."

"No, I dinnae imagine you will." Her voice carried her smirk, "I told yoo that this was nae tha tired human narrative where the man saves a woman and she falls all over him. I am nae some maiden or damsel in distress to hand out affections fer great deeds, some whore fer the honors of y'ur person." She laughed as she went on, "I am an assassin. So skilled I choose not to kill. Remember tha' Callum. When ya think back on the fond sights y'u've grifted, High mage or no, y'ur life was spared by me." She twirled the axe around a bandaged hand and threw it at the ground, where it embedded next to his face. He felt the dirt ricochet off his face as the blade bit into the dirt and haft sticking at an angle into the air, "Up." She commanded, taking her foot from his chest.

Rayla was kind enough to offer him a helping hand up, and Callum had to surreptitiously rearrange himself as he stood.

She turned from him, going to find a place to sit on one of the elevated and overgrown stone planters. He could trace every movement of her hips as they swayed, every articulation of her spine, like the soft lulling of waves on a lake, his eyes trailed her undulating movements.

He thanked whatever cosmic orchestrator had given him an eidetic memory.

She turned and leaned against the planter, still covering her breasts with her off hand.

Callum stood there waiting, eyes glued to her ivory skin.

"Well? What're you waiting for, boyo," she teased, "Start undressing."

"I hardly think that's-" Callum croaked.
"Fair?" She cut him off, "Necessary?" Her smile was wicked, a cat with a bird in it's paws, " I assure you, my lecherous protector, that it is both."

He struggled as she waited expectantly for him to start, eyes patient, face unreadable.

Grumbling to himself, Callum worked his arms out of the sleeves of his coat, not taking his eyes from Rayla.

"What's that you're saying, Mr. Peeksies?"

Further protests died and he continued to disrobe, untucking his shirt in short swift jerks. He pulled his shirt over his head and heard Rayla whistle, catcalling.

"Mmmm," she mocked, "Keep it coming"

Callum glared emerald fire meeting her mischievous violet eyes. He threw his shirt to the ground and hooked his thumbs into the loops of his pants. He paused.

Rayla rolled her free hand, telling him to keep going.

Callum shook his head, the trepidation in his gut chilling him. He tugged his pants down in one a quick motion and pulled his boots off inelegantly, stumbling to one side. He righted himself and began to tug at his undershorts.

"Nah," Rayla said, stopping him. He met her words with a questioning gaze, "No gurl wants to see that half tied ribbon appendage you men are so keen on sharin'."

Callum stood then. As undressed as she would have him, a mixture of hurt and embarrassment as well as relief plying across his mind. He supposed it did look like a half finished bow, if you used your imagination. He threw his arms out wide, the autumn morning air was cold, and the ruined structures around then had a way of funneling the wind so that it came billowing down pathways, buffeting him, "Well then, Rayla, are we done with this? Can I apologize and just go lie down. May I go to sleep and forget this embarrassing affair?"
Rayla paused, considering. Callum could feel her eyes on him much the same way she must've felt his on her. It felt wrong. He felt vulnerable. His mouth was dry. His adrenaline was rushing. He was excited. She pushed off the planter, still covering her breasts with that forearm across her chest. Rayla sauntered toward him. He swallowed with difficulty. He couldn't decide where to look: the Ivory flesh of her abdomen an the muscles there almost making an arrow guiding his eyes ever lower, the hypnotic rhythm of her hips, the savory curve of her neck, or the barely hidden flesh of her chest. In the end, he settled on those hauntingly beautiful violet eyes that burned with strange otherworldly fire.

Rayla approached, each measured step hypnotizing. Her presence so overwhelming that as she neared, Callum stepped back hesitantly. Her eyes and entire demeanor were hypnotizing. She was so suddenly close. He could practically feel the heat raising off her skin. Whispers coaxed him, reach out, take her hand. She was close enough to him that he could see the each individual dimple of gooseflesh, exposed to the same cold autumn wind he was.

Rayla's voice was low, almost sultry, teasing and toying. His heart was in his throat and he felt the tension between them, she licked her lips and drew his eyes, "Now, my Prince of Katolis." She mocked, "Dance."

"What?" His voice was breathy.

"Dance." Her voice changed from sultry to perky, "Yoo owe me a Jerkface dance." She turned on her heels quickly and walked away, a spring in her step, a lilt in her laugh. Her hair wild, white, and untamed in the autumn winds.

"You cannot be serious." He reeled, back from the intensity of the moment that had come before, to the now.

"Oh, but I am." Rayla jeered, "I expect my dance of stupitude and sorryness."

Callum stared at her, the biggest grin on her face. With a sigh he crossed his eyes and proceeded to initiate the dance that had made him the King of Katolis' favorite brother. A mixture of random impersonations and animal goofishness that was meant to show the other the regret at their own personal foolishness. The king's only brother, true, but still. A flail of the arms, a lock of the legs, and a mostly naked Callum danced to cheers and derisions of the nearby elf maiden.

After a time, Rayla's laughter bubbled enough and she clapped her hands together cheering him on.
Her giggle was infectious, and Callum paused, looking up. She laughed and smiled, not caring to cover herself any longer. Her laughter faded and she saw him staring at her.

"Oh, get over it," she rolled her eyes, covering herself again. "It's nothing yet haven't seen before. Now go get my things from the river bank."

She laughed at him backing away, obeying, eyes never breaking from her body. Her laughter faded as he backed away, her smirk being replaced by a coy smile. Was she blushing?

Callum's view of the vixen broke, but the spell continued. He, in a daze meandered to the bank, finding her pauldron, her blouse, and boots. He grabbed the clothes and the sheathed dagger that hid underneath.

Standing, he found he couldn't wipe the smile off his face. Try as he might, it stayed there.

He returned toting Rayla's belongings to where she waited, covering herself still, her eyes off to the side in a thoughtful glance. She had yet to notice him as of yet and he took the time to appreciate her beauty. It wasn't the exposed nature of her attire that he found alluring, no. Rayla stood there in the morning light, casually reclining on the stone planter where he had left her. The posture that of an elf poised ready to move, even as she lounged, a feline propensity for action at any moment. Her face was a mixture of emotion to the point of losing capability to be read, a smile mixed with a frown, concern mixed with relief, a true mystery.

Callum approached and wordlessly offered her things. She took them, offering him another brief glance of her hidden skin. Rayla set the clothes, armor, and blade out on the planter next to her and she worked her way into the blouse, not bothering to strap the pauldron or dagger on, but merely picking them up after donning her boots.

When Rayla was dressed and had all her belongings in hand, she looked to him, her own eyes lingering, "Ya gonna get dressed or are ye just going to strut around in your skin all day." Her expression seemed to say she wouldn't be disappointed with the prospect.

Callum started, recalling his attire, or lack there of, and immediately went about dressing himself, still managing to catch the sunlight kissing Rayla's ivory skin across her shoulders and face. She watched him suspiciously, "So, did you get a good enough show, can I bathe in peace from now on?"
"Oh," Callum laughed, speaking absently as he went about working into his own pants, "You can bathe without worrying. But I didn't see anything."

"Nothing?" Rayla questioned, suspicious. Scared.

"Nothing." Callum confirmed for her.

Rayla's face couldn't go pale as much as the slight blush drained from her cheeks, and then came back with a vengeance. Her entire face becoming hot and red and spreading down her neck. She stammered, trying to get words out, a question, a twisted face, a realization.

"Have I ever told you how good of a memory I have?" Callum pulled his shirt over his head as he teased. She had her fun with him, now it was his turn.

Still feeling exposed, more exposed than she had been without the blouse just moments before, she crossed her arms. Rayla turned and began walking away, trying to cover the fact that she was blushing intensely, "I don't see what that has to do with anything." Rayla stated tersely, "If you're so good at remembering: Why'd you cry out?"

Callum paused in donning his coat. What had caused that startled cry?

He went through the events, reading his memories as though they were words of a book, moving from one sequence to another. He stood straighter.

"An arrow." Callum said, he set off towards the watchtower entrance again, "The arrow." He corrected. He disappeared into the shadows of the watchtower. Rayla, a question on her lips, just a few steps behind him.
"King my ass." Callum growled. Rayla watched him pace the round watchtower room, arrow in one hand, letter a crumpled mess in the other. He mocked, "'Your Liege', bah!"

"Are yoo a sheep now?" Rayla tried her patented brand of raillery to derail Callum's anger. Instead she only received a withering glare. Unabashed, she met the High Mage's glare with her own sarcastic smirk, daring him to talk back to her. It was a brief stand off, but his glare softened. It wasn't much but it was a brief glance at how hot and raw Callum's nerves were, normally he would never rise to the bait, even years ago, he would just serve it right back.

He went back to pacing, and Rayla stayed out of his way.

Footsteps echoing in the silent round room of the stone tower and it was starting to drive her mad, "Can I read it?" She held out her hand expectantly, absentmindedly keeping the other one across her chest and holding onto her other arm. She wasn't sure why, but this posture numbed a bit of the embarrassment from the previous interaction. When Callum had danced his dance and she had shown her…appreciation…in more ways than she had intended. His mind may have moved on to his brother's letter, but in the back of her mind she kept having whispers of disbelief and waves of embarrassment crashing over her.

True, she did enjoy the way his eyes had drifted and lingered so lazily across her in those moments, a lightness of excitement making her stomach flutter. Not that she would ever tell him, not this back-flippin' high-kickin' assassin. Oh, but how those emerald eyes had burned.

Callum glanced at her hand and thrust the parchment into her hands a little more roughly than she felt was deserved. Rayla elected not to say anything about that right now, though if he took time to notice her thin pressed lips he would've understood well enough. Her eyes raced over the words: 'Callum, I miss you and Rayla more than you can know. But in what I write, I ask not as your brother, but command as your king. Do not bring Rayla to Katolis, where I have stayed. She is in no condition to help with the task you would set her to. Instead I will send a small force to aid you in caring for her, they will meet you atop Humdrum Hill.'

Rayla, re-read the letter. No condition to help? In the last two days she had taken down a guard of Lunaflowne and the High Mage of Katolis. Care for her? If she remembered correctly it had been she who had kept these two bumbling humans from stepping into more than a few pitfalls, even had helped Ezran when he was sick with the bogey berries. She was practically a medicine woman. Healer and skilled murderer rolled into one, though, she had never killed anyone. Which she was
The letter did bring new questions to mind, she had to admit.

Those would wait, plying this human with questions would not be well received at present. Callum continued to pace, mumbling just barely audible.

She held the letter out to him, watching him with calculating eyes, "You dinnae know wha ta do."

"Right." Callum answered, taking the letter, finally pausing in his pacing. He turned from her and looked out one of the round openings of the watchtower. Tired eyes scanned the grasslands around them as if those rolling hills and waves of grass caught in the wind held the answers he sought. Rayla's had cut to the heart of the issue he currently mulled. She had taken the wind out of his sails and now he floated adrift in his mind, desperate to catch some current or insight as to what his next steps should be. Callum leaned against the stone, propped an elbow on the frame and held his head, trying to calm the racing thoughts. At his side, his off hand kept clicking his nails together in a nervous tick, a habit she had never noticed in him despite their time together.

Taking a breath, Rayla joined him at the window, standing beside him. Trying to soothe him with her presence alone she rested a bandaged hand on his shoulder. Callum looked at her out of the corner of his eye, smiling weakly, before his eyes went back to their studying without seeing. The Carnivorous Expanse swept on around them. She followed his gaze, and just stood for a time, careful not to look too closely at the patterns of movement that almost didn't fit the way the wind blew.

Rayla leaned her head on her bandaged hand, careful not to catch Callum with a stray horn, "Yu'll have something by the time we reach Katolis, I know it. I can see yo'r mind working." She reassured him, "Yu're the smartest human I've ever met, which isn't saying much, admittedly."

He snorted a laugh.

She was getting that pensive, angsty young man to crack a little, "The first human to touch the Sky Primum, to harness it, and in yo'r absolute madness, created little primal stones. You think some king's words are gonna stop ya?" She looked at him, noting with a fair amount of distaste she had to look up slightly. Just slightly. Luckily she had her horns to make up the difference. Rayla could see the confused features race across his face.

A pit of darkness replaced the light feeling in her gut, had she given something away? An icy hand caressed her spine. Everytime before, when she challenged the hallucinations, when she brought information into them from others they would begin to deteriorate, to crack and break. Sometimes they could pop like a bubble, leaving her to fall into infinity until the next one started, other times
trickling down steadily into a maddening hell of unreal, yet unforgettable, landscapes. Refusing to let the fear paralyze she forged on, pushing it down. She would deal with that in time, but now, here, the only thing that mattered was that this was the world before her, this was the world in which she participated, "Tell me what happened." She attempted to distract his attention, "Tell me why now, you came for me."

Callum took her hand from his shoulder, and held it, turning to face her, "So much, Rayla," Callum started, he searched her eyes, "Just a week ago, I had no idea if you were even still alive." He sighed in relief, "And when I heard you were alive, it was like the first time seeing the sun after years of night. But that knowledge came with a price, a chance. Zym told us that another contract for the life of the King of Katolis had been conscripted. Being the most powerful regent of the pentarchy is bound to get you in trouble, but Zym came and told us that the dragon queen still wanted his head as a price for Thunder. Maybe an eternal price for the murder of Thunder is that the Kings of Katolis will be constantly pursued."

She squeezed his hand, listening. Her heart ached for him. The thoughts he struggled with, the darkness twisting his mind and heart, an opaque reflection of her own struggle with that ever present threat of creeping sanity. Rayla looked, yes, looked up, into the eyes she had so often seen, but had never truly been this close to, "Ezran is lucky to have you." She smiled faintly, "I never had any siblings, only the other members of my Pack. I have no idea what it must be like for you two, but in all the time I have known you, you have never been at odds with one another. It was always the two of you against the world. Even when he went back to Katolis, I know that a piece of you went with him. A piece of you is still there with him."

Callum looked out the window again, furrowing his brow, "Where do you think this refusal of your help is coming from? He's obviously scared."

"I would be too." She cooed, "If I wasn't so stealthy and amazing." Rayla continued haughtily, "He's just doing this because he wants to be protect you. If he falls, yo're all Katolis will have." She let her words sink in, "Yo're the one that would be King. He's thinking of his people and the king the knows you'll be. For him. For Harrow."

Callum nodded along with her words, "Yeah," Callum agreed. Then in a harsh bark of a curse, "Fuck that. I don't want to be King." He turned from the window and began walking away.

She laughed coarsely after him, "So you have a plan then?"

"No." He grunted, "Yes." he corrected, "I plan to sleep. I'm so tired, Rayla." He began to meander toward the stairs. For the first time she was really aware of the way his feet dragged, the way he almost stumbled and swayed a little more gratuitously with each step. It wasn't the first time she noted the dark circles under his eyes. How long had it been for him without sleep now? Two days?
Did he sleep on the way to Lunaflowne at all?

Rayla grudgingly admitted being impressed to herself at how hard he had pushed his body and was able to keep going. Coming up beside him, letting him use her for a little more stability, they descended the narrow spiral staircase next to each other, "Well, Callum, I know what my plan is."

"Oh?"

"I'm gonna go to the Moon Nexus and tell those troops to turn their butts around and go protect the king. Because that's what he needs. Not people tha' will protect him, people that wan' to."

"He'll put you in the pillory for disobeying." Callum poked, "The whole city might show to throw vegetables at an elf."

"Eh, at least you'll be right there with me." Rayla told him, confidently. They emerged from the stairwell leading out of the watchtower and began their way back to the round room in which Bait and Zym snoozed, "That little boy thinks he's king of the world, but one command is one too many for him to be givin' me. King in the Pentarchy, but this-" she gestured to herself, "Is Xadian territory."

"At least until it's conquered." Callum quipped.

Rayla immediately dropped her support of him, causing him to stumble, catching himself on the edge of one of the stone planters that lined the corroded stone city. He smirked.

"Yoo," she pointed a finger at him, accusing, "Are a vile perverse little man." Her admonishments were half hearted and given with a wicked smile, 'I'm hopin' to forgive this whole muddlin' mess 'cause your so sleep deprived. I kno' that messes with yo're head."

Callum nodded as Rayla took his arm and wrapped it around her shoulder to help him. He nodded, "What happens in the Carnivorous Expanse, stays in the Carnivorous Expanse." He looked at her with sleep-drunk eyes. He had finally stopped resisting the somnolence and it showed in his walk, pace, and speech, "How is it that after three years you are able to talk me of the ledge so easily?"

She held him up as he tripped over his own toes, rolling her eyes, "Because humans are simple minded."
Callum’s laugh came out as a bark.

Rayla hadn’t been able to move on from the thought though. Three years? Was that really it? It seemed so much longer. One would think that she would be used to the cycle of lifespans and dreams that interweaved in her mind. Darkness did strange things to the perception of time when it was perpetual. For all she knew, she was still beneath that ancient stone monument, dwindling away towards the end of her life, and this was just the latest in a list of deprived dreamings. This particularly harrowing experience was one of the more inventive paths her mind had taken, and it seemed, somehow, more full. But didn't they all, in the moment? This Callum seemed so much more intense, more firm and grounded, than any she had encountered yet. He operated by the rules she knew him to follow, even if there were things about him that scared her. He still smiled readily, still laughed easily. But what Elyas had pointed out to her: this Callum seemed a hairsbreadth away from doing terrible things. Would three years of not knowing what happened to her really push that innocent, morally righteous, boyo, into this almost twisted mage?

The deeper she thought about it, the more she realized that she wanted these moments to be real, wanted to shed the responsibility of the accusations lain at her feet.

By Luna, Runaan, the others. The thought caught her off guard. Her heart still ached for them, she missed them terribly, and it was so much worse to not have a body to lay to rest in the ancient lunar groves of the assassins, she tried not to dwell on how without interring their bodies to their ancient burial grounds, they would not be permitted to join the ancestors of the Moonshadow. She forged on in her thoughts, leaving the ache and pain of her pack's demise.

Rayla wanted these last two days to be real, was allowing herself to start to hope, and whether it was her being swept up in a new narrative or herself giving all vestiges of lucidity away to the darkness, she didn't care. Right now, Callum needed her, Ezran needed her, Zym needed her. She felt bolstered, by moonless nights, it would seem the Pentarchy needed her.

She sighed, taking in the scent of Callum, regretting it instantly, she coughed, "You need a bath."

He responded sleepily, "Alright, but no peeking."

She jokingly slapped the back of his head.

They reached the room where Zym snored and Bait dreamed, jelly tarts dancing in his head, and Callum stumbled to the bedrolls alone, Rayla staying at the entrance atop the sloping dirt ramp.
Callum unceremoniously collapsed after making a straight line for the bedroll. There was about five minutes if him breathing evenly as he lay there on the floor before his eyes shot open wide and he cussed. "Shit!"

Zym snorted, not arousing.

Bait was unmoved.

"Did that help you solve your problem now?" Rayla asked, reclining against the archway frame.

"It was slightly cathartic, yes." Callum grumbled.

"Just breathe, Callum," She soothed, "focus on that."

Rayla looked out across the carnivorous expanse. She wouldn't be sleeping while they were in this forsaken land. Even now, she could see the grass undulating unnaturally about them. Rayla supposed it was safe enough to assume other elves would not be coming after them here.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, all, for the comments. They are addictive and I love them.

I hope you keep enjoying!

If this part of the story is going to take the path I want it to, there will be some non-main character stories coming, but I wanted to give you readers a heads up on that (in my experience when I read a not-main character chapter in a fic, it's a little disappointing)
Elyas had made his way back into Lunaflowne. Initially he had hidden in the copse and the abandoned home as Zym, his prince, had commanded him to. After a time, he had begun to get antsy, being caught in the cold night and drenched with rain, and had been about to make his way back to the city when two patrolling guards of the city, bearing no torch, scanned the area with their keen eyes. They passed, they chatted, half-heartedly searching for something they hoped to not find, most likely. Elyas had waited, breath caught in his through, hoping that the Danceleon made no sound, uttered no growls. In the end the due moved on, a mass of leather on steel that moved almost quietly. An all together uneventful course.

When they reached Lunaflowne he and the Danceleon had been greeted by a city in tumult. On every lip was the tale of the human that had come to Lunaflowne and murdered and conjured with abandon. Every tale he heard, the body count was climbing. Three to eight to twelve to fifteen. Elyas had a hard time believing any of it. Then, when he had seen his own home from a distance, blocked and surrounded by guards, he had begun to meander through Lunaflowne, worried that they would be hunting him as well as the ne'er-do-well human. As he wandered though nobody seemed to care that he was returned and walking in the daylight? With a Danceleon no less. The lack of interest in seeking out him or Rayla was remarkable, there had been multiple elves that had seen them with Callum, the guards of the Lunarium knew that Callum had taken a prisoner, and the police force knew that it had been Elyas's home that the trio burst out of in a mad dash at escape. Not really having a clear orientation or motive, he decided his first order of business had been to return the Danceleon to her owner at Shadows in the Dark, the brothel that he attended more for the female companionship than for the services provided.

It was while he was en route to talk to Sibyll, the proprietor of Shadows in the Dark and long time friend of Astrid, that he came across Alter. The first to recognize Elyas and usher him into his home, babbling loudly about unfortunate times and speaking nonsense about an unfortunate time to have traveled so far. Alter stabled the Danceleon in a shed to the side of his home where he kept the dried foods for his stew, closing the barn doors of the shed after giving the great lizard a handful of dried meats. He quickly led Elyas inside, who had never seen the interior of the fat old assassin's cramped home, and was surprised to find a stairwell leading down immediately upon opening the door that led to a spacious subterranean den that was outfitted with dark woods and warm leathers.

As Alter went about lighting a few candles, he stoked a fire in the open hearth made of river stones and pulled two glasses off of the accompanying mantle and grabbed a bottle from some chest. He had wiped the dust from the second glass, worked the glass stopper out of a caraffe and had poured a strange opaque and clear liquid into each glass, before handing Elyas one. They had spoken, Elyas close mouthed at first, but the kind interrogation techniques of his old friend were too much
to be avoided and before long he felt the tale of Callum and Rayla spilling out over his lips. When he finished he looked to his old friend, noting the tired look in his eyes.

"That is quite a tale, Elyas." Alter said, draining his glass. He poured himself another. Alter sat in a large leather chair in his sub-street level den across from Elyas own hard backed wooden chair, the cushions curving and supporting his own gratuitous mass. The fire crackled as it built, throwing long dancing shadows across the room and up the walls of the two men sitting in opposition. One elf, soft with age and girth in a soft chair, the other a mass of the hard muscles of youth in a hard chair coupled with a hard expression and furrowed brow.

"Really, though, Alter, can it be believed?" Elyas asked, holding the crystal highball in his massive hand, the grey liqueur swirling, dancing as it moved. Smoke Liqueur. He had recognized it by taste and scent, if not it's appearance. A mix of opaque grey and translucent that burned it's way down to your belly and left the pleasant scent of charcoal in your head that made one's head swim with only a little.

"So tha' is your concern? Not whether it is true, but if it can be believed?" Alter probed Elyas, getting him to think more thoroughly about his words. The round and wrinkled face, so wrinkled that his facial markings were almost lost, but the triangles adorning his upper brow still shone a faded violet. Teal eyes

"By Luna's grace, Alter," Elyas ran a hand through his beard, scratching absently, "I was with the boy, I saw what he was capable of, but I also know tha' he was not responsible fer Omni's death." He worked the events over again and again in his head. True, Callum had been a force to be reckoned with, an unstoppable mage that had played with the guards and toyed with their perceptions of reality. Could he have played with Elyas? Could he be so manipulative and arcane gifted that he could do things unnoticed with Elyas right in front of him?

No. Callum had been strong, clever, but not unstoppable. Elyas had seen the limits of his power.

He could not bring himself to believe what tale the people of Lunaflowne spun. These were words that likely fell from the Warden's tongue. Knowing now what had transpired, Elyas could see the way the Moonshadow elves were being bent to the will of the Warden.

"With a mage that powerful, knowing what we know about humans, their culture, and their affinity for deception and destruction, how are you so certain he didn't do it with his Dark Magic?" Alter continued to push his friend. His words were losing the hint of jovial and good natured laughter and were taking on an intensity that Elyas realized might have to do with the many years wielding blades. A glimpse of the assassin within seeping out through the cracks.
"I just feel it, Alter. In me bones," Elyas huffed, turning his attention again to the swirling dance of the liqueur in his glass, "I know it dinnae make sense."

Alter's intensity eased and he reclined further into the leather chair. He examined his younger friend for a time before speaking, "Why would the Warden have anything to do with the death of Omni? What would he gain?"

Elyas stared into the depths of his glass as though it would offer up the secrets he sought, "It stirs up trouble." He finally pondered aloud, "People are scared now. When they're scared they can be manipulated easily. You give people a common enemy, a threat, and they will turn their eyes from the troubles of their world and focus on the impending... threat..." Realization dawned on Elyas. Like iron at the forge, the Warden's words and tale were a bellows that stirred trouble like sparks. The Warden would have to strike while the iron was hot.

"But why, Elyas? The war is at a stand still. There has been no skirmishes at the Breach for almost a year." Alter continued to pull at the knot of his thoughts, hoping for the final strand to slip free, but Elyas heard these words as though they came from far off. He felt like a boat without a rudder, a ship lost without a sail, as his mind swirled amidst the smoke he drank in.

Elyas worked, the scent of smoke in his nostrils, "Think how threatening that would be, Alter, an empire of elven warriors suddenly without a foe to fight? No where to turn their blades? Do you really expect all the assassin's and forge wrights to beat their swords into plows?"

Alter lead Elyas's thoughts on, "And all the seemingly minor issues suddenly become much larger. With a common enemy, you can manipulate a country, a nation, but if there is no threat, then people start to question your rule, start to fight it."

"Exactly!" His eyes darted, seeing things as if for the first time, "Which begs the question, why did we, elves, in the first place pledge to follow these arch dragons. They are not like us, they are as otherworldly as can be. They say it was due to dark Magic, but surely dark Magic doesn't pervade their culture, I've seen as much, Rayla has seen as much. She trusts them." His voice became distant as did his gaze, "But to convince an entire civilization, six civilizations, of their natural maliciousness, you would need …"

"Generations?" Alter smiled into his glass, downing another full helping and filling it again. He topped off Elyas as well.

Astounded, Elyas drank, "Yes."
Alter scratched his chin, "I'm not saying you've convinced me, Elyas, but what would we do with that information? Riot in the streets? Take the fight to the Dragon Queen? Confront them? Just talking about things like this is apt to get you knifed in the streets."

"What if we left, Alter," Elyas stood from his chair, going to the fire place, leaning on the mantle, "We go to the Pentarchy, tell them of the lies the Dragon Queen spouts."

"Well that sends pretty drastic." Alter chuckled.

"I'm serious," Elyas bit, eased, took a deep breath and asked, "What would you do?

"Well if I was ever granted the honor of an audience with her Eminence, Gale herself," He downed a third glass and filled a fourth, "I would ensure that neither she nor that whelp of hers survived and I'd take out every member of the Dragon Guard that got in my way."

Elyas was aghast, "What dark words are these, Alter?"

The growl that emanated from the fat elf made Elyas take a step back, "That most holy of infernal serpents has more sins to pay for than any human could ever accrue." His eyes were black with rage. His grip on his crystal glass was tight, the cords of his hands straining.

"Only the Katolin King Harrow and his mage Viren the Vindictive have ever managed to kill an Arch Dragon." Elyas was stunned, it was all he could think to say. He took a deep breath and finished the rest of his own smoke liqueur.

Alter looked into the flames, "Maybe his sons are up to the task."

Chapter End Notes

How do you get your loyal fan base to read a second thing you're writing? Include it in the first thing you're writing!

Here is a glimpse into an AU I had an idea for. If it is well liked I would continue it separately, but this would of course delay A Narrative of Power's progress. Let me know your thoughts, friends!
"You could always order the house special, Callum," Claudia leaned on the counter top, bored, watching other college students walk about the campus coffee shop, Can't Sleep, Won't Sleep.

Callum stood at the counter looking at the menu, unsure of what to order, "I mean…" He hesitated, "Sure."

Claudia called out, "One Hot Brown Morning Potion for Callum!" and began punching keys on the register.

From the other side of the bar came a girl's voice, a thick accent coating her words in it's warm embrace, "Black Coffee for Cal, comin' up."

Callum poked his head around the glass display case and saw a new face. A girl, no, a young woman, wearing a red plaid skirt over black tights and laced up boots, her top a sleeveless t-shirt that revealed hints of her bra without showing anything other than black. Her make-up was just slightly dramatic with two curved lines of purple coming to a point on her ivory cheeks. Violet eyes focused on her task, biting her lower lip in mock focus. Hair died white with red showing at the roots kept in a mess of braids, that was haphazardly arranged to keep her hair from her face.

"Order up." white haired woman called.

Callum continued to watch her and asked his old friend, "Who is the new girl?"

Claudia, expression anything but entertained, lazily glanced at the new barista, "That's Rayla," She mumbled and then went back to watching the other college students meander by, free from the ties of financial oppression, "Just transferred here from over seas. Here on some scholarship for something I didn't really pay attention."

"Cool," Callum said, impressed, then, "I'll see you back at the house."

Claudia waved him goodbye without looking at him.

He went and grabbed the black coffee, eyes never leaving the girl with white hair. She kept her focus on cleaning the counter behind the chest high bar where his beverage waited.

"Why don't ye take a picshure," She bit without looking, "It'll last longer."

"I-I, uh," Callum grabbed the coffee and walked away uttering a hurried, "Thank you!" and walked out the double glass doors, joining the rest of the students streaming by.
Ezran sat on the throne in Katolis, the room about him in a grey haze. He wore a scowl on his face that faded into a smile. He spoke, but Zym could not perceive the words. Before Ezran knelt a large man in armor of silver and black plate, overlapping in a vertically descending pattern that hugged his form. The sword he carried was out and he used it, point down, to brace his weight. Beside him a woman in a chair with grey hair and grey skin wearing a simple black dress made worthy of the throne room by it's gold embroidery and pointed sleeves. Her posture was hunched and her hands fidgeted in her lap. Her legs were unmoving. The silver grey of her hair covered her eyes.

Zym strained to hear the words, reaching further and further west, where Ezran constantly pulled him.

In frustration, Zym growled. He opened his eyes, the distant scene fading away as he awoke. The small room that he shared with Mage and Snack came flooding into his perception. He stretched his mighty wings, flexing and relaxing the large thin appendages. He extended his neck in the just small enough room and groaned. A sound like the earth moving caused the small pebbles and collections of dirt to vibrate around him, a layer of silt from the dirt ramp slid down into the room.

"Good evening, sleepy head." Mom chimed from where she stood leaning against the arch way into their subterranean accommodations. Her figure was highlighted by dusk coming through the archway around her, white hair kissed orange. Even though it was growing dark, his eyes could make out the features of her face, the kind violet eyes and sarcastic smirk. Joy swelled in his hearts. It wasn't the same as the joy he felt when he had met Mother. Mother he knew to be his relative, there was a strict and formal emotion there, forged by the memories he had received over the years as an egg. There was respect for Mother, but there was love for Mom. The dragon purred his contentment, a deep and rumbling sound, still so filled with joy to know she was safe now, safe out of the Lunarium.

Noting Mage and Snack still slumbered, the purr turned to a bark that startling Mage and Snack from where they slept on the small bedroll, no bigger than his haunch. The human cried out and jolted awake with Snack at his feet. Stumpy legs flailed as Snack turned a sour red and tried to right his pudgy body from lying on his back. He scrambled and writhed, eventually overturning himself. Mage nudged the Glowtoad with his boot and every uncoordinated attempt came to fruition. As Mage rubbed the sleep from his eyes, the sour red became a pleasantly panting yellow.
Mage let out a chuckle and pat the toad on the head.

Mage stood, righting his pants and coat, then stretched, "Nothing beats a little bit of sleep in an ancient abandoned fortress ruins." He stood and pulled his arm across his chest, then the other, "Though I was having the best dream," he said absently.

"What about?" Mom asked, sliding down the ramp and joining the trio.

Mage looked as though he suddenly didn't want to talk about it. After a long pause, "Water proof socks." He said finally.

"Ha, you're as mad as Villads." Mom laughed as she began to roll the bedroll she had left unused and tie it to the other shoulder bag they had brought with them.

Mage contemplated aloud, "He might have been on to something actually." Standing, he slung his sketch book over his shoulder and then added the shoulder bag with his own bedroll.

Bored with their banter, Zym looked to each of his miniscule companions in turn. Rayla, surrounded in the soft white aura of her lunar gift, Bait with his own orange red hues, and Callum, a hueless creature. An abomination of nature that magic had forgotten. At least, that is what the memories of Thunder told him as they had tumbled through his head. But even as he looked to the human, flickering of red and orange as well as blue, that no longer seemed to be the case. The colors continued to undulate and twist into and out of one another, folding on themselves with incomprehensible dimensions.

Something to dwell on another time, he opened his mind to the trio: a sending of himself in flight, the three of them upon his back, the scent of the wind and the cool caress of the frigid air. Moonrise and moonfall, with sunrise at it's end, *It is time we left.*

Made nodded his agreement, grabbing a handful of nuts and berries out of one of the shoulder bags external pockets. He threw some in his mouth and then handed the rest to Snack who left trails of thick saliva across his hand. Mage didn't seem to notice or care about the thick mucus on his hand. He turned to Mom, "Will you sleep?"

"I dinnae kno' if I should trust you to watch ovah' as of yet." Mom smirked. Zym snorted quietly as he navigated to the archway exit, he didn't need elven and hueless pheromones clouding his senses.
"Well, I think Bait will have to watch us both." Mage answered with a yawn, "I've been up for a serious stretch, I could still use some catching up." He followed Zym out into the open air. The night sky was just beginning to edge past dusk, the red of the sun dying in the far west, to the east the deep purples and blues of night already holding sway with the pinpricks of light that were the heavens. As the Sun Primal disappeared and the Moon primal came into sway, the specks of light of the Star Primal added their own incandescent violet aura to the glowing white of the moon's. The green of Earth effervesced into the cyan of Sky with specks of Sea floating like fireflies through it all. An aurora borealis of white, violet, cyan, green, and blue seemed to rained down and bubbled up to Zym's eyes, a beautiful undulating skyscape that he had to close his mind to in order to see the world as the other's did.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Mage asked Zym, taking a deep breath.

*More than you know,* Zym laughed. He whipped his long serpentine tail, *Come, let us fly away from here.*

Mage, Mother, and Snack all clambered onto Zym's back as he bent his forelegs to allow them easy access, the ridges of his silver scales offering purchase and handholds. It was not uncomfortable to have them upon his back, though everything from his shared memories shouted and ranted against ever being so subservient as to be ridden. Zym couldn't place what was different from his perspective or the shared memories of his forebears, but something about having Mom and Mage close felt right to him. Zym knew that if the roles had been reversed they would let him ride upon them, and they had. Mage had carried him in a shoulder bag, and Mom and carried him upon her shoulder.

The three settled upon Zym's back, Mage between his shoulder blades, Mom and Snack held in the canopy between his wings, straddling the ridges of his spine. Zym craned his long neck so he could look them in the face and saw Mom cradling the fat Glowtoad in her arms, leaning on his mass as though he were a giant pillow. Though Snack's visage was that of perpetual discontent, joy radiated off the small creature. Mage was doing some final pre-flight checks on their bags, making sure everything was secure, then nodded.

"Alright, Zym," He said, flashing a thumbs-up in the fading light, "Ready to fly."

Zym did not nod, did not answer, merely began to beat his giant wings, the too large appendages coaxing drafts and lift from the surrounding air. Zym could feel the Sky Primal surging through him and used his wings to guide it under him, propelling him forward and upwards. An ancient magic with no need for runes, something that happened naturally for all dragons, the gift of flight.

As Zym whipped his way upwards into the sky, above the Carnivorous Expanse he heard Mage shout over the wind, "What is that?"
Beneath them, in the distance from the last vestige of the ruins as they rapidly faded below them, the grasslands not just seemed to writhe and beat in the wind, but the entire landscape shifted and changed, the hills of grass rising and falling. In places the grass seemed to tear away and reveal a massive shape covered in boney plates that burrowed through the surface and beneath it.

"Shaitan." Mom said simply, glad to be out of the Carnivorous Expanse, "A great beast, Shai'hulud to some. A Paragon of the Earth Primal."

"Paragon?" Callum asked, confused, "Like the Arch Dragons?"

*No, Zym answered, watching the writhing disappear further and further below, The paragons are creatures of pure elemental magic, not living creatures such as you or I. Where the Primal has run rampant through Xadia, it leaves a seed which the paragons hatch from. Sometimes they are benevolent, but Shai'hulud, once hailed as a great creator, a Maker, the anvil with which the world was forged, became twisted and now only swims this dirt sea, trapped on all borders by mountains.*

"How old is it?" Mage asked, amazed.

"Older than the ruins," Mom answered him, yawning into Snack's head.

"A Paragon of the Primal." Mage tasted the words, "Remarkable." Despite the heavy gusts of wind that surrounded them, he pulled his sketchbook from his shoulder and set to work with his charcoal pencil. Even with the gusts of wind, Zym could hear the scratch of every line and curve he drew.

Despite the departing dusk and only having the light of the gaining moon and stars above by which to work, Mage worked diligently. Moments to minutes the picture took life. Curiously, Zym would look over his shoulder from time to time as they flew steadily on the drafts of autumn.

*Why waste your time with these false images?* Zym asked. The words and images that flowed from him somewhat insulting.

Mage did not seem to be angered by his words, but he did seem taken off guard, "Do dragons not have art?"
Dragons are art. Pride and austerity incarnate.

Mage chuckled as he looked to Mom, noting her snoozing. A small trickle of drool leaked out of her open mouth and into Snack's open and snoring mouth. He watched her sleep, a smile on his face, "I can't say what would mean for a dragon," Mage went on, "But for me, art is a magic in and of itself. It affords me the power of creation, a mastery over the elements. A mastery over time. When I draw something I am taking it as it is in that moment and capturing it to the best of my ability forever so that I may revisit it from time to time."

Confusion and a nonsensical series of images flooded Callum's mind, So everything you draw is real?

Mage turned from the sleeping elf and Glowtoad, "No. But they are moments I may want to revisit again." His voice was quiet.

How can you revisit a moment that never happened? Again, confusion filled the connection.

Mage sighed, "Well, sometimes it’s a feeling. If I want to share a feeling, an emotion, a thought, I can convey many words with just an image, and further than that, it transcends the differences in language that some people have. A smile is going to be a smile no matter where you go."

Zym took these words and thought on them. True it was that way, a smile on an elf was the same as a smile on a human, but there was much that could be deciphered from expressions and pheromones as well as actions. Spoken words, language of images. Interactions with lesser beings were so slow. When he was with Mother the thoughts flowed effortlessly from one to the other. Memories and passions a synchronous symphony of past and present. Here, the song was halting. The communication stilted.

In his time with Mother she had shared with him the ebb and flow of the world, how humans had come to be in the land of Xadia, and the dragons role in their exile. It was strange to think that just a lifetime ago, a lifetime for his kind, humans were not even a consideration. The biggest feat the dragons had to wrestle with was the feuding tribes of Xadians, Moonshadow versus Sunfire, Earthblood vs any other group. Now that they had a common enemy in the humans, the Xadians had banded together.

Remembering a memory that was not his own, Zym drifted through the sky, pushing onwards ever westward. A time when dragons flew through the skies, snatching them from the earth and taking them into the sky to feed on their flesh. He could taste it, the hot blood in his throat and the magic in his gut as the dragon that had been soaked up the nutrients of flesh and soul alike. A ferocious
onslaught, a predator made in every way to be a killer, to sit atop the food chain and glut upon the lesser creatures.

But then dragons had stopped eating elves. He searched his memory for the why of it, but suddenly ages ago, the dragons who had sat atop the food chain suddenly started ruling the elves. Was it a relationship out of fear for the dragons power? Was it a relationship borne out of convenience? Were they not like cattle to the Arch Dragons, little creatures meant to thrive only so that they may be feasted upon later.

It was this time that Mother had kept hidden from him, that he could not glean from the shared memories. There was something forgotten there, almost beyond the edge of his reach. He could feel it, as though his talon scraped across the glassy surface of it, unable to gain purchase.

The night had continued to pass as Zym flew on, and in his frustration he spoke to Mage, *Tell me again, why do you not perform Dark Magic?* The connotations that came with the phrase dark magic were nothing so distressing as they had experienced in the past. It came across as healing, life, and death magic, all intertwined into a single meaning.

"Hm?" Mage was taken off guard, much of the night had passed in silence, his silent contemplation of the moon and stars interrupted, "Dark Magic?"

Zym answered only with a sending of impatience.

"I guess, what it comes down to," Mage spoke hesitantly, "Is that I don't understand that power. I can feel it, I can know how to use it, but I don't understand what it is I am using. The Primal Pebbles are much the same, I have an idea, I can capture some of an Arcanum's essence, but truly understanding it still seems…beyond my reach. And there is something perverse about it. I saw what it did to Viren in the end, I know what it would cost me to use it regularly like Claudia likely still does."

He was silent, and Zym thought he was finished.

"I understand it though, the pull to use it." Mage whispered, "When I did use that power, it was like I was starving for something and a banquet was before me. All I had to do was reach out and take it to satiate myself. But with the first bite, Zym, it turned to ash and dust in my mouth. No, I don't think I would ever use it again."
When I hunt, I do not leave my claws behind, I do not creep across the ground, I do not pull my teeth from my head and gum my prey to an untimely demise.

Mage's face was confused as he looked at Zym's head, white hair blowing in the wind of their flight, "I'm not sure I understand, Zym."

Cyan eyes turned, and in the night, met Mage's emerald ones. A sending of empty graves and rotting flesh, carrion crawling over verdant valleys, Mage's face becoming gaunt and pulled like a skull before the skin whisked away by unfelt winds leaving only bleached white bone, Before this is all done, Mage-Brother, you will be hard pressed to not use it again.
The world below Callum was a mix of darkness occasionally specked with collections of light. Sometimes a city, sometimes camp fires, or a grove of bioluminescence. Callum yearned to be down closer to the ground, to explore Xadia as once Rayla and he had. Now there was no time.

Ezran's words ran through his brain again and again. The letter long since torn up in frustration and cast to the wind, but his memory kept the words fresh. Frustration and anger clutched his heart, and sorrow swam through his mind. Ezran did not deserve any of this, and he always carried everyone else on his shoulders. He was made to be King of Katolis, everything about him forged perfectly for the role that Harrow had left for him. His heart was hard, yet kind, his mind sharp, yet thoughtful. Ezran was everything that a King should be.

Except old enough.

With a sad sigh, Callum resolved to make sure that his little brother reached that milestone.

No matter the cost.

No matter the cost? Zym's sending raced through his head. The hours since the images and taste of carrion filled him had been a cacophonous silence made of wind howling in his ears. The fatigue in his bones from the onslaught that had been the rescue of Rayla pulled at his mind, hindering it. He had been close back then. He knew it. It seemed that Elyas knew it. But how close had he really been?

How easy it would be to just reach out and grasp that power that Claudia and Viren thrived on. Before he had ever touched it, Dark Magic had been something out of reach, something incomprehensible to pursue, but then once he had dipped his fingers in that inky black well, it had left a stain. Ever present, it had seeped through his fingers and into his mind as though there was some dark shade just beyond the edge of his vision.

It wasn't evil. Not in and of itself, or at least, did not seem evil to him. On the contrary, it actually offered warmth. When things were difficult, when he was pushed beyond what he thought he could handle, it seemed to revitalize him, reinforcing his fatigued body and mind.
At times, Callum could still feel the soft wet squish of that worm's body as he had crunched it, the syrup like green blood that had flowed between his fingers, and then, almost as if guided by instinct alone, he was able to reshape the world. There was no arduous trial in attempting to touch an Arcanum. He recalled the spiraling dream that had come on it's heals as he forged a connection to the Sky Arcanum. He recalled the righteous fury necessary to connect him to the Sun Arcanum.

Callum looked over his shoulder at Rayla, and behind her, the sky beginning to glow bright with the morning sun. She snoozed with a smile on her pink lips.

What would she think of him if he crossed that bridge? She would hate him, she would never forgive him. He would have chosen to become an arbiter of death as she saw it. It was a strange promise that had kept them as companions, a promise to break the cycle, to change the world. A child's dream, but it was still what kept them going. It was her commitment to that idea that had him so enticed by her, he realized. She was an elf trained all her life to be deadly, more weapon than person, but at the first opportunity to reject the doctrine of murder and malice, she cast off the shackles and became something more. Not a Paragon of a Primal, but a Paragon of Morality.

And Callum? He had never been trained in anything other than failing at sword fighting. He did not have a gift to forsake, skills to abandon for his own moral betterment. All he was, all he had ever been, was an artist before Rayla, and a Mage after. How could he reject a cycle he was never part of? And with all that was coming, all the battles and all the political posturing, could he really say that it was beyond him to use violence? Was he able to look into the heart of violence that was coming and not use that tool that so many humans and elves had leaned on? And what of Dark Magic? Make your words a little more convincing? Heal your soldiers that much faster than the enemy from battle? Keep Ezran safe? Where was this line he dared not cross?

Callum still had so much on his plate, his brother, Rayla's health, though still intimidating she may be, and the stability of Katolis, and by extension, the Pentarchy. He took his sketchbook out and twirled the charcoal pencil in his hands. He flipped to a blank page and set to drawing. With Shai'Hulud on the opposing page, his thought's drifted and sifted through magic and nature, through people and problems, through Xadia and the Pentarchy. One line leading to another, a smudge here and there to give shadow and form. He didn't realize while he was drawing it, but he went to the muse that always brought his mind peace.

Rayla.

At the end of his On the page before him, Rayla stood, her back to him. A shawl wrapped around her back and draped over open arms so that it flowed about her. One hand held delicately to her lips with, the knuckle of her index finger resting against those soft lips, slightly parted. A glance cast over her bare and slender shoulders. A coy smile teased knowingly below eyes that would be violet if he had his inks. The shawl about her back just far enough above her thighs that it hinted and teased at the hidden curves below, like a small breeze or gentle shifting of her stance would reveal
so much more. Her legs were bare and spread, hips cocked to one side so that all her weight rested upon the leg in the foreground. Though there was no color, the shading gave hints of a blush spreading across her cheeks, on parts of her thighs. Her feet were bare upon the floor.

There were some details he added that he had not realized he placed there. The shawl she was wrapped in was no shawl, but one of the throw blankets he kept in his quarters, the symbol of the two towers of Katolis obvious amongst the blankets bends and folds. The shadowed imagery about her mimicked the view from his bed, her body illuminated by a fireplace off the left of the page. Her horns were adorned with two ornaments that he knew to be silver, like he had seen in so many other elves. Around her neck, a tight band of thin black, that he knew, but no one else would see, Sarai's gold band hung on at a heart shaped ornamentation at her throat.

When finished, he rested his hand on the side of the page. Little hints of things he had included absently tumbled in his head, the dream of them far off, their meaning not fully realized or understood by the artist. A muse close enough to touch, and yet so distant still. There were times when he would catch her looking into the distance, thoughts unreadable, face expressionless, as though she were in a different place entirely. How he wished to know the river of her thoughts and the landscape of her mind, if not the tumult of her heart.

Callum tucked the pencil into the binding and tucked the sketchbook away, the therapeutic effect of his drawing hemmed by thoughts now dwelling on things that cannot, and by all human and elf counsel, shouldn't be. He turned again to look at his slumbering muse for the who-knows-what time that night. Rayla hugged Bait close, soaking in his warmth as she leaned her weight against him. The Glowtoad continued to look grumpy, despite his own somnolence.

What Callum would give to switch places with that fat yellow amphibian.

Rather than dwell on the jealous monster in his heart, he turned his gaze downwards, watching the forested lands disappear beneath them. Where, far to the east there had been a forest of evergreens that molded into the plains of the Carnivorous Expanse, this forest was ancient as well as verdant. The air was damp even this far up and the pungent smell of decay rich soil wafted ever higher as the sun began to beat down on the canopy. To the north, a range of red rock mountains cut the landscape, the trees climbing right up the side of the mountains, only their peaks, awash with white snow and ice, and the steep cliff faces of their terrain, showed its brilliant red through the ancient foliage.

Zym turned southward, and the expanse of trees continued on. Callum watched the land bend and twist, trying to see below them only to have the land go racing by. It was dizzying and made his head spin. He laughed.

Zym's sending came suddenly a flurry of wind and shifting gravitational pulls, *Hold on.*
Callum barely had time to react when Zym tucked his wings in and took a spiraling dive straight for the forest. He yelped and reached out his hands. One to hold onto something, anything, and the other going for Rayla. He wrapped a hand around her wrist which woke her. She looked around blearily for a split second before alarm took hold. She became momentarily weightless as she drifted off of Zym's ridged back into the air.

"Ah!" She screamed as her legs were pulled out from under her by the dive.

"Bowowowwwooowowowoooooo!" Bait protested as his bulk took on the same featured weightlessness, drifting away from Rayla in the air.

Callum's stomach dropped out and he clung to Zym for dear life, but he could not hide the exhilaration of the moment, the wind in his hair whipping around them.

Rayla did not look anywhere as enthused. She shouted, barely audible over the tearing wind, "Wha' in the name o' tha moon ar'ye thinkin'?" Her eyes wide, tears streaming from the corners, mouth open, she watched the land rush up towards them. She clutched Callum's wrist with one hand, and Bait's tail with the other. The Glowtoad was a brilliant luminescent streak of yellow plummeting towards the earth behind them.

Assured in his grasp of Rayla, and her grasp of Bait, he looked and assured himself of his grasp on Zym. Past where he clutched the dragon though, he could see the canopy of trees rushing towards them. To say the speed was alarming would be an understatement. If they hit any of those branches at this speed it wouldn't be a matter of the strength of the tree, Zym or Callum would break. Rayla would likely just bruise.

Callum grit his teeth to hide the laughing scream that wanted to burst out of him.

Like a silver meteorite, the four of them streaked downwards.

And then they were through the canopy.

Zym's wings burst outward, snapping in the air like taught cords. A sudden transition occurred from lethal speed in the light of the morning to the cool damp shade beneath the canopy, their descent slowing rapidly. Callum felt the body of the dragon rise up to meet him as he continued to fall with Rayla and Bait coming to rest behind him. Callum couldn't help the laughter as the racing
wind sucked the breath from his lungs.

Callum took in the forest around them, it was still passing by rather quickly, and when the forest floor came, they passed through it. The dragon slowed his descent through an opening in the forest floor that opened into a large cavernous maw of earth. Multiple small falls of water tumbled over the edge following them. The red rock of the land was covered with moss on the surfaces of rocky outcroppings along the descent. Deeper than the tallest tower of Katolis was tall, the air cooled rapidly and the moisture clung to Callum's skin as the tumbling water bounced off of rocky projection after projection. A fine mist filled the air.

Zym came to a stop, the momentum of his descent thrown far and wide by his wings as they fell. He touched down lightly with all four padded feet tapping lightly upon the ground. He turned about looking at his handiwork.

Callum laughed, still giddy from his near death flight. Bait was a rare shade of green, and Rayla, her ivory skin always pale, yet usually caressed with a blush, was absolutely wan.

Arrogantly, Zym barked, echoing upwards through the earthy maw, *I am a leaf on the wind.*

Callum slid off of his back, his legs still shaking from the exhilaration and slipped directly onto his backside. Rayla's face and Zym's sending tipping him even further over the edge of giddy laughter.

"You. Are. Mad." Rayla accused the dragon.

The expression on Zym's face could only be described as devious. Teeth bared and lips curled, a wicked look in his cyan eyes.

Callum finally caught his breath as Rayla helped Bait off of the offending dragon's back and looked around. Above them, a rocky expanse of red and green beneath a shaded canopy. The sounds of the forest above radiating down and intertwining with the sounds of the various falls. The song of strange birds, the chitter of unseen insects, the odd call of something larger. They stood on an island, or rather, a massive boulder, that had fallen likely forging the pit they had come through, surrounded on one side by a crescent shaped lake that seemed to stretch on beneath the rocky formations into a whole other natural and unnatural terrains. A river ran from the crescent lake deep down into the earth with an unknown distant destination.

"It's awful…wet…around here, Zym. Why did'ja have to pick a place with so much…wetness."
Rayla looked at the crescent lake, waterfalls, and descending river uneasily.

"The river didn't make you uneasy? You bathed in it right?" Callum asked testing various areas for solid footing, getting an idea of where they might set up camp for the coming day.

"Tha' was a river. A large, but shallow, river." Rayla retorted, "Everythin' in here is soakin'. So unless you want bogey berries up yu'r nose for tha next week, maybe we should find sum'place warm 'n' dry."

Zym rolled his eyes and went to the edge of the crescent lake, peering into the depths.

"Wha's he doin' now?" Rayla watched Zym on the bank.

Callum looked over his shoulder from his testing, "Looks like he's hunting."

"Huntin'?" Rayla asked looking back just in time to see Callum have his feet slip out from under him on a slick spot of stone. He flung his arms wide in an attempt to catch himself on...anything. Finding nothing, he caught himself on the wet stone with his tailbone. He felt the jolt race all the way down his spine and his teeth came down hard on his tongue.

Callum let out a cry of alarm and pain.

Rayla let out a raucous burst of laughter.

Callum looked at her darkly, "Thith ithn't funny."

Rayla snorted.

Callum remained where he sat in the muck and grime, squinting at her darkly. Slowly, he picked himself up off the ground, wiping away the dirt and the grime, but only really succeeding in getting his hands just as filthy.

"No rethpect." Callum mumbled to himself as he walked towards the crescent lake where Zym
scanned the water. He squatted there and began to splash his hands in the water, allowing the grime to sift away in it's dark waters.

Zym turned to look at Callum.

Callum looked to Zym, "What?"

Out of the corner of his eye, a shadow shifted in the water, lightning quick. Before Callum could react and pull away, a set of jaws emerged from the water coming right at him. Jagged and yellow, vertical jaws opened to reveal a pink and gaping mouth with two tongues and a pair of red eyes within.

Callum had just time to register that something deadly was happening, when Zym's own fearsome jaws clamped down on the strange beast.

Callum opened his mouth. No words came. Just strangled noises.

Now, Callum, Zym sent, twisting the amphibians neck and having it go limp in his jaws, It is safe to wash your hands.

"Th-thanks." Callum stammered.

"Bahahahahahaha!" Rayal jeered from behind him, "Oy, Callum, d'ya need ta wash yu'r pants aftah tha' wun?"

Callum looked at the creature and, it no longer breathed, and jagged teeth framed vertical jaws, at times growing through it's sickly green flesh. It's body was fat, but low profile with stumpy legs and large in place of hind legs with a long finned tail behind it, hanging limply in the water.

Callum watched as Zym threw it on the rocky surface and pinned the corpse with one hand, biting into it's fleshy mass. Blue blood seeped around the dragons teeth as he chewed.

"You know what, Rayla," Callum answered, "I have a plan for how I am going to stay warm and dry tonight. Do you?" Her laughter stopped.
Taking the small victory, he set his bag in the driest spot he could find, followed by his coat and then his scarf. He took off his boots, then his socks. The stone floor was not as obnoxious as he anticipated it would be on his feet.

He went around the edge of the giant boulder, Rayla disappearing from view.

"Don' fall in, now!" Rayla's voice echoed through the earthen cavern.

"It's like having a shit throwing contest with a monkey." Callum griped to himself, "Is it safe for me to go in, Zym."

Silver scales covered in blue blood as gore dripped from the dragon's jaws quirked at Callum, Is anything ever safe?

Great, now even Zym was joining in the mockery. Sick of it, he fished a Primal Pebble of sky from his pouch and drew the familiar rune in the air with his hand, "Fulminis." No sooner had the spell sparked to life in his hand than did he thrust his entire fist into the water. He heard Rayla yelp and Zym startle, scrambling away from the water's edge.

Though the dragon glared at Callum, he could not help but have a satisfied smirk on his face as some of the dark water's residents bobbed to the surface, stunned. Cave fish of various sorts, some more strange amphibians of smaller size. Seeing these, Zym no longer seemed perturbed by Callum's spells and snatched up the quick snacks from the surface of the lake.

At the lakes edge, near one of the larger falls, Callum finished disrobing and began to wade out into the water, the edge dropping away suddenly leaving him to bob and swim to beneath the falls on his own. The water was cool, but not cold, refreshing despite it's murkiness. Once beneath the falls he attempted to just float and let the cool water rinse the grime of their journey away. He felt muscles ease that he hadn't known had been tense, felt stress seep from his mind. Relaxation hit him like a wave.

A piercing whistle broke the serenity of the moment.

He spun in the water, looking for it's source, and saw Rayla sitting lazily on the shore. Holding his pants. And his shirt. And his undergarments. Callum's eye's went wide.
"No point cleaning yur meat if yu're gonna put it back in tha same rancid wrappin's." She called over the sound of the falls.

"Don't, Rayla." Callum begged, a nervous smile quirking the edge of his lips as he tried to maneuver so the murkiness of the water hid the more sensitive areas of his body.

"Don'? Don' what?" Her own voice teasing.

"Don't throw my clothes in the water Rayla!" It all came out in a rush, panic unfurling.

"Throw y'ur clothes in?" She seemed surprised.

"No!" Callum shouted, trying to stay afloat while both covering himself and paddling water.

"Yes?" She was mocking him.

"No!" he felt himself begin to capsize slightly. Moved his hands he attempted to correct his drift, but it was too late. The natural buoyancy of his body was trying to bring his hidden appendages into the light. He splashed frantically.

"Yes." She threw his pants, shirt, and undergarments into the water.

Callum quit splashing as he righted himself finally and seethed as the clothes floated out to him.

Snatching the sopping clothes, Callum watched Rayla wave and walk away from the banks, giving him a semblance of privacy. Her voice lilted as she walked away, "Don't try and throw shit with this monkey, you'll just end up covered."

Dejected, Callum swam back to the bank where he sa, cleaning his pants, undergarments and shirt in the water. The fresh water ran over them and grime that he hadn't noticed had found its way into the threads was rinsed away. The blue was darker, his pants a more charcoal grey, his underwear was not nearly as dingy and actually resembled the pink and white candy stripe he had left Katolis
He caught Zym looking at him, blue on silver amongst his scales.

"What're you looking at?"

Zym's tail merely frisked and whipped, waiting for the next part of the exchange between the two.

Finishing the undergarment first, he set that aside to dry in the open air and went back to cleaning his other clothes, then himself. It was amazing what just water alone could do, but he would be thankful once he was back in Katolis with soaps and a proper bath tub.

Finishing the chore, he donned the pink and white garment, wincing at it's cold damp sensation. He had nothing to dry with, and momentarily considered the use of a Sun Primal Pebble, but he had already used a Sky Pebble, and intended to use an Earth Pebble before the night was done.

Callum navigated back around the bank, grabbing his boots, socks, coat and scarf. A little further on he grabbed his sketchbook and rucksack. He marched around the stone landscape, Rayla coming into view where she lounged, mouthful of nuts and berries, chewing idly. She smiled at him as he rounded the corner, he only glared.

Rayla swallowed, "Now tha' yu'r as wet as can be, can ya tell Zym we need anotha' place to sleep so we can dry out? I'm still a tad sleepy and would like ta get a bit more rest."

Callum said nothing.

"Why do you have that evil…nay…devilish grin on your face?" She asked around another mouthful of berries.

"Oh. No reason." Callum walked over to one of the walls of the rock formation, "C'mon Bait, I need you to dry my clothes."

The yellow toad scrambled after his long time friend, leaving Rayla on the boulder by herself with her pack and bedroll. Rayla followed the amphibian with a gratuitous scowl.
"Where are ya goin'?" She sat up. Callum suppressed a chill as her alluring violet eyes rested on his exposed skin.

"Right. Here." Callum said. A green Primal Pebble danced across his knuckles, "Defodis." He commanded, the rune coming to life in the air.

The red rock wall before him cracked and a circumscribed bit of stone tumbled away leaving a round opening just large enough for one to crawl into. More rocks tumbled out continuously leaving a pile of fist sized red rocks below the opening. Bait climbed up the ramp of stones and into the opening, luminating the way. Rayla was surprised to watch the light grow dimmer and dimmer, the amphibian disappearing further into the opening than she thought he would be able to.

Callum watched her with a self satisfied smirk on his face, "Maybe we shouldn't be mean to the mage." He took two metal rods from his pack and slid them into two cracks between the stones until they stopped. Callum hung his coat across it, effectively making a flap for his little cave entrance. He ducked under his coat, "Just a thought."

"Where am I s'pose ta sleep?" She called after him, gathering up her things.

"I don't know, snuggle with Zym." The voice echoed from within the stone, muffled by the coat, but clear enough, "He likes you!"

Rayla looked at the dragon splashed with blue gore who just looked back, waiting. He lifted a single wing revealing a perfectly wet spot covered in jagged stones, "Yoo 'ave gotta be kiddin' me."

Chapter End Notes

Defodis - To Hollow Out
Near an hour passed with Rayla brooding atop the boulder. She sat there and had taken her fill of berries and nuts some time ago. Their taste had turned bitter as she chomped, frustrated. Everything about the subterranean cavern seemed to grate at her. The sound of the surrounding falls was almost pretty, if it hadn’t been so raucous. The scenery almost peaceful, if there hadn't had so much water. Rayla wouldn't mind spending more time here, once it dried up. She suspiciously eyed the slick reflection of shadowed daylight coming off of the wet stones, the malicious growth of moss upon the fertile walls. She grunted and stood.

Rayla leapt off the boulder, landing squarely in a way that did not jolt her back and jaw in any way shape or form. She could see that Zym had finished glutting, and with full stomach, curled his head under a silver wing and bid the world adieu for a time. Which left her alone with her thoughts for yet another day.

What a dismal idea. She didn't want to be left with her thoughts. There was nothing more boring that just yourself for company. She had three years with just her thoughts and didn't need more time . Rayla hated to admit it, but she was poor company.

Rayla's eyes traced around the hellish landscape: wet and slick and covered. Rayla shuddered, hugging her arms and looking upwards. She studied the walls as she explored. There was a clear path up and out of the vertical cavern, though it was one that necessitated fully functioning hands and at least some sort of climbing gear. Rayla dropped her gaze, no point focusing on a path you cannae take. She clenched her bandaged hands, holding onto her arms for support, holding herself together. Just having use of fumbling fingers was a far cry from being the deadly assassin that had roamed Katolis with her pack of assassins.

The thought of Runaan and her fellows made her stomach sink and brought the chill from half-ignored irritation to ferocious focus. Rayla shivered, chilled from without and within.

Rayla sighed, reaching the end of crescent lake, turning back from the falls where Callum had bathed, and walked along the driest part of the shore the way she had come.

Rayla stifled a yawn. What she had said had been true, she was still sleepy, but if she opened her bedroll anywhere around here it would wind up soaked. And she along with it. Such rest would do naught for the deep weariness in her. It was something pervasive. As though a chill and ache permanently resided in her chest, sapping her strength. If she was not careful it would seduce her down into the darkness of sleep. Could Callum and Zym not see that this place would be the death
Of course, Zym regularly slept amidst the downpour of thunderstorms and had scales suited for water or air and was perfectly at peace with the current accommodations.

And then there was Callum. Arrogant prince-mage of Katolis. Perfectly warm with his little cave with the Glowtoad to warm him. He could have left Bait out here to warm her. Some rescuer he was. Comes to get the damsel, then lets her freeze to death.

Well, not to death, but at least to severe discomfort.

Rayla was not warm, she was not comfortable, and worst of all, she was wet. Her bare arms were covered in gooseflesh, her blouse had become heavy on her with the dampness, the straps of the pauldron irritating her skin from their constant rubbing. The coolness of the air smothering her, weighing her down. This deep in the shade the subterranean falls were not being warmed by the heat of the sun as it continued to climb. The white mist of the falls and shaded canopy blocked the rays but making for a colorful spectacle. Beautiful rays of white light were dispersed in half seen colorful rings of light. Rayla begrudgingly admitted a type of hateful beauty to the landscape.

Rayla toyed with a damp lock of hair, watching the shifting rings of color all about her. It was beautiful, but even the sea could belie the troublesome currents with it's serenity and picturesque presentation. She looked bitterly at the warm red-orange glow coming from behind the hanging coat draped over the entrance.

Granted, she had pissed him off. Had he deserved a little bit of mockery? Yes! Always! Had she fully repaid him for trying to peak at her while she bathed? No! And that free glimpse of her she had let slip? He still had to pay! Did she take it too far? Maybe! But that wasn't the point. The point was she was cold. She was wet. And everything was moist. Moist was the worst. Not only was it wet, which conferred the sense of ever present water, but everything was moist, which just made her cringe to think of the word. The sound of it in her head as bad as the sound of it aloud.

Fed up with the situation, Rayla gathered her belongings and ventured over to Zym. Tiptoeing through the fresh collection of bones that barred her way, her boots made the occasional slurp and squelch. She tried to not think of the leftover gore that was making the sickening squelch, but just the ever present dampness and mud. Between the dragon and this small mountain of bones, Rayla walked. A crunch beneath her boot caused her to wince. It wasn't a bone, she told herself, swallowing.

Rayla did not fancy trying to navigate the rest of that boneyard. Plus, beneath his wings didn't
Rayla continued her walk about, doing her best to keep herself warm. Surely there was a suitable place to rest somewhere around here.

She made a third circuit.

There was absolutely no suitable place to rest somewhere around here.

Try as she may, Rayla kept finding herself outside the coat flap of Callum's makeshift residence. Rayla could feel the difference in warmth coming from within the stone cave compared to the open air she was draped in. It's warm caress soothing her skin, causing the tension that had been building between her shoulders to ease ever so much.

She reached out for the coat, pulling it aside and feeling the warmth rush over her like a tide. After basking in it for a moment, she let the coat flap fall.

Rayla began pacing back and forth, indecision feuding inside her. Going into the little cave felt like a concession, that she was letting Callum win something. Not as though they ever really competed at anything. When it came down to it they both had their own skill sets that complimented one another. He was the caster, and she the shield, Callum to change the world, and her to protect him from it. The only reason they had succeeded as much as they did in their past was because of that complimentary nature of their personalities and skills. When everyone else has failed or let them down, it had been the two of them. Even running through the various iterations of Callum she had known: Sunfire, human, Moonshadow, the black mage, the artist, the Mage-King; all of them has helped her with something. Some challenge, internally or externally, she was able to overcome through his intercession.

Rayla wanted to take solace in his other iterations, the times she has been able to confide in him, rely on him. But in this damp dismal cavern he had abandoned her, left her to freeze!

Rayla scoffed at herself, "Now you're just being silly, Rayla." She said. Talking to herself. Like a crazy elf.

She wasn't crazy.

"Well, then quit talking to yourself." Rayla whispered, chastising herself.
It was finally enough: the chill, the moistness, the irritation, now talking to herself: all of it was too much. She hefted her pack over her shoulder and ducked under Callum’s coat and entered the tunnel.

Immediately she was greeted by a waft of warm air coupled with soft amber light, coaxing her deeper. The glorious heat washed over her, searing her so sweetly. The blouse hung heavy on her, cold in stark contrast, the damp weight of it pulling away from her skin and the air leave it's the sweet warm caresses across her damp flesh. Rayla curled and stretched in the warmth, soaking it in like a Dragon sunning itself on the rocks. Her toes curled in her boots as the much welcome warmth coated her.

A smile creeping to her lips, she climbed through the tunnel as it sloped gently upwards. Rayla came to a landing tall enough for her to stand in, if she stooped a little, and just wide enough for a bedroll to fit. At the end of the landing was another ledge on which Bait lay glowing softly. The Glowtoads even sonorous breathing muting the sounds of the falls just feet away. Bait seemed to pulse giving off his radiant heat, using Callum's sketchbook as a pillow for his round head. Callum's clothes hung on the rough hewn slanting inwards slope of the wall.

She bitterly noted that his garments already appeared mostly dry. Splayed out on the bedroll Callum, his comically pink and white undershorts on display, snoozed lazily. Rayla twisted and sat at the top of the little slope, looking over him in the glowing light. Rayla traced the unfamiliar lines of him with her eyes, patiently watching the even breathing of the thin young man. Warmth filled her. Like tumblers in a lock, certain things fell into place, shadows of memories: the two of them cutting across Katolis and Xadia, Zym, Bait, and Ezran in tow, the arduous climb up and into Callum's home where she had been ready to kill him, Callum lying and telling her he was Ezran, raising her blades to strike him down.

Rayla moped, she had been ready to end this wonderful creatures life all for the crime of being the heir to the throne. True it was meant to be in retribution for Thunder and the Dragon Prince, but those were crimes that could have, nae, should have, been laid at Harrow's feet. Even then, it was like feeding the flames, just round and round and round in a dizzying wheel of violence.

Rayla knew he had been just trying to keep her talking, to stay her blade with hopes of escaping. There had been none, no way to run. But Callum always made her mind churn, work through things, not just accept them at face value. Mulling over it, she was still as astounded as she had been then. A human, deceitful by nature, self serving to the core, had been willing to lay down his life for his brother, and through that had stayed the blade of an assassin.

Rayla crossed her arms and leaned against her drawn up knees. She rested her head so she could continue watching him, his presence here almost as reassuring as the warmth.
A human that had bent over backwards to protect Ezran, had been willing to lay down his life. There wasn't loyalty to royalty in Callum that she could see, just the love a brother who had suddenly found himself in the role of mother, father, and brother. Even then it had weighed on him, stressed him out. When he had learned of Harrow's death, one of the darkest days of he and Ezran's life, she had watched the war in his heart. Callum took that information, turned it, twisted it, and found forgiveness for Rayla in it. Callum did not act rashly, he acted with careful thought and spoke with measured words. Rayla could see that he was the pillar upon which Ezran leaned.

Callum had cut across all of Xadia, leaving his brother and home behind, to find her, to bring her out of whatever hell hole she was in.

Rayla supposed she was leaning on him now, too. How long before the cracks in his foundation fissured?

Despite the warmth, Rayla shivered slightly and then looked around, trying to find the blanket with the bedroll. He didn't need a blanket as warm as this little cave was, but she was still chilled, though rapidly improving.

When she found it, it was because it was under his splayed figure, "Selfish jerk." Rayla pouted looking at his peacefully sleeping face. She doffed her pauldron followed by relieving herself of axe and dagger, setting them down on the slight incline leading into the cave. Armor and weapons were followed by boots, and she briefly entertained the idea of taking off her blouse for comfort, the dampness of the garment clinging to her skin now but thought better of it. Callum had enough freebies for now.

Rayla entertained the idea again, thinking of how warm it would be, skin to skin. It had nothing to do with the feeling in her stomach, the flitting of butterflies. Absolutely nothing to do with it. She elected to keep her blouse and breeches on.

Though his face would be priceless…

Rayla leaned against the stone wall of the sloping entrance, content to take her rest there. At first. Try as she might however, nothing seemed to be comfortable. Laying just so, there was always a rock poking her hip, or her head would rest at an odd angle that ground into her temple.

Rayla glared at the sleeping Callum. Magic boy didn't know how good he had it.
Grumbling to herself, she stooped in the rough-hewn alcove and gingerly stepped onto the bedroll, careful not to wake the sleeping human. It was for naught though, as she attempted to lower herself onto the bedroll, her hip squeezed against Callum's and he stirred.

"Rayla?" Callum asked, a half confused, half asleep, expression on his face, 'What are yo-

"Never mind tha'," Rayla cut him off with a whisper, "Scoot over. It's freezin' out there."

Callum didn't question it in his half asleep state, he merely settled onto his side, allowing Rayla to slip in next to him. He propped his head up on his shoulder, leaving enough of an arm for her to use as a pillow. Rayla settled onto it, the warmth hot against her skin, his body radiating heat behind her that she basked in.

"Just don't poke me in the eye with your horns like last time." Callum mumbled as she settled in.

"Last time?" Rayla asked, confused, turning her head ever so slightly.

Callum jumped, pulling away from her head, chuckling sleepily, "Yea," he yawned, "That. Don't do that." Her back was to him, but she could see his arm rub at his face. That same arm wrapped around her hips and pulled her closer to him. The intense warmth of him pressed against her back and she melted into it unconsciously.

"Yea, I couldn't see out of my left eye for, like, three days." Callum murmured, then his lips brushed gently against the back of her head, "Goodnight, Rayla."

What had been an unconscious basking in his embrace suddenly was no longer as relaxed. She felt rigid in his arms, an unyielding board. The shock and bewilderment of the moment washing over her. Callum had kissed her, there was no mistaking that gentle caress. She wanted to sit up and wake him, confront him, ask him just what he thought he was doing. But that wouldn't do. No. He was half asleep. He couldn't know what he had done. It was a conversation she didn't want to have. Not here. Not now. Not like she was. She couldn't even be sure what was real here, had she not been in similar situations so many times before?

As she lay there, his arms wrapped about her, her mind tried to hold back the flood. Various iterations of the same overlapping memories intertwining and mixing until you couldn't tell where one ended and the next began. They all became foggy, but still jangled loosely about her head like
rattling bones. The longer she stayed rooted here and now, the more other versions of her and their wisdom seemed to fade and fog.

What strange deviation of insanity was this?

Wanting to ground herself she reached out and traced the stone with her bandaged hands. Her touch numb to the lines she traced. The rock felt real. She felt real. Callum's arm was hot and real.

Please, let this one be real.

She was so tired, so weary from all the thoughts inside her head. A tear welled in her eyes, tracing it's path across the bridge of her nose where it fell onto Callum's arm, the other tracing it's way back to her ear.

Please, let this warmth be real.

Please, let this affection be real. Let it be something that she could reach out and grasp and clutch and hold onto with all the strength she had. Rayla was sick of tumbling terrified through that endless void filled with shadowed memories. She was ready to stop. To cling to something. To someone. Was the here and now a blissful dream in desolate darkness calling to her with sickening allure, or was her caution just a siren song of fading dreams? She was sick of the questions. Rayla bit her lip and wished for this to be an end to the dreams. An end to the darkness. If she could put that behind her, maybe then she could start living again. She lay there, bathed in the warm amber light of a Glowtoad. Laying in the arms of a man that she remembered in ways that seemed too abstract to comprehend.

Rayla was cold. Callum was warm. That was all that mattered here. Tired of the passive role she played, she pushed herself back into his warmth, and pulled Callum's arm across her hip tighter. If this was just another dream, it was the one she chose to keep.

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Rayla adjusted how she lay. Then again, not quite arousing at first. She tried to maintain that half awake state, but the more she tossed, the more she was aware of her discomfort. It wasn't cold, she was warm enough laying here with Callum's arms around her: his skin hot to the touch. Rayla moved her hips. It was that damned sketchbook.
She recalled drifting off to sleep with tears in her lashes and a sob in her throat, remembered being thankful for sleep that finally came, but wanted it to stay. Rayla felt it slip away like sand through her fingers. Callum's sketchbook was uncomfortably boring into her back. She stirred, continuing to try and find a comfortable spot, but in the end, always trying to sneak back in closer to Callum as he slept.

Rayla reached behind her, trying to move the sketchbook.

Rayla's eyes flew wide. She was suddenly very awake. That was not Callum's sketchbook. A realization shocking. At first. Her hand recoiled as if burned, and her face felt on fire. In the same instant she felt her pulse quicken, her adrenaline surge, and excitement blossom. She attempted to calm herself, to cool herself. She told herself to take that newly awakened nervous energy and find somewhere else to put it. Steadied breaths calmed her. It wasn't the first time she had encountered a male's verpa, or so she told herself. Rayla clutched her hands in front of her.

Callum slumbered on despite their contact.

Though faded and fogged, Rayla pulled courage and audacity out of her overlapping memories. She locked her knees together and edged herself backwards. Hyper-aware of every point of contact, she used her body to feel his, gently. How had she mistaken that for his sketchbook? Rayla bit her lip as she wiggled her hips, attempting to feel for him without using her hands. Her face was on fire but she moved with an otherworldly intention, her curious audacity forcing her actions. Heart pounding, breath raspy, she moved in slow and agonized increments. The more she felt of it, the more she realized why she mistook it for the binding of his sketchbook.

As Rayla continued her silent wriggling, Callum's arm wrapped around her waist and unconsciously pulled her into him. The strength and force of his hold on her uncharacteristic of Callum. Dozing, his hips ground against her for the briefest of moments and she could feel all of him.

"Oh, Luna," Rayla cursed breathily. Part of her wanted this, she knew. Wanted the connection, the warmth, the affection, the sweet abandon of it. And part of her knew it was wrong of them to be together. That they didn't have the right physiology to be compatible was more of an afterthought really. It was that this was jumping too many steps. She asked herself all of the questions. She didn't know his middle name, she didn't even know his proper surname, all she knew was 'Callum of Katolis.' She didn't know if there was some one else, didn't he hold Claudia in his heart? Was that still true? Was it ever?

Rayla turned over, careful not to wake him, and could feel him pressed against her abdomen. She felt something deep within her clawing it's way out. A hunger, a dark intention, a feral Rayla overpowering her common sense.
She wrapped her fingers around Callum through his tented shorts. Though her bandaged hands couldn't feel textures, she could feel the heat of him. She began to work him out from his shorts, not wanting him to wake yet, but begging him to at the same time.

"Bowoowowowwoo?"

Rayla froze looking first at Callum. She let out a vastly relieved breath when she saw he still breathed quietly, evenly, with eyes mercifully shut. Then Rayla turned and glared at Bait.

The damn Glowtoad.

Bait sat on the edge of his ledge, tail thumping happily against the stone, panting. Callum's sketchbook there beside the Glowtoad, mocking her.

Rayla sat there for a time, skewering Bait with the daggers of her eyes. The Glowtoad merely quirked his head and looked at her stark disapproval with unconscious disregard. His perpetually grouchy yet vacant eyes met hers and Rayla had to think over what she had been doing, what she had been about to do. What she still wanted to do. But the longer she thought about it, the more unreasonable it seemed. The longer she thought about it, the more impossible going to Callum's bed, despite already being in his bed, became. A sigh of mixed frustration and relief escaped from her. She made up her mind to settle back into sleep, releasing her grip on the gratuitous verpa.

Rayla wasn't allowed much respite, as within moments what had been the happy façade of Bait began to whine. She looked at the small beastie and saw the anxious look on his face. Confused, she watched him pace back and forth on the ledge. Understanding, and still not wanting to wake Callum, Rayla knelt first and held her arms out to the full-bladdered Bait.

Bait wagged happily and scrambled to her arms where he slid clumsily down her body and meandered past where she knelt. Rayla couldn't help but giggle as a small padded claw scraped across Callum's arm that had been her pillow, and his thick stub of a tail bopped the sleeping mage in the face.

All the respect paid to the High Mage of Katolis.

As Bait left the little cave, the warmth remained, having soaked into the stones, but the amber light of the toad faded with his withdrawn presence. As Rayla was plunged into darkness, her eyes
adjusted. Scant light filtered in from where Callum's coat still hung at the entrance, but just enough for her to make out some of the larger details. With the new darkness of the cave, she felt that feral part of her creep forth again. Quietly, slowly, she pulled the hem of her blouse over her head, noting that it was dry and ever so slightly stiff. Rayla balled the soft teal cloth and tossed it over to the sloping ramp. She postured, stretching and setting her shoulders, asserting herself to her task.

The air felt cooler now, it sent electric sparks hopping and skipping across her skin. Rayla twisted to kneel with bare back pressed against Bait's ledge. Ferocious and feral, she stalked. Her prey strewn out before her, sleeping. Again, her heart raced, again she felt that excitement build in her. Her pulse in her ears, her ragged as she crawled over Callum's body. He looked peaceful, calm. Rayla licked her lips. She would pluck his innocence like a piece of ripe fruit. Rayla looked forward to devouring it.

Callum's eyes flew wide in the darkness, "Bees!" he sat bolt upright.

Rayla barely had time to scramble backwards, startled. Callum looked confused for a moment. Rayla defensively brought an arm up over her chest in the darkness. Her mouth suddenly dry, she worked for words, none came.

Callum said it again, still staring into the dark, "Bees." The excitement fading from his voice.

Callum looked around frantically, "Rayla," his voice searched for her, his eyes drifting across her to where she had been laying, but never seeing her in the deep dark of their little cavern. His human eyes and their poor low light vision meant that in this deep shade he couldn't see her.

She cleared her throat. He jumped.

"Yes, Callum?" She did her best to not sound as breathless as she felt.

"Where'd Bait go?" He turned his head to listen to her voice, "Never mind, do you see my sketchbook?"

Baffled, she just stared at him.

"Rayla?"
One hand began to clumsily feel the wall, the other awkwardly reaching towards where he had heard her voice coming from. Rayla shrunk back, her own hand searching for the book of drawings. Callum inched closer.

"Rayla?"

Her hand searched blindly, her own eyes glued to his groping palm as it came closer. Part of her wanting the touch, part of her startled into reasoned thought once more. She felt resistance on the ledge, unable to feel the texture beneath the fingertips of her bandaged hands, it slid away. She lunged sideways to get it as Callum kept approaching, that one hand held out in front of him.

"Here!" She spoke hurriedly, thrusting the book into his hand, inches from her chest.

He took it and flipped through the pages, not seeing them, but knowing the feel and weight of his book. He flipped through images too quick to see all the details. He finally settled on an empty page and grabbed the charcoal pencil. He didn't bother to test it, just started scrawling quickly. An uneven six sided object with lines dividing it into three semi even portions took shape. Beneath it he scrawled quickly, his letters running together and overlapping the picture. She couldn't read the human chicken scratch, had never taken the time to learn it, but she assumed she knew what it said.

Callum closed the book and set it back on the ledge, laughing in disbelief, "Bees." He lay back down sprawling out again, leaving the startled, befuddled, and half naked elf untouched.

Dumbfounded Rayla watched him snore. She sat there in the darkness for a time, watching him, double, triple thinking everything. Resolving to just lay next to him for now, she crawled in beside him.

Rayla's eyes had been shut for all of a moment before Zym's sending jolted her and Callum to alertness, It is time to be gone.

Chapter End Notes

Verpa - Latin for erect penis

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Me: I'm having trouble with my story, I think I cornered myself into a sex scene.

Spouse: Trouble writing what you don't know?

Me: I hate you.

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I agonized over this scene and where it went, but at the end I wanted all the actions to be plot driven, character driven, not just for the sake of having the actions happen. I am interested if you all think I stayed honest to Callum and Rayla as characters for this scene. Thank you! And thank you for reading!
Keep your friends close

The Warden scrawled furiously. Pressure applied with the ink pen cutting through the thick parchment at times. He made an effort to relax his hand, to be less forceful. As he wrote, however, he unwittingly pressed harder and harder leaving gouges across the scroll. Tazel must know. The Catalyst of the Blood Lock poison was missing. The one and only elf that had a chance of stopping the assassination of King Ezran was loose. Likely in the care of her human conspirator. He cursed as he wrote, relaying the events of Lunaflowne to his son.

The events, sixteen innocents dead, as well as a certain captain of the guard, a war hero that had retired to bring peace and stability to the families of Lunaflowne. A failure at his simple task of keeping a chained elf. The people were in tumult, uncertain. They jumped at shadows, fearful of dark human magics and what atrocities may burst forth. Children wailed in the night and parents hushed their fears, never speaking of their own. But the children could see the terror in their eyes and they knew. Children always knew.

He did not relay the other dangers, the darker truth to events. He dared not write such things down for other eyes to see. It would not do, no, Tazel would just have to read between the lines. He was a smart boy, he would figure out what his father's words meant. That the human's murders offered more freedom to Tazel's task. That he would be able to act more as a surgeon, excising a tumorous growth. The people would shout his name with their revelry.

More than that, though, care must still be taken. These events endangered the position which he and Tazel held amongst the Moonsight Elves. Secret trials against assassins, hidden events, covered up with convenient stories, now on the brink of coming to light. Should that occur, Gale would not be pleased. The Dragon Queen would be sure that for every mistake that was made, Tazel and the Warden would pay for it with their hide.

To the Warden's benefit, he was already out ahead of the story. The people would ask, why, Warden, why did the humans sue for war when they faced a superior force, when they were out numbered so terribly. He would say to them that the humans crave war, they need it to thrive. They have shown generation after generation that they needed the world to be in a state of chaos to flourish. Humans need the chaos of war to steal into the magical lands of Xadia and drain the magical life force of the lands and beasts, if not of the people. The people of Lunaflowne cowered, the horrific events of that evening had been elucidated. At the order of the King Ezran, the Dark Mage Callum of Katolis, Callum the Calamitous, made a mad rush into the heart of Lunaflowne. Thanks to the sacrifice of captain Omni, he had been thwarted. The attempt to harvest the magical energy and relics from Lunarium, thwarted. He had come like a thief in the night. Even now, as people recovered, the more hot headed, hot blooded, called for blood. How dare the elves abide a human kingdom at the border of Xadia, how dare they sit in diplomatic talks with kings and queens that order such atrocities. What use was this peace other than to let the festering disease that was humanity grow?
The Pentarchy had shown their true colors at last. Mages sent to wreak havoc in the most holy of Moonshadow cities, a distant, but inevitable revenge for the death of King Harrow. Three years they took, but it was anticipated, three years so they could grow their armies stronger and lull the people of Xadia into a false sense of security. The lies and pacifications of King Ezran finally shown to be falsehoods.

Despite being out in front of the terror and able to direct it, the Warden still felt as though he teetered, balanced on razor's edge. So many secrets piled on secrets, the truth could be bent and strained, and the closer the story to the truth, the more resoundingly it rang. The story was on every lip, the truth weaving in and out as necessary. One little touch could tip the balance of this rising storm of the people's ire and turn it on him.

He must tread carefully.

They must all tread carefully.

The letter to his son complete, he rolled it and set it unto a Blood Eagle arrow. He cracked his naked hands, used to their verdant silver gauntlets, and set to writing the next letter.

There would be five letters tonight, the one to his son, and then to the other four of The Summit. His words were more measured, carefully chosen. Though he held a place of honor and leadership among the other four liaisons of the elven council to the Archdragons, it was a precarious balance of threats, blackmail, and tentative alliances. This trade agreement here, this imprisonment there, information passing hands. True, he has held sway over the Court of Primals and the Summit, his words being as heeded with the same heft as some of the minor dragons, but he felt the platform beneath his feet tremble and shake. So he wrote.

A letter to Pazene, Siren of the water kin, ordering her silence

A letter to Durmoff, Rex of the Sunfire Elves, encouraging support.

A letter to Yelna, Seed of the Earthblood, threatening the salting of their lands.

A letter to Sollum, Zephyr of the Skywing elves, entreating his ear.

Each threat or weighted word would be considered, some with spite, some with outrage, others
with dark humors. He knew that he would have their support. The lives of all the elves depended on it.

These four letters all ended with the same flowing script, "Meet me at Secampter, Your Warden of Xadia, Tazun of the Eclipse."

Secampter, the ancient meeting place of the Court of the Primals, resting place and eternal prison of Xander, the First Sin.
"What do you mean all the food is gone?" Rayla whispered, aghast.

Callum held up the empty glass jars that had occupied the two packs, I mean exactly that. The food is gone." He was less than pleased about the lack of food, but he supposed there could be worse things. Callum had watched Rayla nonchalantly plow through their rations and hadn't spoken up then. He wouldn't dare try to get between her and the food with the voracious appetite she displayed. Callum might lose his hand. It certainly helped that her color seemed healthier and more robust. A far cry from filling out, but this Rayla resembled the Rayla he knew three years ago more than the one he had pulled up from the forgotten chambers in the Lunarium.

Callum put the empty jars back in their bags, and stretched, his legs stiff from the hours of riding Zym compounded on days of hard riding. The first time he had ridden Zym had not been like riding the back of Phoe-Phoe, it was more like a desperate clinging to a wildly undulating serpent as it moved through the air while fighting gale force winds. He decided that he missed his bed, decided that though he enjoyed Xadia, it was hard to beat the creature comforts and soft down to lay your head upon at night. At least at the Moon Nexus, there were beds. At least there, Lujanne would have some semblance of food. Even if it were grubs masked by illusions.

Callum briefly debated if he cared that everything she would feed him was grubs.

Today. Today he did.

Tomorrow?

"Well who ate it all?" Rayla demanded, disturbing his thoughts, "Bait?" Rayla looked out over the expanse before them, standing next to Callum. Zym had left them off in the shade of what was either a massive outcropping of formed mud, or the only stone for miles. Everything was nearly flat, sloping downwards from here made up of undulating ravines of mud that dipped and swelled like waves of a frozen sea. The foliage of this terrain was weak and choked, made of muted browns and greys that clung to the ground belying their deep root systems. Anything that thrived in this terrain had to cling to water for life.

Callum looked up at her tired, but amused, "You ate it all."
"Wha? No..." Rayla trailed off, realizing. Her violet eyes widening.

"Yes." Callum reiterated, only a little irritated and a little playful. He wasn't near as hungry as her. Granted, he could eat, he could eat a whole three course meal. He was even pondering the idea of ice cream flavored grubs with affection, but he had not quite reached her level of hunger.

"Tha' cannae be." Rayla looked down at him, stamping her foot in protest.

"I assure you, it is." Callum smiled up at her, covering his eyes with a hand and squinting in the sunlight. Her eyes darted left and right, trying to recall just how much of the food she had consumed, she rolled her eyes at him.

"Well, we must not have brought enough!" She defended, "How would you know the rations we need with your cushioned life in Katolis?"

"Elyas packed enough in each pack to last five days." Callum let that sink in, there was a long pause as Rayla searched her thoughts.

"Well I've been in a dungeon, literally starved and wasting away." Her stomach growled loudly, punctuating her point. An embarrassed hand drifted over it as though pressure could silence the whale call of her hunger.

The blush of Rayla's embarrassment blossomed on her cheeks. Though about the her embarrassingly vocal hunger and raucous abdomen, it brought that same soft red hue to her cheeks, her neck, and across her collarbones, to where it disappeared beneath her teal blouse. Callum just stared for a moment in the quiet, a small smile barely suppressed as he swam back through to the memory of Rayla at the riverside. Her fierceness, her femininity, both the threats and the playfulness.

Before standing would give the etiology of his thoughts away, he stood, forcing his mind to change it's focus, "I'll go find some pomati or some leaves or something." Callum sighed finally, missing the previous muse of his mind and drifting to the task at hand.

Rayla clapped, "I'll set up camp."
Callum looked at her confused, "What camp? We have no tent or anything."

"Oh you're little you know, hooman, how very little," She chided, stretching and beginning to unstrap her pauldron and take the dagger and axe from their sheathes, "Do ya plan to spend all day in the sun? We're in the Blighted Londs, you'd literally be baked alive if we don't find some shade. Not to mention poor Bait." She gestured over her shoulder at the Glowtoad, his yellow and teal a stark contrast to the muted browns of the blasted terrain. He had his back pressed against the firm dirt mound and watched the steadily shrinking shadow with wide eyes, frantically looking between Callum and Rayla.

Callum grumbled his assent and set out over the scraggly terrain. Zym had dropped the duo and the Glowtoad off and then promptly too to the air once more. Informing them of his intent to hunt with a sending of blood and bone and hunger. Rayla had gagged a little bit at that, not used to the taste of meat, the idea of it repulsive to her.

Callum wandered for a time, not really ever dropping out of sight, but he could hear more than see Rayla working. The early morning in this landscape was already edging from tolerable towards sweltering. He undid his scarf, unbuttoned his coat and enjoyed the breeze of air. The land around them, despite being flat and nondescript for the most part, there were slight undulations to the landscape where he would drop out of view for a moment only to rise the next second. In these ravines what little plant life could survive here did. Callum was looking specifically for a type it plant Rayla had introduced him to in the last foray into Xadia.

The pomati, a plant with wide thin leaves that unfurled to great ferns in the morning sun, and then wrapped up on itself in the heat of the day to conserve moisture. The plant itself was tough and leathery, and aside from that the nettles of the leaves left a tingling numbness over the skin it dragged across, but beneath it's tough leathery stalk, deep in the ground, was the tuber. A knot of roots deep in the dry earth that collected moisture and stored it for the long dry days. Able to be eaten and full of a sort of milk, the flavor was spicy for a second, but as you continued to eat the flavor transitioned to a sweet and almost creamy flavor.

Callum removed his coat, tucking it in to hang I've his sketch book. He undid the laces of his sleeves and rolled them up, enjoying the warm breeze before it became to unbearable. He undid his collar as well as he wandered. From the barren landscape he was able to find the dry broken twigs of a scraggly dessert plant. Given how hot and barren the land was he estimated that temperatures would drop very low come nightfall, fire wood and bedrolls would be what little they could do to thwart the hot and then the cold. Then again, come sundown they would take to the air and they would have to brave the chill air of the upper atmos.

Callum briefly entertained the idea of asking Zym to take them to another location, but after flying all night, he imagined the dragon was as tired as he and Rayla were. Let alone after hunting for whatever food he could find in the barrens. Zym was probably in as much of dire straights as they
were with fatigue and hunger.

His own stomach growled and he forced his mind to turn from thoughts of his own growing hunger and went back to the same idea that he had entertained all through the night.

Bees.

When he had awoken the previous day he had recalled some sort of dream about bees, and knew that he had, in a scramble, written and drawn something. He recalled waking up with that eureka moment as though he could suddenly see a path forward through the ordeal with the coming assassins, with Gale, with the arcana he still had to touch, and their respective primal sources. But then when he stared at that strange hexagon drawn in charcoal and the underlined word he could only muster confusion. No insight to be had, the thought stuck in his mind through their travels. Like a thorn in his mind, the thought was wedged just beneath the surface, irritating to the point of being painful.

Bees.

Fucking. Bees.

Last time he had been stung by a bee it had been before he had ever left on an adventure to Katolis, before he had ever met Rayla. He had been stung in the training yard after Soren had absentmindedly batted the bumbling insect away. As his arm went numb and breathing became harder, Soren just stood over him chastising him for being weak. It was a whole few minutes of worsening breathing and increasing concern from his friend before he called for the medical officer came. After that, Callum had trouble catching his breath for three days before it started to improve on it's own. Lord Viren had offered a poultice of some sort, but Sarai had adamantly refused it and King Harrow obeyed. Sarai had seen Callum in his breathing fits many times before and she had worked with him to get through it. Harrow was not as easily calmed, staying close to Callum's bed, watching over him, his duties as king playing second fiddle to his son that struggled to breathe.

Callum kicked up more scraggly brush, still looking for a pomati plant, not having much luck.

He sighed and began circling around so as to not get too far from Rayla, he could hear the sound of her exertion carrying through the air of the barren landscape to him as his shadow continued drift across the land.
Nearly thirty minutes into his hunt, he found one. A coiled fern that still had its branches out in the growing heat of the day, but was already trying to furl in on itself.

"There you are," Callum said to himself, cracking his knuckles. He crouched and began pulling up crumbling bits of hard soil that covered the root network of the tuber below. He scraped and dug, his hands becoming covered in dust and dirt slipping beneath his finger nails.

He very much looked forward to reaching the moon nexus tomorrow, Lujanne at least would have some soaps he hoped so he could get some semblance of clean again. He hadn't minded it at first, but the longer his stubble grew the more it itched, the stiffer his clothes grew the more they chaffed. It didn't help that they rode the back of a dragon for several hours every night without much difference in position leading to a profound dermal irritation.

Callum dug and scraped until the dirt around the stem had been dug away and he had a nice stalk to grip. He agitated the dirt a little more, loosening and loosening, before finally beginning to pull. At first it didn't want to give, at first he made no progress, but as he pulled and worked the stem he began to feel it give way. The dirt began to blossom and move as the pomati bulged forth from its home.

Triumphantly, Callum grunted as the first sized knot of edible roots finally came loose. Holding it by the stem he shook it vigorously, clumps of dry dirt falling off in a rain of sod. Careful not to let the nettles of the leathery fern touch him, he twisted the stalk feeling the fibers bend and give way before they pulled apart.

He threw the splintered stalk back into the dirt hole and brushed the dirt on over it. Hopefully it would be able to take root again. Callum hoped he never had to dig one up after today, but he be would rather there be as many as possible in the Blighted Lands should he ever have to make such a trek again. Callum pulled off the extra roots and tossed the pomati into his left hand and continued his search for another.

After an hour Callum had found two more pomati, one the size of his fist and another one just slightly larger. Triumphant, with the promise of a snack before the trio turned in, he made his way back to where he could hear Rayla hard at work.

When Callum returned he was surprised to find a mound of dirt pulled up beside a hole in the ground in the shade of the large rock. With a bundle of spiny ferns with a much larger bough than the pomati plant, more like a palm tree from Neolandia beside it. Where had she found that, he wondered. Rayla's axe and dagger sat unused next to the hole in the ground. As Callum approached he could see arcs of dirt flying through the air and onto the mound next to the hole.
Callum peaked over the edge and had to be impressed, Rayla knelt scooping the dirt, using the straps of her pauldron wrapped around her wrists, she manipulated the curved metal as a shovel to scoop the dried cracked dirt. Callum could even see some moisture in the soil. She dripped with sweat and her face, arms, and clothes were covered with the dry dust of the soil, her sweat cutting dark lines across her shoulders and face.

Callum whistled in appreciation as he looked at her handy work, "Nice."

"You dinnae need to whistle at me like I'm some hound. A simple 'you look pretty' will do." She didn't even turn to look at him as she kept working.

Callum laughed, "No, I meant the hole in the ground."

"Spend a lot of time wanderin' round, appreciatin' random holes?" she smirked over her shoulder. Her face was dirty but her smile and eyes were bright. Her hair damp with sweat, it clung to her forehead and neck. Her horns seemed to catch the light, the smooth surfaces of the twisting bone gleaming slightly. Callum opened his mouth to retort, but she was too quick for him, "If you say so Mr. mage," she shrugged. Rayla stood and took one large step out of the hole. She went over to the packs and bedrolls where Callum had left them and began undoing the ties on the bedroll and one of the canteens.

Callum looked at the hole in the ground, trying to think of something to fill the growing awkward silences, "You couldn't have made it any bigger? Only one of the bedrolls will fit down there."

Rayla leveled an annoyed look at him even as she took a large swig from the canteen, the muscles on her neck stood out as she drank greedily. Her voice was breathy as she wiped her mouth, "Well, yu're welcome ta sleep out in tha open if it's too appallin' ta go ta bed with an elf." Rayla tossed the canteen to him. He fumbled, but caught it.

Callum, already starting to sweat in the growing heat of the desert morning, felt his face grow burn and looked away, why did she have to phrase it that way. He cleared his throat, trying to clear his mind, "No it's not…I mean…I liked…" Callum watched her watching him expectantly, waiting for him to say something. Rather than continuing, he buried his awkwardness in taking a drink. He paused, the lukewarmth of the water spreading through his belly. Callum took a deep breath, reorienting himself, "I merely meant it seems small."

"Well you can sleep out in the sun then." She sauntered over him, placing a pointed finger on his chest, "I worked my fine ass into a lather ta get this dug before it got too hot, if you're not gonna appreciate it you can just lay out in the sun." She put her hand over her eyes and looked to where
the sun was in the cloudless sky, "Looks ta be a scorcher, too."

"Whatever," Callum let out a chuckling groan, "Let's just get set up and out of the heat."

"Didja find any pomati?" Rayla asked, looking at his hands. Her finger still rested on his chest, relaxed more than pointed.

"Yea, three." He handed one to her and she happily clutched it, taking it to where Bait lay frantically watching the shadows disappearance with great consternation. Rayla inspected it. After brushing some of the dirt off she took her dagger from its sheath on the ground and began carving a hole in the outer edge. As soon as the knife bit into the flesh of the tuber, thick milky white fluid seeped along the edge of her dagger. She took the blade and watched the fluid trail down the blade before she gave it a long languid lick, making sure to not miss any of it. She let a small giggle escape as the taste went from quick spice to creamy smooth.

Callum watched this with eagle eyed intensity.

Rayla happily cut the root further with her dagger, slicing off chunks before popping them into her mouth and happily munching. After the second piece she noticed Callum watching her, "Can I help ya with something?" She carefully licked the juice from her dagger again, eyes never leaving him.

"No." Callum's voice didn't sound strangled.

"Are ya hungry?" She offered him a slice of the pomati.

"No." Maybe just slightly strained.

"How 'bout thirsty? Are ya thirsty?" Rayla offered gesturing to the canteen in his hand.

Callum looked at it, then back to her. She was a mess and filthy and beautiful and fierce, "A little." He admitted.

The silence stretched on, and Rayla merely continued to eat, watching him watch her, "Well," She laughed, "If you're nae gonna do somethin' about it, then get ta finishin' the shelter while I take a
well deserved break.” She shooed him back to work with her dagger.

Callum looked to the gathered fern boughs, screwing the cap back onto the open canteen. He began to try and arrange the boughs so that they would block the majority of the sunlight as it arced across the sky. Rayla continued to watch him, eating the pomati. "Can I make a suggestion," She offered before he got too far in his task.

Callum shrugged, tossing his sketchbook and coat to the side, undoing his shirt a little more, "Sure."

"Maybe," Rayla laughed, "Just maybe toss the bedroll in first. That way ye don't break my brittle li'l boughs when you force your big bedroll through that teensy opening." She pouted around her suggestion raising her eyebrows at him, trying to lighten the blow of the correction. But did she not hear herself?

"Not a bad idea." Callum nodded stiffly, and unfurled the bedroll into the opening in the ground before getting back to arranging the boughs for the optimal amount of shade. It was quick work and the bedroll fit nearly perfectly into the rectangular hole in the ground, he admitted grudgingly.

Once done, Callum looked over his word, satisfied, and turned to Rayla, gesturing to the little hut, "Well? What do you think?"

Rayla came up next to Callum, Bait scrambling to stay in her shadow and jumping down into the shaded accommodations with a grunt. She held up a sliced pomati to Callum and watched Bait scramble down and make himself at home, "Well, I think Bait and I will be very comfortable." Callum could tell by the way she smiled that she meant the words in jest. He chuckled and graciously took the sliced pomati from her, biting into it. The heat of spice flooded his tongue before it was replaced with the cool sweetness of cream. He sighed contentedly.

Taking the cut tuber from Rayla, he noticed the state of her bandages. They weren't bloodstained or bled through, but the gauze on her hands was worn and filthy. Tossing two slices of the pomati to Bait where he lay in the mud hut, Callum finished the last piece and grabbed Rayla lightly by the wrist, "C'mon," Callum said around a full mouth, "We need to get clean bandages on those hands. Last thing I need is for you to get an infection."

"Oh, Callum, my prince, you're oh so noble." Rayla chastised with a laugh.
"Shut up." He laughed back. Callum grabbed the bag from where it lay on the ground and sat in the shade of the great boulder or dirt mound, he still hadn’t figured it out. Gesturing for Rayla to sit he began to pull out the medical supplies. At least these were lasting as long as Elyas had figured. He set the bandages and gauze out, followed by the minty citrus balm.

Callum began unravelling the dirty cloth fibers from Rayla's wounded hands, focused on his task. She sat cross legged straight in front of him, watching him work with her own intent eyes. She studied his face, but he did not note it.

He worked in silence, but it was Rayla's timid tone of voice that brought him out of his work, "Did I ever thank yoo?" The words were soft, uncharacteristic of her strength and ferocity.

"Hmm?" Callum responded, "No, but you don't have to."

"But I do, Callum." Rayla answered, watching his darting intelligent eyes, "I've barely wrapped my head around how long I was down there. I know what you say, that it was three years, but it feels so much longer. I-"

Callum looked up as Rayla paused, her dirty face pensive, her gaze distant, "What is it, Rayla?"

Rayla took a deep shuddering breath, steeling herself, "I-I'm still no' sure this is real." She waited, waited for Callum to say something, to reassure her, but he said nothing, merely waited, continuing to care for her hands. Then it all came flooding out, "How can it be real, Callum?" She took another breath, "I remember things, kind of, they're foggy now, but I remember other times you helped me, other times I lived and died. How can I be so sure that the here and now is right? How do I know I'm not still stuck beneath the Lunarium wastin' away? This could all just be another dream."

Callum paused in his work, looked around at the wasteland, "Rayla, your dreams suck."

Rayla snorted, the gravity of the situation brushed under the rug with a simple observation coupled with his smile and emerald eyes. She laughed as she spoke now, "I mean it. How do I know though?"

Callum went back to his work, "It doesn't matter." he said simply.
"How can it nae matter?" She demanded, confused, but still amused at the turn this conversation had taken unexpectedly.

"Whether this is real, whether this is a dream, will it change who you are, how you act?" Callum prodded her mind, wiping old salve off her hands with the dirty bandages. He inspected the strips of hard yellow flesh that looked bruised, frowning. Callum scooped two fingers of the minty citrus salve onto his fingers and began applying it gently to one hand.

"I s'pose not," She trailed off, "But how do I deal with tha memories. How do I knoo which of those c'uld be real and c'uld be a dream."

Callum nodded as he worked, mulling over her problem, "You called them memories. That is all they are. Dreams, memories. Nobody's memories are 100% true, and there is no way to know which is real. All you have to do to prove that is watch me and Ezran fight, then ask us the next day what happened. You'll get three slightly different stories. When it comes to memory, it helps guide our decisions, helps us make decisions, but in the moment the decision still rests on our shoulders, not some memory's. You just get a little extra guidance."

Callum watched Rayla work through these thoughts, he could see the internal struggle plain upon her filthy face. He began wrapping the new gauze and bandage around her four fingered hands. Callum remained silent as she worked this over, sometimes smiling, sometimes again drifting back to pensive. He took her bandaged hands in his own, "Look at me, Rayla."

He waited. She looked everywhere but him for a moment, but when their eyes met, Callum couldn't tell the difference from the streaks of sweat cutting through the dirt of her face or the lines left in the wake of her tears. Rayla shuddered under his gaze.

"I know that I am real, that I am here, and I am with you now." He took her hands and placed them on his cheeks, "Can you not feel me?"

She stammered, "I-I cannæe feel an'ythin'. My hands 're numb. They haven't been getting better."

Callum's brow furrowed, his expression saddened, "Oh, Rayla," He pressed his cheek into her hand, the implications running through his mind. Her skills were what defined her. She had been having trouble using her hands, to grip things, hold things, but Callum had attributed the fumbling that he had seen to her injuries, to the encumberment of the bandages that wrapped their way through her fingers. Realizing now that it was numbness causing her blundering he worried for her. Her skills as an assassin had been what defined her, allowed her to go above and beyond, allowed her to stare into the dark heart of violence and choose another path. It was what had made her so
unique from any other person he had ever encountered. So many people saw a world of violence and cut the world out from their hearts, segregated the world into those it was acceptable to be violent towards and those that needed to be protected. He may have inspired her initially, but it was she who continued to inspire him. It is what made him counsel Ezran against violence, even when it was warranted. Her influence had made Callum, and thus Ezran, sue for a better way.

His heart was heavy when he spoke, his voice dark. There was a path to take away this ache and numbness, this separation from her former self and her skills. A way to restore what she had lost, "I can fix it, Rayla, using... That type of magic." Callum knew the phrases, knew the runes, and knew the cost. If she asked it of him, he didn't know if he would pay it.

She recoiled, her hands pulling away from him as though burned, "No." She said emphatically, "Never that."

"Never?" Callum asked, torn between his breaking heart for her situation and the relief that she would never ask him to venture down those dark corridors. He sighed, looking around the desolate terrain and then back to her, "Zym seems to think that I will have to use Dark Magic to win this, maybe even to end the war."

"Well," Rayla searched for the right words, "He's wrong, what does he know, a baby dragon barely big enough to be out in the world. He's what, three?" Never mind the burden of the memories of his forebears that had no doubt been passed down to his developing draconic brain.

Callum held out his hands for hers again and waited patiently. Rayla hesitantly placed them back in his waiting palms, "I hear you, Rayla. Never." He gave her wounded hands a squeeze, "Can you feel that at least."

Rayla's dirty brow furrowed, "Aye, I can feel it." She bit her soft lower lip, "It's strange though, like I slept on it wrong, or like you're pushing on it through something else, like a thick leather glove, or a mitten?" She closed her eyes, trying to explore the sensation better.

Callum rubbed her palm through the bandage, trying to reassure her.

"Ooh!" She said excitedly, "I can feel tha, wha is tha?"

"I'm just rubbing your hand." Callum said sheepishly.
"Keep doing it." She said excitedly, "It's the most I felt with my hands in days if not years."

Callum stopped, "I have an idea." he continued rubbing the palm of one hand with his thumb and then he brought her off hand up to his cheek. He hummed a note.

Rayla's eyes shot wide open, "I can feel tha!'" Her smile was unadultered joy. She took her other hand from his and placed it upon his other cheek, "Do it again."

Callum obliged, producing a low hum in his throat.

Callum watched Rayla's violet eyes close, she got onto her knees, scooting closer to him. Hands pressed to his cheeks, a soft smile on her gentle pink lips. She licked them and they glistened in the intense sun, "Keep doin' it, this is magnificent."

Callum laughed as she kept scooting closer on her knees, their faces not a foot apart. Entranced by the beauty of her face, the innocence of her visage, he hummed. He was no bard, no skilled musician, but there had been a song or four that had captured his heart through the years. He began to hum something heard long ago. A song slow and low at the start that built to excited energetic revelry only to be brought low at the end with the angst of the story it told.

On a night like this, I am warmed by the touch of her kiss
When the light is gone, I have her mem'ry to keep me 'til the dawn
Through the lands and over seas, there never been one sweet as she.
A beauty to behold, a heart of joy and never cold
We would laugh, we would sing, and the days they would bring
Us to a time the world was sleeping

Days come and nights pass, but there's nothing I want like this lass
To stay beside me
She keeps my heart and keeps me here, of her I know no fear
But a day did come where we were parted and the world swallowed 'n' dark'n'd
In the coming days there were kings that betrayed and cared not for the wills of their people
I wished for naught but stay apart from the world and its sorrows.
But far away they feud and fight
And far away I am called to their plight
And far away I must tread
To leave behind my lover
There's naught to do,
But follow the crew
To bring down the Kingdom and Crown

While I was away
I saw blood and the fray
I was wounded and lain low
But there was one thing that I know
It kept me strong,
And kept me brave,
My lady waiting for the coming days.

The war was ended
And blood was shed
I crossed the realm to find her bed
Her beauteous voice and loving caress
Gave me strength to continue the onward press.
Calling me from far away
But in my time I knew great sorrow

Upon my arrival none came to me.
In our bed she now lay,
But with another she did away
A grim kiss stolen from my lover.
My bride to be now ne'er to see the happiness of the morrow.

Plague and devastation came, you see,

And took away my bride to be

and wreaked a dark plight upon my heart.

On a night like this, I am lost without her kiss

Her light is gone, but her mem'ry keeps me from dusk til dawn

Through the lands and over seas, I wait and wait til she can once again be with me.

Callum came to the end of the song and his humming ceased. He had closed his own eyes in recollection. Whenever he heard this song he was carried off to a distant place: a world of peace and sorrow and love that he had never known. A grim reflection of the fear of losing loved ones. Callum looked up at Rayla and noted that fresh tears had streamed down her cheeks.

Rayla opened her violet eyes and looked at him, his own verdant eyes staring up at her. She bent her head, turning it slightly, getting closer and closer before pausing and meeting his eyes with a timid gaze. Callum encouragingly smiled back to her leaning his face into her hand, but bridging part of the gap between them. Inch by inch she approached, hesitating, and Callum could barely believe it. In his chest, his heart thrummed, the world seemed alive with color, even the desolate lands around him were bright and sharp, multi-hued stones mixed among the undulating dirt all around him, the hot breeze cutting across the landscape doing very little to cool the world. Rayla's hair a matted mess of white and brown and grey tied back in loose braids that gave her a murky hectic halo. Her cheeks splashed with blush, from exertion, anticipation, or embarrassment, he couldn't tell. Her violet eyes searched his, darting and daring, trying to read his thoughts, doubting what she saw there, but pushing on anyways. Her chest rose and fell with the rapidity of her breathing, her breathing matching his own. Her arms were still, locked holding his face, but the caress was gentle. Callum wouldn't have pulled away if he could. When all he could see was her face, when all he could feel was her hot breath on his lips, close enough that he could smell the creamy sweetness of the pomati, he spoke, halting her.

"Can I kiss you?" The word's were delivered with a confidence he didn't feel, with a courage that was not reflected with the nerves making a mockery of his bravado.

Rayla laughed. Her eyes were dangerous, "You better."

Callum needed no further approval, he closed the remaining agonizing inch between their lips and pressed his dry stubbly mouth against hers. He could feel the softness of her, taste the sweetness, just from the chaste kiss. The duo sat like that pressing against each other, Rayla walking her knees
right up to Callum until she loomed over him where he sat and he had to crane his neck, not willing to break the kiss yet. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her against him. She refused to let him go. Callum and Rayla stayed like that, caught in the moment for a time, then parted. Callum's reprieve was short lived, and unwanted. Rayla pulled away further and he could see she thirsted for air as much as he did, but it was but a only a moment before their lips came together again. Soft, restrained kisses, though he hungered for more.

Rayla straddled his hips sitting across his lap and smiled, "How do you know that song?" She sniffled, "The Lost Bride is my favorite."

"I heard it when Ezran and I went to Duren for marriage negotiations." Callum kept trying to steal more chaste and not so chaste kisses. This line of questioning not the one he wanted to take.

Rayla wrapped her arms around his neck, "Wait," she ducked and looked into his eyes, stopping his kisses, and peered at his face, "You're nae promised to somebody are you? You don't have any facial tattoos."

"No, no," Callum laughed, "Duren tried to get Ezran to marry me off. Queen Aanya wanting to cement an alliance."

"What happened?" Rayla inquired, quirking her head to one side curiously.

"Let's just say that the ladies in waiting found me...unacceptably eccentric." Callum chuckled remembering the awkward encounters. They had been interested in political gossip, power moves in the court, as they were supposed to be, but Callum wanted none of it. They all wanted the latest news from the high courts of Katolis and a peak inside the pacifist kings head, none of them wanted to talk about magic. At the end, he thought he wound up scaring a few of them. Maybe a fireball got out of control once or twice. It's not as though anybdy got burned. Just enough of a mishap to keep further proposals of Callum's matrimony a distant possibility for the foreseeable future.

Callum and Ezran had laughed the whole way back to Katolis.

Callum wrapped a hand through Rayla's dirty sweat soaked hair, not caring in the least. Everything about this moment was perfect, "Come here." She melted into him, kissing him back, bandaged hands pressed to his chest. He hummed against her lips and she smiled against his.
Something struck him, "Wait." Callum broke the kiss, "Are you engaged to somebody?"

Rayla's eyes went wide, then she squinted, speaking in a small voice, "Y'u din'nt know?"

"No…" Callum offered a confused expression, but he wasn't about to let her out of his arms any time soon.

"Then why do you think I have the Promised Marks?" She gestured at the two fang like tattoos on her face.

"I don't know," Callum offered, "Elves have tattoos. I've seen lots of elves, lots of tattoos."

"All elves?" Rayla provoked.

"No," Callum thought over what he had seen in Xadia, "Not the children I suppose."

"True," Rayla nodded, "But I had these even as a child."

"So you came into the Pentarchy, all set to be married, and then absconded with some human boy to return the Dragon Prince?" Callum kissed her again. He didn't care if she was promised to somebody else. He kissed the salty softness of her dirty jaw line.

Rayla laughed as he moved to her neck, "It's something Moonshadow Elves do, it's an old tradition. You get promised to a family to care for you should something happen to your parents. Usually ya get wed after y'ur first mission, gives ya something to come home to."

"Hm." Was all Callum elected to offer, moving his lips across her clavicle. She didn't stop him, just let him continue his ministrations.

"So tell me about him," Callum focused on his work.

"Ugh," Rayla guided his head lower, and pouted as she wriggled a shoulder out of the blouse sleeve, "Nae, I refuse, just, keep doing that."
Callum smirked against the soft flesh of her chest and continued to plant soft stubbled kisses. She giggled and pulled his head away, kissing him fiercely a final time before pulling away, leaving them both gasping.

"Down, boy," She purred, "Plenty o' time for tha'." She brought her sleeve back up, much to Callum's chagrin, "I'm not about ta take some human boy's virginity out in the middle of the Blighted Lands. Besides, we're both exhausted."

Callum's eyebrows climbed, "Are you sure? I mean, I'm okay with it."

"Well," Rayla laughed standing, "I'm thinking this should be a wee bit more special that just out in the dirt with a Glowtoad watching." She nodded to where Bait watched them panting from his shaded hole in the ground. Callum looked at his happy fat face and hated it instantly, "Dinnae get me wrong, Callum, thi' was so perfect." She held out her hand to help him off the ground.

"Y'know," Callum commented as he grabbed her forearm and Rayla pulled him up, "I hear Glowtoads are quite delicious."

She laughed, fighting a yawn, "Stop."

The two got into the shade covered hole, bedding down together, a Glowtoad curled at their feet. Sleep took Callum first, and Rayla curled into his arms despite the heat. The troubles of her mind hadn't vanished, but her worries were quiet for now. She bit her lip and relived the moment again, and again, and again, until sleep finally took her.
Chapter End Notes

Rayla's Numbness:

The way we feel is broken down into several different types of mechano-receptors. In the superficial layer we have free nerve endings that help us to interpret soft touch and temperature sensation. In the deeper skin layers we have more complex types of mechano-receptors that allow the perception of pressure, vibration, and pain.

Rayla has had extensive damage to the superficial layer to her hands on both sides so she has lost some of the finer sensations for discrimination, but still maintains other sensory modalities.

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Thank you for reading!

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Art by LionessLeone. Check out her tumblr, her twitter, her Ko-fi
Smoke Liqueur, it was always Smoke Liqueur that kept Alter's memories quiet. At least these days, he wouldn't dare venture into another drink knowing what sobriety brought. He had tried other tonics, other tinctures, even some leaves that had a particular potent effect, but none of them kept the dreams away, none of them kept the memories locked away quite like several hefty glasses of smoke. He swirled the glass in his hand, this particular vintage he had sampled before, the hints of caramel in the oaky char offered flavor that he had long since burnt away from his frequent visitations.

Three days of discussions, Alter introducing Elyas to various members of his little underground network of conscientious objectors. It was always an accident that brought them to the table, concerns learned through accidental alliances, kind healers finding wounded elves far past the Breach. Regardless of the story it always lead to the same, worsening assignments, questions leading to less pay in the civil arena of the military force away from any sort of confrontation. This lead them to the bars, and this is where Alter made his move. He would talk, share war stories, and wait for the tell tale hesitation prior to answering questions, the sideways cast glances that told them they were hiding something. True, some were here because they were sociopaths or unsuitable for military service. Alter had a way of rooting them out, but he had established quite a little network of elves with higher than normal opinion of elves. Over time each of these little groups of conscientious objectors had formed into bands, people who were often deployed together to different parts of the city.

Now Elyas spoke with two female elves and one male elf, the leaders of the leaders of these tiny cells.

Three days of discussions, of bereavements aired, of conflicts noted. The first night they spoke their conversation had been tentative, light, only coming at the end to dissatisfaction whispered over empty glasses. The second night it progressed, early in the night with clear heads they approached the issue before them and attempted a solution. And now they met again. Some semblance of a plan forming. Over the years, Alter knew that he wasn't the only one troubled with the constant threat of war, surely after so many generations of humans any war they pressed for should have died out. It had continued, however, so Alter continued. The other elves told Elyas of the details fleshing out the various insults and instigations that the Moonshadow assassins had elicited throughout the nations of the Pentarchy.

Elyas knew that Alter harbored some dark intent for the Dragon Queen and her regime, her allies and confidants, but kept talking about 'breaking the cycle'. Alter was content with letting the younger man pursue such endeavors, but had a singular reason why Alter was sure he would be the one to put the nail in the coffin of the Warden himself, if not Gale: Lessa.
Her name had been Lessa. Or at least, that was how the young girl had called herself. A human from across the Breach, somehow stumbling into the no man’s land between the human and elven military forces, found under the heavy corpse of a downed steed and it's human rider. Alter had returned across the Breach after some dark deed done in Del Bar or Neolandia, he could not remember, but knew he had been long in the human lands. He cut through the Breach and the lands of Katolis, keeping to himself and made straight for Centuri’s Watch. A keep overlooking the Breach more than any sort of outpost. His sister's wife had been stationed there during her military service and he had made more than a few cordial relationships there passing through over the years. The Moonstone Path too far north from his next dead drop location, Alter had elected to come to Centuri's Watch by way of shadow. As he crossed the terrain he had heard whimpering, the soft cries prickling his ears in the broken landscape that was either desolation or active death. In the middle of the former fray, as though dropped to middle of a battle field, weeping. He heard it drifting through the silence of the night, some Dark Magic trick Alter assured himself.

But no unholy magic could craft such an innocent creature. Auburn hair matted with blood that was thankfully never hers and large doe like eyes made of earthy brown. Her skin as filthy as her dress, Alter remembered fondly that she had only one shoe at the time, and even that one was torn so that her toes could be seen wiggling. When he approached he was silent, and he sat and watched her there, pinned beneath the horses hooves, grunting and struggling but not making any progress towards her freedom.

When he stepped into view she stopped, halting her struggle and looked at him, lean and fit then covered in the navy and green armor of his trade he must have looked strange to her in her dirty dress that was once pink.

"Help." She had whined. She hadn't screamed, hadn't been scared of him. He was an adult, somebody that could help her.

So he did. Alter helped her out from under the horse with a simple act and she had scrambled to his arms hugging him. Thanking him. He had never known such gratitude, such appreciation, and was not even alarmed when he found himself hugging her back, assuring her it would be alright.

The duo, now together, made their way to Centuri’s Watch.

The looks Alter got when he showed up with that sobbing creature in his arms were confusion and ridicule. How dare he bring one of the enemy there to their fortress, one of the infestation? When the foot soldiers moved to take her from Alter, moved to end her short life, she clung to him, sobbing harder.
Alter had never known a spouse, not seeing the time or the place for it in somebody who had been a sharply honed tool for the Dragon Queen's use, but in that moment he felt the pull of a father, the need to protect this lost and scared thing that was not his own. Sometimes he cursed himself, sometimes he cursed that day in particular. If he had never stumbled upon Lessa, if his hearing had been ever so slightly further gone he may have never rescued her, loved her, and never would have had to watch her die.

Alter fought with them, argued, and the scared little human clung to him, her savior.

Years away he laughed into his glass.

Soon the arguments went from soldier to commander until finally the Clerk of Centuri was called down. Alter an unyielding lethal force, the others not knowing how best to address the deadly elf that had brought a human to their midst. There was no precedent for this. No child had ever crossed into the Breach. There were soldiers who remained silent as Alter defended the human child against the verbal onslaught. Accusations and slurs from some. Amongst them though, were the seeds of his far off notions. Some amongst the jeering calling crowd remained silent, distraught. None moved to act, none moved to deter their attempts to wrest the little girl from him and end her life. But they watched, disturbed.

This back and forth continued until the Clerk of Centuri came. Tazun of the Eclipse. An elf whose military prowess was only matched by the political audacity that had earned him dominion over one of the watches of the breach with a battalion of Sunfire, Moonshadow, and Earthblood beneath him, an honor formerly reserved unto the Sunfire elite commanders.

"Finally," Alter gasped, relieved, seeing the man of rank, "An elf that will see sense. You all have obviously tossed sense to the wind."

Tazun descended the stairs into the common room where a growing crowd of mixed nationality had been growing, Sunfire, Moonshadow, Earthblood, all were here doing their part to defend the Breach, the pacifistic Water Kin wanting no part and the heat being too great for the magics of the Skywing to be anything but unpredictable.

Tazun opened his arms and greeted Alter like a brother, they both had dark hair at that point, atypical for Moonshadow elves, but not unheard of. Either way, age had greyed them both well and had not been kind to Alter's joints.

"Assassin," Tazun said, "Be at ease, you are a friend here, now some one say, what in the light of the Sun and Moon is going on?"
The Sunfire elf that had brought Lessa and Alter into Centuri's Watch stepped forward, standing next to the Warden at attention, "This elf, Alter of the Waning Light, comes home from across the Breach. In his passage he claims to have come across this girl, injured, and in his pity rescued her. Obviously a trick of a dark mage, I have never known an assassin to show pity, soulless creatures that they are, forsaken by Sol." The soldier spat to punctuate his statement.

Alter merely watched, confused, enraged, and stepped forward, but the crack of Tazun's gauntleted backhand across the soldier's face sent the soldier reeling. Tazun's teal eyes cold, he watched the grey skinned Sunfire wipe the black blood from his lips. The Clerk's voice was cold when he spoke, "At attention, soldier." Despite the fresh swelling and trickle of blood down his lips, the soldier stood at attention, standing straight with arms at this side, "Good. Now, I did not ask for your assessment, only what happened. You keep your opinions on the most gifted, most blessed, of my people to yourself."

Tazun turned to Alter, his voice warmer, curious, "Does he speak true, you rescued this girl in the wastes of the Breach?"


"Good." Tazun turned and looked at the gathered men, bringing himself up to his full height, voice still warm, "Come here, child." He beckoned her with a warm smile and open hand. She was hesitant at first, and Alter held her back, not knowing what was next. He looked around at the timid and quiet men that had been so raucous moments before, then looked to the smiling Moonshadow elf commander.

And Alter let Lessa go.

He would always regret that.

The little girl limped over to the other elf, shrunken in on herself, not looking at anyone but Tazun, this gleaming example of elven kindness. Tazun guided her to stand before him and called out to the men around him, challenging them, "Now, who here feels threatened by this creature?" Silence, "Who here feels that this little child is a threat to Xadia?" Again, silence, "Good. Then let us consider this what the scholars of my youth called, a teachable moment. Look upon this girl, this human. She is frail, she is broken, she is scared. She carries no weapons, and she bears no threat. The women of the humans are weak and frail things, poor breeding stock, yet they have produced a girl with courage enough to face the Breach. Tell me, girl, what is your name?"
"Le-Lessa." She stammered, her voice a soft a stark juxtaposition to the steely strength of Tazun,

"And Lessa," Tazun continued to glare at the surrounding elven forces, "Why did you come into
the Breach?"

"I's hungry, my tummy hurt." She whimpered, looking down cradling her abdomen with her tiny
hands.

"She is hungry." Tazun said simply, "She is scared, and she is hungry. Let this be a lesson to you
all. Human children are just like elven children. They have needs: hunger, sleep, thirst, and when
they need for something they will go to amazing ends to accomplish their goal. Isn't that right,
Lessa."

She smiled up at Tazun as he patted her kindly on the back.

"But there is another thing that human children have in common with elven children." Tazun
continued, "They are so very fragile." His gauntleted hand wrapped around Lessa's throat. As
Tazun clamped his grip around her tiny wind pipe her eyes bulged and her hands came to his fist,
trying to pull it away

"No!" Alter could still hear his own voice echoing as Tazun's men held him back. Tazun lifted the
little girl into the air with one arm and her feet dangled and kicked at him, eyes fixed on the
ceiling. Lessa's choking gasps were muted by the rising cacophony of shouts to the surrounding
elves. Some shouted in protest, some in abject horror, but most cheered on their Clerk of Centuri.
Cheered to the coming death of a frail little girl. Alter screamed, he raged and railed, felt the red
seeping in at the edge of his vision.

When the Clerk dropped Lessa's body, it's face was grey and horrid, still in a frozen shriek that
never ended. Those soft doe eyes were filled with blood from the strain her passing had caused and
they would not close. Just stared.

"By Thunder's Law," Tazun shouted over the men, bringing silence, "By Thunder's Law, no human
shall enter Xadia without being served the sentence of death. This is no different for man, for
woman, or for child." He leveled a gaze at the Sunfire elf that had relayed the tale of Alter and the
human, commanding him with a gesture, "Take this trash out and throw it in the Breach. We keep
our quarters and commons clean, take this rot out before an infestation grows."
Alter was numb as he watched the Sunfire elf pick up Lessa by a twisted foot.

"You absolute wretch," Alter growled, he didn't know when he had been forced to his knees, but a Moonshadow elf held one arm back, and two Sunfire elves held the other. "She was innocent, a child, she probably couldn't tell the difference between a human and an elf!"

Tazun looked at Alter, and he could feel the burning in those cold blue eyes. Alter looked away, feeling hot shame burn in him. Tazun turned and marched over to Alter where he knelt, "Brother," He grabbed one of Alter's horns harshly forcing the assassin to meet his gaze, "I only keep the Dragon King's laws. Do not lay these sins at my feet, lay them at his." Tazun patted Alter's cheek with the same gauntletled hand that had strangled the life out of Lessa, "Take your grievances to him." He turned to the surrounding elves, "Be sure our brother here is given the supplies he needs to reach his destination, but relieve him of his weapons. He won't need them now that he is home in Xadia."

The laughter of the elves as they stripped him bare and set him on his way in the dark of night faded away and he found himself in the tavern, another empty glass of Smoke Liqueur in his hand. The laughter from back then faded into the laughter of the men at the table with Elyas as he regaled them with the various aspects of his time with Callum of Katolis and the rendition of recent history that he had shared with them.

Alter watched Elyas talk with the young elves of the Lunar Guard, male and female alike. He was more well suited to this task than Alter ever would be: talking, parsing words. Elyas was a former brawler, an elf with thoughts that were simple, yet wise. He was an elf who had lost his love but had been inspired by her love of the commoners of Lunaflowne. And like Alter, he had nothing left to lose. There were no loved ones that could be used against him, no kith or kin to pull at his heartstrings and weaken his resolve.

Alter had already intended to talk to Elyas about The Umbrage and what role he might play in it. Then he ran into Elyas and the Danceleon that day on the street after he had thought is friend a lost cause. It was as though the Sisters Fate had brought them together at last. Watching the questioning glances of the young elfen Alter saw the admiration there. Elyas was a natural leader, offering care and compassion to those around him, but with a vision that could help the others catch fire to set the world ablaze.

Alter hoped it would be a purging fire.

With a grimace, Alter stood, caught his balance, and walked across the slanted floor to Elyas and the other men. When they noticed his presence, those closest to him parted. Elyas may be the mouth piece, but they knew Alter to be the brain, smoke-soaked though it may be. Alter suppressed a belch and asked the men there, "Whooz good for anothur?" Simple words were best.
Elyas met his presence with an easy smile and the large burly elf clapped him on the shoulder, "No friend, I am well. I was telling this young lady here, a former siege artificer, about the potential applications of various different devices in her repertoire."

"Berry good." Alter nodded, and walked uphill towards the bar to secure another helping of Smoke, the only spirit that seemed to be able to drown the sounds of Lessa's gagging scream.

Alter reached the bar and put his glass down, not bothering to say anything, but just flashing a single finger at the young elfress behind the heavy wooden bar. Platinum straight hair shaved on the sides to show the base of her horns that was tied in a short tale at the nape of her neck, she wore an uncharacteristically soft attire of a black and white cloth bustier and skirt with puffy sleeves that revealed her shoulders. When he flashed the finger she gave him a sidelong glance, but still popped the cork on the bottle and pouted for him. Maybe ever so slightly less gratuitous than she had been when he first came in. Young elves were so stingy.

Alter grabbed the bottle and began to bring it to his lips, when a young elf leaned towards him. Why was everyone young? Was he that old that all other elves just qualified as this nebulous designation.

"You are Alter of the Waning Moon? Yes?" The voice was furtive drawing Alter's attention away from his glass, "Luna's Sickle himself?"

Alter suppressed a laugh, "By Luna's grace it has been a long time since I have used that title."

"But it is you, yes?" The elf was obviously of the water kin, skin a slick appearing grey with webbed fingers and fin like projections from wrist, elbow, and disappearing beneath the collar of his unlaced shirt. His form was tall and lanky and he seemed to sit with an awkward presence as though he was unused to keeping still and was constantly moving. The horns upon his head were webbed to his skull as well causing bony ridges or fins in a triune that carried forward over his heavy brow and merged just before they became his brow.

"Aye, you can call me that, my amphibious friend." Alter nodded to him and raised his glass before taking a drink.

"Your friend, Ellass-"
"Elyas." Alter absently corrected.

"Yes, yes, El-li-ass," Not only the name sounded strange in his strange sharp toothed mouth, but each syllable seemed difficult for the water kin to pronounce, "He speaks of dark things, no? Best he not say such things, yes?"

Alter drunkenly watched the water-kin's eyes dart back and forth around the bar. He considered attempting to sober a little bit, but instead opted for another swig of smoke, "You want to talk to him?" Alter mused.

"You want to talk to me?" Elyas asked coming up and wrapping an arm around Alter. He didn't need the extra support, but he welcomed it.

"Yess," The waterkin drew out the 'ss' a little more than was necessary, "I am of the water tribes, far to the south. An old acquaintance of mine told me of this meeting of minds."

"Aye," Elyas said warmly, "Just a few people gathering together to meet and discuss old war stories is all."

"D-do you not speak of, " eyes darting around again, voice hushed in it's fumblings, "speak of taking the storm's throne away?"

Elyas looked to Alter with a long and worried glance masked in the feign of a smile, "Friend, friend, no! We are just sharing old war stories. Old soldiers telling the new how good they have it, is all."

The water kin's face fell, eyes continuing to dart, he coughed, a wet sounding slurp, "I-I shouldst be going." He drew out the vowels with his words.

Alter had half a mind to let the creature be on his way, let this stranger to Lunaflowne go peaceably, but perhaps it was all the smoke in his mind or all the smoke in his belly, but he called out for the retreating water kin. He paused in his loping saunter when Alter called out, "Friend, hold." With arms too lithe and legs too long, he turned, too large eyes in his grey skinned face.

Alter leaned over to Elyas, "I have not had the…courage…to reach out to other," he chose his words carefully here, despite the smoke, "like minded individuals of the other Xadian races.
Worried that differences in mannerisms may hide a snake."

Elyas didn't like this prospect as much as Alter it seemed from the grimace on his face, "And now?"

"And now he comes to us." Alter whispered, "Have you ever known a snake to seek a mongoose?"

Elyas furrowed his brow, "I do not like this, Alter, not a bit." That may have been how Elyas felt, but in the next breath his arms were wide, "Come join us, cousin! Surely you have tales to tell and can buy us wine to drink! Come and tell us!" Elyas played the uproarious role well.

Alter decided that it was fright upon the water kin's face, and followed as Elyas led him back to the table with the waiting members of the Lunflowne guard. When Alter came up to the table where they all stood. Elyas waved to the elftress behind the bar, "Sadrimay, wine if ya please!"

The black and white garbed elftress nodded, "Comin' up, Elyas." Barkeep and matron of Tinsel and Ties, she fetched a flagon for the elves at the table, bringing a chalice of ice water for the water-kin, which Alter noted he took gratefully. Sadrimay knew her trade and her patrons, even if they were virgins to the Tinsel and Ties. Blessed girl brought Alter another glass of smoke too, even if it was a little on the shallow side.

"Now," Elyas said, pouring the flagon for his companions, "Tell us your name that we may cheers to your health and good fortune."

Large eyes looked at each of them, Alter couldn't decide if those eyes were scared or just constantly wide. The water-kin placed a splayed webbed hand upon his narrow chest, "Is Zuri, of ze Water-Dancers." He smiled at them each in turn, "You honor me with the water of your home."

Elyas smiled, not deterred by the odd mannerisms of the creature. Cousin, odd mannerisms of the cousin, "Zuri, to you and your kin, may your years be many." The men around Elyas raised their chalices of wine to resounding cheers, Alter raised the smoke, and Zuri raised his water. Once all had taken a drink, Elyas didn't waste anymore time, "Now, tell us why you come seeking us."

Zuri's grin was unsettling, two rows of sharp teeth meeting one another, "Tell me, what do you know about the origin of humanity?"
Not a Rayllum chapter, but with this much plot, there is more of a stage to set. I am trying to give you all a world with rich storied characters each with their own motivations, but I recognize it may stray far from what brought you to this story originally. At this point this beast has taken on a life of its own.

As always, I love comments, I love critiques.

Thank you for reading.
"Wahahahahaaaaa!" Callum screamed, a wild grin on his face. He held tightly to the bony spines on Zym's back, feeling Rayla's grip around his waist tighten as the dragon began to dive again with Bait sandwiched between the two of them. The wind rushed around him, blasting his hair backwards as they plummeted. Green eyes wide, tears streamed from the corners as he clung to Zym's back, he couldn't contain the shouts of exultation and excitement.

Not wanting to blink, the ground rushed up towards him, the terrain of the sparsely wooded foothills of the Cursed Caldera coming closer and closer. More and more details revealing themselves as his field of view became narrower and narrower. The terrain of the Pentarchy, of Katolis, was not nearly as vibrant as Xadia had been. Here there were no glowing plants throwing their blue luminescence into the growing night in stark contrast to the sun's final orange caress, but the verdant greens and muted brown-grey of the terrain below looked like home. It felt like home. It was home.

Callum hadn't been able to see the people in the village that resided at the foot of the Cursed Caldera, but Zym's silhouette against the orange red sky edging towards violet would be an unwelcome reminder of the tensions that had been an ever present aspect of their lives. Callum anticipated those citizens would be huddled close in their homes tonight. Some would sit silently, some would stare out the window pondering, waiting, and even others would whisper their fears aloud. Zym had been uncharacteristically nonchalant, this far from Gale's throne, with what was to come, Zym no longer seemed to care if he was seen. Being home in Katolis, he couldn't bring himself to care either.

After crossing over the glowing red scar of the Breach in the night they had found a small cave to rest in. Large enough for the dragon, the four creatures took time to rest away the majority of the day, but as afternoon turned to evening, they had aroused. To reach the Moon Nexus tonight, they had a little farther yet to go. Callum had been the first one up that afternoon and had spent the next hour or so sketching while the others slept. He contemplated the six sided figure, the hastily scrawled 'bees' underneath it. Callum tried desperately to recall the dream that had prompted the indecipherable hint.

At the end he was left with the same mystery he had started with. Somewhere deep in his mind he knew that there was an answer, but he didn't know the question. So when the others had aroused they had found a very frustrated brooding young man anxious to be gone.

The darkness of his earlier mood only made him savor the exhilaration of flight all the more.

Zym pulled a hard bank sending them into a slow and wide descending spiral, the sudden change in forces bringing his torso years against Callum. Callum could hear Rayla laugh and Bait groan over
his shoulder as they flew. In the fading sunlight of dusk, the trees of the caldera threw long finger like shadows that spread slowly across the forested mountain side. The wild life took note of Zym, too: a family of deer watched the great hunter circle overhead warily.

With the slowing rotation of the world below Callum, he could see the shapes and structures of the Moon Nexus and the ruined parapets: a long lost vision of Moonshadow Civilization. Back before the banishment of humans, before Thunder split the land with his decree. A time and a people, if not a whole culture lost. Rayla and Lujanne had said on more than one occasion that the secrets of the Nexus, Moon or otherwise, were lost to the ages.

Zym righted himself, and the horizon took it's natural place and angle in the distance. Callum was able to relax his grip on the Storm Dragon and leaned back. Rayla did not loosen her grip on him. He looked over his shoulder and met her violet eyes, noting her smile. Callum smiled back. Their kisses had been an all too brief foray by his estimation, the heat of the day keeping them both uncomfortable and sticky in their shaded hole. Then when evening had fell and they emerged to find Zym had returned to them while they had slept. There was no time to discuss things, to talk, before they were off.

Callum and Rayla had exchanged furtive looks, unsure of what came next. Callum recalled their shared touches as precious moments, the memories of it and all the soft moments that came before sending a jolt like thrill through him. But what was next? He had to admit to himself: he didn't know. He wanted Rayla, he knew this, thirsted for her taste and hungered for her touch. He wanted to capture those lips again and again. More than that he wanted her with him, wanted her by his side through the coming ordeal. No matter what it was or what it brought, he needed her close to him. Three years without her presence after such a short initial time together, Callum had not realized how comforting her presence had been. Now, with the long view of time lost, he marveled at how he had become so infatuated so quickly. With as much as he had fantasized about running his hands through her hair, teasing her skin with his touch, tracing figures on her skin with a lazy hand, they could not just retreat and explore what this new step in their affection meant.

There was no time.

It had been a nice respite while it lasted. He both knew and feared these days of long flights and stolen kisses were in short supply. With the Nexus now in sight, the gravity of the coming confrontation weighed heavily on his shoulders. He could feel the anticipation of it in his frayed nerves. Like a celestial clock, the moon grew ever more full. In three days time, the full moon would be upon them and the troupe of assassins would be in the castle.

A chill went down his spine as he considered that somewhere out there, the assassin with the twisted horns was coming for his brother. A force armed with the deadly skills and natural abilities of Moonshadow elves traipsing through the woodlands of Katolis. Would they have the same
respect for life that Rayla's mentor had? He doubted it, his general impression of the elf from Zym's vision had been that of spite and malice, but murdering humans on his way into the capital would only create a stir, cause panic. On the way out however, it would suit their purposes just as well to taint their blades further.

All the more reason Callum needed to stop them. Before the people of Katolis lost anyone else.

How many people had he lost? His mother, Sarai, his father, Harrow, Soren, a friend of sorts, Claudia, his magical contemporary, and yes, even Viren, though he grew cruel in the end, Callum still missed him. He missed them all. With all those people lost in the shifting shadows of the past. Aunt Amaya, Gren, and Ezran were all he had left. And Rayla, whatever there was with Rayla. Warm and real whatever it was, he felt his heart race and his face burn, but he wondered just how deep this ran. In him, in her. What would become of them after this ordeal?

If they survived this ordeal. The joy of the exhilarating flight faded.

Focus on the now, Callum, he told himself, One step at a time.

Still, it didn't bring the smile back to his face.

Zym lighted down into a small amphitheater made of white marble stones overgrown with rich and verdant moss. Lujanne waited there, Reserved and matronly. She watched with a simple joy on her face as Zym met the ground again. Callum leapt off of Zym's back first in a single stumbling movement and turned, taking Bait's gratuitous weight in his arms. He didn't get the chance to help Rayla down, she leapt down as he set the fat grumpy toad down.

Lujanne crossed the distance to them and Callum looked up at the sound of Lujanne's voice, "Azymondius, my Lord of Storms, you are most welcome here." Bowing, she addressed the dragon, who bowed in return with a simple craning of his great serpentine neck, "Callum of Katolis, know that you are always welcome to desecrate this most holy of sanctums with your presence. I see you bring yet another Moonshadow elftress to my home. Seeking to impress her with your knowledge of the Moon?" She teased holding her arms open to embrace him as a friend.

Rayla walked up next to Callum, "Lujanne," she laughed nervously, "It's me. Rayla."

The old illusionist watched Rayla with cautious eyes and a reserved expression, "Hm, I suppose you are." Suddenly there were two Lujannes examining Rayla, lifting arms, pinching cheeks,
pulling at the dirty and stiff clothes, "I wonder what happened to you, dear." Lujanne offered a sad smile, "You seem lost." The two Lujanne's melded together to squeeze Rayla with a motherly hug.

"I dinnae get lost, Lujanne," Rayla growled, though not fighting the embrace. He could see from her conflicted frown that she had not liking the overly thorough examination. It made her feel like a horse for sale at market, "I was in the Lunarium for three years."

Lujanne backed far enough to peer into Rayla's violet eyes, "Oh dearie, your body was," Violet eyes searched violet eyes, "But I think your mind ran rather far afield, didn't it?" Callum watched Rayla stiffen in the elder elftress's arms. How had Lujanne cut through all the anxiety and preoccupation that Rayla had been struggling with since being freed? With just a look and caress she seemed to know more about what Rayla had been through than what Callum could peace together.

Their embrace was broken suddenly, Lujanne pulled away and gripped Rayla's face fiercely. Rayla protested but was hushed to silence. Trying to stare even deeper, almost past Rayla's face as though she was seeing something behind her or through her. So still and odd that Rayla began to struggle against her grasp again. Lujanne's words were cold, "Who took it from you?"

Rayla wilted in her hands, the former slight struggle forgotten, "I-I dinnae know. I jus' know it's no there."

"This is a dark thing they've done, no wonder you feel so lost." Lujanne seemed to come back to herself a little more, and stepping backwards from Rayla, "So this is no simple assassin troupe coming for our king then." Callum and Rayla both sobered, the joy of the reunion dissipating like fog before the rising sun.

_It's not gone_, Zym interjected, having watched the exchange silently in his ponderous way. His sending was that of Rayla surrounded and bathed in the silver light of the moon, then it ebbed and was slowly siphoned away, _It's just not here._

"This explains the human and Moonshadow dragonguard here."

Zym sent panicked thoughts: flight, fleeing, the sense of being of hunted, _Dragonguard? How? Where?_ The beast frisked and sparked, the hair amongst his silver scales standing on end, the bony spines along his back arcing with electricity. Callum felt his own hair begin to stand on end as Zym's magic charged the air and envy sat like a stone in his stomach.
"Be at peace, Azymondius," Lujanne raised both her hands in a calming manner attempting to soothe the future king of dragons. At least to the best of her ability, "Here there are two who come from Katolis. They seemed to expect you here this very day at this very moment. I believe King Ezran has sent them."

"A Dragonguard, though?" Rayla asked, making an effort to join the conversation.

Lujanne beckoned them, "Come, they are eating at the moment, their journey was long and hard. An elf and a human together, you can imagine they did not have much to talk about." She lead them through the surrounding trees, the odd ruin standing out at times. What used to be a walkway, what used to be a pillar, and even the foundation walls would make the odd appearance among the foliage as they passed.

"They're eating grubs aren't they?" Callum asked suspiciously as they walked.

Lujanne chuckled, "Very astute, Callum, my old tricks are too transparent for you, aren't they? Are you going to spoil their meal now?"

Callum shifted the bag on his shoulder, and mumbled uncomfortably, "Nah, ignorance is bliss." He remembered the illusions. Illusions of ham and cake that had not been nearly as good when it was coming up later and there was no magic to mask the flavor or the chunks.

"Maybe you are starting to understand the Moon primum a little better." Lujanne turned, smiling over her shoulder as she led them, "Though, do you really need to, with your little marbles?"

Callum laughed sadly along with her, "Of course I still do. I'm not convinced that there is nothing I can do to touch a primum without siphoning it away. And besides that, the Primal Pebbles will always be limited, though I thank you for the insight of Ava's collar."

"Well, if anyone can do it, I'm sure you'll be able to." Lujanne encouraged as they walked.

The group took a longer meandering route to the outdoor table where long ago they had dinner on a similar meal, the arced tips of Zyms wings brushing the tree top canopy. When Lujanne came to the illusory copy of herself that she had left behind watching over the two dining guests she clapped her hands, drawing their attention, "Esteemed guest and most welcome defiler, I would like to take this opportunity to let you know those that King Ezran bade you find have arrived. Though their journey was long and hard they are a welcome sight and they are welcome here."
Callum saw the two male figures stand and push away from the bench. He immediately recognized Tomaz, the trusted physician of Katolan Kings, a tall man with a pinched nose and thick glasses. Shaggy brown hair adorned his head in a tumultuous mess that always had the appearance of having just awoken. His dour face was hidden by a thick beard that he kept trimmed close. His figure, though tall, was lost in the long black duster of his profession. His black leather bag at on the table. Callum smiled at his family's trusted medical liaison and Tomaz nodded in recognition, the corner of his mouth quirking up in a smile mostly hidden, the equivalent of a crushing hug.

The other was a male of the Moonshadow persuasion who stood head and shoulders taller than Callum, nearly as tall as Tomaz, and if you counted their horns. Callum most certainly did not. The horns of the severe looking elf stood an inch taller than the black garbed physician, curved and twisted to points. His face looked oddly familiar, but his facial tattoos were strange to Callum, a circle of indigo ink above the corner of each eye with a large oval that spanned across his nasal bridge. His hair was cropped short to his head, showing the simple silver horn ornamentation that he wore, but the cut of his hair was a style Callum more associated with human kingdoms rather than any citizen of Xadia. His face was hard with narrow lips and square cheek bones emphasizing the hard look of his indigo eyes. Adorned in, oddly enough, attire akin to Neolandian styles with a tunic of black and white overlapping layers and a coat of grey vertical stripes.

Callum could see him examine the newcomers, those hard eyes studying, they looked to Callum first as he was standing beside Lujanne. Then as Zym emerged from the first, the light of dusk transitioning into the luminescence brought by the magic of the Moonshadow Nexus, a faint white green glow that seemed to originate from the stones all around in soft, almost dim, light. The light of the Moonshadow stones reflected off the silver scales of the small Arch Dragon whose head craned above them all at the level of the canopy. The elven male was taken aback at the presence of the Storm Dragon, but as he studied the great lizard Rayla walked up beside Callum, laying a hand on his shoulder as she studied the two other guests Lujanne had welcomed.

Callum felt Rayla stiffen.

The male elf's face was an interplay of emotions, worry, fear, joy, hesitation. He took a step towards them, "Rayla," His hard face had melted and his eyes shimmered, the steel of the elf that had been present a moment before, now vanished, "By Luna, is it really you?"

"Someone you know?" Callum asked, suddenly very aware of the fact that she was engaged.

"You might say that, though I don't know how well." Rayla answered him, her voice flat. She stepped in front of Callum and Lujanne, looking down into the dining area from the ledge above, "What are you doin' here, Praid?"
The male's face was wounded as Callum watched this exchange with rapt attention. Tomaz looked on without showing a shred of emotion on his face.

"I—we, we came seeking you, Rayla," Praid answered, the emotion in his voice fading into formality, "I have been guest to King Ezran, but when he became aware of your health he asked that we come and intercept you."

"No, I mean, what are you doin' in the Pentarchy at all." Rayla asked. Callum couldn't read the muddied mess of her emotions, her voice sounded both hard and hateful, and strangely on the verge of crying, yet her face was impassive. He waited with her standing before him. Callum wanted to reach out to her, to comfort her, even if it was just a touch, a presence to remind her that he was still there, but unsure of how to read this encounter between the two elves.

"We were exiled, we were banished." Praid answered, taking another step closer, "Gale told us to leave and we ran, we ran in fear of her wrath."

"Leavin' everything ya kno and love behind? Leavin' your only daughter behind?" Rayla challenged.

Callum perked up, "You're her father! Oh!" He jumped down from the ledge and closed the distance between Praid and himself. Praid took a hesitant step backwards, but Callum closed the distance just the same. Callum reached out and took the elf's four fingered hand in his own and shook it, "Callum, brother of King Ezran and High Mage of Katolis, a pleasure to meet you." The elf's expression was that of bewilderment and mistrust. Retrospectively, Callum understood why, but he had moved unable to stop. He couldn't blame the elf, this scruffy windblown human suddenly interrupting the conversation he was having with his daughter.

Praid's word's were drawn out, "Likewise, I'm sure." He looked the human up and down. Callum felt self consciousness creep into his mind, remembering he had been wearing the same clothes for the last week or more with only a single washing.

Callum looked back to where Rayla stood, pinching her nose. When she spoke her tone was flustered, "Callum, do you mind if I finish talkin' with my Da?"

"Oh, of course, sorry," He turned back to Praid, "Sorry. I'll just…go over here." Callum meandered over to Tomaz who clasped his hand and bade him good fortune. As if that were enough to break the tension of the meeting, Lujanne descended the steps, Bait stumbling after her, not aglow for a change. Zym staid on the ledge with Rayla, not to reinforce her or comfort her, likely it was because there seemed no better perch. His expression was bored if anything, Zym sat and crossed
his forelegs, draping his legs on the ground. But then the silence persisted.

Nobody spoke for a time, the awkward silence stretching on as Rayla approached her father.

It was Praid who broke the silence, amused, "Who is my daughter that she commands High Mages to silence?"

Rayla smirked, laughing at some personal joke, "Nobody likes a loud mage."

Praid closed the distance between them so that they were at arms length from one another, "Let me have a look at you, li'l bear." Rayla, initially not wanting to meet her father's eyes, looked up to those indigo eyes, "You've grown so much, we've missed so much."

Callum watched as she laughed bitterly and wiped a tear from her eye with a bandaged finger, "Ya really haven't missed that much. I've been locked up for three years in the Lunarium."

The hardness of her father's face returned, "Why the devil would they put you in the Lunarium, that's for political prisoners, for cult leaders, for those that go against the fiber of what it means to be Moonshadow."

--Zym interjected, despite his dozing appearance he had apparently been following the exchange, Were it not for Callum and Rayla, I would be some toy or tool of Dark Magic, but because she and Callum ventured across Xadia, because she led a human through the secret paths of elven lands, because she divulged the secrets of multiple peoples to the enemy, she was incarcerated.

Praid now looked at the dragon a little more thoroughly, "You're a Storm Dragon, how is that possible? I saw the last egg destroyed."

--The rumors of my death were greatly exaggerated. Zym answered with a sending. Not leaving it at that though, a flood of images came one after another. The story unraveled in Callum's mind as well, one he knew well, but had never seen from this perspective. An egg, shielded from the world, but still part of it, still aware of it, a consciousness reaching out and exploring, aware of where it lay in the Dragon Queen's nest, aware of the Dragon Guard, aware of Praid and Alayza and all the others, but never interacting. Then, chaos, rough hands leading to tumultuous currents within the egg, constantly shifting. Shouting, cursing, flashing lights of spells and the heat of fire. Then time, so much time, passed in silence broken by the occasional light and strange words not understood.
Then there came Ezran, in a world that had become so cold, the first consciousness that had reached out to Zym in the darkness. The world changed again. It kept changing, then it became cold. He had been so sleepy then, ready to sleep the long sleep. Zym's first storm that cracked his shell as he felt the electricity of the Sky Primal surge through him, awakening him in more ways than one. More flashing memories that Callum had never seen, Rayla and him trekking across Xadia, the danger, Sol Regem, Callum drawing, until finally, the Sky Nexus and the final confrontation with Gale.

The torrent of imagery left Callum mildly stunned as the world swam back into view, he could see it had a similar effect on Praid and Rayla, Lujanne and Tomaz were untouched, or at least, unperturbed.

"We didn't fail. I had heard rumors…but…” Praid watched Zym wondrously, "We didn't fail Thunder."

"No, and I made sure Gale knew it." Rayla answered harshly, "But the queen herself sentenced me for the crime of bringing her child back! Who does that?"

Callum left her question unanswered, instead trying a way to soothe the nerves of the estranged father and daughter, "So you didn't know that Zym had been rescued and returned?"

Praid turned his head slightly to Callum, but not taking his eyes off of the heir of Thunder, "We heard a rumor in Neolandia. That King Ezran's brother had traveled across Xadia to speak to the Queen of Dragons herself with the help of an elftress named Rayla. Further details were… confusing. They rode dragons and fought an ancient elven evil. So many confusing tales that we couldn't make sense of. Rayla was a unique enough name that Alayza and I ventured to Katolis to seek audience with the High Mage for more answers. Whispered words, though often spoken with disgust, was that Katolis was becoming tolerant towards elvenkind. We thought, at least, we may have a peaceful reception and news of our daughter, though we had long ago given up hope of seeing her.

"This," He gestured to Zym, and then to Rayla, "Was more than I could have ever hoped for."

Rayla heard Praid out, heard his words, but still bristled, "I-I don't know how to feel about you and mother leavin' me behind. No, that's not right, I still, I still am just, I hate it. I hate that you two left. Why? Why didn't you come get me, I would have gone with you! I didn't care that you failed! I didn't care that Thunder was dead, I only cared that my mother and father were gone. That I had no family left."
Praid's hands twitched at his side, "We thought that you would be cared for, Runaan always had your best interests in mind. We trusted him to care for you while we went to be Dragon Guard, we trusted that he would continue to."

"Well he tried as long as he could," Rayla whispered, "He was killed in the assassination attempt on King Harrow."

Callum, bit his tongue. He had since learned that his Shade had been sent by Viren to warmonger under the direction of Aaravos, but chose not to add this information, better to let them think that he had died doing his mission rather than to let them know the torments he had to bear. Runaan's soul was free now, and Viren could no longer answer for those crimes.

"In his absence, did Tazun not care for you?" Praid asked, confused, "The marriage contract should have protected you."

"The Warden is the one that dragged me to the Lunarium. Put me on trial in the dead of night!" Rayla bit, "He may have been your friend, but I don't know what benefit the contract bought me! Three years, Da! Three fuckin' years I was trapped down there, barely fed, barely able to sleep. Look at me, I am practically wasted away to nothin'." Rayla growled, the momentum of her rage building, "Whoever he was at the Breach when he was your friend, no matter how many times he saved your life, when you left I was thrown into prison and starved. What do you have to say to that? Do yoo really think it's better that ya left me behind, now?"

Praid didn't answer, under the tirade of Rayla's arguments he had taken a step backwards, his gaze was distant trying to peer through time, trying to see where it all went wrong.

"I'm glad he left you behind." Callum interjected, Tomaz who was next to him turned his head and raised his eyebrows at Callum.

Rayla turned and looked at him confused, while Praid looked relieved that her attention was off of him, "What do ya mean by that? You mean you're happy I've been stuck in Xadia? Starved?"

Callum raised his hands in front of him, trying to soothe the situation, "No, but if they came to you, would you have gone with Runaan to Katolis?"

Rayla looked him up and down, seeing where he was headed with this, "Nae."
"You'd be in Neolandia, with them, you would never have come to Katolis and tried to kill Ezran. Ezran could be dead by another's hand, I would have never left Katolis, we would never have found the egg, we wouldn't have Zym, I might not have ever learned magic. Harrow would still be dead, and who knows what would have happened with Viren and Aaravos. I would have done anything to take away the time you spent in the Lunarium." Callum approached Rayla and Praid, "But I cannot." Callum looked at her father, placing a hand on his shoulder, "He cannot."

Rather than standing by Rayla, he stood by Praid, "I think he was trying to do his best by his daughter, but he cannot be held accountable for the evil of others. As much as I cannot be held accountable for Viren's actions, can you hold him accountable for the Warden?"

Rayla crossed her arms and glared at Callum, then at Praid. She tapped her foot impatiently trying to get her irritated energy out. Finally, she threw her arms in the air and nearly shouted, "I guess not!" And with that the anger and the rage and irritation seemed to flow out of Rayla. Her tightened shoulders relaxed, her posture slumped, "I would really like to be alone for a bit. Da' it's good to see you, but this is a bit much." She began to walk away.

It was Tomaz's turn to interrupt, "Lady Rayla," he cleared his throat, "My king bade me find you that I may address your wounds and nutrition. I implore you, let me do these first, I will be quiet while I work and this can be done in private."

Rayla looked at the physician, then turned away, "Whatever. C'mon." And stalked away towards where she knew the private guest quarters were. Tomaz grabbed his black bag off the table and hurried off after her, his black duster swishing around his legs.

In the silence of their absence Lujanne said to no one in particular, "That went rather well, I think."

*Any encounter with an assassin that does not lead to blood shed is a welcome change. Zym acknowledged, Callum would swear the dragon was asleep for all he moved.*

"You can stop touching me now, human." Praid was looking at Callum's hand on his shoulder with reproach.

"Sorry," Callum laughed, his hand jerking away as though burned, "I was just-um."

"I am ashamed to say this," Praid went on, ignoring Callum, "But thank you for your help with my daughter."
"Oh, no problem." Callum ran a hand through his hair, "Tell me, did you like Katolis?"

"Let me be clear, human." Callum didn't like the way he kept twisting the word as he spoke, "I spent the last four years living on the outskirts of a Neolandian village called Onfid. While I was there I learned two things from observing and interacting with humans. One, the vast majority of you all are too stupid to see how evil you are, two those that are intelligent enough to see it and do something about it, only rig the system to work the other way. I have an inclination of which you are, even if my daughter trusts you."

Callum stammered, not expecting this. He could feel his own anger seep into his voice, "I assure you, humans are no more inherently evil than elves are. As for intelligence, I haven't seen an overabundance of intellect from your kin either."

Praid barked a bitter laugh, not even bothering to look at Callum while he insulted him, "Kin? You dare speak of kin?" He spat, "Your brother is the kind that's so feeble minded he thinks that there might be peace, one day." Praid mocked and walked off leaving a baffled Callum behind him.

Callum growled under his voice as Praid left the clearing, "Frog humping sonuvabitch."

Lujanne waited until Praid faded into the foliage, marching off in the opposite direction Rayla and Tomaz had gone, adding, "Again, that went rather well."

Zym snorted.

Callum looked at the last Moonshadow elf in the clearing, face and voice emotionless, "Surely, you're joking."

"Or is it an illusion?" She waggled her fingers at him with a large smile on her face.

Callum ran a tired hand over a tired face, pulling the skin, "Lujanne, you are the worst."

"Thank you, Callum, I'm quite proud of that." She held a hand over her smile as she laughed, "Now tell me how was your first kiss with the young elf?"
Callum stiffened, "How could you know about that, who told you?"

"Callum, my dear simple, stupid, human," her words were harsh, but her tone a mimicry of Praid that made him smile along with her, "You just did." She placed a hand on his shoulder and bade him to follow her towards the guest quarters. Callum had assisted her as she spruced up over the last few years with his frequent visits. It certainly helped that when Callum or Ezran or both had made the trek out to the Nexus that they had brought with them more than they left with. Though the illusions still protected the Moonshadow Nexus, the ruins, and the temple from the surrounding population of Katolis, Callum and been able to set up a bartering relationship with a more open minded merchant. Naturally, Ellis and Ava as the representative for Lujanne and the Nexus. Lujanne was not ready to come out of hiding, nor did he think that Katolis was ready for her.

Remembering the wolf and her wild child, he spoke up, "Where is Ellis? And Ava? I expected to see her here."

"Ah, the little wild one is down with her family this evening, she will be back tomorrow morning."

"And Phoe-Phoe?" Callum asked.

"Resting so she can make the flight back with you in the morning." Lujanne offered simply.

Callum rose his eyebrows, confused, and said so plainly, "I'm confused, what do you mean."

"Well, how else are you going to take the Dragon Guard and Tomaz back to Ezran, are they not needed there?" Lujanne paused, turning, confused at his confusion.

"I guess I hadn't considered that," Callum murmured to himself.

"Regardless," Lujanne continued walking on, "Have you thought about what comes next, Callum?"

"I've tried to." Callum ran a hand through his hair, scratching behind his ear absently, "I just, I can't seem to see past the upcoming assassination attempt."
"That's fair," Lujanne allowed, "A lot does hinge on what happens in the next few days, for both you and for Rayla."

"Wait," Callum laughed, "Are we talking about Rayla and I as a…a thing… or are we talking about the war between Xadia and the Pentarchy."

Lujanne opened the door to one of the solitary guest houses made of a large common room and an attached washing room. Callum entered into a pod of white marble shaped as a guestroom. Curved walls surrounded the accommodations and came together in a almost flower bud like curvature above that allowed Callum to see the foliage of the canopy above through it's meshwork of glass and iron. The bed to one side looked to be comfortable and soft with a blanket of thick down topped with pillows of fluff. A curved desk sat upon a raised dais in the room, a soft separation of the utility opposite the bed. Opposite the entrance an alcove of curved stone with cushions made a reading nook. Between the bed and the alcove, a simple wooden door separated the wash room from the rest of the simple accoutrements. On the walls of white marble, silver effigies stood out on thick pillars at the four points of a compass, the silver reliefs a shimmering representation of lunar arcs and phases. In the center of the room, hanging from the strange bud like mesh was a draping flower with vines that hung low enough from the high ceiling to just be out of reach of brushing his fingertips when he reached up to touch them. Along the vines and at the center of the plant above, long white pedals bloomed, folding and spiraling back upon themselves. It filled the room with it's scent, something both sweet and spicy like cinnamon.

Callum took a deep breath in through his nose as he looked about, despite the passing of dusk into night the accommodations were aglow with the soft lunar light coming from rivetted lines in decorative pillars at the for corners of the room, seeping out from the silvery effigies that allowed an ambient light that was both soft and cool. The bulb above held onto some sort of strange luminescence adding a warmer light to the center of the room.

"Here should allow you to find some respite," Lujanne smiled at him, she noticed him looking at the blossom, "Beautiful isn't it?"

"Yea, what is it?" Callum asked, not taking his eyes from the sweet smelling plant.

"A meswil. " Lujanne went on, "a plant that only blooms fully once per lunar cycle, they were the flower my husband, the first one, went into Xadia to find. I asked him to bring me a bouquet of them, and from the cuttings I have kept them alive. I told him they were a favorite of mine from my childhood, but I had never really cared for them until he brought them back for me."

"First husband?" Callum processed what she was saying, he felt as though his mind was struggling through molasses this late in the day with so little sleep, "Into Xadia? Lujanne, were your husband's... Elves? " 
She offered him a coy smile, "Not all of them, no."

Callum persisted, inexplicably enticed by the idea of romantic relationships between elves and humans, "Any of them?"

She chuckled, "You are getting too quick for me."

Callum laughed with her, "Why tell him it was your favorite of you didn't care for them?"

"Well," She went about the room, pointing out different amenities, at times interrupting her dialogue, "He wanted a way to prove his love to me, and I wanted him to have a way. I made up a little bit of a lie but it didn't change how I felt about him or how he felt about me. In the end it made me fall in love with both him and the miswel more. It just goes to show you that sometimes good can come from a little dishonesty."

"But didn't you want them to know you?" Callum wasn't paying attention to the spare towels or the dresser of extra clothes, "To take you as you were?"

"Oh Callum," Lujanne was almost affronted, he would have believed it, too, if not for that continuous coy smile, "My first husband never knew I was an elf, nor did my third."

"And the second one?" Callum was amazed at the history this woman could keep hidden with a simple partially provided answer.

She looked into the past, eyes sliding out of focus, "Had a thing for horns and pointy ears. So he got a little more of me than the others." She came back to the present easily, breaking her own memorial trance.

"Wasn't that hard though? Always hiding what you were? Are?"

She shrugged, looking at him, "Maybe, I never really noticed. I let them into my heart just the same, stole the same amount of kisses. It didn't change anything about who they were or who I am."
"I suppose you're right," Callum mumbled, still trying to wrap his head around how she had lived so long and led such a full life all while being tied to the land here.

She watched him ponder before stating, "It's like the moon, hiding faces, you stop, see it there, you cannot conceive of it's entirety, but it is still there to be seen. It hasn't changed it's nature or character because you have only seen a sliver."

Callum couldn't help but think of Rayla, which, knowing Lujanne, had been her intent this entire time. He knew Rayla better than he knew anybody and wanted to know everything, to experience every emotion with her, but did he really need to know everything about her to understand how he felt? What would change?

"Additionally, why worry about it?" She asked, finally making it back to the door of the room leading to the open areas of the ruins, "Think about the here and now, what do you feel? What does she feel? What good will it do Ezran to keep these feelings to yourself."

"So," Callum countered confused, "You're telling me I need to figure out how I feel and tell her before I go and help Ezran."

"I'm not saying you need to do anything. That is not my place, I have wisdom, real or illusory, but I think if you keep distracting yourself with the angst of how you feel, it will just distract you from what needs to be done." She placed both hands on his shoulders, standing over him, "Admit it, Callum, you've come here and attempted to contemplate the Primum so many times. Yet, you are no closer to understanding the Primum. I've come to know this stubborn prince in that time. You have a singular focus with the exception of one thing,"

"Oh?" Callum found this amusing now, "What is that?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Lujanne countered, "It is to almost everyone else, why do you think Praid suddenly became so hostile?"

"What do you mean," Callum questioned, confused, "We didn't show any affection in front of anybody just now."

"No," Lujanne acquiesced, "However, Zym's memory of you drawing her, which had been beautiful by the way, was telling in more ways than one."
Lujanne watched him settle his belongings in the room, as he mulled over what she said. Finally, Lujanne opened the door to leave, "I cannot tell you what to do, Callum, but don't you think that it would clear your head a little bit to know where you stand? If you do not owe it to yourself, do you at least not owe it to Rayla? To Ezran?"

Callum had paused looking at the bed, large enough for two, and looked forward to another night of sleeping alone after having spent the last two sleeps holding Rayla's weak body close. He didn't look up and Lujanne took her leave. Callum stood alone in the celestial blue green glow of the room, beneath the warm spicy sweet miswel and could not make up his mind, could not find the next piece to the puzzle, his head was a tumultuous dance of Lujanne's word's, Rayla's kisses, and Ezran's undecided fate.
Rayla sat at the desk in the room she would claim as her own as Tomaz went about his work. He had removed the stiff and brown bandages that Callum had carefully applied several days prior and began evaluating the state of her hands. The strips of missing flesh marred by hardened and black eschars, cracked and red at the folds of her hands. Tomaz took special interest in the balmy residue of the salve that Callum had been applying.

"Interesting." Tomaz muttered under his breath. He held her hand up in the lantern light, two of which burned brightly offering ample yellow light in contrast to the soft ambient green light that filled the quarters. The start dancing shadows conflicting with the lunar glow of the room's Moonshadow lamps. Tomaz wiped some of the balm off, testing it's consistency, rubbing it between his fingers, then examined it in the light, turning it and watching how it glistened, "Curious. I wonder?" After a moment's hesitation, almost nonchalantly, he inserted his thumb into his bearded mouth and sampled the balm.

Rayla looked on, suddenly disgusted, "Ech." She felt bile rise in her throat, "What are ya doin'?"

Tomaz mulled over something, never taking his eyes from her hands, not hearing Rayla at first, "Oh, I'm sorry, mistress, did you ask something?"

"Why did ya taste the dirty pasty thing?!" Her face twisted at remembering the event.

"Oh?" Tomaz continued, his voice was soft, confused. He didn't seem to understand why Rayla was repulsed, "I was sampling it for properties. It is colloidal in nature so that it provides a sufficient barrier to dirt and grime, preventing infection, which it seems to have done very well so far. Also it seems to possess small beads of menthol giving it that mint like scent, but is also soothing to injuries. Now I have seen something of the like before, but it was the citrus scent that baffled me, it is as though somebody added Xadian orange rind to the balm. I had heard it rumored that the rind in particular had antibiotic properties, but…" He looked at her blank face, recognizing his ranting, "I believe the mistress also wanted quiet?"

Rayla looked the black garbed physician up and down, "Yea, I suppose that would be preferable." She felt a little guilt when she noted the look of disappointment tighten the corners of his eyes. She had seen his face light up from the flat visage she had seen since coming here at her question, "Ya really luv y'ur work, don't ya?"
Tomaz looked at her, raising a questioning eyebrow.

Rayla laughed, "Speak, please."

"As the mistress wishes." Tomaz acquiesced with a nod, continuing to clean the dirty balm from her hands with small damp cloths, "Yes, I do love my work. I get to use the mysteries of the world, of nature, to make people better. Sometimes. Most times. Well, sometimes." he nudged his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose and continued working on her hands, "I am going to have to debride some of this dead tissue so that the good tissue underneath can thrive." He moved to his bag, "I have some pain medication here somewhere."

"That's not needed," Rayla shrugged her shoulders, "I cannae feel them, anyhow."

Tomaz paused, "You can't?" When she only shook her head, he asked again, "Nothing?"

"Well," She blushed briefly, suddenly in the desert lands in Callum's lap and his face pressed to her breast, "I can feel hummin', like…" she searched for the right word, "Vibration."


"No, no, and," She flexed her hand, causing the scabbed over tissue to crack and flack, new blood beading forth, "No."

Tomaz furrowed his brow and went about placing towels from his black bag under her bleeding hand. After this he pulled out a scalpel and sat down, pulling up a second chair closer to the desk where he was to work, "No point wasting the medication then. Now try to hold still." He worked silently, meticulously, one hand holding the hers aloft, the other delicately peeling away layers of dead flesh and dried blood. She watched with a morbid fascination as her hands became lighter and bright red. Occasionally there would be a bead or red blood where he moved the sharpened blade, but never enough to obscure his field nor any to cause more of a mess of the towels. Slowly the black eschar was removed, she felt the skin of her hand loosen. When it was done and there seemed to be a mass of dead old flesh beneath her hand he took several jars out of his bag.

"This is a cream, the poultice you had been using locked in moisture, but the skin was already dry, that's why it hardened so much. This will allow the wounds to be moisturized as well as providing vitamins and building blocks for your body to use in healing." He pulled out several bundles of finer gauze than she and Callum had brought with her, "Wrap this about your hand after thoroughly
applying the cream, loosely." Finally Tomaz took out a pair of black gloves, "Then I want you to put these on over the gauze, they will provide padding, keep your hands warm, and allow the moisture of your skin and the cream to not evaporate, but provide a healing environment to the injru."

"You jus' carry this all with ya?" Rayla was amazed at the versatility of the black bag.

"I had a notion of what would be needed from our king." Tomaz said simply and began on the other hand, working silently, efficiently.

"Well, Ezran was always considerate and observant." Rayla laughed remembering the goofy little boy and his devotion to Zym. Her smile faded, now it seemed that he needed that devotion repaid, that strange relationship sweeping up Callum and Rayla in the process. Changing the subject, she coughed and recalled, "You also said somethin' about nutrition? Do you have a trick for me to get all my strong as steel muscles back?"

Tomaz raised his eyebrows, unmoved, unimpressed "Well, my main concern was that you would gorge yourself at the first sight of food, as that can actually be severely detrimental to your health. But you seem to have not done that based upon how vivacious you are."

"You mean eatin' could hurt me?" Rayla asked, shocked, "But I love berries and nuts and…"

"Well those are still good, I'm just trying to warn you against large portions." Tomaz waved her concerns away, "You just need to be more careful about what and how much you eat so that you can recover to your best." He began to pack up his bag and clean up the mess on the desk, "Many small meals a day will be best, and I don't know your position on meat, but eating high protein lean meats will help you rebuild muscle fast. But some nuts have good protein in them as well. Additionally, be sure that you are getting vitamin rich greens in. Over time you'll find that you can tolerate more and more. You've been restricted for a long time and you need to let your body adjust to hopefully a new abundance."

"Well, thank you, Tomaz." Rayla looked at the gloves, they were a thin leather lined with brown flannel like material on the interior, "One thing though." She held up the pinko finger of the glove, "This has an extra finger."

"Hm." He looked over at her, then began rummaging in his bag more, "Go ahead and put them on."
Rayla did so only after applying the cream thoroughly as instructed and then wrapping them in the fine gauze which earned a terse nod of approval from the rummaging physician. Once on, she played with the dangling extra finger, swinging her hands back and forth watching them sway.

What do you do with a fifth finger anyways?

As she pondered this Tomaz set out a pair of sheers, a long strand of thick shimmering thread with a curved needle on one end.

Tomaz guided one hand to his field of vision and examined the gloved hand with dangling spare finger. He delicately slid the sheers between her bandaged hand and the glove, making careful cuts. He was artful in his craft, and after he had slid the needle in and out of the separated leather flaps, she was left with two black leather gloves that had cross-hatched stitch work up the base of her hand that seemed to flow seamlessly into the rest of the glove.

Rayla examined his skill and handiwork, "Very nice, herr doktor."

Tomaz nodded without missing a beat, "Bitte." And clasped his bag shut. He patted the leather bag and patted it, standing, "With your leave, mistress?"

"Please, you can call me Rayla," She held out a gloved hand, the human greeting that was at times used as farewell.

Tomaz clasped it gingerly, "Always a pleasure, mistress, but I think I will keep the honorific." She watched him leave, but as the door closed behind him, another entered.

"Rayla," Praid began, pausing just past the threshold to her room.

"What?" She cut him off, not bothering to stand. Rayla was suddenly very interested in her new gloves and how they glistened in the lunar light.

Her father was smart enough to not to approach an assassin unwelcomed. Or better yet, he knew not to approach an irate young elftress unwelcomed, "I came to…to apologize for leaving you behind."
Rayla looked away from her gloves, glancing at him momentarily, then scanning the room. Did he have to look like such a lost little elf? It made fueling the fire of her anger harder, "Don't worry about it, Da." Rayla muttered, "Callum was right, you needed to do that for things to turn out like this. For Zym to be here, for me to be here, for Callum and Ezran to be here. I dinnae know that I would have gone with you anyways."

"Truly?"

Rayla sighed, defeated, and she supposed slightly petulant, "No." She stood and walked over to him, "I was so mad at you both for leavin', and I don't know if it was because I was ashamed y'u had failed, or ashamed ya didn't love me enough to take me with ya."

Praid's face was pained, "Rayla…" He tried to reach out to her, but she blocked his hand with her own, the leather of her glove keeping their skin from any meaningful contact.

"I'll get there, Da'," Rayla said, looking him in the eye, "But I am nae there yet." It hurt her heart to do this to him, to keep him so distant. She remembered riding on his shoulders, clutching his horns, laughing as he threw her in the air. But she remembered the black emotions that had wracked her when they had left her behind. The freshest memories the darkest.

His hand dropped, she could convincer herself that tears were welling in his eyes, "I…I don't know how to be part of your life anymore. It's like my l'il bear went and grew up while I was gone."

Rayla took in a quivering breath and crossed her arms in front of her, rubbing them, "It doesn't mean you cannae be part of the future," she spoke quietly, seeing hope kindle in his eyes, "But I've only known a world alone for so long. That is a scary place to be. Then Callum came and saved me." Whether she meant their fateful encounter in the castle of Katolis, or their reuniting beneath the stones of Lunaflowne, Rayla wasn't quite sure.

Praid stepped backwards, turning, "Is he really such a great person? This human?" Praid took in his own shuddering breath, "Can you really affiliate with a dark mage?" He wasn't mad or disgusted, just confused, befuddled.

Rayla looked upon her father, seeing not her father, the imposing warrior figure that he had been all her life, but a scared elf in a tumultuous world wracked by war that he had wound up pulled between the wishes of his queen and self preservation, and she pitied him. Rayla laughed bitterly, "He doesn't use dark magic, Da.'"
These words only earned persistent confusion splashed across indigo eyes.

"He touched the Sky and Sun Primal." Rayla smiled weakly, "He's compassionate, he's kind, he's the reason I've never killed anyone." She felt the tears welling in the corner of her own eyes and dabbed at the corner with the black glove, "If not for him I would have the blood of innocents on my hands, he's saved me from that. He's saved me from the darkness of the Lunarium."

There was a long pause, Praid set his shoulders.

"I know how you feel about humans," She watched him continue to leave, "I cannae believe after four years among them that you dinnae have doubts about what you were taught, what we were told, what we were molded to believe."

"Maybe wun day." Praid offered simply, mimicking her words, "But not today. Not yet." With that he left.

Rayla stood for a time after the door had closed behind him, pondering the short exchange, each turn of phrase plucking an already painful heartstring. She had no reason to not cry, she was in private, she had just reunited with her father, an elf she couldn't not love, but also couldn't bring herself to hug like she wanted to. As though some major mental obstacle was wedged between them still. Maybe when she saw her mother, she would feel something different, maybe when she had them both with her. For now, she took the tears that threatened to fall and forced them back.

Rayla felt cold, through and through. She flung the door to the wash room open and took note of the large basin that stood on clawed feet, the pristinely white towels, and the chain on the wall. She gripped the ring at the base of the chain and pulled, provoking water to come spilling into the basin from a spout on the side. As the basin filled quietly she watched the wisps of steam mixing with the cool air rise and dissipate. Rayla stood there numbly, waiting.

As the water approached the rim of the basin, Rayla released the metal ring and the flow tapered to a stop. She tested the water, still too hot, but it would cool quickly. Undoing the belt straps that held the dagger at her hip and axe upon her back, she let them drop to the floor. She abandoned the boots, stretching her aching feet in the cool air, feeling the kind touch of the cold marble beneath her. Rayla slung the singular pauldron off over her head and tossed the stiff and dirty attire at the wall, kicking her breeches after themsd. Of all her attire, she left the black gloves on. The cold air settled gently against her pale skin and she felt the wave of gooseflesh run across her.

Rayla didn't stay exposed for long, in a moment she sat upon the edge of the basin and delicately
dipped her toes into the water. Rayla eased herself into the basin, letting loose a quiet moan of approval as the heat of the water edged over her legs, hips, abdomen and up her chest, until she was in water up to her neck. The heat rushing across her skin relieved the cold and bitterness she felt outside, but not the chill within.

Rayla hated water, true, wild and untamed water, running rivers and lakes. Water than hid the monsters of the deep that could reach up and pull her down. She hated boats and sailing and the like. But baths were soothing, the water was clear, there was no seaweed or silt stirring at the bottom of the tub. When she had been a child, baths were frightening prospects, but as she had aged, like most children, she had come to appreciate the benefits of a hot bath, especially with all those years of training to be an assassin. What had worked to undo knots in muscles and relieve the aches and pains of training now worked to undo the knot in her stomach and relieve the aches and pains of family reunions.

The hot water seeped through her skin, into the aching joints and she rested her gloved hands on the edge of the tub out of the water. Easing further, she held her breath and let the hot water soak into the knotted mess of her hair. It was not as filthy and grey as it had been, but was a far cry from it's former luster. She held her breath beneath the surface, testing, waiting, soaking, letting her lungs burn and ache, simply wanting to be swaddled and surrounded by heat.

Caught halfway between the surface and the bottom by buoyancy, thoughts raced through her head, she tumbled from one scenario to the next, tripping up and down over potential next steps, but she kept getting pulled back. The warmth of Callum's arms around her in that forged stone cave, the feel of him cradling her in his arms, hot sticky kisses in the desert and their hands clutching one another as they reclined in the shade, it too hot to cling to one another, but the idea of letting one another go so soon a terrifying prospect.

Her chest burned for breath and though she fought it wanting to swim through these happy memories, Rayla finally emerged gasping for breath, coughing. The muted sounds of the private bath making her disturbance resonate loudly in her ears. She felt the water run down her neck and out of her ears as she breathed.

Briefly, Rayla contemplated soap, but with the gloves on settled for a prolonged soak. She blushed, thinking of asking Callum to come and help her scrub.

When a chill set into the water making it an uncomfortable embrace, Rayla eased her way out of the tub, the cold air more intense on her skin than before. Her skin felt kissed by heat, but something still chilled her core, as though the heat had only ever reached skin deep. She toweled off, wiping the remaining drops of water away numbly. Wrapping it around her she tucked the towel into itself and strode from the bathroom.
"Oh!" Lujanne smiled apologetically as Rayla entered, "I apologize, I meant to leave these for you before you were finished and be gone. She gestured to an assortment of clothes spread out on the bed, "You looked like you could use something a little more appropriate for traveling than a blouse. Seems to me you'd be awful cold."

Rayla approached the bed, "I stayed warm jus' fine, but thank yoo! I would very much like something else ta wear." Rags for years was bad enough, but the same shirt and pants were a little old after several days.

"You looked a little worse for wear, and I thought to myself that I had some of my daughters clothes tucked away somewhere. And she was close your size, if a little more be generous in the bust." Lujanne commented absent-mindedly, not noticing the irritated glance from Rayla.

"Everyone seems ta be." Rayla bitterly muttered under her breath. Holding an arm over her chest, ensuring the towel didn't fall, Rayla approached the bed and began piecing through the attire. Rayla looked at the array of clothes, a set of elven fashions at least three decades out of style, but well cared for, "Thank you, Lujanne, this is very kind of ya to share with me." She looked over the clothes, picking up one, setting another aside. She began to piece several outfits from the array of clothes.

"Well, you can have them all, she's not in a position to come back and get them. She and her wife live in Del Bar now. You can have whatever you want." Lujanne smiled matronly, "Some of her choices were a bit less than decent, but you should be able to find something in this mess that will keep you warm."

Rayla held up a trim black piece made mostly of lace between two gloved fingers. With a smirk at Lujanne she drew out her words, amused, "I see."

"Oh." Lujanne stammered, "That is embarrassing. For her. Because there's no way that can be anyone else's." Lujanne chuckled nervously, "I'll just take that and dispose of it." She grabbed what Rayla had decided must be some variation of one-piece undergarment for women and shoved the embarrassingly scant piece into a pouch at her hips, "I'll, um, take my leave. Please, keep whatever you need."

Rayla snickered, watching Lujanne bustle away. Rayla could have sworn that Lujanne had been blushing.

Shaking her head, Rayla pulled out several more garments from the pile. A white shirt that hugged the waist and bosom, but billowed at the sleeves, tapering down to tight sleeves with thumb holes.
Pristinely white and made of breathable cotton, she set it aside. Navy pants almost as dark as the night sky and a clasp of two silver interlocking moons. They would hug her hips and cling to her legs. A sleeveless hooded shawl that was made of fine black cotton with down at the lapel. A patterned cross hatch ran across the light blue underside. A belt of violet leather and matching attached belt pouch that could be strapped to one's thigh. The boots in the pile were black leather that laced up the back with violet leather cord and two inch thick straps at the top, where the leather itself would fold down into boot cuffs. The sole was soft treated leather.

Rayla set these out and arrayed them before her as she would wear them. It was still missing something.

Rayla rummaged further, tossing shirts of deep navy, vibrant reds, and shockingly bright yellow this way and that until she found the last piece she needed. Though it probably came from her more ‘select’ garments. A black leather bustier that was made of surprisingly sturdy leather. Rayla also chose a pairing of select matching white cotton undergarments. She tried not to think about how they had been somebody else's, surely they had been cleaned before, surely it was fine. That and it was that or continue to traipse about without underwear like some streetwalker.

Dropping the towel, she stepped out of the pile of cotton, and stepped into the clean undergarments, donning the white billowing shirt next. She took the gloves off and threaded her thumb through the hold in the end of the sleeve, placing the black gloves back on top, the billowing sleeves puffing outwards. Rayla say on the bed and stepped her feet into the navy pants, pulling them up and cinching the violet leather belt with it's metal semi-lunar clasp. The hip pouch was secured by a second leather strap with a metal clasp right where her thigh met her pelvis. She tucked the white shirt into the navy pants and then grabbed the bustier, donning it over her head and pulling on the hidden straps that tightened it over the curve of her hips and chest. A pair of waterproof socks over her feet from the pile of clothes preceded the black leather boots which fit comfortably. And finally, the hooded shawl with it's padded lapels and hood.

Rayla pulled the hood up, tucking her hair deep into the shadows of it's folds hid her horns beneath. She found a mirror and examined herself in it.

Almost.

Rayla fetched the pauldron, axe and dagger from the bathroom where she had left them. Opposite the pouch she strapped the dagger's hilt, hid the axe's sheath between her shoulder blades, haft in reach with a careful move beneath the shawl. The pauldron over top the billowing sleeves.

There. Alluring and deadly. Rayla tested a few faces in the mirror; coy smile, angry stare, chaste chuckle, come hither.
All the while, the face that looked back at her bore those same matrimonial fang marks. The same that he had. She ran her hand over them. A reminder to all elven-kind that she was promised to another, and he to her. A decision she had no choice in, one that Praid and Alayza made for her at a too young age. Before he could ever show what type of elf he would be.

Unfortunately, it he had become an elf just as honest and compassionate as his father.

Rayla pulled the hood down over her eyes, hiding the fangs from her view.

'It's fine,' Rayla told herself, 'it doesn't matter, ya never meant to marry him anyway.'

Violet eyes peering out from under the shadow of her vision she worked her way up from her feet, turning the boots this way and that, appreciating what it did for her calves, which gave way to lean legs barely hidden in the tight navy garment. The violet leather belt sat at her hips, making them appear ever slightly more gratuitous and the bustier rounded them off nicely, the white of the billowing shirt peeked out above them, but then disappeared beneath the black leather bustier. Her chest hidden by the folds of white then disappeared beneath the layers of the hooded shawl. A protective fold of cloth within the shawl hid her neck and chin, but her lips still shone.

Rayla took another breath.

Then looked herself in the eye. If she ignored the fangs and the elven tone of her eyes she could almost pass as human.

A wisp of white hair fell, spoiling the illusion slightly. Rayla tucked it back. And wondered. Why did she want to look human? She sucked her teeth as she thought it over, testing different postures, pulling the dagger out again and again until she was sure she had a sure grip and a fluid motion. Then repeated the same action with the axe.

Rayla squared her shoulders and headed for the door. She didn't know exactly when she had decided she was going to go hunting for Callum, but she didn't intend to let this pervasive chill in her bones persist longer than it had to. And his lips were just warm enough.

Chapter End Notes
Medicine? - Check
Emotional Plot Points? - Check
Angst? - Minor check
WARDROBE CHANGE?! - Check
Tazel reviewed the letter from his father, brow creased. It would seem that the Sisters Fate had orchestrated some fantastical machination that led to the Catalyst of the Blood Lock being freed. Who so cared for his betrothed that they would pierce into the heart of the Lunarium to drudge up that forsaken assassin? The question answered itself, it was the name that had been on her lips as he drained the thick, desiccated blood from her.

Callum.

Callum of Katolis, Prince of the Pentarchy, High Mage of the Murderer's Heir. A rodent, a mutt of a warrior mother that had stumbled his way into power and regard. Tazel twisted the paper in his hands from where he crouched, away from the others of his pack. He took a striker from a vial on his side, flicked the beaded black head of the stick with a thumb, and in a flare of acrid white smoke, a flame whisked to life. He held the flickering flame to the letter and watched it catch, watching the ash float lazily down to the forest floor.

He returned to his pack, a veritable collection of killers, each with differing experience, but all with skills specifically honed for ending life. They were aware of him with being seen to watch him. As he approached them, they all lifted their heads in an ethereal unison.

Tazel stood before them, feeling the mantle of the Alpha on his shoulders, he straightened them.

"Sisters. Brothers," Tazel began, his voice strong even while hushed, "We left the lands of Xadia, left the boons of our beloved, with one goal."

Tazel looked to Neim, where he lounged on the forest floor, propping his elbow on a stone. A large elf whose size belied his speed. An assassin was usually a creature of silent precision, carefully trained to silently infiltrate and retreat after the deed was completed. Neim was a beast of a Moonshadow elf who carried out the tasks with all the precision of a hammer, leaving swathes of blood in his path. If not for the elf's unflattering record of successful missions, there would be very little keeping him amongst the Guild. His head count at least ten times his mission count. He wore a vest of green leather and had two multi-blades on his back, meant to be used as battle axe or scythe, the warping winding metal with it's green painted hafts almost worn away from use. Long white hair hung straight down from his head, the waterfall of hair only interrupted by the protruding ears and black twisting horns.
"Our great king, the Storm dragon who lead all the elven civilizations for generations, Thunder, was slain by King Harrow out of jealousy of the great power the Arch Dragon was able to wield. His closest advisor, a Dark Mage, Viren, destroyed the egg of the Dragon Prince."

His eyes drifted from Neim to Lilsep. A female elf whose specialty involved bringing elves of power to her bed, and then, in their vulnerable moments, ending their life. Her particular set of talents, apart from her elven wiles, was the use of the Blood Lock poison. The daughter of two banished Illusionists, she inherited their talent for the arcane, but honed it for a different goal. A vest of black and navy leather that looked almost a dress, showing a fair amount of her gratuitous chest and long sleeves that hung over her hands, coming to points. Boots of black leather with hefted heels, adding to her height several inches done up with white laces behind her legs that ended in skin tight black leggings. No weapon was apparent, but Tazel knew from experience that blades lined those sleeves and boots, and even the leggings, it was a miracle she could run at all, given the amount of steel she carried. Her horns were bare, identifying her status as unwed, amidst almost silver locks of wavy hair down to her shoulders.

"And then," the lie fell from his lips easily, a story told so many times that he had begun to believe it himself, "When we came to end the King of Katolis and his prince, in the fray, I became lost, I failed my pack. And while I have berated myself for my own failings that night, I must believe that it was the orchestration of Luna and her Sister's Fate that I stumbled into the dark workshop of the mage, Viren, and there before me was the Dragon Prince's Egg."

Where Lilsep sat leaning against a stone, she toyed with the white have shaven hair of another female elf, Torani. For every bit of femininity that Lilsep oozed, Torani covered. Plates of Moonshadow steel hung loosely over her figure, down to her knees and pauldron of blocky curves coupled with wrapped gauntlets of leather cords, she swam in her armor, the counterpoint to Lilsep's languid revelations. Torani sharpened the dual swords she used, that if connected, functioned as a bow, much as her brother, Runaan's, had. One of her horns had cracked long ago and it split off, stunted compared to the other. Her face and arms a marred landscape of scars that Lilsep loved to trace with her pointed nails.

Tazel met Torani's eyes as he continued his words, "Knowing the importance of the Prince, I secreted away, leaving my pack to do the task I was meant to carry." Shame entered his voice, "And their fate, death, with the exception of one. He paused before continuing, "We left the Prince of Katolis unharmed, leaving them a ruler to allow the humans peace instead of turmoil after their debt had been payed. Unbeknownst to us, one assassin apart from me survived, Rayla," He spoke her name softly, lovingly, each syllable coated with honey, he gestured to his facial markings, "My betrothed was taken into the ministrations of the Dark Mage and his apprentice, brother to Prince Ezran, Callum the Calamitous. He used his dark magics to twist the mind my bride to be and turned her into an assassin with the sole purpose of recovering the egg and returning it for use of their sinful magic."

He pulled the collar of the white sleeveless robe he wore to the side, "He so twisted her that the love we share was in no way able to overcome his dark compulsions." A sinuous scar marred
Tazel's pale flesh, "She attempted to end my life, but I was saved by my father, The Warden of the Moon's Shade as I bled out, and the mage fled, his compulsion fracturing." Just enough truth mixed with lies, Rayla had given him this scar, he had almost died at Rayla's hand many years ago, his father had saved him then.

Eyes falling on the last two of the troupe, a brother and sister that looked eerily too similar, the male too feminine to be handsome, and the female too masculine to be pretty, but with a strangely haunting symmetry that made the duo beautiful together. Kei and Key. Honestly, Tazel wasn't sure which of the two carried the name, and never saw them apart or bothered to designate. They wore sloping opposing togas that hung from a shoulder, cinched at the waist with a flail on each hip. When they fought they were a spinning mass of steel and chains that were unrelenting. Their thin and acrobatic forms bore no armor. They claimed it slowed them. They also had no scars that Tazel had ever seen, and they were not abashed sharing their physique.

"Try as we might," Tazel continued, "We could not save Rayla's mind, but in her moments of lucidity she cursed Callum's name and the Pentarchy. She gave of herself that we may put this to rest." The weight of his words rested on the gathered troupe. They had all known Rayla, they had watched her train with Runaan, his most beloved apprentice, "By the Command of the Dragon Queen, we are to make this look an accident, that King Ezran will fall for natural causes, that there might be peace at last. He has lied to our people and to his own for too long, and for the twisting machinations of his brother, we will take their king from this plane and send him to the ethereal. If we see the mage, however, we are freed to take his life however we please." Gale had not given permission for that particular contract, but it was better to ask forgiveness than permission. Ezran was more a means to an end, the key needed to open the path to his true goal: Callum.

Tazel sighed and hung his head, "Stand with me, brothers, sisters." They did and the six formed the circle, the most ancient and binding of shapes in reflection of Luna's full form. As they joined him he passed out vials, two to each of them, green liquid swirled with opaque strands of something almost seen writhing within, "Take this gift from our sister, the Essence of Rayla's Arcanum. Her anchor to the mother Luna, freely given, that we may succeed." He pulled the lunar tie from the Robe of the Alpha, and began his mantra, each Alpha with their own variation, "As Moon reflects Sun, life reflects death. We do not take life lightly, knowing that the natural order must be preserved. All things require balance, and for life to be balanced, for life to be preserved, death must be dealt to those and that which threaten the maintenance of the order." Each of his five held their arms forward, and he tied them each once, "We have but one task, to cut King Ezran with our poisoned blades. We do this for the Dragon Queen, and the future of our people."

Neim was first, growling, "My strength for the Dragon Queen."

Kei and Keye in unison uttered, "Our life for life."

Lilsep purred, "My body for Xadia."
Torani bit, "My heart for Luna."

Tazel did his own ties, finishing, "My revenge, for Rayla."

The ribbon glowed bright, a silver to match the moon of the waxing gibbon above.
Sick of Waitin'

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Callum didn't know how much time passed, he went from pondering at the foot of the bed, fiddling at the writing desk, laying across the comforter, but all to no avail. He couldn't clear his head. He couldn't decide what to do. Callum eventually became so frustrated with the circumstance that he left the room entirely. He practically threw his sketchbook around his neck and marched out of the room into the cool autumnal air of the caldera. The cold wind buffeted him, invigorating him, washing away the weariness. It was a welcome and stark contrast to how warmth of the pod-like chambers.

Callum didn't know where his feet would take him, but he stomped on, pulling his scarf around his neck and stuffing it into his buttoned coat, preserving what warmth he could. Callum did this more out of practice and reflex, but it certainly helped take the bite out of the air.

He left the accommodations of the others behind and Callum's feet found lost cobble paths and white marble structures that lead him through various entryways long forgotten, long lost. Each ruin unique and strange marred and beatified with age. Without purpose he traversed the ancient structures with feet that were never meant to desecrate their contents. The walls covered in elegantly scrawled script, the ancient history of the Moonshadow people and their illusory skills carved into the stone itself. The script glowed with the same blue green light that everything Moonshadow seemed to possess. He ran his fingers across the cool white stone of the slabs, the smooth edges of the inscribed text tracing across his finger tips. Ancient Draconic, he recognized some of the symbols, but the majority of them were lost. Lujanne had expounded upon his personal understanding and his library. Coming here had been what guided him to make the first Primal Pebble, seeing the way the text had soaked in the light of the moon and came aglow at night. Coupled with Ava's illusory necklace he had been tinkering with different materials to trap spells within and had instead found out how to trap the essence of a primal itself, as though some common thread connected all six, no matter the source.

Callum's fingertips blocked the light but allowed him to see the green glow through them, tainting the light, making it warm and red. What was the point of the studying magic if he was constantly trying to avoid touching it. Callum lamented his tainted heritage, lamented how his touch pulled and tainted the primal sources when he touched them. He could feel the air in his lungs, could taste in on his lips and feel the charging electricity in the air and it felt right. It felt so completely right. The air in his lungs and power in his hands had been like a hug from his mother, like he had somehow channeled her to help him in the now. The fire in his blood felt like Harrow's righteous fury reincarnated in him. He had never ventured to touch the sun Primal again, but knew it was there, just out of the corner of his eye, within reach, if he needed it.

How could that be wrong? To feel the love of his parents coursing through him and channeling it? What harm did it really do?
And then there was Dark Magic. This seventh unholiest of primals sources, perverting life itself to mold the world to your whims. Callum couldn't feel it as influentially as he did the sun and sky, but it was there, like a black speck in his vision, a painful hitch in his breathing, a chill that never seemed to warm. There was something off about it, but also alluring. Almost as though when you had a sore tooth, it hurt to touch, but you kept running your tongue over it, testing it, until you took the discipline to stop yourself. That was how easy it was to touch Dark Magic, something almost unconscious that had to be constantly guarded against, whereas touching the Primals took struggle and strife, had to be earned and not taken.

He groaned and smacked the wall with an open palm, the cold slap of his skin on stone reverberating in the temple. Frustrated, his hand dropped from the wall and Callum marched out of temple, the lunar moths flight perturbed by the wake of his presence.

Walking out onto the walkway, it was bathed in the light of the moon, the lunar light on white stone seeming to make the whole terrain before him seem almost otherworldly. In the silence of the night it was as if something new and strange had been born into the world, and the chilled autumn wind carried the scent of fresh water across the lake of the Nexus. He walked to the balcony and leaned heavily upon the stonework.

Here had been where Callum had learned about King Harrow's death. Here had been where he lost his third parent. He would never have predicted himself on this wild adventure three years ago, would never have thought to find himself as high mage let alone bounding across the lands of Katolis and Xadia on dragon-back to save the elf he...he what?

Callum stood, placing his hands behind his neck and took in a deep breath, staring at the white gleaming beauty of the moon above. It was nearing full, he could see the landmarks of it's silver face. The lake water was still, a perfect mirror reflecting the almost perfect roundness if the white moon. The water glowed brightly with the reflected light of the moon, it's reflected face staring back at itself.

"I wasn't expecting to find you here." Rayla's voice was soft, but it carried in the night's quiet. Her words not wanting to disturb the pristine perfection of the crisp night.

Callum started, surprised, but seeing her realized that this chance encounter had been what he had hoped for. Though he hadn't dared wish for it. He smiled at her, seeing her violet eyes in the moonlight, "Don't you think you should be resting?"

She approached him, looking out over the lake water. He turned and looked over the mirror with her. She spoke softly, he had to lean in a little closer to hear her, "Careful," her voice carried her
playfulness, "Rumor has it there's a deadly assassin in these parts."

Callum chuckled fondly, "I think you mean the least deadly assassin."

Rayla let out a soft snort, "Hah, fair." She bent and leaned against the stone, resting her elbows on the ledge and the silence stretched between them. He took in a deep breath and noted her attire. Her black leather boots, the tight pants that hugged those savory legs, and then the shawl! The way it teased to show her backside as she swayed or shifted, but never quite revealed it's curves was making him feel that dizzying all consuming focus.

"You're staring, Callum." Rayla looked over her shoulder at him.

Callum felt his face burn in the night, "S-sorry." He said with a croak. He broke his gaze from her body, and leaned next to her, clearing his throat. This time, more firmly, "Sorry."

Rayla nudged him with her pauldron, "What would the people of Katolis think? The high mage, ogling an elven maiden? Oh! The travesty! The gossip! Whatever will they do? How could Katolis survive?" He felt the barbs hidden in her humor, a bitter taste after the rich sweetness of spoilt fruit.

The silence stretched on between them. Callum could think of nothing but her lips and her touch and felt himself derailed all over again. Her words had broken the trance of her body, but her teasing had pulled him right back in. The space between them seemed insurmountable to Callum, but then again, here she was not even an arms length away. He felt like a ship without a rudder, spinning about and about, never knowing his heading.

When it had been just him and Ezran, he had been so sure of things, so definite. This was the goal, these were his morals, these are the lines I will not cross. Ever since she had come back to him he felt that part of him being eroded away and he was thrilled by it. Rayla was destroying his surety, the lines he hadn't ever wanted to cross, his morals were not his own, but dependent upon her thoughts and deeds. What had made him 'Callum' had become inextricably interwoven with this elftress. He longed for that assertiveness, to not be plagued with doubts about what was to come, but he didn't want her to leave. Callum didn't want to have to learn what that would feel like. Would he have a clearer mind or would he be even more lost.

Callum sighed, coming back to the now for a respite, "Where are we going with this Rayla? Where's the end of this fight? how far are we willing to take it?" He hung his head, cradling them in his upturned palms.

Rayla's voice was soft, sad, "As far as they push us to."

Callum turned his head, looking through the window of his thumb and palm, "You don't mean that."

"No, I do!" Rayla turned and leaned on the bannister, propped on bent arms, facing away from the lake, "I'll flight them tooth and nail. They take my hands, I'll kick them inta submission, they take my legs, I'll bite their kneecaps. They cannot keep coming forever."

"But can't they?" Callum groaned frustrated, staring into his palms again, "If we let them go after each battle, let our opponents, the entire nation of Xadia, return to their homes after each battle they will just go back to their posts. We let them keep coming back, recuperated, we will keep losing men and women while they don't. We avoid killing while they have no qualm killing us. We're not worthy of life to them, we are an infestation that has been tolerated."

As though she saw where this was headed, Rayla stood, "I refuse ta kill, Callum." The softness was gone from her voice, revealing the cold steel her conviction was forged from.

Feeling her absence beside him, Callum turned, searching for her. When his eyes fell onto her, he spoke softly, placing a hand on her shoulder, "I'm not asking you to, I don't want you to."

Rayla turned to him, not bothering to brush his hand away, stepping towards him on a planted foot, her tone challenging, hand on the hilt of her dagger, "Then what are ya askin'?" He could see her hand work the hilt of the dagger, her knuckles white.

Callum didn't back down, but didn't rise to fight her either, "I'm asking how we win. I'm asking how we can stand between two empires at each other's throat and stop the blood shed."

Rayla took his hand off of her shoulder, the touch of her glove soft against his palm, "We show them a better way."

"What?" Callum muttered, "Like with an arranged marriage?"

Rayla stared at him flatly, "No, idiot. Peace cannot rely on such a delicate arrangement."
"Then what do you mean." Callum practically begged her.

" I cannae be tha only elf that has managed to get along with humans." Rayla offered.

Callum rolled his head back, "No, I know Lujanne has managed to get along with three at least."

"Ya see?" Rayla encouraged, placing a hand on his chest, slipping beneath Callum's arm, "We know it can be done. And surely there must be others. I bet ya there are elves out there that don't want war, that don't see humans as lesser than elves, we just need ta find them. We'll have time after we save Ezran, once we stop this merry band of assassins we can make an effort for peace, with elves as allies. Ones that are willin' ta question Gale's narrative. And besides look how good of friends you are with Lujanne. Previously a recluse now welcoming multiple humans at once on the promise of your brother. It can work. Look at Lujanne, look at Elyas. Look at me."

"And your father? Praid?" Callum asked, hesitant, bending his neck slightly so he could look into her violet eyes out of the corner of his.

Rayla took in a breath of air, sighing. She grabbed his hand on her shoulder and held it in her own, unconsciously wrapping it tighter around her. Callum could feel the soft pressure of her against him. She spoke softly, sadly, "He will be hard. But I don't think it is his fault."

"No?"

"Think 'bout it." Rayla mused for him, "He spent his entire life, over a century, as an elite warrior. Fightin' an' killin' humans. Imagine if suddenly all that blood on your hands was innocent. If the monsters you had been told about since your childhood were suddenly just scared and frightened people fighting to survive. The people you killed just as complex and intricate and innocent as you were. All that blood on your hands from doin' the right thin' is suddenly the darkest of sins."

"I suppose." Callum didn't want to think of Praid like that. A lethal weapon that was now confused about it's prey. In a world without war, what did you do with a sword? Idle people tend to stir up trouble. Idle people looked for excuses to hurt that which they didn't understand. The Breach had been proof enough of that, three years of pacified arguments attempting to boil over, always wondering if the next minor conflict would be the one that sent them into all out war. Feuds for no reason, violence without purpose, all because the humans were different from elves, they were that other race, that other breed.
None of them knew the truth of it though, not the humans, not the elves. As far as Callum knew only Gale, Zym, and he knew of the deep past. None knew the fact that humans were just another piece of the complicated elven lineage. Not even Rayla. The problem was there was no history book that far back, only the memory of the Arch Dragons spanned that far. He had to trust what she had shown him. There were advantages to sharing this information for Gale, suddenly the advisor to the largest military opponent, one who is already too merciful, suddenly feels a bond to their enemy. It hamstrings their capabilities. The information had potent military potential for that reason alone.

But that didn't make it false.

He could tell her, he realized, tell her that deep history and the implications it had for them. But to what end? What would be the point? And what if it wasn't true?

And none of them knew that they shared the same lineage. Humans were just another form of elf, a dominant gene pool with shorter lifespan, consumers of magic and the land, but cousins, distantly related. Sun and moon had eclipsed and left humanity in its wake.

Rayla pulled him from his pondering with soft words. Hopeful words, "Just look at people, not tha humans, not tha elves, but people. Mother's, father's, husband's, wives, People don't want war, they want peace, safety." She interwove her fingers in the hand on her shoulder, "People just want to hold their loved one's close."

Callum felt the jolting excitement run through him at her words and actions, smirking over-confidently, he spoke "You know, saying things like this kind of takes away the threatening airs of Xadia's most deadly assassin."

"Oh, this dinnae make me any less of a threat." She smirked, her voice honey coated.

Callum became aware of the sharp point poking into his abdomen. He looked down and noted that Rayla's dagger had been drawn and now pressed lightly to his stomach. He swallowed, looking at her confused.

Rayla's word's continued to drip sweetness and innocence, "I may have all the strength of a kitten, but remember Callum, fightin' isn't about strength. It's about power and leverage. It's about using what you have at your disposal to knock your foe off balance and strike in the openin'." With a flourish the blade was back in its sheath, "All I needed to take this here dagger off an elite
Lunarium guard was a door and the element surprise.

Callum breathed easily the moment the steel was sheathed again, "So we need leverage, we need something to upset Gale. Surprise her."

"Too far," Rayla corrected, "Focus on what's next. We aren't going after the dragon queen. Yet."

"We need something to knock the assassin's off kilter?" Asked Callum.

"I knew you had somethin' behind that pretty face." Rayla laughed breathily, "But exactly. I know how they think, how they trained. They are blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh. How would you fight me, how would you get me to submit?"

Callum mused, and spoke, voice distant, "Oh, candle light dinners and a healthy helping of moonberry wine, maybe under the moon, secluded getaways and the like."

Rayla laughed, leaning her head on his shoulder, "Confident, aren't you"

Callum puffed up his chest, speaking with false bravado, "Well, I am High Mage of Katolis"

Not leaving his shoulder she looked into his eyes, "I knew once ya had a taste of this, you wouldn't be able to be satiated." Rayla bumped her hip into his and laughed along with him.

Trying to make up a little bit of ground, and a little bit of pride, Callum offered hurried words, "And I know the king! Face it, that gets me points."

"Yes," She scrunched her nose at him, "but you have five fingers, five toes, and no horns. Can you really be all that comely?"

In defeat, Callum hung his head low, "Alas, I cannot help the circumstances of my birth."

Rayla laughed at this. That laugh. It wasn't cute or dainty or restrained, but a snorting chuckle that was infectious and tapered off slowly. There was nothing beautiful about it other than that it was
hers and it meant she was happy, that she found him funny. Rayla never moved her hip away from
his and just stood pressed against him. His body soaked up the warmth of her, he inhaled the scent
of her. He marveled at how she had bridged the distance between them and now stood wrapped in a
lazy arm. What he had found so unmanageable she had accomplished without him noticing. Callum
only now too time to look at her hands.

Thin Black leather gloves covered her hands at the end of a white shirt. He picked up the hand that
held his and held it aloft, asking, "What's this?"

Rayla sighed disappointedly, "My new bandages. Your physician knows somethin' about style. He
just cleaned mah wounds a little more and now I have a different salve. Doesn't smell nearly as
good, but that's tha Pentarchy for you." The continuous digs had to be intentional. She had never
offered so much derision for the human kingdoms before.

"Surely you don't look down on everything from the Pentarchy?" He rubbed her shoulder and
clutched her close.

"No, not everythin'." Rayla practically purred, "I suppose."

Callum ran the other hand through his hair, the other slowing in it's soothing rub of Rayla's
shoulder, but never stopping it, never leaving it. He felt the urge to lift her chin, to turn her face
towards his and gaze into those beautiful violet eyes. Stare at those soft pink lips, to marvel over
the intricacies of her ears and ridges of her horns. But he didn't, too much other things demanding
his attention, "You should get to bed."

"You should go ta bed, too" Rayla's voice was tight.

"I'll go in a minute," Callum dropped his hand from her shoulder, "I'm restless yet." He gazed up at
the moon.

Rayla took his hand in hers again, and stepped away, drawing his attention, "Let me put it this way,
you idiot man." Frustration evident in her voice.

Confused, Callum asked, "Hmm?"

"Callum," Rayla said his name deliberately, staring him in the eyes, "Come to bed. With me." She
bit her soft lip after she spoke, letting the meaning sink in. The lip he longed to kiss. She began walking away from him backwards, her eyes not leaving his. Their interlaced fingertips unwove as she retreated. A long and wondrously drawn out caress.

Callum, still stunned, let his hand drop to his side as he watched her mischievous smile fade into the shadows with her. When she was surrounded in darkness she turned away from him and he could still make out the edges of her silhouette, the way her hips swayed a mesmerizing metronome.

And Callum followed.

It took him all of a moment to work the moisture back into his mouth. All of another to get the courage to walk after her. And a third moment was wasted as he hesitated, and plunged into the shadows following her.

His approaching footfalls gave him away, the pace, the clumsiness. Callum, somewhere in his mind, bemoaned the oafishness of his eagerness, but it was forgotten the moment she turned to meet him.

Rayla's violet eyes practically glowing in the darkness of the shade of trees surrounding the Nexus, her unguarded smile blossomed on her face as he caught up to her, "Took you long eno-"

Callum didn't let her finish as he pressed his lips to hers, and he could feel her smile against his lips as she laughed. Rayla was caught up in the force of his kiss and Callum's hand went first to her cheek, and then the other to her hip. She turned her head into the caress and pushed her body into his hand, her own hands beginning to tug at the buttons of his coat. The idea of her pulling at his clothes pushed him further into abandon. Callum couldn't see anything in the shadows but those smirking violet eyes. Callum's kiss was long, but Rayla didn't pull away and just met him warm caress for caress.

When the kiss broke, Callum felt pride that her breathing came as ragged as his own. His coat hung open in the dark now.

Between breaths, Rayla spoke, "So," she inhaled a short quick breath, "Is that. All you. Wanted. To do?"

Suppressed, surprised squeal escaped her as he drove her backwards, the shadows revealing enough
of the landscape for him to know he was driving her against one of the ruined pillars amongst the woods. Rayla grunted, finding something pressed against her back, but he offered her no reprieve, pressing himself to her as she had to him. Rayla bent to his embrace arcing as much as she could, hips pressed to hips, chest pressed to chest, lips pressed to lips.

Rayla didn't speak anymore, did chastise or make a sarcastic flirty comment. Callum didn't let her. Callum took her hood down as he moved a hand to run through her hair and cup the back of her head. Her white hair billowed in the soft wind and tickled unnoticed across his face. His other hand went to her hip, and he would pull her closer if he could have, but she plied herself to him willingly. Growing courageous, his hand went lower, tracing a burning path down her outer thigh and he tugged at her knee not gently.

Callum smiled in their kisses as Rayla's leg wrapped around him.

Callum had never kissed a girl, let alone a woman, let alone an elfress. Callum knew that his actions were clumsy, fumbling, unpracticed, but Rayla didn't seem to mind, didn't seem to want to take the time to comment.

When they would break in breathless moments they would press their foreheads to one another and simply gasp, staring with heavy lidded eyes at one another before a resurgence of soft kisses built to something deeper and more needful. Rayla's leg stayed wrapped around Callum, her hips rubbing against him slightly building fire in his head that seemed to cloud everything with it's smoke.

Rayla's hand's had threaded through his coat and held him against her.

"The Nexus is this way, Tomaz," Lujanne's voice carried in the darkness, "You just have to trust me."

"I don't see why I couldn't bring a lantern." Came the physicians stoic voice.

Callum and Rayla froze where they stood. Their kisses broke off and they both looked towards the source of the approaching voices. Callum's heart raced, or maybe that was Rayla's, he could feel it thumping against his chest.

"Because it would ruin the beauty of the night. The Nexus of the Moon should be viewed without the perversion of firelight." Lujanne added as if she was quoting some old text. Callum was fairly
certain that she was making it up as she went.

"Alright," Tomaz conceded, "But at least lead me there, I cannot see a damnable thing in these shadows.

"Relax, Tomaz," Lujanne added as her shadow came into view, leading a silhouette that could only be Tomaz by the hand, "My elf eyes can see in the dark." She looked down the path that Rayla and Callum were down, still pressed to one another. Rayla's leg still wrapped around Callum. The duo was breathing softer now, quieter. Callum felt as though he could feel the glowing teal of her eyes lock onto them.

Lujanne paused.

"Is something the matter," Tomaz asked, "Lujanne?"

"Oh," Lujanne turned back to Tomaz, "I wanted to show you the moon and stars here, at the Nexus..." She trailed off, "Never you mind that though!" She laughed dismissing the thought, tugging him onwards, and passed the duo without a second glance. She led him back in the direction of the temple, her voice fading as they left Callum and Rayla where they stood, "There are more heavenly bodies than the moon and stars to appreciate tonight."

Callum watched the shades leave, and the silence stretched on before he spoke in hushed tones, "I think Lujanne has indecent intentions with the royal physician."

Rayla laughed quietly, her voice even again, "I did see she was wearing some black lace that she doesn't usually wear."

"What does that have to do with it?" Callum nuzzled her cheek, the cold skin of his nose soft against the warmth of her.

"Nothing." Rayla said, lowering her leg, "But let's not wait around for Bait, or Zym, or worst of all, Praid, to stumble upon us." She craned her neck into his affections, "Come on." She took his hand and led him through the dark and shadows. His body missed hers, such a brief and breathless encounter had not satiated his wants in any fashion, if anything, Callum merely thirsted for her kisses more.
Overgrown cobbles passed underfoot as they came into the open again, the stars and moon above giving ample light this late in the night. He stumbled after the siren before him, an illusive shade pulling him forward in a trance. He had every intention of capturing her again.

Callum gently tugged her arm, causing her to turn directly into him when he captured her in a quick kiss again. She didn't fight the kiss, but didn't let it persist either, despite his best efforts, and she led him onwards again without a word.

Callum and Rayla came to the guest quarters, those pod like accommodations, and Callum pulled her towards the one where he had left his belongings, which she followed with him.

Rayla flung the door open, and Callum flung out to grab it. The last thing he wanted was somebody coming to investigate a loud noise in the dead of night. Rayla smirked at him and entered the quarters, trailing a finger across his chest as she left him in the doorway. The illumination of lunar light from the markings on the wall glowing to life as she entered, bathing her in their ethereal green light.

Callum entered and closed the door softly behind him, letting it latch and locking it. The sweet spicy scent of the miswel filled the air.

"Afraid of being interrupted?" Rayla smirked as she turned, facing him. She stood directly beneath the miswel and it's glowing green lunar light. Bathed in it's ethereal light, her violet eyes caught the glinting light and almost shone.

"I'm afraid I'm going to wake up." Callum admitted, to her and to himself. He crossed the distance between them with careful steps, only to be stopped Rayla's upraised hand gently pressing into his chest, keeping him at arms' length.

Callum stopped, but gazed at her still. Rayla withdrew her hand from him and undid the hidden clasp of the shawl, letting it fall to the ground. She stepped out of each boot towards him, her height dropping slightly so she stood more than just slightly shorter than he, his eyes at the level of her horns. Next, her hand went to the leather strap of the pouch undoing it, and undoing the dagger's sheath as well. "You mean you've been dreaming about l'il ol' me?" She undid her belt, letting pants hang loosely off her hips. Callum's eyes darted between her violet eyes and the tantalizing teasing glimpses of what was beneath.

Rayla reached him where he stood and pulled his coat off his shoulders He let it fall like her shawl had. Her gloved hands worked at the buckle of his belt and Callum felt that same fire in him, the same smoke in his senses. He watched her work, both smirking confidently and blushing excitedly all the while.
Callum placed a finger beneath her chin and turned her gaze to him, she stopped, questioning. Callum let out a sigh, "Rayla, I always thought you were the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Rayla didn't say anything, but Callum was certain she blushed just ever so slightly more in the strange green glow. Her hands continued their work.

Callum's pants fell to the floor, but settled over the top of his boots. Rayla lifted his arms to help him out of his shirt, taking his scarf with it as she attempted to disrobe him. It went over the top of his head almost effortlessly, and as his shaggy hair fell free of the collar, he felt something tighten at his wrists. He looked to find that Rayla had wrapped the shirt about his forearms and bound it with his scarf creating a makeshift form of shackles.

Callum looked at his wrists, holding them up between them, "What are you doing?"

Rayla leaned to his ear, "Makin' sure that you don't take advantage of my frail state." Rayla pouted the words with mock innocence. When she pulled away though, her eyes were vicious and predatory.

Rayla pushed Callum towards, her hand driving him backwards with his feet struggling to keep up, caught in his pants about his ankles. Luckily, he back peddled quickly, but his feet couldn't keep up with his shifting center of gravity and he began to slip backwards beneath the force of her push. Callum tried to catch himself, but with his hands bound like they were he merely struggled feebly. Callum bounced hard on the bed, it suddenly behind him to catch his fall.

Rayla giggled as Callum struggled, half on the bed half off. She lifted his legs for him and tugged at his boots, one pulling the sock off with it, the other sock dangling half off his foot. She pulled it off and tossed it after the boots. The two heavy soled boots made a loud thud as they tumbled across the marble which were rapidly followed by sound of his pants crumpling on the floor. Despite his bound arms he pushed himself back on the bed, dragging across the top of the blankets, and Rayla followed him, a greedy glint in her eyes.

Callum felt the headboard come up behind him and swallowed. He felt like quarry, like prey, like he was cornered, but, dammit all, he wanted to be caught. He used his bound hands to cover himself, though he still wore the pink and blue under shorts he felt more than exposed. The way the paltry shorts tented left very little to the imagination and threw decency out the window.

Rayla didn't seem to care about his bashfulness, and Callum soon stopped caring as well when she
let the tight navy breeches she wore fall to the floor. Callum couldn't help but drink in the pale color of her thighs. Soft and sleek, he wanted to touch them, to trace strange lines and pictures that could never be seen upon them. Rayla came onto the bed and walked on her knees over top of him. She nudged his hands with her own, guiding them away from himself, but he didn't care about hiding himself anymore. His eyes were drawn to her thighs and higher, the hem of her white shirt dangling just low enough that it teased the barest glimpse of where her thighs met.

Unable to restrain himself, he reached out to her and tentatively stroked the bare skin of her legs. He watched Rayla have a flurry of chills at his touch. Resting upon his hips, she sat and Callum could feel the fire of her skin and the heat her. Violet eyes heavily lidded, Callum was certain she felt him beneath her.

"Undo my hands, Rayla," Callum asked, his voice, like him, barely restrained.

"Mmmm," Rayla turned her head, tangles of white hair falling to the side. "No," She finally decided, "I don't b think so." She teased licking her lips, a giddy smile on her face, "I want to see how creative you can be." Her hips wiggled and Callum couldn't suppress a groan. Despite his bound hands, he clutched one thigh tightly, the other hand tracing towards her center.

Callum felt the soft linen beneath the hem of her shirt and Rayla growled pleasantly at his touch and basked in the soft caress of his fingers, but didn't let him continue. She grabbed the cloth that bound his hands and pulled them forcefully up over his head. Callum started to say something but found his breath taken by hungry kisses that stopped all his thoughts in their tracks. Hot and hungry her lips intertwined with his, back and forth, biting, nipping, kissing. Their lips danced.

Rayla leaned forward and pulled the scarf out from the knotted mess of his shirt and bound it through the head board of the bed. Callum didn't mind, feeling her lithe body against him, her chest pressed to his face, the soft flesh beneath the white shirt pressed gently against him. He didn't care what she did with his hands, so long as she didn't move away, so long as she kept shifting her hips like that.

Rayla did, she shimmied and ground, bracing herself weight on his chest. The sensation of her heat and weight pressing into him coupled with the lusty half lidded look in her eyes was nearly too much for Callum.

The next time Rayla let him breathe, he spoke in staggered words, "I love. You. Rayla."

What happened next, Callum didn't quite understand. He had been speaking, but his words and intent had been lost in the fog of their actions. Rayla's hips slowed to a stop, her kisses ceased, and
she sat back on Callum's lap. Her eyes were no longer lusty in the green lunar light, but dispassionate, "Why would ya say that?"

Callum searched back through his memory, worried, what had he said? He didn't even remember, whatever it had been had spilled out of him unchecked. He tried to move to her, to take her hand in his, but was restrained at the wrists. He continued to struggle, "Rayla, I'm sorry, I-"

Rayla leaned and moved off the top of him, sitting next to him in the bed, "It's fine Callum," Rayla said softly, "I just, I didn't expect you to say that. And I didn't expect to feel this way when you did."

Shit, what did he say? He wanted to ask, but all his limited knowledge of women told him that would wind up with him in deeper trouble. Rayla was already pulling away. All he could muster was, "What?"

"I think we should stop." Rayla said matter-of-factly and kissed him lightly on the forehead.

"Oh." Callum blinked, confused, restrained, and now in the absence of her body, cold and exposed, "That's okay."

"You're not upset?" Rayla asked, bending her head and staring at him suspiciously from the corner of her eye.

"I mean…" Callum thought it over, feeling blood come back to his brain ever so slowly, "Not really. Part of me is, but that's not what I want out of this. I mean, it is, I want that, I crave that. But there's something more too. I don't know exactly what that means yet." Apparently, in the absence of clothes he also found himself in absence of careful thought and careful words. Understandably so, a beautiful elftress was half-bare beside him in a bed and logic would have a tendency to be slow and soggy.

"You are an artisan with your words," Rayla let lout a short laugh, pulling the blanket out from under him and throwing it over them both, she snuggled into his bare chest. He could feel the softness of her ears juxtaposed with the hardness of her horn on his skin.

Callum waited for a moment, before asking, "So you can untie my hands now?"
"When I am sure you've completely cooled off, I will," Rayla answered sleepily

"When will that be?" Callum asked playfully incredulous.

"When you're asleep," Rayla yawned.

"My hands are asleep, does that count?" Callum begged.

Rayla considered, then, "No. Now go to bed."

"Can I at least get a good night kiss?" Callum offered the peaceable solution.

"You needy thing." Rayla lifted herself and planted a chaste kiss upon his lips then curled into the mass of blankets and Callum, enjoying the warmth.

Callum sighed, trying to ignore the growing irritation of his tingling hands, but even with that it wasn't long until he drifted off to sleep.

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Callum sat up from the bed with a start. Images raced through his head, six sided objects shifting, the sun, the moon, the stars. The sea, the sky, the earth. All of them folding in and out of one another.

Bees. No, not bees, honey combs. Like a hive, a meshwork of six sided shapes folding and overlapping. A dizzying imagery that made too little sense to be comprehended.

Callum stood from the bed, testing the binds that had held him, and found them absent. Rayla had been true to her word. He left the bed, trailing the blanket behind him as he walked across the room to his sketchbook. He flipped it open to the page with the hastily scrawled hexagon. In a state of sleep, he doodled. Not really thinking of what he drew, but letting his foggy mind drive the charcoal pencil. Lines emphasized and darkened under his somnolent ministrations. The edges came to life, popping off the page. The six sided structure before him simultaneously seemed to disappear into the page and have 6 edges to six sides that popped off the page.
When he stopped, his eyes widened. It hurt his head to look at. But it made sense in a strange sort of way.

"What is that?" Rayla trailed her gloved hand across his back, "You thinkin' about playing rolly-cubes?"

Callum looked, she was right, it was the Key of Aaravos, "I think...I think it's the key? Well, I know it's the key, but I think it might be more than we thought. Or maybe a key to more than we thought. I feel like...it can drink in the primals...or funnel them somehow."

"What do ya mean?" Rayla continued to scan the pages lines.

"I don't know." Callum threw the charcoal pencil on top the open sketch book in frustration.

"Well obviously sleep is good for you," Rayla concluded, leaning on his shoulders and whispering in his ear, "So you should come back to bed." The hot heat of her voice causing a surge of chills to course through him.

"Will you trust me not to have my hand's tied up this time?" Callum pouted semi-bitterly.

"Why don't we pick up where we left off and see if you can be trusted." Rayla teased, nipping his ear.

Callum turned his head and his lips were captured in a chaste kiss that did not stay chaste for long. She pressed her lips hard into him and he welcomed her. As hungry lips kissed a path along his chin and neck she left little bites in her wake. A feral creature toying with its prey. While her lips caressed and teased Callum's hands wrapped around the curve of her hips and pulled her close to him. Rayla followed his guidance, placing a knee between his legs on the chair. Her gloved hand ran through his hair and pulled his head to her shoulder, opening the crook of his neck for her to keep up her lip's delicate path. Her other arm wrapped around his back. He lost track of everything but what she was doing, caught in the heat of the moment. He pulled her in to him wrapping his arms around her waist.

Unable to get enough of each other, they tangled and intertwined and Rayla put all of her weight on the chair, Callum leaning further and further back to accommodate her. He felt the chair tilt beneath him but dared not fight back, it was a passing thought, balance shifting unconsciously
recognized. Without breaking the embrace his leg moved and braced his foot against the base of the desk. The chair tilted and Rayla pulled away.

Callum could feel his heart in his throat hammering away unchecked, ragged breaths came and his entire body was a work of heat. He felt lusty waves of fire coming from him. Above him Rayla's pink lips were wet and glistening in the lunar light, her violet eyes catching the green hues and making them glow as their lidded gaze searched his face with something akin to some dark deviant of affection that gave him chills to combat the heat raging within him. Those soft pink lips smirked, the curve of her gentle cheek flushed with her own exertions.

Rayla bit her lower lip, watching him with a wicked smile, and shifted her weight.

Callum's foot slipped from the edge of the desk and they were in free fall, the feet of the chair sliding out from beneath them. Their shifted weight sent them crashing into the floor, into each other.

Callum fell to the ground with a painful thud causing him to grunt, Rayla landing on top of him, knee rubbing against his groin pleasantly. He was all to conscious of the growing pressure, each movement bringing exquisite friction. Callum gazed at the elftress, the scent of the miswel fresh in the air and the lunar light giving her feral silhouette an ethereal halo.

Rayla purred ferociously, dragging her hand down his chest, he could feel the soft fabric of her glove on his bare skin. When her hand came to the hem of his shorts, she dragged over it and continued downward, moving her knee and replacing it with her hand. Her hand caressing him through the fabric. Callum began to trace soft circles on the skin of her exposed legs, his touch leaving hot trails across her skin. Rayla, despite her ferocity, kept looking to him. Part of her must not sure of this, and Callum not wanting to break the spell of their mutual desire, reassuringly continued to stroke her legs, moving higher and higher.

Rayla paused, looking into his eyes, and after taking a deep breath, gripped him firmly, not unpleasantly. With one hand she held him, and with the other she pulled at the pink and blue shorts, exposing him. As he came into the open air she switched her hands so that only the black gloves was between her and him. Callum took in a sharp breath at her touch and he gripped the flesh of her thighs tightly, pulling her to him. Reluctantly, she let go of him and straddled him, setting one leg on each side of his waist. While he missed the pressure of her hand, the weight of her sitting across him was even more exhilarating. The heat of her seemed to seep into him, the pressure and pleasure of it intoxicating.

Callum sat up from the floor, meeting her in a deep kiss evoking a giggle from Rayla. She wrapped her arms around him and began to nibble on one of his ears. She started slowly, agonizingly, shifting her hips so that she ground against him. This pulled a sharp gasp from Callum's lips and a
soft rasping chuckle from Rayla. She slowed her pace even more, each movement slow and mind-numbingly unsatisfying.

Callum growled and gripped her hips hard with one hand and supported their weight with another.

She whimpered slightly at the tightness of his grip on her bare hip, a sound that both excited him and made him loosen his hand. Rayla was toying with him, he knew it, he didn't care, there was only the sweet friction between the two of them.

His breath already ragged, her pace picked up to meet his, and he could feel her hot breath on his neck as they moved together, searching for a rhythm with one another.

The pace became faster, the rhythm harder, their ragged breaths punctuated by whimpers and grunts.

Rayla pulled away, the cool air both a welcome reprieve from the heat and a hateful interloper between the two of them. Callum gazed at her, transfixed in the spell of the moment. Her face an interplay of exertion and joy. Lips parted soft and succulent, violet eyes lidded and heavy with lust, she met his gaze. Like a fire, burning heat spread through him, each silent touch and movement a sweet piece of kindling added to the fire. Slowly his perception faded, the details of the world fading and blurring, tunnel vision leaving only her parted lips caught in a half smile moving back and forth with her. Searching he ran a hand through her hair, still wet from earlier, and found the base of her horn. He gripped it and pulled her head back exposing the pale flesh of her neck.

He heard her groan and bit her flesh lightly as he was sent over the edge of sanity. For the briefest of moments there was only an excruciating pleasure that took his breath away, and there was only the silence of the moment and the quiet gasping spasms that she had left him in. He released his grip at the base of her horn and he caught a glimpse of her self satisfied smirk.

"That was... Something else." Callum breathed heavily into her.

"Oh Callum," Rayla nuzzled into him, "This is just the start of all the fun we can have." She bit his neck not too hard and giggled when he jolted at the sudden pain, "Let's go to bed now," she continued to nibble on him, "We need our sleep."

"Are you going to let me sleep?" Callum still felt dazed

"From what I understand of males in general, it will be pretty hard to keep you from it." Rayla
stood and offered him a hand to help him up from the floor, "I bet you'll be asleep by the time I'm back from cleaning up this mess you've made."

Callum felt himself blush and stammered an apology. She barely let him start before she stole a final kiss, righting his shorts for him.

"Go to bed," Rayla turned him and gave him a gentle shove followed by a firm pat on the buttocks, causing him to yelp, "I'll be there in a minute."

"Real quick though, what changed your mind?" Callum asked, walking towards the bed a strange mix of bashful and confident at the current circumstances.

Rayla's voice came from the washroom adjoining his quarters, "I was confused about something, but when I saw you sittin' there, drawin', I decided the confusion didn't matter. What mattered is what I wanted, what we wanted. I'll figure out the rest later. I've spent too long waitin'."

Callum tried to fight it, but she was right. No sooner had his head hit the pillow then he felt the exhaustion overwhelm him. He only woke enough to welcome Rayla back to bed by curling his arm around her and pulling her close once more. For a change there were no fitful dreams, no awakenings to dark thoughts. Her touch and their time together had soothed the darkest musings of his mind.

Chapter End Notes

- Plot - Check
- Fluff - Check
- More of what you've all been waiting for - Check
Moisture trailed the wingtips of the Arch Storm Dragon as he shot through the cloud cover over Katolis. As the city came into view, large wings shot out in a wide swath to catch the air currents and slow their rapid descent. Callum had grown used to this maneuver, and Zym seemed to enjoy the groans of Bait and the uneasy screech that Rayla made every time their descent sent her stomach to her throat. Callum had a feeling the dragon was showboating, making them understand that he ruled the dominion of sky. Ensuring that his passengers were merely guests here. Each descent had been more death defying than the last, a dizzying tumble of gravitational pulls and spins that always wound up with the great wyrm touching down lightly at his destination.

Callum could only ever laugh in exhilaration, which seemed to push Zym to ever more terrifying acts. He envied Zym his flight, but understood the rush and adrenaline of rushing wind and hairpin turns at speeds that could do serious damage. Callum could practically feel the magic of the Sky Primal arcing with magic around them.

Rayla clutched to Callum once again, Bait sitting in his lap on this journey. The Moonshadow elftress holding Callum close and tight, resting against him the entire journey. They had spoken sparingly, not much to say since setting out that morning. Callum reminisced, marveling at awakening to find her in his bed, marveling that the night before hadn't been some sort of wishful dreaming. Rayla had awoken still basking in his presence and warmth. Having had enjoyed the reprieve from other eyes and had soaked in each other's affections, they shared quick kisses and traded pinches, but knew they had to settle their affections before they were under the watchful eye of others.

True, they could have been flippant with this development, but there were a number of things that prevented these affectations from being readily public. Praid being first and most daunting. But his presence was just the tip of the iceberg. Back in Katolis there would be any number of fallouts for their relationship. The persistent racism of the humans towards elves, not to mention elves towards humans. The fact that Callum was a prince of Katolis and was in a high governmental position meant that his life and choices were under a fair amount of scrutiny.

In the wake that Zym left in the air, Phoe-Phoe followed, the black and blue phoenix a much more graceful and calm ride. On her back Tomaz sat dispassionately and bored, Praid clung nervously to the creature an unusual color of green tainting his pale Moonshadow features. The reassuring peace of satisfaction settled in Callum as he suppressed a smirk. To see Praid frightened of heights after their last interaction was a true treat. This revered warrior reduced to a petrified child so terrified of heights that Callum was able to laugh off bolstered his confidence. At least at first, after a time he began to feel pity for the Dragon Guard.
The screams of the people below drew Callum back into the now, the amorphous blob beneath them took on increasingly defined individuality as shouting voices began to carry to his ears. The cry going up across the city, "Dragons! Dragons!" Screams of men and women crying out for the guards. Frightened children whining and sobbing as this most feared of creatures plummeted into the heart of the city. The people streamed away, glinting metal funneled through the throng, the people parting before the Katolian Guards and swarming around their shining armor.

Buildings ringed an opening of the main road, houses and shops of every sort shared a wall with this ring, with kiosks and stands constructed along the wall. Amidst the ringed street, in the center was the curated trees that offered a little shade to the cobbled road. Amidst these trees and the curated grass, Zym touched down, flapping his wings and sending up billows of dust in the court yard amidst the cobblestone. The few shop merchants who had stayed in their stands tried to slowly close their stands without drawing attention to themselves before slinking away past the guards.

Zym's wings folded down and Callum hopped down, taking Bait with him and setting him onto the cobbles. Bait immediately lay flat on the ground, thankful to be back on solid ground. Callum turned to help Rayla down as Phoe-Phoe touched down with a less robust flapping of wings and sat upright, Praid and Tomaz sliding off of her back to land on their feet. Tomaz a little more steady than Praid.

"Halt!" Came the voice of one of the guardsmen. Callum heard the stern yet youthful voice and didn't recognize it. The voice did bring his attention to the ring of guards forming up around the court yard. They came in twos, one bearing a shield, the other with crossbow raised and pointed at the small group that had just landed in the center of Katolis.

Callum froze and looked at Rayla, "Don't do anything, please."

"I dinnae like having pointy thin's aimed at me," Rayla growled in his ear as he helped her down, she spoke to him through bared teeth, a forced smile.

Callum nodded, "Me neither," he acknowledged, "But we're here to help Ezran. Let's not make this worse."

Agitated at their failure to comply, the stern voice came again, "I said, 'Halt'. Not 'stop moving but keep talking', not 'talk as you will and do a dance'. I said 'Halt.' I mean fucking 'halt' else I'll put a bolt in you and yours."
Callum took a deep breath and raised his arms, showing he bore no weapon, bore no ill intent, "May I turn and address you, Captain?"

"Commander." The gruff voice corrected, "May I turn and address you, Commander'."

Callum rolled his eyes, earning a quick snort from Rayla, "May I turn and address you, Commander?" Callum obliged.

"Aye, slowly." Callum could hear several other crossbows begin to be drawn.

Callum turned slowly, looking at the men that had gathered in the courtyard. Fifty men and women of the Katolian guard. A rapid response to an infiltration, Callum admitted. The city having been so long without incident, Callum had previously considered that the guard and military would grow soft with time, not so with these men. The assassination of King Harrow must've still been fresh in their minds. They reacted quickly and appropriately. Every one of twenty five crossbows were aimed at Callum and his entourage, each leveled at them overtop of a tower shield held by another guard crouching at the ready with blade drawn.

At seeing Callum's face, he saw some of the men relax, but most did not. That was good. When Callum finally found the commander, a man whose voice was rough, but belied his clean cut demeanor. A man just slightly taller than Callum, but twice his age at least, stood before all the other's. His own crossbow leveled, not at Callum, but at Zym. Callum was impressed that he had identified the truest threat. All the other men and women were sitting with crossbows poised at the elves or Callum. The man's hair quaffed into a wave that would fit beneath the helmet that he held at his hip, he held the crossbow in a single hand, the weight of it not seeming to bother him.

"State your name, purpose in Katolis, and reason for bringing these threats to the crown so close to his majesty." The commander's voice brooked no nonsense, "It will make the paperwork easier after I've dealt with this disruption to the peace."

"My name is Callum, I bear the title High Mage of Katolis, and I return home to my brother, King Ezran." Callum spoke loudly, clearly. His voice reverberated off the walls of the surrounding buildings. Unease grew in some of the surrounding faces, "I bring with me Tomaz, the royal physician, Rayla of the Moonshadow, personal friend of King Ezran, Praid of the Moonshadow Dragon Guard and protector of the King of Dragons, and Azymondius, Prince of Dragon's and heir to the throne of Thunder." All but the commander's crossbow had dropped now and the surrounding men and women shuffled trying not to be noticed by the High Mage, "These are friends of myself, but more importantly, friends of the crown. I come to defend and serve my King.
"Would you stand in my way?" Callum's voice challenged, but was met by silence. The echo of his words clashed with the silence as the Commander considered the situation and studied the newcomers.

Slowly the clean cut blonde's crossbow lowered, then he did, taking a knee, "Prince Callum, High Mage, I apologize."

Callum squared his shoulders, standing straighter. Here, he bore the mantle of a prince, "No, rise, please, there is no need for apologies." Callum's voice was firm, commanding, confident. Everything he didn't feel. Like a second skin had come over him, a personality that wasn't his own as he slipped into the role he needed to play. Callum left Zym and approached the kneeling man. Holding out his hand, "What is your name, Commander?"

"Dorian, sire," The commander rose, still bowing as he did so, "Dorian of Lockwater."

"Very good," Callum clapped him on the shoulder. He spoke to Dorian, but his words carried through the courtyard. He knew the men and women around them could hear his voice well enough, "Your forces response time was impeccable. Your soldiers have done well here and you should be proud of their training. I would not have been able to perform any dark deed before you and your men would have dealt with the threat."

"Thank you, sire," Dorian seemed to inflate with Callum's words, "We are here to serve the King and his people."

"As am I," Callum returned to Rayla, "May my companions dismount?" Rayla jumped down beside him before permissions was given, causing Callum to wince to himself.

"Aye, Prince Callum," Dorian eyed the elftress standing beside him. Hood drawn up to hide her face and features she was covered in head to toe in a garb that was foreign to these parts. Praid at least wore a relatively human attire, though that much seemed to be minorly unsettling. The clear and present danger was the elftress and the dragon, "Though, sire, you must admit that this is a bit of an unorthodox manor in which to return to the city."

Callum raised his hand's in understanding, "Dorian, I agree," Callum nodded, rubbing his chin, "But you have to understand from King Ezran's perspective. For years he has argued with elvenkind as well as humans for the betterment of our two peoples through peace." There were some murmurs at that, some dissatisfied, "King Ezran has put his heart into leaving the past in the
past and moving forward. King Ezran is not alone in this desire."

Confused glances from the soldiers all around. Tomaz walked around Zym's tail with Praid on his heels. Callum thought Praid looked a little green, but was maintaining his composure well. Callum turned and stood at their head, the two elves behind the two humans, Bait at his feet and Zym turning to tower over them. Callum continued, "Azymondius, prince of dragons, and heir to Throne of Thunder, came here, not to instill fear, but to instill hope. Hope for a future where we can live together peaceably. I recognize that we may have caused panic, but all those who quivered in fear can move forth from this moment knowing that this dragon came in peace and that they witnessed the first of what will be many meetings of power between the nations of the Pentarchy and the tribes of Xadia."

"That is a fanciful dream, I hope you don't mind me saying," Dorian conceded, speaking more candidly, "Peace would be a nice change, I hope that is what is coming. Though silence and peace tends to make a man uneasy."

"On the battlefield, quiet is a terrifying prospect," Callum looked at the gathered troops. The only battles he had been part of were small affairs, not true war, "But let us not continue to think of peace as a quiet field of destruction, but correct this notion to a quiet field of grain, or wheat, an orchard overseen by generations rather than a farm overseen by a single family." Much like the farmers and workers in this fantasy of Callum's, he was planting his own seeds, "Now if you'll excuse us, Commander Dorian, I wish to speak with my brother, I have been away too long and have missed him."

"Of course, sire," Dorian bowed, still thinking on Callum's words, "Thig, Lira, provide Prince Callum and his guests escort through the city to the castle." An armored man and woman who could scarce be seen beneath their armor stepped forward, saluting their commander. Two non-descript guards to provide an escort wearing red cuirass amidst their golden plate.Dorian again turned to Callum, "Again, sire, deepest apologies, but you do us honor with your compliments."

"Of course, Dorian," Callum smiled at the man, "I will be sure to tell both King Ezran and General Amaya of your work."

Dorian stood a little straighter, saluting.

*That went well, I think.* Zym sent to Callum and the entourage; an image of Lujanne with a simple smile on her face and a pleasantly vacant look passing between them all. This earned small chuckles from Callum and Tomaz, but Rayla and Praid did not seem to find the sending as funny.
"Yes, your plan for entry into the city, despite my best advice, seems to have worked out exactly how you thought it would." Praid watched the windows fill with the curious eyes of common folk as they walked by.

Callum waved to the children he saw poking through windows even as their mother's rushed to bring them back into the hiding shadows, "Thank you, Praid." Callum acknowledged the compliment, finding that there might be hope of some semblance of a comradery to be had between Praid and himself.

"And you deftly managed of the situation with the commander as well." Praid admitted grudgingly.

"Why, if you keep up like this, I may think you are growing fond of me, Praid." Callum continued smiling as children further up the road closer to the castle's main gait were growing more and more courageous. Boys and girls filthy from head to toe that poked their heads out, initially scurrying away into the shadows, but now growing bolder, staying in the street as the entourage of the Dragon Prince passed by. Some had even taken to trailing behind Zym's lumbering figure as he walked across the cobbles.

"And to think, the rumors I heard paint you as a bumbling recluse." The cut was delivered with the same offhanded tone that the compliments had been.

Callum continued to smile and walk, but turned to stare first at Praid with wide eyes glaring. Callum looked to Rayla for support, who merely shrugged at him. When he seemed to deflate, Rayla reassured him, "I've been in a dungeon for three years. I don't know what people say."

Callum swung his head forward, the smile on his face now masking the exasperation he felt.

By the time the small entourage reached the castle gates they were met by more soldiers, Royal Guard in this case, and the common folk that had streamed behind them halted with them. Where they had been afraid just at the sight of the elves and Zym moments before, now they pressed in curiously. Callum watched one group of daring young brats discuss with their youngest companion to reach out and grab Zym's tail as it flicked and rolled back and forth across the cobbles.

Lira and Thig halted before the rest of the group and the Royal guard opened up not to reveal Ezran and General Amaya, but another face that was less familiar and less welcome.

"Soren?" Callum asked, dumbfounded.
"Hey! Step-prince!" Soren's smile was wide and full of white teeth. His skin was darker now, tanned from long days in the sun, and his armor glistened gold and silver, the emblem of Captain of the Royal Guard on his shoulder. The sword at his hip hung lightly, a hand resting on it's hilt, with another blade across his back. Soren threw his arms open and came to embrace Callum, who couldn't resist the larger man's overpowering hug, too dumbfounded to even begin to think of a retort. Soren hoisted him and whispered in his, "I thought King Ezran told you all to stay away." There was no question in his voice. Soren knew the command, means that Ezran was for some reason behind his presence here.

"I wasn't about to let my brother deal with matters of…state… by himself." Callum groaned in the larger man's arms.

"So, you knowingly didn't follow the king's orders?" Soren asked, setting Callum down.

"No-" Callum couldn't finish before Soren was speaking over him.

"Do you know what the chain of command is, Callum?" Soren's voice was earnest and concerned.

"I don’t see what that has to do wi-" Again, Soren rolled over Callum's retort.

"It's a chain I beat you with until you understand who's in charge around here." Soren wrapped his arm around the smaller man's shoulders and Callum became vastly aware in their difference in size and strength. Did Soren just keep getting taller and bulkier?

Letting Soren guide him into the castle court yard, the entourage followed, "Ezran would never let you do that." Callum said nervously as the castle gate closed and the rambunctious volume of the gathered crowd was suddenly muted.

"I would." Ezran's voice carried an authority that Callum was unfamiliar with. Could he really be so different in just a week's time?

Callum turned astounded at his brothers words.

"I would if it meant it kept you safe," Ezran stood on the steps leading from the castles main
courtyard flanked by Captain Gren and Corvus. He wore his royal robes and the crown of Katolis
on his head. His unruly hair had been tamed and now hung in short braids reminiscent of Harrow.
His face was stern and it frowning, but his voice was careful and measured, "It is good to see you
brother, and you too, Zym, Rayla. Tomaz and Praid, welcome back. Alayza and General Amaya
are in your office and require your skills at your convenience."

Ezran stepped down as Praid bid adieu to his daughter who only offered a cold wave in response.
Tomaz merely mounted the steps and passed by Gren with passing words before disappearing,
leading Praid into the castle.

With the gates closed the sounds of the crowd beyond was starting to dissipate. Thig and Lira took
their leave as did most of the royal guard leaving Callum with Rayla and Zym facing Soren, Ezran,
Gren and Corvus.

Bait raced by Callum's feet and pawed happily at Ezran's royal robes. Ezran crouched and
scratched the fat Glow toad beneath the chin, "I missed you too, buddy. I'll be sure you get all the
jelly tarts you can eat later. You will have to tell me all about your adventure." With that, Bait sat
satisfied at Ezran's feet.

"And Rayla," Ezran smiled at the elftress behind Callum, "It has been too long," Ezran walked by
his brother and embraced Rayla. Callum watched Gren stiffen nervously, but then overcome it. Old
animosity died slowly. Corvus, however, trusted Ezran's instincts, a lesson that Gren was still
learning, it seemed.

"Aye, Callum came 'n' found me, told me ya needed help, so I came as fast as I could." Rayla took
the hug from the gangly king and squeezed him tight, "Callum tells me that ya have been a great
king. I never doubted it."

Ezran sighed sadly, "Time will be the judge of that."

Reading his tone, Rayla let him go and looked at him, "What's wrong, Ezran?"

Ezran placed a hand on hers and spoke, "Later, after we've retired from the watchful eyes of the
castle."

Next, he approached Zym. They merely looked at each other, there was no embrace, no cooing or
encouragement of a long lost friend, but Callum was certain they were having a lengthy exchange
based upon the expressions that would flash across Ezran's face and the muscle twitches that would offer little insight into the emotions of the great dragon.

"So why is he just staring at the Dragon?" Soren asked, leaning to Callum.

"They're talkin'." Rayla answered for him

"Like, magically?" Soren queried, looking at her.

"I don't know." Callum watched his brother and the dragon passing thoughts back and forth and wished that he possessed a modicum of what this gift allowed his brother to do. Envy was a green beast, one that he did not intend let to come between Ezran and him. He squelched it down and watched patiently.

Ezran turned from Zym and Callum watched as the great dragon spread his wings and took to the air suddenly, leaving Rayla and Callum to cover their face from the dust. Soren was sent into a fit of coughing. Gren and Corvus merely watched from a distance as the dragon took flight. Corvus always a picture of grace and strength at ease, Gren visibly relaxing as the dragon receded into the distance.

"Where's he going?" Soren asked gesturing after Zym, asking nobody in particular, the hesitant edge of concern evident in his voice.

"There is much hunting left to be done, and he has a great hunger." Ezran said simply, "He has flown a long way. He will return tonight."

"He's going to show himself across the countryside causing panic!" Soren protested.

"That is exactly his goal." Ezran leveled a weary eye at Callum, "This plan of yours to delay the assassins will most likely not work."

"Well," Callum shrugged dismissively, "It was the best chance we had to make them rest on them hold their horses. Maybe if they realize the Dragon Prince is here they will hesitate in their mission. Or did you just intend to lay down and die for them when they asked? I take it not since seem to have called Soren back from Del Bar. What's your plan?"
Ezran smirked darkly at Callum, the dark circles beneath his eyes showing. He hadn't been sleeping. Despite all the pomp and circumstance of being the king, all the fine clothes and refined words, the lack of sleep shown in how he carried his shoulders, the pallor of his face, the bloodshot appearance. He teased his brother, "Oh, I have a few tricks up my sleeves that I think even you will appreciate."

Callum looked at his brother uneasily, "What are you plotting, Ezran? Soren is here, Is Claudia, too?" Thoughts of Claudia were interesting to say the least. He felt that same fondness that he felt for Soren, like for a cousin you wished to only see in passing and to never actually have to deal with. He wished her well, wished Soren well, but the things they had done were unforgivable. At least to Callum, it seemed Ezran was ready to welcome them back with open arms. Soren and Claudia were essentially family, anyhow.

"Of course Claudia is here," Soren said happily, "We're Katolian, after all. We're not about to let some filthy elves cut down our king and do nothing about it." Soren paused for a long and awkward moment, then seemed to realize Rayla was staring at him, "No offense."

"I'm sure." Rayla bristled.

"Let's not talk here." Ezran cut through the tension by simply ignoring it, "You have arrived in time for us to dine together this evening. Go and kick the dust from your boots and then we can discuss at length why I commanded you not to return and then why you disobeyed." Ezran turned and ascended the steps back into the entry hall of the castle.

Callum glared at his younger brother. The King of Katolis, "What has gotten into you, Ezran?"

"Yea," Rayla added, standing directly behind Callum, "What happened to the little child that helped us save Zym?"

Ezran didn't turn, but merely paused on the steps. He spoke in a tired voice, "When I was a child I made childish choices. I ignored the responsibility that I would be fitted with, and I was rushed into this responsibility. Now I am a King, and a King must make hard choices."

Callum watched his brother recede into the castle, Soren accompanying his king. Callum shouted after him, "What the hell does that even mean?" He seethed, how dare Ezran. What was the idiot child even thinking, how could he consider this in anyway a good idea. They had a plan. Hide. Away from the assassins. Mayne even discuss alliances with the queen of Duren. Wait out the
danger in relative ease and then as they wait for the next full moon and the next attempt, begin to shore up the defenses of the castle, recruit and train more guards.

Now, with the full moon tomorrow night, all the guards seemed to be stationed out in the city with the exception of the Royal Guard. Which now had Soren among them again. Callum remembered the betrayal he had suffered, they had suffered, Ezran and Rayla and him, at Soren's hands. Remembered the conflict about the dragon. He shook as he remembered skimming his hands across the black surface of Dark Magic and the tumultuous dreams that came after.

A short and awkward silence passed as the rest of the royal guard left until only Callum and Rayla remained in the courtyard.

"I'm sure he has a reason," Rayla reassured Callum, her drawl a song to his ears. She had let the storm in him settle before speaking, "Everyone in 'is life has taught him to think carefully. He knows to consider every side of things. I think ya need to ask yo'rself, what is he seeing that ya dinnae see?"

Callum slumped forward, speaking flatly, "Then why is he such a…a…" Callum realized he had no insult coming to mind, no barbed words to sling, "I have never encountered such a frustrating and obstinate individual as him, he has pushed me beyond the threshold of insulting. I can only flail in agitation."

"Then why are ya just standing there." Rayla laughed.

"Because." Was the only answer Callum felt to muster, continuing to pout.

"Well," Rayla pulled his shoulder so that Callum stood up and leaned on her, "The king mentioned washing up. Frankly, you're a bit ripe, so that is a most welcome idea. I literally haven't seen a bar of soap in years."

Callum ran his thumb under the shoulder strap of his belongings, accepting the embrace, "Well, I mean, welcome back to Katolis? Let's get you some fucking soap then."

They didn't ascend the steps that Ezran had, instead he led Rayla to a side door in the wall leading to the lesser tower of Katolis. Through narrow halls unadorned with the pomp and circumstance of the rest of the castle they walked, not really talking. Thankful to be at the end of a journey, but at the same time the monolithic event of the next twenty four to forty eight hours loomed ahead of
them.

Callum led Rayla up a spiral stair and came out into an expansive hallway lined with statues. The windows on the southern wall offering glimpses of the courtyard below. Reminiscing, Callum couldn't help but comment, "You know, the last time you were here, you were trying to kill Ezran. This is the hall you chased me down."

Rayla looked up and down the hall, recognition registering on her face, "Careful with saying things like tha'. I have enough negative energy coming my way jus' because of my pointy ears."

"Well, after generations of war, do you really expect that people will forgive and forget that elves have been that looming fiend in the night?" Callum offered, but to soften the harshness of reality, he commented under his breath, "I always liked your ears though."

"I know." Whether she meant the comment about the ages old animosity between humanity and Xadia or the comment regarding her ears, Rayla didn't clarify. Instead, she brushed her shoulder against his, "Tell me what else you like about me."

"That's it." Callum said, "That is literally it. No other thing comes to mind."

Rayla slugged him hard in the shoulder.

"Ow!" The word was more a declaration of mock surprise than any sort of cry in pain, "Rayla, how dare you lay hands on the High Mage! I ought to have you thrown in the stocks."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you." The sultry way she wrapped her lips around the words gave Callum sudden ideas on what exactly he could do with the situation. She laughed at him as his mouth worked trying to continue on the same conversation without letting his mind descend down that particular path of depravity. When Callum couldn't muster the next part of their banter, Rayla saved him, "What are we looking for, anyways? I thought we'd each get a bath. I see no tub, I see no water, let alone a place private enough."

Thankful at the change in topic, Callum restarted his brain and answered, "I am trying to find one of the maids or manservants." They came to a hallway that cut across the one they traveled down. Callum poked his head down one direction, and then the other.
"What for? Don't you know where a bath is?" Rayla asked, "Don't you live here?" Then in a lower voice, "Do they wash you?"

"What? No!" Callum was incredulous at the suggestion, "Don't you want it to be hot?"

Confused, Rayla answered, "Is there another option?"

"You could take a cold bath." Callum offered simply.

"What? No! Why do I need a maid or a manservant to take a hot bath?" It was Rayla's turn to be incredulous.

"We need to ask them to bring the heated water."

"You mean it doesn't just come out the wall?" Rayla screwed up her face.

Callum paused and turned to her, taking on a mocking voice, "Hello, welcome to the human kingdoms, where magic isn't in everything and we had to come up with a way of life without the convenience of heating water magically. Everything we've done has had to be accomplished without that particular tool."

Rayla only laughed, astounded, "But you're high mage! I've seen you carve illusions that, honestly made me pee a wee bit, and you're telling me you cannae even draw your own a bath?" She laughed, wiping at her eyes. When she noticed his slightly disgusted expression she piped up, realizing what she had said, "What? Too much?"

Chapter End Notes

Don't you hate filler episodes?
Another Bath

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Callum had finally located one of the staff, it was as though others suddenly flocked to them. Callum was asking for a maid by name and the others would send them on a chase about the castle as they attempted to find this woman named Mira. When they did find her, she was busy polishing a decorative suit of armor. Callum spoke kindly to the young woman who wore the attire of a maid, and her eyes shone back at him in a way that Rayla didn't particularly care for. Explaining that he needed to find quarters for Rayla, a personal guest of King Ezran, and that he needed baths drawn for her, and then one for himself, Callum smiled as the maid practically leapt at the chance to help.

Mira was just ever so slightly older than Callum himself by appearance, though she seemed as though she had seen a decent days work, strands of her auburn hair that were not kept tied back by the kerchief about her hair clung to the skin of her face. An oval face and a button nose set between almond eyes the same emerald as Callum's, she smiled at the task, happy to leave the polishing behind her. She walked ahead of them leaving her cleaning supplies behind. As they walked, she asked after Callum's journey and took the opportunity to ask the High Mage about the happenings abroad. She offered a paltry question to Rayla time and again, but it was obvious the woman had little idea on how to handle the idea of a bloodthirsty elf traipsing about her peaceful and clean corridors. Initially Mira had attempted to put Rayla in a small room at the end of a corridor of similar small rooms. Callum protested, saying that she was an honored guest and asked after different accommodations.

Mira pondered the layout, tapping a finger on her lips, "What of the Gratlian Quarters? Will that be suitable?" Mira asked humbly.

"Is the Cartesian Room taken?" Callum asked, pushing.

"Yes, I believe the Lady Alayza and her spouse are residing there currently. The Frincesca is occupied by General Amaya and Commander Gren."

"I see…" Callum continued to ponder the layout.

"I don't need much," Rayla interrupted, this conversation of names and rooms annoying. She just wanted a bath. She wanted soap. She wanted clean hair, "This room is perfect."

Mira smiled at Rayla, "My lady has a good head on her shoulders, this room is one of the core of
the castle, each wall shared so no place for the heat to go. With autumn upon us the nights will be getting cold and there is no place for a draft to come in."

"No windows?" Rayla swallowed hard, remembering briefly the cell beneath the Lunarium and their strange instruments. Her hands twitched at her side, her voice was soft, "I'd really like to be able to have a window."

Callum clapped, not seeming to note the change in her visage, "The Gratlian it is."

"Yes, High Mage," Mira curtsied and closed the door to the small room, and they were off again, through hallways that seemed to be occupied by only the sparsest amount of staff that would turn as they approached to acknowledge Callum before returning to their work.

The Gratlian Quarters were larger than any room that Rayla had ever had been able to claim as her own, a vaulted ceiling over a combination of accommodations, bed, desk, and sitting area all flowing into one another. A mantle of dark wood against the grey marble sat cold above the dark hearth on the far wall next to the four poster bed. The furniture was made of sharp lines and angles that differed greatly from the peaceful flowing of curvatures that she was reminiscent of Xadia preferences. The grey stone of the walls was decorated with wall hangings depicting various scenes, some of men and women on horseback, others showing a congregation of kings. Each wall hanging telling it's own story. On the fourth wall was a large array of tall windows, but no balcony.

Mira welcomed them to the quarters and led Rayla about introducing her to the different features of the room, particularly the linens and where to find them, how to summon a member of the staff, and the like. Finishing with tossing some wood into the fireplace, she took a box of kindling hidden beside the logs and lit a striker, "I'll get this fire going for you first, and then I'll fetch another maid to help me with the water. We'll recruit some to draw you a bath as well, High Mage." she added that last bit as an almost afterthought.

"Thank you, Mira," Callum smiled graciously at the woman.

Rayla was along for the ride and didn't really know what to say, so she merely murmured a thank you on the heels of Callum's own words.

Callum looked hesitantly at Rayla and then cast a glance at Mira, her back turned to him. She saw that look in his eye and knew that he wanted to reach out to her, to touch her, maybe even kiss her, but with others around, others that may not understand, that may not approve, that may actively work to keep them apart, he had to be careful. Rayla could see the thoughts behind his eyes, understood them maybe better than he did himself. She felt the same urge to go to him, to melt into
him, but had to hold herself back. Though this was Callum's home, it was still very much a strange place and she was an outsider here.

"Thank you for the generosity, High Mage," Rayla attempted some sort of mixture between curtsy and bow, "I will see you again at dinner?" It was a dismissal as much as it was a question, permission for him to leave without a kiss, without a touch, though she wanted nothing more than to crawl into the four poster bed behind them and have him peel her clothes off.

No, she reminded herself, though ya want tha', now is nae the time.

"Yes," Callum nodded, "Very good, then." She worked hard to suppress her amusement as he awkwardly retreated from the room.

His absence left only the awkward silence between Mira and the elf. Rayla, a stranger in this woman's domain, yet, by the human precedent, it was Mira's job to serve the elf, a formerly detestable, despicable entity. She hoped that this Mira didn't bear any ill will towards elves, that none of her relatives had been cut down or maimed by Rayla's own kin, Moonshadow or otherwise. If not her kin though, there was always King Harrow who was murdered by her own pack.

The fire was starting to take and Mira finally spoke, breaking the silence, "The High Mage is a very kind man." Her verdant eyes peered over her shoulder at Rayla, her eyes thoughtful, measuring, "I always thought he would be a good kisser. Is he?"

Rayla nearly choked, "What-What do ya mean?"

"Oh, please," Mira laughed, "I've known Callum since he started living in the castle. I've helped take care of him. I've watched over him. In the last three years I've looked over his shoulder a time or two when he draws. I never thought to meet the muse of such beautiful drawings, but here you are before. He really is an amazing artist."

"He's been drawing me?" Rayla asked. She had known that he had drawn her several times, maybe once or twice through the years, but frequently enough that this woman would recognize her on sight? She would have to flip through that sketchbook's pages the next time she could pry it away from Callum.

"You had to know…" Mira said, suddenly nervous, she tried to cover, "I mean I may have been mistaken, maybe I've misread the situation…" The blush on her cheeks was pure embarrassment.
With the fire now lit, Mira stood and hurried from the room, "I'll go fetch the water for your bath, Lady Rayla."

Before Rayla could stop her the woman was long gone.

The silence was long and awkward as once Mira returned with another few maids, each toting large buckets of steaming water. Rayla was impressed that they had the exact number of maids necessary to fill the tub in the washroom of the Gratlian quarters. She watched from the next room as they filled the claw footed basin. Once it was full the other maids funneled out in much the same fashion they had entered, which is to say quietly and casting sidelong glances at Rayla as they moved, but their gossip exploded as soon as the door shut behind them. In the end, they all left but Mira, leaving her and Rayla in that same awkward silence.

Mira tested the water, speaking up, "You may want to give the water a minute before it is cool enough to not burn. But let's go ahead and get you undressed." Mira wiped her hand on her apron and approached Rayla, assessing her attire, trying to figure out how to undress her.

Rayla took a step backwards, arm coming up defensively, "Excuse me?"

Mira's expression was understanding, "Lord Callum mentioned to me that your hands are injured, that they are bandaged. He thought this might mean you need help with washing your hair?" Her words were both question and story as she relayed the brief conversation.

"So he think's I cannae use soap by myself?" Rayla growled, her anger not aimed at Mira, but more at her lovely human, "What does he take me for? A kitten?"

"No, nothing like that," Mira laughed into her hand, "As I said earlier, the High Mage is a kind man."

"I think he just enjoys the idea of me being undressed." Rayla muttered, exasperated. She regretted the words instantly. Her eyes went wide and darted to Mira's face and tried to read the emotion there.

Mira's eyes went wide immediately and her lips pressed together tightly, but even so she was unable to hide the upturned corners of her cheeks. Her features pulled tight as she tried to hide the emotion, excitement?
Rayla sighed in defeat.

At that, Mira laughed and clapped her hands together, "I knew it!" Sighing satisfactorily, she nodded to herself and immediately began undoing the thick cloth tie that held Rayla's cloak in place, speaking to Rayla as she worked, "I knew the way he was looking at you was different. He was always tough to read, but he is different with you, he's more grounded, more here, than, y'know, in his head." Her hands undid the belt clasps and Rayla just ceased fighting as this woman excitedly extricated her from her clothes, shedding the dirty articles one piece at a time.

When it came time to pull her gloves off, Mira's tirade of excited brainless chatter ended with a sharp gasp, "Oh, m'lady, your hands!"

"Oh," Rayla laughed, flexing them, "I hardly notice 'em anymore, this is what it's been like. They're actually doing bettah than they look."

"Still," Mira took her hand tenderly and led her towards the tub, "Poor thing!"

Rayla hardly noticed that she was almost completely bare in front of this stranger, a woman she had never met before, but uncomfortably covered herself as the thought crossed the landscape of her mind. She could feel the steam rising and warming the chill air from the basin and sat on the edge, removing her undergarments by hooking a thumb into the waistband and lowering them as Mira went about picking up the rest of her clothes. Rayla turned and eased herself in.

Mira left the room with the clothes and returned shortly carrying a basket of perfumed soaps and lotions, "You go ahead and get your hair wet and I'll set up so I can help you wash."

"Mira," Rayla said blushing, sinking further into the water, "I swear! I can manage myself."

"Nonsense," Mira added, "I don't know if you can tell, but those bandages seem to have fresh blood on them meaning you're still healing. If I didn't help I would feel bad." her tone changed from helpful to commanding, "Now get your hair wet and let me wash it."

Rayla complied, the bath a welcome change. Her life seemed as though it was getting to a point where the normalcy she had known before returning Zym was not such a distant dream. Each day that passed she felt more firmly grounded in the here and the now, with the old images of false memories being washed away. Like the grime from her hair and the soot from beneath her nails, each cleansing experience seemed to trickle away the filth of her own confusion. She enjoyed the
passive nature of the bath, the way Mira's fingers massaged her scalp and worked the soaps and creams into her hair smelling of lavender and vanilla. Then came the rest of the lathering, which had been an awkward interaction, more awkward than anything as of yet, but all the protests that Rayla could mount were deflected deftly.

Rayla finally quit protesting when Mira addressed her complaints, "Honestly, Lady Rayla, you are not the first woman I have had to help bathe because of an injury. I get that it's uncomfortable, truly I do, but you're just making it worse for the both of us by continuing to protest and bring our attention to just how awkward it is. Why don't we talk about something else and we can forget the embarrassment?"

Rayla suddenly felt guilt, not having been aware of the discomfort of the woman with her, and apologized for her being inconsiderate, "You're right, Mira, I'm sorry."

Mira waved off her apology, and conversation came. It was slow at first, but then picked up and they spoke of Mira and her family. Rayla was surprised to learn that Mira was married, given the looks that she had been giving Callum, learned that humans wore rings on their fingers to signify marital commitment, and she learned of how Mira had watched Callum grow up and realized that the she had mistaken an almost familial fondness for Callum as a romantic love.

Time seemed to pass slowly and quickly all at once. When Rayla was finally clean, truly clean, for the first time in years, she got out of the tub and Mira helped her dry off, offering her white downy towel after downy towel. Continuing their banter and conversation they moved into the main room where Rayla was surprised to find that a number of outfits had been laid out for her to see.

"When did these get 'ere?" Rayla asked, approaching one of the dresses, testing the fabric in her fingers.

"I had the other maids bring a selection from a local seamstress." Mira commented as she followed Rayla from dress to dress.

"But…How did ya know my sizes?" Rayla asked, confused.

"I have served many women and many men, I have an eye for measurements as any." Mira said proudly, "Now, you should let your hair out if you are going to have it dry before we braid it."

Rayla complied, this whole event was confusing and strange. She felt as though she hadn't been in
Katolis more than a few hours at this point and already she had a room in the castle and somebody waiting on her. She was being pampered and primped and after years of hardship, this cushiony lifestyle felt jolting and halting as though it didn't fit her purpose and potential. It was a dizzying change from the dark of the Lunarium, not unwelcome, but strange none the less.

"Which dress do you prefer, Lady Rayla?" Mira asked, draping the damp towel over her arm.

"This one, I s'pose." Rayla picked a dress of black and grey and what looked to be a simple cut.

"I see." Mira said, her voice carrying hints of disappointment.

"Is tha' wrong? You asked me which ae wanted." Rayla defended her decision.

"No," Mira said, "It's not that you're wrong, the choice is yours, but I wonder if that really is the dress best suited for the event."

"Event?" Rayla continued to finger the different fabrics, fine cotton, silks, velvet.

"Dinner, with the King of Katolis, and the High Mage." Mira offered simply, watching Rayla test the fabrics.

"I've eaten with them before. It's nothing speshul." Rayla laughed, "I even helped Ezran shove berries up 'is nose."

Ignoring the tangent, Mira pushed on, "Lady Rayla, you're eating with the King of the most powerful human kingdom, you are his personal guest here. In a human kingdom, an elf. You and Lady Alayza are the representative of all elven women here to all the human kingdoms. I merely hesitate because I think you may want to consider the gravity of it that before you decide."

"Elftress." Rayla thought over what Mira said while she spoke, "Elven is the male form of elf, and elftress is the female form."

"Oh, I didn't know." Mira was surprised.
"Neither did Callum," Rayla smiled at the maid, "I'm still surprised about how much he doesn't know. Then again, Xadians and Humans don't really fraternize all that often."

"Something he and you seem set on changing." her tone was as suggestive as her wiggled eyebrows.

"You're right," Rayla gave in, referring to the dresses, "But I don't know where I would begin, this is very different from my training."

"If I may make a suggestion, I would go with the dark purple dress, the green and the grey are very nice cuts and fabrics, but I think the purple dress takes the lead in elegance." Mira came over and held the purple dress aloft for Rayla to examine.

Rayla looked at the other clothes, then back to the purple dress. A sleeveless affair that would hug the shape of her torso and hips before flaring out with cloth buttons up the back to a tight collar. Rayla just looked back to Mira and shrugged.

"I'll just grab you a slip and then we'll get you all done up while your hair dries, then we'll deal with that!" Mira went about her work excitedly, putting the dress down and grabbing a black mass of black silk before returning. She handed it to Rayla who found it to be a scant piece of silk fabric with two shoulder straps that might as well not have existed they were so thin. Dropping her downy towel she worked her way into the black silk, the fabric felt as though it would be tighter than it was and ended just above where decency would forbid. Mira undid the buttons on the back of the purple dress and helped Rayla to step into it. Doing the buttons up the back, the collar of the dress became tighter and tighter, and it ended kindly right at her jaw line. It limited the movement of her head which she did not like, but allowed Mira to keep working as she considered the gravity of the situation. She could feel the waist hug her hips, but it hung loosely from there in purple skirts that fell straight down with a cut up the side that allowed her to move freely, which she appreciated.

"And, to add a little bit of flair to it." Mira produced a complicated necklace from a pile. What appeared to be small pauldrons of overlapping metal plate made of silver connected by draping chains of the same luster. It was attached to the dresses sleeveless shoulders, "And finally…” Mira produced a fine silver chain and wrapped it around her hips so that it looped into itself and the excess dangled to her knee in a single strand.

Rayla felt the weight oddly on her hip, and placed her hand there, feeling a dagger and it's sheath, "What's this?" Rayla asked, pulling the blade and examining it. The pommel was jeweled and made of fine silver, a terrible grip and awfully off balance.
"Adding that little bit of danger to it." Mira squinched her face proudly, "You're an elf after all, you need to be beautiful and deadly. Make an impression on these people that they won't forget. Make them respect your beauty, your elegance, and your deadliness."

Rayla examined the maid, "You are not what I expected, Mira." And she truly wasn't, this was not what she anticipated out of humans in any way shape or form.

"I believe in what Callum wishes for," She smiled sadly, "I believe that there can be a world without war."

"Me too, Mira, me too." Rayla returned the happy notion with her own sad tone. That was her dream, and Callum's dream: a world where the people of Xadia and the Pentarchy could live side by side, without the constant fight and struggle to survive. The differences between their two cultures were so stark and glaring, but, she thought to herself, Praid and Alayza had managed for nearly three years to integrate themselves into human society, on the fringes yes, but what could be possible if they only tried and didn't need to hide?

Mira bade her to sit before a looking glass and Rayla obeyed, still thinking. The maid went about braiding Rayla's hair in a myriad of thick and thin strands that wrapped from the left side of her head and hung over her shoulder on the right. Rayla continued to think about all the elves that seemed to be living secret lives among the humans. Lujanne and her three human husbands, her daughters out in the world of humanity, her parents, and who knew how many others had somehow slipped into the world of the Pentarchy and remained uncorrupted.

She noted that Mira was done with her braids and looked up only to see Mira produce a black hooded scarf that she draped over Rayla's head and then wove the long tails of the hood around her arms so that they hung freely at her forearms.

"What is this?" Rayla asked, playing with the fabric.

"A lady should always be able to hide her face, whether it be to be coquettish or to hide her anger, best not to let everyone know what she is thinking."

"Very well," Rayla sighed, "I dinnae think I have the mind for these politicking games you want me play, Mira."
"Nobody does, Lady Rayla," Mira placed her hands on Rayla's shoulders and looked in the looking glass with her, examining her mistress's features with a smile, "These games are unnatural and unfair, and often those that wind up in court get chewed up and spit out if they cannot keep their heads about them. Additionally, you're not human, making most of the people you will encounter in court your enemy just because of what you are, and you will not understand all the barbs and jests they make at your expense."

"Well." Rayla pressed her lips together, "Thank you for that nugget of encouragement."

"Don't fret, Lady Rayla," Mira rubbed her shoulders, then offered her the black leather gloves to cover her bandages with once more, "Every disadvantage can be an advantage if you just play it right, and you have me to help you with that, not to mention Lord Callum. He cares not for these games any more than you do."

"But he was raised playing them wasn't he?" Rayla asked, standing from before the vanity, "You'd think he'd develop a taste for it."

"On the contrary," Mira said proudly, reminiscing about the little Callum she had helped raise, "He could never find an appropriate challenge, the games of the court always boring to him. Just look at what Ezran and he have done, do you really think a ten year old boy could have held the throne, regardless of his heritage and military family, if he didn't have a mastermind of politics on his side? Let alone push for such a revolutionary idea as peace?"

Rayla considered this, could her Callum really be such a complex person? That goofy recluse of a boy turned man, always with his nose in a book drawing or reading, Wracked by medical issues and anxiety, could he really be the master manipulator behind Katolis and her king? Callum who had dropped everything to return a dragon to the other side of the known world without batting an eye, who forged his way without teacher or mentor to bonding not just one arcanum, but now two. Callum, who had stood toe to toe with the Dragon Queen and survived, who had faced Sol Regem, Callum who had cut a path into the most ancient of Moonshadow temples and pulled out a withered and decrepit elftress, nursing her back to health even as they flew across the sky to fight off an entourage of assassins.

Rayla laughed out loud.

"What is it, Lady Rayla?" Mira asked as she continued to gather up the other bits of clothing and tucking them away in various closets and cabinets.

"He's fooled us all, hasn't he?" She muttered with appreciation, "He plays the innocent and anxious
so well that even in the face of all he's accomplished, you cannae see him as threatening. He's just Callum."

Mira tucked the clothes into the wardrobe as she listened to Rayla, "I think the thing that is most reassuring about the situation, Lady Rayla," She sighed, "Is that even with all of his skills, he holds himself to a higher standard than he holds anybody else. He is kind, he is forgiving, and he is caring." There was a long pause, "I shudder to think of what somebody with his aptitude would do if they did not have his morals."

Rayla considered these words and agreed, she had seen darkness behind Callum's eyes at times, but always the bright and cheery boy prevailed, a reassurance capable of fending off the dark prospect.

Looking out the window, the sun was beginning to set, "Well, I best get you to dinner before you are late! Where did the time go?" With that Mira ushered Rayla out the door, leaving the pile of clothing behind as she lead her through the castle.

Mira led her through the halls and Rayla noted that the conversation between the two dropped off abruptly. The maid led her a step and a half ahead of her, not walking with her. They passed very few servants and even fewer guards. When the duo turned the final corner, she noted that the large arched oaken double doors were closed and out front of it, Callum stood alone, waiting.

Callum was dressed differently now, and Rayla thought that this was the first time she had ever seen him appear so refined. He wore a long sleeved coat of navy with red embroidery at the collar in intricate shapes of vines. The embroidery ran down the outside of the long sleeves that were folded back at the wrists revealing the red interior of the coat with navy embroidery in a similar fashion. The coat itself was long, hanging well past his knees and hiding the tops of his boots and was done up from below the waist with silver buttons over his left breast.

Callum's gaze was distant, his eyes staring straight ahead at the wall and sconces without really truly seeing them, he held his left hand before him and seemed to be counting off something in his head, his right hand moving from finger to finger, then every so often as they approached he would shake his head slightly and start counting all over again.

Callum didn't look up as they approached.

Rayla walked up right beside him and leaned into his view, "So is this what ya wear when you aren't gallivanting about the land?" she asked, making an effort to make her voice soft. He had shaven, she noticed, and had to resist the urge to reach out and test the softness of his skin. Callum's shaggy hair seemed perpetually caught in a breeze and windblown, strands of it falling
"Rayla!" Callum startled as his eyes slid into focus, an immediate smile coming to his face that she was more than pleased to see, but he suppressed it quickly, "Lady Rayla, I mean to say," He cleared his throat, "It is good to see you again, I was just thinking of what I will be discussing with my brother."

Rayla became aware of the guards positioned at either side of the dining hall, understanding the lack of familiarity that she was growing so used to.

When Rayla didn't provide a response, Mira broke her silence, "Lord Callum, I will entrust you with the care of our honored guest if you have no qualms?"

Callum's eyes drank in Rayla, looking her up and down. Rayla had the notion that she was a piece of food dangled in front of a starving man, not that she would mind being eaten.

"Yes, of course," Callum answered the maid off-handedly, "Thank you, Mira."

Mira curtsied despite not having Callum's attention and backed away several steps before turning on her heel and walking away. Rayla was impressed with the woman, the mixture ofrailery, respect, and banter that she had shared with Mira flowed effortlessly into regal servant.

"You look stunning, Rayla," Callum said in a low voice for her ears only, holding out his arm for her.

"Anythin' less and I would be insulted." Rayla smirked at him, taking his arm.

"I can see Mira took good care of you," Callum added.

"Yea, thanks for that." Rayla added, a hot blush splashing her face. "I haven't been bathed since I was a child."

A new voice cut into the conversation, "Rayla?"
A voice Rayla recognized instantly. Her encounter with Praid had left her pensive and anxious for this encounter, so much so that she hadn't pushed for it to happen as soon as she arrived.

Rayla turned, Callum moving with her, "Hello, mother."

Alayza and Praid walked towards Callum and Rayla, stopping before them, a mirror reflection of the younger duo with Alayza's hand on Praid's folded arm. Praid a tall and stern monolith of black and white in Neolandian garb with the softer, kinder presence of Alayza arranged in matching tones and hues of a more feminine cut. Overlapping folds of black and white that showed off the femininity of her features. Praid wore an ornamental blade on his back, but no armor over his sharply cut clothes, Alayza carried the staff that had been her constant companion for as long as Rayla could recall.

The four all stood before each other, Praid watching Rayla with wondering eyes, Alayza looking at Rayla with eyes watering and full, but without shedding tears. Callum glanced between the elftress on his arm and her parents.

Rayla felt him give her arm a reassuring squeeze reminding her silently of his support.

"It is good to-" Rayla began but was cut off as Alayza let go of her staff and Praid's hand, throwing her arms around Rayla. Rayla couldn't act quick enough, the arms embraced her and wrapped snugly around her. She stiffened at the touch, wanting to pull away, wanting the push her mother away. She felt all the anger and all the creeping rage that she had felt at the Moon Nexus when she had spoken to Praid. Rayla brought up quivering hands to force her mother away, to pry those clinging hands off of her.

Praid's hurt expression caught her eye.

And rather than pushing her tearful mother away, wrapped her arms around her and held her close, patting her back, "I'm okay, mother, I'm okay."

Alayza continued to shake and weep. When the older elftress finally pulled away her face had the tracks of tears across her plump cheeks, her violet eyes were puffy and red, but there was a beautifully sad smile on her face, "My l'il bear, look at you! " She gestured to Rayla, looking her up and down, "You've changed so much from the fierce little brat you used to be."
Callum chuckled, "Oh, she's still a brat." Callum added, earning a glare from Alayza.

"How dare you say such a thing about my beautiful daughter," the weakness and joy ebbed from her voice, becoming defensive as she rounded her attentions on Callum.

"Mother!" Rayla winced, wanting to crawl away and hide, taking Callum with her, "Do you have any idea who he is?"

"Oh, I know very well who he is, Rayla," Alayza spoke kindly again to her daughter, her gaze softening as she broke her glare, but came rushing back as she turned to Callum again, "You may be High Mage around here, but keep in mind that she is not part of this human kingdom. She is an elf and therefore outside of your purview."

"My purview?" Callum took a step back his hands up in a calming manner, "I don't know what you mean."

"I know how you human mages work!" Alayza spat, "Taking and consuming the life force of others in order to bend the world to your whims. Just how were you planning on reversing the Blood Lock, hmm? You knew my daughter was the key so you go flinging across the land to bring her here, but now you bring her directly into danger without consideration for her sake. You stand there holding her arm as though you are some royal gentleman, but that couldn't be further from the truth could it, you are a defiler, a perverter of the natural world."

Rayla looked nervously at Callum. She knew how these accusations of dark magic worked on him, grinding him down until he did something rash. She knew he had worked and struggled so hard. Every bead of sweat, every sleepless night was a sacrifice towards being something other than what he was accused of. Rayla was afraid he would do something rash. Some part of her, deep down, wanted Callum to be respected by her parents, if not liked. Praid and Alayza may never understand what Callum and Rayla had found in one another, but they could at least respect him. She expected to find a dark look in his eye and frown on his lips.

Rayla was surprised to find that she saw only a sad smile, "Lady Alayza," he looked earnestly into her eyes, "I have had to defend myself time and again against these same accusations, I must inform you that they are tired and inaccurate."

His voice reverberated strangely and echoed from elsewhere as a copy of himself sidestepped from him, and then another in the opposite direction, then a third copy, a fourth, each of them standing and crossing their arms behind it's back.
An illusion, like Lujanne. She saw no pouch at his hip, she saw no pockets for him to hide the primal pebbles.

"Callum!" Rayla suppressed her excited voice, "Did you-?" Rayla didn't understand why the thrill that coiled through and over her was so intense. She was there with him when he connected to the Sky Arcanum, and, though foggy, had been there when he connected to the Sun Arcanum. The idea that he had somehow come to understand the Moon in ways she couldn't truly express filled her with pride and joy. There was something special about the Moon Arcanum, something that they now shared.

"There is no dark magic here, Lady Alayza." One Callum uttered, "I am a primal mage and I have worked long nights and even longer days to get where I am."

Another Callum spoke, "And my intention in saving your daughter from the Lunarium was just that, to save her from the Lunarium. If she had chosen not to come and help Ezran, I would have been hurt, but I would have let her go without stopping her."

Rayla wasn't quite sure she believed that bit, not anymore.

Alayza watched the Callums with a wary gaze now, Praid openly smirked at the exchange. He had been chewed out by Rayla for making the same assumption that Alayza had. He hadn't seen Callum's skill, but this display offered some insight into his prowess.

"You can quit showing off now," Alayza pressed her lips together and crossed her arms beneath her ample bosom, "Nobody likes an arrogant mage."

Rayla and Callum laughed together, struck by the same similar memory. And like that, the extra Callum's were gone, leaving only the original.

"I mean no disrespect or showboating, only to prove that I am not a mage of Dark Magic." Callum approached, standing beside Rayla once more. He quirked his head to one side, "Though, I wonder if you may answer a question for me?"

Callum took Alayza's silence as acquiescence.
"Do you feel as though the Moon Primal is any different?" Callum asked, looking to both Praid and Alayza. They seemed to be put off by is question, not quite expecting it.

Finally, her curiosity getting the better of her, Alayza asked, "No, why?"

Callum nodded thoughtfully, "I am not the first human to connect to an Arcanum, others have accomplished the same feat way back in ancient human history. However I was told that it disrupted things, made the Primal unusable, tainted it."

"What a stupid notion." Praid laughed, "To say that it consumes a Primal, would you consume the sun and stars too? Would you pull the moon from the sky? Who told you such a silly thing?"

Callum met his laughter with a somber face, "Gale, the Dragon Queen herself." That stopped his laughter.

Had it not been for Mira, Callum's words and this exchange would have seemed a completely natural progression to Rayla, but now she was beginning to see it for what it was. A manipulation, a posturing game. Callum had recognized the conflicted loyalty in Praid and was pulling at the marionette strings Gale may yet hold. Even so revealing his own strength in a Primal they were intermixed with, showing vulnerability and curiosity. He was showboating his strength, his capability as a mage, but had made it seem as though they pushed him to it. He was making them question their perceptions and loyalties, because they had asked him a question. The conversation seemed to be a natural flow to this point, to this revelation, and Callum had hardly spoken at all.

Rayla thought proudly to herself that her Callum was quite the impressive specimen. Maybe not the most physically fit, but his mind was as sharp as any blade.

"I suspected that it would be impossible to consume the entire Primal, but I was unsure, I could never confirm it. I had no way to discuss the Primals and their well of potential and it seemed any sage that would know better was long gone or not on speaking terms with humanity." He smiled broadly, "But that you don't feel it diminished is wonderful news."

Alayza cut in, "It's not that the Primal hasn't changed, it just hasn't been consumed." Her eyes were distant again, reading some far off thing, or deeply introspective. She squinted, "It's as though your touch is causing ripples across the Primal." She carved a silvery rune in the air that Rayla couldn't read. Callum watched this intently, confused when nothing happened, "It's as though I'm trying to wrestle the ripples across the surface of the Primal in order to get the spell to come forth. As though the primal energy in the immediate energy is resisting me. But once the ripple fades…" She tried carving silver light in the air again, a simple bouncing light springing to life in her palm.
Callum looked disturbed, "Thank you, Lady Alayza," Callum bowed, "You have given me much to think on, but furthermore, for the events that are to come-"

The oaken double doors swung open, showing Ezran, Corvus, Soren, Gren, and Amaya.

"-you have freed my hands." Callum finished.

Chapter End Notes

Like a twinkie: All fluff and filler.
Ezran stood in the doorway, front and center. Rayla, turned to greet them, as did her parents and Callum. Ezran seemed taller, lankier than he had even this afternoon though maybe it was a trick of the eye, a way in which the weight of his position affected him. He swam in his royal attire of red and gold, a long coat cinched with a golden belt and a crown that sat lopsided on his tightly braided locks, knotted into golden caps.

Beside and behind him immediately to the right was Corvus. The ever present guard stood at his side unchanged even from the time when Rayla had been confronted by him in the forests of Katolis. A mixture of leather armor and informal wear with flail at his hip. His eyes were hard and stern, but Rayla saw the spark of familiarity in them with the slightest quirk of the corner of his lips.

Gren wore a simple yet fine red coat that did not match his complexion well, washed him out, making him look paler than he was, but stood next to Corvus as stiff and formal as any before her.

To the left was Soren, even here he wore his armor and blades, the mark of a guard captain emblazoned on the armor, a cloak of black pinned to the breastplate. The armor shone as if he had spent the whole time since he saw them in the court yard polishing it for this dinner.

Then the shock Rayla had not been expecting, behind Ezran General Amaya stood. She wore a long fine dress of green cotton that hung from her protuberant belly gracefully. Her hair was pinned back with two large needles sticking out from the bun that hung loosely at the nape of her neck. The last time she had seen General Amaya, Rayla had been slinking away with her nephews at knifepoint. This was quite a different presentation that she would have expected out of the woman that seemed to be made more of steel than of flesh. That her stern features could belie tenderness, Rayla would not have guessed. She tried to suppress the smile, but when she could not tucked her face behind the wrapped strands of her strange hood.

The wafting smells of dinner came drifting through the air, beckoning them forward.

Ezran spoke, opening his arms in greeting, "Lady Alayza, Lord Praid, I thank you for joining me at dinner this evening, Rayla my dear friend, please come and have your ease. And brother, High
Mage of Katolis, let us welcome you home with warm food and warmer conversation." The words were delivered with all the formality and ritual that was necessary. The words tired. It was Katolian tradition to welcome friends and family with dinner on the eve of their arrival, and guests or strangers, like Alayza and Praid, were welcomed again every night. A way of both ensuring guests knew that they were both welcome, but separate from those that resided in the castle, "Please, join me at my table, there is much to discuss. Guards, you may leave us, you and your companions are dismissed as previously discussed."

Ezran turned and led the entourage the dining hall. He stood at the head of a long table that spanned farther than necessary. At times, there would be placards with names elegantly scrawled onto them, but at this juncture there were none. The food was lain out, large bowls and platters that offered an array of roasted meats, vegetables, and fruits. Even an array of sweet tarts and desserts sat on one end of the table away from the main courses. As others stood behind chairs, taking their places, all sat while Ezran watched, sitting last.

"There will be no servants to assist with serving, I implore you all to help yourselves to the dishes lain out." Ezran gestured for the others to begin.

Soren immediately apprehended his plate and began spooning what Rayla thought was some small form of roasted bird swimming in thick soup onto his plate while her own parents began helping themselves to vegetables. Gren signed with Amaya and ensured her plate was full before filling his own. Corvus began to accrue a plate of vegetables and rolls for his king before making his own meal. Rayla watched, wondering which of the dishes to try first, and noticed that Callum had not moved towards his plate.

Looking around the room, Callum asked, "And why are there no servants? No guards? What have you done with all the staff."

Ezran smirked at the plate Corvus had lain before him, picking up and taking a bite out of a sweet roll before answering his brother, "I have granted the castle staff a holiday." His words were muffled by the mass of gooey dough in his mouth.

Callum hung his head low, "Not that I mind taking care of myself, but why would you go and do a thing like that?"

"No hesitation to get right into it, I see." Corvus sighed under his breath, sitting down with his own plate.

"No." Callum affirmed, "And why would I? We had a plan. We had a good plan. Ezran decided
"Do not presume to know what I think." Ezran growled uncharacteristically, glaring at his brother. Rayla watched as her parent's eating slowed, eyes darting between the High Mage and his brother the King.

Callum leaned back resting on the arms of the highbacked wooden chair, "Then enlighten me, Ezran. I would love to hear why risking your life and deciding we don't need additional time to prepare for six Moonshadow Assassins is the preferable plan." His tone was acidic, already dismissive of any response his brother could proffer.

Rayla, sitting to the right of Callum, who sat to the right of Ezran, looked at the foods before her, not wanting to focus too intently on the degenerating conversation between the brothers. The foods were things she didn't recognize and scents that reminded her all too starkly that she was not in Xadia. Still, the scents were savory spicy sweet, she didn’t want to drool over the roasted seasoned meats, the drumsticks, the ribs, but that wafting aroma made her stomach turn in disgust and growl in anticipation at the same time. As her stomach rumbled she understood the warnings of Tomaz all the more. She wanted to gorge herself on the meats, on the sweets, on the myriad of flavors before her. Of all of it though, the one thing that she had going for her was the one thing that was taking her appetite away: the argument gaining momentum between the two brothers as she and the others at the dinner watched.

"I choose this path because it was the way that offered the least potential for death." Ezran added definitively, allowing for no retort, "No servants, no guards, just me and those that I could not keep away if I wanted to. My most trusted. Those that know the danger and are truly equipped to deal with the threat." Ezran gestured to the surrounding guests, "If I could I would sit by myself and await their blades, try to defend myself, I want as little life sacrificed as possible."

"Yes, but why does the sacrificed life need to be yours?" Callum's voice was sharp, "Why are you so willing to die instead of letting your people protect you?"

"What makes it okay for anyone else to die in my stead? Is my life worth any more than somebody else's?" Ezran's annoyance was plain on his face. He never stopped eating in all of his words, the tirade of petulant and resistant arguments spoken through or around mouthfuls of food. For somebody as thin and lanky as Ezran was becoming, he continued to pack away hefty servings of food. Rayla wondered if there would be enough food for everyone.

"So, you are willing to die," Callum's plate was empty, his voice feral and angry, "Great! You want as little sacrificed to save you as possible, which, I get it, you've decided you're a martyr just like Dad."
Ezran shook his head at the audacity of Callum's words.

"What I don’t get is this resistance to sacrifice others, but a willingness to use Dark Magic?" Callum continued to push past Ezran's silent protests,"I note that Claudia is absent from the table? Is it that you didn't want her skills and preferences to upset the sensibilities of your guests?" Callum gestured sharply at Praid and Alayza.

Soren was uncharacteristically timid when he spoke up, "Clauds needed time to prepare." Such a soft voice coming from a large man was odd for Rayla to see. It was like Elyas being timid, such things just didn't happen.

"So is that the line, not people, but animals may be sacrificed?" Callum ignored Soren, "You who still doesn't even eat meat?"

There was a long pause as Ezran glared at his brother before he finally spoke, his tone even and measured, "What is the difference between a person and an animal, Callum?"

"Oh not this argument again." Callum rolled his eyes, wiping a hand over his face.

"I use the same tired arguments because you make the same erroneous assertions." Ezran sniped from his seat at the head of the table, "There is no difference, Callum, the animals are just as sentient, just as aware and complex as the lives of people. I have heard them, spoken with them, but then why is alright for us to eat meat?" Ezran stabbed a fork into a piece of roast chicken and brought it to his mouth, "Quite simply, because we choose to." He punctuated his words with tearing a wet piece of meat from the impaled chicken with his teeth.

"When did you become so callous, so bullheaded? I swear you could give a stone lessons in stubbornness." Callum pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes in exasperation.

"When I had to take the crown and become responsible for the lives of thousands if not hundreds of thousands men, women and children." Ezran offered the sad truth of his upbringing. The defense of his weights and measures and morals.

"But there is always a cost. Always." Callum reached for a pitcher on the table and finally poured himself a drink of some dark red spiced fluid that smelled faintly of moon berries, but there was a pungent scent to it as well. Wine. He took a long draw of the chalice and placed the empty
container back down, "That's the allure, it's easy, a short cut, but there is always a hidden thorn that is going to twist you with whatever bargain you make."

It was Ezran's turn to have dark looks, his shoulders slumped and he glared at Callum openly, "Am I okay with it? No. Am I willing to endure it to survive, you bet your high horse I am." He punctuated his words with a finger pressed hard into the table, "Answer this, Callum, just how do you balance the needs of the many? There has to be a compromise. Mine is the sacrifice of livestock, the sacrifice on animals already destined to die for another reason. There is going to be loss. It's all about how much loss is tolerable to you or your people." He let that sink in, waiting for Callum to open his mouth before plowing over him with more words, "I'm responsible for the lives of every man woman and child out there, Callum. The last three years have been a careful balance of keeping the nation of Xadia pacified while maintaining enough military might to be threatening. I hold the pen poised above the death warrant of my people. The countless lives that are out there and the countless lives that are yet to come all hang in the balance. When I weigh my needs against the needs of the many, my people will always be heavier piece on the scale. However, if it takes the sins of one woman to keep me alive, to keep a peace that nobody else wants, then I will lay the sacrificial lamb at her feet and not lose a wink of sleep."

Callum couldn't get a word in edgewise while Ezran spewed his black and morbid logic. Rayla saw Callum try, stammering and half speaking before the torrent of Ezran's words overpowered him. Eventually he retreated to just angrily tapping his fingers on the table as he picked through Ezran's words.

Ezran saw this and continued, "Furthermore, Callum, what happens should I die? You have none of the royal blood in your veins, your lineage is as obscure as your stance on magic and morality. The last thing the human kingdoms need is a succession war. No, I refuse to sacrifice any life I don't have to, but I will use the lives of the ones I must to their fullest potential."

"Ezran," Callum's eyes were sad, he practically begged, "I really think it is a mistake."

"Noted," Ezran took an angry bite of the impaled chicken.

Callum sighed, looking at his empty plate. It was as though something in him broke, something in him gave up, "No matter what happens, though," Callum finally acquiesced, his anger and rage stripped away leaving only a man scared for his brother, "I will be there to protect you."

Ezran softened a little, "I know." He waited for his brother's eyes to meet his own and spoke earnestly, "Thank you, Callum. For wanting to protect me, as well as sharing your honest thoughts."
Callum finally grabbed a scoop of some strange orange chunks mixed with whitish chunks and brown sauce from a platter, serving himself. Noting Rayla's empty plate as well he scooped more and offered some to her.

Rayla looked nervously between Callum and the spoon of savory food, "I-is it meat?"

Callum barked a laugh, drawing the attention of the others, "No, it's vegetables. Carrots and potatoes."

"Not meat?" Rayla watched him dump the ladle of vegetables and their sauce onto her plate.

"Not meat." Callum confirmed.

Gren stood and cleared his throat, "I think maybe it's time we clue in the gathered guests about what the next steps are." He interpreted the flashing fingers of Amaya for the guests that could not speak with their hands.

"Yes," Ezran nodded, "Corvus."

Corvus looked up from his food suddenly, his mouth full. He swallowed the large partially chewed mouthful with a grimace and, taking a large draw from a chalice of wine, stood clearing his throat, "Yes, King Ezran." Taking the napkin from his lap and folding it over the back of his chair, he stood behind the highbacked wooden piece, resting a hand on it's back. He cleared his throat, "At this point all those gathered here are privy to the fact that not too far off there are six assassins coming for King Ezran's head. They will be using a certain type of poison that makes even a scratch lethal, a poison called 'Blood Lock'. We have also been informed that the guards and staff aside from those present here, plus an absentee Dark Mage will remain in the castle. This will effectively clear the potential casualties and collateral from potential incident."

Rayla listened attentively, but was drawn to the orange bits in the brown sauce. She used a fork to spear the vegetable and placed the morsel in her mouth. It was a burst of savory heat mixed with bitter. It was chewed easily and left an aftertaste of a not unpleasant bitter fruitiness.

When nobody voiced a concern, Corvus continued, "We know that should Ezran be struck by a blade carrying this 'Blood Lock' then we will need Alayza and her skills to reverse the poison and Rayla's…whatever it is… as well. Therefore, Ezran, Rayla, and Alayza, you all need to stick as close together as possible. We also want you as far from the fray as possible."
"And where will that be?" Praid inquired, concern for wife and daughter evident on his face.

"Deep beneath the castle," Ezran smirked, "In the ancient boroughs beneath the city. Once you pass through the catacombs there is an amphitheater of sorts. It is there we will wait to make the last stand. Though I hope it doesn't come to that."

Callum saw a potential opportunity, "So if we can just place you in the catacombs, why not seal them until after the full moon, hide you away?"

Rayla shook her head, "I see what ya mean, but that will nae work. The bindings we use give a seventh sense, an idea of where our prey lays."

"Then why did you mistake me for Ezran when we first met?" Callum whispered, watching the others gathered there watch their aside.

"Because ya lied to me, dummy, and Ezran was around us then." Rayla teased him affectionately.

Callum chuckled, nodding, "Alright, sorry, Corvus, please continue."

Rayla looked at the faces of the others and could see two pairs of eyes squinting at her suspiciously. Alayza's eyes seemed to be trying to read something beyond the interaction between Rayla and Callum, while General Amaya seemed to know exactly what was going on. Rayla decided it was the perfect time to take another bite and pay close attention to Corvus, deliberately trying to ignore the inquisitive eyes.

"Meanwhile, the path down will be long and arduous, Lady Claudia has been working hard to enmesh the descent with traps and tricks of every sort. A veritable gauntlet through the catacombs that will be defended with guerilla tactics by Soren, Praid, Gren, Callum, and myself. We'll continue to retreat ahead of them, setting the traps, slowing their descent." Corvus offered, "There are many traps in place that need to be set, traps that will hopefully take the edge of their prowess and abilities away."

"Which," Soren interjected, "Might be a good time for the elves present to explain just what advantages they have under the full moon? You always want to know the true measure of what you are going up against."
"I don't see why that is necessary at all." Praid added flatly. This earned him glares from all the humans at the table and Rayla while Alayza smirked next to him, looking at the vegetables on her play, using a fork to toy with them. He looked at each of them making no expression then shrugged, "It was a joke. Thought you all could use a little levity."

Ezran smirked, leaning on the table with his elbows, "I appreciate the attempt, but maybe not when my life is on the line."

Praid nodded, though his expression never altered, never twitched, "As you wish." he cleared his throat before continuing, "The impact of the Moon Primal on a Moonshadow elf is multifold, and our equipment has been forged in a way that they are enhanced by it as well. I would be surprised if any of them carried weapons or armor that was not cast from Moonweave."

Callum listened attentively, raising the question, "Moonweave?:

Praid frowned, "A plant that our mages have enhanced and woven into steel to create weaponry that matches our natural abilities. Common knowledge, really." His tone was dismissive of Callum, but the human mage raised no qualm, his question answered, "Moving on, we are strongest at the time of the full moon, most agile, most perceptive, as though every sense has been heightened, but with that comes a bit of a risk as well, pain is amplified. Those that are born with an arcanum of the Moon somehow naturally know how to bend the light of the moon around them, those that are particularly skilled can bend any light around them with this trick. Each assassin has been trained to do this."

"So we cannot see them," Soren added, "Not only super fast, super strong, but super fucking invisible too."

"Having second thoughts?" Callum challenged the traitor's son.

"Oh, no way." Soren smiled broadly, "This is going to the best fight I've ever been part of."

"These are not entities to be taken lightly." Alayza added, chastising Soren.

"Oh, I realize that, but don't go talking down to me, woman." Soren leaned forward and met Alayza's eyes, "I was there when King Harrow was slain, I've fought you shifty invisible fuckers before."
Alayza became indignant and opened her mouth, "I-

Ezran raised his hand, "Lady Alayza, may I?" The older elftress had ceased to speak at Ezran's interruption, and nodded her consent, "Soren, do not antagonize Alayza and Praid. They are here as guests, they have offered to stay and help me fight off their kin when they learned of my plight. At this juncture I trust them as much as I trust you."

"And I have to ask," Callum cut in, "How much is that?"

Rayla could tell that his anger was getting the better of him, he must still be seething from the earlier discussion with Ezran that now he was returning to pick another fight. Though they had left the previous topic behind, the gears in Callum's head still ground against one another. She could see the cords in his neck stand out beneath the high collar, the muscles of his jaw working to keep his mouth shut.

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised," Ezran said, defeated, "Callum we have worked hard to make Katolis into something it isn't. A beacon of hope for a potential civilization where the elves and humans could work together, we have welcomed ambassadors, sent our own, all to no avail. And why do you think that is."

Callum was quick to respond, "Because they cannot forget the past, they cling to the wrongs of others and use it as an excuse to continue to hate and continue to antagonize one another. Human and elf both."

"And," Ezran continued, pulling at the strands of the web he wove, "What should they do instead."

Callum looked about the table, "We need to move beyond the past, learn to forgive, not forget, but learn to work…together…er." Realization dawned on him and he looked at Soren first, pain in his eyes, then Ezran, "I hate it when you're right."

Ezran stood, pleased with himself, "I learned from the best." He leaned heavily on the table, his braids swinging forward and crown tilting just so, catching the candle light of the iron work chandelier that hung above their dining room, "The past is done, there is nothing I can do about it." Ezran looked at each in turn, "I cannot undo the fact that Soren's father ordered him to kill me, I cannot undo the fact that Soren tried, I cannot undo the fact that Corvus fought Rayla, they traded blows, I cannot help that Alayza and Praid served the dragon queen and likely have the death of more than a few Katoilans on their hands, I cannot change that Aunt Amaya and Gren have cut
down numerous elves of numerous nations."

Silence hung in the air as those gathered considered the sins of those they dined with and their own.

Ezran took a deep breath, "I can applaud, and do, that Soren and Claudia came to me, confessed their betrayal and sought forgiveness. They were banished, but their loyalty remained strong and they returned when I called. I can laud that Corvus has worked hard to be a loyal mentor and arbiter for my wishes both here and abroad, treading confidently at my discretion where threats lurked all around. I can laud Praid and Alayza for their overwhelming love of their daughter that brought them to my throne room and disclosed their true nature, their past, and now they are helping out of a compassion that I do not deserve. General Amaya has been an avid supporter of peace as has her husband Gren and work to mend old bonds. On the border and hopefully one day beyond."

Ezran took a deep breath, "The ages of bloodshed are done, and even should I die tomorrow, I beg you, don't seek revenge in my name, instead seek love, seek forgiveness, above all, seek peace." He hung his head and his voice waivered, cracking, "You all are no longer strangers, enemies, here at my table, and Claudia included, you are my family, please, no longer look at one another with resentment, or distrust, but see yourselves and each other as I see you. Wonderful individuals who when given the chance for peace, for forgiveness, seek it with all their heart."

Ezran sat, not meeting their eyes.

It was Gren who spoke, but did so interpreting Amaya's hands, "That is very nice, Ezran, but there are some things that cannot be changed. There will always be the distinction of elf and human, our cultures are too different, it is soaked in blood and animosity. Do you really think a few kind words and peace talks will change that."

There was a pause, and it was Soren who spoke, "I have to agree," Nodding to Rayla, Praid and Alayza, "No offense meant, ladies, sir, but I have to agree. If change is going to happen, it's going to take a long time, longer than just a human's lifetime. We're just too different."

Rayla tried to seek Callum's hand under the table, outside of the view of others. He took it in his and squeezed it tightly. She looked at him again, the strain of his jaw passed, his eyes downcast and thoughtful.

Rayla didn't expect what he said next, "We're not all as different as we would like to think." Callum looked around at them all, Ezran first, then Rayla, he met each of their eyes, "What if I told you that humans and elves shared the same heritage, more than that though, that humans were
descendant from elves?"

The silence was instantaneous. Resounding.

Broken just as suddenly by Soren's laughter. Soren looked at Praid who started to laugh with him. Then Amaya, and Ezran until finally Rayla joined it. The idea was ludicrous, she laughed happily with the others. It took Callum squeezing her hand tightly for her to see that he wasn't smiling, was pained more than anything, and like a thunder strike, Rayla realized he wasn't joking. He wasn't lying.

As the laughter died down, more took notice of Callum's expression. Rayla urged him in the awkward silence, "Where would you learn such a thing?"

Callum sighed and looked into her eyes, "From Gale herself, confirmed by Zym."

"How could he know such a thing." Rayla pushed, "He wasn't there, he's barely three!"

"And yet he knows more than he should, it is the way the Arch Dragons learn, the same way they talk with us, they share thoughts and memories." Callum spoke levelly, explaining. Callum looked to the elves, "Why do you think it is forbidden for straight couples between the different tribes?"

This seemed to trouble Alayza, and Rayla herself considered, there was no intermingling, no child of a couple in recent history that she could recall. Out of all the people in Xadia, was there never an elf that broke that rule? Only those who preferred the same sex were free to intermix, and that would never produce and offspring.

It was Praid that spoke up, "No, that makes no sense, the reason that elves don't intermix like that is because any child of such a union would have a Primal opposite that of the mother, her own Primal would influence the child and cause a miscarriage. This has been known since…"

"…Since humanity arrived?" Callum finished for him as Praid trailed off, he meandered further, "Now say a child could survive, would it make sense, if the mother's body rejected the Primal of the child, for the child to be purged of the opposing Primal, leaving it without a connection? Just like humans."

Soren sat back and let out a long whistle, "What. The. Fuck."
"Indeed." Corvus nodded his agreement. Around the table the words that Callum and Ezran spoke sunk in. They all shared this secret knowledge. They all shared this task. They were all family.

Chapter End Notes

Overused phrases - 'met their eyes'

Ooo look at that thicc plot.
"So the farmer says," Soren continued his tale, taking a swig of wine before imitating the country drawl "- 'I didn't have any more rope, so I took off my belt and tied the cows tail to the rafter. So now the cow is standing there, two buckets of spilled milk, each hoof tied to a fencepost. Then, because I didn't have my belt on my pants fell down. Which is exactly when my wife walked in to see why he was taking so long milking the cows.' And the drunk farmer says to me, shaking his head, 'Some things you just can't explain'."

Callum couldn't suppress the laughter that bubbled forth, as it did from the others around him. Elf and human alike. At first, the conversation had been forced and slow going, the revelation of humanity's roots pulling hard on the gathered peoples focus, but as time went on the wine flowed, tongues loosened and emotions were bared. As they came to the end of the night, everyone seemed to have a story to share.

Soren's anecdotes were bountiful. Callum had never really expected Soren to have so many different stories, so many different tales of his interactions with people throughout the Pentarchy. For all the aloofness that had set him apart while he lived in the castle, it seemed as though he had become quite the hero of the common man, going from city to city and exacting justice, large or small. The more stories were shared the more Callum realized that it had been a hard life for Claudia and Soren since leaving the kingdom of Katolis. When the ire of the Pentarchy for Viren's sins did not follow them, they had led the life of paupers in anonymity. At least at first. Soren was strong both constitutionally and mentally, if not intellectually. His conviction and flat out might carried them far, and Claudia had always been one that was quick to adapt and overcome. Though they had started as paupers traveling the land, it didn't seem to be too long before they found their niche and managed to live semi comfortably.

The night had grown late, the dishes cold, and though there was still abundant food, none really made a move to eat more. The flagons of wine that had populated the table were near empty and Callum himself had more than one helping. Not so much as to make his head swim and swirl, but enough to numb the tips of his awareness, a pleasant fuzz hemming in the world. Looking around the table, the smiling flushed expressions of the others, sans Amaya and Ezran who did not partake from the bounty of the various vintages, revealed just how deep into inebriation everyone else was feeling.

When Ezran's laughter trailed off, his face and gaze were preoccupied. His voice was thoughtful as he spoke, "This has been the best way to spend tonight." He looked around at each person at his table, sharing a smile, then he suppressed a yawn, "But I think that should be alone for a time." It was words that needed no explanation, it was a dismissal, abrupt and sudden, but not unexpected. The king with the contract on his head had kept them into the night and enjoyed their company, a wistful wish for tomorrow not to come. Now having sat and sated his various hungers, Ezran was
giving them their leave in order to take his own.

Callum nodded, "We shall retire then, Ezran, may you rest well this evening, and we will try to do the same." There were murmurs of agreement as people stood from their chairs, leaving their plates and mess for another time. Normally the servants would deal with the left over foods and dishes. With the gone now, though, Callum thought that taking care of it tomorrow might be a way to pass some of the idle hours.

The other's began to retreat, and Rayla stood with Callum pushing their chairs in. Not looking at him, Rayla asked, "Can ya show me how ta say 'Congratulashuns'?" Rayla cast a glance at Aunt Amaya as the pregnant general waddled from the dining hall, Gren holding her arm.

Callum smiled warmly, "Sure." He took her hands and made her face him, then held his hands out before himself, "Clasp your hands like so," the palms together, rotated so that the fingers did not interlace, "And then a nice firm shake." He did the action, and Rayla watched attentively. He did the action for her twice, noting some of the others take notice but not enough to halt their own retreat. It seemed others had an agenda of their own as Ezran left the hall all together.

"Thanks!" Rayla was already walking backwards as she smiled at him, then she turned and jogged to intercept Amaya and Gren. When she did Callum watched as Rayla tapped on Amaya's shoulder, grabbing her attention. The duo turned and Rayla made the sign that Callum had shown her. A little embellished on the movements, a little overdramatic with the shake, but the point was clear. Rayla made the sign to both and spoke the word at the same time, "Congratulashuns."

Gren smiled, bowing his head and spoke the words, "Thank you."

Aunt Amaya took a moment. Piercing eyes looked Rayla up and down. She knew this elf, knew the taste of her fist, but some new edge had entered those dark pools through which Aunt Amaya saw the silent world. As if seeing Rayla again for the first time, an elf, it carried hostility along with consternation. At her side, Amaya's hand twitched slightly before coming up to her lips, palm open, fingertips pressed to her lips before gesturing with her hand, lowering it with her palm up towards Rayla.

The signal that Callum knew meant, 'Thank you.'

Rayla bowed, surprisingly, and stepped backwards. Callum watched that action, confused, but it seemed to amuse both Gren and Amaya as they walked away from the Moonsshadow elftress who beamed, proud of herself. They glanced at her over their shoulder before they went into the hallways leading to the rest of the castle halls.
Not long after, Corvus left through another door, ignoring all the interactions about him and retreated into the night swathed castle halls.

Praid and Alayza went to meet Rayla where she stood watching the pregnant general retreat, and struck up a conversation with their daughter, much to the anxiety of the elftress. Rayla looked between her parents at Callum nervously, then back to her mother. A look that Callum could see Alayza examined intently when her daughter's gaze was turned. Rayla's violet eyes pleaded with him to come rescue her from the conversation.

He would have, if Soren's muscular arm hadn't snaked across his shoulder and rested there, holding him.

"You know," Soren pondered, looking at the ceiling above them and the intricacies of the woodwork there, "I get why you pushed so hard for us to be banished, and it really meant a lot when you apologized."

"Of course," Callum felt the pang of guilt heavy in his heart, thinking of how he had treated Soren and Claudia, "I was angry then, I think, if I think about it, I still am. But the landscape has changed."

"You had the right to be angry, the right to rage." Soren nodded, "I was actually a little proud of the fire you had in you back then. I only wish I could have put a blade in your hand then and shown you how to properly harness it. But, I am glad that those days are behind us." He sighed, the machismo and bravado fading offering insight into the innerworkings of Soren's mind. His words were wistful and sad, yet happy and hopeful all the same, "It is really good to be home, Callum."

Callum gave him a sidelong glance, noting the uncharacteristic emotion from his old friend and mentor, "How long until you start calling me names again?"

"Oh I never stopped." Soren smacked him roughly on the back good-naturedly, jostling the smaller man, "I just have to show your title respect while others are around." Soren strode forth, "See you later, Callum the Small-Man."

An old barb, but one that still dug deep, "I got taller." Callum called defensively after the large and muscle bound royal guard.
"You're still short." Soren waved without looking back at him. Nodding goodnight to the elves as he passed them and disappeared into the hall beyond as well.

Callum sighed to himself, "It doesn't even rhyme well, so much for being a poet." Still, a smile sprouted on his lips in Soren's absence. It had been an insult and a jest that had been from their childhood together. Something Soren would taunt him with to get him riled up, to get a little more fight in him while they trained: a way to encourage mistakes. As much as he had hated it then, something about it made him smile now, it took him back to those simpler days, as simple as being the step-son of the king of Katolis could be.

Callum stuck his hands into the pockets of his dark blue sherwani and waited patiently for Rayla to finish with her parents. He noted that she kept looking his way, but it was no longer a look that begged for help, more just her checking in on him, looking for where he was, only to find him still near. Conversely it seemed as though she didn't want him as part of this conversation.

Time passed, but the conversation between Rayla and her parents did not look to be dying down in any way shape or form, and Callum could feel the fatigue setting into his joints and muscles. Just that morning at dawn they had been at the Moonshadow Nexus, and now it was late, though the night not yet halfway gone. Some of the candles on the chandelier had begun to sputter out.

Callum had been attempting to be respectful, but grew tired of waiting, Callum approached Rayla and her parents. A piece of their conversation carrying to his ears.

"-are engaged, Rayla." Alayza reminded her daughter in hushed, harsh tones.

"I do nae see what that has to do with anythin'." Rayla whispered back vehemently.

"I jus' had to endure the nauseatin' display of my daughter makin' eyes at a human for the last several hours. An' I held my tongue." Alayza countered, "You are ta be wed to an elf, and an elf of considerable reputation and standin'. You care about changing the world like you talk about, then marruin' him is the best way to help. He won't take you if he learns you've been defiled by this human boy."

Callum came up behind Praid and Alayza, their words hurtful but not meant for him so he kept his face impassive, ignorant. The bumbling and vacant minded High Mage of Katolis. Rayla's glare was shared between her parents, but heavily featured Alayza. Rayla noticed him as he approached and she softened her features, "Callum!" she spoke nervously, the retort she had been about to deliver dying on her tongue, "High Mage! Is there something I can help ya with?"
Callum noted the intentional formality and mimicked it as well. They had been intentionally distant this evening, all night. Apparently, it had not been enough to go unnoticed by Alayza.

Callum had not really thought about the long term consequences of a relationship with Rayla, in fact, he didn't have to. He knew them forthright. If this conflict between elves and humans was to continue, was to rage on, then any relationship was bound to be fraught with disapproval from multiple entities. Even if the world accepted that humans were just a type of elf that had lost their connection to a Primal Source, there would still be the last thousand years that the cultures had sprouted and grown in opposing directions to rail against.

Callum reflected sadly, Moonweaves and Sunstones as opposed to forged steel and burning torchlight. He spoke, injecting himself into their conversation, "I mean no interruption," He lied, "But I wanted to thank you all personally for how much you have cared for my brother. In my absence you have likely counseled him and I am sure kept him from a self-destructive path."

Callum rounded the trio, standing equidistant from each person.

Alayza shifted the topic of conversation easily, though Callum could see the unease in her, she wondered about him, about how much he understood of the previous exchange. Praid's eyes were thoughtful, not suspicious.

When the Praid spoke, it was respectful, not reflecting his wife's words and tone, "High Mage, it felt natural to do as we have done. Your brother, as Rayla pioneered long ago, is not to blame for the sins of Harrow, just as Soren is not culpable for the sins of Viren. Though they are my people, my queen, I do not condone their actions and I will not lay the sins of Gale at Zym's feet."

"That is all well and good," Alayza followed her husbands words, for such a kind face and pouting lips, her words could bite, "I will continue to aid Ezran, as Praid says, the boy king is innocent in this. Your sins, however, I will not forget."

"Mother…" Rayla's warning tone tried to cut the tension.

It went ignored.

"My sins?" Callum asked tiredly, "Have we not gone down this rabbit hole already?"

This seemed to amuse Praid, concern Rayla, and encourage Alayza's tirade, "My daughter, High
Mage," she said the title the same way one might call somebody trash or filth, "How could you let them do this to her, how could you let them put her in the Lunarium, how could you let them take her Arcanum?" Her words went from angry to tearful, a near sob pulling out with her words. Alayza placed a hand over her own heart, caught her breath, and continued, speaking more firmly, "How could you let them take her Arcanum?"

Callum thought a moment, Alayza's eyes challenging. Praid and that damn smirk just watched his wife berate Callum, but added nothing. The elf was enjoying this Callum realized.

Rayla was just shaking her head, her hand with a death grip on the gilded dagger at her side. It always made her calmer to have a weapon in hand.

"You don't trust me." Callum acquiesced, "Nor do I expect you to. Immediately. My father, my ilk, have been nothing but unkind to you. You have had to live the last four years in hiding for fear of repercussions just due to the skin you wear, for the horns on your head. You worry that I am using your daughter to protect my brother."

Callum paused, letting his words sink in, "You are right. I am. I value Ezran's life above my own and I know that her blood is necessary to reverse any action this Moon Mage curse enacts."

Alayza opened her mouth.

Callum didn't let her speak, "But there is another life that I value above my own, Rayla's." Again he paused, leaving his meaning hinted but unsaid, "I would never ask Rayla to do something that I would not be willing to do myself, it is just that in this thing, she is the key. I cannot take her place. I don't intend to let these murderous assassins anywhere close to my brother," vehemence began to seep into his words, "And I will be hard pressed to not only stay my own hand, but to stay the hands of others. Rayla will not kill. Rayla will never kill. Ezran and I have tried to embrace that. She has influenced us and therefore has influenced the whole of Katolis. But if I told you I didn't have murder in my heart for what they have done to Rayla, for what they want to do to Ezran, I would be lying."

Callum spread his hands, leaving himself open to Alayza's examination. Praid looked to his wife, waiting, Rayla examined Callum, seeing him again, seeing something deeper than she had seen before. Alayza placed a balled fist on her hip, taking his words and twisting them, "So, you admit that you will kill elvenkind when it comes down to it."

"I admit that I have never been pushed that far, that I have never found that I had to take a life." Callum gave Alayza her minor victory, "I do not set out to kill anyone, but when all is said and
done I do not know who may fall and who may walk away."

Praid finally spoke up, adding, "So, you intend to capture these assassins?"

"I intend to protect my brother." Callum left the rest unsaid. Truthfully, he didn't know. Callum had never been pushed that far before. There had always been a way, there had always been a path to avoid lethal force. Diplomacy and charisma seemed to carry him far. Tomorrow night, however, was likely beyond diplomacy. He would try though.

He had to, for Ezran, for Rayla, and for himself.

"An' what of my daughter," Alayza continued her dogged pursuit, "Will you protect her? What will you do if you have to choose."

Callum began to speak, but Rayla's hand on his arm silenced him.

"He will protect Ezran." Rayla answered for him, taking a step towards him. He looked at her, startled, "You will protect Ezran," Rayla commanded him, reading the protest in his gaze. Turning again to her mother, "I can look after myself."

"You're barely standing!" Alayza countered, "You may look all fancy and done up in these human threads, but I know my daughter. You're thinned out, squeezed, you always thought you were invincible, Rayla, but you are not." She pleaded with her daughter begging her to realize her limitations.

With a smirk, Rayla cut in quickly, "I have yet to see any proof to tha contrary."

Alayza warned her with a maternal glare, vaguely reminiscent of the glare Rayla could often produce, "One of these days you will find your wit and wiles aren't enough to protect you from the edge of a blade."

"One day," Rayla agreed, "But until then if I can stay a blade with wit and wile it seems like a much better alternative."
Alayza groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose, "Praid, talk some sense into her."

The male elf startled and looked to his wife, like a deer chanced upon in the forest, he froze, "What in the seven hells makes you think I can do anything of the sort?" His tone was flat, voice matter-of-fact. "You were the one who could always make her see reason, even as a child. I just bought her candies when Runaan said she did well in training."

It was Praid's turn to receive a glare from Alayza out the shadowed corner of her eye.

Praid cleared his throat and looked away, obstinately refusing to acknowledge that Alayza could possibly be looking at him.

Hesitant to talk, lest the anger be directed his way once more, Callum spoke, "It is late," all the eyes turned to Callum, "I know today has been emotionally trying for me, and I cannot begin to imagine what it has been for you all. Please, let us retire, let us sleep. We have a whole day to argue tomorrow before our guests arrive."

"Frankly," Praid mumbled, "If the prospect is more of this, I'd rather they just get here already."

Rayla snorted.

Callum held his face plain, smirking inside with Praid, agreeing with the sentiment.

Alayza shook her head.

"Regardless," Callum continued and attempted to usher them from the dining hall, "My bed calls to me with the sweet siren song of sleep." With the mention of sleep in the near future, Callum found himself stifling a yawn.

Alayza and Praid allowed themselves to be ushered out and Rayla followed beside Callum. The goodnights were terse and rough, but not prolonged. After the arguments, after the casual racism of the elves against their human hosts, there was not much else to say, not much else to add. Alayza and Praid receded down one hallway, and Callum led Rayla from the dining hall.
As they walked down the long and dark corridors towards the Gratlian Rooms, her hand found it's way onto his arm, her head onto his shoulder. Callum's pace wasn't brisk, but slowed further. The pressure of her head against his shoulder a reassuring and welcome presence. They walked in silence at first, the two of them enjoying the privacy and solitude with one another, finally away from the eyes of others.

The duo turned down yet another hall, the lanterns here mostly out with the exception of a few that cast long shadows. Their slanted shadow mimics growing longer and longer before the next mimic started to approach from behind with the next lanterns approach. This pattern continued to iterate and their silence persisted.

There weren't words at first, this silent path smothering words as they both just enjoyed the presence of one another.

"I dinnae realize that my parents hated humans so much." Rayla said finally, no sadness or dismay, just true surprise. When Callum didn't speak in response, she continued, "You would think that living amongst them for a few years would have softened their stance on it."

Callum scratched his face with the hand opposite Rayla, "Well, they never said that they hate humans that I heard," Callum pondered, "It seems that they are fine with humans, and if anything are actually very conflicted about what to think." He paused in his walking, making her turn to look at him, one side bathed in the lantern light with stark shadows and the other lost in darkness, "But we made it a little more complicated."

"We?" Rayla laughed, weaving her arms into his and pulling Callum close, "It's cute that you think you had any choice in the matter."

Those damn smirking lips and teasing eyes. Rayla bent her head, tilting it ever so slightly to meet his, and Callum went to meet her lips, but she pulled away just before they could meet. He felt her breath on his face, he was so close, "Callum!" she went on in mock surprise, "What would people think! I can only imagine the rumors of the High Mage and his elftress concubine. Caught smoochin' in the halls of the castle, no less!"

"You have a bad habit of putting yourself in these compromising positions in my head." Callum teased her back, pouting over the missed kiss. He held her arms tight as she held his.

"What?" She inquired readily, then darkly, huskily, "You would prefer to be my concubine instead?"
When he kissed her, this time he didn't let her pull away, and her mock resistance faded quickly. It was fierce and hungry and he could feel her press and arch into him.

Callum pulled away and Rayla's eyes were closed, a small and distant smile on her face. Her words were chastising, "You've gotten too courageous, too comfortable. Keep on like this and I will have to remind you how deadly I can be."

Callum laughed and began to usher her onwards again, the Gratlian quarters just up ahead, "We should both be sure to rest tonight."

"Oh, so now that we're back in the human kingdoms, you'll just drop me off for a good nights sleep and retreat to your own chambers. Nevermind that I got to sleep next to you last night. Or did you not enjoy that?"

"Oh, I enjoyed it, Rayla," Callum reassured her, "That was the best thing ever, but it wouldn't do to have the maids start up gossip about who came to who's bed while they were away. Those rumors spread like wild fire. We could barely hide…whatever this is…between us from your parents, let alone a flock of maids and servants. I think that…until we have a handle on it, and on Katolis, we need to be careful."

"So you're just goin' ta leave me here and go back to your own bed, knowing that ya have a lithe, limber bedpartner here." He could tell by her tone that she didn't really expect to change his mind, but wanted to drag out the titillation, the teasing.

Callum groaned. Struggling, "Rayla, I-"

"Nope," She put a hand up to stall his words, "Say no more." She was being overly dramatic, "I'll just have the same fun by myself."

Rayla closed the door leaving Callum looking, and feeling, quite dumbfounded in the hallway.

He paused there for a time, raised his hand hesitantly to knock, but then lowered it. Callum walked away into the night. His path was not meandering, but direct. Callum no longer cared to prolong the time he spent in the hallways, the fatigue was creeping deeper and deeper. His feet ached, his knees creaked, his back protested and his eyes felt dry and grainy. His mind was still covered in fluff and down, but not so much that he couldn't recognize the effects of his imbibed wine. His path
was straight, he did not stumble, except once. No, twice now.

He berated himself, focus.

Finding his way to his quarters, the double doors swung wide before Callum and he was admitted to his own modest quarters. He had chosen it for the bookshelves, for the space, and the view of the sunset that reminded him of a time before coming to Katolis. A wistful shade of memory, but impactful and peaceful. Now the view of the west was black, the terrain swathed in a black that seemed to ooze over the landscape and encroach upon the windows, into and over the features of the room.

Callum strode unabashed into the room. He had been gone a long time with none to light the hearth, and he had not bothered to earlier as he prepared for dinner, too preoccupied with the coming events and coming conversations. The room was cold but not unpleasantly so, a kiss of autumn promises to come. Callum glanced at the fireplace, and made up his mind.

Fuck it.

A red rune appeared trailing the tip of his fingertip as he delved deep into his mind and called forth the righteous rage he discovered beneath the Lunarium, "Incendo." Callum commanded reality, and it obeyed.

The firewood piled in the hearth of his room flared to life, logs being overtaken with a flare of heat that washed over him before it dissipated and the wood started to crackle. The clean scent of the pine wood filling the air as it burned. As if lighting a fire would consume a portion of the Sun Primal.

He chuckled at himself, having believed such things for the last three years. He had to laugh, otherwise he would scream.

After briefly stoking the hearth, Callum strode directly to his adjacent washroom where he had taken his own bath earlier today. Entering through the door just beside one end table of his bed, Callum's fingers fumbled with the metal buttons of his sherwani coat, the fine clothes opening up and allowing him to breathe. Callum craned his neck one way and then another as the Sherwani blessedly hung open. He found the washbasin and pitcher of water left over from before his bath and poured the water into the basin, splashing it on his face and groaning. The cold air had drank the heat away and now the water was as chilled as the air.
Feeling ever so slightly more sober, ever so slightly more refreshed, Callum left the washroom and made for his bed.

At his drafting table, a figure stood in the firelight. Callum took a sudden and sharp intake of breath before his mind could register that this shade was no threat. That figure was one he knew well, he had drawn it frequently over the last three years.

"These are some interesting sketches, Callum." Rayla stood at his desk, the slanted surface an array of charcoals and inks. Before her, she had discovered some of his darker desires splashed across the pages of his sketchbook. She flipped another page, raising her eyebrows, "You certainly are … inventive."

"Rayla," Callum began walking forward. Please, don't let her have seen that picture, "Didn't we agree that it was best to not start rumors."

"Oh calm down," She held her braided white hair in one hand and intently examined the subjects and muses that danced across his fancies, "I messed my bed up and made it seem like I slept there. Simple to do, really. But tell me, Callum," Her voice was curious, but there was something deeper in it too, "Just who exactly is this elftress that you seem to have me…intertwined with?"

"Well," Callum began, wincing, "I don't really know…"

"So you draw pictures of naked elves that you don't know?" Her words were pointed, he couldn't tell where these words were coming from. If they were in good nature and they were her usual banter that kept him spinning about and about, or if that venom in her voice was truly toxic.

Callum cleared his throat, "Well, it's just, erm, there is more than…one of you with another."

Rayla looked at him again, her face unreadable due to the shadows of the fireplace behind her. A silhouette outlined in firelight, "And here I was, thinking I was something special." Her voice was hurt.

"No, Rayla, I swear," Callum rushed to her, taking her hands from the pages of the book. That damnable sketchbook. He would have to purge some of the more fanciful productions from it's binding, "I don't think you realize how special you are to me." He met her gaze, his own eyes pleading, and in the firelight Callum realized too late that she was toying with him.
Eternally the mouse caught in her cat's paw to her, he lamented.

Callum saw the ear to ear grin, her eyes catching the firelight giving them a hint of feral, "Go on,"

Callum felt the floor fall out from under him, felt the world suddenly rushing up at him. He didn't want to tell her how much he cared for her, not yet. They were only just discovering each other and their feelings. In the back of his mind, his caution whispered, warning: don't ruin what was happening, keep the depth of his devotion hidden. The training of the courts and kingdoms teaching him restraint, teaching him to pace himself and not show his hand, all unraveled in her presence.

They spoke of unbalancing their foes, what to strike to tip the scales, but in her presence he was a ship without a rudder, subject to the winds of her whims. He was eternally tumbling and falling and never in control.

Callum never wanted to be in control again.

Callum held her hands in his own, noting how her eyes never left his face, encouraging, but he realized she could be giving every sign in the world and he would still feel this nervous energy in his heart, these fluttering palpitations, anxious trembling suppressed by determination, "I feel like we've missed out on so much time," Callum began, she let herself be held by him, "The world is as broken and tainted as it ever was, and you were always the one source of purity. It anchored me. It anchors me."

Rayla's smile changed from mischievous to abashed and she shifted uncomfortable with the honest emotion that he was revealing.

But Callum pressed on.

"Truly," He laughed, "I didn't know how deeply it ran in me, this obsession with you, this fascination, not until I saw you in the Lunarium, and I couldn't get you off my mind, every time you would be gone from my vision, you traversed my mind. The more I discover about you the more I love it, your confidence, your humor, your conviction, your stupid sarcasm, I drink it in like water, want to gather it in like air. But it wasn't until I really reflected on the moon that I understood how I felt. Like the moon I know only so much of you, and I realize there are parts of you I may never understand or comprehend, you're so beautifully alien compared to the world I have known. I simply stand in awe of your beauty, physical and otherwise. Rayla, I-"
Rayla placed a finger on his lips, suddenly quieting him. Not letting him speak, he was startled, but saw that it was her turn to be wracked with nerves. Her hands trembled in his, her eyes didn't meet his, she looked down at their hands, four fingers in five. Her voice was soft, a tenderness that Callum had never known from her, "I love you, Callum."

Callum was confused at first, but then overjoyed. All that anxious energy he had felt, each heart beat of trepidation and breath of preoccupation suddenly diverted into the purest form of joy. Callum swept her up into her arms, causing her to squeal and giggle, her own nervousness forgotten. Callum planted a kiss upon her laughing lips and spun her around, "Truly?"

"Yes." She affirmed, hands on his chest.

"I love you, too." Callum told her, a stupid grin stuck on his face.

"I know." Rayla smiled coyly.

"I-I don't know what to say!" Callum set her down, now suddenly unaware of what to do with himself, "When?"

It was Rayla's turn to feel shy at Callum's inquisition, "It was a long time ago."

This only fueled his curiosity further, "When?" He pressed, good naturedly.

"When you helped me free the dragon." She said quietly, "Before we ever set foot in Xadia."

"That long?" Callum asked, amazed, "I was only a child then! A confused and lost little boy!"

"An adorable confused and lost little boy finding his way with a lost little girl." She rubbed his arms as he suddenly began to see their shared past in a different light. Conversations over campfires, food and drinks shared, hesitant touches and supportive hugs all taking on a different meaning.

Callum enjoyed his arms wrapped around Rayla holding her at the small of her back and pressing her close. Callum drank in the subtle adjustments of her posture as she leaned against him. He
drank in the lavender vanilla scent of her. She already looked so much healthier than when he had
found her beneath the Lunarium. It wasn't as if she was back to her former self completely, but her
eyes were brighter, her smile wider, her hair carried a shining white luster that reflected the
firelight in a hellishly haunting highlight.

Rayla burrowed into his shoulder, just holding him in return. Breathing in his scent the same way
he drank her's up. They stayed like that, intertwined for a time before Callum lifted her chin and
claimed a kiss, warm wet lips dancing across his own, and let her pull away.

"Let's not focus on what we missed out on." She turned, wrapping his arms around her so that she
pressed her backside against him, she felt like she belonged there, "The way things happened
cannae be changed. Any time spent regretting it is time wasted. There is no point dreaming of
changing it when it cannot be."

"Would you if you could, though?" Callum whispered, daring to dream in spite of her words.

"Maybe," Rayla mused, turning her head, giggling as Callum began to nibble on the tip of her ear.
She sighed contentedly, "I would make Gale a little kinder, maybe make it so she didn't send me
away. Make it so these assassin's weren't coming for Ezran."

Callum stopped nibbling long enough to speak, "Yea, that would be nice, wouldn't it? I'd be afraid
to change things, though." His words were offhanded before he continued enjoying the taste of her
ear.

"Why?" Rayla ran her hand across her neck and found Callums, holding him at the nape, not letting
him move from his ministrations.

He stopped, "I'm afraid I'd lose this. Afraid I'd lose you."

"Would you, though?" Rayla teased, wiggling against him, "I had a lot of dreams down in the
Lunarium, sometimes I was human, sometimes you were an elf. We always wound up together."

"That must have been quite the trip." Callum mused, "What was I like as an elf."

Callum felt Rayla shudder in his arms, "You were...not kind." She bent her neck and Callum
started laying kisses along her chin, "But, you always carried such a torch for me. Much like now."
Callum didn't know when she had dropped her hand to below his waist, but he felt her hand light across him as his body strained against the cloth between their bodies.

Callum shuddered as her touch caressed the most sensitive parts of him through their clothes.

"You like that, my lil mage?" Rayla teased before meeting his lips.

"When your hand is on that," Callum smiled, "Please don't refer to me as anything 'little'. It's not good for my ego."

"You are anything but 'little'," Rayla smirked, giving him an affectionate squeeze.

Callum ran a hand through his shaggy hair, and Rayla used the freedom to break their embrace. He saw that Rayla still wore the deep purple dress, but had removed the metal shoulder pieces and the metal necklace, she walked away from him, exploring the room, leaning on the back of a chaise lounge made of red leather just inside the hearth's ring of heat. Her hips swayed and her long skirts swished, her shadow growing larger as she approached, swallowing Callum.

"You're still wearing that formal dress?" Callum asked, "I would have figured you changed out of it at the earliest opportunity, I was just about to change out of my coat as well."

"No, this piece of human attire suited my intentions well enough." Rayla laughed tersely.

"What do you mean?" Callum asked, finally closing the sketchbook and tying it shut. She had only made it so far in the sketch book, nothing he had drawn in the last year seemed to have been revealed, which he was thankful for.

Rayla mock fanned herself and did her best to imitate a Katolian accent, "Oh my, it's awful hawt in heer. Do me a favyor," She peered over her shoulder at him, "And undo my buttons, I'm feeling awfully light headed. I might have a case of the vapors."

Shaking his head, Callum walked to where she lounged, her back to him, and ran a hand up her back. When the shiver tore up her body, he didn't even try to suppress the self-satisfaction, "No human girl talks like that."
"What d'ya mean, I sound exactly like a human girl!" She protested meekly, "My impression of a human girl is renowned far and wide!" Callum didn't say anything else, but just laughed with his love. His fingers fumbled with the buttons on Rayla's back and she giggled as she held her hair to one side for him. The dress was peeled away slowly, one button, then another, revealing the pale ivory flesh underneath.

Rayla shrugged her shoulders out of the dress when the buttons were undone to her midsection. She shimmied out of the purple attire and once over her hips it fell away, pooling on the floor.

Rayla stood there in just a black silken slip, the garment hanging loosely from the barest thin straps of black silk on each shoulder. One strap carelessly falling to one side, the slip tilted across her chest, held up by the small swell of her breast. Callum's eyes were glued to her in the firelight. A timid demon of a magical and unnatural persuasion, a muse that captured his desire. A succubus that drained him of reason and thought, leaving only a dry mouthed lust. The orange tongues of flame sent flickering shadows across her ivory skin where he longed to touch, to kiss. Her face was shadowed but her violet eyes caught the warmth of the fire and turned it to light of her own desire.

Rayla, now in naught but her black silk slip, pushed Callum back to the bed. He backpedaled easily with her hand to guide him, until his legs rested upon the edge. She took his hands and guided them to her hips then took her own and draped them over his neck, pulling him into a deep kiss. He felt her tongue, an intoxicating sensation that pulled his fuzzy awareness away from other sensations. Callum's mind became a network of focal sensations that would flare up as one began and another faded.

The scent of lavender and vanilla filling his head.

The taste of her lips, somehow soft and bitter with a touch of the wine on her breath. Their softness a mixture of silken caresses and a wet cold racing across his own.

Rayla's hands tugging at the coat he wore

Rayla's hips pressed against his.

Rayla broke the kiss. Callum's own heart thundered in his ears, yet apart from their ragged breathing, the only sound was the crackle of fire from the hearth behind her. Rayla timidly searched his eyes, but took one of his hands and leading his fingers across her skin.
Starting from her hip, she dragged it slowly down her thigh, never breaking his gaze. Down the ivory flesh and up the silky soft skin of her inner thigh. He watched her hesitate, could see the conflict on her face. He stole a kiss. First one, then another, kiss after kiss they shared their affection, and it bolstered Rayla's confidence. Guiding Callum's hand up beneath the barely concealing hem of her slip, Callum felt the texture of her skin change to even softer, the skin warm, almost hot, to the touch.

Rayla's breath caught as his hand came up to meet her, Callum pushed against her and Rayla groaned, her face caught in anticipation of joy not yet attained. Rayla again draped her arms around Callum's neck again and worked herself over on his hand. She moved rhythmically and her breath continued to catch in gasps as her pace picked up, all while Callum watched and bit and nibbled.

Callum found his way into her with his fingers, earning another groan of pleasure and a satisfied smirk from him. Her grip on his neck grew tighter, her eyes went from gazing into his and now searched the back of her eyelids. Her movements were punctuated by soft moans that he was ecstatic to hear over the sound of the hearth behind them.

Callum had been trying to restrain himself, to hold back, to focus on Rayla, but with her moans peaking, the muscles of her arms and legs starting to tighten, Callum withdrew his hand from her. Rayla slumped slightly as her muscles loosened and her eyes bolted open, wondering after him and why he stopped.

Callum struggled out of his coat, tossing it to one side, and climbed fully onto the bed, holding out his hand for her to join him there.

Rayla's sultrily angry look made him pause, and he began to second guess himself all over again. One balled fist followed by the other, she crawled slowly onto the bed, the weight of her, slight though it may be, deforming the blankets beneath her. She approached, her hips swinging intentionally.

The hand held out to her had been the hand that held her, and as she came to his hand, rather than taking it in her own hand and pulling herself close, Callum felt the smooth embrace of her lips sliding, slipping, down his still wet fingers. It was Callum's turn to groan as she worked her lips over his fingers, tasting herself on him. She smiled around his fingers and continued to suck the taste of her from his fingers.

When done, she pushed his hand aside harshly and crawled up him, straddling him against the headboard of the bed. He could smell her breath mixed with the scent of her, vanilla, lavender, plus something feral and wild. She placed her wet lips on his and a new flavor exploded in his mouth, something strange and new that he couldn't quite classify, tangy and sweet mixed with sour, but not unpleasantly so. It spurred in him an intense hunger, his hands became a flurry, coming up to her
Callum grabbed her by the neck and twisted her so she faced away from him, her body following as she whimpered in his lap. One arm slipped through hers arm and across her chest where he could feel the silk of the slip beneath his finger tips. He found his way beneath the fabric and grabbed hungrily at her breast. Her own arm didn't fight him or lead him elsewhere, but she reached over her head and held his head against hers.

With his other hand, Callum spread her legs and returned to his former place, teasing his way up her thighs first before re-engaging the same sensual ministrations. She moved against him, his only saving grace from his own breathless intoxication were the constraints of his pants.

Callum explored this new area of her body that she had led him to. He watched attentively for her reactions, how one soft stroke would be met with increased breathing, another with a groan and gyration. Rayla moved in his hands, enjoying herself as much as he was. Again her pace increased, her breathing became more ragged, gasps were more and more frequent. Callum found himself entranced by the slight fluctuations in her breathing, the way her legs began to quiver and tense in his arms.

Rayla's hand went from his neck to his hair, holding him close. He felt her arms and legs tighten and her breath caught completely. Callum continued his gentle touches as her legs straightened and toes curled. She bent her legs and grabbed a fistful of his hair tightly. Rayla let out a prolonged groan and squeezed her thighs together, grabbing his hand there about the wrist and pulling it away.

Callum sat beneath her, pretty proud of himself. He didn't know much about what he had been doing, but was encouraged that it seemed Rayla enjoyed herself as much as he had the other night. He kissed along her neck and shoulder blades as she basked in the aftershocks of her orgasm, every so often he would feel her tense in his arms.

"Mmmm." Was the only semblance of words she could muster.

"Let's get under the blankets and, "He kept kissing as he spoke, "Get some sleep."

Rayla's eyes were lidded heavily, she turned in his lap and met his eyes, violet glow burning bright, "I know it's late, but what makes you think we're done?"
Callum could only stammer as she began to undo the ties of his pants for him. As they loosened she shifted her weight and tugged them downwards. He didn’t dare to stop her. He didn’t want to stop her. Her movements were lazy, sluggish, but direct. After her help, Callum kicked his pants the rest of the way off and they landed on the floor in a heap. She pulled his shirt off over his head and threw it in a random direction, not caring where it landed.

Gooseflesh raced across his skin, the air only slightly warmer than it had been thanks to the fire.

When freed from his fabric prison she took him in her hand and squeezed him, the warmth of her hand wrapped around him and he shook, a chill completely unrelated to the nip in the air. Callum followed her arm up to her chest, the strap of one shoulder had somehow freed itself and the slip hung at an angle across her chest, one soft and round breast exposed to the night air, her nipple the same slight pink as her lips.

Not releasing him, she sat across his lap, slipping her other shoulder out of the slip so that the silken garment sat in a banded heap about her abdomen. He could see the tight muscles of her stomach, formed and defined as she shifted positions. The her body no longer hid behind the hem of the slip and decency was a long lost thought. He could see how she glistened in the firelight, the source of the sweet and sour flavor drawing his eyes in.

Rayla began to guide Callum when he spoke up, "Wait, Rayla…"

The elftress froze and looked at her love and lover, naked in the firelight, "What? I'm kind of in the middle of something." She joked with him, even now, even like this.

"I mean, I-" Callum winced, "Your mom, she was, she was worried, about you, being defiled?"

Rayla sat back, but didn't release her grip on him, "Callum." She met his eyes, her own violet ones soft, "First of all, anythin' that we do will be the most pure thing I can think of." She used her free hand to crawl up him, placing kisses on his chest and neck making him groan and giggle. Up his chest, up his neck and to his ear where she whispered, "And if it does defile me, Callum, I want to be defiled, I want to be violated, desecrated." She growled in his ear, her dark words wiped away any reservations that Callum had.

Rayla bit his ear hard earning a yelp and sitting back on his lap, "Now, don't be nervous."

"That's kind of hard." Callum laughed. When this morning started he never imagined this is where
he would be. He could not have fathomed of this situation a week ago, could not dare to hope for it a month ago, yet here he was.

"Well, 'kind of' is an understatement." She glanced down at what she held in her hand, squeezing him again.

"No, not 'that'," Callum cleared his throat, "It's just that this is …the first time."

"So you're nervous?" Rayla moved back, sitting on his lap, speaking flippantly, "Don't be. Callum. I love you. This is my first time too."

"Then how the hell are you so confident?" Callum laughed, propping himself up on his elbows and kissing her.

"Well, you weren't taking the lead, so I figured it was up to me." Rayla shrugged after the kiss broke. She pushed him back down and went up on her knees, placing him against her. He could feel the burning heat of her against him mixed with the new sensation of her glistening secretions. She slid down slowly and Callum had to grip her hips, slowing her further. They didn't speak as Rayla moved, each enjoying the sensation too much to ruin it with words, the first of many hopefully to come. Rayla wrapped around him and squeezed him as he moved through her. He tried to form a thought, tried to form some sort of lasting memory, but the sensation whited out other sensations and processes. All that could possibly exist in that moment was the two of them, and her moving slowly down him.

Rayla's face looked almost pained, but she sighed triumphantly as she rested against Callum's hips, relaxing. As much as the engagement had ruined all potential for thought, the muddying sensation slipped away and left only the desire for more. As Rayla adjusted, she began to move up, and then down, her actions slow and teasing even as they embraced him. As if his heart hadn't been beating wildly enough he felt it pick up even more, his breath growing ragged as hers had. Callum tried to arch off the bed to meet her as she came back towards him, but it wasn't enough. She was giving him everything, and it wasn't nearly enough.

Taking his hands from her hips, he placed one on the small of her back and another cradled the base of her skull as he came up off the bed. Lost in her movements, she didn’t notice what he was doing until he shifted his weight with her most recent thrust and tilted them both sideways.

With a yelp, Rayla found herself lying on the bed next to where Callum had been. Callum braced his weight on the bed and loomed over his elftress lover, her flushed face stared back up with parted lips and ragged breaths. With the hand that wasn't bracing him above Rayla, he grabbed her
thigh and pulled it up, she wrapped her legs about him and he thrust into her causing her to moan softly. She bit into the flesh of his chest and rolled her hips to meet him, clutching him close.

Again the fuzzing of reality happened, each subsequent movement taking more and more from him. Though it would fade at times, it mounted and built in him, a fire raging wildly and pouring through his veins to devour the world with its white hot heat. Lost in the rhythm, lost in the sensation he swam in the scent of her, devoured the sight of her, tasted the purity of her.

Rayla's voice was pained, "Defile me, Callum. Do it." She encouraged him with words he didn't need. He could feel her tense beneath him, could feel that same building tension in himself, but knew he couldn't last. He attempted to slow, to prolong this taste of heaven, wanted it to go on and on and on and on and on.

But it couldn't.

In a tense moment of anticipated realization, Callum tensed as Rayla had, and he felt himself suddenly drained of energy as the world came swimming back to him in blurs and swirls.

Beneath him, Rayla ran her hands over his back and sides, over his chest as she crooned sweet nothings to him.

When Callum finally caught his breath, he looked up to meet her gaze only to find her lewdly beaming at him, "Good job, fellow human, human fella."

Callum snorted and fell to his side, burying his face in the pillow, laughing.

Laughing to herself, Rayla pressed her legs together and got up from the bed. She stretched beautifully and asked over her shoulder, "Which of these doors leads to the washroom?"

Confused, Callum gestured to the door next to the nightstand.

Rayla left him wondering and went into the restroom. Callum, careful as he got up off the blankets, waited there awkwardly, naked. He could hear Rayla in the restroom, first water in the basin, grumbling words, likely about the chill of the water, and then opening of cabinets and more grumbles.
Callum walked over to the fireplace, warming himself up and kicking the abandoned clothes across the floor to a singular pile. He threw more logs into the hearth, sending a scattering of sparks out into the room.

Callum yelped and jumped backwards.

"Careful doin' that when you're naked," Rayla called, "Unless you're trying to get a boo-boo you need me to kiss better."

Callum turned, "Now there's an i-" His words were halted as clothes impacted his face.

Catching them and holding them before him he saw that it was a set of warm cotton bed clothes. Rayla wore a similar set, cut to fit him so that they hung slightly loose on her. Forgetting what he was going to say, he instead gestured to her clothes as he pulled the cotton pants up over his naked body, "Glad to see you've made yourself at home."

"Whatever, I'm not going back to my room." Rayla began pulling at the blankets on the bed, pulling them back and revealing the sheets beneath, "Now are you going to come cuddle me or just stand over there half dressed?"

Callum answered her question by walking over to Rayla, kissing her square on the lips, and getting into the bed where she had pulled back the covers. He tucked himself in, leaving Rayla outside the bed.

"Nuh-uh!" Rayla laughed, "Scoot over, ya selfish mage!"

Callum laughed, backing up and opened the blankets and his arms for her, letting her crawl into the space she fit perfectly into, "I love you, Rayla."

Rayla smiled in his arms, in the firelight. She answered smugly, "I know."

Chapter End Notes
Racism, Love, Sex: what more could you want?
The sun was coming up, just beginning to bathe the land about the castle of Katolis with its hues, the surrounding city already awakening and beginning its bustle. Though she couldn't hear the hustle and cacophony of daily life, the castle felt abnormally still by comparison. Down there the people milled about doing their daily tasks as though this day were as inconsequential as any other. The momentousness of the coming conflict unnoticed compared to the imperative monotony of daily life, of the daily struggle.

Amaya sighed.

She hadn't slept at all last night. Likely not the only one who went to bed too late and awoke too early. She squelched the fleeting pity for Ezran. The boy was hard, harder than he had a right to be at his age, and she wasn't about to forget that he was King even if he was far too young to shoulder that mantle. Pity would belittle all that he accomplished. His age should only enhance respect, not endow pity that would undercut his success.

Amaya ran a hand over her belly, and thanked whatever cosmic force turned the cog wheels of the world that her child would not be subject to that. No crown would adorn their head, no assassin would come calling to end their life at the ripe young age of thirteen. The thought caused her a few pangs of guilt, but at the same time she was grateful for the cause of guilt, thankful for the child yet to be named, thankful for Ezran.

Gren's child. A part of her, so intricately a piece of her and yet it was destined to be somebody as unique as her, as Ezran, as Callum. She recalled when Tomaz had told her that she was with child. Joy, trepidation, fear, love, all of the emotions she didn't know that she was capable of mustering after a lifetime made up of conflict and battles. Amaya had thought she was no longer capable of fear. That there was no place for hope. That looking forward only meant disappointment and loss. Just living in the now because one never knew what tomorrow would bring. You could lose a sister, she herself had lost two.

Amaya pondered her child, she hoped that this child had Gren's hair, and her skin. Her battle prowess and Gren's resilience. Her strength, his intelligence. There was so much that she hoped for, but this was coupled with fear.

Amaya had often mocked Sarai when her sister had been pregnant, how she had always said that she 'just wanted it to be healthy'. But now? Amaya understood the reality of those words. If the child was dumb, or slow, fat or lazy, she knew she would love it with all of her heart. There would
be some disappointment, sure, but that didn't take away an ounce of love. In the end though, what she wished for apart from health, was that this child might know a life without war, a life without battle and pain. That it would never lose a loved one due to the arrogance or complacency of those that ruled foreign lands.

Ezran would be a good king.

No, Ezran was already a good king, and had the potential to be a great king.

It pained her that she couldn't help protect him, couldn't help keep him out of trouble. There was bound to be some trouble. She could feel it like an icy shadow over her heart. Could you have maternal instincts for a child that wasn't your own?

She frowned, focusing on her reflection.

Where was her Gren?

She had sent him to find them what felt like hours ago, though she knew it had only been minutes. She wanted to pace but her pelvis hurt too much, this waddling gait causing her bones to shift and ache. Tomaz had said that it was part of her body getting ready for birth, which was still a month or so away he had estimated. In the meantime she had to deal with swollen and aching feet, a pelvis that liked to grind when she walked, unbearable back pain, and the inability to lie on her back or walk more than ten paces without getting short of breath.

Not to mention she was hornier than a soldier on his first leave in over a year.

Despite the pain in her feet and hips, she paced, waddling back and forth in her shared quarters with her Gren.

That was how Soren and Gren found her, angrily waddling in a line before her picture window, glaring a hole in the carpet beneath her swollen feet.

"I found one of them," Her Gren spoke as he signed, "Honorarium of the Royal Guard, Soren."
Amaya's finger's flashed, 'I know who he is.' She wished there was a way to make her words more biting with sign language. It was probably better for their relationship that there wasn't.

"Soren, I will leave you with the General, take care not to anger her, her blood pressure is concerning to Tomaz." Her Gren didn't sign this, but spoke it out of the side of his mouth to Soren, thinking she couldn't see.

Her Gren had a habit of taking her health as a priority over everything else. It was an annoying habit that she hadn't found a way to berate out of him. Since becoming pregnant she hadn't been able to have any Hot Brown Morning Potion, she had been restricted to berry teas. No ale or wine was bad enough, but none of that bitter brown liquid made her even more cranky.

Not to mention that her Gren was too gentle with her now. It made her so angry she wanted to pin him to the bed and never let him leave, but he probably wouldn't find her attractive like this. Some massive whale coming after you would not be a turn on to her, how could she expe-

Dammit.

Amaya swore up and down that pregnancy brain was a thing.

She focused again on Soren as her Gren turned to leave, she watched the way his shapely ass sauntered when he walked. She made a note to be sure to get in a good pinch later.

Soren bowed and began signing with her. It had been a pleasant surprise when he returned that he had become relatively adept at signing, or had it been before he left? Amaya was not sure, and in the end it didn't matter.

'Good morning, General.'

'Is it?' She asked pointedly.

Soren hesitated, looking to the side, 'Pardon?'

Amaya pinched her nose, 'Nevermind, sorry, I find I am not quite myself these days.'
Soren chuckled nervously, a sound that didn't reach her ears. Or maybe it did and she just couldn't hear it. Tomaz said that it had something to do with an illness she had as a child, some sickness she couldn't even remember. Soren's fingers moved clumsily, 'You wished to see me, General?'

'Yes.' Amaya nodded and went to one of the tables that adorned her quarters. On it, splayed out and polished, was the armor she no longer wore. She had the strength, the desire, but not the physique, instead she was now relegated to flowing gowns that hung off her bulging body like a potato sack. She went to the far end of the table and lifted her shield. A towering slab of steel that had been with her through many confrontations. The shield had saved her life more than once and she intended that it save more lives.

Amaya hoisted the steel, it weighed heavily on her arm, comfortably on her. Tomaz said she was not to strain herself, not to lift anything too heavy, but this was the shield she had carted with her across the continent more than once. It's burden was minimal.

Amaya returned to Soren, holding the shield out to him.

Soren took it, confusion on his face. Setting it reverently to the side, he signed, 'I don't understand? You want me to polish your shield?'

Ever the dimwitted fool, but loyal to a fault, 'No,' Amaya answered, 'I want you to wear it. To use it.'

This seemed to confuse Soren more who merely looked between her and the shield.

'I cannot be there,' Amaya gestured to her abdomen, 'My condition prevents it. But I will be damned before I let my nephews face this foe alone. If I cannot help them myself, I will make sure those that are helping them are suitably armed.'

Soren realized the weight of the words, realized the request that Amaya was making.

'I cannot protect the king the way I am, I am a liability.' Amaya sighed, continuing, 'Be the shield that guards the king, be the blade that cuts his enemies down.'
'Ezran and Callum don’t want us to kill.’ Soren offered. It wasn’t an endorsement of the idea or an objection. Merely a statement.

'If it’s a choice between you and my nephews coming out alive, or some elf, I would choose you three every time. I only ask that you do the same.’ General Amaya ordered.

Soren lifted the shield with his off hand and tested the weight of it, lifting the shield above him, before him, gesturing and getting a feel for the weight of it, the protection it offered. Amaya was impressed to see that it didn’t even seem to strain him to hoist the tower shield above his head.

Soren belted it across his gauntlet, tightening the straps. When his hands were free, he signed, 'Understood, General Amaya.'

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Callum rifled through the chests, he knew they had to be here somewhere. In his personal closet, or rather, what had been a closet that he had turned into a lab of sorts. He had packed the large storage room wall to wall with tables and there were sketches of runes and symbols pasted all over the walls. A troubling look into the disorganization of his mind and the dizzying amounts of knowledge he had managed to accrue in the short number of years since his first encounter with Gale.

Callum would have sworn that they had been in this chest. He ran a hand through his hair.

They had been in this chest, but then he switched out the contents when he was experimenting with the Sea Primal and needed to fill a reasonably sized chest with salt water. That was right he had moved them to...

Callum looked around the room.

There!

Callum half stood and scrambled across the floor sliding on his knees to the other chest, fishing the appropriate key off one of the tables as he passed it. He pushed the key into the lock and turned, he could feel the brush of metal on metal as the lock disengaged. He cracked open the lid and peered inside.
"Callum?" Rayla's voice came from the next room.

Callum let the chest close and picked up the wooden container, groaning under the weight of it as his arms strained. He left the closet hurrying as his arms and hands protested. Pressing his lips together to stifle a groan he ambled across the room towards his elf.

"Now there'z a pritty face." Rayla barked a laugh as he approached her in the main area of his room.

She lay in the bed swathed in blankets, her hair a disarray, falling at odd angles, the braid having been pulled out in frustration in the middle of the night.

Callum struggled to carry the chest over to the bed and set it down atop the mass of blankets.

"What’ve you got there, Callum?" Rayla yawned.

"Presents." Callum nodded happily breathing normally again.

"Presents?" Rayla inquired, "What do I get a present for having sex with you?"

Callum looked at her through squinting eyes. "No…?"

Her voice was disappointed, "Oh," Rayla sighed, stretching her arms out above her that lifted the hem of her cotton shirt just enough to tease the kissable skin beneath, "Because I could get used to that."

"Uh-huh." Callum nodded, still amazed at how flippant she could be about the two of them. An elf and a human. In the Castle of Katolis. The strongest military entity in the Pentarchy, the biggest thorn in Xadia's side, and they had…
Callum cut off his own thoughts as tumescence began to take hold, lest he get pulled back into that sweet ecstasy again. As much as he wanted to, today he needed to be focused, "Joking aside, I have a present for you. Though, I don't know how you will feel about it."

Rayla only could offer him a confused expression from her refuge of blankets and inched closer across the sheets. He opened the chest and she looked on with confusion that gave way to wonder.

"I…" Rayla worked her mouth, trying to start several times, but literally unable to find the words. Tears welled in her eyes, "How?"

"When he was taken prisoner, his belongings were confiscated." Callum watched as Rayla lifted the Moonshadow vestments out of the chest, the leather and Moonweave pauldron, followed finally be the twin blades that Runaan had carried with him, "It took me a year or so to find them amongst Viren's things, but I recognized them and knew their owner from the night we left Katolis."

Rayla held the blades in her ever gloved hands, feeling the weight of them from the hilt. She stared at them in disbelief, not speaking.

Callum watched her face, it was a mixture of pain and happiness very unlike the night before. He could see tears in her eyes, "Rayla, I'm sorry, I thought this would be good. Thought that you would want these things. As much as you talked about Runaan when we traveled together before…” Callum trailed off. He decided it was time to just stop talking and reached out to Rayla, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Rayla met his eyes with her glistening violet eyes, a fat tear began to slowly roll down one cheek, tracing the outline of her facial tattoo perfectly before falling to splash onto her cotton pants. She wiped at her cheek with the flat of her hands, not dropping the blade, "Nae, it's good, it's just...."

Callum waited

Rayla took a quivering breath, "I's jus' tha' we di'n't really part on good terms, righ'? I ever tell ya that?" Her eyes were staring at the blades and distant at the same time.

Callum continued to rub her shoulder, "I was there, Rayla." he reminded her gently. He didn't know then all the subtext of their conversation, but he knew now. He could comfort her now.
"Aye," She sniffed, a gross and phlegmy rattle, "but before that, we argued, he made me feel worthless, like I had killed them all." She paused, another shaking breath, "And really, I did."

"No Rayla, don't say that." Callum felt pained with her, "I-I don't believe that."

"It's true, ain't it?" She mumbled, looking up and letting more tears fall down her face, "They're all dead." She took another breath and her brow lowered, angry, "I thought I was over this, but I'm not. I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Her chest was quivered with sobs.

Callum laughed and sat down next to Rayla, wrapping an arm around her as she shook, "Has anyone ever told you about the ball and the box?" He tried to soothe her.

Ratios looked at him, confused, laughing nervously, "If that's anything like the bees and the birds talk I think we may be past that, and I'm not sure now the best time, Callum." She laughed wiping away more tears. He had gotten her to smile at least, if unintentionally.

"I'm not joking," Callum defended, he kissed her temple, "It's good I promise."

"Okay," Rayla settled a bit, resting her weight against him, "Tell me about the ball and the box."

Callum sighed, rubbing her back, "So imagine a box, and in it there's a ball, always bouncing around, hitting all the walls." He attempted to paint a picture with his words and gestures, "Now on those walls there's a spot. Every time the ball hits that spot, we feel it all over again. It's as if in that moment it's the first time it happened.

"Now the trick is that over time that spot gets smaller and smaller, right?" Callum continued, "You'll go longer and longer without the ball hitting that spot, but that doesn't mean on some idle summer day or while you're sitting alone in the bathtub that you won't be blindsided by the sudden overwhelming realization that they're gone, really and truly. Over time that spot gets smaller and smaller and you will become overwhelmed less and you will adapt, being able to come out of it faster, but in that one instant, the pain will always be as raw and terrible as it was the moment it happened."

"That's a little sad," Rayla said, her tears were drying and her face was ponderous.

"I think it's beautiful." Callum countered, "An homage to those we've lost or the mistakes we've
made." Callum wrapped an arm around her shoulders, squeezing her close, "Like those that are important to us have some indelible influence over us that we can never truly have back, like a piece of them was torn from us, but it's imprint permanently interwoven into who we are."

"It's a lot of sad, but also beautiful." Rayla nodded, "Something I don't think I would have understood when I was younger, but I kind of get now." Rayla smiled, sniffling her final tears away and leaned on his shoulder, "How did you come up with that?"

"Well..." Callum trailed off hesitantly, "After my mother died, it was just Ezran and I and Harrow. I didn't have a parent left, but Ezran did. I had run away from Harrow and hid in the castle. They searched for me for hours. Late in the night I got hungry and made my way to the kitchens to sneak food away and go back to being alone. Except there was somebody waiting for me."

Rayla nodded knowingly, "King Harrow."

Callum laughed, it was brisk and sad, "No, he was trying to calm Ezran down still, though he was worried about me, I know now. No, it was Viren. Viren was up in the kitchen waiting for me. While other's searched he knew that I would eventually be hungry and find my way to the kitchen. He gave me a sweet and actually made me something hot to eat. It's weird that I remember that it was pancakes and eggs. It seemed so odd for him to know how to make pancakes and eggs. I remember their taste and the jam he gave me to spread over it. This memory, for some reason is just so incredibly vivid compared to others from my childhood. It was as I stuffed my face, too hungry to fight or grieve appropriately, that he told me about the ball and the box."

"That's weird to think about." Rayla grimaced.

"Yea," Callum nodded, "Knowing what we know now, it is. At the same time, it just goes to show that nobody sets out to be a monster, nobody sets out to become corrupt. It happens as you fight for your ideals and are forced to make more and more questionable choices. Sometimes, somehow, your morals can be corrupted along the way. Monsters are not always monsters, sometimes they help people. Sometimes they make little boys pancakes and comfort them."

Callum felt Rayla's hand pull at his chin, "Kiss me." Her voice was commanding, yet soft.

Callum obliged, turning to kiss her sweet soft lips.

Rayla pressed her forehead to his and spoke, not opening her eyes, just nuzzling into him, "Runaan
and I had our issues at the end, but he raised me, more so than even my parents. I would like to think that we would have worked things out if times were less tense."

"I hope you are right," Callum stroked the base of her neck, "Something tells me he wouldn't approve of this though." He gestured between them and kissed her again

Rayla chuckled sadly and snuggled in closer, holding Runaan's swords in her lap and trying to be in contact with Callum as much as possible.

The elf and human sat like this for a while, not speaking, but just thinking about those that they had lost. Callum reminiscing about his father, his mother, and King Harrow, Rayla and her band of assassins that had been so integral in forming who she was, different ideas and ideals that filled her head for her to follow or rail against.

Unfortunately, their reveries were interrupted with a knock on the door.

The morning was still young, the barest light from the new sun reaching Callum's windows.

Callum looked at Rayla hesitantly and she had the light of panic in her eyes.

Rayla whispered, "Should I hide? What should I do? Where should I go? Should I change?" She pulled at the cotton threads of the pajamas that she wore, obviously a cut meant for Callum and some of the most damning evidence she could be adorned in.

Callum gestured for her to go into the bathroom and she scurried across the blankets. Callum winced as she stubbed one of her toes on the night stand in her hurry. The impact loud, but her anguish stifled as she limped into the bathroom, closing the door softly behind her.

The knock came again.

"Just a minute!" Callum called, he righted his own pajamas and went to the door.

When he opened the door he found somebody he did not recognize.
Before him, sitting in a chair was an old woman. The chair had wooden wheels like a wagon and then two smaller wheels in front. Her hair was long and grey falling over a black long sleeved robe adorned with black feathers at the shoulders and gold edging along the folds of cloth. The outfit looking vaguely familiar.

A voice that was soft and raspy asked, "May I come in?" It sounded faintly familiar as well.

"Wh-who are you?" Callum asked.

The woman looked up at him, and Callum was surprised to find that her face was not old or wrinkled, but youthful despite what looked to be crows feet at the corner of her eyes. She smiled softly and the fullness of her cheeks belied her actual age.

"Claudia?" Callum was astounded, what had happened to her?

She nodded, smiling at his surprise, "I know I've changed a little bit over the years, but so have you." When Callum just stood there, she asked, "So, can I come in?"

"O-of course, of course." Callum backed into the room opening the door for Claudia.

Claudia spun the wheels of her chair with her hands and entered the room without difficulty, navigating over to the hearth that Callum had yet to stoke, though warm red coals still gave off their heat.

Callum followed, not knowing quite what to say. Claudia didn't seem to be offering anything up either, just waiting for him to talk as she warmed her hands by the hearth.

Callum cleared his throat, prompting her to look at him out of the corner of her dark green eyes, "Claudia I want to talk to you about something,"

Claudia leaned on one leg that didn't seem to want to move, "Is it how you completely stonewalled Soren and I after returning from Xadia, banished us from the court without trial and actively did all you could to condemn Dark Magic in Katolis, my home?"
Callum's face fell, he looked down and fidgeted with the hem of his pale blue cotton bed shirt, "Yes."

Claudia looked startled, and then laughed, "Oh, oh, Callum, I was just messing with you." her laughter, while sweet and innocent, but halted abruptly almost as if it had been forced, and she returned to staring at the coals.

Callum fidgeted uncomfortable, "Why are you here, anyways?" Callum asked, remembering Rayla hiding in the wash room.

"I'm just looking for some of dads things." Her voice was hollow, thoughtful, distant, "There was a...dinglehopper or doodad of sorts. Something that I could use tonight. It wasn't in any of his hiding spots so I wondered if you might have it."

"There's no artifacts or symbols here, I gave them to you when you all left, anything that was left behind was destroyed. Though I did hang onto the elven weapons and armor." Callum said simply.

"When we left? Just say it Callum," Claudia seemed frustrated, but he couldn't tell this strange mixture of fluctuating non-emotion, "When we were banished."

"Yes." Callum nodded.

"And you pushed for it to happen," she turned her chair to face him, her dark green eyes almost black.

"Yes." Callum affirmed.

"And we deserved it."

"Yes," Callum nodded, then paused, "...no ... I mean....I don't know Claudia."

"It's okay, Callum." Claudia chuckled oddly, "Enough has happened that I understand."
Callum looked the grey haired young woman up and down, "What has happened to you, by the way."

"Oh? My hair?" Claudia laughed, then lifted one limp leg with two hands, "My legs? Well you always did warn that Dark Magic had a price. I've been paying it hand over fist, apparently."

Callum sat in the chair next to Claudia, "How, how have you used it so much?" Callum was flabbergasted at the toll the use had taken on Claudia, her skin looked both youthful and frail, her eyes dark, yet milky at the same time.

Claudia shrugged and smiled, stating simply, "Soren."

Callum took this in, mulled it over. Soren had so many stories, so many tales of battles and interactions, but never spoke of himself being injured or hurt for very long. Now, looking at Claudia, he understood why.

"How long can you keep this up?" Callum asked, worried for his old friend.

Again, Claudia was flippant despite the severity, "As long as I have to, Callum. I'm not going to let Sor-Bear be hurting for very long."

"I have to say, I am a little relieved." Callum rubbed his legs, speaking without really thinking, "I was worried that you were going to be fighting along side us tonight, but now I won't have to worry about Dark Magic being used."

Claudia laughed, "Of course I am going to fight with you. You still very much need to worry about Dark Magic." At Callum's confused glance, Claudia shrugged, "You'll just have to wait and see, High Mage. But I came here for a reason, and none of this conversation, fun though it is, has been why."

"Then what, Claudia?" Callum asked exasperated.

"I came to bring Rayla her clothes." Claudia said simply.
There was a sudden crash and muffled cursing from the bathroom.

Callum with wide and nervous eyes spoke, "I don't have any idea what you mean."

Claudia pressed her lips together, "Hmmm, and that's your purple dress on the floor? I was always into men who liked to experiment, but I never took you for a drag-step-princess." She chided

"I-uh-" Callum was trying to keep up with what she was saying, not panicking over having been found with an elftress in his bedroom, but couldn't muster a response.

The door to the bathroom swung open and Rayla stomped out, the farce exposed, "Ya coulda least told me from tha," Part way through her exclamation her words faltered, catching sight of Claudia, but then picked back up with the same ferocity, undeterred by her surprise, 'beginnin' so I dinnae havta bend over with my ear press'd ta the fuckin' door."

Claudia startled in mock surprise, "Oh my goodness, Rayla! So good to see you again after all these years! My, where has the time gone." She spun her chair to face Rayla, "But, that being said, I come bearing gifts," Claudia lifted a bundle that Callum hadn't noted draped across the back of her wooden chair, "I ran into the good Commander Gren outside the Gratlian Quarters this morning on my way scrounge up some butterflies for my daily face lift and he was perturbed to find your quarters empty. That being said I told the adorable little Commander that I had seen you out in the courtyard, practicing in the early morning. Told him that 'the poor thing, must not be able to sleep with everything that is going on',' Claudia faked vapidity surprisingly well, "And I told him to go find you there, clear on the other side of the castle. Then, knowing that Callum had been enamored with your 'womanly wiles', put two and two together. After all, who knows who may die today? You wouldn't be the first two young lovers to find their way to each other's arms the night before some momentous battle." Claudia sighed, a smile on her lips, and hand clutched over her heart, "Oh to be young and in love."

Rayla had walked up to Claudia as she spoke. The human woman offering up the bundle of clothes, "I find you, put simply, disturbin'."

Claudia picked at her nails, and in a breathy voice sighed, "I get that."

Wrapping his head around the interaction, "Why does Gren want Rayla?"
"Apparently Auntie General wants a word, or a hand." Claudia took the chance to look confused, "How would you say that Callum?"

Another knock came on the door.

Callum shook his head exasperatedly, "Is the entire castle going to find their way to my chambers this morning?" He and Rayla shared a glance and she retreated back to her hiding place of the washroom, taking the clothes with her.

Claudia followed Callum to the door.

When Callum swung open the wooden doors this time, Corvus stood waiting for him.

"Good morning, High mage." Corvus greeted him warmly.

"Good morning, Corvus," Callum smiled broadly, masking his nervousness, "What can I do for you."

"I'm here for Rayla," Corvus smiled.

"Fuck!" Callum exclaimed, turning away from the door, "Are you kidding me!"

Corvus eyed Callum nervously, "Gren is looking for her and is on the complete other side of the castle of where I thought she might be, so I was going to surreptitiously help him out."

"I'm comin'," Rayla grumbled from behind Callum as she came out of the bathroom, righting her gloves over the sleeves of her white blouse, the deep navy sleeveless shawl billowing out behind her. As she passed by the bed she grabbed the quiver filled with Moonweave arrows and combined Runann's swords so that it formed his bow. Slinging the bow across her shoulder's the way her mentor had she passed by Callum, whispering to herself, "And I thought I was sneaky."

As Rayla left, Callum met Corvus eye, "Don't worry, High Mage," the man winked at Callum, "Your secret is safe with me."
Callum groaned running a hand over his face.

"Though," Corvus now whispered in his ear, placing an arm across Callum's shoulder, "An elf woman and a human woman? If I knew magic could bring such bounty I may have attempted its study!"

Callum stammered, "N-no-no, it's not like that." He waved his hands in front of him defensively.

Claudia wheeled her chair by and spoke in breathy tones, "High Mage, I have to say, the tutelage you were able to provide last night was absolutely… magical." The implicated lewdness of her words and impish grin painted a picture well enough.

"You're all insane." Callum said flatly, "The world had descended into madness, or I finally have. You're all crazy."

Rayla was waiting patiently in the hall for Corvus and seemed to be more focused on her own personal panic than by the exchange. She didn't comment, just waited impatiently tapping her foot.

"Well," Callum said looking at the three gathered outside his room, "I suppose I'll get dressed."

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Rayla stood there silently, not quite sure what to say. General Amaya stood looking at her from across the room, adorned in simple and functional attire the draped off her pregnant body so that she looked like a curtain. The bodice of the dress she wore hugged her breasts in what appeared uncomfortable to Rayla. And that was just based upon how the skin seemed to press past the cut of the fabric.

No wonder the general looked like she had been chewing on nails that morning.

Commander Gren stood between the two of them in full armor, smiling happily.
No need to be nervous, he had said, General Amaya wasn't scary he said. What did he know.

Rayla spoke up, finally breaking the silence that had come after her introduction, "Good morning, General Amaya, you wanted to see me?" She cursed herself that her voice was so timid. Was Amaya like Claudia and Corvus? Did she know where Rayla had spent the night? Did Amaya know and that was why her face was so dark?

Beside her, Gren's fingers flashed, interpreting, though it seemed Amaya did not even look at him. When Gren stopped, her own fingers flashed in gestures and swirls and Gren spoke for her, "You look better suited for a fight this morning than you did last night. That is the elf Runaan's blades?"

Rayla pulled at the cord of the bow, "Yes. He was a mentor, sort of like a second father."

More gestures, she hated how Gren's voice seemed to bring with it a tone of joy when the features of this stone hard woman were glaringly irate, "You and Callum have that in common: A difficult inheritance from a second father."

Rayla had never thought of it that way. In the same night she and Callum had both lost influential people in their lives, and they had mourned separately, alone. She regretted that and would have to make it up to him. She thought of several ways as last night flashed through her mind again. Rayla had to fight hard to keep the flush from her cheeks, "That is true."

The silence stretched on.

Rayla fidgeted uncomfortably with her shawl, and then her knife sheath's strap on her thigh.

"I have something for you." Gren spoke up, Rayla hadn't been watching for Amaya's finger's flashing.

Amaya turned from her and went not to a table where all number of armaments and armors lay splayed out, but instead to a chest. The chest was done up ornamentally with red and gold. Etched in gold ornamentation was the figure of a dancing woman.

Rayla walked up closer, and she could see that on the woman's head she wore a crown, the crown of the Queen of Katolis. Rayla realized that this was not just any chest, the dancing woman wasn't dancing, but was frozen in poses of combat, fluid movements that belied the way that Queen Sarai
Amaya undid two clasps and lifted the chest's top. Inside on red velvet, polished and clean was the armor of Queen Sarai, arranged to be a beautiful display that unfolded as the chest was opened. Amaya paused looking at the armor of her departed sister.

Rayla could see the tears in those dark eyes, though they never fell.

Amaya's hand's moved silently, and Gren seemed to have a second sense, interpreting what she was saying from behind them, "My sister was in every way a fierce woman. She fought elves, she fought humans, but she always wanted there to be a peaceful way. She knew that war was necessary. That violence was necessary, but she only ever used it as a last resort. For that, I am most proud of her. She was able to find happiness while I struggled to impale foes with my anger. Now, in her absence, I have found joy."

Rayla remained silent, listening whole heartedly.

Amaya took a deep breath and continued with Gren's voice, "I am absolutely…" Gren paused, waiting for Amaya to sign, "Devastated that I cannot be there to protect her boys. I was there when they were born you know, I helped raise them."

Rayla reached out, placing a four fingered glove on Amaya's shoulder, "I know that Callum loves you, he thinks of you as a second mother." Rayla knew this to be true, though Callum had never said as much. The way he spoke of her with respect and love.

Amaya's hand drifted up to Rayla's, hesitated, and then embraced it causing Rayla to smile to herself.

A small acceptance, a small victory.

Gren continued for Amaya, "I have been the shield protecting Katolis from the Xadian threat, protecting her son's from danger. Now, I cannot fight, I cannot defend." Amaya knelt beside the chest and pulled out the gauntlets that Sarai had worn. She turned and handed them to the young elftress, flashing when Rayla took them, "Will you stand in my stead? Will you protect them with all the heart and all the ferocity that Sarai would? That I would?"
Rayla took the gauntlets in her hands, steel forearm guards with a steel plate attached by straps woven through the ring, the plate made of two opposing triangles forming a guard, outlined in gold.

"Will you protect my Ezran, and my Callum? Will you protect them that my child may know her cousins? That I can watch them continue to grow and meet their children?" Gren's voice begged Rayla for Amaya, the emotion that this couple shared raw and real, laid bare before a former foe.

Rayla didn't hesitate in strapping the gauntlet on over her sleeves and gloves, tightening the belt until she could feel that they were secure. The steel was much heavier than Moonweave, but felt right somehow, like their weight was an appropriate reminder for what she was taking on. Embracing the request, Rayla offered a cocky smile, "Oh, I'll protect tha wee king and tha loud mage. I'll protect Gren too, just for good measure." She tested the weight, standing and giving a few thrusting punches to the side, "These comin' assassins may share my heritage, but that is where the common ground ends. They are coming for my Ezran and my Callum, and I won't let that happen."

Amaya stood, taking the hand that Rayla offered to assist her standing. Amaya beamed at the elftress, "You are fierce, you remind me of her." She embraced the elf in a side hug, avoiding the young elftress with her protuberant belly, "I think she would approve of you and what you are trying to do. Sarai would have helped make this peace happen."

Rayla stood there, abashed, "That means a lot to me, thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, I must make my way to the city for my own safety and the safety of our child." Amaya went to a table and began to gather things, Gren with her, taking the things she lifted off the table and carrying them himself.

Rayla watched until she had Gren's attention and then asked them both, "Have you thought about names yet?"

Gren signed with Amaya, who nodded, now speaking as himself, "Well, if it is a boy, we were going to name him after my brother, Brodde, but if it's a girl, we were going to name it after Amaya's sister."

"Sarai?" Rayla asked, relaxing her pose as they talked.
Gren smiled, shaking his head, "No, there was another sister, one that died when they were young. Elessia was her name. Sarai and Amaya called her Little Lessa."

"That's a beautiful name." Rayla smiled with Gren as Amaya continued to pack.

Chapter End Notes

This is the first time I have included multiple perspectives in one chapter, but it made thematic sense to me to wrap these three scenes together given the motif of what they entail.

Anyways, looks like Rayla is suiting up for battle...
The sun was high and the afternoon hot for an autumn day, though the leaves of the forest surrounding Katolis were beginning to turn. The glowing sun above had traversed the sky in relative relaxation and the people below in the city of Katolis, defended by the ever watchful two towers and it's high walls, went about their life. Children ran through streets and alleys, dodging the supervision of their parents. Playing, laughing, screaming: they went about their life as though nothing was amiss. And for them, it wasn't. Merchants watched the darting children warily as they raced by, sure to block them from knocking over stands and displays.

Despite the events of the day prior, a dragon flying into the city, the knowledge that at least two elves resided in the castle, the city had hardly stopped to notice. At least in function. The tales and stories of the event were on every lip as people had gone about their daily chores. Wash women would bicker and laugh, merchants would somberly discuss, just as they would any other rumor. Some even people claimed to have seen the dragon, to have spoken with the elves, to have seen the High Mage himself. More people than could have possibly fit into that courtyard. It was certain there was at least one claiming that they had personally greeted the High Mage on his arrival. They told tales of the majesty of the dragon over flagons of wine or ale, it's beauty, it's ferocity. To hear it told in the alleys and taverns it had been a spectacular arrival of lightning and fire that dwarfed the sun.

It had been nothing so fantastic, and overtime the rumor would build and swell until there was really very little of reality to it.

Idle tongues were apt to waggle.

Claudia opened her eyes. Her true eyes. The black smoke that covered them drifted away on some ethereal wind. She had left tokens of power for this spell around Katolis, up and down the catacombs, in various areas of the keep itself. Cow eyes were so helpful. So versatile, much like cows themselves.

Claudia resolved to find herself some ice cream the first chance she got.

On the floor of the amphitheater, below the catacombs. The dust of the stone stage clung to the folds of her dress, but she didn't pay that any mind. Dust was a constant companion this deep into any mausoleum. In a circle about her were the gruesome artifacts of her craft. Claudia had prepared her tokens and articles for the tasks at hand. Some things planned, others at hand for improvisation. Bones of creatures that she had collected, here a tooth, there a rib, a pelvis, a skull. Meat and
organs and flowers, jars of insects and giant feathers. There seemed to be no organization to the arrangement, but to her they each sat in their appropriate place, just within arms reach and arranged for the type of spell she could use them to bargain for.

Callum was right, there was always a price, but you could bargain a little. The black flecks that never seemed to leave her peripheral vision shifted as she looked at the items around her. You could use a cow's eye for a short time, maybe three or four hours, but a dragons eye could give you a whole week. It all related to the inherent magic that ran through the creature and what extra the mage might have to pay. The idea was to give more than you took, so a debt was not accrued.

Claudia tried not to think about what that debt had to be paid to, but there was a reason it had earned the name 'dark magic'.

Claudia looked to Ezran where he stood, informing him, "The moon has yet to rise."

The young king stood with Bait at his feet in remarkably common clothes. Simple boots of leather and rugged roughhewn canvas pants. His shirt was too large and draped down over his waist and came to his neck in a high collar. He didn't wear his crown, but did wear the golden caps at the ends of his tight braids seeming oddly out of place with the rest of his attire. Over his sternum and tan cotton shirt he did wear a leather cuirass with pauldron. His long sleeves were covered by leather bracers that lacked ornamentation. On his back he wore a steel short sword and dagger on his thigh.

Ezran didn't answer, lost in his own thoughts.

The Dark Mage looked at her king from where she reclining where she sat, "Do you even know how to use those blades?" her question was prodding and petulant, a tone of mockery carried in the suggestion like she was talking down to him.

Ezran didn't bother looking at Claudia, but pulled the dagger from it's sheath and spun the blade about his hand in a flourish. It wasn't fancy, but it was something.

Rayla whistled, "Well now, the li'l pacifist king has a sharp tooth, does he?" Her voice was jovial, but Claudia could tell that the she-elf was doing a poor job covering her trembling nerves.

"Even little dogs can have a fearsome bite." Ezran boasted, sliding the dagger back into the sheath, missing it entirely to have it scatter across the floor, "Oh, shit!"
Rayla and Claudia snorted in unison.

"Well, let's just hope ya dinnae need ta use it." Rayla picked up the dagger from where it had scattered, flipped it in the air and caught it by the blade, presenting it hilt first to the king.

"Yes," Claudia agreed with Rayla, picking her nails on one hand with the other, "Let us hope that being down here is an unnecessary precaution."

Alayza's voice cut through, the first time she had spoken since coming through the catacombs, "We are about to face off against six Moonshadow elf assassins, the most feared assassins in Xadia and the Pentarchy, and what stands in their way? A dragon guard of considerable skill, a human officer, a royal guard, a ranger, and two human mages?"

"Don't, mother." Rayla groaned. Claudia was noting this was a common theme between Rayla and her mother.

"What makes you think we stand any sort of chance, when armies and kings have fallen before their blades in the past." Alayza asked, her tone shrill and biting. Claudia thought the stress of the situation was getting to the elven woman, while she herself didn't feel that same anxiety, at least not for the outcomes.

The idea of Soren getting hurt, that was another thing all together.

Ezran leveled a regal gaze at Alayza, the resident illusionist, "You left out that we have our own moonshadow assassin, an illusionist, a storm dragon, a Glowtoad, a Frobbit, and a king who really doesn't want to die."

"Yes," Alayza conceded, "A dragon that is not anywhere near us, and the others are in the catacombs waiting while we are here in the amphitheater."

"You are free to leave." Ezran said simply, turning his back on the illusionist.

That stopped Alayza's protests, she stammered and Claudia could see Rayla smirking as her own mother struggled with the young king. Alayza bowed her head, biting her tongue, "I would never,
"No." Ezran knelt and scratched Bait's chin, the Frobbit hopping over from Alayza's side to receive some of the same affection. "If I run, I leave you all to face the fate I sidestep. If I run, I don't know what will happen to my people. I will not let my fear be the root of Katolis' to fall after a millennia of standing tall."

"Are all humans so stubborn?" Alayza asked rubbing her temples.

"Yes." Claudia and Ezran said in unison, proudly.

Rayla chortled, holding her sides, "Oh, Luna, yes."

"That and in general men don't like to listen to common sense." Claudia added, the females in the gathering sharing a knowing glance between one another. Some measures of commiseration spanning multiple cultures, multiple racial divides. Claudia scoffed, rolling her eyes, "Men."

"I would argue." Ezran mused petting the Frobbitt, "But I feel like that would only prove you right."

Rayla bowed with an exaggerated flourish and in her human voice spoke, "A wise choice, my liege."

The stones of the walls shook, soft rumblings reaching deep into the catacombs and causing showers of dust to rain from the high arching ceiling above them. Ezran coughed as the dust filled the air and he waved a hand before his face, trying to dispel the assailing dust motes.

"What was that?" Alayza asked, no longer trusting the stone above their heads.

"The signal." Claudia looked around her, grabbing a pinch of ground up bee eyes, the second part needed for the spell that let her see, "Secalp tnahtid ot thgis ym ekat." She reached out with her words, reached out with what she could only describe as her soul and plunged I'ts hands into the inky black veil that surrounded everyone and everything, letting light burst through. Her vision darkened, and then lit in a flare of light, only to be darkened again.
Claudia was impressed to see the change that had taken over the sky, where it had been cloudless and bright just moments before, it now was roiling black with fat clouds. Flashing lights amidst the darkness revealed towering thunderheads pregnant with rain. As far as she could see in every direction the sky was dark. From her perspective atop the short tower of Katolis, she could see Zym, heir of the storm, roaring. Whether his calls were lost in the rumbling thunder or if they were the thunder she couldn't tell.

Just three years old and such power.

His wings spread wide above his head, his scales arced with electricity the same way the thunderheads above did, without the gleaming sun to give his silvery shimmering scales their light, he only reflected the black sky and their flashing lights, the mane and tufts of hair standing on end.

And then the deluge started.

Like a curtain of rain, obese quivering drops fell from the dark skies. First one pat, then another, then in rapid percussive succession the world was swallowed by shifting curtains of water.

Claudia spoke deep beneath the keep, "Zym kindled the storm, the moon must have risen."

"What else can you tell me, Claudia?" Ezran's voice carried to her ears, as though she was next to him, and despite where her vision told her she was, she knew that her body was still deep beneath the earth.

She looked around, taking in everything, flitting from one eye to another. All across the castle of Katolis she watched the rain, the deluge.

"Claudia?" Ezran pestered.

"I'm looking" Claudia sing-songed, then with a mocking pout,"Mr. big for his breeches needs to learn something patience!"

"Claudia, remember that I am your king." How did he sound so much like Harrow?
"And remember," She said in her best imitation of matronly, "that I covered for you that time you wet your pants when you were a kid."

"Now that's a story I want to hear more of," Rayla added, her voice another disembodied source far away, but still heard.

The sheer amount of rain was startling, the streets would flood, cellars would be soup. A problem for another day she supposed, everywhere the fine mist of the constantly splashing raindrops created a blanket of near opaque white.

Then, on the southern wall, overlooking the river and cliff that, unbeknownst to Claudia, Rayla has scaled in an effort to join her kin in an unjust assassination so many years ago, something changed, shifting.

Flit.

The transparent silhouette of a hand broke the form of the pouring rain, deforming the curtain and coursing over, making it's features clear. Following the arm, the rest of an elven body rose, scaling, stepping silently over the ramparts. First one invisible spectre outlined by rain, followed by another, and then another.

Claudia gasped. If this wasn't such a dire task, the haunting beauty of the ghostly elves climbing over the ramparts would have made her quake in appreciation. So rather than gushing over the awesomeness of her enemies, she restrained herself. Claudia called out, "They're here, all six of them."

"I was still wishing they would decide not to come." Ezran muttered, the pain in his voice uncovered, "Well, the blood that is spilled today is on their hands as much as mine."

"None of that." Rayla chastised her friend, "Don't you go acceptin' blame for somethin' that had nothin' ta do with ya. This was their decision to not let the past go. They can pay the price for it."

Alayza muttered in the background, "We're all going to pay the price for it.

Claudia rolled her eyes, though she knew they couldn't see her doing it, "Give it up, Alayza. Oh, you don't want to be here, we're unprepared, we're all going to die. You're whining more than the
child that their here to assassinate! Now," She changed the subject and her tone, "I need the tongue, where's the Corlib tongue?"

Claudia held out here hands, opening and closing her hands waiting for somebody to give her what she asked for. She kept her focus locked onto the six. They had stolen into the grounds, sliding down walls and rooftops in an effort to navigate the rain and find cover outside of the storm.

She followed them, changing perspectives from different eye to different eye.

Flit.

Flit.

Flit.

"Ugh," Rayla gagged in the back of Claudia's consciousness somewhere.

Claudia heard Rayla's struggle not to wretch as she get close. Something slimy and wet squelched into her hand. She could feel the thick saliva that the tongue secreted oozing over the skin of her hand. Claudia felt along the sides of the thing, wet and squelching, no ruggae, "No, the other tongue, smaller, blacker. Valleys on the side of it."

"Gah, Claudia, how many tongues are there?"

"Here!" Ezran swapped out the large slimy piece with something a little firmer, a little less slimy, and all the magical potential she needed to cast.

"Perfect." Claudia stuck the black piece in her mouth and began to chew. It was earthy in flavor, like chewing a mouthful of mud, thick and tough in texture. She tried not to think of the creature the tongue came with little success. The slovering mouth and thick green sputum about the drooling tongue with thick black teeth and pincers flanking it's opening. Luckily she was distracted from the creatures disgusting orifice with the sound of Rayla actively heaving in the corner.

There was a wet slopping splash followed by a couple more dry heaves, "Oh gawd that's
"You vomiting or watching her eat something's tongue." Ezran asked, not perturbed by the scene in the slightest.

"Both." Rayla strained, "Let's go with both."

Swallowing, the meat of the tongue writhed down her throat and she felt its power fill her. When it stopped growing in potency, she spoke, altering reality to suit her whims, "Sreiht em gnirb eciov ym ekat. Sreiht em gnirb eciov ym ekat. Sreiht em gnirb eciov ym ekat." She chanted, once for each person she would carry her voice to. Any more and she would have to relinquish the spell that was offering her the skipping sight.

"Callum, Soren, Gren," Claudia became aware of several points of...something, and whispered their name into the void. The points were almost marble-like in nature, isolated floating glass separated by some indistinguishable space. This understanding was overlain and yet separate as though she could switch her focus between the view out the scattered cow eyes, or she could be aware of the floating orbs and the other would fade, waiting to be recalled. For each name she spoke, like a spark on a moonless night lighting a stream light trickled towards her. Flitting between eyes, she strained to maintain the two spells that felt more like four.

"What's up, Clauds?" Soren's voice was confident, a bravado she knew to only be partly true. She new that little quiver in his voice, same as it had been when he snuck into her bed during lightnight storms as a child. Same as it had been when he realized that she wouldn't walk again and promised to carry her everywhere. She knew he was scared, but Claudia also knew he would fight all the harder for it.

"Yes?" Callum inquired, a voice so different than the little princeling that had doted on her all across the castle grounds. That had idolized her. Even different from the mage that had banished her after her return. She wondered what had changed him this time. Was this confidence in his voice? Resolve? What was this strange mage thinking? Was it Rayla's influence on him? She pondered that, saddened over the loss of her fan club, but at the same time happy for them in a sadly wistful way. She would be okay, she had her Soren.

"This is weird." Gren whined.

She didn’t know Gren all that well.
Their voices shot through that dark and nebulous other space, flares of light dancing and weaving through to hear that sparked and lit their sound within her head. To those around her, Rayla, Alayza, and the young king, not to mention Bait and the strange Frobbit, Claudia knew they couldn't hear the voices of the others carried to her on strange currents. She was privileged in that way, to be the conduit. So it just looked like Crazy Claudia was talking to herself.

"They're here. I see them, all six." Claudia's the warm huskiness of her voice was carefree as she spoke.

"Are they not invisible yet." Callum asked, confused. His spark red and blue and white.

"No they are, that's the thing, they are still outlined by the rain, just like Alayza said." Claudia confirmed flitting back to the view of the castle walls, following the elves.

"You doubted me?" Alayza was feeling testy today, defensive.

"Oh! Never!" Rayla said sarcastically.

Gren's voice coming in a light of strawberry sparks, "Where are they now?"

"They are moving," Claudia licked her lips and searched through her eyes, "They are moving, cautiously, but-Oh, they're sprinting now!"

"Where Claudia?" Gren growled.

"Calm down, or I'll have General Amaya tighten that leash she keeps you on." Claudia bantered back, "They're on the south wall, moving towards the keep."

"Don't lose them." Callum commanded.

"Thanks for that, Callum, I was gonna go watch the storm." As sarcastically as I meant that, it is quite a downpour. A cup of tea and a nice peanut butter/Glowtoad sandwich with an ancient tome would be a nice way to spend the day. But there were more important things to be about.
"How long do we have" Callum ground his teeth in her ear.

"Minutes? Half hour? An hour? It depends on how they want to go about doing this." Claudia mused, dodging the answer further, not out of playfulness or disregard, but out of sheer inability to know.

So it proceeded, Claudia giving them updates to the location every step of the way, talking so much about their movements that her throat grew parched. She should have brought water down into the catacombs with her. She could summon some water, drawing the moisture from the air, but then that meant she would have to pee. She hated casting on a full bladder, that’s the last type of distraction she needed.

"They’ve reached the outer doors, without the rain, I don’t know how long I will be able to track them." Claudia again jumping between eyes followed them into the keep. She could see their soaked outlines shifting through the castle halls, runlets of water dripping off of them and six sets of damp footprints trekked across the carpet, an imprint in the carpet followed by a wet footprint of twelve different feet. In a flurry of movement the imprints flurried across the red rug, dashing from cover to cover.

Though they were fast, Claudia could read hesitation in their steps. There was confusion. Where were the guards? Why were the walls unmanned? Where was the serving staff? Claudia could just imagine the bafflement they were experiencing. Smiling to herself with satisfaction, this had been partly her concoction and conniving.

Following the ethereal pull if their bindings, the six invisible elves trekked through the silent shadowed halls of the empty castle, driving themselves deeper and deeper into the castle itself. Through the antechambers, the welcoming hall, the servants quarters and kitchens all the way to the cellar. And Claudia watched through dead eyes and otherworldly power. In the cellar it was the dust and stone that gave away their presence, no light here, but Claudia could make out the barest shifting of dust on the floor as their unwelcome guests penetrated deeper and deeper into the castle.

The six paused there, outside the opening, Claudia would have loved to be able to hear what they were saying to one another, if they were saying something at all.

Claudia hoped that trepidation marred their courage; hoped that confidence in their purpose faltered.
"They're right above you now." Claudia felt that sick twisting in her heart, rage bubbling forth to mix like oil and water with her rattling nerves. Soren was going into battle again, likely coming out with another scar, another wound. She wouldn't let him hurt again. Not after he was paralyzed, not after having to face that. Never again. No matter the cost.

Claudia took in a sharp breath, last time she had tried to do something 'no matter the cost' it had been a dear price to pay. While the power of Dark Magic could erode away at somebody over time, causing physical changes, if you didn’t have the intrinsic essence of a magical being to offset the cost, you'd be paying it yourself. It was the reason Claudia needed the wheelchair most days. Most days.

Not now, Claudia, focus on now, that will come later. She berated herself and refocused her vision flitting to where the five, four humans and one elf sat waiting in the dark. Even in the blackness the ring of the wooden slatted cover into the catacombs could be clearly seen outlined in light causing a single ring - like ray to illuminate a cone beneath it.

The cover shifted and Callum's voice came to her across the distance, "Now, Claudia."

"What's going on?" Rayla asked Claudia her tone low and pensive, the elf was doing very poorly at suppressing her concern.

"They're here," Claudia tried to reassure her…friend?, "But don't worry, we're ready."

"How's Callum?" Rayla was really quite obvious, even if she thought herself this grand and secretive assassin.

Claudia chuckled, "Relax, Rayla, your lover is just fine."

There was a long pause.

Alayza's voice cut through the silence, "Your what?! Rayla what have yo-"
Claudia growled, "Quiet! I need to focus." Shit, she said too much. Claudia scrambled to cover.

"Don't you dare tell m-" Alayza's voice rounded on Claudia.

Claudia released every spell she clutched, the black smoke drifting away in tendrils through her straight grey hair and glared with dark green eyes at Alayza. Her voice took on a dark growl, "I said quiet!" Completely unlike the normal goofy sing-song coupled with the natural warm huskiness that was her normal voice. Each time she did something this strenuous it became harder to clutche to who and what she used to be.

No matter the cost, Soren would be protected.

Claudia grabbed her father's staff from where it sat on the ground beside to her. As her fingers curled around it, she began to feel the energy flow into her body, invigorating long silent aspects of her body. Forcing the tip into the ground, she braced herself and strained to raise herself up, her legs gaining strength the longer she clutched the bone white staff. Some dark nexus of power leaked into her denervated and withered muscles giving them some semblance of vitality. Her legs that were so weak began to feel stronger, they twitched and quivered beneath her, the numbness in them dissipating in a series of electric shock-like pops than raced up and down, getting less and less every time one snapped off until they felt like they did years ago.

Claudia managed to get her feet beneath her, locking her knees, but standing again. With a sigh, she relaxed her hold on the staff and stood independently, noting that her hair had again run black, the tips dyed violet.

"You can stand?" Ezran looked at her his eyes squinting and mouth quirked in a thoughtful gaze., "Why the chair."

"There's a cost." Claudia coughed, wiping the scant blood on the handkerchief in her pocket. They didn't see the blood, Claudia reassured herself. The other's also wouldn't see the almost violet lines originating from the staff's amethyst gem and running on distinct channels through the white bone like material and into her hands. The training and black flecks that filled her peripheral vision allowed her to interpret the subtle distortions of light at the outlines of those channels, running through the staff, through her veins, "To use the staff requires a little piece of myself, a little sacrifice, but it gives so much more than it takes. For a time."

Claudia flicked her wrist and an orb of flame appeared there, she could feel herself begin to grow
slightly cold as the magic sapped her energy, her strength, her heat, but she held fast, fueled by the
invigorating possession of the staff. Smaller beads of flame bounced about her and lit several of the
grotesqueries about her. Scales of a sea dragon, peeled from its carcass washed ashore. Renowned
for their strength, their resilience, capable of withstanding the extreme pressures of the deep. The
hind leg of a chimera, lending their beast-like strength and agility.

The attributes conferred were only as good as the tokens used. She wished she could have found
something faster than a chimera, but when you were getting two attributes, it was hard to beat. The
chimera would have to do would have to do, "Nogarap rieht emoceb yam eh that os, tsol si tahw
dnif."

With her incantations the scales and fur burned black, sending their undulating tentacles of glowing
black into the air and drifting towards the amphitheater's entrance. Black streams of shadow and
strange light coiled and snaked as they moved forward, seeking out their target: Soren.

Rayla moved between Ezran and the opening, Alayza coming and standing next to her daughter.
She made sure Rayla saw the glare, ensuring the young elf woman knew that there was more to be
discussed when this ordeal was over. If this ordeal would be over. Still, Claudia caught the
maternal squeeze that she gave Rayla too. As complicated as the situation was, there was still a
mother's love behind all her actions.

Claudia envied that. She missed that.

Moving next to the assassin and the illusionist, blocking Ezran, she asked them, "Are you all going
to turn invisible?"

"We don't have Moonweave clothes," Rayla pulled at the fabrics she wore, "These may be elven
fashion and be well armored as any, but if I Faded, then I would still have these clothes floating
around to give me away."

"And I'm a Dragonguard Illusionist," Alayza said, "We don't receive the gift of Moonweave."

"So what can you do?" Claudia growled, squaring her shoulders as she felt the mantle of
responsibility fall onto her alone.

"Well," Alayza mused, "We're both stronger and faster than you by a long shot, a failing of your
human body, you couldn't help it. And that's only amplified under the sway of the full moon." The
elf woman added haughtily.
"It'll have to be good enough." Rayla said, reassuring Claudia, ignoring the holier-than-thou-bitchdom of her mother.

"It's okay, Claudia," Ezran added confidently, "They won't get this far."

Claudia didn't answer, not nearly as certain as her king was. She smiled weakly at him over her shoulder and waited, sending her gaze back to the catacombs where the others waited.

Chapter End Notes

I'm interested to know if you think I did well capturing an older Claudia's personality. Not as bubbly, she's seen some shit, had to do some shit.
Callum stood shifting his weight uncomfortably standing at the maw of the entryway into the catacombs. A stone stair case descended from the cellar of the castle of Katolis from already deep beneath the mesa on which it stood to even deeper where the kings and queens of times long passed slept eternally. Rumors and millings often mused that even the Orphan Queen had found her way to eternal rest here as well. Part of Callum lamented that he had brought others down in here and blasphemed these sacred grounds. Perhaps those ancient souls would forgive the desecration as this was to be the first and last stand to save the king.

Bloodshed was assured, but he hoped death's scythe would be stayed: that ever present phantom with greedy hands ready to take away everything.

Again, he tested his pockets, it was still there. Good. It made him uneasy to hold it, to run his fingers over the runes, especially after everything that had happened. But Callum couldn't shake the strange allure that kept calling him back to it. He had salvaged it from the depths of one of his chests of artifacts in a last minute venture that he hadn't quite understood. Running his hand over the cube seemed to make the orbs of light just beyond the edge of his sight glow brighter. He felt the influence rather than saw them, glowing spheres deep within his mind. A beautiful blue sang a distant tune like the persistent swaying of beach grass, a red that roared passionately racing through his blood with each pulsing contraction of his heart, and a silent somber silver that waned before returning, slowly spinning, but never showing it's whole self.

Then there was that final node. A knot of black and twisted light that seemed to quiver and writhe. His curse to bear ever since his foray into Dark Magic. Though he had only sparingly leaned on it through the years, and paid a price too dear each time, that unfed feral wolf in his mind still panted and howled. It promised a faster way, an easier way, if only you fed it.

Callum knew it's secret though, where there was to be a stomach in any other wolf, this beast only held a gaping black void that was as unending as the night sky, as unending as the death toll of time.

Callum pondered these things, considered the world and its moving parts, and waited for Tazel and his crew to find and follow that ethereal wisp that would lead them directly to Ezran.

Pity and rage welled up in Callum, he had to cast his gaze down and swallow to re-assert himself in the present.
The soft rasp of metal on metal accompanied by the soft grunt punctuating movements kept Callum from getting too deep into his brooding mood, however.

"Do you have to do that here?" Callum asked scratching his stubble and casting a sidelong glance at Soren.

"Rule number 18: Limber up." Soren didn't even pause in his stretching, leaning deep one way, and then the other before standing up straight and bending his mass of muscle to touch the toes of his boots, "And I. Actually suggest. You do the same," His words punctuated by breaths as he stretched, "Especially, if we. Are going down. Into the cata. Combs."

Praid shifted his weight, leaning against the stone and dirt wall of the roughly hewn cavern, "I don't believe in it." His voice drawled.

"Oh?" Soren asked, not stopping.

"You ever see a dragon 'limber up' before taking on an army?" Praid offered this wisdom and let the bubble of knowledge float towards Soren.

Soren, who merely paused, considered, and then resumed his grunting exercises.

"Wonderful," Callum hung his head, frustrated.

Corvus had something akin to a whale call emanate from his gut. The other four all swung their heads to meet the ranger's embarrassed gaze as it shifted between the others, "Sorry, I-I was too nervous to eat this morning." This was bookended by another hungry protest from his abdomen.

Praid pinched his nose and Callum ran a hand over his face, groaning internally. Gren merely chuckled softly and pulled a jelly tart out from beneath some armored plates of his Katolian armor, "Here, Corvus, don’t want your hunger giving away your position." He tossed it lazily to the leather clad ranger, who caught the gift easily.

"Well I suppose it's better than nothing." Soren scoffed, twisting his torso with elbows bent.
"Oh," Gren laughed, "What, pray tell, does the master of fitness Soren recommend." His smile was good natured, his grin easy.

Callum began ignoring their banter, how did they all cover their trepidation so readily?

Callum took in a deep breath to soothe his nerves, knowing it wouldn't work. It never worked. Instead, he resolved to tick through the plan again, envisioning every contingency he could think of, but the basic structure of it was the same

Puff, jangle, dangle, wrangle, fwoom, boom, krackoom.

Callum knew what was coming, he had been with Rayla at her peak. Strength unmatched by any human strong arm, agility to outtrace the most limber of jungle cats, and all the stealth of a passing specter. She had been untouchable, a master of movement.

And now six just like her were intent on sending Ezran to an early grave.

Callum cleared his throat, coming back to the conversation and the raillery, "You're all clear on your roles, right?" This silenced their nervous banter quickly.

Praid raised his voice from where he waited, both apart from the group and a part of the group, "There is one thing I don't understand," He cleared his throat, "That is, what exactly is a 'jangle'?

Callum looked to him, beyond Soren and Corvus, past Gren, and to Praid where he leaned leisurely in his Neolandian clothes covered in Katolian armored plate. He let out an exasperated sigh, "There's no time to argue about how I can or cannot be touching the Primal Sources, Praid." He couldn't hide the irritation in his words, "Not again."

"Don't deride me because your explanations don't make sense." Praid scoffed, "I won't believe that you or any other human can touch the Primal Sources. It's not possible. There have been hundreds of years of humanity and I am to believe you, out of all of them, were just the most determined? The most lucky? No. I think not."

Callum rolled his eyes and went back to watching the cellar door.
"I know your deeds for the dark magic, I know you for what you are, Callum." Praid stoked the flames of Callum's anger, approaching by cutting a path between the human warriors to their mage leader.

"I touched the Primal Source of the Moon, even your spouse said as much." Callum's anger was not hot and flaring, but a cold frosting burn. Praid's words stirred him, took his emotion and reason and cast them aside, Callum snapped, "If you do not believe her, then what will it take, Praid. What feat would it take to prove to you what I have done?"

"So, I never thought I'd be the one to break up a fight between a human and an elf," Soren placed a hand on Praid's shoulder, earning a sneer from the elf, "but Callum, Praid, don't you think there are more concerning things to be about at the moment?"

Praid threw up his arms, "Exactly my point! That's why I want to know what exactly a 'jangle' is."

"Couldn't you have said something about this sooner?" Callum bit, "I wish you would have said something, oh, I don't know, anytime up until right now?"

Praid looked at Callum, shock in his voice, "Don't be short with me you prepubescent punk."

"I will have you know that I went through puberty already!" That Callum's voice cracked did naught to help his argument.

"So, you're always going to be that short?" Praid snorted, standing tall and making Callum all the more aware of the height at which he stood.

Soren couldn't suppress the chuckle. Nor Gren for that matter.

Claudia's voice came from across the great distance and reverberated in their minds without travelling to their ears, "Praid, I appreciate you trying to calm Callum down, but that's enough. They're here."

Callum turned to Praid, commanding, "When things start 'jangling' stay low, strike fast."
"Do your plans always make this much sense?!" Praid bit in hushed tones.

"Quiet!" Corvus hissed, urging their silence.

The creak of the unoiled door filled the high ceilinged entryway to the catacombs, but probably the most disturbing piece of the scene, was the lack of shifting shadows. Doors moving of their own accord, it was a page taken from somebody's nightmares. A part of him recoiled at the idea of the unnatural power these elves had, another part of him was envious, and even still he seemed to think of Rayla as something completely different from the breed that came with violent eyes and black intent.

The five waited as the light washed against the far wall.

"This smells like a trap, Tazel, I don't like it." A deep and gruff voice mumbled uneasily.

Praid looked to Callum, confusion on his face, and whispering asked, "Tazel?"

"Of course it’s a trap, Neim." Tazel, presumably, answered, "An empty castle, not a pawn or peon in sight. Our quarry has gone to ground. Surely, you saw the dragon."

A soft and husky voice, "A storm dragon to be sure, only two of those."

"What are you saying?" Neim growled.

"She's saying that this is more than just an assassination contract," Tazel mused, "We're playing the Dragon's game now."

A fourth voice hissed, "You three talk a lot for assassins."

"I'm not afraid for them to know I'm here." Neim jested, "What will they do? Stick me with their toothpicks? Flail their arms against me? I've no fear of their kind."
"You would not be the first overzealous elf to be warped by Callum the Calamitous," that feminine voice chided, "Remember what happened to Tazel's betrothed and her band?"

"You'd think that three years of starvation and torment would be enough to break the mage's spell, but she just kept uttering his name between lucid intervals, 'Callum I'm sorry, Callum, help me,' it was pitiful. You'd think Rayla would have stronger steel in her veins.

Callum caught Praid's eye. Praid's astonishment now reflected in his own and pieces of the over all picture finally revealed. Tazel and Rayla, betrothed, the matching fang like henna tattoos upon their face. Praid's astonishment at Tazel's presence and the look on his face astonishment. Realization and understanding were just the beginning of what Callum was feeling.

Callum watched Praid's expression change: Confusion, astonishment, bewilderment, rage. In the low light, even Callum could recognize the strain of his clenching jaw, the tightness of his face, the anger in the set of his brow.

Good.

If Callum had any doubts of which side Praid and Alayza would fall on at the end of all this, they were dissolved in that moment. Any conflicted allegiance that the former Dragon Guard may have had leading into the night, the light of tomorrow would see it erased. No matter how strong the doctrine was amongst them, it still seemed that family came first.

Bidding the others to lead the way, Callum skulked after them, though they didn't anticipate to stay hidden for long. This wasn't a war to be fought in a momentous battle throwing everything you had at the coming foe, no, this was a war of attrition.

Puff.

Praid, Gren, Corvus and Soren led the way, and they came to a split in the path, three separate openings of stone splitting off. Soren went with Corvus, and Gren and Praid went another way leaving the third path unexplored. Two paths that would lead to the amphitheater, eventually, but not without paying dearly. Callum stood in the entrance of the third one and waited as he heard the boots of his companions fade into the shadows.

He crouched in the carved opening next to a carved out coffin, the stone some resting place of one of Ezran's ancient ancestors. Callum focused on feeling the cold wind of unseen currents that
breathed through the underground city of ancient dead. Here the currents of air were softer, slighter, but if he wasn't careful he could convince himself that the rocks themselves breathed. The slight drip of some distant runnel of water as moisture collected on the ancient stone echoed through. Earth, Sea, and Sky. All here. Callum felt the cube in his pocket.

If it had been another time, another place, he might have tried something, but now it was more of an insurance policy than anything else.

Between the narthex of the catacombs and the pathway down to Ezran where Callum stood there was a grouping of outgrowths, an outcropping of mushrooms. Green with spots of yellow. Coughcap. One of Callum's most terrifying foes. It took some metaphysical coaxing, and about three hens worth of blood according to Claudia, but the fungus had managed take hold and flourish. At least enough for one day. Greater than seven of these triangular caps leaned off the wall at odd angles.

Callum passed time idly about a corner waiting for the sextet of assassins. Waiting for that telltale sound of the gravel scraping across the cobbles that would mean they approached.

When it came, Callum took one of the Primal Pearls out from his pouch, one of the Primals he still needed help touching and understanding, the aspects of its nature still beyond his reach. Earth.

Three quivering lines drawn in air with brown runes that gave off no light, "Crepo." Callum commanded and the entirety of the underground began to shift and shudder. It was as though a great stone giant beneath the castle had experienced a sudden chill.

The assassins did not cry out, they did not raise and alarm, but that was not the point of this slight. It was the Coughcap that was the trap. Callum peaked out and he could see, caught in the light, the green bioluminescent pollen floating in large spheres originating at each of the mushrooms that grew upon the wall. Callum had hated the mushroom because any time he approached one, he had never been soft enough to not trigger it's ejection of spores. A large cloud of abrasive and irritating pollen shot out up to six feet in diameter. With the multiple mushrooms lining the hall way, there was no way to pass through without being coated head to toe in the thick and sticky spores.

"A delay tactic," Neim scoffed, "As though this will stop us."

The fourth voice spoke again exasperated with Neim's boasting, "Just stop talking, Neim."
"This is why I always work alone, Tazel, I dinnae need the weak clucking of an elfress telling me how to kill."

Callum peered through the spore cloud, light still filtered through. It would have to be cover enough.

Callum darted out into the juncture of pathways and planted his feet, three lines of blue coming to life.

A fifth voice, "Movement!"

There was a thrum and the scream of air tearing, a hole appearing in the spore cloud as the wafting clouds were parted by the momentum and aftershock of an unseen arrow which clattered and ricocheted off the stone beyond Callum.

"Aspiro!"

A heaving breath that became a gust, a whirlwind of chaotic force billowed down the narrow path to the narthex opening up into the last bastion of King Ezran. There was no harm to be done, no great poisonous effect, but as the spores were caught in the twisting winds, a blanket of glowing green pollen covered the assassins.

A second thrum and arrow screaming. But Callum was already running. He tried not to think of how the arrow passed through where he had been standing just seconds before. The last image he saw before tearing off down the pathway after Praid and Gren was that of six ghostly figures covered in specks of glowing green.

One advantage the assassins lost.

Adrenaline, exhilaration, he couldn't help the smile on his face even as he ran. He made no attempt to stay hidden.

"I'll kill him." the growl came echoing down the hall.
"Reign thyself in, Neim," Tazel commanded sternly, "You yourself stated this was a trap, this is not unexpected. Callum is just more resourceful than I gave him credit for. We can either be careful, or you can be foolhardy."

Their continued conversation faded as Callum continued down the path, but Claudia's came, "They're exploring the mortician's room. I can see them perfectly now Callum, that was great." there was a pause, "Yes he's fine, it went off without a hitch." She said to somebody aside, either Ezran or Rayla he was sure.

The sound of some ceramic breaking came echoing after Callum.

"Big guy is mad about something." Claudia explained the racket.

Another clattering crash.

"Really mad." She finished flatly.

Jangle.

Callum navigated narrow passages lined with coffins made of various materials, some stone, some wood in various states of rot and decay, but finally burst into a natural cave formation that transected the carved pathways. While the path forward was clear there was a number of natural formations that had been used and utilized as alcoves and places of respect for certain tombs. Open pods of stone naturally forged by some unknown force that curved and carved out shadowed entries. Within one, Callum saw the metal glint of Gren's armor, in another, the black matte of Praid's Neolandian attire acting as a shadowed camouflage. Here in the black it acted to blend Praid into the world, however it was likely for naught, Rayla's eyes had always been better than keen in the night.

Callum knew this next part was risky. It depended on them being baited, being pulled, and having the assassins follow the descending path. If they took the bait, if they followed the plan that Callum had devised, there was still the chance of the being too risky and ruthless so as to lead Callum and the others to lethal ends.

He wrestled with that idea still, they were coming for his brother's life. They would pursue it until they could no longer lift themselves up from the dirt, no longer push their blades through flesh and bone. Callum and his companions would be hard pressed to suppress creatures of otherworldly
strength and agility. He was no master of stealth, no fiend with a blade, could he really be expected to keep to a rule that stayed his hand the same way Rayla did? That Ezran did?

On the other hand, if he took a life now, what did that mean for the last three years of peace, of the potential for peace yet to come?

He rolled a primal pearl across the back of his fingertips nervously.

Time stretched on, and on, and on.

"They're not coming after you, Callum." Claudia's voice added nervously, "The bait was too obvious."

"That's okay, we planned for this."

"No. No we didn't." Claudia's voice was scared. A rare emotion in her or Soren. Viren's gift he supposed, after everything, but to hear that chink of fear in her voice, a flaw in that calm and bewildering demeanor filled Callum with trepidation.

"What is it?" Callum asked, Gren and Praid were peering out at Callum from the deeper shadows of their cover. Privy to the conversation occurring between the two mages.

"The good news is that they are still all sticking together." Claudia added, "The bad news is that they seem to have brought a mage of their own.

The catacombs quaked and rumbled, dust shaking loose, a more powerful example of Callum’s own spell. There was the roar of earth tearing.

"They're cutting a path directly to Ezran." Claudia groaned, "They're going to bypass the traps."

Gren came up beside Callum, "How can they break up the stone, is that part of the Moon Primal that we didn't know?"
Callum flashed the pearl in his hand, glinting silver, "We don't know everything the elves have at their disposal, especially coming from the Dragon Queen's armory. I've seen trinkets and the like imbued with one time use spells."

"Still, to have the foresight to bring with them a stonebreaker?" Praid commented, coming up beside Callum, "If they are carving a path it will leave their backside open. I say we take advantage of that."

"Claudia?" Callum called to the open air.

"Yes, High Mage?" She curled her voice around the words in both respect and adoration, if a bit of child like whimsy.

"Tell me what you can see," Callum added, heading back down the black path from whence he came with Praid and Gren following closely.

"I see five elves standing around while the big guy uses some sort of great heaving hammer to bust large craters in the stone wall."

"It can't be that easy." Callum muttered.

"Why not?" Gren shrugged.

Callum mulled over the options, running a hand through his hair, "Regardless, we need to pull them back on the path, if they continue in this fashion they'll just take longer, but they will still get Ezran." He decided something, "Alright, Gren stay here, Claudia, tell Soren to stay back, have Corvus meet us out the splitting of paths. Praid, you're with me. If they won't come to us, we'll go to them. They need to take this bait."

"What have you concocted this time, High Mage?" Praid mused falling into step behind Callum.

"Infusco." Callum felt the shifting of light that he had learned to associate with the Moon Primal, using the primal pearl rather than the touching the primal source directly. If his influence would disrupt Alayza's capability to reverse the poison, he would have to avoid utilizing it. He pulled the shadows of the catacombs around him like a cloak, swaddling himself and Praid in it.
Callum noted that using the primal pearl wasn't nearly as exhausting as touching the source directly. A small portion of the primal used much like a water skin. It was easier to take a swig than it was to reroute the river to one's mouth.

Corvus met a shifting shape in the dark and was swallowed by the same black that Callum and Praid moved through. At the crossroads of passes they moved to the mortician's chamber, thunder-like cracks came followed by the rumble of falling rocks. Callum pushed forwards, using his obscurity as a shield to protect themselves from view.

"They're just ahead," Claudia whispered, caught in the stealthy approach as much as any of them, "All six of them, I can still see the pollen covered assholes." Callum continued forwards when Claudia's voice again broke the silence, "No, Soren, I cannot see their assholes, I was calling them assholes."

Under his breath Callum commanded, pointing at himself then each of the accompanying warriors in turn. "Fire, pull, slash." There was no back talk from Praid, the elf and Corvus simply nodded. They continued on and soon Callum could see the shadowed outline of the pollinated elves.

Using the blanket of black to obscure himself he lit a rune of crackling red in the air, speaking the dragons tongue, "Flammae Sphaera." In an instant the black cloak was gone and the last remnant of lunar energy slipped away. Callum pulled on the dregs of the sun Primal all about. This deep underground it was sparse enough. Callum strained harder than he thought he should have to. The counter currents of raw energy from the Sun was few and far between, but far above the sun still beat down, and that heat penetrated the ground and stone and it's influence was still felt.

It started as a splash of swirling sparks that spun and grew. Held in the palm of his hand, it bellowed and pulsed, a small star carrying with it fury and flame. In the same breath that he dropped the façade of shadow and summoned flame, he urged, "Now!" Callum hurled the orb of fire through the air, arcing towards the collection of six pollen covered assassins. The concussive force of the ensuing explosion would be enough to ring their heads, likely knock them unconscious. The fire would leave them scorched and singed, but still alive. He would be lying to himself if he said that he wasn't tempted to use that extra fragment of sun, that extra sliver of energy that could have ended this here and now so definitively.

Flashing shadows hither and yawn thrown across the stark stone walls leading to where they worked. An assassin, a female of slender build and suggestive attire, even in her Moonweave armor raised the call first.

"Mage!" Her word was sharp and quick, carried on a lilting voice.
Four of the others turned even as the one known as Neim swung what appeared to be a massive hammer into the stone wall.

Callum twisted the leashes of energy that controlled the sphere of flame. Twisting the currents of Sun unseen in the air, sending the orb to fall between them all, to lay out a blast that would knock them all to their knees, and hopefully, allow this to come to an end.

What Callum hadn't expected was for the orb of flame to fly through, not one, not two, but all six of the specters, as though there was nothing there at all. When the flaming sphere finally crashed into its destination, a whoosh of roaring fire echoed through the cavern, the six assassins continued to move.

Praid realized the trick as Callum was beginning to come to it himself, "Illusion, it was a trap!"

"They have an illusionist." Callum cursed under his breath. This had all gone to shit, and he had played a role in stirring the pot. If they had just stuck with the plan…

"Guys," Claudia's voice came, "Soren really needs your help? Gren too…"

"How'd they slip by us?" Corvus asked worriedly.

"Who said anything about getting by you?" Came a soft chuckle. A voice both masculine and feminine greeted their ears.

"We were always right here, just waiting for Callum the Calamitous to show his face." Severe features upon a gaunt face emerged from shadows.

"Calamitous?" Callum was taken aback.

"What?" A disembodied voice flirted.

"Never heard your Moniker before?" The severe face cooed.
"Oh yes, you have quite the reputation in Xadia." The faceless voice.

"The human mage that the Dragon Queen spared." The severe face.

"I'll never understand why she didn't kill him when she had him in her claws." The faceless voice added.

"She wasn't ready to move, is all." The gaunt featured face murmured over it's shoulder. Callum felt as though these assassins were ignoring him, like he had not part in their conversation.

"True, she had to bide her time, to wait for the peace to start to show its fruit. How did it feel? I wonder, to find your bounty already beset with rot and pestilence?" The question was asked of the surrounding air and not of Callum, they would not deign to acknowledge him. He was an intrusion in their conversation with one another after the initial fuel he gave.

Praid didn't bend to their bickering, didn't let their words sway him, "Your leader left you behind to deal with the three of us yourselves?"

"Hardly." The irritation at the interruption was evident in the disembodied voices acknowledgement.

"We're just here to keep the mage out of the fight." The severe face smirked.

"The rest of you are just, well, our just deserts." Something giggled from the shadows.

Callum felt the spite and malice in his soul, murderers in his home, on his doorstep. Sun and sky, both answered his beckoning gestures.

"Oh, will you use a spell?" The conversation turned to amusement, fascination. Severe eyes going wide, intent on seeing all.

"Terrifying, truly." Laughed it's counterpart.
The voices of the duo faded further into the shadows, taking the singular androgynous face with it.

"Come back and face us, cowards." Praid growled into the black

"I think not," Tittered one voice

"No," teased the other.

"We didn't kill all those other mages by taking them on head to head, no, this is our game you'll be playing." the rattling of chains echoed through the short cavern, and a soft thrum hummed to life.

"They have flails," Corvus stated simply, "Means ranged attacks, likely will avoid close quarters."

"There's only so far they can retreat," Praid added, gripping his hilt steadily.

Praid and Corvus moved forwards.

Something was off, but Callum moved with them. He did his best to hold himself on the threshold of summoning some defensive or offensive strike. He tried to keep the storm a servant to his whim, the fire his muse to dance with. But this deep in the earth it wore on him, made him weary as he strained to hold onto those components of sun and sky.

Corvus crept forward a step behind Praid, the elf leading with sword point and armor, carefully moving with each step. The thrumming seemed to fall evermore distant, and Callum and his companions came again to the division of paths, carefully examining the crossing of paths.

The way the thrumming echoed didn't make sense, it bounced off of walls and reverberated in strange ways with the atypical structure of the catacombs in such a way that Callum couldn't tell from which direction it came.

And then the humming stopped.
The rattle of chains growing closer was the only warning, and it came a split second before the dual flails emerged from shadow.

Praid swung his blade, grunting in surprise as much as effort, knocking one flail askew.

The other flail, Callum couldn't help but take the brunt of. The heavy spiked metal ball flew into his chest. He felt something crack as he tried to bend with the momentum of the weapon. A sharp pain shot through his chest and there was a sharp intake of air as part of the world went red. The hold he had on sun and sky slipped away and he clutched gasping at his chest.

Even as Callum was brought to a knee, Praid and Corvus moved to defend him against the coming patter of boots. Out of shadows a whirlwind of steel daggers giggled amidst them and then vanished. The strange echoing laughter hailing its coming and fading even as the searing pain of the multitude of new cuts began to flare.

"So that’s their game." Praid growled, dabbing a gauntleted hand to his forehead and pulling it away soaked in his own blood, "Ranged and close quarters."

"So it would seem." Callum gasped, then rose to his feet, "Protect me from the slashy boy, I have an idea."

The thrumming picked up again. Callum would have to trust his reflexes, trust his agility. The things that had always let him down before were now crucial to not only his, but Praid's and Corvus's survival. If not Ezran's.

The humming continued and Callum watched the direction from which they had come previously, waiting for that tell tale change in humming.

It never came.

Bouncing laughter tripped off the walls and came from all directions at once, the whirlwind of giggling knives spinning through slashing up and left and cross wise as the blades moved.

Praid and Corvus moved at the first sign of assault. Their bodies coming together to protect Callum from the coming onslaught. Dagger met sword and flail almost too late. The blade matched the first strike, the chain the second, but afterwards they couldn't keep up with the rapidity of the
onslaught. Corvus too human to keep up with an enhanced elf, Praid too sluggish in his plate.

And then it came, what Callum had been waiting for, that sudden change in humming.

There wouldn't be enough time. It wasn't from the direction Callum had anticipated, somehow it had moved, or Callum had gotten too turned about in the conflict with the dagger wielding assassin.

"Move!" he groaned and tried to dodge, moving left. One flail traveled through where he had been, catching Corvus in the back of his left shoulder.

"Argh!" the ranger cried out. The leather armor protected the man from the short metal spikes, but the blunt force of the flying steel ball carried through. The man pitched forward spinning and Callum saw the shifting shadows and glowing pollen just in time. It came glowing out of darkness, flecks of light seeming to shift and weave through the air of their own accord.

Sun was difficult to reign in here, Moon was off limits, which left only sky, "Aspiro Friga." He cast the line of ice from his breath and set it down along the cavern floor, catching the feet and body of elf, leaving the head free. Callum was thankful that the sky magic had obeyed, he had only intended to catch hands and feet. Another extra foot of ice and the elf's mouth might have been covered. For now, it was alright, but these spells were getting harder to control, he was running out of energy, at this rate he would not have the energy to keep casting.

Even as he caught his breath, and Corvus stood again, holding his shoulder and limp left arm with his right, Praid shoved Callum.

The thrumming had stopped again.

Never a second to stop.

Callum followed the shove and dodged left, feeling his ribs groan in protest as something within him seemed to snap back into place. Painfully. Through a forcefully exhaled breath he uttered the word he needed as a blue tipped finger carved the rune in the air, "Fulminis." Sparking light came to life in the palm of his hand as he dipped low and swept the same arm up through where he had been standing, where one of the flails came and passed through heading for a target no longer there.
Sweeping it up in his grasp there was a crack of thunder as his hand closed around the running chain. Each link flashed sequentially into vision as the Moonweave of the elf's weapon began to split and crack, disrupted by the intense charge being sent down its length. The shifting thin chain burst into existence as they raced towards their owner.

Much like the chain, suddenly an elf flashed into being. Flat chested and narrow-hipped, it's features just feminine enough to be recognized as female, it's angular face hard and square enough to be considered male, wore a snarl. A toga of Moonweave wrapped around it, revealing half of it's chest, on it's shoulders it wore simple half moon pauldrons of leather, slender arms wore gauntlets made of silver wraps that ended in fingerless gloves, one of which held the suddenly apparent silver chain of it's flail, the other now hanging limply in the other hand.

Arms and legs going rigid, the body seemed to leap into the air as it stiffened before falling to the ground, the electrical charge finished. Singed and smoking, the body lay on the floor.

The trio caught their breath, but it was Corvus that broke the silence, "We need to move, Ezran is still in danger."

"Claudia!" Callum huffed, "Where should we go."

"Gren is down, Callum, he breathing, but they made it by him." Her voice was scared.

"And the other traps?" Callum asked. Gren had been all that stood between the assassins and the amphitheater aside from the traps Claudia had created, "Are they having any success?"

"Just at slowing them down." Claudia seemed to reign in her fear, a momentary flaw, "Whatever Soren had been fighting, when Gren went down, retreated. He's alone, winded, but good."

Callum moved towards the smoking elf assassin, away from Soren and towards the pathway where Gren lay, hopefully just unconscious.

"We should have stayed in position." Callum growled.

Praid unexpectedly clapped him on the back, "All the best laid plans of men and elves go to hell one the fighting starts."
"Isn't the saying of 'mice and men'?” Corvus added, walking up next to them both, holding his arm.

"Mice, men, what difference is there really?” Praid added.

Callum glanced at Praid in the shadows, was that a smirk on his face? Was he enjoying this?

Tendrils of smoke rose from the body still where it lay crumpled in the dirt against a wall. It's chest still rose in jagged breaths. Corvus checked the pulse of the assassin, "Feels stable, as far as I can tell, he will live."

"What do we do with him?” Praid asked.

Callum looked around at the surroundings, trying to think of a way to detain the assassin. Considering, he looked at the two flails he still carried and held it up to Corvus and Praid.

They made short work of tressing up the assassin in it's own Moonweave flails and then drove one of it's unused daggers into the links of the chain.

"We just going to leave him out in the open?” Praid asked.

"You have a better idea?” Callum asked, catching the amusement in the elf’s voice. He looked to Rayla's father who merely nodded at one of the stone coffins.

"They do say they 'do not fear death', afterall." His tone was flat, but Praid was definitely smirking, if not outright smiling. Did it take the risk of death and morbid humor to crack this elf of stone?

Callum chuckled and the three heaved the lid off of the stone coffin, revealing the corpse of some ancient human within, "Sorry, old buddy,” Callum addressed the desiccated body, "I need you to have a roommate for a little while." The ajar mouth and yellow shrunken eyes offered no protest.

As they slid the cover of stone back over the unconscious assassin, Callum winced grabbing at his chest, "Remind me not to get on your bad side, Praid."

"Remind me to have a talk with you about what exactly the nature of the relationship between you and my engaged daughter is." Praid answered, his comment in turn like a crack of a whip.

Corvus snorted and covered it poorly with a cough.

There was a long and drawn out silence as Callum picked his next words carefully, "Let's go and make sure Gren is alright, then see if we can make up lost time."

"What of the slashy giggler?" Praid inquired.

Callum looked to where the elf sat in a block of ice, the elf had dropped the Fade and was now easily visible. He walked up to the androgynous being at watched it's teeth chatter. It's face was defiance, it's eye's set in a permanent glare.

"I wish we had more time to talk." Callum looked into the violet eyes promising violence.

"You may take all the time you wish." It chattered, "I will tell you all you want to know." Callum was tempted, would this thing tell him the truth? Would it be to their advantage? No, that was the twist. It was a stall tactic. This assassins job had been to delay the mage, to prevent Callum from participating in the battle. The ice would hold for quite a long time, the magical ice held a strength that was beyond even Rayla at her peak, Callum recalled.

"No." Callum answered the elf's offer, "Later, there will be plenty of time to discuss exactly how you will help me bring Gale to heel."

Despite the chattering teeth, the laughter of this giggling assassin broke through.

As Callum, Praid, and Corvus left the assassins in their wake, hurrying to find Gren, Callum overheard Corvus whisper to Praid, "Do you think he really intends to take on Gale?"

"I've known this mad human for less than a week." Praid murmured back, "You've known him longer than I by far. Tell me, has he ever failed at something he set his mind to?"
So, some of you may have read a chapter I had up for less than a day, but I was not pleased in the way it went and one of the readers, System Shock, commented that it was not up to par. In talks with the group of writers I share this with and whose feedback I value I decided to rewrite the chapter.

Special thanks to Porsche, Dec, and System Shock for pushing me to make a chapter that is better, a chapter that not only the story, but the readers deserve.

My focus in writing on this chapter that I would love to get feedback on how believable the skirmish and wounds were, or anything else you want to comment on!
Rayla twirled Runaan's blades nervously. Spinning them one way, then another. She couldn't get used to the sensation of the hilt in her hands. She couldn't convince herself she had a good grip on the blades, constantly feeling as though they were going to slip from her fingertips and clatter on the floor. So she kept spinning them, the reassurance of the rough motion, a poor imitation of the vibration she could feel in her fingertips, enough to distract her.

A little.

Claudia had been markedly silent in her works, mumbling under her breath strange rantings that Rayla couldn't tell if they were spells or the ravings of a madwoman. At times she would thrust some strange amalgamation of organic tissue in her mouth, or have her fingers dance over or through ground components. Lights would flare, sometimes there would be otherworldly whispers, but other than an unsettling display nothing else much happened. But she could feel things shifting and moving, like the sensation of shade passing over you when in the sun.

Alayza crouched next to Ezran, her Neolandian robes pooling around her feet as she passed the time trying to entertain the young King. A ball of light would move from fingertip to fingertip, attempt to pass it to Ezran, only to have it tumble through his fumbling hands and be caught by the illusionist. Bait and Tibber, the frobbit, watched entranced by the dancing lights. Ezran seemed caught between wanting to be amused, distracted and the pondering weight of his own gravestone.

Rayla again scanned the strange amphitheater at the bottom of the unnatural cave system. A place harshly hewn from stone where the humans buried their dead.

A strange concept: burying the dead, but she understood wanting to keep your loved ones close. Even the Moonshadow elves shared that desire to not let go. Moonshadow Elves burned their dead, sending their essence to the moon and stars where they belonged. Though, they kept their dearly departed close by mixing the ash of the dead into the soil of their fields, into the furnaces and kilns and forges. Their loved ones, while dead, formed the latticework of society, interconnecting families and professions intrinsically with the love of those that have gone before. Each piece of Moonweave, each bountiful harvest, each success was due to the sacrifices of those that had come before.

Rayla couldn't help but ponder what it meant for her to be here, beneath the stonework of human construction, surrounded by the dead of Callum and Ezran's ancestors. What did her ancestors think of her choices? Of the way she had moved through life, training to take life, and then fighting to
She knew that there were aspects of what she had done they would be proud of, that she was proud of, and then there was this. Her failing to kill Ezran so long ago had taken her down a strange and wild route into a world of the unknown. She had crossed a threshold then and never looked back. What would they think of that?

What would they think of her love?

Then again, what did it matter?

Rayla looked at the swords in her hands, hefting them. They would have been forged in a kiln lined with the soot of Runaan's blood line. The iron in their blood inextricably intertwined into the iron fibers of the Moonweave blades. What would Runaan think of her choices? Of where she had gone?

She sighed and twirled the blades again.

Elves did have a concept of a soul, of an afterlife, and she wondered if Runaan had stayed with her, or if he had gone on to that other place beyond the reach of moonlight.

Their parting had been...conflicted.

Rayla sensed something change, as though the world held it's breath. Claudia wasn't mumbling any longer. There were no more utterances or castings. Her tongue was held, her eyes were wide.

Claudia, the black mage with a mane of white hair stood, leaning heavily on the staff which seemed to pulsate with light.

"What is it?" Ezran asked across the amphitheater.

"They're coming now." Claudia answered, striding out front of her small gathering of tokens and charms.

"You haff ta tell us more than that." Rayla growled at her. Was Callum ok? Was he hurt? Were they able to pull the assassins into the myriad of traps?
"They're still fighting." Claudia whispered.

"Fightin'? They weren't supposed ta fight!" Rayla began to pace, her glance moving from Claudia to the dropped portcullis and back again, "What did tha' dummy do."

Claudia smirked, "Your dummy took out two Moonshadow assassins without ever laying a hand on them. But they were separated, small in ranks. Soren is going to meet them and they are checking on Gren, but then the elves will be coming down the path towards us. Maybe Callum will be able to squeeze them against the wall and end this." Claudia looked at the iron and wooden barrier that was the last defense between them and the assassins, seeing beyond it.

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Corvus checked Gren's pulse, his fingers going to his neck where the swollen mass of the man's face ended and bulged against the unforgiving border of his armor, "He's breathing, the pulse is strong, he should be able to make it just fine. But he's going to need to spend some time in the infirmary with Tomaz."

"Good," Callum nodded, watching Corvus work. At this point he was envious of Corvus field medical knowledge, he didn't know the first thing about figuring out if somebody was too injured to continue or if they would live, "Well, not good. Get him hidden somewhere, we will have to come back for him."

"If we survive." Praid added.

"Yes, if we survive." Callum nodded.

"Cheese and crackers are you two are a cheery pair." Soren's voice came up from behind them. Callum had already heard the soft scuffling of his boots hailing his approach, "Have you ever thought to yourself, maybe, instead of saying something dark and dismal, I'll just go ahead and say something bright and cheery instead?"

"Honestly," Praid scratched his chin in thought, "I tried being positive once. Worst experience of my life."
“Soren, help Corvus with Gren,” Callum asked, not taking his eyes off the path that he knew the assassins had traveled down. "Try to be gentle with the poor guy."

“Sure, yea,” Soren moved beside Gren and Corvus, then paused, "Oh! Did you guys leave an elf back there in a block of ice?" Soren bent over to heft Gren and help Corvus move the not dead weight of the Katolian commander.

Praid let out a long uneasy word, "Yes…"

"He's super annoying, at least, I think it was a he." Soren dropped Gren, not softly into one of the alcoves of the room that had formerly been designated for the Jangle portion of the plan. Mr. Jangly Bones and his Army of Skeleton Dancers would not be making an appearance yet. He was unsure if they would show at all, given that he had used the last Moon Pearl. True, he could now reach out and touch that soft silver light, caress it and draw its illumination along his fingertips, shifting and changing the light to his whims, without the pearl, but that would hinder Alayza, and possibly Praid & Rayla.

"Did you do anything to the elf?" Callum asked, nervous. Soren was one of those that most ardently refused to stay his blade from killing the elves.

"Well, it kept talking so I clubbed him good with my hilt." Soren shrugged, dropping Gren hard enough on the ground to make Callum wince and the immobile Gren to groan slightly. Soren rolled his eyes at Gren, then continued, "Shut it up good and then I kept moving."

"You didn't kill him?" Praid asked, surprised, amused.

"Not sporting to kill somebody that can't defend themselves," Soren shrugged, "Regardless of whether or not they're a shifty mistrusting Moonshadow Elf or a completely rancorous invalid."

"Those are big words for you," Praid laughed, "Try not to strain yourself." Praid jested with the mass of muscle that was Soren.

A leveled gaze from Soren at the elf, “I am not just a gloriously meaty man, I have brains behind these biceps and a poet's soul."

"No, I agree," Corvus nodded, tucking Gren deeper into the shadows and covering him with a
cloak, wrapping an arm around the massive Kingsguard, "Don't strain yourself, Soren."

"Now, I have had enough of these-" Soren began rounding on Praid and Corvus both, coming up between them and pushing a finger into their armor while the other two smiled openly.

"Soren," Callum laughed, "They're messing with you. Praid, Corvus, Enough." Callum came between the three of them. The adrenaline of the confrontation had become intermingled with a strange abandon and disregard. A type of apathy mixed with overconfidence. They were high on the success of the first conflict. They had passed through the flame of this trial and were onto the next.

Callum felt himself losing grip on the severity of the situation, reoriented himself and spoke more soberly, "Enough. Soren, take point." He watched the others recognize that the reprieve was over, "Praid I want you with me, and Corvus, take the rear. I don't want to be taken from behind again."

"Phrasing." Soren called out as he took point, passing Callum.

"I swear Soren," Corvus rolled his eyes, "If you start talking about how you invented the tactical turtleneck again I will gouge my own eyes out."

Soren scoffed, "I didn't invent it," Then softer to himself, "But I was the first to realize it's capability for stealth."

Callum couldn't help but smile, "Enough, go!"

Dangle

Dangle was next. Just past the Jangle. It was a chamber as long across as it was deep, the entrance of which opened up into a cavernous expanse. A hidden natural structure with an underground river that flowed far beneath the opening, eroded continuously over time so that light could not penetrate the murky depths of shadow, but the chaotic roar of the underground river surged up. Walls slick with moisture and moss offered poor purchase. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, some as large around as the beast Neim, others not nearly as thick, but unstable with sharp points. Across this was a singular mechanism on which a sturdy rope and pulley system was arranged in order to move corpses across the expanse to the deeper section of the catacombs. The depths where the amphitheater sat below the castle much closer on the other side of this stretch than the other pathways.
When Soren emerged from around a bend of stone to peer into the room, he crouched low. Looking into the expanse he signaled the others to hurry after him. Callum huddled down close and up next to Soren, close enough that he could smell the pungent scent of his sweat overpowering the mildew and rot of the catacombs.

The shifting shadows of the assassins sat just ahead, they had dropped the invisibility as they pondered the pulley system. Mumbled words came from the four of them but not close enough for Callum or Soren to comprehend. They hadn't tried to cross yet, which Callum be was thankful for. This was the final room along this path to get to the anteroom of the amphitheatre, then all that stood between the assassin's and Ezran was a heavy iron and wood portcullis, dropped now and separating the assassins from their goal.

Callum urged Soren forward, initially earning him an astounded look, but with continued gestures urged Soren closer, Callum practically on top of him.

"I don't like it," Neim stated simply. His voice a beast like growl.

"I didn't ask you if you liked it." The husky feminine voice answered, "I told you to cross."

"No." Neim answered simply. It sounded more like a bark.

"We get it." A rough yet feminine voice answered, "It's a trap. That's why you're going first."

"That doesn't make sense." Neim added flatly.

A crooked horned elf clapped the large beast on the shoulder, "Neim, I never attempted to credit you with an abundance of thoughts and trepidations. Let those better suited to thinking do what their good at, and stay silent."

A canine like growl emanated from the beast of an elf.

"Lilsep will mask your approach, as soon as your across Torani will follow, then Lilsep, then me. We aren't going to leave any one of us open for attack more than we have to." Tazel eased the large elf's reservations. His voice was sly and serpentine.
"Why not go back," Neim barked, "Find another way?"

Tazel threw his arms out wide in exasperation, then rounded on the large elf, "He's too close. Too close! I can taste his blood in the air, you can too. The night wears on. Too much time has passed and I don't want to waste any more. I want to forge ahead and be done with this task. It is beneath us." Tazel turned from his minion and paced, "Now I do not want to hear any whining out of you, I want you to do as your told so that this can be done."

Neim laughed, moving to the edge, "For somebody who fought so hard for this contract with Gale you seem to want to be down with it awful quickly. Have you never learned to savor the kill?"

"Oh, the kill is not the endpoint here," Tazel rubbed his clean shaven jaw, "No, Callum is."

"The mage?" the one Callum estimated must be Torani scoffed, "Not even the king? Why?"

"Because that is what needs to happen." Tazel answered simply, "He is the one that has attempted to show another way. He beguiled and lied his way through Xadia with the help of his assassin, my Rayla, whom he twisted and corrupted with words and magic." Tazel paused and looked to Lilsep, then the others again, "She was meant to be mine, and he took that from me. He twisted and pulled, sundering whatever future we had together. My little lamb gone astray."

Soren looked at Callum, as did Praid, they exchanged unimpressed glances with one another shaking their head slightly. Callum rolled his eyes.

"So you do this out of jealousy?" The one called Lilsep derided, twirling long luxurious white locks in her fingertips, "That's pitiful, even for you, Tazel. Jealous of a human, barely even a man." She pouted at him.

"His corruption of Rayla is only the start. He will stir up whispers regarding magic, have you heard the claims that he can touch the primal source of Sky? What is next? He will touch the Moon? How long will the Xadian people endure the poison of his lies in order to keep a peace that we know cannot last. Since humans have descended upon the Xadian lands and consumed the world in which they reside, what is the longest true peace that was ever known? Ten years, twenty? This is about more than the corruption of my Rayla, this is about the inevitable corruption of Xadia at the hands of humanity. They are a disease, and we will purge them. But first we will make an example of him."
"Fine, I'm going." Neim said finally, ending the conversation, "Anything is better than hearing Tazel the Longwinded give history lessons."

"Glad you finally decided to spare us." The coarse female elf added.

"Glad you found a way to get the last word," Neim smirked. This brought a laugh from Tazel which was almost slithering in nature, a hiss of a chuckle.

Callum watched as Neim backed up from the ledge several paces, stepped to his left twice, and then took a running leap. Callum was amazed to watch the agility with which the gargantuan elf moved. He would have expected a trade off bulk for speed, but Neim did not seem to be constrained by such laws. The soft slap of the assassins feet was punctuated with a grunt and the elf flew threw the air, not touching the rope and pulley system, but flipping and leaping off of the vertical stalactites that hung from the ceiling.

"He didn't even wait for cover," Lilsep laughed stepping up the rope and pulley system and taking hold of one of the hanging loops to which wooden coffins were normally secured and wrapping it about her arm.

As Neim landed he took a quick and surreptitious look around the distant side. Callum had to grudgingly admit Neim's silence and stealth. A tossed rock acted as the all clear signal and Tazel began to work the pulley system to move Lilsep across the chasm beneath. She didn't move or shift in transit, she was completely still and unperturbed, unafraid of the fall below.

Time was running out to act. The original plan had been to incapacitate the assassins as they crossed, but that was best accomplished from the distant side and had presumed Callum and the others had managed to stay ahead of the group. Now, the positions were switched, if they took too long to attack the assassins would be unfettered in their stalking of Ezran, if they acted now, there would be plenty of time for the other elves to return to this side of the chasm and fend off Callum and his crew of merry guards, plus a not so stoic elf.

No, they would have to wait until the very end, the very last elf remaining on this side, and then run, run through the entirety of the catacombs on the other path. If the assassins pursued Callum would drag them across all the traps that lay between here and there. At best, if the assassins didn't pursue, it would be a free shot that might take another assassin out of the picture, at worst it would be as successful as being trapped in the bottom of the catacombs with bloodthirsty assassins, a situation he was already in.
Callum mimed for them to wait, he flashed hand signals to Corvus and Soren, again thankful for Amaya's strong influence over the Katolian army. //When I throw, run, but stick together.//

//Throw what?// Came back Soren's reply in rapid flashing signals.

//I don't know how to sign for-// he spelled out m-a-g-i-c.

//Oh, that's easy.// Soren laughed, //It's// Soren put up both hands, palms towards Callum and shook them.

//What, really?// Callum asked, flabbergasted.

Soren answered simply, //Yes.//

"By the way," Praid added, breaking the silence, gesturing to the silent conversation made of hand movements, "I'm not understanding any of this." Praid looked to Corvus. "Did you get any of that?"

Corvus nodded and signed 'yes' simultaneously.

Callum whispered back over his shoulder, "Start moving back towards the entrance, slowly, and then when I run by, keep up."

"You're an absolute madlad." Praid smiled.

"Hey, show some respect, I'm jumping into the fire and out of the frying pan." Callum defended his pride.

Praid pat the human on the back, "That was respect."

They all turned and looked at Praid flabbergasted, respect? For Callum? From Praid?
"I think this fight is getting to your head, Praid." Corvus added under his breath.

Callum looked back and only Tazel remained on this side of the expansive chasm, he was already backing up, "Go!" Callum hissed and hurried towards the edge where Tazel waited.

The tall and lean Moonshadow elf with crooked horns looked down over the edge, assessing the fall ahead of him should he fall. He backed up and made to run.

Callum was ready, he pulled at the primal energy surrounding them, breathed in it's essence even this deep in the earth and found what he was looking for. He found weaves of wind and sparks of energy, scooped them up and collected them in his hand, the rune starting to form in the air.

The violet light of fulminis formed and Tazel turned slowly noticing the change in light.

Callum roared, "Fulminis!" and thrust his hand forward.

No ball of lightning formed, there were no thick arcs of white energy. No, there was only a small zzzt as the air scorched and small white lines formed from his hand and then dissipated.

That sinuous sinister laugh came again, "So," Tazel began, "Your spell, your ace in the hole failed you. What is next, Callum?"

Callum's eyes searched, what had happened? All the energy he had been able to summon previously, now unable to cast a simple spell that he had done thousands of times? What was this sudden projectile dysfunction? He saw the other assassins across the chasm had noticed him, but none moved to attack, they merely watched, whispering with one another, laughing.

"Well," Callum stood up straighter, "I imagined our first conversation going a little differently, I have to admit."

"As did I," Tazel mused, "I was hoping you would be a little more bloody, a little more broken. Tell me, what happened with Key and Kei, the mage killers?"

Callum shrugged, trying to stay confident in the face of this murderer, "Oh, they're taking a break."
"Hmmm," Tazel smirked, "I must say, I'm impressed that you've managed to corrupt the Dragon Prince in addition to Rayla. A truer master of dark magic there may never have been. But," Tazel drew an iron spike from his belt, "that won't help you now. That won't help you against steel."

Callum reached out again, pulling at everything he could, Sun, Sky, careful not to touch Moon, though like the other two it was so scant this far beneath the earth. He felt the energy in him, the Primal magic that he was so familiar with now, and he tried to let the unending rage consume him. That scouring heat of the sun. It wasn't enough though. There was so little here, even less than when he started, like the dried dregs of hot brown morning potion stuck to the bottom of the mug. But it would have to do.

He let rage pour through his veins, letting them light up red, a soft glow emanating from him. Then it stopped, it ebbed, and Callum clutched at anything he could to force it forward. Callum grabbed weaves and windings of Sky and air, forcing them to intermingle with the power of the Sun already residing within him.

The soft glow around him shifted from orange to purple and he could feel static in his flesh as his bones began to vibrate with a new energy.

Tazel merely watched.

"My plan now?" Callum asked. He couldn't focus with the buzzing in his head, he felt pent up, restrained, he needed to burn this off, "I'm going to run away, of course."

And in a flash Callum took off down the stone pathway that lead to the chasm, his feet carried him faster than he thought possible. His feet slapping nearly continuously in his ears accompanying the flitting fleeting sensation of tingling running sharply up his arms and legs and up his spine.

Callum left the chasm with Tazel behind, and soon came upon Corvus, Soren, and Praid slinking along. They rushed towards him, or rather, he rushed towards them as his feet ate up the tunnel. When he reached them, Callum tried to stop, his feet doing his bidding, but the soft and uneven ground of the catacombs offering poor traction, he slipped and stumbled past them.

"What in the hells?" Corvus asked, seeing the purple glow rise up behind him, only to follow it after Callum passed.
"Callum?" Soren inquired, "Get up, what happened?"

Callum shot up, standing from the ground, not bothering to right his coat or his hair, now standing up on end, "It didn't work, there's not enough around here, they might be right behind me!"

"Why were you purple?" Praid asked.

"Yea," Soren added, "It was like the Sunfire Heatbeasts, but...purple."

Callum thought over what he had done in desperation, he had forced two Primal sources to intermingle in his veins, in his body, and he had felt such a sudden rush of energy, where the Sun had offered strength, when he intertwined Sky the nature of the spell had changed. Callum had never been able to do such a thing before. He had never really tried. He had never read about any other mage doing such things either.

It wasn't without price though. He could feel the fatigue that he had been fending off so well just moments before suddenly weighing down in a much larger magnitude upon his shoulders. His arms and legs ached. They felt like he had spent all day training with Rayla and then Soren. His breath was coming in ragged intakes and there was a stitch in his side. He didn't recall when he started to sweat, but he was drenched.

"There's almost no Primal energy down here." Callum answered, "I did what I could, but I don't know if I can do that again. I don't know that I can pull off Krackoom."

"Never mind tha', boy," Praid answered coming to Callum and placing a hand on his shoulder, "Can you run?"

Callum was thankful that Praid chose to place his heavy hand on his right shoulder, his left still smarting from the blunt impact of one of the mage killer's flails.

Callum wanted to tell him yes, to say he could keep going, but breathing was hard, speaking was worse. He only nodded emphatically, swallowing hard, and then continued to breathe heavily.

"Good boy," Praid nudged him with a gauntleted hand and pat him on the back, "Let's move."
Callum nodded and began moving up the path. They passed Jangle and the hidden Gren, they moved beyond the unconscious elf in a block of ice, and further beyond the entryway into the path where Soren had waited initially.

"Guys?" Came Claudia's ethereal voice.

They continued to run through the winding pathway.

"What is it, Clauds?" Soren asked. How was he not even winded? The bastard was running in full plate mail.

"I don't want to alarm you," Her voice was definitely uneasy, "But I think that the assassins are right on the other side of the door." There was a pause, then she continued with much more confidence, "The assassins are right on the other side of the door."

"We're almost there, Clauds." Soren answered, he did a better job of masking the worry from his voice, though it fell plainly across his face. Soren's pace doubled and Callum groaned to keep up, his body wasn't used to these hard pushes. He was never at the point where his stamina would have been able to contend with Soren on his worst day. Now, however, Callum was worn. Not only was he going toe to toe with physically superior foes, had been beaten and abused, was fairly certain he had at least one broken rib given the way it ached and seared with each breath, but on top of all that he had been pulling Primal energy seemingly out of thin air. Once the initial spells were cast, once the energy latent in the catacombs was consumed, it had felt like trying to pull gossamer through a sieve, like it was constantly about to tear away in wisps. Each adjunctive casting seemed to make things worse. He had never been so far from a source. He worried that trying to cast the potent spells which he needed, which Ezran needed, might not be a possible reality.

Claudia didn't have this same limitation, he realized, surrounded by death and artifacts, she could push on without the need for Primal sources.

He stamped out the temptation quickly. Now was not the time to argue moral grounds all over again.

Focus.

One foot in front of the other.
Callum couldn't say whether they came to the audience hall before the amphitheater quickly or slowly. He had to put all of his intent into moving that one step at a time. There were instances when he stumbled and he would catch himself on the wall, instances where Callum fell to his knees and it would take the hand of another to lift him again to his feet.

"Callum, you need to stop." Somebody said.

"I can't" He would argue, "They need me. I have to protect them."

"Callum, you need to rest." Somebody halted him.

Callum stumbled past, "No, I have to do this. Harrow and Sarai. He's all I have left of them."

"Boy, you're in no condition to continue, I won't let you kill yourself over this." A hard and familiar voice reprimanded.

"She needs me. I won't let her down. Not again." Callum seethed. How dare they try to stop him, how dare they stand in his way. He wanted to shout, to scream and rail against them, but he couldn't. Everything had to go into that next step, that next plod forward.

"Stop trying, Praid, Corvus," A pitying tone carried in this voice, "He's pushed himself too far, yes, but he's still going, still fighting. We'll worry about repercussions later."

Callum kept moving, one foot and then the other, one foot and then the other, one foot and then-

"Callum stop!" a voice hissed. He felt himself be jostled as someone firmly grabbed his collar.

"Idiot boy!" scolded another, "I tolerated this while we ran, but this is too much, you risk our lives with your stupidity!"

Callum blinked and saw the Moonshadow elf glaring down at him.

"Thanks," Callum mumbled, not sure what he was thanking them for. His body ached and
protested, his chest burned and the stitch in his side had only gotten worse, feeling like a knife in his side. Not to mention that slipping grinding sensation coming from his left chest each time he moved his left arm, each time he took a jolting step or stumbled it flared anew.

The Moonshadow elf. Praid, that's right, Praid stared down at him, frowning.

Purpose and reason came slamming back in the reprieve from the pain that resting brought. The transition must have been obvious.

"You good, Mis-Step Prince?" Soren teased.

Callum swallowed, trying to suppress the pain, trying to ignore it, but in the end realizing that he merely had to acknowledge it and live with it. "Yea, just…" he paused, trying to think of the most eloquent way to put it, "…Ow."

Praid and Corvus shook their head smiling, Soren clapped him hard on the back causing the pain to surge forward again before receding.

"They’re right ahead, aren’t they.” Callum asked nobody in particular.

"All four of them." Corvus nodded quietly.

"And the door?" Callum sat and leaned against the wall, his arms propped on knees, he was still trying to catch his breath, still trying to orient himself as to what was going on.

"Still holds." Soren answered, "But steel and wood can only do so much. It is almost as old as Katolis,. Just a matter of time before it buckles like an old donkey."

Callu nodded, not quite sure how an old donkey could buckle things. He looked left and then right, why couldn't he get a good deep breath in? "We're going to open it."

"What?" Corvus hissed, "You're going to open the path to the king? Did you hit your head? Did you lose your sensibilities?"
"We'll push them back. Push them. I'll need help. Get Claudia to open the gate on the other side. Push them as far…” Callum coughed, "…as far back into the catacombs as we can. Get us on the other side of the gate, and then shut it."

"And trap ourselves?"

"No." Callum coughed, "Buy ourselves time to rest. They will be breaking themselves to get through before the night is over. While we rest. When they break through we throw everything at them, we hold as long as we can. Maybe we can hold long enough to get an advantage. Maybe we can hold until morning."

"There is much of this night left, Callum." Praid said somberly.

"Right." Callum nodded, "Do you have a better idea? Because I'm out. This is the last one. We need to buy time."

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"No, we are not opening the door." Rayla sneered back at Claudia.

"It'll be okay, it's Callum's idea." Claudia stood opposite the crank cog from Rayla, her hands gripping the iron of the wheel and Rayla's hand's on top of hers. Their faces mere inches apart, violet eyes meeting soft green. Their eyes searched each other's, two iron wills clashing, "Don't you trust him? Don't you trust me?"

"Him? Yes." Rayla laughed, "You, not so much."

"God, woman," Claudia growled, "What will it take?!"

Rayla opened her mouth, almost reprimanded the mage for the role her father played in attempting to kill Callum and Ezran, almost dug up the past.
"Rayla!" Ezran shouted as Rayla opened her mouth, "You may not trust her, but I do. Do as she says." His voice was a child's. His voice was kingly.

There was silence as she looked between Ezran and the dark mage.

Claudia spoke hesitantly, "I don't have the strength to hold it myself," She took her hands out from under Rayla's and placed them atop hers on the steel wheel, "but you do. It won't lock unless its all the way open or shut."

"When we get it up, hold it." Rayla nodded, understanding. She would have to hold it up using the strength of her heritage.

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"This is going to hurt." Callum mumbled to himself. He slipped his vision past reality into examining those glowing nodes. Moon glowed so bright tonight but even still it was faint this deep in the earth. Even if he was willing to compromise Praid and Alayza, there was no spell he was familiar with that he knew would turn the tide better than having them at their best. Sky, flickered like a spark, not nearly enough air stirred down here to create the differentials he needed to bring up a gale or lightning strike. But, just as before, though the sun itself be far away, the burning heat of shifting plates of rock were closer here than on the surface, a strange dichotomy of Earth that it somehow produced the primal essence he needed for Sun magic.

Callum looked to Soren who waited with a pensive smile, his blonde locks held back in a tie, the sides still shaved. His Katolian armor dented and battered in an exchange where he had stood his own against the elves. Corvus beside him hefting Praid's armor onto his back, keeping a hand free to brandish a dagger. The elder Moonshadow elf stood all but nude before them.

He grimaced, "This is going to hurt you?" Praid did not seem happy about the current arrangement, judging by the scowl he cast at Callum, "Bah."

"On my signal." Callum nodded, coughing softly.

"oN mY sIGnAl." Praid mocked.

Callum spread his fingers out before him, trying to pass through the veil of the world before him to
feel the flows and ebs of the Sun Primal as it floated up from beneath his feet, drawing it up, drawing it in. His muscles ached, his back burned, and his head pounded with his heart. He felt the muscles of his neck strain as he tried to produce the words he needed, having to drag them out through the liquid sand to summon his intent.

His eyes flickered to Praid. The elder elf made a small gesture and began to fade from vision, leaving only the floating small clothes he wore, which were then removed. He would move, as Callum had asked him to, into the next chamber where he would, to the best of his ability, draw the assassins to the far end of the chamber.

Callum heard the echo of a rock cracking stone in the distance, the signal Praid had warned him to listen for. He moved towards the fusion of all the paths leading to the amphitheater of the Orphan Queen. The assassins didn't make a noise, like he expected, but he anticipated that they would move towards the sound, and Callum would push them further.

Callum rushed into the room, quickly looking for the assassins, two near the opening, one still at the door, and another between the two in the large expanse.

Red light flared to light at his fingertips and he carved the sinuous red lines in the air, drawing their attention. He felt the brush of something unseen at his side. Praid was out of dangers reach. Momentarily.

Before the assassins could raise the alarm, Callum was already roaring the words, "Obice Ignis!"

Roaring words summoned roaring flames from the ether, tongues of fire emerged from clawed hands, waves of heat blasting back at Callum. But he forged on, a wall of flame sweeping across the chamber, forcing Neim back from the door, Tazel back towards the two that examined Praid's trap and wrapped around the distant wall, keeping a barrier of red light blazing yellow between them, floor to ceiling.

Over the roaring flame, Callum screamed, his words nearly lost in the force of the crackling blaze, "Claudia, now! Everyone, move!" Flaming arrows burst through the barrier, firing blindly through the flames hoping to strike something.

The portcullis of iron and wood, now scorched black across the surface thanks to Callum's ferocity, shifted slightly upwards. The halting movements of the hidden cogwheels moved the door up, just a sliver, then another.
Callum had to look away, he had to focus on the spell. He felt the Primal energy being used up. He was already amazed that he had pulled so much, but it was like a sieve, once the flow started, it almost kept itself going, wearing him away in the process. He pushed forward as he saw Coruvs's shadow race past and saw him slide under the door, taking Praid's armor with him as he did so.

Callum went to a knee, how were his legs so weak? They quivered beneath him, causing him to shake.

Soren was beside him, "Callum, we have to go!"

"No." Callum strained, holding his arms aloft. He could feel the palms of his hands scorch and blister, the sleeves of his coat beginning to smolder, "Get in there, I'm right behind you!"

More arrows flew blindly past to bounce against distant walls.

Callum could feel the primal energy flowing through him begin to sputter. There wasn't enough, "Now, Soren!"

"Dammit, Callum!" Soren grabbed the mage, his friend, the closest thing he'd known to a brother, and heaved, pulling the mage with him.

Callum grit his teeth and pushed with a last great effort. The fire wall faded. It flickered and failed. Callum nearly collapsed in Soren's arms as the guard lugged him towards the gate.

Callum watched the elves there, Tazel, Neim, Lilsep, and Torani, as they lowered their arms and peaked beyond. Callum could see scorched bits of flesh on them. Soot on their faces, clothes that had been scoured away in flame. But they had moved fast enough to avoid truly being burned.

Tazel righted himself, recognized Callum and Soren, quick as an adder looked to the opening iron and wood barrier. He watched the elf run to intercept Soren.

Soren heaved Callum towards the opening.

Callum did his best to get low and use the forward momentum to carry himself forth. He clawed
his way through to the opening beyond the door. He saw them and relief washed over him. Praid was hurrying into his armor with the help of Alayza. They stood between Ezran who saw him emerging, and smiled. Claudia was helping Soren to his feet and pulling him up, Corvus was helping Rayla hold the door up.

Callum heard her voice, a sing song in the din, "Help him, Corvus, I have tha door, g't him in here!"

Callum continued to scramble, legs and arms weakly making headway.

Corvus ran and slid towards him, arm outstretched, and Callum felt something firm and strong wrap around his ankle.

His fingertips slipped through Corvus's hand as he was pulled backwards under the portcullis with great strength.

He heard that beautiful voice again, screaming in agony, "Callum!"

He saw her start to run towards him, leaving the wheel.

The world spun as he was flung through the air. He hit the ground hard, with a grunt and rolled before stopping against the wall of the chamber. There was a thud followed by a rumble as the portcullis slammed into the ground again.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you thought of the action this chapter, I tried to keep it intermittently fast paced, funny, and back again.
A Key Without A Lock

Chapter Notes

Warning: torture ensues.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rayla had watched Callum's fingers slide away beneath the portcullis. Feeling panic snake through her, she left the crank wheel and dove for his outstretched palm, though as her hands left the device spun quickly and the gate slammed shut before she could even reach him. Callum hadn't cried out, there was no anguish on his face.

But there had been fear.

Those perfect emerald eyes wide as saucers, a look of dawning realization had raced across his features. Rayla couldn't shake the afterimage of his expression, imprinted on her mind.

Rayla ran back to the wheel, heaving her weight against it even as the others, Soren and Claudia, Praid and Corvus, Alayza and Ezran, watched in stunned silence. The crank wheel shifted as she slammed her weight into it. The door budged and began to raise, but suddenly Praid was there, his hands on hers.

"Let go!" Rayla howled at her father, "I hav'ta help him!" Her eyes stung even as she screamed, the world swimming and distorted in her vision, but she forged on.

Praid remained unmoving, his hands locked and tense over hers, "Rayla," Praid whispered sternly, "You can't." He pleaded with his own daughter, understanding.

"Father! Let go!" Her voice urged and sputtered, her voice almost sobbing as she screamed. She knew coming into this that either she or he might die, they had discussed losing one another, but it hadn't seemed real. As though it was just a jest. Neither of them truly believed that they might perish, that they weren't the protagonists in some fanciful tale, impervious to anguish and death. On a certain level they knew that they could die at any second, in any confrontation, but never did they truly believe it. Nobody believed terrible things could or would happen to you, until they did. The prospect of losing Callum was alien to her, one that she wouldn't let herself accept.
"Rayla!" Praid tried to stay soothing, his hands trying to both stay her from opening the portcullis as well as offer comfort. But their hands battled to turn the device. Praid nearly growled at his daughter, "Rayla stop it!"

"They're goin' ta kill him!" She sobbed in his face with feral ferocity, she didn't realize that the tears had already begun to fall.

In a cold voice Praid scolded her, "They're assassins, Rayla. That's what they do."

She shook her head in terror, "I can save him, I have ta save him!"

Praid leaned in heavily over her, using his full height to intimidate his frantic daughter, "Rayla, if they're going to kill him, he's already dead."

Rayla continued to struggle against her father, but she lost momentum rapidly, understanding what he said to be true. They were six assassins. Weapons honed to end life. If they were going to kill him, he was dead, if they weren't going to kill him…it would be a mercy to Callum to be dead.

"Don't say tha'." Rayla slumped, her father's arms going from fighting her hold to holding her together, "Don't say tha'." She looked at him with desperate violet eyes, as though he could take back the words, as though he could tell her it was all some awful dream, as though he had the power to change the course this nightmare had taken. Rayla's body quivered, sobbing softly into her bandaged hands, seeing Sarai's golden gauntlets.

She hadn't protected him.

Ezran approached Rayla where Praid crouched, holding Rayla together. Alayza was at the young king's side. The elder elftress only taking her eyes from the young king to share unnoticed glances with Praid and stare worriedly at her daughter.

Soren still stood staring, mouth working, stunned, with Claudia at his side, brow furrowed and eyes closed. Corvus had taken a step backwards slumped against one of the arcing pillar like supports of the amphitheater. His face was slack, his gaze fogged, Corvus had no clear plan of action, and stood still, reliving the moment.

Alayza's voice was distant when she spoke, callous yet soft, "The King's brother bought us time,
with his life, we are preserved to fight yet again. Our mission still has hope, because of him. Katolis still has hope because of him. He may have given us the time we need for peace to flourish."

Rayla met her mother's eyes, but couldn't keep her focus there. Her vision swam, her body wracked by sobs.

Praid did his best to comfort the pacifist assassin in his arms: patting her back, whispering unheard soothing words, kissing her crown. After all, Rayla was his little girl, his little lamb. However, this didn't protect her nor him from the harsh truths of parenthood. Praid was just another fleck of dust caught in a windstorm, he was no more special than the next. There was no grand power that having a child brought to change the ways of the world, so he could only watch as his daughter's world fell to pieces.

Ezran's voice was cold tempered steel, "Is it true Claudia, is he dead?"

"Dead or unconscious," Claudia put out the facts of the situation. When the pressure was on, when there was no time for antics, Claudia became viciously efficient. Her eyes were closed still, Rayla noted, not because of tears or sorrow, but while they had all be focused on what had happened, Claudia was already focused on what needed to happen. Her brow furrowed back and forth, her closed eyes rolling, searching, "My connection to him was severed."

"Couldn't he have gone to another plane?" Soren asked excitedly, looking at his sister, "Like that time I-"

"No." Claudia said simply.

Soren was confused, looked thoughtful, then added, understanding, "Because he didn't swallow the magic frog."

"Because he didn't swallow the magic frog." Claudia added, vexed.

"Can you make another connection?" Corvus asked coming up beside Claudia, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Claudia sighed, shaking her head, "If he's not conscious, I can't."
"Open the door then," Soren shrugged, "I'll get him." His blade had never been sheathed and he worked his neck, popping it audibly.

"Don't be an idiot." Claudia scolded.

Ezran took a deep and shuddering breath. Rayla watched him suppress a quiver before he spoke.

Rayla mouthed the word 'No', but could produce no sound. She turned, clutching her father's cloak and wept into the Neolandian fabric.

"Until we know that Callum is alive, the door stays shut," Ezran's words were definitive, brooking no argument. Like a king, he took he lives of others and weighed them against his kingdom.

"No! No, no, no, no..." Rayla began to sob aloud anew.

"Callum bought us time. Zym says that dawn is a short six hours away." Ezran tried to explain himself, explain his plan. "Until then we are on our own. The noose still cinches about their necks." Grim talk, even for King Ezran.

"What noose is that, king Ezran?" Praid asked, confused.

Soren smirked, as did Corvus. Something they knew, but not the elves. Trust was still tenuous.

"There are layers to this plan," Ezran sighed, "I did not think to stand alone against the assassins, merely to buy time and let them exhaust themselves trying to get to me." Rayla saw his sad eyes take on a triumphant smile poisoned by the reality of his brother's demise, "The trap is bigger than just a few fireballs and illusions."

And then, there was a soft rapping at the portcullis: a gentle, almost cordial knock.

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Torani rapped softly upon the portcullis of wood and steel, the soft pounding causing a hollow reverberation to echo through the catacombs. When no answer came, she turned to her pack, "Well, other than just breaking the fucker down, that was my last idea. What now?" Torani asked the group, shrugging.

"Knocking was my idea." Neim grumbled, sitting on his haunches on the other side of the door.

"They will open it," Tazel laughed walking over to Callum, crouching, "or else the mage will die." He grabbed Callum's face, the breaths the mage drew were shallow. His chest moved unevenly, and with each breath Callum's face seemed to wince in pain. Tazel's four fingered hand slapped his face gently, almost affectionately, "He is the key that will open this door."

Tazel gripped Callum around the wrist and dragged him towards the portcullis.

"This insect has caused me too much angst," Tazel licked is lips, pulling an iron spike from his belt, flipping it over and over in his hand, "I will enjoy this, but let's make sure he's awake for it. Lilsep?"

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Callum saw only black, watched a world of darkness through unseeing eyes. He stood alone in the void.

Alone with himself.

"Do you think it's odd," the grey skinned reflection mused to the beaten and bruised mage, "that every time you carry the Key of Aaravos, we wind up talking."

Callum rolled onto his stomach within the void, a terrain of formless shadow that undulated and twisted, somehow leaving a plateau on which he lay, "I don't want to talk to you." Smoke and ash swirled around him.

The grey Callum crouched in front of the wincing mage, "Well, that's hardly any way to treat an old friend." The figure tossed the cube in the air, bouncing it in his hand. It was easy to see the two serpent runes forming the dark eye of Claudia's type of magic on each of the faces of the Key.
Callum spat, blood smacked the ground before his face. It bubbled and rose on unseen currents of air. He came to his knees and met the gaze of Callum the Grey, "I told you," he groaned, "I chose my own path. I don't need you."

"Callum," The Grey laughed, "You will always need me. Humanity will always need me." The figure wore attire similar to Callum's, a jacket left unclasped, hanging open, but the colors were faded and the hems were frayed. He turned from where Callum knelt and moved away, the ash of the landscape swirling and fading into the distance, and from the shadow a dais formed. Rising from black marble ash coalesced into a mound of strange, finely polished orbs that shone reflecting an nether light that wasn't there. The orbs spiraled and rose to meet the feet of the Grey as he ascended the framework and took his seat on a forming throne, "One of the things you fail to realize, is that though dark magic is your destiny, it is not just your destiny, but the path the world must take."

"No, we've been over this." Callum coughed, rising to his feet, "Destiny is a book you write yourself."

"Destiny is a book you write yourself," The figure on the throne sneered, looking down on Callum where he now stood, "How contrite." The Grey pressed his lips together, "I see it falls to me to educate you. I had hoped you would be intelligent enough to figure this out yourself." There was a long drawn out sigh as the Grey twisted his fingers and arising from the orbs of ash was a candle of red wax that with a glowing white flame atop it, "Consider the following: the world is made up of equal and opposing forces, yes? Sun and Moon, Star and Earth, Sea and Sky. These forces working against one another are what spin the weave of reality into being, yes?"

"Yes." Callum added hesitantly.

"Well, then, Callum the Contrite," Laughed the Grey, "Where does thought come from? Where does love come from?"

"Where are you going with this?" Callum felt uneasy watching the display before him. He didn't know if he was stepping towards the throne, or if the throne was looming closer to him.

"All magic exists on a continuum. Six points on a wheel of spinning possibility. The beams between the points the framework on which the rest of the world is built. Even spirit magic."

"Spirit magic?" Callum had never heard of such a practice.
The Grey pursed his lips, "Dark magic. Magic at the cost of a creature's life force."

"Just another lie," Callum scoffed.

The Grey ignored him, continuing, "But what is life force but an amalgamation of primal energies? Surely it's crossed your mind, else we wouldn't be here."

There was a long pause where nobody spoke, the Grey's emerald and ash eyes met his own.

Finally, the Grey spoke again, "Fine, consider the bee."

Callum felt a chill, "The bee?"

"Yes, the common bumblebee." The Grey waved a hand and out of the ether and soot a too large approximation of a bee hovered between them, "Earth to make the body, Sea to give it life, Air to keep it aloft, Sun to dictate its days, Moon to show the passage of time, Star to keep it aloft from the ground."

Callum couldn't help but ponder the words.

"When I take the life force of a bee," The Grey grinned as the apparition of the bee shattered, "I am merely taking what the Primals have forged and redirecting it, remaking it. Because of this capability you are uniquely positioned."

"What do you mean?"

"Why do you think humans found Spirit Magic so easy?" The Grey didn't let Callum speak, instead he just continued with his pedantic speech, "You find dark magic so easy because you are balanced. The magical creatures you love," Soot and ash swirled forming the figure of Rayla, "that you covet," Zym and Thunder, "They're polluted. Diseased with primal magic. Their bodies so drunk on the toxic primal sources that they coded it in their blood and bones. But then humans came," Ash and soot in the shape of Rayla, Zym, and Thunder all turned as a fourth apparition joined them. A long haired human carrying a staff and wearing a long robe of intricate work. Bones hung in ornamentation on his brow and at his neck. "When humans re-emerged, it was because a
balance was once again needed. No taint of moon or sky, just an amalgamation of sources balanced in each other. Perfection."

"This doesn't make sense." Callum interrupted.

The interruption was met with a grimace, "You would be an idiot. Serves me right for waiting so long." It sighed, "Does Sky not fill your lungs, does Sea not fill your veins? Are you not grown from the sediment of Earth? Does the Sun and Moon not dictate the cycle of your life? Do the Stars not provoke you to dream, yet keep you grounded? You are more than balanced. You. Are. The. Balance."

Callum could see it, the interweaving flecks of primal energy that filled his lungs and veins, the earth of his body.

"Yes!" The Grey watched him excitedly, "You are that which elves could never be. Life in a tenuous balance of all the primal sources. They clung to their roots and stunted their growth. The natural world grew tired and it churned out something forgotten in humanity."

Callum saw the Key of Aaravos with it's Dark Magic symbols in the left hand of the Grey. Callum took his version of the key from his pocket, seeing the Primal symbols on it, "And what role does this play?"

The Grey considered the ignored key in his hand, "What does the key open, Callum? Where is the lock which this opens?"

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"It's quiet out there." Rayla finally spoke. Sitting on the floor in her fathers arms, it had taken a gargantuan effort to say anything in the silence. She had allowed Praid to comfort her while Alayza looked on worriedly.

Ezran nodded grimly, "Yes, but they will get the door open eventually. I don't know how, but they are not just sitting on their hands."

Soren went and placed a hand on the steel and wood, "I don't feel anything, no vibrations, no pounding or hammering. What are they planning?"
Behind Soren's back, Rayla saw Claudia's hand seek Corvus's and clutch it tightly, briefly, before letting go.

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Callum's eyes fluttered open. A world of sparks in every hue expanded out before him. A world in chaotic motion coalesced into being without revealing what he saw. Flecks of red floating up like embers from the stone beneath his feet. Floating red lights filled his vision, filled the black of his awareness. He tried to focus, tried to bring up a bit of purpose, but couldn't latch onto anything, it all seemed to slip away.

Where was Rayla?

Where was Ezran?

Where was he for that matter?

Rayla. That sweet timid smile that slowly gave way to intimate chuckles. The confident bravado and flirty phrases that would crumble to giddy giggles when confronted with affection. The smell of her, moonberries and sweat and a strange floral scent he couldn't place, but something that swirled and swam through his head that reminded him of the Nexus of the Moon, of Lujanne, of a secret night spent together.

His vision may have been black, but red motes swirled, gained and lofted, he could feel their warmth, feel the timid kiss of their scorch. And then motes of blue, every so often, gusting through and twirling in and out of motes of red making them spin about themselves with a relieving caress. Silver motes like fat drops of rain falling through it all. Trickles of deep blue along barriers of earthy brown. He took in a breath, one of the hardest thing's he'd ever had to do, took the still air filled with motes of red and blue and silver into his lungs and exhaled a mixture of the same.

"Oh, it's awake." A hissing voice, the serpentine Tazel, "Good work, Lilsep,"

"Tazel." Callum mumbled, trying to look around, trying to get the world to fade back into view. Callum was vaguely aware of the ground slipping away beneath him. He hung limply in the air, held aloft by his wrist, floating amidst the red lights that filled the chaos.
"Good," The voice seemed less than pleased, "You're awake enough to recognize me. Bring him out of it more, Lilsep, I want him to feel this."

Silver flecks twisted in mid air and coalesced within him, Callum became aware of figures moving, ahead of him an oval face of soft features and pouting lips that stared at him with cyan eyes beneath tumbling tresses of white hair. Next to her, a crooked horned demon standing over her shoulder, leaning in and grimacing. Neim and Torani further back, focused on the door which barred the path to their quarry.

"Why are you doing this?" Callum moaned, "Why not just kill me and be done with it?"

"Callum, Callum, Callum," Tazel grabbed Callum's chin, orienting the human's emerald eyes to meet his own violent ones, "You have perverted everything that not only I, but the elven peoples hold dear. There must be punishment. There must be anguish. Your kind must know what happens to those that forget their place. The Dragon Queen agrees, we have tolerated your insults long enough, you have grown unruly, you have grown petulant. It is time for the humans to be culled, more than that, it is time for you to learn the lesson of what happens to those who try to grasp beyond their station, what happens to those who feed lies to the world. In time, the truth always comes out."

Callum became aware of something sharp dragging across the bottom of his jaw, he winced and tried to pull away, but could only move a minute amount before he met wood and steel.

"Struggling just makes this more fun for me," Tazel whispered, "By all means, try to get away."

Callum's eye's rolled as he clutched at consciousness. A smiling smirking Moonshadow Elf drew an iron spike along Callum's coat sleeve. A popping tearing sound following it as seams popped and stained. The sleeve did not hang open, but there was enough of a strain to fray there. Tazel gripped Callum by the wrist while Lilsep held his head fast, somehow using the Moon primal to keep him awake. Callum's wrist was held flat against the wood of the porticullis and Tazel pressed the tip of the iron spike to Callum's palm.

Callum's eyes shot open, the pain was sharp and sudden, boring into his hand. A fire of sharp pain that smoldered and caught across his mind. He tried to turn his head to look, but couldn't. Soft hands hard as steel held his head fast. Instead his eyes strained against Lilsep's hold. Callum was forced to watch out of the corner of his wide and straining eyes.
"Glad you're paying attention." Tazel laughed.

Bone and flesh parted before the unyielding iron. Separating sinew, it drove through the flesh slowly, Callum could feel each incremental and halting movement as Tazel intentionally twisted and tortured. With disconcerting ease the elf drove the metal spike through Callum's hand. Red at the edges of his vision then ebbed to black, Callum had to grit his teeth to keep from screaming, but the best he could manage was intense groans of pain against locked teeth. The spike emerged from the other side, and Callum got a glimpse of just how much Tazel was toying with him. The spike drove into the dense wood of the portcullis like a hot knife parting butter. As the spike descended into his flesh he could feel that it got larger and larger, distorting the architecture of his nerves, bones, and vessels. Sharp pain was accompanied by running shocks moving like lightning bolts up his arm.

Callum panted against his own teeth, spittle flying from his mouth.

"How is this going to help us get our prey?" Neim asked, toying with the lunar ties about his wrists.

"We have found ourselves blocked by a door without a key," Tazel said proudly, standing from his ministrations, "So I will forge one from his screams." He leaned in close to Callum, "Hear that, human, your life will be the key that kills your brother. The key that brings Rayla back to me. Tell me, does she still smell of sweet miswel and moonberries?" His voice was distant and fanciful, "Shame that I will have to scour your stain and stench from her. She had all the makings of a perfect concubine. Somebody both lethal and nubile. A shame you ruined my toy."

"Tazel?" Callum managed to piece the name together through the fog of his pain and chattering teeth.

Tazel lifted Callum's chin again, "Yes, mage?"

"F-ffuck y-you."

"Ha!" Neim barked behind them, "Insect he may be, but I like him. He has steel in those veins."

Callum felt the world slip away to blackness again.
"Back again?" The Grey sat upon the throne of gleaming black orbs, distorted and melded in their shape. Red mist seeped in a dense cloud around it's base. Callum could taste copper and didn't know if it was the wisps of red that entered his lungs or his own blood sitting on the back of his tongue.

"Not by choice." Callum cradled his left arm as he stood. Callum felt woozy, disoriented, the world spun as he held his stance. He could feel the pain coursing through his body, through his arm. His chest still heaved. Vaguely, he remembered the catacombs and Tazel. Like a dream, he remembered Tazel driving the iron spike through his left hand. Callum looked at his hand and could see the gaping wound. He moved fingers and saw the tendons moving beneath the flesh pulling the fingers like a complex machination making them dance and twitch. They didn't move naturally, but twitched spasmodically independent of his will.

"Oh," The Grey barked, holding up his own left hand, "That old injury?" There was a scar there, a parting of grey flesh leaving a pink mar, "Is that when we are?" A grey fingertip traced over the harsh pink outlines of flesh, "Oh, I had so much fun playing with Tazel, in the end he deserved it for what he did to Rayla. She gave him more than one scar, but I found her revenge wanting." The Grey leapt down from the gleaming black throne and it faded to dust on an unfelt wind and Callum continued to struggle to maintain feet.

"I envy you, in a way." The grey apparition approached Callum, offering him a steadying hand to help him. A hand Callum stubbornly refused to accept, "The world is on the cusp of change and you will stand there, directing the currents of change. For me, all of it has already happened, again and again and again and -" it droned on repeating itself, caught there in the cycles of it's own past.

Callum stepped backwards, stumbling over his own feet and falling on his backside. He tried to brace himself on his left hand instinctively, but drew it up sharply, falling to his side. Callum looked up at the Grey, struggling to support himself on his right hand to again stand before the grey mirror of himself, with disgust in his voice, he asked, "What are you?"

The droning stopped, and faded emerald eyes blinked, black seeping into the whites of its eyes. The iris faded under and through the black before it spilled out over his eyelids and running down its cheeks like fat black teardrops. A smile revealed crooked yellow teeth, "I am that which seeks to unlock the balance. Primal Magic, Spirit Magic, it is all one, interwoven."
"He's awake." A feminine voice cooed in Callum's ears.

"Don't let him slip away again." Tazel growled lowly, commanding brusquely.

"I just didn't expect him to have such a weak constitution." Lilsep defended, "It won't happen again," she assured. Even as she spoke, Callum could feel the world coming back into view, that world of shifting multicolored sparks giving way to the world in which the assassins and he resided. Callum could feel his heart pounding in his chest, his awareness shifting from a shadowed sphere of the world expanding outwards. His breathing became more rapid and pain again began to race up and down his left arm. Lilsep tsked, "Though, if we push this weak thing too far his heart will burst. Human's are so terribly fragile."

"No matter," Tazel flipped another iron spike in his hand, smirking as he moved to Callum's other side, "We'll put a pin in it for the moment." Tazel grabbed Callum's right wrist and pressed the iron spike to the human's palm. Eyes wide and quivering, Callum watched, "Do me a favor and scream so my bride knows we're having a good time out here."

Tazel drew the metal point along his coat sleeve again, this time causing the seam to pop and fray, the metal point dragging along Callum's flesh beneath.

Callum began to buck against Lilsep's hands on his head, but she merely rose a leg and pressed her pelvis against his, holding his body flat against the wood wall with the weight of her body, straddling him and holding him flat with the strength of her legs, "Now that could be a fun time, " She purred in his ear, biting it, "Keep fighting, it makes this part better."

Callum didn't listen to her words, but continued to writhe and shift furiously trying to escape. Each movement causing his other hand to shift painfully around the metal spike impaling his hand. Bolts of pain keeping his awareness in the here and now as his body desperately tried to flee the horrendous experience.

Tazel began to press the other metal spike into his hand, Callum, clenching his teeth hard enough that he felt them start to crack. But then something crossed the threshold. Callum couldn't hold the pain back anymore, couldn't reign it in any longer. From the groaning resistance he had been mounting, a scream finally tore from his throat, and with it came the flood. The dam of his resistance broke and fractured and screams of agony spilled over, tumbling out of his mouth unbidden. A part of him struggled to gain control again, a part cognizant of what Tazel was trying to accomplish, but it was such a small portion compared to the mountain of pain that was bearing down on him.
The catacombs of Katolis echoed with the screams of Callum the Calamitous intermingled with the laughter of Tazel the Treacherous.

"Oh, Luna." Alayza stood facing the door. The furthest back from it than anyone else, the screams they were hearing were strange and unnatural. As part of the Dragonguard she had been trained to resist torture, trained to pocket the pain and place it elsewhere, but as part of the Dragonguard, she had been trained on just how to break that resistance. These hellish screams, this immoral agony that she heard reverberating against the portcullis she knew, she had been part of creating in the past. She shivered remembering the look in the eyes of the humans that had their flesh peeled off of them like a grape.

She placed a hand over her heart, her own pulse beginning to beat furiously. Was this the fate that awaited them all?

Praid growled, holding their daughter close, "I cannot believe Tazel would do such things. The apple seems to have not only fallen far from the tree, but rolled quite a ways downhill." Alayza looked to her spouse. This was Tazel's doing? The sweet assassin boy that had courted Rayla so long ago, or what seemed so long ago. The one that they had agreed with the Warden on a price for their daughter's hand?

Screams poured through the amphitheater. Alayza shivered.

Rayla's face was ashen, her face stunned and emotionless, "Callum…"

Ezran turned to Claudia, "This mean's he's awake, can you see through his eyes? Can you talk with him?"

Claudia didn't respond, her hand clutching Corvus's. Her face white as a ghost, even Corvus looked pale.

"Claudia!" Ezran hissed.

Claudia started, jumping slightly, turning towards Ezran, "What, what is it, Ezran?" Alayza noted the oddest things. The black mages face twitched with a false smile or a smirk, she dropped the
honorific for the king that she had always been so perfunctory in adding. Her voice held something else in it, it didn't sound quite right, as though it spoke through molasses or shadow.

Ezran took a deep breath, "He's awake, can you tell us anything? Can you see anything?"

Claudia seemed to realize that she should be doing something, and leapt into action. A mumbling spell and flourish of hands and be Alayza saw the girls eyes go black, rolling up in her head.

Claudia didn't have to say what she was seeing, she suddenly had the strength flow out of her, leaning heavily on her staff, and on Corvus, "Oh, Callum." Her voice quivered and her face went green, "What are they doing to you?"

Ezran spoke, voice urgent, "Tell me, Claudia!"

Black eyes stared straight ahead.

"Claudia!" Ezran shouted.

But it was Rayla who spoke, "They're flaying him." She hugged her legs, pulling them close, "they're skinning him alive and not letting him pass out." She turned sad violet eyes to Ezran, "and we're letting it happen."

Ezran balled his fist, clenching and unclenching. Another swell of screaming could be heard coming from the other side of the portcullis. It had been one thing when they thought Callum had died on the other side of the door. It had been terrible, horrendous, literally the stuff of nightmares.

These screams, however, this had been unimaginable. A strange hell they didn't know could exist. Screams that made the idea of a merciful creator seem some far off fantasy. A lie that quivering creatures told themselves to keep the fear of living terrors of the night at bay.

"We have to open the door. We can't just let him suffer like this." Ezran finally caved. He said it aloud, but he feared those words, feared the response.

Rayla bolted to her feet, "Yes!" And ran towards the wheel.
Praid gripped her wrist, "No!"

Rayla drew Runaan's blade, "Let go of my hand before I cut my hand free, father."

Another scream and Rayla struggled in his grip. Praid held up a staying hand, "Listen, I'm not saying we don't help him, that mad lad is holding it together to buy us time. He's buying us time to rest, to survive. I say we use it. I cannot come up with a plan by the seat of my pants like that mage can," He pointed to the portcullis, "but we can at least do our best to ensure success by having. A. Plan."

Rayla hefted the blade threateningly.

Praid let go of her hand, backing away, but adding, "Do not insult him by sacrificing yourself unnecessarily."

Rayla looked at her father, tried to come up with a reason to forge ahead, but threw her arms down in frustration, "Then what's the plan?!" Her eyes were wide and intense. Stained red they were on the verge of crying again. Her intense gaze bored into each of them expectantly, waiting.

The silence was broken only by Callum's continued tormented screams.

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Torani sat bored, picking her nose, "How much more do you reckon it will take?" Torani asked no one in particular, "We only have five hours left until sunrise."

Callum slumped forward again, catching his breath in the slight reprieve that Lilsep forced Tazel to give the human in order to keep him conscious.

"Sorry, sweetie." Lilsep planted a kiss on Callum's cheek, "You can't go running away just yet."

Tazel laughed, a dark and dangerous glint in his eye.
"How much more do you think you can take?" The Grey mused. It had rolled up the sleeve is his right arm and was watching the scars appear on its grey skin. Callum slipped in and out of awareness, caught between Tazel slowly peeling skin away strip after strip, and this grey apparitions chastising.

The Grey held aloft the Key of Aaravos, "The key to open the pathway is within your possession," the dark sigils featured prominently in red glared brightly in the ashen landscape. In an instant the key disjointed from itself, the panels flipping and spinning to reveal the reverse sides with the runes of each of the Primals, "It is all a balance, and you sit at the fulcrum. You are the key."

Chapter End Notes

If you would like to provide feedback on how I described pain, I was trying to make the reader feel squeamish, to really visualize the grotesqueness of the torment that Callum is experiencing, I would greatly appreciate it.

Otherwise, if you thought I was mean to Rayla, you better prepare yourself.

I hope you continue to enjoy my story!
Ezran stood watching the closed portcullis. Agony. That was what Callum was experiencing. Complete and total agony, an unending song and dance of dismal dreams. Those screams. Those infernal screams bounced around inside his head, Ezran couldn't think straight, couldn't piece words together. He felt them dig through him. That scared little child that had sobbed into Sarai's skirts, had clutched at Harrow's hand was waiting just beneath the surface of this calm and collected king. Ezran felt panic in his gut stirring him to immobility and nausea. The world wavered. Ezran couldn’t take this.

But he had to.

Callum had to.

Closing his eyes Ezran forced control, whispering to himself, "I am all I have control over, I must not fear, fear is the mind killer, I will let the fear pass through me and only I will remain."

Old words. Ancient words. Words of those that came before Ezran, before Harrow. And with these words, Ezran refused to hear his brother's agony. Though he wore simple leathers, he could feel the weight of the crown on his brow, he could feel the mantle of responsibility on his shoulders. Ezran had to force the world to silence, had to acknowledge that Callum, his brother, was just another cog in the machine that was Katolis. That his suffering was no more important than the suffering of the hungry and destitute of his lands. Had to tell himself suffering served a greater good, the good of the kingdom. Ezran had to tell himself this lie so he could force Callum's cacophony of torment out and be embraced by a world of downy silence.

And in the silence, he breathed, and it was Rayla's words that reached him first, "Then what's the plan?!" Her words screamed and begged in a single phrase. She was a weapon, a tool, begging to be used. They all were. Ezran loved each and every one of them. The Kingsguard who had tried to kill him, the Dark Mage that twisted death to protect life as she saw fit, the ranger at one with the wilds, the illusionist, the Dragonguard: he loved them all, but they were his tools.

"Alayza," Ezran spoke. His words not cold or hard, simply in control.
The elftress startled at his side by his words, turned to him. Her hand was over her heart as she spoke, "Yes, King Ezran?"

"I need an illusion," Ezran continued. A plan was coming together in his mind. Callum would already have thought out all the pitfalls and be working on it's execution. He envied his brother's mind, but knew that it also made for a lifetime of sleepless nights. Ezran would have to forge forwards regardless, "I need a copy of the door." He mimed his idea to the illusionist, "So, as we open the door, they don't see it moving. can you do that?"

Alayza nodded, catching the idea of the child king, "Easily."

Ezran nodded as though he expected nothing else, turning to Rayla who watched the exchange eagerly, Ezran pointed, "Rayla, once the illusion is up, open the portcullis." Ezran met her eyes, she had pleaded for something, and he was giving her the answer, giving her the plan. Rayla went to the door, walking stiffly from her father's embrace to the task at hand. Ezran watched her. She wasn't thinking clearly, then again, how could she? He knew where she lay her head at night, and it was no surprise.

As Alayza began to weave the illusion, he let his mind trod back to happier times. When they had first set out, it had practically been love at first sight for Rayla. Ezran smirked, Callum had needed a little more convincing. "Then, Corvus, I want you to pull the first pair of legs you see with your flail. This will get them confused, and Praid I want you to fade. Go out there and get my brother while they're confused. Soren and Claudia will be on support." He turned to the siblings, "Make sure they get back safe, and then we close the door, hopefully breaking at least one of their legs in the process."

Soren laughed excitedly, "Into the gray again!" He swung his sword, loosening his muscles in preparation.

Corvus hung his head and stood, "It's 'fray'."

Soren continued slashing the air, " No, I'm pretty sure it's 'gray'."

Claudia was already pulling things out of her pouch, "Soren, you beautiful idiot."

Praid was mumbling something under his breath as he began removing his armor yet again. A
catcall whistle emanated from Alayza as he stripped which was only met by a dire glower.

Joviality was short lived, jests and jokes made soon faded as another set of shrill screams swelled and doubled. Ezran sat on a step of the dais, not hearing the gut wrenching howls of his brother, "Get to work, Alayza."

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Tazel stood, his knife parting the flesh of the mage from his body. Callum hung, impaled upon the portcullis, and was a captive audience to the separation of various layers of his own skin. Tazel paused in his careful works and examined the entirety of his progress. With both arms impaled upon the wood of the gate, Lilsep cradling his head in her Moonweave gloved hands, straddling his waist while standing, the mage's head lolled back and forth with his screams, "Maybe you should have been a bard, Callum," Lilsep chided in the prey's ear, her voice honey sweet and dripping, "I do so enjoy this song you're singing."

Tazel pulled at another blade's width strip of flesh, slowly tugging it away. The elf watched the blood bead and pour over, dripping and draining off of Callum's forearm in runnels of thick red liquid. The human's bucking started anew with his screams redoubling. As the strip of flesh tapered off and it peeled further before finally severing itself under the force of Tazel's gentle pull.

"And such a thing gives pause to Gale?" Neim pondered aloud from the periphery, "What a disappointment." He spat thick mucus that clung to the wall without dripping.

When Callum's screams faded to barely lucid panting, Torani spoke, "I know that there is plenty of time left for us to get to the king, but I am beginning to worry. What if they do not come to save this one. What if they abandon him so that they may survive? We should just year it down, even if it would tire us."

Tazel raised an eyebrow, turning towards her, flecks of blood across his face and pale fingertips red, "Torani, you grew up with Rayla, you were stuck under the tutelage of your brother, Runaan. Do you really think that she is one that would abandon somebody of her pack, however contrived it may be, to their fate?"

Torani both petulant and thoughtful, slumping uncomfortably at the pack leaders reprimand. She sighed before muttering tersely, "No, I s'pose not."
"Exactly," Tazel grinned in a way that didn't touch his violent eyes and turned back to Callum, his key to eradicating the barrier before him. The Moonshadow Elf dragged his knife between the flesh and fat of Callum's arm, separating another strip of flesh from the sinew and pulled at it with his free hand, the wet portion dripping as the human mage continued to howl all over again.

It was as Tazel plucked out another choice bit of the mage's flesh that something changed.

Lilsep kept pouring moonlight into Callum's mind. Silver streams of light that only Moonshadow elves trained to use the Primal like she was, like her parents before her, could see. Illusions and other sinister manipulations of the mind were such fun toys. Treating and altering perceptions required a delicate touch, but just forcing a mind awake was like holding open an already open heavy door. It would be the strain of his body that killed him, not her work. So light poured in.

Lilsep remembered Rayla, too. A sweet little morsel of lamb that had lost her way. Tazel possessed the shepherds rook needed to coax her back, though. Rayla had always been a dedicated assassin, so easy to take up the mantras, doctrines, and ideologies of life and death. A shadow in moonlight eager to be the blade that Gale and the Council needed.

It was obvious that this mage had used black magic to twist that little lamb's thoughts and deeds. She didn't need Tazel's constant reiteration and belaboring retelling to know as much. A disciple as loyal to Runaan and Gale as Rayla had been suddenly having a sudden change of heart like this was unthinkable.

Still, Lilsep did have to admit, this human had a handsome cut off his jaw, beautiful emerald eyes. She loved how they twinkled with exquisite pain as Tazel pulled and pried his flesh away. Those screams were sweet, too, but what Tazel accomplished lacked skill, lacked precision, lacked art. If she had this mage to herself she would make him walk the line between pleasure and pain. A torture he would beg for.

She gave herself chills thinking of where to start.

Instead, she would have to sate her appetites on agony, a flavorless meal. Boring. Bland.

Lilsep's hands clutched his face, and lucky too, else she wouldn't have noticed when he moved upwards.

Her eyes went wide. These rats were clever. But their affection for this mage made them blunder.
Lilsep caught Tazel's eye, he hadn't noticed the incremental movement of Callum upwards, too focused on the most recent strip of flesh, but he did notice her looking at him. Gesturing with her eyes, she urged Tazel to examine the suspended mage.

His torments became half hearted, but Callum's screams continued. Tazel watched with widening eyes as the mage seemed to drift slowly upwards while the portcullis itself remained unmoved.

This time, his smile reached his eyes where they burned with predatory fire.

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It hurt.

It hurt a lot. The emotion so simple to describe, an ache, and pain, so pervasive and deep, but any depth of thought had been stunted away from her. That terrible sound she never conjured to hear, compounded on shadows of memories of lives not lived. This was real, the here, the now. Nothing else.

She didn't remember peeling Callum's skin off herself. She didn't hold that knife. Rayla could see each action that Callum's torturer took like a silhouette bathed in moonlight. That memory wasn't real.

Then why did the screams sound the exact same? Rayla turned the wheel ever so slowly so as not to make a sound. Inch by inch the gate rose opening the way. Rayla couldn't see out but with each inch the screams of her Callum grew louder still. Listening before had been torment, but now it was absolutely unbearable.

And still she knew it didn't hold a candle to what her Callum felt.

In training, Tazel and she had been partnered. She knew his sadistic twists, that his one malformed horn wasn't just a birth defect but a representation of a broken soul. That time she had awoken with her hands tied silently in her sleep, how he had dragged his knife across her bare skin.

But that was then.
It took all of Rayla's restraint, every ounce of her being, to hold herself steady and to hold on to this cogwheel. It anchored her here in the now and she just had to keep telling herself over and over again. Rayla prayed this would save him, prayed Callum would be saved at the hands of her father. A great twist of irony that she had to rely on a human hating warrior. A warrior's life spent dedicated to eradicating and deterring human actions in Xadia. And now she had to trust him to save her mage. Now, she had to trust him to guard the life she held most dear and protect it.

Inching the gate up one turn after another, Rayla began to sweat. Where screaming and howling had been torment to her heart, the volume increased and began tearing into her soul. His shrieks made her eyes swim. She could feel each drag Tazel's knife across her soul. Callum's screams only built in their torment growing more and more intense. Every time she thought that surely it could get no more unbearable, it creeped upwards.

Rayla looked to Ezran, at the king clenching his jaw over and over again. He fought hard to maintain that composure. She envied that restraint. Where had the boy learned such steel? She could feel the panic in her mind, a frantic rodent scraping at the bone of her skull to get out.

First an inch, then two, and then a foot. Rayla saw Corvus bend and examine the other side readying his flail.

The ranger turned to Ezran, shook his head, and Ezran motioned Rayla to raise the portcullis higher. She obeyed: a foot and then two.

Corvus held up a hand, nodding, then slung his flail, though she could not see the target. She could only see the lip of the gate and the void beneath.

Rayla watched, eyes wide, heart pounding in her ears. She licked her lips.

Shouts arose from the other side of the portcullis, jeers and laughter. Rayla saw the color drain from Corvus face as he immediately began pulling the flail and shouting. The metal chain went taught in his grip and he was nearly pulled off his feet, "Close the gate!"

Corvus didn't get the whole alert out before there was a resounding thunk. The wood and steel gate quivered in its track. Corvus shouted again to close the gate, but confusion was blossoming in everyone's mind. Rayla looked to Ezran, question in her eyes.
Ezran gestured for her to close the portcullis. Rayla's arms worked reluctantly through the confusion. She strained against the great cogwheel, but it refused to turn. Stuck. Rayla planted her feet and threw all her weight, all the power of a Moonshadow Elf on the night of a full moon, into turning the wheel. It began to budge, at first she thought she had imagined it, and then finally she felt it give way.

And then it snapped, the metal rod twisted, the door unmoved remaining frozen aloft.

Rayla looked dismally at the cogwheel in her hands unattached from the wall. She met Ezran's eyes. He wasn't panicking, why should she? She strangled the rat in her head through sheer force of will.

Two balls of cloth rolled under the door suddenly, spurting grey clouds of acrid smoke, pouring out quickly, filling the formerly musty air with their thick and choking miasma.

There was a flurry of motion, a shifting of white in the black fog.

How had it all gone so wrong so fast?

Rayla held the wheel with one hand, and drew one of Runaan's blades with the other. She could go to her Callum now, she could save him, help him lick his wounds, help him do something.

The one relief in the tumult is that Callum's screams had faded.

Rayla tested the blade, twirling it, her grip ever in question.

There was another flash of white from the gate, this one closer to Rayla. The elftress took all of her anguish, all of her rage and sorrow, and unleashed it at this flashing Moonweave plated figure. A resonant sound rung in the amphitheater as Rayla slammed the broken cogwheel into the moving figure's center of mass, a grunt and a growl following.

When the figure stopped, Rayla instantly recognized that scarred face as it turned to her. It had more scars than the last time she had seen it, and now a cracked and stunted horn, but there was no mistaking that bitter face. Torani, Runaan's sister, her constant rival under his guidance. That changed nothing though, still her foe, Torani was still one of the beasts complicit in the torment of her Callum. Rayla didn't give the chance for Torani to counter and gain balance, she was already slashing down with Runaan's blade at the assassin.
A blow that glanced off of the heavy armor Torani wore.

Alayza's voice rose in the tumult and confusion, "Protect Ezran!" There was a flash of silver light in the air, like lightning seen from the corner of one's eye and the young king vanished from view. Alayza's hand's flashed symbols and she worked to maintain the shifting light.

Alayza's voice drew Torani's attention. The assassin in plate opened her mouth, "He's go-.

"No!" Rayla roared again slashing out, now hefting the second blade. In the confusion Torani had the opportunity to draw her own twin blades and Rayla's slice was interrupted by the crossed blades of her opponent.

Rayla poured her fury into her attack, slashing down, right, then sidestep, up and across. Runaan had tried to teach her sword forms, but it had always been wasted on her. She saw openings and she moved. But in her furious assault, she realized how not knowing forms was to her detriment. Torani seemed to dance and flow from one defensive position to the next, the blocky elf in heavy armor moving as though dancing through the steps, Rayla's participation in the fight nearly unnecessary.

At first, Rayla's tenacity was keeping Torani on the defensive, but Rayla was becoming closer and closer to being outmatched.

Rayla saw her opening, she thrust one blade forward.

A feint. A sidestep and Torani's blade came up quickly, knocking the blade upwards and knocking Rayla back off balance. Torani slammed her armored shoulder into Rayla's tumbling body, forcing her to the ground.

The short haired elf stood over Rayla for only a moment, "Those blades don't belong to you, Rayla." Torani spat.

Just outside her awareness as her head spun, Rayla heard a beast like howl over the tumult of battle, "Where's the boy?!!"
Knowing in this chaos, the most she could do was distract and delay Torani, "They are more mine than yours, Torani." Rayla bit back. She tried to get to her feet, but was met by a Moonweave boot in the ribs causing her to cough and collapse again.

"We'll settle this later." Torani sneered, raising her blade's hilt to clout Rayla in the back of the head.

Emerging from the black fog of the smoke founts, two massive hands in Katolian armor grabbed at Torani's arm. One grabbed the raised wrist, while the other knocked the elbow of the elf up. A sickening crack and tear as bone popped out of the flesh and Moonweave.

Torani's scream was cut short as she clenched her own arm, drawing it close in surprise. From the black fog, Soren came, not using his blade, he drove the base of his tower shield into the fold at the back of Torani's knee, driving her to the ground.

Rayla recovered to her feet, watching this happen. Soren raised his blade for the killing blow ready to drive the blade through the downed elftress' center, but caught Rayla's eye. A moment of conflict arose as Rayla warred within herself. Should she stop him? She didn't have to. She could let Soren end the life of her old training rival, let Soren end the life of an assassin that came to end Ezran's life, that was complicit in whatever had been done to Callum.

Rayla continued to stare wordlessly at Soren.

Soren turned his blade in the half second, grimacing, and brought the flat of his blade down hard on the assassin's head. Torani dropped as though all the bones holding her up had turned to gelatin. The armored figure slumped over on her broken arm.

Soren offered her a hand, clasped her forearm pulling her close to talk in her ear over the tumult, "Done resting?"

Rayla offered him a flat gaze, but picked the Runaan's second blade up from the ground where she had dropped it, "Where's Ezran?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't say it out loud!" Soren laughed.

"Dniw ym eb ,ria eht raelc." A soft chant in the cacophony cut through, Claudia's multi tone
ethereal voice rising over the sounds of battle. The black smoke began to move and shift, twisting and funneling in rapid gusts out of the amphitheater and Rayla was offered a clear view of what Torani had distracted her from.

Neim, a beast like elf who stood head and shoulders over Soren was looming over the figure of Alayza. One of his massive hands clutched the illusionists hand, halting her spells of shifting light. She struggled vainly against his grasp and had resorted to trying to club him with her staff. Not trained for melee battle, her staff pummeled softly against his side. Neim's other hand was restrained by a chain flail wrapped around Corvus's arm as he attempted to pull the beast off of Alayza.

Praid was nowhere to be seen. Ezran was nowhere to be seen.

Claudia stood spinning her staff guiding the gusts of black smoke, the purple gemstone leaving a trail of light as it spin in the air.

"We have to help Alayza," Rayla urged Soren, pulling at his arm. Every part of her wanted to duck under the opening and go to her mage, but she had to remain focused. If she let this fall apart it would be on her head. She wasn't going to fail at this, too, but it was so hard to remain strong, "If Ezran get's cut, she's the only one that can reverse to poison."

Rayla felt her eyes burn as she stepped forward to get to her mother. Callum was so close, but so far. She could only imagine the state he was in. She hoped they had left those beautiful eyes alone. Even if they hadn't... As she moved Rayla was able to see two more figures emerge from beneath the portcullis.

The Spider Queen, Lilsep, and Tazel of the Blood Moon.

Lilsep, a lithe weapon of poison and allure, a needle in the dark stitching together a web of warped minds and desiccated, drained corpses. Tazel, the forsaken protégé of Runaan, the tormenter whose soul had been baptized in the violence of the Breech. A warrior adapting the skills of an assassin to front line combat, and somebody who could easily meld between the two fronts of war. Rivers of blood followed him.

Rayla's pace stopped as these two emerged, Soren continuing forward.

Lilsep's lips were smirking, her pristine white locks flecked with red. Her pale angelic face with a
soft splash of blood.

Tazel watched Rayla. Those violent eyes piercing through her. The feeling of helplessness, of the
time she has experienced at his disposal flashed to the front of her mind. She saw the blade in his
hand, the blood that stained his fingertips.

Callum's blood.


There was no thinking, no struggle of will, no regard for the potential plan. Rayla didn't remember
turning, all she knew was that, suddenly she found herself unleashing an onslaught. No longer
worried about the grip on Runaan's blades, a savage flurry of attacks came like a whirlwind. She
crossed the distance between herself and the two other elves in an instant, and then Rayla was
between them, lashing out left and right. A slice at Lilsep's head, feinted from range, a slash cutting
at Tazel's ankle, sidestepped almost an instant too late. Rayla's blades were everywhere they
moved to, trying to counter, trying to avoid her ferocity. A strike here, a slash there. There was no
restraint, no holding back. Slish. Slash. Rayla became a storm of steel.

Tazel looked surprised as a thin line of blood appeared on his cheek, his last deflection using his
blood stained dagger sending half coagulated flecks dusting through the air. Rayla relished that
look, his blood, basked in it, thirsted for it. He had always looked down on her, felt she was weaker
than he just for being female. Felt she was something to be used and discarded and played with.
Her parents could never see the corruption in his soul. They always continued to encourage and
endorse a relationship between the two of them up until the point they actually made her bear the
same promissory markings as this cretin. It was just another reason she was so furious with them so
angry in a way she couldn't express. They never listened to what he did or what she wanted, there
was never time. Praid and Alayza were always too consumed with their Dragonguard
responsibilities.

Tazel used that, way back when, had been sure to tell her that he and everyone else thought she
was less than worth considering. That she was nothing to him, that she needed to know her place:
beside him or beneath him. Rayla needed to know she was just an elftress something to be used and
discarded. Tazel told her that not even a human was worse than her, and she had believed it. The
emotional abuse caved her in, broke her down in ways that she couldn't even begin to fully
understand. Until her time in the Lunarium.

Rayla's time spent constantly broken down mentally and broken apart physically, taken from
everything she held dear, given enough food to just slowly starve. Rayla was Tazel's toy to be
broken.
Callum made her something more, his kindness had made her something beautiful and furious. Spending time with him knowing that there were those out there that felt that life was valued. More than that, seeing it expressed in more ways than just a doctrine the Moonshadow elves purported and recited. They would say the life was precious but then would proceed to take it, a dichotomy of thinking allowing for strange moralities.

A stark juxtaposition to Callum. He saw the cycle for what it was, what it could be, and had thrown himself in the path of her blade to protect his brother. It was so different than anything she had ever known, anything she had ever seen done in any familial relationship. Never before had she born witness to this sacrificial nature, one laying their everything down to protect another. Callum always said that she was strong, but in many ways, that day he was far more powerful than she ever thought to be. He was stronger for it, courageous because of it.

At the time she had been conflicted, she had warred with herself over what exactly it meant thinking that humans by nature were repulsive, that their practices evil by nature. Simply because she had been taught to. But in watching his actions he had taken sixteen years of distress, of indoctrination, and shattered it.

That would have been enough and she had been willing to bear her sentence with head held high. But Callum the Courageous cut across a continent for her. Traversing across lands hostile and unknown, riding on the back of one of the most dangerous and powerful creatures in Xadia carrying only a glow toad and a bag of marbles. Callum cut a path into the most sacred and holy of the Moonshadow elf relics to her. To her. To Rayla, this did more than prove his devotion to life.

And now Tazel was again a seed of pollution and corruption. The assassins at his side twisted by his words backed by the Dragon Queen. Dark deeds condoned by the ruler of the elven and dragon empire.

Though Rayla was rage incarnate, though she was steel and fury, slashing out again and again, Tazel and Lilsep rebuffed her attacks. At first it seemed Rayla gained footing, then lost, then gained. A back and forth dance that had each ballerina battling for control of the tempo.

It was Tazel that won out, knocking her twin swords aside with his own blade, twirling around her arm, twisting her wrist forcefully and sending her blade clattering to the ground.

Rayla brought the remaining blade, slish, down hard, but Tazel's twisted scimitar crossed with the dagger still covered with Callum's blood and caught her attack. She tried to remember stances and poses that Torani had used against her that, Runaan had tried to teach her, but she could only press forward. Twisting, striking, and twisting away again.
In the end, Tazel thrust his dagger forward after deflecting another slash even as Lilsep pushed her forward into his attack.

Rayla turned, the edge of Tazel's dagger catching against a raised golden gauntlet, glancing off of it.

Rayla felt a hand grip her cloak, and saw the glint of something shining pass out of the corner of her eye. On reflex she brought her hand up just as the garotte wire was pulled tight around her neck, two fingers were caught as well, giving her some purchase on the metal thread. It cut into the skin of through her gloved and gauntleted hand, but she felt nothing.

Rayla felt Lilsep pull the wire tight, forcing her down to the ground by the throat. As Rayla struggled, the air in her lungs stagnated, growing stale as she fought against the strangulation, dropping her other sword. Violet eyes bulging she gasped for breath. Rayla kicked her legs vainly, trying to gain any sort of ground by the way Lilsep held her weight, just hovering her body high enough to not touch the ground. If she used her hands to stabilize herself she would lose the grip on the garotte. Instead, she weakly thumped at the elftress's arms, trying to knock her grip loose.

Rayla's world turned red and then black. The only thing she could still see in her vision was Neim with Soren draped over his back, arms squeezing the beasts neck in a headlock with one arm while the other hacked at the arm holding Alayza aloft, Corvus wrestling with the giants free hand to keep him from taking Soren or Alayza out of the fight.

"Llac ym deeh , ssenkrad," Claudia's multiple toned voice seeped into the darkness of Rayla's diminishing consciousness. In a flare of purple fire Claudia's figure burst to life, Lilsep's grip easing ever so slightly in surprise.

Frantically, Rayla worked her other hand beneath the garotte and pulled, she couldn't remove the wire, but she felt cool musty air fill her lungs. It tasted of joy and relief. Rayla wheezed audibly against the strain of her need to breathe and cool the blaze within her lungs.

Rayla took in that blessed air and took in that blessed mage, Claudia, wreathed in black flame giving off twisting purple light, stood between Neim and Tazel. Head tilted upwards, staring with black eyes crying black tears down her nose at the two having their fun with Rayla. The flames took on a life of their own, black tentacles rose up from her dark aura, black shades given life from her shadow. They danced went about, her figure lost amidst the mass of black writhing limbs.
Claudia made no movement, cast no other glance, but the writhing forms suddenly halted and bent forward sharply. A mass of black knives, straight and sharp, leading directly to the Moonshadow elf witch restraining Rayla.

Black knives streaked towards Lilsep. The pristine angelic mistress of torture dodged right, letting Rayla free. And at the last instant the tendrils shot off at a sharp angle towards Tazel who laughed as he watched this new exchange between the dark mistress mage and Lilsep. Slicing sideways with his dagger across the shooting tendrils that had bent towards him, he severed the shadow, but there were too many, wrapping quickly around his extremities and yanking arms and legs. But he artfully twisted away.

Rayla, free of Lilsep and her garotte wire coughed and sputtered as she tried to rise to her feet. Clutching at her throat and gaining her breath again was the least of her concerns, her head pounded, her eyes ached, and her chest burned. Her chest burned with such relief. Tazel and Lilsep tried to rise to their feet to get up for themselves, unable to gain footing as black tendrils slipped around them, pulling arm or their foot out from under them causing them to tumble back down but each time. Then they started slashing at the dark tendrils, when the shades met steel, a shadowed tendril dissipated quickly. Unable to keep them restrained, Claudia could not keep them tamed.

And then Rayla was among them, burning lungs and pounding head be damned. Claudia's unholy tentacles worked in tandem with her blades. Glinting moonlight and steel shadows weaving forwards in unison, one step and then another, their attacks rebuffed and cornered Tazel and Lilsep both.

The assassin duo was on the cusp of losing this fight, backed into a corner.

The triumph was secured, but for Corvus, whose body came flying over Claudia and Rayla to slam into the wall. He was battered, he was bruised, and he was broken. The ranger slumped and twitched, eyes wide and staring, but not quite lifeless. This, coupled with the strangled cry of Alayza drew Rayla and Claudia's attention. Not taking her eyes off of Tazel and Lilsep, Rayla saw her mother hanging in the hands of Tazel, clutching at the too large hands wrapped around her throat, legs kicking frantically.

Soren was still there, trying to hack at the skin and bone of Neim, but his cuts only made it so deep and the beast himself laughed at his attempts. He used the body of Alayza to block the blows of Soren, not letting the guard get any closer than an arms length and ensuring that the illusionist was between them. Feints and thrusts deterred at the last second because of Alayza's dangling body as Neim laughed.

Rayla, momentarily distracted, she was able to block the first blow that Tazel brought, but made
the mistake of looking towards her mother. A second blow made her dodge out of the way, right into his waiting blade.

A burning slash across the back of her thigh, and arm. The cut across her thigh made her drop to a knee at which point Tazel grabbed her by the horn. When she cried out, Tazel stuffed something wrapped in cloth in her mouth, "You should know better than that, little lamb."

The distraction was momentary, but it was enough. Claudia glanced to Corvus and then turned around to look to Soren before turning back to Lilsep. That brief distraction, that bare instant was enough to turn the tide. The Spider Queen's fist crossed the mages jaw, sending the frail woman reeling, long enough for Lilsep to grab Claudia's hair, yank it back, and draw a quick blade across the mages throat, spraying Rayla with hot blood.

With Tazel's hand firmly gripping her horn, Rayla was forced to watch Claudia. Red blood gushing out from her slit throat. The woman's already pale grey skin when whiter than the full winter moon. Claudia stumbled, going to one knee and then slumping over, catching herself on her hands only to have Lilsep kick her arms out from under her. Claudia feebly flailed in the growing pool of her own blood. Her mouth worked making no sound, black eyes fading as they stared at Rayla.

"Dammit, Lilsep," Tazel reprimanded jostling Rayla with one hand, speaking emphatically with the other, "Remember, but for the king, the humans were to live."

"Gale's presumption that we could get this done cleanly was foolish," Lilsep laughed, wiping her blade on her sleeve, "You should have known the moment you brought Neim that anybody with the king would end up a corpse. Besides, what's she afraid of? A war with the humans?"

Claudia stilled.

Half of the battlefield quieting drew the attention of both Neim and Soren, their own battle halted. There was confusion on Soren's face, and triumph on Neim's.

Confusion turned to realization turned to rage. Rayla struggled, her eyes darting between Alayza, her face growing blue and eyes rolling up in her head as she went lax. Soren turning from his battle with Neim, face contorting as he sprinted towards his sister. Soren's skin no longer brilliant and gleaming as Claudia's invocation's faded, the haunting quiet of a battle decided was broken by Soren's raging sobs, "Claudia?! Clauds!?"
Lilsep stepped away from Claudia as Soren approached, the guard running up to his sister and scooping her limp form up in his arms. He hefted her dead weight so that her head lolled against his shoulder, "Claudia? Claudia, come one!" His voice squeaked and rasped, "Don't do this, you always said you'd outlive me. C'mon, Claud's, c'mon." He sobbed. Rayla felt her heart go out to Soren, but he was being so foolish, he was being so stupid. This wasn't over yet.

Neim sauntered up behind Soren, dragging Alayza's limp body as the blonde man continued to sob. Neim threw Alayza's into the pool of blood emanating from the dark mage and Rayla saw that she still breathed, shallowly, her neck swollen and bruised.

Tazel held tight to Rayla's horn, forcing her to the ground, her leg and arm too weak, her other arm twisted up behind her back in his claw like grasp.

Lilsep crossed her arms, "Well, the king got away."

Neim sniffed the air, growling, "The boy snuck past, but he didn't get far. His trail is still warm."

"You're monsters." Soren whispered, holding his sister, looking around at them, wide eyed and pale, "I know you're elves, but you're fucking monsters."

"No, no, no, sweet boy," Lilsep leaned in close, "We're hunters. And you?" She smirked, placing a finger under his chin, tilting him to meet her eyes, "You're just the prey."

Soren took a deep breath, filling his lungs for another sob.

But launched his head forward instead.

There was an audible crack as Lilsep and Soren's heads collided. Lilsep stumbled backwards, crying out and clutching at her head. Rayla saw fury in her eyes, but indomitable defiance in Soren's. He glared at her through dark eyes, a trickle of blood smeared across his brow from where the force had split the skin.

"Cunt!" Lilsep growled, brandishing her blade at him. Tazel caught her and Neim's large hands wrapped around Soren's shoulders, forcing him to be still even as he held Claudia.
Soren's breath was forced into barely restrained rage, nares flaring with each breath, eyes wild and blood thirsty, "I'm going to kill each and every one of you."

"Not if I kill you first you straw haired fop!" Lilsep glared into his furious eyes with her own cyan fire.

"Be still, Lilsep," Tazel pulled her shoulder, breaking the intense gaze of the two, "Hold Rayla," Rayla's neck protested as she fought to prevent herself from being taken by Lilsep from Tazel's grasp. Her soft hand was no less tight in its grasp of her wrist or horn, "Neim, since Lilsep already fucked this up," He glared at the stunning elftress, "There's no point in trying to restrain yourself any longer. I'm going after the boy."

Tazel stalked away, ducking under the portcullis.

Silence followed as Lilsep pouted and Neim bent in close, whispering in his ear.

Soren's eyes went wide and turned, looking at Neim, still holding his sister's corpse, "Wh-what did you say to me?"

Grinning, Neim stood, taking his hands off of Soren's shoulders, "I said, 'Don't worry,'" Neim the beast leveled his eyes at Lilsep and Rayla, and speaking in multi-toned voice spoke with deadly intent, "I'll always protect you Sor-bear."
Claudia grimaced looking around.

Mirare Umbre: The Shadow Mirror.

A realm existing as a pale reflection of Xadia. Existing just beyond the surface that Claudia and Soren normally trod upon, this place acted as a sieve of existence. One would pass through it on their way elsewhere. Nothing so silly as 'death' or a 'veil', but a place that scholars of Black Magic oft postulated existed.

And then there were those like her, like Viren before her. Those that had slipped upon it by accident, found the cracks and crevices in reality that led beyond the tethers of Xadia. A gift linked to the terrible virtue of careful bargains struck, inversely worded phrases, and sacrificed pieces of self. All in part had been the key that opened a door.

Once, Claudia had slammed it shut, fearing the strange rules of this place. Since then, growing in wisdom and in power, Claudia had dared to open that door a mere crack and peer into this forbidden land.

But now, she was here wholly and fully.

Claudia looked around, trying to get her bearings. The haunting familiarity of the black and grey terrain did naught to ease her consternation. Biting her lip she tried not to remember the sharp edge of the knife as it dragged across her throat, the hot burning pain, the gush of heat pouring down her neck and soaking her clothes, and finally the fade into blackness. Claudia looked around, "Fuck," then again, louder, with lungs filled with ashen air, "Fuck!"

When she had to claw Soren back from the other side of this ancient door, she had to drag him back from this shadowed realm tooth and nail. It had been a feat that had taken her strength, leaving her bedridden for weeks. It had even taken her legs from her, too. And, if she really thought about it, it had cost her a speckle of sanity.

But it had been worth it.
taken deer, birds, fish, and any magical creature she could get her hands on. Claudia had pieced him together, molding his skin like clay and giving it new life so that his mind could be housed within. Stitching with strands of spiritual magic, the hovel she had secluded them in became a graveyard of disposed creatures.

It was nearly a month of intense magical work, balancing keeping his soul locked in the Mirare Umbre as well as constructing the strange Golem to live again. But when Soren breathed again, he had hardly remembered any of it.

Claudia twitched, never mind what came before.

Claudia knew if she stalled here too long it could end in death. This place was more of a holding cell, a waiting place, while the last vestiges of oneself were sucked out of Xadia. Maybe a form of cosmic mercy to let you watch through opaque spectacles as what remained and what came after you passed happened haltingly before your dying eyes. Over time, one would die. Nothing momentous, just a slow drifting away into eddies of dust. She could already see it happening, flakes of greying skin floating away on unfelt winds.

Around her Claudia could see the figures of those she left behind. Shades within the amphitheater: that arrogant assassin holding Rayla at knifepoint with his twisted horns, that bitch assassin that had slit her throat, then the massive assassin dragging Alayza over.

And Soren.

Poor Soren. He knelt holding her body, cradling the limp meat in his arms.

Claudia saw these shades moving, speaking in words muffled beyond hearing. Each of the figures a silhouette, a shade made of shifting particulate grey ash and each turn or movement led to a writhing cloud of black taking form again slowly. The surface of these strange reflections carried both a black sheen and dancing vibrations in a way that made her head hurt to look at too closely.

She placed a hand upon her head and noted her own reflection. It seemed to fade, pulse, droop, and reform. She watched the thing in Soren's arms bend and sag before taking form again. If the Shadow Mirror worked like her father had theorized in his journals, it wouldn't be long before she was able to answer that final question of what lay beyond the next horizon.

"Well," Claudia sighed, sitting next to her brother. She drew her legs up to her chest, "This sucks."
She pouted, and crossed her arms over her knees and leaned her head on them, "Oh, Sor-bear," she whined. She didn't cry. But she did whine, "This really sucks."

Claudia watched the reflected tears stream down his cheeks. She watched Lilsep reach out a finger and trace the line of would be moisture along his jaw.

"Oh no you don't," Claudia steamed, stiffening, "You did not just touch him. I swear, when I get-"

Soren pulled back and slammed his head into the female assassin's crown.

As the bitch reeled away, she was sure cursing, Claudia jumped to her feet, "Aww, Sor-Bear," her emotions a mixture of sorrow and pride. She swung a mock flurry of punches at the shade, "You show that cunt for killing me."

The one known as Tazel watched, laughed, and spoke. More muffled words in exchange between the giant muscular assassin and himself. The twisted assassin faded from view, but the giant assassin placed his massive hands on her older brother's armored shoulders.

Claudia felt her stomach tighten, her shoulders square, "Oh, you better get your hands off of him," Claudia warned, knowing the shadow couldn't hear her.

She didn't care. She stood straight as the beast bent to speak in Soren's ear. She felt anger rise in her heart, rage boil through her bones. Around her, she heard voices rising up. Coming from everywhere at once, and no where all the same, they spoke words she heard through and through.

Something speaking in her ear, Viren's voice, "You were supposed to protect him, Claudia." it chastised.

Her mother's voice, "I needed you to protect him, Claudia, not just from the world, but from your father."

Mixing together with the guilt of her failures, the failings of her father that she and Soren shouldered, the voices of her parents added a weight she hadn't expected to feel. An angst that twisted her in death as it had in life.
Even here, on the other side of the reaper's scythe, was there no peace to be had? Could she not lay down her head to rest?

Then again, why would she want to?

Claudia searched the whispering, the chanting, undulating chastisement from the ghosts seeping through, seeking something in particular. Seeking that one voice. A voice had been warned by Viren to steel herself against. A voice full of promises. Promises of strength and life and respect, but most of all, promises of power, of immense magical energy. Somewhere, behind the shimmering gleam of this Shadow Mirror, it waited. Whatever it was beneath the surface whispered of secrets and hinted at potentials. The great tempter, a wyrm greater than any that had ever cast it's shadow across Xadia.

Against the advisements of her father, against the teachings of all those who had ventured through this place before her, philosophically or corporeally, she sought out the source of that voice. A tumultuous channel of thought and picked out alterations in tone of other whispers. As she reached out, grasping with an eager and supple mind, she strung together the voice from it's various fragments in her mind, and like a blacksmith's puzzle, all the pieces seemed to slide together.

With the voice, came the promise of power, came the note of cost. But what hung in the balance was too great, she would risk it for this, for him, and for Soren.

And, maybe one day, he might find a way to forgive her.

Claudia looked at the usurper Rayla dispassionately. She didn't particularly care what happened to the elf. She had stolen the eye of her sweet Callum. But as Claudia's eyes traced over to her brother it brought a wellspring of guilt.

Still, she spoke the words that the wyrm had whispered in her ear, "Raeb-rosouy tcetorp syawla ll'I, yrrow t'nod."

And then like glass, the silhouette of Neim shattered like glass, leaving only the shards floating and twisting in the air. She felt the shards drag their sharp edges across their skin and reform around her. A new shape took on a new purpose, and her own face replaced Neim's upon the reflection.

Xadia rushed into her consciousness. The Catacomb's beneath Katolis slammed into existence
around her, the ashen fog falling away.

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Ezran ducked under the portcullis, the last vestiges of Alayza's illusion still flickering invisibility across his skin and armor. Ezran hugged the wall out of the amphitheater.

Neim storming into the fog of smoke had been the distraction he needed to forge ahead. Ezran hadn't anticipated the unstoppable force of Neim, a mammoth of an elf that had cut a path right for Alayza. And as much as Ezran hated it, he had to follow the plan. Neim had provided the opening and he had to take it.

There were contingencies in place for this exact reason: in the event that their last bastion was compromised, he was to run.

Admittedly, it wasn't much of a plan.

Ezran was to run. Run, run, and run. He was to keep pressing forward until he physically couldn't any longer. Not only was his life dangling in the balance, but so were lives of so many others. There was Callum, Rayla, Soren, and Claudia to start. But should they fail, what would happen to Amaya? Gren? Opeli? The various heads of the military and multitude of lords and ladies of Katolis.

Ezran may hate running away, but if it would stop a succession war, that was reason enough. If it would save anybody other than himself, it was worth it. Katolis was the kingdom of his ancestors, his people, his blood. For them to thrive, he had to bury this shame and push forward. He had to survive, even if no one else did. And that would keep him awake for the rest of his life. If he lived, and the others did not, he would ever be able to look a soldier in the eye again.

For now, though, Ezran had to run.

Ezran emerged into the narthex, giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness outside of the amphitheater's shifting lantern light. He looked around warily, and saw instantly why Rayla couldn’t close the portcullis: a large Moonweave Axe was holding it up, haft and blade supporting the mass of wood and iron.
And Ezran also saw why those screams had been so loud, so unending. First, his ears caught something unsettling stirring in the black, a low groan of something pained, something in agony. The dark obscured much, for this, Ezran was grateful. It was Callum's moans that drew his eyes. Ezran had been hit before in the training grounds, been knocked down, but had never had the wind knocked out of him like he did there, seeing his brother's partially flayed body strung up in the shadows.

Callum barely stirred, barely moved, hardly groaned as he hung upon the door, runnels of thick blood making small pools of shadow rimmed in red in the low light coming through the ajar gate.

Ezran approached his brother more detail coming to view, "Oh," Ezran wavered and stumbled, "Callum!"

Callum's head lolled against his chest. The sleeves of his coat were torn to shreds. His face was pale in the darkness, the pallid flesh of his visage in stark contrast to the dark shadow of what remained of his left arm. The metallic scent of blood made Ezran's nose itch and burn, and he rubbed at it absently, catching the shadow of his own movement out of the corner of his eye.

Understanding the implication, he discarded the idea that he was not longer completely invisible. Something had happened to Alayza. He pushed onward. Ezran hesitantly reached for the metal spike in his brother's hand, but felt something unseen wrap around his wrist.

"You need to run, King Ezran," Praid whispered, his voice urgent, but unafraid, "I will take care of the High Mage."

"I'm not leaving Callum like this," Ezran hissed, "I can't. I just can't."

"This is not about what you can do," Praid overpowered his grip easily, "Its what you must do. What the king must do."

Ezran opened his mouth to argue back, but the words died in his throat.

You have to hurry.

Images of himself running through the darkness poured through Ezran's mind. Zym's sendings to calling him through earthen stone and chaotic skies.
Since Zym's return the dragon had been an ever present entity within his mind. They had been in contact throughout this endeavor and Zym had been whispering things, offering ideas, rebuttals, thoughts and insights. But now, the only thing the Storm Dragon sent was urgency. He sent it with such imperative force that Ezran felt his heart begin to slam in his chest. The two of them had been working in tandem, intertwined on a level Ezran couldn't begin to comprehend.

Ezran couldn't see Praid, but felt the elf's grip grow lax on his wrist.

The dragonguard's command was simple, "Now, go."

Obeying though he didn't want to, he turned as images swam up into Ezran's mind. Since meeting Zym, these images, this connection was a thing always felt but never understood. The first step of his escape was accompanied by the overwhelming thought of his subjects, his family. The image of Callum hanging there, near death, blazed into his retina so that the afterimage seemed to hang in everything he looked at.

He didn't want any of them to have to suffer on his account. Not Callum, not Rayla, not even the assassins. He wanted nothing to do with this throne and crown.

Another step.

But also knew he couldn't give it up. Through the years, defending the throne against different nobles and relatives plying for the throne, if Ezran believed any of them to be better suited than he, he would have abdicated. Unfortunately, the only one worthier than he was himself was the one without a claim.

Callum.

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"Alright," The voice was familiar to him. He knew that much. But it still sounded strange, like heard from down a corridor, "Down you go, there you go, easy does it." Callum could feel his weight shifting under than guidance of rough hands attempting to be delicate.
"Unnh," Callum groaned, he couldn't muster the strength to do much else. Pain pulsated through his left arm, but at the same time, it seemed to lessen. An eternity of agony cut short.

He couldn't be more grateful. Whatever, or whomever this was bringing this sweet relief would finally put an end to this misery. Tazel or Soren, or whoever so chose to take him down from the wall, he would give anything to them just to make this pain stop.

Even before he could make these promises, the spikes were pulled from his hands. One and then the other, taking away the pulling strain that had held him aloft and he collapsed into the waiting arms of his savior. The body was warm, the touch rough, but it was the best thing Callum had ever experienced. This final relief now free of what Tazel had done to him.

"There ya go, Boyo, I got you." The voice came again, soothing.

"My hand." Callum's voice rasped in his throat, an artifact of the screaming he had been doing earlier this evening, "I can't feel-"

"Shhhh now, boyo, no need to talk, I got you." The voice was paternalistic, understanding if brusque.

In a haze, he lolled back. The next thought didn't come together in his head fully before his spoke, but he needed to know...something, "Rayla?"

"Don't you worry about her now, I'll take care of her, but I got to get you someplace quiet first." The rescuer hefted Callum's dead weight and began to drag him away from the door, moving slowly.

A voice reverberated through the catacombs.

Callum felt a spike of ice pierce his heart.

"Oh, King Ezran?" Tazel. His words echoed and bounced against the ancient stone and wooden coffins, fading and rebounding back, "Don't hide, it won't help you!" The laughter filled Callum's mind as they echoed, the source of the taunting moving further away into the catacombs.
"No, Ezran." Callum struggled weakly, "I have to help him. He needs...he needs me."

"You're in no condition to do anything, stay here, we'll go after him." Praid leaned Callum against the wall.

"No." Callum used his right hand to prop himself up and struggled to his knees, "I'm coming."

"Callum," Praid. Praid was this one's name, "I get you have to protect your brother, but you're a stiff wind away from death's door. Lay down. Rest. That's an order."

"Last I checked," Callum glared. Why was the room spinning? "My brother was the king, not you."

"I cannae argue with that logic," Praid mumbled, Callum's eye's tried to adjust to the darkness, but only saw empty space. Rayla's father continued, asking, "But how are you going to stop Gale if you throw your life away now?"

"I-I don't know." Callum leaned heavily on his unskinned arm, pulling the left one close.

"Aye, that's what I thought." Praid placed an unseen hand on his shoulder, "Take a minute, get yer head on straight. Let me go an help the others, then we'll all go help Ezran."

Callum nodded reluctantly, "Just...hurry. Please." Callum felt the world swim black for a moment and his head nodded forward. He had the strange sensation that some unknown duration of time had passed. Callum wasn't sure that Praid had left him, wasn't sure that he was alone. But he was sure that he wasn't waiting any longer. Praid understood tactics, understood safety in numbers, but Tazel was pursuing his brother, he had to follow.

He couldn't lose Ezran.

Not his brother.

Shaky legs found their way beneath him and he took a step forward, clutching his bloody left arm. He immediately felt dizzy on standing, waves of nausea nearly overwhelmed him, and Callum could feel the sour burn of bile in his throat.
As he walked, he strained to pull his right arm out of his coat and wrapped the remainder of the torn and bloody fabric around his left arm, doing what little he could to staunch the blood flow. He could absently feel the rigid structure of the Key of Aaravos in the palm of his left hand, but thought nothing of it.

It never crossed his mind that Rayla might not be safe. Such a fierce and formidable elfress, how could she not be? With that in mind, Callum followed the echoing taunts of Tazel, up and out of the catacombs.

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Ezran's footfalls echoed through the catacombs as he wound backwards through the twisted and, at places, crumbling tunnels.

As he ran, he couldn't help his racing mind. Ezran knew Callum truly had the best interests of Katolis, of Ezran, of all of Xadia in his heart. And now he may have just left Callum to die in his stead. Why was Ezran the one that needed to live? Could he not just as easily have passed his crown to another and taken the mantle of responsibility from his shoulders so that he may bear the punishment that The Dragon Queen wanted for him. Could he have just perished and be done with this?

A sharp turn took him past triggered traps. His feet slid against stone and oil causing him to skid and stumble, but he picked himself up without losing speed.

Would his death buy peace?

No.

If it meant that the people of his kingdom could live unperturbed by the happenings of war, if they could thrive and strive for love and happiness all at the cost of his head upon Gale's pike, he'd march up to it and plant his own head there proudly.

But Ezran knew it wouldn’t. Zym knew that, and therefore, Ezran knew that.
No, Zym knew that Gale sought something else, now. It had started with vengeance for her mate. To lay waste to the king and kingdom that had taken her Thunder from the skies, her Zym from her nest had been the goal that had nearly consumed her. But as time went on, as the year passed, as Callum and Rayla moved across Xadia and Ezran returned for a rushed coronation at the hands of Opeli, something twisted Gale. Already tensions had been high for years before Harrow's Blunder. The time she spent, believing herself to be the last of the kind had left her with naught to think about other than the legacy the Storm Dragon's would leave.

Something had pulled and twisted her mind and the counsel of but a few either hurried along her degeneration or did naught to slow it. At the end of the year without mate or child Gale decided that the world she would leave to the other dragons, leave to her loyal subjects the elven races, would be a world of peace. A world that could forget the stain of humanity, a world that the elven kind could inherit and be one with their Primals, unperturbed.

Gale grew so obsessed with this idea. Ezran could see that floating in Zym's memories. Even when Zym was returned and she was confronted with the possibility that humans could be caring, honest, and pure, she was repulsed with the idea. Gale refused to conceive of a world where humanity was not the antithesis of all things that were deemed 'good'.

Zym had been sad at first, seeing Gale like that, but even he knew that some dark thought had wormed its way through her mind and into her soul to the point that his former mother was no longer the caring and sensitive dragon he had come to know through their interactions as an egg.

Zym knew these things, so Ezran knew these things.

Their time apart had been an isolation that felt strange and uncomfortable. Ezran had been able to talk with other creatures, which had been strangely isolating as well. He didn't fit with the other children of the lordlings, didn't fit in with the street urchins, didn't fit well with the various animals. No matter which group he would join, it was always as though he was apart from them, aside. Except for his family, except for Dad and Callum, then had come Rayla. Then had come Zym.

Zym both closed his mind and opened it. Ezran could feel the wind beneath Zym's wings, could feel how they cut through the air. When he breathed deep, he could feel the air in his lungs, crisp and pure. When storms rolled over, he could feel the static on his skin.

So now, when urgency and panic wrapped around his heart, he knew Zym felt the same things. Knowing this didn't diminish the imperative nature of the sending, Run, Ezran, faster!

Ezran's feet pounded the stone work. He no longer cared about being stealthy, he just had to get to
Zym, had to make it out of this place filled with the dead. This was the closest he wanted to be to
death for a good long while. He felt sweat wet his back, he could feel it running down his face, but
his legs kept pumping. His chest heaved and sides burned, but he ignored his protesting body.

Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth. In through the nose.

Out through the mouth.

Furiously pumping his short legs, they worked to propel him forward through the darkness in
which he could barely see.

Faster!

His breath now ragged, his sides now splitting, Ezran could no longer fit thoughts within his head.
The ache in his feet turned to burning turned to wet and slick pain.

Hurry!

And still Ezran raced onwards. If Callum were to have a chance, for that bloody man draped across
the portcullis to live, then he had to keep running, keep drawing the assassins away. He could save
them. Ezran could get them their chance. He just had to be fast enough.

The noose was tightening on the assassin's throat and they didn't know it, but he had to try and save
Callum. There was no way he couldn't try. That noose didn't tighten fast enough, didn't suffocate
Tazel and his merry band of miscreants fast enough, and now Ezran had to make this gambit. It
should have been a small scale siege, should have been about waiting it out, and breaking the
assassins in the catacombs as the soldiers returned in full force in the morning. They had known
where the king drew them, and by dawn the assassins would lose their fading ability and
advantageous strength.

That feeling of pins and needles on his back had to be his imagination. There couldn't already be
somebody behind him. He had taken the winding course at full force, had taken it one bounding
step at a time, one gasping breath, each breakneck turn.

Turning sharply at a crossways, he could see the stairway leading up out of the catacombs, and
paused briefly in relief to catch his breath.
From the depths of the shadows he had been navigating, came a slithering laughter bouncing off the walls, "Oh, King Ezran?" It laughed, "Are you out of breath already?" There was the sound of metal scraping on stone in the distance. The shouts distant and echoing, but chilling all the same.

His legs protested, his lungs cried out for air, but he ignored them, taking off again. Ezran didn't give himself time to be afraid.

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"Neim?" Lilsep took a step backwards, pulling Rayla with her at knife point. Rayla could feel the point of the knife at her throat digging into her skin. The slight elfress growled at no one in particular, "No, you did something, didn't you." She backed up further as Rayla struggled for purchase with her feet. She just had to get that one advantage, just that one unexpected tilt that could get her out of this. Rayla had fought with these people plenty of times, had gone toe to toe with Lilsep and Torani herself and come out on top. It was why she was chosen to go with Runaan over everyone else.

Lilsep seemed to speak to no one in particular, "That witch," Lilsep shook Rayla, "What did she do to Neim?"

"Claudia?" Soren asked, turning eyes that trailed tears to look up at the hulking elf.

Strange words out of those scarred pale lips with a strange voice made of tones of both Claudia and Neim. Something both feminine and feral, hulking and languid, "I'm not done, yet, Soren."

Soren laughed, he guffawed, sliding the corpse of his sister off of his lap and standing. He threw his arms around the massive elf, not giving a care about the threatening presence of the giant, "Claudia! What did you do?" Soren buried his head into his muscular chest and snuggled into it.

"What I had to." Claudia's voice soothed sadly. He…she?... placed a comforting hand on Soren's shoulder as he clung to her…him.

"What the fuck?" Lilsep's voice twisted in disgust, "Dark magic, Rayla, soul stealing dark deeds, do you still stand for this human filth." Rayla could recall the twist of her lip that accompanied that tone. Lilsep shook Rayla's head by the horn causing the world to bounce around in her vision. With one hand still clutching the garrote wire around her neck, Rayla tried to reach up and clutch the arm
holding her horn.

Lilsep batted her hand away easily.

Neim withdrew the embrace of Soren, looking down on the Crown Guard, kissing him on the forehead.

Rayla had to admit, it was an unsettling sight, and even she had no clue what was happening.

Neither, it seemed, did Lilsep, "Ex-fucking-scuse me?" Lilsep demanded, "Neim what the hell are you doing? What are you thinking?" Even knowing something was wrong, something had changed within the other assassin, Lilsep couldn't seem to wrap her head around it.

"I don't know what your name is." Neim growled taking a step towards Lilsep. Deep navy eyes gazed out of Neim's skull no longer, but instead orbs of black onyx glistened in the flickering lantern light of the amphitheater. Rayla could only watch and struggle, "But your part in this night is through. Let Rayla go, and I'll go easy on you."

Lilsep barked a laugh, she could retreat to further, "I don't know what you expect to happen here, but I still have the advantage."

"You have a stalemate, at best." Claudia countered.

Alayza stirred on the ground, drawing all their attention.

"A stalemate that is rapidly turning into disadvantage." Claudia mused aloud.

"So throw in the flag before we checker you." Soren taunted next to Claudia.

Lilsep spared a glance of confusion to Soren before returning to Neim, "Two big brawny males versus little ol' me, how will I ever stand a chance? Oh, wait," Lilsep jostled Rayla again, "I have a hostage. You come at me, I'll just kill her."
"You won't." Soren answered, "You kill her, there's nothing left protecting you, that's the point." Soren explained.

Soren lunged forward, blade held high.

Neim's fist closed around Soren's shoulder, and pulled him backwards, pulling the human off balance. The elven Claudia using it to propel herself forward into the fray.

Rayla felt the blade at her throat pull away and was shoved forward, away from Lilsep.

They had called Lilsep's bluff. And for the sake of Rayla's skin, had been right.

The garotte wire loosened from around her throat and her lungs took in a gasp of fresh air.

Was Lilsep just giving up?

The booted heel that connected with Rayla's face was answer enough. The world spun as she collapsed to the side. Her face ached and the world faded dark and red before coming back to her. The sounds of battle drawing her attention even as the world spun.

What had been Neim continued to lunge at Lilsep.

Lilsep continuously sidestepped, rolled and dodged. Neim was a formidable assassin, a murderer bathed in blood and gifted with brute force. But now, his body moved in clumsy jolting movements, his strength a tool not properly utilized. Meanwhile, Lilsep's agile dodges and rolls kept her easily out of the way of his massive fists.

Soren tried to join the fray, but when he did, Lilsep would lash out at him. Claudia, with the heightened reflexes of Neim, would pull the Crown Guard out of the fight.

It was then that Lilsep would strike, a small dagger flourished into her palms and would leave small cuts across Neim's fist and forearm as it grabbed for Soren to protect him.

Rayla tried to stand, the world spun and she still reeled from the kick to the face Lilsep had
planted. She watched them dance and quarrel around the amphitheater.

Rayla watched as Soren grew frustrated, he would come in close to the fight, be ready to strike, but always going for a cut that would leave him open, leading him to be pulled back by Neim repeatedly, leading Neim to sustain another cut. One and then two. Then five. Then ten.

The way the battle was going was not in the favor of Neim or Soren.

"Claudia! Let me fight!" Soren roared then next time the elf threw him back, taking yet another cut.

"No, Soren," Neim barked, not pausing in trying to keep Lilsep at bay. Rayla could see the angry red raised skin of the cuts. Lilsep was a mistress of poison as well as the blade. The toll the cuts were taking on Claudia were more evident. Blinking expressions, sweating, dazed attacks that missed more often than not. Neim was slowing down.

"You don't have the wards anymore," Neim swung at Lilsep, "She'll cut you down."

"You think I don't know that?!" Soren jumped into the fray again.

"I'm not having this be wasted." Neim huffed and panted.

The world finally stopped spinning for Rayla as the strange set of siblings argued back and forth. Slowly, careful not to draw Lilsep's eye, she crouched and grabbed Runaan's blades. She cursed that she didn't bring a quiver, no arrows to shoot the Spider Queen down with.

Rayla tested the grip of the blades, squeezing them.

She reached out to the Primal of the Moon, not to Fade, but more to give herself that extra piece of strength, extra speed of reflexes that she lacked.

Neim and Soren couldn't take Lilsep down, but if she joined the fray, that might just be the edge they needed to sway the battle.
Rayla rounded on the battling trio, watching from the outside, waiting for her opportunity.

Neim swung a right hook and then left followed quickly with a rounding kick towards Lilsep's midsection.

A sidestep, a bend, and then a garotte wire wrapped around Neim's foot left an opening for Soren to slash downwards. His cut forced Lilsep to duck and roll, but not releasing the wire from Neim's leg, she pulled it out from under Claudia. Neim's arms wheeled as he tried to maintain balance, but crashed to the ground. Lilsep bounded up in his absence on the other side of Soren's blade, brandishing a dagger. She thrust it forward, trying to slip it between the folds of his Katolian steel only to have it glance off the chain he wore beneath the plate.

Soren knocked her arm down, causing her to drop the blade, but it was only a fraction of a second before another one was brandished in her hand taken from some other hidden sheath.

It thrust again for Soren.

But this time it was Neim's turn to stop Lilsep.

From where he lay upon the ground, Neim grabbed Lilsep's legs and yanked them forcefully. One lithely escaped his grasp, but the other was her only support left and as it went out from under her, she fell forward.

Soren, quick to react, battle hardened, acted without thinking. His sword was still finishing it's arc, but he twisted as he spun, already blending his movements into the next attack. He raised the massive tower shield Amaya had given him and slammed it into the ground around the back of Lilsep's neck. The metal prongs on the end of the shield burying themselves into the cobbles pinning her there.

Rayla relaxed.

Maybe they didn't need her.

"Yea!" Soren cheered, then scoffed at the slight elftress, "You just got checker-mated."
Lilsep struggled against the shield. She grasped the prongs, but immediately Soren's blade was at her eye.

"Don't even try it, filthy fucking elf." There was a long pause, then Soren looked to Rayla and Claudia, "No offense, ladies."

"None taken," Neim growled as he stood, again. His black eyes went to Lilsep, "Ah, no you don't." Neim relieved Lilsep of the blade she had begun to brandish and kicked it away. The large elf pulled Lilsep's arms behind her forcefully, the female elf pinned down unable to resist. Though her strength was amplified by the moon, so was Neim's and between the two of them, her arms were frail toothpicks compared to the trunks that Neim had called arms.

Rayla walked up as Neim relieved Lilsep of more daggers and garotte wire, tossing them out of arms reach easily. Finally, Neim trussed Lilsep up, wrapping a wire around ankles and wrists, preventing the poisonous spider queen from any form of retaliation.

Rayla rubbed her jaw absently, still feeling where the heel had connected with her face, "Soren are you alright? Claudia?"

Neim muttered in Claudia's voice, "I am a damn sight away from alright." Neim was sweating, panting. His skin paler than Rayla thought it should be. Black tendrils seemed to drag across the skin from the variety of shallow cuts, "But nothing that this bitch's death won't solve." Claudia stood, her massive weight leaning forward and limping around to the other side of the tower shield.

"You can't kill her," Soren added absently, not really caring, "It wouldn't be sporting."

Neim rolled black eyes, "Alright, let her go, what was it you needed to be sporting, one second?"

Soren held up his hands, trying to defuse Claudia's anger, "I'm just saying that the king ordered us not to."

"She killed me, Soren!" Claudia raged as Lilsep and Rayla watched the exchange, "This is it. This is me now, there's no going back." She gestured to the limp body that had been hers, "That is just meat now! And look at me! I was sexy!"

"Alright, alright," Soren began to get heated, "She killed you, you...kicked...him out of his body."
"One for one, that's fair right?"

"How is that in anyway fair?" Claudia screamed, "I'm an elf now! I- I can't, Soren, I can't protect you like this, I can't... Dark Magic... with this body, I can't do it anymore." Her voice faltered, as though saying the words aloud made her realize they were true.

Rayla looked down to Lilsep where she was an avid audience member to this exchange, "We don't have time for this, Soren, Claudia. We need to move. Tazel is still out there, Callum is still out there. I don't know where my father is. What I do know is that this bitch and you still have the bindings on, meaning that Ezran is still alive, meaning we need to move our asses."

"What of her?" Soren asked.

Rayla planted a boot on Lilsep's wrists and hefted the tower shield, separating it from the cobbles before lobbing it to Soren. She crouched over the seductress's shoulder blades and wrapped an arm around her neck. Rayla could still feel the garotte wire and the bruising line it had left across her neck. Squeezing tightly, she saw Lilsep's eyes grow wide, saw her face grow red. Rayla could feel the lithe body struggle against their bindings beneath her before finally going limp.

Rayla released, sure to only keep pressure to the point of forcing unconsciousness.

"Do you think she'll be a problem now?" Rayla's voice carried an edge that seemed to ask, 'can we go, now?'

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Ezran wasn't sure when the illusion of invisibility had faded from him, but he knew he saw his shadow streaming across the walls as he plunged down hallways lined with lanterns and suits of decorative armor, he saw his arms as he flung his body full force into heavy wooden doors, forcing them open. His shield was gone, all that was left were his little legs, already beyond exhaustion, and any turmoil he could leave behind him.

"Ezran! Stop running, let's talk this out!" Tazel's voice laughed.

Since stumbling through to the opening of the catacombs and back into the castle proper, Ezran had the constant companion of Tazel's taunting and jibes.
"Come, see what Xadia has to offer the Kind of Katolis!"

Ezran was almost there. He moved, navigating the castle he had known all his life, almost as if pulled by some ethereal force. He knew what lay behind and he knew what lay ahead.

Zym. Zym and salvation.

I'm ready.

Zym soared over the castle amidst the forks of lightning and thunder, the onslaught of rain unyielding this night.

The final door opened inward and Ezran had to skid to a stop. Heaving it open, he paused for only a second. The fat raindrops pelting him, he was soaked almost instantly. Ahead of him, the catwalk disappeared into the black night, lost in the storm.

Ezran took his first step out into the storm when he felt a sharp pain in his side. He stumbled forth.

Hand going to his flank, his hand traced along his damp clothes and found something heavy, something metal. Ezran grabbed it and pulled. New pain flourished in his side as he pulled a Moonweave dagger from his side, the metal coated with some strange opaque greenish substance.

Run!

Ezran wanted to obey, tried to obey, but something was off. He tried to move his left leg, but it felt like it was getting weaker by the instant. His entire left side would intermittently flash warm and dry, then back to cold and damp, getting weaker and less intense all the while. His running steps became stumbling. He was no longer sure his foot was beneath him. Out on the catwalk he stumbled sideways and leaned heavily on the parapet, sliding down the stone.

Ezran's left arm hung heavy at his side, he couldn't move it.
What was happening?

He wanted to look around, but his eyes seemed to be fixed looking right. No matter how he tried, he was always looking right, meaning that he saw the dark silhouette of Tazel enter the doorframe and walk out into the rain. The heavy pelting of water gaze the assassin an aura of halted lantern light.

"King Ezran," Tazel mused, crouching next to the boy king, "Long may he reign."

"Wha di oo do a ee?' Ezran's words were mush in his mouth, his face as paralyzed as the left side of his body.

"You should count yourself lucky, my liege." Tazel picked up the Moonweave dagger from where Ezran had dropped it, "You won't have to watch humanity be expunged, you have the privilege of being the first piece of kindling for the coming purification."

"Fu-fu-.

Tazel cut him off, "There's no need for profanity. Don't speak, I'm not going to bother trying to figure out what you're trying to say, anyways."

Ezran heaved his chest, panic setting in. He let his head loll to one side, but did his best to keep his eyes on Tazel.

As he felt his connection to his body fading, the weakness in one side, he could see through Zym's eyes. Amidst the storm, there he was laying on the parapet, Tazel next to him. He could feel Zym's confusion as though it were his own. He could sense the worry in the dragon.

Luckily for Ezran, Zym knew things.

And so he knew things.

A look of incredulity appeared on Tazel's face as Ezran's left hand traced lines of blue light in the air, he mumbled through a mouth thick with numbness, "Fuhlminish."
With the storm all around, the Primal of Sky was at Zym's beck and call, at Ezran's beck and call. A blast of white light and a crack that seemed as though the world itself had split in two, Ezran didn't know what had happened to Tazel, he only knew that as the white light began to fade to black, there was a scorch mark where the elf had been crouching. The rain above him suddenly stopped as Zym landed, giving him the cover of his wings.

They had been so close. So close to getting away. But it didn't matter now.

He could feel remorse and sorrow coming from Zym, the young dragon mourning him already, "Ih'll beh o'ak, 'ym." Ezran lifted his right arm and crossed his body so it could rest on one of the tufts of feathers on Zym's leg.

"Ezran! Ez! No." the voice was weak, but it gained in strength as it grew closer. As Ezran's world turned black, but he could still see through Zym's eye's. Callum, bloody coat wrapped around his left arm moved towards him in the rain, right hand dripping blood from an untended wound. His brother kneeled next to him, placing a hand on Ezran, "No, c'mon Ez, get up."

"Get up, buddy, c'mon, I'll get you all the Jelly tarts you want. Just breathe, c'mon Ez." He felt the pressure of Callum's hands on his body faintly, but as Callum continued to speak, Ezran didn't hear the last of Callum's begging as the white noise of the rain drown out his words, and then that, too, faded.
After a tense and confusing exchange between Praid and Claudia in the body of Neim, Claudia hauled the unconscious body of Corvus and Alayza. One under each massive arm, she carried their limp weight with ease. Ahead of her in file, Rayla and Soren with weapons at the ready to face what might be ahead, behind her, untrusting Praid with his blade drawn ready should she turn on them. Beside her, Bait and the frobbit waddled along, not wanting to be left behind or alone.

"Callum's just ahead." Praid commented from behind her, "I left him around the bend in the rock so he was out of view. Poor bastard's been through the ringer."

"And ya jus' left 'im?" Rayla accused, not really wanting to fight, but her worry getting the better of her in the moment. Despite marching forward with blades in hand, Claudia could tell that she was wrestling with something else. Worry for Callum, worry for Ezran, who knew? There was plenty of worry to go around between everything that was happening.

With Moonshadow eyes, so much better at seeing the world regardless of the light, Claudia saw Rayla look back at her father as he refused to speak. Shaking her head, she turned forward again and hesitantly crept forward, "Callum?"

Claudia held her tongue, but couldn't help but think that Tazel was still out there, despite what Praid had said about the assassin running after Ezran. She recognized that they all needed to gather together. She could still feel the cold sweat along Neim's, no, along her arms and back. Her head throbbed, but she was holding it together, despite feeling sluggish. She looked around at the others. They were all weak and worn, all beaten and bruised in one manner or another and if they were to have any chance of stopping Rayla's betrothed, it would be together.

To Rayla's inquiry for Callum, there was no answer, no groan.

"Maybe he's napping?" Soren offered. Even his voice carried notes of trepidation.

"Callum?!" Rayla hissed in the dark, searching for her mage.

Praid rounded up from behind Claudia, keeping Neim at a careful distance, and looked at the empty space, "I left him right here, he said he would wait!" The elder elf gestured defensively. The
warrior ran his free hand through his hair and cursed, "Idiot boy! He's in no condition to fight."

Looking in the dark, Claudia couldn't help the knot in her gut, "There's so much blood," she muttered. Even with all her experience in dark magic it made her feel ill, "How is there so much?"

"So somewhere out there," Soren mused, "Callum is out there bloodied to shit, and he picked himself up to chase after an assassin? Little guy has more balls than I thought!"

"Balls?" Praid asked absentmindedly as he crouched to examine the blood stains on stone. Bait waddled up next to the Moonshadow Elf examining the bloodstains for himself with a sniff.

"Yea, balls, B-A-W-L-S, balls." Soren gestured obscenely, but the meaning lost given the clunky movements required for somebody carrying a sword and shield.

"Let's just move." Claudia groaned. She watched Rayla stare at the smears and stains of blood in the low light. The elf woman's shoulders slumped before she turned away, grumbling under her breath, "If tha' mage went off and got himself ki'led, I'm going ta drag him out of whatevah grave he found just so ah can kill him ag'in."

Tough words, but they couldn't hide the consternation on her face.

"I'm not sure how he mustered it, but at given the distance between this blood and the next, he set off a quite a brisk pace. I wonder...did he still have it in him to do the..." Praid struggled with words, "...sparky...thing...again."

"Either way," Soren grouched, taking off ahead of everyone, "Ezran is this way. Callum is this way. Tazel is this way." His voice began to fade down the hall, he was already running ahead of everyone else. The other's made to follow, Claudia taking up the rear with her burden, but halted as a cold chill ran down her spine.

"Rayla!" Neim's voice was strange in her own ears, fear quaking in the still alien voice.

"What is it Cla-" The words dropped off, her breath frozen in her throat.
Claudia shifted Corvus and Alayze to one arm and bent to the ground. When she stood, she held aloft a thin strip of intricate cloth. Grey and silver marked with a metal clip in the shape of a moon. Neim's black eyes wide, she could tell their strange appearance doing nothing to halt the unease that this ribbon brought Rayla, but didn't care.

The binding.

Neim's binding had fallen off.

King Ezran was dead.

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Glassy azure eyes stared up a Callum from Ezran's pale face. It was as though something changed within his brother. From the last time they had seen one another something now was missing. There had been laughter and warmth; a joy that seemed to permeate Ezran's personality that was no longer there.

Instead there was something still and unmoving; something gray and cold. So pervasive was this change that it touched on every aspect of him. His hair seemed less lustrous despite the pouring rain, his lips frozen in a drooping smirk, eyes gazing to the right. Rain drops pelting unblinking eyes. Even his clothes seemed to be different than when they had moved and shifted with him: a vibrant proclamation of life. Now they seemed to be soaked rags draped over stone.

Ezran was dead.

His brother was dead.

Callum reached out with a trembling and wounded right hand touching his brother's skin, already beginning to cool in the rain. Callum ran his hand over the tight braids of his brother's hair, cradling his head, "Ezran, please wake up. Ezran, please!" Callum didn't feel the rain soak him through and through as he held his brother, "No, Ezran, don't leave me, too. What are we going to do without you?" Rain poured over Callum's cheeks, plastered his hair to his head. Callum's voice hitched as he begged, "What am I going to do without you? Please wake up!"

Callum hardly took stock of Zym's presence, but when the dragon's voice reverberated through his
skull, he couldn't ignore it. There was as much panic and fear in the dragon's sending as there was in Callum. Majestic beast of sky and thunder though he may be, still a scared little child that had never truly lost a loved one. True, his father had never been present, but that was different than losing somebody you loved. Not worse, just, different. Zym trembled at his core.

The dragon's large head levelled to look at Callum, those nearly glowing blue eyes catching the scant light of the night and the occasional flash of distant lightning. Rain ran off of his scaled face. Azure orbs intent on Callum, You have to try something! There has to be something you can do!

Callum just sniffed and looked away from the dragon, back to his brother, his right hand never leaving Ezran's cheek.

Callum! Zym's voice quaked through his head, the stones seemed to shake beneath Callum as he struggled to conceive of a world without Ezran, Callum!

"Stop it, Zym!" Callum shouted over the rain, "Just stop it! Ezran's dead, there's nothing I can do!"

Try! The panicked, knowing eyes of Zym bored into Callum.

"Just go away, Zym! What is the point of you?" Callum roared, dragging Ezran closer across the stone, "Why is he out here? Why didn't he just stay in the catacombs?"

I... Callum had never seen a dragon hesitate, but now was as good a time as any, I called him out, I...I thought we could get away.

"Then where were you?" Callum accused, bringing Ezran's head to rest upon his lap. His wounded left arm still held at his side, unused, he struggled damp and slick on the stone to pull Ezran into him, unwilling to let him go. The hole in his right hand still oozed blood, leaving coagulated chunks across Ezran's clothes and hair.

He was struck before I could grab him and get away, struck down before he stepped into the open for me to help. Zym sounded defensive, like he was pleading with himself as much as with Callum.

They stared at each other in silence. Dragon and human, human and dragon, mourning the loss of the only family they had left.
Rayla's voice reached Callum's ears before the other's. Calling out into the storm where he and Zym stood vigil over the dead king, their dead brother. It jumped an octave as she saw him, "Callum?!"

He didn't look away from Ezran.

"Callum!" He could barely hear her footfalls of she raced towards him in the rain, sliding over the stone of the catwalk as she came to a stop next to him. "Oh…Callum…Ezran…" she fell to her knees next to Callum. The other's found the four like this. Callum, bloody and hateful cradling Ezran's cold face in his lap with a torn hand. Rayla, kneeling to his right, a single hand on his shoulder, trying to both give him her strength and draw upon her own for this nightmarish moment. And the dragon prince, neck craned looking over the body of the boy he loved like family so that the rain of his storm ran off his snout and scales like tears.

"Callum!" Soren's voice called, "Wha-what happened?" the crown guard demanded.

"What do you think happened?" Callum sneered, "Tazel killed my brother."

"No." Claudia's voice in strange overtones of a deeper more menacing voice, "Callum, I'm so sorry. I-"

Callum stared on the large black eyes beneath the straight locks of white hair now clinging to Neim's face. Despite the situation, confusion stirred him before apathy took hold. What did it matter? His eyes traced over the limp forms of Alayza and Corvus in Neim's arms. The small figures of Bait and the frobbit who's name he didn't know scampering through the night after them all.

Alayza.

Easing Ezran's head down onto the stone, Callum stumbled to his feet, not caring that all the eyes were on him.

Alayza.
Callum dragged himself over in front of Neim, "Put her down," Callum growled.

Neim obeyed, setting both Alayza and Corvus down on.

"What are you doing, boy?" Praid's voice was stern, stepping in between Alayza and Callum.

Callum glared at the elf between him and his goal, through clenched teeth he spoke, "Waking her up." He didn't need to touch Alayza, he didn't even need to draw the rune in the air. One of the curses of his eidetic memory was that he recalled each and every portion of his torture, he remembered how Lilsep had manipulated the streams of the Moon Primal to keep him conscious.

On a whim, he bent the scant streams of the Moon Primal amidst the storm and threaded them through Alayza's eyes, reaching for something deeper.

The elf matron stirred in the rain, then bolted upright coughing.

Praid looked over his shoulder to his wife, then back to Callum. Appraising eyes watched the mage uneasily before breaking his gaze and going to her side in a hurry.

Her eyes wide and panicked, Alayza whipped around fearfully, "Praid? Praid!"

"Shh, shh, I'm here, mama bear, I'm here." Praid ran soothing hands through over his wife's hair and pulled her head against his chest.

"What's happening?" She asked looking around, "The last thing I remember is…" her hand went to her throat as her eyes fell upon the looming figure of Neim.

"Never mind that." Callum commanded.

Alayza spun where she sat to look at Callum, then saw the rest of the dismal scene. The mage glaring. The dragon looming. Her daughter kneeling. The king doing…nothing.

"Do what you are here to do." Callum demanded of the illusionist, "You said you can reverse the
blood lock poison. Reverse it. Now."

Alayza didn't bother to stand, but scurried across the stone to Ezran on all fours, Callum's eyes followed her, "How long has he been like this?" Alayza asked. She lifted his head, looked in his eyes, seeking something Callum didn't understand.

"Minutes." Callum said coldly, walking up behind Alayza, standing over them all.

"Fuck." Alayza cursed, "Fuck. Callum, what did you do?"

"What do you mean?" Callum bit, "I woke you up, now do what you're here to do!"

"You touched the Primal of the Moon, you idiot." Her eyes were closed, "I can't...I can't get a hold of anything. It's all slipping through my fingers. Your touch makes it too chaotic!" Alayza growled before finally giving up, sighing defeatedly, "It wouldn't matter, anyways, we're too late."

"It's been only minutes, you're telling me it works that fast?" Callum muttered disbelievingly.

Alayza didn't say anything, merely gestured at the corpse of the king at his feet.

Callum threw his arms up in the air then pointed it in Alayza's face, asking pointedly,"What is the point of you? What's the point of Zym? A dragon and an illusionist and you were both completely useless!"

Rayla stood and interposed herself between her mother and Callum. She held up her hands before her in a show of placation. Callum looked at her, fighting the tears welling in his eyes as the world swam in his head, fighting to wrangle the pain in his heart.

Callum let her take his wounded hand in her gloved one, "Callum." Rayla's whisper barely audible over the pelting rain, "Nothin' ah say er do will take this away. Nothin'."

Callum just looked at his hand in hers, four fingers interweaving between his five. It hurt to move his fingers, but in a way that helped him in this moment. The pain was awful but it was something real, something that kept him grounded.
"I get it, you're angry, you're hurt. You've been through too much." She whispered in the rain. The hand not holding his was placed on his cheek as he stared through her, still trying to glare holes into Alayza. Still, her touch was the encouragement he needed to let the rage leak out.

So, Callum stood there numbly.

Rayla stared back at him, placing a gentle, wet kiss upon his cheek.

Alayza shifted uncomfortably behind them.

Callum felt the energy taken from him and leaned into her touch, accepted the kiss. When his eyes rose again, he looked around, eyes catching Neim.

"You're Claudia?" Callum asked abruptly.

"Yes…" Claudia's timbre and tones overlaid upon Neim's, "But Callum, this is not something Ezran can do. He's not a mage, he hasn't dabbled in dark magic, he would not pass through the Shadow Mirror."

"I don't know what any of that means." Callum said overconfidently.

"He can't be brought back like me." Claudia said definitively.

"But there is a way. Black Magic, Spirit Magic, has a way to tie a soul to a living body? Right?" Callum drifted away from Rayla, his expression furtive, "Don't you see?"

Claudia's answer was hesitant, "Yes... But it's not that simple."

"I didn't expect it to be simple." He cast a glance at Rayla, then back to Neim's black eyes, "Can you help me?"
"Callum," Neim soothed, placing his massive hand's on the small mages shoulders, "You can't know what this will cost, you're barely standing as it is." Was that worry, he heard?

Callum's air changed from energetic to adamant, "You want my forgiveness? You want my forgiveness for how you betrayed Ezran and I?" Callum quipped, watching the elves warpainted face fall in sorrow, "Help me with this."

Neim didn't speak.

"Help me bring my brother back." Callum demaned.

"That's not fair, Callum," It was Rayla this time, taking his hand again, trying to draw his eye, "It's ok."

"No," Callum swallowed hard, fighting the tears. He had to steel himself. Ezran had become so hard, he could do the same. If he had to, "No, it's not okay, and if that is all you have is empty words, I need you to go."

"I ain't goin' anywhere." Rayla spoke sternly squeezing his forearm, a measure of reassurance intermingled with her defiance, "Callum, I'm here, no matter what."

"No." Callum looked to the elves around him and Soren, "No, Tazel is still out there, he is still a threat to Ezran and all of Katolis. If I am going to bring...If I am going to help Ezran, Tazel needs to be detained."

Praid moved to listen, Soren at his back, but Rayla stayed planted where she stood. By his side.

"I'm right where I'm supposed to be." She added softly.

As angry as Callum was at her, as furious as he was that she wasn't listening to him, he knew it was because despite everything that had led to this point, despite every bend of logic he had been through to get here, something still did not sit right with using Spirit Magic, Black Magic, he couldn't extricate the sensation of something oily and slick about it. Almost as though something was sliding and slithering over him as he considered what he was about to endeavor upon.
Rayla met the eyes of Praid and Alayza, both who ventured away with Soren, taking Corvus with them.

The frobbbit followed Alayza, Bait stayed by Callum's side.

Callum was already ignoring their departure.

He moved haphazardly to his brother's side, having to focus intently on each step. Rayla helped him to sit beside the cooling body. Callum forced himself to stare at it, at the eternal outcome of what he would be faced with if he didn't try.

"Callum, what are you doing, this isn't safe," But those words didn't stop him as Neim took up a place beside Callum, so that now they ringed Ezran's body. Callum at his head, Rayla to the king's right, Bait between them, Claudia opposite Rayla, and Zym standing over them all. Mage opposite Dragon, and elf opposite elf.

Claudia continued to plead with Callum, "This is sheer madness."

"I know that Claudia!" Callum snarled so that he wouldn't sob, "I know that, I'm untrained, unpracticed. Every time I've done Dark Magic, it's left me sickly."

"And you're already barely standing." Neim argued again.

"I get it!" Callum sighed deafeatedly, "I get it, there is no point being redundant. Don't you see? I have to try!"

For Ezran, Zym's voice shared through them all accompanied by the bright and smiling visage of the dead king.

Rayla ran a gloved hand up his right arm, "For you."

Callum met each of their eyes in turn, lastly looking to Ezran's upside down face, pulling it into his lap. Callum unwrapped his wounded arm, the wet coat sticking to the exposed flesh, "Dark Magic, it needs a price right? Blood?" He proffered the soaked jacket to Neim, "Is this enough."
Neim took the stained coat reverently, "Blood has power, especially that of family, but not for this." Neim swallowed hard, worried black eyes looking at Callum, "For this," her voice was distant, seeing something beyond Callum, "We need bone."

"Bone?" Rayla asked nobody in particular, her unease breaking through as snark, "Where tha fuck are we gonna to get a bone? Let me just waltz on down ta tha shawp and pick up a bone."

Claudia looked at Rayla pointedly, "Anything you do with Dark Magic is going to be at a cost. I am not the one that sets the price, only the one that's paid it."

"So, a bone," Callum sighed wincing. He knew the only way forward. Unfortunately, it made a sort of cosmic sense to him. Despite that, he didn't have to like it, "Fuck, my arm. It has to be my arm, doesn't it?"

Neim looked piteously at Callum, a strange dissonance coming from compassionate expression on the hardened face, "The more potent the magical creature that it comes from, the more likely it will work."

*We will use mine, then.* Zym raised a claw over Ezran's body, *For Ezran I will give my arm.*

Callum scoffed, "No, don't you see, Zym, it has to be mine. Blood has power. Bone has power. He is my blood. Bones forged of the same womb." Callum sighed, "Fuck."

"Callum..." Rayla continued to try and soothe him. He knew she would have no words to say, no offerings of advice. Who else in all of Xadia had ever been in this situation before?

"It's fine." He mumbled determinedly, "This arm was going to have to be amputated anyway, I bet. Wish that I had the strength to do this." Callum muttered

"Wish that we weren't here." Rayla added, leaning her head on his shoulder.

Callum sighed deeply, exhaling, before opening his mouth, "Okay, okay."
If you're going to do something, hurry. Zym begged in their minds.

"I'm doing it, it's just..." Callum hesitated, "It's not easy."

Except it was.

It was really easy.

His mind's eye flitted over the nodes in his mind; vibrant blue of sky, a breath of fresh air, warm red sunkissed days, and pristine white, the eerie beautiful silence of night. Finally, deepest black, an untended and shadowed graveyard.

And then he ran a tendril of his consciousness over the gate, unlatched it, and stepped forward to be embraced by that overcast garden of the dead.

He felt himself transported, taken elsewhere.

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When Callum opened his eyes, they were not the verdant gems that had so entranced Rayla so many years ago. Gone were the emeralds that had captured her fancy and her heart.

No, these eyes were dispassionate and dark. They stared hollowly across a great distance, seeing the world without being a part of it.

And then his fingers began their work.

Digits digging and working into the bloody and bleeding flesh of his own arm pulling and separating the sinew and muscle. His lips quivered, not in pain or distress, but in a strange mumbling rant, "Senob, senob, senob."

Rayla withdrew her hand from this creature, whatever it was, it was not her Callum, "What's happened to him?" Rayla asked Ne-Claudia, "What is he doing?"
Neim only confirmed what she already knew, "This is not Callum's work, this is Dark Magic, acting of it's own accord."

*It can do that?* Zym asked craning his head one way and then the other to take a look at Callum's black eyes and mumbling lips.

Rayla watched her loves body be desecrated by the dark antics of this alien force moving through him as his fingers moved through the slopping living meat of Callum's arm. Fingers twitched as though moved by some marionette's strings, his head crooked and whipped, but in the end, his fingers found their way around something.

Rayla couldn't tell if Callum was pale due to the blood loss or due to the dark forces moving through him. A grin made of dead teeth split his wriggling almost worm like pale lips. Callum's right arm jerked suddenly and in the rain storm he held aloft a bone covered in gore.

Chunks of Callum slapped against Rayla's face and her eyes shot open. She dare not lick her lips, unsure if the liquid there was the rain, only now transitioning from it's unyielding downpour, or a piece of the partially coagulated remnant of Callum's left arm.

Even Cla-Neim, seemed to be confused, "Callum? Where are you getting these words from? This is no magic I know!"

Callum's head lolled backwards and a laugh split his throat, a crypt long forgotten exhaling it's stale and rancid air, "Yek Eht, Yek eht."

"Rayla! We have to stop him!" Claudia stood and took the shadowed Callum in her hands and shook him, "You can't trust that voice Callum! It offers things but the price is too much! It's always too much!"

A voice not Callum's spoke in the high mage's stead, "You took it, witch! Let this one make the same choice."

"No!" Claudia shouted, her own tones coming out adamant and strong, "Leave him alone!"
Rayla didn’t know how to help, and took up a confused stance behind Neim as Zym watched on. Bait scrambled over to her, but stood between all of them and this new Callum, bent low and growling.

She had never heard Zym have such a serpentine hiss as when he spoke, *Leave him, Grey Wyrm, you are not welcome here.*

"No, no, no," Callum arched his back and rose up on pointed toes, pulled by some unseen force, "You have no power here, runtling." His entire body lurched forward, heaving his arms and sloping forward, "Know your place."

Zym opened his mouth, a terrible fanged orifice with sharp teeth lining the inside of his scaled snout. It snapped forwards for Callum.

"Zym!" Rayla screamed, but her words had no effect.

Zym's jaws snapped shut on air, closing around nothing.

It was the laughter that made the words all the more disturbing, "Begone, Azymondius, heir of gale and thunder, you stand in my domain now."

And so, in a flash, Zym disappeared into the black of night, carried off by an unseen force, his roar growing ever more distant. Leaving behind exactly what this entity needed, unbeknownst to them. Two fore-claws of silver blue scales.

It was now that Rayla moved, now that she sprinted into action. She had no idea what was happening, no idea what was in Callum's head and no clue where this immense power was coming from.

But she knew she had to stop it. Whatever this was, she could not allow it to come to pass.

Rayla leapt for the claws even as Neim attempted to swing at Callum.

An upraised finger halted the massive fist Claudia had sent forth. Simultaneously with the other
hand, Callum gestured downwards, and Rayla slammed into the ground hard enough to bounce.

"Know this, brides of Callum," The hunched body of Callum walked forward, feet never touching the stone walkway. His presence causing the remaining rain to bend away from him, unbidden, "He fought this. Every step of the way, Callum fought this end. But even as I told him years ago, Dark Magic is his destiny. I am his destiny."

The body of Callum moved on marionette strings and picked up the two foreclaws of Zym, the hefty meat of the claws giving him no pause. Callum's master placed them upon the parapet, severed ends balanced cleanly on the stone as Neim and Rayla struggled against their invisible bonds.

Head quirking to the side suddenly, "Ah, the key, I knew it was here." A boneless limp left arm caught it as it shot through the air towards him. This Callum, this Grey, lifted his left arm, but it moved in odd ways, as though it didn't follow the designated pattern of muscles and structure. It twisted and hung in the air, but in the end he placed the key in the open space between the dragon's severed claws.

Rayla watched with a strange fascination as the cube began to float in the air between them.

Electric sparks danced across Zym's removed scales and arced to the cube, lighting up the rune of sky.

Still holding the bone in his right hand, the Grey began his dark work.

".enob derettahs htiw yek eht kraM" A voice so sinister and still somehow Callum's spoke, a strange verse. He slammed the gore covered bone against the parapet and watched it splinter and shatter. ".enots dna tooos fo ffo gniparcS"

She could feel the air come to life around her, charged with the energy pouring off of Zym's claws. The Key of Aaravos acting as a focus of the surrounding Primal energy that was in and throughout everything.

Callum marked the Star Sigil first, dragging the stylus of broken bone across the raised rune. Tracing a path across the ceramic surface, scraping a new mark in it's ancient form, it began to glow. First in the light clean and pure of the Star Primal's energy, a strange black light ringed in a halo of white. Then, as he completed the new sigil, a serpent eating it's own tail looped over upon
itself around a staff, it changed. The original rune's light faded and the serpent glowed inversely; pouring out of white light wreathed in black.

Rayla felt as though a weight was lifted from his shoulders, she still felt the invisible force pressing her now more softly into the ground. The force of the Star Primal was toyed with through this both ancient and unknown magic. The pebbles on the catwalk trembled and spun just above the ground.

The Key rotated of it's own accord.

The bone chisel in Callum's hand began to hum.

Sea was next. The serpent slithered surreptitiously around the rune of ocean and the water began to run over an invisible wall around Callum, collecting and spinning, spiraling up along it's outside.

Earth next. Again, the serpents spun easily over the sigil of earth shaped reminiscent of a mountainous landscape. Brown light faded, devoured by the snake, and a cool blue light began to emanate from the earthen sigil. Though pebbles floated at his feet, Rayla could feel the castle beneath her tremble.

Rayla, Neim, and Bait were kept away from Callum, the rain pouring down around him forced away by some unseen sphere of influence that they had no way of penetrating themselves. Rayla looked around hesitantly, then shouted at Callum, "Please, Callum, I know the choice is hard, but this is too much! Don't!" Something he couldn't hear over the cacophonous roar of stone shifting beneath him. But it never fell, it never collapsed, like him, the stones of the castle shifted on the unseen power of the Star Primal.

Callum cast a fateful glance at Rayla.

For a moment, his eyes were as they had been. Her hands, garbed in black leather, wearing his mother's bracers, were reaching out to the invisible barrier. She fought with all her strength to pull herself forward. Violet eyes watching him intently, she licked her lips nervously, watching him as he worked.

Rayla could see the hesitation in his eyes, the concern resting upon his shoulders, the defeated posture. Rayla didn't want him to go forward with this, and knew he would stop if he could. But with Ezran in the balance, not even she could tell him that stopping was for the best. At the end of it, Rayla just met his eyes, and nodded silently.
Callum was consumed again with dark looks as he carved into the rune of the moon. White streaks of primal energy burst forth blood red, pouring out over the new rune and dripping over the scaled foreclaws of Zym, the lightning arcing there boiling the sanguine substance.

The vibrations of the bone intensified, but she could see he held it all the same. Cracks and fissures began to appear on the surface of the bone glowing in amber light.

Sun was marred by the same symbol, and the light of the world seemed to fade.

Finally, blindly, she watched nodes of light moving in the inky terrain. Callum etched over the symbol of sky, and the air was stolen from her lungs.

In the coming silence, his voice reverberated with words not his own. She knew that he spoke inversely, but Rayla understood the words, "With this Key of Primals marred, I open the gate at last unbarred. Take this bone to pay the toll, and change for whom the grave bells knoll."

A key that wasn't a key to open a door that didn't exist.

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He felt a child staring at an old a decrepit yard, overgrown by years of being untended. He stood there, not wanting to cross that threshold into the unknown, despite the gate sitting ajar before him. He knew that monsters and ghosts weren't real, but that was paltry reassurance in this place.

Trepidation and fear be damned, he did it, he stepped across that barrier and plunged himself into the inky black well of it. Headstones so covered in grime that they appeared covered in soot, foliage so thick that the shadowed greens took on a depth all their own.

He meandered for a time, lost in the graveyard. The headstones and mausoleums unreadable, or rather, no one had deigned to put names upon them. The path he took was overgrown, but still a path. Some of the foliage was even broken, as though some one had been by here before him.

When Callum burst into a clearing, it was a most welcome change.
"It's about time you got here." Ezran smirked at his beloved brother and turned his gaze from the fields of white grass and under the boiling green sky. His small figure against the haunting landscape of was a welcome sight.

"Ezran!" Callum rushed to his brother, wrapping his arms around him. He was exactly what Ezran was supposed to be. Warm, laughing, and squeezing him back tightly. Ezran's snark doing nothing to diminish the joy of holding his brother again.

After not long enough they parted and merely looked at one another.

Callum put this brother in a head lock suddenly, snaking his left arm around his brother's neck, "Don't you ever do that again you dumpy-monkin. How could you?"

The laughter died, and they just stayed like that, holding each other.

It was Callum who finally spoke, "What is this place anyways?" he looked around, somehow the graveyard seemed miles behind him over hills that seemed to shift with the landscape, covered in white grass and a solitary red leafed spruceling marring the otherwise unbroken terrain.

"I don't rightly know," Ezran shrugged, looking around, "I've only been here a week or so."

"A week?!" Callum exclaimed, "It hasn't been an hour!"

"You know what?" Ezran laughed, "I can't say. Time is funny here." he scratched absently behind his head.

Callum felt something pulling at him, dragging him forward, away from Ezran. So powerful was it that it pulled his eyes out over the expanse, "What is that?"

Black clouds frozen in a storm with red lightning bolts that seemed to move imperceptibly slow, but when he looked away and looked back, the entire storm front was completely changed. It ate and chewed up the ground beneath it, glowing white sheets of rain catching the green light of the blue sun.
"The storm on the horizon? I don't know, but I feel... Pulled towards it... " Ezran took a step forwards.

Callum placed a hand on his shoulder, "That's more than just a storm, Ezran."

"That's more than just a storm, Ezran," The younger brother mocked, "Of course, but what?"

Callum leveled an irate gaze at his brother, no wonder Praid and him seemed to get along so swimmingly, "It feels, like, like in the catacombs. Something ancient and still."

"That doesn't make sense, though," Ezran turned to his brother, "It's not still, it's utter chaos."

"We need to go Ezran, we can't stay here long." Callum urged, I don't know what's happening back there.

"We can't, not yet." His brother tossed off Callum's concern easily, "We're here for a reason, I don't know if I've figured it out yet."

Callum became exasperated. It felt like when they were kids all over again, Ezran being mysterious and not speaking plainly. But then he remembered that Ezran had been telling the truth all those times he said he was talking to the animals. He sighed, "Why are we here, Ezran?"

"Because how else was I to tell you of what must come next?" The voice was familiar, a voice that was seeded with dark intent and potential, but commanded their attention in a way it had all their lives.

Callum and Ezran turned around, and there before them both, in this alien terrain, Lord Viren stood proudly.
---End Part III---

Thank you all for taking this journey with me. I will continue to work on this story, but I have reached a point in the year where other things must take priority. Thank you for all the feedback and thank you for reading my work. I hope you return for 'part IV: The Calm' which I will continue in Ch 68 when I am able.
Want that extra level of immersion?

Play this while you read

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egFm6MHLvYk

And drink this (+/- a helping of whiskey)

https://todayscreativelife.com/russian-tea/

Ingredients
1 1/2 Cups unsweetened Instant Tea Powder
2 Cups Tang
1 Tablespoon Lemonade Powder Mix - use sweetened or unsweetened.
2 C. Sugar
1 teaspoon ground cloves
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon nutmeg (optional)

Instructions
Mixing all of this creates quite a bit of dust. I decreased this problem by using a gallon size ziploc bag.
Pour all ingredients into your plastic bag. Of course a large bowl will also work.
Mix ingredients well, either stirring or shaking it around in a well sealed ziplock bag.
Store in the baggie or in any container that keeps moisture out.
Mix 3 to 4 tablespoons of your new mixture into your mug or glass of hot water or cold water, about 1 cup. Adjust accordingly.

The aged and wooden shop door opened with the clangor of high pitched ringing. A bell suspended above the door announced the arrival of a customer, fulfilling its purpose. Despite the ringing silence fell over the room in moments but for the blustery gust that came on the heels of the visitor. A cold and biting wind that sent the warm scent of autumnal spices that had filled the shop just moments before flurrying away. A puff of snow followed the woman into the shop, the flakes of snow melting into fat drops of water before they ever touched the warm wooden planks of the entryway.

The woman took a moment, allowing her brown doe like eyes to adjust to the interior of the store and bask in the penetrating embrace of it's warmth. Coming to herself she turned and quickly shut the door behind her, sending the bell into a jangle of alarm once more. The wind's scream grew as the door shut further before completely falling silent with the closing of the latch. The howls of the early evening wind faded, but could still be heard just beyond the stout and sturdy wooden barrier.
With the door shut and the wintry cold once again banished from the shop the woman set to her task, pulling off thick leather mittens and stuffing them into the pocket fold of her green cloak. She doffed her hood and pulled down the red scarf wrapped around her face to keep the chill away before taking greedy breaths of the warm air. Her dark complexion scattered with freckles, contained a masked hint of rosy hue from the cold. Rubbing her hands together as she looked about the store, a coy smile turned her chapped lips.

Winter had come early this year on the heels of what had been a too short autumn. Some of the surrounding farmstead’s last harvest had been taken by the first frost, freezing over. Then, the first frost had almost instantly become the first snow, and left the store rooms of the lords, ladies, farms, and the Castle itself, all but barren. And this winter was just beginning, the winter solstice still over a month away. This shop, however, despite the barrenness of the surrounding lands, was still full of dried goods. Bundles of herbs hanging from rafters filled the air with their unique scents and flavors. Heavily seasoned strips of dried meat added their savory tang to the mix; a cluster of red oblong fruits with dried green stems gleamed in the warm firelight of the shop appearing sweet but if one got too close, the scent would make one’s nose would itch and burn.

At the beck and call of the bell, a large man shouldered his way into the shop from the back. He carried with him a platter of wood and iron between two round bulbous hands. The spout of a coarse porcelain teapot released a constant thick wafting column of steam drifting upwards. An array of cups of the same coarse material were arrayed on the platter with a heel of bread and spread of fruit jam. The man's eyes, burdened by a brow of excess fat and finely plucked eyebrows, peered into the warm interior and at seeing the woman his moon round face split with a smile as warm as the fire crackling in the corner. His low voice led the way as he bustled to her side, "Lady Ohksha! Come in, come in out of that nasty mess of weather. Come, come, warm yourself by the hearth."

Lady Ohksha laughed, "Be still, Milo, be still. Ah'm fine, a l'l bih of cold ain't sendin' me runnin'." She tolerated the large man's gentle pushes towards the fire, it's warmth drawing her to it.

"Here, now, you wait here, and I'll go get the good tea cups." He paused licking his lips, "And maybe a little honey? And some whiskey? To keep us warm tonight?" He pursed his lips in a smile that made his round cheeks gleam.

"Aye, that sounds wonderful," She nodded, lifting her hands to the flames, "But ah swear, you jus' bring out 'the nice tea cups' to flatter your customers. Ah bet more have drank outta the fine cups than those there." she gestured to the coarse porcelain cups on the platter.

Milo merely smiled at her knowing he had been caught before ducking back into the back room and leaving her once again amidst the dried goods of his shop. He was a merchant who knew the importance of flattery and posturing, especially when dealing with ladies and lords.
When Milo returned he carried the same platter, now with a few more slices of dried fruit to and a bowl of nuts. To the side of this new food thin white and gold fine porcelain cups bore the symbol of the two towers of Katolis inlaid in gold leaf with gold lining the rim. Setting the platter down beside her, he turned his gratuitous mass towards Lady Ohksha again, "I know that you prefer the Moonberry tea with rose and honey, but I have a new mixture that I think you will find to your liking: Citrus and cinnamon with a mixture of lemon and clove. Add a spoonful of sugar and it will settle you in to any warm night."

Lady Ohksha nodded mulling over the flavors in her mind, "That sounds delightful, but let's not forget the whiskey either."

"Oh!" Milo chortled, his chins waggling as he shook his head, "Lady Ohksha, you are my type of woman." He hummed as he worked, pulling a sturdy leather hip flask from beneath his shopkeeper's apron and winked at her with a grin. He splashed a bit of whiskey into each cup. Milo then gave his guest a measuring look, and tipped an extra splash into each, "To keep the cold from your bones."

"And loosen my purse-strings no doubt." She laughed good-naturedly while watching him add the brewed tea to the cups.

The large man shrugged, and stated offhandedly, "Whiskey to keep you warm tonight, gold to keep me warm through the winter."

Finishing his work he handed her a saucer with a teacup centered upon it as well as a chunk of dried bread already spread with jam.

Gratefully she took the proffered items and brought the cup to her lips. Before the liquid touched her tongue, she could already taste the sweet citrus mixed with the spice of cinnamon as the scents wafted towards her. The rest of the flavors blended together to mask the whiskey. She swirled it about her mouth, making sounds of appreciation. When she swallowed, the burn of the whiskey followed it down and spread out across her chest bringing a heat that fire couldn't mimic.

"That." She gestured with her eyes emphatically, "Is a dangerous poshun."

"Cheers, m'lady." Milo took his own tea and downed the entire glass in one go. Popping the bit of dry bread and jam into his own mouth, he chewed and spoke around a full mouth, "Now, what is it that Milo's Magnificent Merchandise can do for you?"
Lady Ohksha sipped her tea once more and nodded, savoring the burn on her tongue as well as the burn through her chest, "Aye, Ah was hoping to get somethin' speshul."

"Something special? Color me intrigued." Milo leaned in and whispered conspiratorially, "What are we celebrating?" 

Lady Ohksha looked to the left, searching for the right word, "Reunions." She tested it, hearing it, tasting it, "Yes, reunions."

"And who is being reunited? Do you have a sister or a handsome brother coming from Neolandia?" Milo waggled his eyebrows at her earning a breathy laugh.

"No, no siblin's for me. My parent's focus was on thur career more than family." Lady Ohksha answered glumly before brightening, straightening up, "No, Lord Callum and Ah are going to be reunited today."

"Reunited? Why, my lady, I don't know if you were aware of this, but since the Fall of the second tower, you haven't left his side but to run errands." He gave her a confused look, "What was that? Two months ago?"

"Aye, tis true, tis true, and since then his health has been rather poor." She sighed, "But now the High Mage is ready to make public appearances again, accordin' tah thar royal physician, Tomaz. He no longer believes Lord Callum's 'constitution to be adversely affected from such strenuous activities'."

Milo's eyes went wide, his brows raising high and mouth forming a large 'o' as understanding rolled through.

"I am glad to hear! The King's brother wasn't doing so well." Milo shivered, "What with the cold and all. I have just the thing, how about a special meal to sate hunger, but not so bogged down as to leave without thirst for some of life's delicacies?"

Lady Ohksha was thankful for the dark complexion hiding her blush. Normally, she would never speak so plainly about…about that. And Milo was parsing words rather well. Maybe it was only so obvious because she knew what she was talking about. Still, she didn't speak, merely nodded, taking another swig of tea.
"I have just the thing." Milo clapped his hands and left Lady Ohksha. He moved deftly about his shop, gathering a number of things into a basket for her. As he moved he spoke, "Strange, this weather of late, no? I remember this time last year we were sweltering away, my shop was making gold hand over fist on ice shipped down from the mountains. Now though, I swear I've never seen it get this dark so early. After the tower fell it seemed as though the autumn, went in a flash, didn't it? Why even some of the leaves are stuck, frozen to the trees! Though I know that people talk and gossip and, look at me, going on and on. Though I have had a fair share of the farm folk I trade with complain that they lost the last of their harvest to the frosts. Still. There have been hungry winters before and there will be hungry winters again. No?"

"What of Harrow's Promise?" Lady Ohksha asked, listening as she swirled the tea, helping herself to a nut or two from the bowl.

"Oh, a noble intention of the king, undoubtedly." His string of language was broken by a curse as he stubbed his foot on something on the other side of the shop, "But spooning out meals for the hungry of the city doesn't feed the farm folk, if anything, it brings them in from the fields and then they don't have shelter. Leaves their homes up for grabs to any number of ill intended individuals. A good intent to honor his father, but there may yet be fallout from it. Not to mention the rumors of elves."

Lady Ohksha's ears perked up, "Elves? This close to Katolis? Surely not."

"Oh, I mean, my husband, Roland, he tells me they're just rumors, but I still worry about him taking the cart out to the folks there. They tell him they're seeing troupes of them, six or seven shadowed figures moving in the distance. Now, Roland ain't ever hurt anyone after he got retired from the army due to the injury and all. Still, he thinks that every elf somehow knows he's got blood on his hands."

"Oh, I had no idea." Lady Ohksha shuffled nervously, "He must have been really nervous when the Lord Callum brought the Dragon Prince and his entourage of elves."

"Oh, hmm?, the night before the Fall?" Milo mused taking time to scratch his balding head, "Luckily for Roland he was conscripted to take a cart load of soldiers out of the city. Now when he returned the next day to find a wounded dragon, a sickly High Mage, and the King with six captive Moonshadow Elf assassins, he had found that unsettling. Granted, they had help from three elves on their side the rumors say. But why am I telling you this, you surely know better than myself, being Lord Callum's caretaker. And from the sound of it, eyes of being his...companion...too." He smiled broadly, but not lewdly, as he approached her and passed her a basket laden with groceries. Whispering over the prize he changed the topic, "Venison steaks to be braised with sweet onion and cloves. This'll make a warm meal to take the chill out of the air, a bottle of Xadian sweet wine,
green, not red, to accentuate the flavor of the venison. I keep it stored away for special guests and special occasions, this seems to satisfy both."

"That sounds like bliss, Milo," Lady Ohksha took the basket and peaked inside, "You've outdone yourself!"

"Oh, I'm not done yet, m'lady," he puffed out his chest proudly, "On your way back to the castle visit Vigni, the tavern keepers wife, she's been baking dried fruit tarts today as well as making cinnamon baked apples to keep for the winter in jars. Get some of those for a taste of sweetness on your tongue. Her sister who lives next to the tavern, is a bit of a trollop, honestly, but sells bedclothes that keep wives and husbands warm on the coldest nights, despite their scant appearance."

Lady Ohksha choked on her tea, snorting, before she was able to proclaim in a scandalized voice, "Milo! You presume too much! Is this what you and your husband talk about? The comin's and goin's of the local folks private past timez?"

Milo's face fell, "I apologize if I overstep, Lady Ohksha." He bowed low, a true feat given his girth.

"As you should!" She balked, but then compressed her lips into a thin smile before biting her bottom lip, "Now, do tell, where can ah find this tavern and clothier?"

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Lady Ohksha remembered the throngs of people that had been in Katolis when she arrived, the memory all the more prominent given that the roads were currently barren. People jumping and shouting all coming to see the new comers out of the blue. But that was then. That was when it was warm. When the sun still kissed the spires of the Katolis and the castle as much as it had caressed her skin.

Now the land had grown dark. With the change in daylight, the land changed, and with it so too did the people. The dark and oppressive night seeming to force them out off their streets. Trading common areas and fountains for smokey crowded hearths of pitiful flames. And the strange oppressive cold that pushed in on them chilling to the bone was no help. A wind that cut like knives could whip up out of the slightest breeze. It was a strange winter much like Milo had said. She could not account for such a drastic change in weather, and, even though she was an outsider, others told her that Katolis had never seen a winter like this.
She pulled the scarf tied around her face up and the hood on her head down further shielding as much as she could from the cutting wind. The frosty slap was cold enough to make her eyes water and sting. She could already feel the moisture of her breath collecting in the wool of the scarf and irritating her chapped lips. She wore layers upon layers and the cloak she clutched tightly didn't seem to shield her from the wind the way that it should. Despite the warm leather boots and mittens lined with fur she was already starting to feel the cold in the tips of her fingers and toes.

But for the warmth of the tea in her belly with the spirit heavy amongst the flavors this weather would be considered damn near intolerable. At the moment it was the closest thing to home she had. She was able to muster additional warmth when she considered what she carried with her the wine bottle, the meat, the tarts, and the clothes she'd purchased.

Lady Ohksha recalled the way that Vigni's sister had pulled at her clothes, pulling them open as soon as her purpose was clear. Comments on color and complexion how green and yellow would go well with her caramel like complexion. And the strips of cloth and lace that the woman pushed at her were in no stretch of the imagination anything that would keep one warm.

Feeling the flush in her cheeks again, she adjusted the shoulder bag more mindful of the weight of the implications at the tavern keeper's sister had made. True, implications she intended to follow through with, but implications nonetheless.

Out of the corner of her eyes she saw movement. Old habits die hard, causing her to pause.

A hand going to a sheathe kept under her cloak, while the other clutched it shut. Losing that extra grip allowed the cloak to billow out around her letting the wind cut deeper. Her eyes scanned the dark alleys looking for any sign of danger. Though the solstice had yet to come it was already hard for the lantern keepers to keep all the lamps lit as long as they were meant to be. Shadows stretched out and the moonlight didn't seem to help as much as she expected it should.

"Who's ther?" She called out. Suddenly Milo's warning of elves being in Katolis conjured to the forefront of her mind. Surely they couldn't have come this far and infiltrated into Katolis without her being aware. Surely there would be some sign.

"Sorry!" Came a timid voice, "We don't mean you no harm! Sorry!" Ohksha could hear the voice wincing as a figure moved out of the lurching lanternlight shadows with two smaller one's huddled behind it. As they moved into the dying winter light the young woman, who couldn't be more than fourteen summers, clutched tightly at two younger children. Both boys, one with a complexion similar to Callum's and another so fair-skinned she might have mistaken him for a Moonshadow elf if not for his flame red hair that seemed to shine, even in the low light. And his rounded ears. All
three wore clothes made more of rags than from any semblance of fashion. Cut and stitched together in odd ways there were holes and flaps, wrapped around them to give them whatever excuse for cover could be had. The eyes of the little boys sunken and hollow. Eyes of children who'd cried too much and no tears left to be poured out. It bore the hallmark distant gaze of those who have gone so long without comfort or warmth. The warning signs of frostbite giving way to something harsher evident on cheeks and noses. Lady Ohksha could see black on the tip of the young girl's nose.

This wasn't the first group of vagrants she had stumbled upon looking more frozen than alive. Lady Ohksha was sure it wouldn't be the last. She just hoped Tomaz could save the girl's nose.

"Come with me," Her hand left the dagger at her belt behind, hesitantly. If they attacked her, it wouldn't be the first, unfortunately. The locals were going feral with lack of resources. Katolis was beginning to crumble. Not from forces outside pressing in, not Xadia or other members of the pentarchy, just the vicious unrelenting discipline of Father Nature, "Come, I know a place to warm yourselves by the fire. Fill your bellies."

The girl pushed the boys forward, "Egan, Red, come on." Lady Ohksha could hear the hope in her voice.

The one named Red pushed back, not wanting to come with, "She's not telling the truth! She's an elf! She's going to eat us!" The boy dug in his heels as the other one stumbled forward at the behest of his guardian.

"Red! Enough of that, hush now." She stammered, looking at Lady Ohksha, not sure if to be frightened or apologetic, "I must apologize for him, m'lady," She turned back to Red, "she obviously ain't got any horns, she's not one of them devils."

Lady Ohksha remained stoic, these were not the first that would flippantly belittle the king's new friends, if they couldn't truly be called allies. With only three elves on the King's side, the people did not forget years of prejudice. Some so deep rooted that she hadn't even known was there. Times were simpler when you could tell a foe by the way they looked. By letting some elves in close, it made it harder to distinguish between the those with violent intentions as opposed to amicable endeavors.

"There's no need to worry about that," Lady Ohksha crouched meeting Red's green eyes, her voice steady and reassuring, "I'll walk ahead of you, if you wish. That way you can keep your eyes on me, and at the end of it we can part ways. I don't blame you for not trusting strangers. That’s smart." She turned to the girl again, "Are you all out from the farmlands?"
"Aye," Egan sniffled, "Woke up and Mah and Pah were cold. Rubbers come and left 'em red 'n wet."

Lady Ohksha inhaled sharply getting the simple phrases meaning, "Oh, child I'm sorry," her face was have been hidden by the scarf either way, no need to mask expressions. The cold was harsh to those that had farms out in the open plains, but even worse was that they were exposed to the cruelties of humanity. The brigands and deserters that would occupy the woodlands and forests in camps would suddenly grow an appetite for a sturdier roof over their heads. An old story of a family turned out, or assailants grown violent.

"Well," She rose to her feet, righting the satchel on her shoulder, "Follow me." Lady Ohksha led the way, cutting a path through frigid and empty streets. Every turn or bend she would stop to ensure that the children and their guardian followed.

It was sad to say the least: a young woman, too young to be a mother, but acting as one none the less. The trio wandered the streets with wide eyes, not able to leave the country behind completely. Buildings larger than they had ever seen at two or three stories, fountains now quiet and still made to the likeness of great warriors, Sarai, the Queens of Duren, Harrow the Just, Yurac the Bold, all of them idols of what a citizen of Katolis could and should be.

But they were impervious to cold, and of elf and human alike flesh was weak.

The winding path leading up to the main gate of the castle was normally enough to shield the wind, but today it seemed as though the blustering gale was funneled by the castle's gate and roared down the approaching pathway. Lady Ohksha had to shout out over the winds to beckon the children forward, her cloak whipping about her.

As the road bent and the castle of Katolis came into view, she saw the changes that had occurred since what the common folk had begun to refer to as 'The Fall'. That fateful night when Callum reached out and clutched at dark powers from some terrible source and had dragged Ezran back from a fresh grave. The world had been caught in the aftershocks of that unspeakable power. She had trouble these days distinguishing between the after effects of Callum's spell, the cost of Ezran's new life, compared to if it was just another strange weather pattern that cropped up as it did every so often.

Was this just the harshest winter in record, or something else?

Some sort of quake had come, but the epicenter had been Callum, not some underground friction at fault lines like those pompous professors from The University postulated to King Ezran.
The servants, though they didn't speak of it to the public, were still cleaning up the rooms in disarray from that fateful night. Some of the things they found were strange, a hearth emptied of ash only to have strange symbols scrawled on the walls. Emptied cabinets of linens that were somehow inexplicably clinging to the ceiling, only to fall as soon as touched by skin, but immobile otherwise. Sometimes a guard would be walking the walls only to suddenly find himself in a place down in the dungeons. It was as though with the natural order disrupted the world forgot to follow logical progression.

The first thing that was noticeable after the castle tower that was no longer standing was a number of new wooden spires reaching out over the courtyard of the castle. These wooden spires reached towards the center where they were all linked together using nails in folds of wood and then draped with further scaffolding and heavy canvas to complete an enclosure. It was as though the entire courtyard of the castle had become a large interior room. Though it wasn't a sturdiest roof, it did keep in some of the warmth.

As Lady Ohksha entered the courtyard it was bustling with people, not kitchen staff but those that sought the king's graces; food and warmth: Harrow's Promise. Some sought more, some searched for loved ones, others tried to find work in the cold winter months whilst the farms were frozen over. Food was not abundant, but it was better than nothing. The hardships felt commonly across the nation of Katolis represented here in their strife.

Remarkably, Lady Ohksha thought, even through this terrible and hungry time, children ran, women laughed and men took their respite over pipes. Even though it was a dismal display of humanity clutching together to fend off the cold, there was something inspiring about it too. Despite everything that was going on, despite the question of a tumultuous nation on the brink of a war that had been looming for years, there was nothing here that could stop people from living life. There was still joy to be had in the little things. And sometimes finding those moments made all the difference.

Lady Ohksha continued to lead the trio of children to where a large pot of bubbling broth sat overseen by a guard. He nodded to her approach and began to ladle a bowl of the vegetable stew out.

"Lady Ohksha, good to see you back within the walls," Marcos said, his breath puffing up a cloud of vapors as he spoke, "I see you've brought more friends."

"Aye, a nervous little lady and her two wards," She nodded, taking the stew and offering it to the one named Egan. She smiled when he took it hungrily and began shoveling the still steaming soup into his mouth. The trio already did not clutch themselves as tightly, the warmth of the collected humanity and the collective fires already thawing them. She looked over her recent find and
smiled, "They will do well, though Ah think Tomaz should see them sooner rather than later."

Marcos nodded, "I'll see to it. You children are wearing nothing but rags!" the guard shouted jovially as he grabbed another wooden bowl, trying to put a forced positivity on the situation, "I think we'll have to remedy that. What we have is not much but we will do everything we can for the citizens of Katolis. By Harrow's Promise, we'll see it done. King Ezran will care for his people. King Ezran will care for his family."

Lady Ohksha dug into her bag and pulled out the two fruit tarts that she had intended to share with Callum tonight, but these children were hungry, they were hurting. She couldn't justify keeping the treats she had brought with her from Milo's. She held out a tart to Egan and Red. Egan eyed it and nabbed it greedily from her hand, but Red merely watched her.

When he didn't take it, Lady Ohksha offered it to the young woman, "And your name?" She asked handing over the tart.

"Lydia." She took the tart and licked her lips, but rather than taking it, handed it to Red. The little boy eyed it, snapped it up, snapped it in two in two, and handed the bigger half back to Lydia.

Lady Ohksha smiled. Good boy.

Sighing, Lady Ohksha asked, "Marcos, where is Mira, is she about?"

Nodding as he worked the line he answered, "Aye, she was helping distribute blankets as some of the soldiers re-work the catacombs to make more apartments."

"Thank you," Lady Ohksha touched the guards arm in gratitude as she walked away. He merely nodded and continued to dole out the bowls, "Now," the guard smiled at the children, "What are your names, little ones?"

Lady Ohksha began to walk away and heard the little boy with fiery hair cry out, "Why does no one care that she's an elf? She's going to hurt us!"

Lady Ohksha turned and looked at the guard, Marcos, who met her gaze and grimaced, "Little one, you can't be saying things like that about here. She's clearly no elf, where are her horns? I've seen her pinky finger, she's got all five!"
The little child didn't seem to know what to say, didn't seem to know how to communicate exactly what was wrong with Lady Ohksha. She made a note to herself to keep an eye out for this little one, he could stir up trouble for her.

Lady Ohksha left the children, their caretaker, and their steaming bowls of broth to the warmth of this new courtyard, what had been affectated with the title of 'The Roost'.

Turning again from them all she made a path for the new throne room. Connected to the Roost, a long hall had been constructed from trunks of wood, still bearing the natural bark. The walls of the structure made from the fallen tower's stone reinforced with wood gathered from the surrounding forest. It had been an endeavor, but the high ceilinged throne room was needed so that it could accommodate Zym's size. A large set of wooden doors to one side connected directly to Zym's makeshift quarters so that he could enter and leave at a whim his unnatural cave within the courtyard for The Roost.

The people had been nervous about the dragon at first, they had stood at a distance, they had leered warily at the beast in the corner, but as the months passed on and the great beast continued to welcome children into his presence to play and climb on him, the people grew warm as well.

It was like the first day Zym had arrived in the city, wariness at first, then open embraces. Katolis was a fickle land with a fickle people.

At first it had been tentative children, touching the dragon's wounds and changing his bandages, but as the veterinarians cared for Zym they had made an astounding discovery, one Zym had expected, but hadn't realized that the people of Katolis were unaware of. In the right circumstances dragons, much like some of their smaller cousins, could regrow appendages. The cuts had to be clean, the wounds cared for well, but in time his blue scales had mounded up at the borders and the bones regrew. The meat would make new connections and the nerves and sinew would be reforged.

Zym now was still not at his full strength, it was an exhausting process. At least, that's what the dragon told her on the occasion that they had spoken. The scales were paler compared to the brilliant silver-blue of the rest of his scales, and the muscles of his forelegs had a stark step off, the tips of his paws bore no claws as of yet, though the blackened nubs of their base could be seen on close inspection.

Lady Ohksha walked through this new throne room full of wall hangings and banners of the heroes and heroines of Katolis depicted in their prime. Sarai standing off against Thunder, Harrow bearing Sarai's spear on the broken king of dragons crown, the Orphan Queen herself being crowned. And at the center of the room, on a dais of raised wooden planks, a simple wood backed chair upon
which Ezran could often be found sitting, though he was not here now.

She nodded to Zym who snorted back in greeting as she strode by looking for Mira.

It didn't take her long to find the maidservant. Arms laden with folded blankets and faded cloaks, she carefully moved through the halls of the deeper castle structure making her way to the new throne room to dole out the cloaks and blankets within the Roost.

"Lady Rayla!" Mira smiled, "Good to see you back amidst the warmth of our walls, tell me, how was your excursion?"

Lady Ohksha sighed as she unwrapped the red scarf from her neck and began to pull off the mittens on her hands, "Mira, how many times do Ah have to tell yoo that when Ah wear the moonstone necklace call me Ohksha."

"Aye," Mira made a show of wincing and looking about, "Sorry, but best to note that nobody is around that would be concerned about your lineage, though." She smirked at her lady who merely shook her head.

"True, but did you know that before yeh spoke?" Rayla laughed with her.

There was a long pause as Mira pursed her lips, caught.

"Thought so," Rayla added curtly, "No matter, Ah was looking for you."

"I've already asked some of the strong backs to start drawing up water from the well and heating it for you, m'lady."

"And whe-" Rayla began, still wearing the moonstone necklace making her look like a Neolandian native, much like her parent's had been when they arrived.

"Lord Callum is just finishing up with Tomaz. They've been working him hard today." Her smile faded, "There's been a lot of cursing coming from his quarters, I'm afraid. Did you find what you were looking for out and about?"
"Yes!" Rayla added excitedly, but her excitement faded as she went on "Ah spoke with your brother at his shop and he had some wunderful suggestions…"

"But…?" Mira made to walk on and Rayla fell into step with her.

"But Ah cannae really enjoy these treats with everything going on out there." She ran a hand through her hair, doffing her cloak. They walked in silence together, the pressing reality of frigid winds and hard times weighing on both of their shoulders.

When they turned a bend and Mira handed the cloaks to another maid servant who was already bundled up headed into the Roost, Rayla spoke again, "Aren't you going to say anything?"

Mira shrugged, "What do you want me to say, m'lady?" Mira stopped and turned Rayla to face her, "That people aren't out there starving? They are. That people aren't out there so cold they cannot think? It's worse than that."

Rayla shuffled her feet, guiltily, "Aye."

"Aye?"

"Aye, though I was kinda hopin' you were 'bout ta tell meh to enjoy it anyways." Rayla laughed nervously, feeling the shame in her.

"I was." Mira said somberly.

Rayla searched her maid's eyes, before speaking flatly, "Couldn't lead with that, huh?"

Mira grimaced, "Lady R-Lady Ohksha, times are hard. Katolis has seen hard times before and it will again, but what gets people through hard times?"

"Charity and the strength of the King?" Rayla answered, not knowing what Mira was looking for.
"No!" Mira tugged Rayla onwards, "Do you think humans so soft that they need to have somebody else carry them through their weakness? No, what gets people through hard times is normalcy, love, and hard work. Give a man food and he will sit around with a full belly waiting for the next one. Give a man a task and he will work even if hungry. Harrow's Promise isn't about giving the people food. It's about giving them a goal, a task, something they can focus on together to forget their woes. We draw them to us with food, we keep them warm best we can, and we ask them to serve the city in return. They aren't going away anytime soon, so the task is, prepare for the worst."

"That's why the apartments in the catacombs..." Rayla nodded as Mira led her on.

"Yes," The overly familiar maid patted her on the back, "And, in these times, it is all the more important to celebrate the little victories over the darkness. Remind ourselves and others why we need to keep fighting. Keep helping each other. That's true power. Not these militant peacocks positioning and politicking, but the strength of the people coming together in the worst of times. Supporting one another. Celebrating life."

"So, now celebrating Callum's rehabilitashun is mah duty?" Rayla snorted.

"And jumpin' his bones is a service not just to humanity, but life all across Xadia." Mira added matter-o-factly before giggling and pushing open the door to Rayla's quarters where the two had come to get to know each other quite well over the last two months, a strange and informal friendship forming behind closed doors.

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Callum sat at his desk, grinding his teeth.

Tomaz said it would stop hurting eventually. But it had been two months now. He was beginning to doubt the man's skills in the field of medicine.

Callum opened his clenched eyes and looked to his left hand.

Well, where he thought his left hand should be. Where his left hand should be.

It wasn't there.
Nothing was there.

Callum stared at the cloth folded over and pinned to where his upper arm had met his forearm and saw the empty space there. He could still feel it, sometimes. He would go to scratch his nose with it while he wrote letters or drew, only to be frustrated when he couldn't itch it. Or when he would be walking and trip, Callum might reach out to catch himself on something, only to fall as the left hand wasn't there to grasp what he needed.

Having only one hand changed everything in ways that he never could have anticipated, not that he had ever tried to conceive of it before what Rayla called 'the Fall'. As aggravating as all of that was, the most unsettling thing was when he felt something touching his left hand. Sometimes a hot iron, sometimes a gentle scrape, sometimes electric shocks dancing up his arm that didn't stop.

And it was those electric shocks that set him to grinding his teeth against the pain.

Two months.

Two whole months he had been a sickly mess in his rooms. After that night, his arm had been a mangled mess, let alone the massive hole in both palms. Despite every hygienic precaution, the fevers had come. Burning through him like wildfire, the delirium made the world around him melt and bubble. He didn't when they amputated his arm, but Ezran and Rayla assured him that he had made the decision. He didn't doubt it. All Callum remembered was begging them to cut it off.

It was a black stain on him, a terrible sacrifice he had made and he felt dipped in pitch and muck by its mere lack of presence. It had been a reminder of the sin he committed, the threshold he had crossed, and the darkness he had once again embraced. He was grateful for the lack of memory of that night. Only fevered dreams of strange lands and something about Lord Viren.

But he remembered the therapy. Each grueling day of it. After a prolonged amount of time in bed from the fevers that had taken him, there were days when just standing was enough to wind him, to set his heart to racing. Meanwhile he was forced to watch Rayla, a supreme physical specimen walk candidly about his quarters, caring for him.

She was as beautiful all the same, but he didn't dare lie to himself and deny that spite had seeded itself in his mind on those dark days. As that resentment sprouted in his mind, he could see something in her change as well. When she looked at him now, he could see something that was never there in her eyes before. Where affection, inspiration, and adoration had been betwixt
amusement, now there was something frightened there slinking between it all. The violet gems of her eyes took on dark circles as she worried not about his health, but about something he couldn't articulate and she dared not speak of.

Days of lightheadedness, days of nausea and sweats gave way to longer sessions of torment, longer bouts of exercise and even less sleep. Exhaustion a permanent friend.

It went hand in hand with frustration. Nobody would tell him what became of the elves, what became of Tazel. They merely told him not to fret over it, not to worry. Which he had, naturally. He worried extensively. If they were dead, what did it mean for him as a mage? As a person? What did that dark pact accomplish? If they were alive, where were they? Were they still a threat?

It had been about a week, or was it a month, before Ezran had finally told him what happened to the assassins. To think that Tazel was just a few hundred feet away through stone and earth, it was almost as unsettling as the nights leading up to the assassination attempt. Armed with this knowledge, Callum had found his way out of his apartments one night, out from under the sleeping gaze of his Moonshadow Elf warden and caretaker, to wander the castle only to be stopped by the guards. High mage though he was, they had barred his way on King Ezran's order.

All in all: frustration, exhaustion, pain.

"So what do you think?" Ezran asked from beside him.

He snapped out of his thoughts, back to the now, "Honestly?" Callum asked, looking up to his brother who stood over his shoulder, sighing in exasperation, "I stopped listening about five minutes ago.

Ezran paused and placed a hesitant hand on his brother' shoulder, "I…I understand, it's a lot. You're tired."

More excuses being made on his behalf. Callum rolled his eyes.

"Just…” Callum shook his head and turned in his chair, "A trial? You want to put them on trial? You think that will prevent Gale and all of Xadia from turning on you for executing them?"

"I'm not going to execute them, Callum, that is up to the selected Justicars."
"And what if they decide they were right to kill you? Do you just bend over and die? Do you have the same death wish that Dad did?"

"They won't do that, and that isn't fair do say about Dad!" Ezran had to visibly restrain himself, when he spoke again his voice was measured, "Callum, that isn't fair. I cannot offer a dispassionate view. Part of me wants each and every one of them dead. I cannot let go of that, but I can listen to the wisdom of the people and those I trust."

"You listen to the wisdom of the common fool over the wisdom of your heart." Callum scoffed, "Is that what it takes to be a king? Might as well grab a beggar off the street and put him on the throne."

"You think this easy for me?" Ezran challenged, "You think that I enter into this without preoccupation?"

"I see you forging ahead doing what you think is best without thinking things through, threatening to throw the whole continent into chaos." Callum mused bitterly.

Had Ezran's eyes always sparked like that when he was angry? Or was this azure light something more than just happenstance catching flickering firelight, "I see illness and fatigue still cloud your reason, else - "

"Oh, fuck off." Callum barked, "I am no invalid, my reasoning is as sound as ever."

"-Else you would not talk to your king so." Ezran warned his brother and waited for Callum to hold his tongue, "I will leave you to rest and hope you think on what I have said."

A knock came at the door.

Callum said nothing.

Ezran waited.
Callum sneered, "By your leave, my liege."

Ezran threw up his hands in frustration, "Come in! Please, save me from this idiocy."

The door opened, but Callum didn't turn to see who entered, but instead spoke up, feeling his obstinacy give in the smallest portion, as his brother-king walked away, "Ezran."

He heard Ezran's footfalls cease, "Yes, Callum?"

"I don't agree with you," Callum said flatly, "But I love you. I always will."

Ezran's voice softened, "I know, Callum, I love you, too."

Callum couldn't hear the whispered words of the King to whomever had come to his quarters, but it was only a moment before the wafting scent of roasted meat and clove reached his nose. His mouth began to water.

Meat.

He made to stand, but found a hand on his arm in an instant.

"Arguin' with Ezran again?" Rayla asked, touching his arm.

"What can I say?" Callum laughed, "It's our daily ceremony now." He looked to the beautiful elftres at his right side clutching his arm and offering him support. Her white locks were tied back loosely leaving the wavy white tumbles to fall from her temples and frame her face. No longer did she bear the markings that bound her to Tazel. Callum had not realized they were only temporary markings made from plant oils. In the two months since their reunion she had told him more about the torments she experienced beneath the Lunarium. The re-application of the markings at Tazel's sneering face just part of it. Or so she thought.

That was another he had picked up on, rather than being outright told. Something was off in how she connected to him, connected to her parents and the world around her, and the Lunarium seemed to be at the center of it all. Callum didn't push, but he could tell that some of the things she told him
didn't exactly make sense. Time seemed to have unraveled in her head. Where one moment could happen simultaneously overlaying others or not at all. She told him of her strange memories, strange glowing tablets and buildings made of molded stone. Of relationships had and shared and elven Callums and human Raylas. He wanted to blame those dark worlds she had traversed in her mind for the mistrust he saw in her eyes now, wanted to blame them for her guarded smiles and restricted laughter. But he knew, that after leaving the Lunarium, she hadn't looked at him with this same fear in her eyes.

No, that was something purely from after the Fall.

Rayla helped him from his desk made drafting table and linked her arm in his, not giving it away that she was trying to support his weight. He stubbornly didn't let her, but tried to enjoy that they walked arm in arm. Even if it was just in the privacy of his own quarters. His eyes fell on the small table he had by the door with two chairs. Sturdy enough to support the library of tomes he usually had piled high on it, but decorative in nature, it was now bare with the exception of the place setting bearing two plates, two chalices and a bottle of wine, with forks and serrated knives by each plate.

"I find this unusually domestic of us." Callum commented under his voice to Rayla, a secret between the two of them, though no one else was there to over hear.

"Oh, don't fret, I wouldn't subject you to mah cookin'." Rayla laughed nudging him towards his chair. "Losin' an arm is torment enough." She laughed, but his smile withered slightly before he attempted to fake a chuckle for her sake.

Silence reclaimed the room but for the crackle of wood in the hearth.

Rayla cleared her throat uneasily.

She took her seat, and Callum easily noted the wrap style dress she wore. It was a shame it had taken him this long to notice. A green and black floral pattern of thick woolen fabric was draped over each shoulder and the way the cut of the cloth bent around her form didn't do much to hide her athletic physique. Hugging and hiding each bend in a way that hinted but never revealed. It took his eyes on a dizzying journey over her form to find where the cloth was tied and cinched, though he never found it. The neckline dove revealing the delicate lines of her neck and the soft skin of her collarbone. Her arms were bare save for the fore-arm length black leather gloves that were now an ever present part of her attire. The dress split in the front allowing her movement and to show that she still wore her green elven boots with this Katolian style.
Rayla wore no jewels, wore no make-up. Nor did she need to. She was intrinsically beautiful without needing a dab of this or touch of that. No amethyst to accentuate her pale skin or violet eyes. Though, he could fancy that she would look just ever slightly more enticing with those elven horn ornaments. That was a thought for another time though.

Rayla caught his eyes drifting over her and staring. A soft blush warmed her cheeks, "Can I help you?" She asked as she sat, leaning forward on her elbows, arms crossed in front of her. Her smile a mixture of coy and defensive.

Callum smirked, "I was just noticing -"

"Oh, ya been noticing' me? Did ah give you permission to go a noticin' anything?" Rayla pushed further forward, fire in her eyes.

"No- I mean." Callum swallowed nervously, "It's just- you've - you've p-put on weight."

Rayla sat up straighter and her eyebrows climbed, "Is that a fact?"

Callum smiled, nodding, then paused, realization dawning, "I mean, well. You have, but in…but in a good way! Like, when we got back to Katolis, you were still very skinny and starved and -"

Callum stammered and stumbled around his words.

"-and that's what yoo preferred?" Rayla offered for him coldly.

"No!" Callum backpedaled trying to find a way backwards through his words.

"So yoo would like meh plump, round and pregnant?" Rayla leaned forward again, eyes still burning as she skewered him with her gaze. He had trouble keeping his eyes locked on her and not glancing at the view down her neckline she unintentionally was offering, "Stuck at home to make yur meals and care fer yur children?"

"No! Wa-wait? What?" This conversation was dizzying.

"Or is it that You don't want to have kids with me?" Rayla's hand drifted towards the serrated blade
"Stop!" Callum felt panic rearing its head in his mind, and saw the smile turn the corner of Rayla's lip up. The foray into insanity had all been a game to her, "You're evil."

"Well," Rayla picked up a fork and took the covering off the plate before herself, "You should know better than to comment on a elfress's weight." She punctuated her words by spearing a roasted shallot and popping it into her mouth.

"I just meant to say that," Callum chose his words carefully, "You look..healthier."

"Amazing what three meals a day and open air can do for a girl, eh?" Her smirk bewildered him and left him lost. Those insightful violet eyes peering at him in the firelight.

Where had the day gone? A day of exercises and walking, of sweating and cussing, all while the world moved about him in a flurry. He felt separated from it all, and thought briefly he was thankful for that, but as he removed the covering from his plate and gazed at the roasted meats he couldn't help but feel a wall between him and... Everything. Between Ezran and him, between Rayla and him. Between the world and him. As though passing through to the other side of existence carried on dark currents had left something interposed.

Despite their raillery, the meal passed in silence but for the clink and clatter of cutlery.

When he was finished, there was still half a chunk of meat on his plate amidst the savory vegetables and juices. He stared at it, but the frustration of cutting this meat one handed stuck in his mind like a bur. Callum set aside the knife and merely willed his hunger away.

It took only a minute for Rayla to catch his dark mood. She had finished her meal of roasted vegetables and was tooting with a heel of bread when she looked up to him. He didn't try to meet her eyes but stared stubbornly ahead.

Rayla stood, grabbing the bottle of wine, thus far untouched by either one of them, and sauntered around the table. Leaning heavily on the table with her free hand she cocked her hip to the side and pulled the tie of the gown keeping the black and green draped around her, allowing the gown to come loose, letting it fall open before him.
Callum couldn't help his gaze, and couldn't think of a reason to want to. Matching her heavy wool floral pattern, beneath the gown was a corset made of green satin lined with lacy black flowers that connected to stockings that disappeared beneath the lip of her elven boots.

He watched her bask in the way his tired eyes drank in her body, exhausted and worn though Callum was, he could see the pride on her face. That she could still stir this hungry beast inside him. She slid his plate away from him and took up residence in his place setting, a foot propped on the arm rest of each side of his chair.

Rayla brought the bottle of wine to her lips, bit the cork and pulled, the glass bottle letting out an echoing thunk as it came free. Inelegantly she puffed out her cheeks and spat the cork across the room before taking a long draw of the sweet Xadian wine.

Some of the green liquid spilled down her chin, running a trickling path down her neck and stopping on the mound of an her breast.

She propped herself on her hand on the table allowing her hips to roll backwards, offering the wine bottle to her lover, "Ah know Tomaz's exercises have left yeh exhausted, but Ah had a different type of rehabilitation in mind that promises to leave yoo 'quite' drained."

Where Callum had salivated over roasted meats, his mouth was dry at the presentation of this succulent dessert. Excitement coiled in him, anticipation, but he couldn't help but feel the barrier between him and her. This felt rushed to Callum, felt out of place. They hadn't known each other in this fashion since before he lost his arm. Was this just another wall? Was this just another excuse, would taking her offer and taking her be the act that allowed the mortar to flake and crack before the wall could finally crumble and fall?

Callum dare not speak, dare not utter a word to break the trance she had on him. If this was the way to heal the barrier and rejoin the world, he embraced it whole heartedly.

Callum stood, the speed of his movement causing the room to spin, he wavered, but Rayla clutched him in response, grabbing at his open collar, both holding him up and pulling him into a kiss. The sweet wine on her tongue leaving tingling traces of is sweetness across his lips. He could smell the shallots on her breath, taste her savory lips, all intermingled with the sweetness of Xadia, something exotic and unadulterated that screamed 'Rayla' in his mind.

He braced himself on the table with his right hand, the pain from the poorly healed puncture doing nothing to deter him from this goal. Exhilaration poured through him, healing fire licking each nerve. His pulse raced and his breath came in short gasps, excitement or his debilitation, Callum
didn't know. Callum didn't care.

This softness and warmth, each touch another chip of mortar flying from the stone wall that he had built up around himself unintentionally. The scent of her spun around his mind and sunk in ecstatic claws pulling him out of himself and bid him to dive into her. His lips offered a litany of proffered confessions of love and lust, a burning trail of kisses tracing the sweet wine down her décolletage. The feel of her gloves on his head and neck, guiding him slowly over her, was the hope of hearing another working to break down that wall that kept him isolated.

He nipped at her flesh with teeth causing her to push him away, but not forcibly. As soon as there was room, her hands raced over the buttons and ties of his shirt, fumbling with them. He laughed cockily with lidded eyes as she worked, happy to let her, trying not to remember the difficulty he would have had one handed on each she passed. Once all the buttons were undone, black leather fingertips traced across the skin of his chest in a strange and foreign way catching and dragging the sheen of sweat that had broke out on his chest and back.

When his shirt fell, it draped across the chair still at the back of his legs, the tails caught in his waistband. It was strange the odd details that would stick out to him. The feel of cool eddies of air on his skin, the scent of clove and roasted meat faintly filling his nostrils. Rayla. Violet eyes alight with mischief slid over him as he worked at that wall inside himself and all around him trying to reconnect with this gift of an elftress physically and emotionally.

Rayla hooked her thumbs into the waistband of his pants and pulled him to her roughly, crashing his hips into her spread legs. Her lips were on his neck in an instant and he was lost in their careful movements, the tug of her teeth and the sly lashings of her tongue. As much as he yearned for this touch, for the barriers to fall away, so, it seemed, did she.

Working between them even as her own lips traced over the lines of his neck, leather fingertips worked furiously at the tie to his loose lounge pants, the coarse leather cord offering resistance only momentarily before her blind fingers made the progress he burned for. Feeling the waistband slacken, he ventured to not brace himself on the table any longer and ran his own hand up the curve of her thigh to her hip offering a natural and seductive place of purchase for what came next.

Giggling triumphantly, she led him on the path, knocking her own scant barrier aside with an absent minded gesture. The sensation of her was enough to make him gasp, a sharp intake of air taken through gritted teeth. He gripped her hip harder. Rayla purred into his neck, nuzzling into him with their embrace.

Callum was ready, this is what they needed, this was the way out of this disparate and dissonant existence where he existed simultaneously here and apart from her. She rolled her hips to meet him and they worked together seeking each other's rhythm in an ancient language of movement.
Exhaustion fell away, fatigue an ancient memory, the pace of this beauty blurring the edges of his consciousness as they sought togetherness in ancient and feral ways.

But it was only a momentary reprieve. Callum couldn't keep the pace. His head swirled, not from pleasure, but with nausea and light headedness. He wanted to push through it, to hold on to this moment harder. He heard her whimper as his nails dug into the soft flesh of her hip, but neither stopped. He kept with her until he had no reserve left, and the world began to tunnel into black.

His hand left her hip.

Callum braced himself on the table. He was slick with sweat. Breathing harder than he should need to. His heart thumped vigorously in his chest. And to top it all off, as the world stopped spinning and he fended off unconsciousness, Callum felt shame.

"Callum?" Rayla's voice timid, disappointed.

"I-"Callum took a deep breath, "I can't yet. I-" Another deep breath, "I don't have the energy."

He felt her hands on his head, wrapping around him and pulling his sweat soaked brow to her breast. He felt her soft lips plant sweet kisses on his skin, "It's okay, Callum, I understand."

Having more breath in his lungs he began to pull away, but she tensed, "Rayla?"

He met her gaze, her face burning red in a mixture of passion and embarrassment, "Let me…try something" Her legs wrapped awkwardly around him and her ankles locked behind the small of his back, "You, just, relax." Rayla soothed as she relaxed and tensed her legs, guiding him back to her again and again in a way that let Callum enjoy the moment together with her without working his already broken body. He rested again on her breast and she worked for them both.

When Callum finished, it wasn't some momentous ecstasy, but merely a brief excursion into pleasure. The mitigating frustration and exhaustion that had been there remained, and at the moment of utmost joy, Callum grew aware of pain. Searing and hot, pain exploded in his head. It rocked and shook him, taking the strength from his legs and leading him to lean heavily on the table again, he groaned, "Oh, fuck."
Callum turned away from Rayla pressing his one hand forcibly into his left eye where a burning spike of pain seemed to be pulsating with each beat of his heart.

"Callum?" Rayla's voice, confused, "What's wrong?"

"Mmmmm." Callum couldn't think straight, couldn't piece together the words with blinding pain in his head like this. It fogged his perception of the room.

"Callum?"

He remained silent, but as quickly as the pain had come, it faded away into nothingness, "Fuck."
He cursed under his breath and meandered to the bed, he was suddenly very sleepy.

Rayla was at his side, wrapping the dress around herself and tying the knot even as she moved across the room.

"I think I need to lie down." Callum answered her question finally and nearly collapsing onto the bed.

"What happened?" Worry pinched her voice.

"Just, at the end, a major head pain. Like nothing I ever felt. Well," Callum paused and glanced at the stump of his arm, "Almost like nothing."

Rayla sat beside him, "Just get some rest, Callum." Rayla soothed, "I'll go get Tomaz."

"No," Callum sighed, "There's no need, it's gone now. If it comes back, then sure, but not now. Now…just stay?" He hated how much that sounded like begging.

Through bleary eyes he saw Rayla's smiling face, she brushed the locks of hair matted to his forehead out of the way and spoke, "Of course, Callum."

She crawled into bed next to him, and Callum was thankful for the warmth and comfort of her
presence. But, when his vision cleared, and he saw that smiling face, he could still see the fear in her eyes. Fear of him, of what he had done. Maybe even something as benign as fear of what was happening. He could see the affection she held for him, it was plain, but it being so obvious meant it was all the easier to recognize the effect that the darkness in him had at corroding it.

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Rayla played with the matted locks on Callum's head, watching him as he dozed. It had taken him only moments to fall asleep and she had used that time to tidy up from their dinner and... dessert. As he slipped into the embrace of sleep, a nervous energy filled Rayla. She felt the need to move and went about to turn the lanterns down, blow out candles. When she returned to the bed the only light in the room had been the fading flames of the hearth and the glowing coals therein.

Now with just the flickering light across his face, the sunken cheekbones gave him a gaunt appearance in the shadows. Rayla lay next to him, the heavy blankets keeping a little of pocket of warmth secure against the cold that seeped into the room through the windows and cracks of stone.

A hand placed on his chest, she hesitated before she pulled a black glove off of her hand left hand with her teeth, cradling his head with her right. Even in the dim firelight, she could see the skin there marred and thick with scar tissue, pale and sickly white. The salve had done its job preventing infection and minimizing scar tissue, but the scars would be there all her life, the thick sensation of a world just beyond her touch ever present.

It was nothing to her, a minor inconvenience, that was all. Nothing to fret over.

Rayla placed her hand upon Callum's chest. Her heart fell that she couldn't feel the warmth of his skin. She couldn't feel the drag of his skin on hers. But deeper, she could feel the soft thumping, that little vibration through everything else that was the beat of his heart. Through it all, through the dark of these winter nights and the darker moods that he had been thrown into, there was still this, this one sensation of his heart in her hands.

With all the force of winter winds howling at the windows, they clattered in the calm of night, enough to make Callum stir, but not enough to wake her mage.

Her mage.

She toyed with the idea in her head, but some serpentine thought twisted it upon her. If he was her
mage, what was she to him? His elf? His former assassin? His broken beauty?

Callum was a High Mage, a prince of Katolis, a brother of the king, a kind artist and viciously smart politician.

And she was...she couldn't think of it. She couldn't find a single descriptive identifier that seemed to suit her skin. What had she been, in all those other fancies and dreams beneath the Lunarium? Once a servant, once an assassin, never a minstrel. Sometimes a mother, sometimes a lover, other times a spinster. But even within these iterations that tumbled through her head, was there not a common strain that was her? There were people. Always Praid, always Alayza, always Tazel and Callum. As many iterations of them as there was of her. But never a defining feature that she felt she could claim in this hush hours of the night.

In this new world that Ezran was forging, what made her, her?

Troubled, she lay there silently with her mage, hand over his heart. Something that beat so vibrantly in her mind, but it seemed more distant than it ever had before. The soothing steady thumping pattern did naught to calm her racing mind, and instead, she passed the darkness of the night in silence.

End Notes

Written after season 2 aired.

Constructive criticism and comments always appreciated.

As more seasons are released, I would appreciate if people would comment on discrepancies from previous chapters. I am going to try and keep this post-series tale in some semblance of accuracy.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!