

Liberty University

Thesis Assignment
Writing for the Fantasy Genre through the Christian Worldview

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Artist Statement: Fantasy and the Christian Worldview

In May of 2014, I discovered my passion for writing as a Christian fantasy author. When I wrote *Frost: Winter's Heir*, I was influenced by Christianity, specifically from authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Christopher Paolini, and Donita K. Paul. I also drew my inspiration from secular authors such as Jennifer A. Nielson and secular stories such as *Star Wars*. Based on these influences, I strive to write fantasy novels with a Christian worldview filled with magic, for I still have the desire to immerse myself in the fantasy genre. This desire stems from a need to immerse myself into a memorable reading experience, whether Christian or secular reading. My work is influenced by my relationship with Christ. Even though my writing does not carry any overt Christian messages, I am influenced by my Christian upbringing and Christian literature. My work and writing often overshadows or omits what some might consider Christian elements. I do not have an evident Messiah figure in my writing as C.S. Lewis did with Aslan, and magic usage is not exclusive to the villains in my story. My first written work did have a Christ-like figure, but as my writing experience continued, that influence was omitted as the story underwent multiple edits and rewrites. This did not hinder my writing or my Christian journey as I had feared. With this discovery, I began my work on a different series, a series that has many gods and goddesses featured throughout the story. I wrote *Timekeeper* because I wanted to create a story and a world for the characters I had designed. I had a story to tell, relationships to develop, and a memorable reading experience to offer readers. Furthermore, I knew that if I did not actively write down my ideas, my characters would continue to live in my head, hidden away from everyone. I wanted to share this experience and partake in this creative journey. The world-building of *Timekeeper* grew into a complex story, an idea that had to complete its journey

through writing. This creative experience has also been a journey for exploring and writing for the fantasy genre through a Christian Worldview.

Impetus

My impetus for writing *Timekeeper* was to satisfy a creative plot thread. Originally, *Timekeeper* was an idea I fantasized about. I had a thought about a young man named Lucian in a post-apocalyptic future. He was thrown into the present where the main story takes place. He then converses with a mysterious being, a god of Time. Lucian discovers that he is the god of Time and that he has been conversing with his past self. This idea was entertaining, but I never gave it much thought. When I was seventeen, I was dog-sitting for a neighbor, and alone in the house, I began to revisit that idea: I thought about popular time deities. What if Father Time could pass judgment because he had power over past, present, and future, and therefore could stop catastrophes before they happened? As an omnipotent being, I wanted to write about a character who was feared and too powerful to be contained. The god of Time could pass judgment before a crime was committed. By doing so, he was expanding his role, which was to govern time, to judge, and to execute the gods who caused harm to the mortals. This idea had stemmed from a story I read with my mother and sisters. The source of this inspiration was a Korean webcomic, *Noblesse*. In this story, there was an all-powerful being who lived in isolation, banished by his own people because they feared him and his power. He only emerged to pass judgment and execute his own people if they ever abused their powers by taking advantage of the humans. His seclusion is lifted when a human stumbles into his fortress. *Noblesse's* concept of an all-powerful being imprisoned by his own might and living in isolation only to find companionship was compelling. I realized I wanted to read about a god using his power to protect the ones he cherished; this connects with the savior's role from a Christian

worldview. This desire further developed into an idea when my sister showed me the artwork of Father Time by a graphic novel author and artist, Maddy Moore. In her novels, *The Cloud Maker*, Father Time was displayed as a young, powerful god with control over the universes. I began to ponder: what if Father Time was younger and could also pass judgment? I felt compelled to write *Timekeeper* because I enjoyed stories I had read about time. I drew influence from the webcomic *Noblesse* by creating Axis Munde, the god of Time. I planned for Axis to live in isolation and meet his human companions, and I also drew further inspiration from Greek mythology with the god of time, Cronus. However, I did not think about making a book out of this idea. I had character ideas with no names, no background, and no plot. Plus, the problem for the story was Axis himself. By writing about an omnipotent being, it was difficult to create a challenge or threat for the character. For well over a year, I continued mentally developing the characters and experimenting with ideas to see if I could turn this into a story: I had not yet designed a plot, conflict, or villain, before I firmly decided that I would write and eventually publish this story.

Unlike my original self-published work, *Frost: Winter's Heir*, I plan to complete the *Timekeeper* series prior to searching for a publisher. I recognized with *Frost: Winter's Heir* that an incomplete work can modify the initial work. Writing *Frost* taught me the importance of characterization, plot development, and relationship dynamics. I enjoyed the writing and development process of *Frost*, but it was a learning process that expanded throughout my college years. Through that process, I learned who I was as a writer and what core values I wanted to incorporate into my writing. After writing *Frost's* sequel, I have made major revisions to the first book, and I plan to remove *Frost: Winter's Heir* from Amazon after I have completed the series and re-release it as a new work when presenting it to a publishing company. In order to avoid a

similar circumstance with *Timekeeper*, I want to complete the series and make any necessary changes to previous installments prior to publishing. Originally, *Timekeeper* was supposed to record the adventures of the god of Time and his human companions. As the years progressed, the story developed to include additional characters, a different world setting, and an altered plot in the fantasy fiction genre.

Background

My writing genre is fantasy fiction, and I am a Christian author. In fantasy, there is magic, mythical creatures, and occasionally different religions. I do not consider my personal walk with Christ when I am outlining and writing my work. I think about the characters, the world they live in, and how I can progress the plot. I write what is best for the story and what I want to achieve. But there are still Christian influences in my writing because I incorporate Christian themes into my stories. The first book that I published, *Frost: Winter's Heir*, has a Messiah figure in the form of a character named Dominic. In my original draft, Dominic was supposed to be an influential Messiah figure much like Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. However, in recent edits, Dominic's role in the story was altered, and he is not displayed as a Christ-like figure despite portraying some of those characteristics. In *Timekeeper*, there is no such Christ or Messiah, but there are saviors and heroes who fight to defend their people. My background in writing *Frost: Winter's Heir* taught me the importance of outlining the story and the journey of the characters and progressing toward plot development. With these lessons, I have noticed how fleshed out the plot of *Timekeeper* is in comparison to *Frost: Winter's Heir*. With peer reviews and feedback from my professors, I have been able to develop a solid writing foundation.

Process of the Work

It takes me years to develop a story since the stories are complex. My process begins with an idea. Usually, these ideas are inspired from reading and watching other media. To further develop the idea for a story about Father Time, I began thinking about alternate realities, but this idea bridged into a different idea. I began thinking about an all-powerful entity, wielding the power of the universe, but still helpless to save the people he loves. To make that change, the entity does everything within his power to change reality to save the loved ones. I wanted to explore the concept of desperate love and loss and stretch the bonds of friendship. Five years later, this idea has evolved from imagination and wistful thinking to putting pen to paper and eventually creating *Timekeeper*. The character creations, designs, and personalities were already established before I had created a plot. I made many notes on the characters within my story before focusing on developing an outline. I grew to love these characters and had to find a world and story to place them in. I had to create a conflict, a villain, and a goal for my characters. Drafting a cohesive outline in my notebooks came later once I finally settled on a vague and rough plot. I wrote what I wanted to achieve in the story and the ending I wanted my characters to have. With *Timekeeper*, there were so many disconnected scenes and plot ideas, and the idea of establishing a beginning was daunting when all I had were scenes. I settled on writing the first book about one of my characters, Iduna Talome. This led to the introduction of the main three characters, Iduna, Skander, and the god of Time, Axis.

The names of my characters may appear simple to a reader, but as a writer, it takes hours of research to find a name that is appropriate. I researched the meaning and origins of the names; plus, the name has to fit the character. For instance, Iduna means “the loving one,” but it has a strong sound as it is pronounced; when returning to the past, Iduna becomes a loving person, but she is still strong and firm like her pronounced name. Talome was supposed to be her first name,

but it sounded too masculine; she needed a name that was not soft but still portrayed femininity. Similarly, the name “Talome” is a twist on the Hebrew word “Shalom,” which means peace. Just as her father is a perverted twist of humanity, so too is his last name. I research mythologies from the Norse, Celtic, and Greek religions to further develop Axis and his powers. This research into different religions has also helped me to develop the hierarchy of the gods and the spiritual worlds. I experimented with the Norse mythology of the Nine Realms to establish different gods, levels of Heaven, and the roles each deity plays. Additionally, I had to research different weapons from medieval times and looked at artwork to modernize these weapons to fit Iduna’s world. Researching how these weapons were used helped me to further develop Iduna’s form and her profession. Her weapon of choice became dual daggers instead of a sword. I interviewed a nurse about stab wounds and learned about the healing process of different injuries on different body parts. My internet search covered gruesome topics regarding the works of an assassin and the art of killing. Later on in the writing process, I read other creative works on psychological abuse and grooming; I pulled inspiration from other authors on children being abused by their father-figures and the ensuing mental damage. To develop Skander’s character and background, I incorporated Biblical texts. I established that Skander was a prophet, but I also looked into Celtic mythology to develop the spiritual aspect of his profession and influence. I researched pagan temples and prophets and created Skander’s role for the story. During the time of name creation, I continued to make plot notes.

Drafting the outline of the first book made it easier for the drafts of the following books to develop. After I had an outline for the first three books, I wrote at night to develop my chapters. My process of writing involves writing scenes and overall ideas to complete the story before going back and editing. I work on other side project stories while working on my main

project. Part of my writing process is balancing multiple projects at the same time. I need a new creative outlet whenever I hit writer's block on one project: I bounce to a different story when this happens. These side projects are shorter, so I have a sense of accomplishment when I complete a short fiction story and can publish these works on online platforms. When I write, I do not go back and edit along the way. I discovered that this editing process was hindering when I was writing *Frost: Winter's Heir*, for I could be stuck on one chapter for two months because I was not satisfied with the material I produced. I have found that if I move along to the next scene, the editing process will soon follow. I feel less pressure when I have arrived at the designated ending of my story before going back to edit. My stories undergo multiple edits. With my future works, I intend to finish the series before I publish the first book. To avoid the prolonged editing process, I will complete the work when the story is finished.

Vision for My Work

Timekeeper is complete when the story is told and that will probably be in the form of a book series. The number of books in this series remains undecided, but I do know where I want to end book one about Iduna, and I do know where I want to end the series. Even though I have an outline for the series, I do not know how many books it will take to conclude the story. The outline shows an estimation of four books with two spinoffs. Each book focuses on an important character who contributes to the story and further develops the plot. All storylines start with a separate mission but converge on a singular goal which is for the main characters to fight against the fallen gods and defend their home.

Literary Context for the Work

The literary context of my first book centers around Iduna Talome, an assassin time traveling to save her brother from execution. This context will change in the second book

because that storyline will focus on Skander Ekrit, who is introduced in the first book. Iduna's story takes place in a time period similar to our medieval time period. This section of the plot shows the different inventions of weapons, conflict, and religion. This context also reveals the values of the inhabitants of the kingdom and how these values are drastically different from Iduna's because of her assassin profession and groomed disinterest for her own people. Iduna comes from a bloody background, so meeting Skander and Axis, who live in a realm filled with magic, challenges her to accept peace and the concept of magic and supernatural beings who reside in the world.

Physical Context

The physical context of the story focuses on how Iduna's character development unfolds in the plot for the story. The simple context of the plot is revenge. Iduna travels back in time to save her brother and take revenge on her traitorous father. Subsequently, Iduna's character development occurs when she forces herself to face her fears by going back in time to her father and the life she despised for the sake of saving her younger brother Perim. Additionally, she becomes less self-centered by focusing on her brother. At the beginning of the book, she noted her shattered relationship with her brother, but by focusing on escaping and abandoning him, she unknowingly sentenced her brother to their father's wrath. When she travels back in time, she sacrifices herself to save her brother Perim and also saves her companions when they are attacked. This character development helps to showcase the development of her skills as an assassin and establish her father as the villain: this reveals the environment she survived. Additionally, when we meet Skander and Axis, her environment changes. She spends seven years with them before Axis sends her back in time. During those seven years, she leaves her life of killing behind, learns about the fallen gods, and she gains a spiritual perspective on religion

and relationships. This happens because Skander used to live in a temple as a prophet with foresight and Axis is a banished god. Iduna takes this experience with her, as a changed woman, back in time. Her brother comments that she has changed because she has compassion and a willingness to protect the innocent, not as an assassin, but as a warrior. She takes the skills her father gave her and utilizes them to defend others.

Cultural Context

The cultural context of the story reveals Iduna in a practical setting. She has no interest in learning about religion or participating in any social events. Her one focus is to escape her father. There is a ceremony for her brother as he makes his debut to society as a young man, but she is not there to congratulate or support him. She does not attend her mother's funeral, and when her companion Dela talks about marriage and having a family, Iduna avoids participating in the conversation. However, when she travels back in time, readers can witness the cultural context because she is there when her mother passes; she is abiding by the cultural norm of honoring her mother. Iduna assists her brother in preparing the burial for their mother and she partakes in their cultural traditions by visiting the burial site. Additionally, she is present when her brother makes his debut in high society. She takes the cultural role of his guardian, as is their custom, and introduces him to society, allowing her brother to transition from a boy to a man. Furthermore, she participates in her brother's first social event at the palace where readers get to experience the elite social circle and the lifestyle of the nobility. Readers learn about the justice system of Iduna's people when her brother is put on trial and scheduled for execution. The workings of the government and kingdom are displayed when a treaty between the Fae and humans are set up to stop a war; war plays a significant part in showing the culture and the hierarchy of the Scouts and army. Readers also get to experience the cultural context of Skander and Axis; initially, their

lifestyle and culture seems simple when Iduna meets them. Skander and Axis maintain their home. They work on the gardens and visit the spiritual creatures. However, Axis is a god and Skander is a human. Skander displays traits of his culture as Iduna observes him; Skander was a resident at his kingdom's temple as a prophet and has more of a religious perspective. Because he is not a warrior, he displays the peaceful lifestyle Iduna had once ignored. Axis also portrays a presence of reverence because of his godhood. He displays an open eagerness to learn more about humans from Skander and Iduna. Readers learn more about the hierarchy of the gods through Axis and the complex structure of the spiritual world.

Situational Context

The situational context of the story is addressed when Iduna goes back in time and finds out why her team was ambushed, why her brother was scheduled for execution, and why Skander and Axis were imprisoned. When the first events happen, Iduna does not know why her team was ambushed or why Perim was executed. She is given a chance to right those wrongs. The situation is as follows: Iduna was betrayed, and her family was destroyed. The broad context that will lead into the series is that Axis was also betrayed by his fellow gods and is being hunted, putting Skander and Iduna in danger. However, for the present story, readers follow Iduna on the journey of discovering why the circumstances happened. Iduna realizes that her father orchestrated the attack on her team in an effort to destroy the treaty between the Fea and humans. This event would lead to the destruction of her kingdom which would expose Axis' location to the vengeful fallen gods. Iduna's interference saves her brother, the kingdom, and Skander and Axis. Iduna also discovers that her real father is the king and a descendent of divine gods. It is revealed that the man who raised and abused her is an immortal vampire who feasts on

his spouses and his children to maintain his immortality. This uncovers a plot which involves her assassin father working with the fallen gods to hunt and kill Axis and Skander.

Significance of the Topic as a Christian Scholar

Iduna realizes she made a mistake when she killed her companion, Dela, to spare her from a brutal death. Iduna has not left the life her father designed for her behind because she opted to kill someone rather than sacrifice herself to save them. But when she is presented with the opportunity to change that, she sacrifices herself to save the innocent. Her mind and spirit are transported to her younger body. Additionally, she revisits her father and home to save her brother. Instead of ignoring her father's wicked works, she takes action to punish him. She works to mend her relationship with her brother, a relationship he always wanted and one she never realized she wanted as well. From a Christian perspective, Iduna's journey is about going into the world of the wicked to rescue the innocent while participating in a constant battle between good and evil. Iduna plays a small part in her world, and developing her character helps the reader to understand that this is a complicated situation. Similarly, Christians are required to live in the world but not participate in its evil while still fighting an enemy that they might not recognize. This book pulls from the lore of the Nephilim and their offspring.

Character qualities are also a factor of Christian traits. In this story, Iduna displays positive character qualities and growth. Initially, she acted in fear and killed her comrade, Dela. Plagued with guilt, she sacrifices herself in the same situation to alter time and save her companions. Later in this book, the reader meets Skander and Axis. Axis was blamed for committing a righteous act and was punished for his actions. In killing the Nephilim, the offspring of his fellow gods, he saves the human race. Unfortunately, in turning back time to give humanity a second chance, his fellow deities do not know the extent of the Nephilim's

crimes. Axis is persecuted. Sometimes as a Christian, actions need to be taken to prevent future harm from occurring. Those actions can be misinterpreted because they are unaware of the greater good or that they were protected from harm. Correcting mistakes, reconciling relationships, and combating evil are Christian themes in Iduna's world.

Christian themes can easily be incorporated into a fantasy fiction work. Just as God has set eternity in our hearts, so too is man looking for God, consciously or unconsciously. This is the reason why Christian themes resonate with the reader, whether the reader recognizes it or not. Finding a savior, discovering redemption, developing family bonds, and helping others are qualities of the Kingdom of Heaven and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Incorporating these themes and developing stories around them can lead to a memorable experience for the reader, and something that remains in their psyche, just like one of Jesus' parables. A Christian might read about the Sermon on the Mount, but a fantasy fiction writer can incorporate Jesus' teachings from that sermon into a story. It is a covert way to reach a secular world. Fantasy fiction is a tool, and just like any tool, it can be used for good or for evil. I intend to write family friendly books that are centered around Christian themes. It is my desire for someone to have a great reading experience and to think about the characters who they admired in my story, people who had character growth as they battled evil.

I am a storyteller. When I write, I want to mirror the real world. Many of my stories have intricate and complex plots because life is complicated. People are complicated. I focus on writing about the relationships of my characters: a relationship to others as well as the relationship to self. My main characters undergo growth and change. I write with the hope for redemption, but some characters, just like real people, choose not to be redeemed. Redemption is a recurring theme in my writings. I do write with Christian themes because I am a Christian.

Years of Bible study have established the foundation of my life and my writings. People, thoughts, and intrigue are all developed to create a written work. I have stories to tell that I hope others will enjoy. I am writing stories that I would want to read.

Writing for the Fantasy Genre through the Christian Worldview

The fantasy genre contains magic, monsters, supernatural beings, and secular content that might be considered an opposition to Christian beliefs. However, writing as a Christian author in the genre of fantasy can present opportunities to explore Christian themes and share a Biblical message. A Christian worldview is based upon the foundation of the existence of God. A fantasy author can build off of this foundation with Christian themes. Whether directly or indirectly incorporating these themes into writings helps an author create a story that includes the perspective of a Christian worldview. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are examples of utilizing Christian inspiration to write their stories and build their world. Fantasy with a Christian worldview has a purpose for creating written works which include God, a savior, the supernatural and magic, redemption, and the struggle between good and evil.

Fantasy's Purpose

The purpose of fantasy with the Christian worldview is to present entertainment with Christian themes. Presenting fantasy is to present a sense of wonder, while the combination of Christian themes provides a foundation of religious undertones and often an underlying message. Readers seek to find entertainment in good stories. Sylvia Kelso is a fantasy and science fiction author who writes about the use of religion and spirituality in modern fantasy. "The 'satisfaction' a fantasy reader seeks is 'wonder.' And wonder is a personal, even a visceral experience" (Kelso 78). Satisfaction can be found since fantasy can present something new in the form of world-building, characterization, and the structure of magic; all of this can be presented within a Christian worldview. A Christian worldview can be expressed in the battle between good and evil, as well as spiritual and moral teachings. These stories can be developed around new worlds created by the authors specifically to convey Christian principles. Unfortunately, for some

readers, Christianity and fantasy should not be combined. Brian Godawa, a professional writer and filmmaker, disagrees with this sentiment.

It is hard enough to get some religious believers to appreciate the imagination of the fantasy genre. But when it comes to retelling a story from the Bible, don't even think about putting those two things together; Bible and fantasy...I think the negative impulse comes from an essentially good intent...but such good intent does not necessarily produce the good result of a well thought out Biblical understanding of story" (Godawa 115).

The fantasy genre seems to be perfectly formed to portray Biblical understandings and principles. This is a purpose of fantasy with a Christian worldview. A common component of these works is that God is present, whether as a specific character or an implied presence. Biblical elements can be interspersed throughout the written work where scenes follow the pattern of Biblical stories.

Among the Christian-fantasy authors who utilize these techniques, J.R.R. Tolkien is popular. Tolkien undertakes a subtle approach when presenting Christian themes and elements in his stories. Even though God is not mentioned, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* contains the Christian theme of good battling evil, as well as a savior. Author Sheridan Gilley writes about Christianity and fantasy in J.R.R. Tolkien's writing. Tolkien utilized fiction to present an inner meaning with a message of "Christian ideas of good and evil, sustained by hope and overseen by a providence which works through the freewill of its creatures" (Gilley 45). Tolkien's works embody a successful combination of fantasy with a Christian worldview. While Tolkien writes about a Middle-earth filled with elves, dwarves, and an assortment of other magical creatures, his writings detail the hidden Christian worldview of the struggle of against good and evil. Tolkien's

most popular work, *The Lord of the Rings*, is set in a world where a creator, presumably God, is mentioned. Furthermore, Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* provides more Biblical context of inspiration with the opening of the creation story and the history of angels falling into sin. Tolkien's use of pulling from Biblical inspiration to build his stories "confirms Tolkien's own already declared understanding in the St. Andrews lecture of the religious role of the teller of tales, who offers spiritual and moral teaching and even points to the Christian Gospel" (Gilley 45). In his fantasy works, Tolkien models the benefits of self-sacrifice, such as Gandalf saving the Fellowship from the Balrog, as well as service to others as exemplified by Samwise with Frodo. This demonstrates a blend of Christian Biblical text to add context to a fantasy setting. There is a reference to the fallen angels when Gandalf tells the Balrog "the Dark Fire will not avail you, flame of Udun. Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass" (Tolkien 331). The Balrog was a corrupted Maia, a supernatural entity who is similar to angels. With the utilization of Biblical text, such as the fall of Lucifer and the fall of man, Tolkien presents Christian themes in a novel way through the use of fantasy.

Fantasy makes the inclusion of this Christian theme possible because of the creation of a new world. Readers are interested in the new worlds presented in fantasy. With new worlds comes the possibility for new adventures. Readers are able to experience this with the fantasy genre. Tolkien created Middle-earth as a place for his story's adventure. "The human spirit delights in the stories of adventures in distant lands or stars, and of traveling the road which goes on forever" (Gilley 45). Fantasy can create new worlds for this adventure and demonstrate Christian principles throughout the adventure. The fantasy element of exploring new worlds stretches the imagination of creation. It is in this delight that readers can come to learn about the distant lands, experience the awe of the heroic tales of mystical characters, and still retain the

Biblical morals imbued within the text. Fantasy writers have the opportunity to world-build, and writers can pull from cultural myths to enhance their world. Tolkien followed this format with Middle-earth. Lili Liu, a professor at the University of Waterloo, writes about Tolkien's values influencing his writing. "For Tolkien indeed, the fantasy realm of Middle-earth was the real earth of England. His term relates to the old Icelandic or Norse term, part of a belief system involving a sense of multiple worlds with our Earth in the center" (Liu, 26). Incorporating worlds with components from different mythologies can add entertainment and enhance the sense of wonder while addressing plots centered around Christian principles. Just as fantasy can borrow ideas from cultural myths and legends, fantasy can also borrow from the Bible.

With fantasy, writing from an origination of different mythologies and Biblical texts is possible. An example of this utilization is when Tolkien uses Norse mythology as a foundation for the gods, heroes, warriors, and elves in his work. Writer Richard Angelo Bergen, from the University of British Columbia, states that Tolkien draws from "the pessimistic Norse mythology of chaotic monsters attacking the hearth of humans and the gods, as well as the Christian mythology of the giants descended from Cain" to expand the knowledge of his readers as cultural and religious exposure (Bergan 104). This combination of Biblical characters and legends with the magical fantasy is an example of Christian worldview influencing fantasy. It is through this technique that Tolkien lays the foundation for his work. Fantasy can have a positive religious exposure with a Christian worldview when Christian themes and principles are present throughout the written work. A fantasy book can be entertaining, but it can also furtively promote Christian themes and standards. Tolkien was artful with his insertion with his Christian themes.

Stephen R. Lawhead also writes from a Christian worldview, although he takes a subtler approach than Lewis and even Tolkien. Lawhead draws inspiration from Christian influences throughout his writings. While some of Lawhead's works, such as *In the Hall of the Dragon King*, have Christian themes about God and the establishment of a religion similar to Christianity, Lawhead never attests that the religion is Christianity or that the god portrayed within *In the Hall of the Dragon King* is the Hebrew God. Lawhead creates a similar world and includes Christian themes, but he does not admit to a Christian religion as he teaches through his writings. Author Cath Filmer-Davies writes about the use of a Christian God in fantasy literature and states that "the works of Stephen Lawhead, a contemporary writer in the Tolkien/Lewis tradition, suggest that Lawhead has learned that subtlety is a more useful strategy than hectoring" (Filmer-Davies 61). The strategy of developing a Christian themed story under a secular heading permits Christian principles to be subtly presented to secular readers. Lawhead's Christian world view is displayed in his works through the themes, religion, and godhead, even though it is not labeled as Christianity.

With this approach, Lawhead's writings can be enjoyed without delving into theology regarding the themes of Christianity, even though his writings have clear Biblical influence and Christian themes. In an interview with Craig Holmes, Lawhead has said that "the link between my faith and writing is completely intentional" even though a writer "can no longer assume a common ground of biblical stories" (Holmes 6-7). For example, in *The Song of Albion*, Lawhead's fiery furnace appears based on the common Biblical story of the fiery furnace that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego were cast into; similarly, Lawhead's main character undergoes the same treatment to represent his purity and right to the throne.

I thrust a burning brand into each of Llew's hands-flame-end downwards. The fire raced

up the length of the branch and instantly Llew's hands were engulfed in flames. Yet he stood before them, grasping the firebrands as the fire licked at his flesh. He did not scream or cry out; he did not flinch or drop the torches "With flames of fire," I proclaimed, "your declaration is confirmed" (Lawhead 28).

Llew's purity is displayed when the fire does not burn him, similar to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego. The three Hebrews chose God and were divinely protected, and Llew was the chosen one who was also divinely protected. The Christian perspective of divine protection combined with the elements of fantasy that Lawhead has set up resonates with a Christian reader because of the fiery furnace. By using fantasy, Lawhead creates a world to revisit Biblical stories with different situations but with Christian principles. Lawhead does this with the fiery furnace, a historical event that happened once, but it can be repeatedly revisited in a fantasy world with new characters; similar moral lessons and teachings can be learned from this reading experience.

Additionally, Lawhead draws inspiration about the right to kingship and expresses the Christian worldview in his writing. He parallels Christ and his main character. Jesus Christ is Lord and king, pure and sinless. Lawhead plays on this Biblical aspect to establish the divine right and kingship for his character. In *The Song of Albion*, a pure king ordained by a high power had the right to rule. The entire series is focused on the conflict of establishing Llew as the rightful king. Llew is from another world, similar to Jesus, and although Llew is mortal, he must have a pure heart and body.

His clothes were gone, and the ropes that bound him with them-the mordant poison had stripped all from him-and now he stood immaculate and unblemished before us. His skin was flawless, clean and whole, his limbs straight and sound. Llew stood. "I am blameless," he said simply. "I have done no wrong, yet I have suffered evil and injustice

at your hands. And for this and for every drop of innocent blood that you have shed, I do condemn you” (Lawhead 380, 392).

Llew is portrayed as the rightful, guiltless savior, portraying a Christian worldview within a fantasy setting. Creating a character similar to Jesus Christ can only be done in a fantasy setting, but that fantasy setting can relay the teachings of Christ in a new format.

Fantasy can present Biblical teachings and lead people to Christ. The themes that are present in fantasy writing can lead to salvation. Stephen R. Lawhead, an author who is a Christian, relayed an encounter where a reader told him:

I read your book and I thought it was so interesting, and it got me thinking. I didn’t become a Christian reading it but I began to wonder: What if life could be like that? And then where do you go to get it?’ That eventually led him to find a group of Christians and, though he still looked the same – a big scary guy, the meaning snuck up on him (Holmes 3).

This is the pinnacle of the purpose for fantasy with a Christian worldview: successfully presenting the gospel and God.

God

The concept of God is integral to fantasy. God represents the divine, the supernatural, or the unseen. Even though authors may not directly declare God, there are some aspects of divinity. For instance, magic, and unseen power exerted upon the primary world, could not exist without the supernatural element or God. Some stories avoid giving a god or a deity a characterization or a name. Instead, they refer to a higher power without committing to a religion. “From *The Lord of the Rings* onward till 2007, the majority of fantasy novels and novelists still portray few gods and no religions” (Kelso 76). Avoiding an established religion,

but having a divine being, still incorporates God. Attesting to an unseen entity which directly influences characters is a method where divinity is introduced. Fantasy can “contemplate the possibility and the power of the supernatural and, in many cases, affirm, even when denying, the presence of God.” (Filmer-Davies 72). This theme in fantasy supports the Christian worldview of a higher being, God, in control of creation. God, an omnipotent being is established with supernatural powers and abilities that humanity cannot comprehend but wants to understand. Fantasy presents situations where God’s nature is explored. Christian author Donita K. Paul explores the topic of God with her deity *Wulder*.

Donita K. Paul uses fantasy to broach the topic of God’s nature. There is an emphasis that God is the creator and also inspires creativity. In *The Vanishing Sculptor*, Paul establishes the presence of a creator when the main character, Tipper, watches her father perform his artwork: “Your father’s talent is not unusual. The Creator first gives the gift, then perfects the gift if the recipient is willing” (Paul 72). From the Christian worldview, a creator has been introduced, a creator that the characters have never heard about. The establishment of a higher being, a creator who is good, opens the way for an introduction of the Christ-like character, Paladin. Paul also uses fantasy realities to ask uncomfortable questions about the nature of God. When Paul’s main character, Kale Allerion, first meets the God’s emissary, Paladin, she asks questions about God’s actions. Kale’s grief over the death and destruction she witnesses makes her question her newly found faith. Filmer-Davies points out that “a common argument against the existence of God asserts that a loving and compassionate God could not permit tragedy; therefore, there is no God” (Filmer-Davies 71). Interpreting God from a human perspective can lead to misunderstanding Him. There is a misconception that if there is an all-powerful deity, then the

efforts of evil would remain nonexistent. However, the Christian worldview on the existence of God and the existence of suffering are addressed by Paul in her first book, *Dragonspell*.

Wulder knows when to do what must be done. I didn't destroy Rosti's army of evil because it was not the right time. In this world, people are growing, learning about Wulder, learning about themselves, making choices. Confronting Risto and those like him is part of Wulder's plan to help these ordinary people develop into something wonderful. I would not cheat these good people of the opportunity to be great in the eyes of Wulder (Paul 195).

Paladin addresses the plans of God in the suffering of the people and the evils in the world. Also, he brings Kale's attention to the good in the world and the order of time which Wulder has ordained.

The Christian worldview can be expressed with the presence of a nameless God with the powers and characteristics of the Hebrew God. In fantasy, this presence of "morality and judgment, mercy and compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation, kindness and comfort, depending upon the needs of the characters and the demands of the narrative itself," provide readers with entertainment and an inspirational impact (Filmer-Davies 73). God's characteristics and Christian principles can be interspersed within a writing to promote a Christian worldview. There could be the argument that fantasy is automatically secular because God and Jesus are not directly named, despite the Christian themes in most stories. Tolkien's works do not outright state any existence of a deity or God, "although divine intervention in earthly affairs is made clear in Gandalf's assertion that 'Pity and Mercy' have prevented Bilbo from killing Gollum, who still has a role to fulfill" (Filmer-Davies 61). Having a purpose to complete before death implies the presence of God who ordained that purpose. Also, the qualities of pity and mercy and

a divine plan for a character, set up by a higher being, provides evidence for God's role and presence within the story.

However, there are some Christian authors who omit a God or Christ-like character in their stories. Jennifer Glenn, author of *My World of Conceit*, holds to the belief that she cannot fully capture or honor the presence of Jesus. "In my novel, I wondered whether or not I should incarnate some form of God, like Aslan, to truly portray our dependence upon Him. I came upon the difficulty, however, that I cannot accurately portray God. He is too great. He is too powerful. He is too wonderful. He is too...indescribable" (Glenn 1). However, Glenn still pulls from Christian doctrine to establish the values of her character. The Christian worldview of truth, love, and family are still present in Glenn's stories and are portrayed through her characters. Despite the omission, God is still present in fantasy writing. Even in writing by Christian authors, the traditional viewpoints of who God is "may have been cast aside, (but) there is still some sense of divine presence in the experience of literature" (Filmer-Davies 60). For instance, when the character within fantasy is called to a higher purpose, there is a meaning established behind the story. There is meaning behind the adventure and the mission, a mission ordained by the unseen. This search for further meaning is a depiction of a desire for an experience outside of the normal, to witness an adventure lacking in life, or to follow a leader and possibly a willing savior.

Savior

In fantasy works, the presence of a savior stems from the Christian worldview. The perfect savior is Jesus Christ: He is the savior of the world. In fantasy, saviors portray heroic characteristics and are present to heal and mend what is broken. A character such as *Star Wars'* Luke Skywalker is deemed a hero to the Rebellion for his destruction of the Death Star, but he is Darth Vader's savior when he successfully saves him from the Dark Side. Luke sees good in his

father and seeks to mend his broken soul rather than fight his enemy. Similarly, Jesus is our hero by destroying Satan's dominion over man, and He is our savior who saves us from damnation. As the savior, Christ came to save the world and mend the broken. Christ comes with love and compassion. He was the hero who saved humanity from Hell. Author and associate professor at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Christopher Garbowski writes that using Jesus as the prototype, fantasy creates heroes and "the hero ascends toward a community of love. He uses prudence and discernment to reach it. He suffers as much as the tragic hero; he struggles against evil forces" (Garbowski, 274). This idea embodies the worldview of Christianity by establishing the hero with Christlike traits. It is this selfless, compassionate, heroic character who inspires readers. Characters of such quality are easily identified in stories such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Dragonspell*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.

In the genre of fantasy, readers can enter a world of fantasy which is created by a power that reigns and puts the world in order. From a Christian perspective, this unseen power is assumed to represent God, though this characterization is often an imperfect hidden and formless power. Historian of religion, Laura Feldt, writes about the representation of religion in fantasy and its connection to reality. In fantasy, this hidden power "does not operate on a mechanical cause-and-effect structure or on an idea of blind chance, but on a providential world structure entailing that actions, events and decisions partake in a higher order, suggesting that there is a supernatural power or force behind the scenes" (Feldt 9). The Christian worldview of a hidden power connects with the hidden form of God. It is with this set-up within fantasy that characters, or the designated savior, are given a responsibility to save their world. This election is often predestined by an unseen force or a supernatural being that grants the hero with a divine right in their quest. It is a predestined fate. "The hero is elected and aided by a providential force or

power and succeeds because of his or her moral strength” (Feldt 9). Fantasy heroes and saviors can be modeled after Jesus for they are part of a divine plan just as Christ had a heavenly purpose.

A popular Christ-like figure in fiction is the savior Aslan from C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia*. A purpose of Narnia is to present a re-telling of Biblical themes. A popular example of this application is in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Aslan represents the personification of Jesus. This representation is central to the plot and the story because Aslan is the one building and leading an army against the White Witch, a personification of the Enemy. Aslan is often viewed as a savior, but he is also a hero. American psychologist and professor at Stanford University Philip Zimbardo states that “the key to heroism is a concern for other people in need - a concern to defend a moral cause, knowing that there is a personal risk, done without expectation of reward” (Zimbardo 7). Aslan is the ultimate hero: his concern for others results in him putting their needs first, even at the cost of his life. Aslan’s selfless act of dying on the stone table parallels the cross; this allegory is powerfully presented in the fantasy genre. C.S. Lewis’ depiction of Aslan as Jesus is further explored when Aslan steps up to save Edmund’s life and die in his place. Another similarity between Jesus and Aslan is the use of power. Jesus has supernatural abilities whereas Aslan has magic. Research scholar Ravikumar states that “Lewis uses the character of Aslan the Lion, whose role within the magical world of Narnia is both creator and savior. Aslan is such a powerful conduit of the land’s magic that even at the mention of his name, there is an effect felt, as the answering of a prayer” (Ravikumar, N., et al. 266). The Christian worldview of a savior is one who comes with supernatural abilities to protect with a divine purpose. Aslan takes the role of the savior for the Pevensie siblings.

The Christian worldview of a savior is also evident with Aragorn from *The Lord of the Rings*. Aragorn could be construed as a representative of Jesus since he resurrects the dead, bestows mercy, and heals others. Christ is known for resurrecting the dead. In a similar parallel, Aragorn has control over the Oathbreakers, and his leadership and power over them signifies his right as king. Aragorn commands the undead to follow him and fulfill their oath. This action is a quasi-resurrection since the Oathbreakers are able to materialize from the spiritual realm into the physical realm to cause a tangible effect by slaying Aragorn's enemies. Aragorn's enemies do not receive mercy, but Borimir does. Just as Christ has displayed mercy to humanity, Aragorn also showed mercy and understanding for Borimir; Borimir is the personification of humanity's weakness and constant struggle against temptation. Yet Aragorn recognized Borimir's noble acts and struggle against the One Ring, and he showed mercy to Borimir in his final moments and consoled him as he was dying. Catholic journalist John Tuttle writes about the connection between Aragorn and Jesus Christ. "More than this, it is Christ's love which fully heals one's soul...In a number of instances, Aragorn is seen displaying these Christ-like attributes of healer and consoler. The most obvious association with Aragorn's role as a healer or physician comes during a sequence that's played out in *The Return of the King*" (Tuttle 11). Tolkien does not focus on Aragorn's ability to heal, but he includes the theme in his work. Once again, Tolkien is covertly displaying components of Christianity in his writings. It is through the quick reference to Aragorn as a healer that Aragorn is further paralleled to Jesus. Jesus is known as the Great Physician, and one of Aragorn's skills is his ability to heal.

At the doors of the Houses many were already gathered to see Aragorn, and they followed after him; and when at last he had supped, men came and prayed that he would heal their kinsmen or their friends whose lives were in peril through hurt or wound, or

who lay under the Black Shadow. And Aragorn arose and went out, and he sent for the sons of Elrond, and together they labored far into the night. And word went through the City: ‘The King is come again indeed’ (Tuttle 13).

Christ commands awe and respect when he displays his merciful healing similar to the reaction Aragorn received. From a Christian worldview, divine power within a hero places a character within the role of the savior.

Christian author Donita K. Paul, author of *Dragonspell*, writes her stories with a Christian influence. Her character, the Paladin, displays savior characteristics. The word paladin is defined as champion, and Jesus Christ is the world’s champion who has a direct connection to God as His son. Paul’s Paladin is presented as a noble warrior, perfect and powerful and has a direct connection with the creator of the world, Wulder. “The Paladin. The champion for the people. The educator, encourager, exhorter, spokesman for Wulder” (Paul 320). The Christian worldview is expressed in Paul’s writings as she establishes her savior in Paladin’s character and the presence of God in Wulder. Paladin parallels Jesus. Paladin was chosen by God whereas Christ came from God. Just as Christ had other-worldly powers, so too does Paladin: his sword emits lightning. Paladin is able to physically fight and is a savior in the physical realm and to his people, whereas Christ spiritually fought and saved his people spiritually. The character of the Paladin is not a main character like Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* or Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but his presence within the series is consistent, much like the presence of Christ. However, the Christian worldview of a hidden creator is often credited in fantasy to establish the origin of magic. The values and divine purpose characters portray point back to the worldview of a Christian. Sometimes these divine instances are attributed to the supernatural or magic.

The utilization of magic in fantasy can still express a Christian worldview. The purpose of magic is to expose readers to the supernatural or spiritual realm which indirectly implies the divine. A frequent form of magic in fantasy is similar to the type portrayed in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Witchcraft, sorcery, and spells are commonplace. Through this, *Harry Potter* bends reality with its use of magic, hidden realms, and mystical presences. Readers are immersed in the magical realm, and the magic makes readers question the reality of our world, such as what is hidden, what is possible, and what remains unknown.

The understanding of what is really real comes across as contingent, and readers are stimulated towards the idea that the present reality is not *all* of reality. In this way, the series taps into central concerns of religious discourses and offers a space for reflection on religion, magic and planes of reality. It promotes a double perspective on both the everyday and the magical plane, rendering the reality status of both uncertain (Feldt 31). The reality of a spiritual realm is often unquestioned by Christians: God is spiritual, supernatural, and omnipotent. God is unseen. Magic operates in the unseen realm but has an effect in the physical realm. Christ used supernatural powers when he raised Lazarus from the dead, and Christ himself was buried and rose from the grave by supernatural means. In the realm of fantasy, these powers could be described as magical: through a Christian worldview, magic can be a bridge to explore the supernatural powers of God.

There are supernatural elements displayed throughout the Bible, elements that question the reality of the tangible being the only reality of the world humanity occupies, the primary world. While the concept of flying away on brooms and coming across monsters does not happen in reality, the thought of hidden realms is so enticing that readers question reality and therefore are amenable to the supernatural references in the Bible. Through this, "fantasy-fiction series

such as (*Harry Potter*) both reflect and inform religious interests and religious fascination in contemporary society, and provide a site for explorations of religious ideas, meanings and attitudes to the religious and religion” (Feldt 43). *Harry Potter* flaunts the supernatural and questions reality, hinting at hidden worlds and buried potential, much like the Christian worldview when Jesus’ disciples were filled with the Holy Ghost and could heal others and cast out demons. Furthermore, other readers and aspiring authors can pull from the world-building of *Harry Potter* and find Christian interpretation within the writing. “These Christian interpreters generally tend to seek to explain the magic away as insignificant and ornamental, seeking a Christian message beneath the magical surface, as it were” (Feldt 29). While *Harry Potter* does not have a designated Christian God and practices witchcraft, the reference to the magic can be directed back to the Bible when Jesus and the disciples display otherworldly abilities that could be attributed to magic. Jesus walked on water and knew which fish had a gold coin; His divinity could be viewed as a magical ability. The idea of religion in fantasy presents a flexibility of thought and world-building, breaking down the concept of religion and giving readers a better understanding about how religion works.

Religion can be viewed as an explanation of the supernatural, but from a Christian worldview, the supernatural originates from God, who is responsible for the supernatural. The utilization of magic in fiction like *Harry Potter* all relies on the intrinsic rules set up within the world that sets up a reality. By utilizing magic, characters are empowered with supernatural or otherworldly powers, similar to how Christ rising from the dead can be considered otherworldly. The use of magic in fantasy writing reflects “contemporary trends in the religious landscape by suggesting that the imagination can somehow connect to deeper planes of reality, that myths contain forms of deeper understanding, and that they convey something about the nature of the

world and human life” (Feldt 45). From a Christian worldview, Peter’s ability to heal his mother-in-law from sickness and cast out demons is a gift from God, a supernatural force similar to the utilization of magic displayed in fantasy. Using magic in a fantasy world establishes the supernatural realm. Professor of English Literature Emily Griesinger writes about the inclusion of hope in children’s books in her article and states “fairy tales and fairy-tale magic may have a role to play, then, in opening the reader to the Christian supernatural and eventually to salvation in Christ” (Griesinger 457). This is the ultimate purpose for writing a fantasy work with a Christian worldview: to lead people to salvation in Christ. Magic is a tool that can be wielded to help a writer express the Christian worldview, which could ultimately lead to a reader’s salvation. Ultimately, the Christian worldview can be cautiously expressed through magic because of the supernatural and spiritual similarity.

In using magic, the distinction between the supernatural world and primary world are evident. The Christian worldview of a spiritual world is displayed since the primary world is interrupted by the unseen. Using magic in fantasy is an easy method to accomplish this. Tolkien utilized magic in his writings to expose the supernatural. In his writings of *Fairy Stories*, Tolkien is quoted to say “magic produces or pretends to produce an alteration in the Primary World. It does not matter by whom it is said to be practiced, fay or mortal, it remains distinct from [enchantment]; it is not an art but a technique; its desire is power in this world, domination of things and wills” (Garbowski 277). The purpose of using magic is to reveal the difference between the spiritual world and the primary world: Christian themed stories can focus on the two worlds through magic. Furthermore, Tolkien defended utilizing magic in his stories by stating that it “sharpens reason” and “the keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make” (Garbowski 277). Readers understand that magic is not real, but Tolkien displays a

Christian worldview even as he incorporates magic into his stories by including Christian themes. For instance, the Christian ideal of self-sacrifice was incorporated when Gandalf used magic and fought the Balrog, sacrificing himself for the fellowship. Both Tolkien and Lewis have utilized magic in their stories about other worlds, wizards, and magical creatures. Even as magic is utilized, both authors use their platform to incorporate Christian teachings to build upon the foundation for their stories.

Lewis worked to introduce Christianity to children in a way he never had when he was younger, using the form of the genre to work in his allegory. Tolkien worked to illustrate the death of nostalgia and innocence i.e. magic, to a world still reeling from the horrors and warfare of the World Wars (Ravikumar, N., et al. 266).

Magic is a necessary component of Lewis and Tolkien's stories because their stories involved the supernatural. Both authors utilized fantasy to create entertaining worlds with magic to expose their readers to the supernatural element. These supernatural elements are utilized to provide a premise to present a Christian worldview and share Biblical values such as love, hope, and redemption.

Redemption

Redemption is a component of the Christian worldview. Because of Jesus's death on the cross and victory over the grave, Christians have been redeemed. There is a promise for redemption for humanity through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and that is perhaps the reason why readers look forward to experiencing character redemption. Readers want to see a representation of redemption because Christ came as a redeemer. The journey of redeeming a fallen character is intriguing. In some fantasy novels, a character seeking redemption is a part of the Hero's Journey: these examples can be found with Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*, Snape from *Harry*

Potter, and Darth Vader from *Star Wars*. Fantasy provides an excellent medium to expose readers to the theme of redemption.

Darth Vader is an example of a redeemed character with Biblical parallels. Darth Vader began as the promising warrior, Anakin Skywalker, similar to Adam before the Fall. Similarly, Anakin fell to the Dark Side and became Darth Vader, condemning the Galaxy to the reign of the Emperor, just as Adam condemned all of humanity to sin and ushered in the reign of Satan. However, Darth Vader is redeemed by his son, Luke Skywalker, not because Luke refused to fight and kill his father, but because Luke stood between his father and the Emperor. This is how Jesus, a descendent of Adam, came to save humanity and stood between us and the devil. For Darth Vader, there is a new hope for his salvation in the form of his son. Despite the evil and terror he has inflicted on his son, Luke's love for his father is steadfast for he only sees the lost soul in need of saving. Anthony Guerrero writes about the value of obtaining lessons from the fall and redemption of characters and focuses on the importance of acknowledging and healing through that redemption.

The real beauty of *Star Wars* may lie in the fact that, as much as evil can be hidden (in the form of Darth Sidious), goodness can likewise be hidden and brought to fruition (in the form of Anakin Skywalker). In spite of Anakin's transformation to Darth Vader, he nonetheless reemerges in Episode 6 as the real hero who brings balance to the Force" (Guerrero 487).

Similarly, the beauty of Christ's love for his people is that despite their sin, He uses love and sacrifice to establish a relationship with them. The retelling of the redemption work of Christ is easily done through fantasy; fantasy provides an opportunity to present the Christian worldview. The love between a father and his son is seen with Darth Vader and Luke. Author Lewis Jorstad

states that love is the motivator for “in redemption arcs, there is often a figure who pushes the flawed character to change, and Luke fulfills that role for Vader” (Jorstad 17). The power of love, specifically God’s love, is an important Christian theme. When Vader chooses to side with his son, he destroys his connection with the Emperor. This parallels a Christian’s ultimate decision to accept Christ as their Savior and renounce sin and the devil. It does not completely erase the past, for people still sin, similar to how Darth Vader has committed horrific crimes against the Galaxy, but in that moment, Luke is only there to save his father, not condemn a criminal. Darth Vader “ultimately redeems himself through love for his son, which presumably had never been part of the usual Sith experience” (Guerrero 487). Similarly, redemption came through the love of Christ.

From a Christian perspective, humanity finds redemption when they accept Christ as their savior. When He was tortured and died on the cross, He did so that we may have a relationship with Him and God. Redemption can be found for humanity when they uncover the strength and desire to acknowledge their wrongdoings and accept Christ as their savior. Likewise, “Anakin’s salvation was possible because he nonetheless had basic inner strengths (e.g., love for his family) as well as a champion (e.g., his son) who believed that this goodness existed” (Guerrero 487). From a Christian perspective, Christ saw the potential to have a relationship with humanity. The fall of Adam and the redemption of Christ can be retold many times with the fantasy genre; with world building and characterization, fantasy is an efficient method of expressing a Christian worldview.

Redemption is a theme in American author Jennifer A. Nielsen’s young adult trilogy, *The False Prince*. Nielsen’s work involves two characters, nearly brothers, involved in betrayal and redemption. Jaron is revealed to be the lost prince of a kingdom on the brink of civil war, and he

extends a hand of friendship to his friend Roden, only to be betrayed. However, that does not stop Jaron from crossing the seas and fighting for his friend. When the two boys reunite, Roden has sided with the pirates and imprisoned Jaron. With a broken leg, Jaron escapes from his imprisonment, and his sheer determination empowers him to climb a mountainside and fight against his enemy to save Roden. Through this conflict, Roden admits to his wrongdoings and swears fealty to his friend and king. When speaking about Jaron, Roden states, “the battle didn’t end with Jaron’s broken leg. That’s how it began. Jaron escaped from a secure room, climbed the face of a cliff, defeated me in battle, all with a broken leg” (Nielson 193). This display of Jaron’s loyalty and determination can be reflected through the Christian perspective of Christ suffering on the cross and battling hell and the grave for three days. The theme of redemption resonates with readers because all have betrayed God by sinning. Presenting redemption in a fantasy writing is a covert method of spreading Christian teachings.

When character redemption occurs, readers enjoy seeing the bond and devotion given to the one who extended mercy. Darth Vader expressed this devotion by rejecting his master to save his son Luke. Roden shows this devotion by fighting by Jaron’s side. When Roden is asked about his loyalty and questioned if he “would follow your king to the devil’s lair and back again,” Roden answers “I would be first amongst them...I would follow Jaron wherever he goes and trust him with all my heart” (Nielson 192). From a Christian perspective, Christians who are redeemed and forgiven of their sins hold Christ in reverence because of an understanding of his suffering and the extent he went through to establish a relationship with humanity. Another example of redemption, but with the Christian aspect, is Edmund from *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Edmund represents humanity. He betrays his siblings and all of Narnia to the White Witch. Similarly, redemption stories can begin with the fall of a character who makes a pact with the

incarnate of the devil. Professor of ancient religion Almut-Garbara Renger writes about the perspective of fantasy and magical influence. “In the Christian tradition, the devil's-pact motif is based on the assumption that, in contrast to the covenant with God, a covenant is entered into in which a human soul is promised to the devil in return for wealth, power, talent, magical powers, or similar gifts” (Renger 17). Humans are under the devil’s dominion because of the Fall when Adam and Eve sinned; that contract dooms humanity. Edmund is promised a throne by the White Witch if he turns his siblings over to her. Darth Vader is promised power to save his wife if he slaughters the Jedi. Roden is promised riches if he joins the pirates to overthrow Jaron. From a Biblical perspective, Judas was promised a reward if he betrayed Jesus. However, the saviors to these fallen characters, Aslan, Luke, and Jaron, offer unconditional love and determination. To save Edmund, Aslan dies in his place. Edmund is already remorseful for what he has done, and Aslan’s forgiveness and sacrifice changes him into a character who becomes just and compassionate. In most stories such as this, “the deliverance of the hero by no means signifies that the hero has attained salvation by turning to Christ as redeemer but rather is to be understood as a redemption from a state of oppression, as the attainment of freedom to live a self-determined life” (Renger 19). Redemption unto salvation is reserved for Christ, but through fantasy, parallels of redemption can be expressed which point the reader to Christ’s redemption. Edmund still speaks with Aslan to confess his transgressions and must even face the White Witch, the devil he made a pact with, to save his brother. Darth Vader must admit defeat and turn on the Emperor to save his son and right his wrongs, and Roden must be held accountable for his treason, despite Jaron standing by his side. In fantasy, themes of redemption with responsibility can be clearly displayed.

The battle between good and evil is not only a Christian theme but also an integral theme in fantasy. The fight of good against evil can be viewed as the struggle of the sinful human nature against the core goodness that God has instilled in His creation. Even fantasy writings which depict that “God is absent, but which nevertheless attempts to deal with issues of the origin of good and evil and their effects in the world, is the (still) extremely popular and influential” (Filmer-Davies 61). God may not be recognized in a fantasy story, but He is represented in the good. The concept of good and evil can be connected to religion, but it is also a universal tenet. A common theme in fantasy is when evil oppresses the good, and amidst the evil, good must rise up and defeat the evil. This ‘good’ must have the determination to protect. One of the key concepts of good rising against evil is present in “a concern for other people in need—a concern to defend a moral cause, knowing there is a personal risk” (Zimbarado 7). The concept of the struggle between good and evil mirrors the struggle between God and the devil over human souls. Author and editor Sarah Winters writes about the importance of religious faith and secular hope in fantasy. The fight for man’s soul has eternal implication, either life or damnation: “The genre of high fantasy in English has traditionally been influenced by Christianity’s semi-dualist vision of the forces of darkness and evil and the forces of goodness and light locked in a temporal conflict against the backdrop of eternity” (Winters 5). The battle of good and evil may be simplistic, but it is also complex. With fantasy and world building, there are endless possibilities to present this struggle from the vantage point of a Christian worldview.

Characters and locations can change, but the central themes remain. In fact, author Irina Rupp Malone writes that “fantasy is organized around the ethical binary of good and evil” (Rupp Malone, Irina 205). This common theme has spawned numerous writings, all stemming from this basic foundation of a conflict. This conflict is a component of the Christian worldview

where Christ is the victor. Good triumphing over evil is a common Christian theme in fantasy, especially when the characters struggle. The theme is present in not only Christian fantasy, but in secular fantasy as well. *Star Wars* is about good triumphing over evil, but it is more than that: *Star Wars* presents the character's struggle.

This is why it is misguided to think that the *Star Wars* vision of good and evil is just black and white. Lucas isn't telling stories about good people and evil people. He's telling stories about characters who can choose good or evil. The Light Side and the Dark Side are the two paths these choices take them down ("The Importance of Luke Skywalker." 10:02-10:12).

Characters choosing good over evil is a component of not only *Star Wars*, but also the Christian worldview. This simplistic conflict is not only at the foundation of fantasy, but also at the foundation of the world: God battles evil. In fantasy, there might be a hero who wins, but in reality, in Christianity, Jesus wins. Presenting good against evil is important in fantasy because the conflict points to Christ.

Pointing to Jesus is the fulfillment of the Christian worldview. The Christian worldview has many themes, but the goal is Christ. Presenting a Christian worldview that leads to Jesus is possible through many means, including fantasy writings. Fantasy, whether Christian or secular, can explore the themes of redemption, the role and importance of the savior and forgiveness, and even utilizes magic to build a learning experience for readers that exposes them to Biblical messages. Christian themes and the core values of Christianity can utilize the concept of the struggle between good and evil to point to God. The concept of spirituality, the presence of an omnipotent being, and a higher calling are all traditional Christian themes that can be found in fantasy stories. It is by utilizing these concepts and understanding their importance to inspire

readers that a fantasy author can incorporate magic, mystical beings, and supernatural worlds while utilizing the gift of creativity God has placed in this world to share His message.

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PROLOGUE

The shadows of the Talome estate stretched over the green pastures of the lord's land.

The manor stood in the center of the field, silver windows darkened by the looming mountains. Shining spires and black marble stretched up to the sky, arrogantly stabbing at the clouds. Emerald fields of swaying grass washed over the land like a calm sea. Blooming flowers of the main garden remained sheltered within the stone walls looming over the manor. Perfectly trimmed rose bushes and mazes of sharp hedges carefully aligned with the well-maintained paths. Just as magnificent as the main building, the stables lay secluded against a backdrop of the dark forests encroaching upon the empty fields. But hidden from the sight of the darkened exterior was the small greenhouse the lady of the manor would frequently visit. Residing in ornate cages of silver and gold were birds of many colors, clashing with the sharp decor of the manor. On rare occasions, a lucky bird would get the chance to spread its wings, free from its cage, to fly beneath the glass dome of the greenhouse under the watchful gaze of its mistress.

Iduna could sympathize with the birds. As a child, she had been in awe of the colorful feathers and the wide, trusting gazes the birds held for their mistress. She could never quite coach a bird to land on her finger the way her mother or brother could, so she was content to watch as an intrigued bystander.

"Iduna, come play with me!" Perim shouted.

But her position on the sidelines never satisfied her brother.

Playing hide and seek and racing across the fields where the looming grass was almost tall enough to hide a young child had become one of Iduna's favorite pastimes, but it was one that was growing less frequent with each passing day. Racing with her brother to slip away from their father's watchful gaze once provided her with a means of escape. But today, as the bandage

on her cheek tugged at the skin, she was reminded of her father's presence within the manor. As nightfall encroached upon the sky, she would have to return to him eventually.

Maybe this was why she was more aware of the Fea forest than her brother. It was a forest of enchantment, one that encroached their property. Iduna used to believe that the trees could move and were slowly taking over their land. Undeterred by its dark and alluring beauty, all who resided in Talome Manor knew better than to wander too close to its borders. Even the faint whisper from the forest spelled danger. Despite Iduna's growing curiosity for the secrets her family's land held, she knew better than to tempt the Fea and their enchantment. What little she had learned of the Fea told her of their dangerous trickery. The forest was their domain, and any human who wandered into their land fell victim to their wiles. Stories of foolish, or brave humans, venturing into the forest, ended with their disappearance.

As Iduna ran through the tall grass, she kept one eye on the looming forest. There was once a time when she and her brother would race across the fields, never heeding the dark presence before them. But now, she watched its dark encampment, certain she saw movement of a dark figure within the shadows.

The tall grass swayed and grabbed at her ankles. Iduna's breath, now tight from the running, chilled as the sunlight began to fade. She slowed her pace before stopping completely, her brother hidden from her sight. She could still catch fragments of his joyful laughter, rising and falling with the sway of the wind.

Breathing in, she prevented herself from calling out to him. Calling out would announce her presence, and she relished the element of surprise whenever she caught up to her brother. Envisioning his look of shock and startled peals of laughter engraved itself in her memory, and she relished the taste of victory that lay before her.

There was a lone tree in the field, far from the forest. Perhaps it was once a seedling carried away by the wind, only to land in the fertile soil of the Talome Manor. She was surprised that the many hooves of the horses had not overturned it.

Grabbing onto a low-hanging branch, she tried to pull herself up. Her stomach burned from the newly developing muscles trembling against the movement, and she hung beneath the branch, debating on continuing or succumbing to her body's protests.

She breathed in, tightening her hold on the branch before pulling herself up. She clung to her new perch, her father's encouragement whispering in her ear, and she trembled. Breathing out, she surveyed the land from her new vantage point. The swaying of the grass gave off the illusion of many hidden souls moving through the land. But Iduna knew to look for the break in the pattern, where the grass fell as it was trampled beneath the body of an eager boy.

Iduna grinned when she caught sight of her brother bursting from the grass and into the clearing, but her smile slipped when she saw where he was running to.

She jumped from the tree. Her feet erupted in static shock upon the impact, but she took off running, desperation welling up within her as the grass hid her brother from sight.

"Perim!" Her desperate scream tore through her throat. The looming trees of the forest towered over her, mocking and dark. The forbidden whispers of the forest washed over her ears. Her eyes burned from unshed tears and fear as she ran forward, every instinct within her body screaming at her to turn and run far from the enchantment.

She saw his form, small and dark. He was staring up at the trees as if it was a welcome sight.

“Perim!” She reached him, grabbing his shoulders to pull him back. She could have sworn there were dark figures darting within the forest. Panic blossomed within her chest, and she dragged her brother away.

Her brother was speaking, his voice erratic and excited. “Iduna! Can you hear it?”

“No.” The wind whistled in her ears, and she shivered, the feeling of spindly fingers brushing up against her spine. The creak of ancient wood groaning in the forest jumped at her, and she felt her brother’s hand slip from her grasp.

Hastily, she grabbed his arm, throwing him over her shoulders before running down the field. Perim’s startled shout was lost as she ran, lungs constricting and legs burning from her brother’s weight. She only stopped when the wind settled and the chill upon her back retreated. Perim slid from her shoulders, looking up at her with an expectant gaze. “Iduna, the voices-”

“Stop it.” She sharply shook her brother. “What were you doing?” The forest was now far behind them, yet the burning chill clung to her body.

Perim’s smile faltered. “They...they were calling.”

“You don’t answer!” She continued to drag him away. “You never answer them. Ever!”

Perim stuttered. “They...they knew father.”

“The Fea lie. They always lie. Or have you not been listening to father’s lectures?” Her worry and anger burst forth, building up into scathing retorts and harsh words. “Have mother’s worried tears not been enough to impede your careless adventures?” She leveled a glare at him, only to stop when she saw the tears spilling down his cheeks.

Any additional words she had were stolen from her throat. She knew father would berate him until he was broken and sobbing on the floor. But she could not muster the words to do so, not when her brother was already reduced to tears.

She held her tongue, tightened her grip on her brother's arm, and dragged him to the back gates of the manor. They could slip in without any detection from their father or the servants. She could envision the punishment their father would have for them should he find out about the situation with the forest.

Sweat slickened her palm as her hand trembled. Tightening her grip on his wrist to conceal the tremors, she ignored her brother's wince as she dragged him along behind her.

The corridors were narrow and dark from the fading sunlight. The servants must be upstairs preparing for the meal. Iduna swiped an unused cloth from the table and ushered her brother away into a hidden corner.

"Dry your eyes," she instructed, ignoring her brother's sniffles. She dabbed at his cheeks, noting the redness under his eyelids. Father would surely notice and comment, but they could easily explain Perim's tears away as something insignificant.

"What do you remember of the rules?" She brushed his dark bangs away from his face and searched his gaze.

Perim sniffled. "N-never give the Fea your name."

"Never accept their gift," Iduna continued, "and never wander from the forest path." She kneeled before him to make eye contact in the cold corridor. Though the summer had been kind to her growth, Perim had yet to reach her shoulders. "Do you understand why we avoid the forest?"

Perim's nod was too quick. "Yes. You get lost and become their prisoner."

She searched his gaze, scanning for deceit. She found it in his flickering gaze when he avoided eye contact. She waited, watching as he shuffled his foot.

“But what if,” he started, “if the people who vanished in the forest never wanted to come back home?”

Iduna raised an eyebrow. “How foolish. The Fea are tricksters. Falling under the spell requires losing your soul. Do you want to lose your soul?”

Perim shook his head but kept his gaze fixed on his shoes. “Maybe for some, it was better to trust someone else with their soul. Maybe we couldn’t be trusted with our souls, and the Fea can own it for us.”

Iduna’s frown was sharp. “That’s slavery.”

“What if you really trusted the person?” Perim looked up with wide, dark eyes.

“Still slavery if they take it,” she insisted.

“But what if you freely give it?”

She frowned at her brother’s persistence. “Do you want to be a slave?”

“No.”

“Then why are you asking such pointless questions?” She gripped his shoulders. “And where did you pick this up?” Her brother was far too young to have devised such elaborate topics.

Perim flinched, his voice quiet and hesitant. “M-mother said once...”

She released his shoulders, her frown now bitter. She had often heard father comment on their mother’s whimsical fantasies and her disinterest in current events. It showed when she never inquired where father was taking her in the dead of night.

Glancing around the empty corridors, she lowered her voice. “You must have misunderstood mother. Next time, don’t ever venture out near the forest alone. If you must

explore its borders, explore it with me. Okay?" She tilted his chin up with a delicate touch, searching his gaze.

He nodded, tears dried and eyes bright. "Okay."

She smiled, small and relieved. She was exhausted and would need to clean up and rest. The nights when Perim safely resided in his bed were the nights she spent with her father in the catacombs, and she knew a rest before dinner was needed if she were to pull through the night.

"Let us clean ourselves up and you can practice your violin before dinner," she said. Her hand slipped into his and she guided him along the corridors. "You can't make mother happy unless you improve on your music."

Her brother's resounding replies filled her ears and were almost enough to block the whispers of the forest that lingered close by. The scent of pine needles still clung to her nose, and she tightened her grip on her brother as the shadows within the manor grew long and dark.

CHAPTER 1

The house loomed ominous and dark before Iduna. The purple evening sky did little to highlight the many crystal windows adorning the black marble stone. Green pastures of untouched swaying grass stretched all around the imposing obstruction.

Iduna stepped out of the carriage. Glancing up, she frowned at the striking fortress. “You did not have to do this.”

A warm presence drew up beside her. “I was curious what the estate of the Talome household looked like.” Captain Kaiser surveyed the land. “It looks like another rich man’s home.”

Iduna bit the inside of her cheek to keep her expression neutral. “I apologize for wasting your trip.”

“Not wasted,” he replied. “Just confirmed.” He adjusted the rim of his dark hat, shadows darkening his face. Despite the cold, his pale cheeks were not flushed. “You poor thing, sucking on a silver spoon. I can see why you were so desperate to leave.”

Iduna’s grin inched upward. She was well accustomed to her captain’s comments on her upbringing. As she was so quick to find out, the Scouts and lower ranks of the army despised her father and many of the lords within his court.

Kaiser whistled. “And you have the entire damn Fea forest surrounding you. How’d you even make it?”

She didn’t need to answer. Kaiser had seen her scars, and he had seen her skills. He heard the whispers and could draw his own conclusions.

“Fascinating though,” Kaiser continued, gaze still fixed on the forest, voice grim and expression tight. “That the source of our problems are within reach and we still can’t do a damn thing about it.”

Iduna glanced at him, aware of the source of his contention. “It was either align with the Fea or constant attacks from the trolls.”

“This treaty will not hold up,” Kaiser replied, leaning back. “The Fea have nothing to gain from this.”

And therein lay her worry. The Fea had yet to make any demands. Based on her captain’s tight expression on his pale face, she imagined that this was weighing heavier on him than most. Despite his young features, the lines of battle and loss stained his face.

“Perhaps because it is taking them so long to come to a decision,” she started, “they are still trying to come to an agreement.”

Kaiser scoffed. “While our men bleed out on the battlefield and entire towns are swallowed.”

The chill of the wind increased, and from the bottom of the stone stairs, Iduna saw the massive doors of the manor open. Her gloved hands curled into a fist to conceal their trembles.

Kaiser stood behind her. “You’ll make it back?”

She nodded. “I plan to stay the night.” She ignored her captain’s dubious look. As the carriage pulled away, she faced her childhood home.

Iduna felt a shiver wrack through her body as the chilly air pierced her official blue uniform. She pulled her cloak tighter to conceal her moment of weakness. Briskly, she ascended the steps of the black marble mansion.

The large doors opened before she had crossed the last step. A young man, pale in complexion and with blond hair nearly stark white, strode forward before lingering at the threshold with his hands folded behind his back.

“Your brother should be back from his joyous ride,” the butler greeted, inclining his head. “I am certain he will be ready to greet you.”

“My brother is always out on a joyous ride.” Iduna discarded her cloak into the butler’s arms. Despite her words, she cast a furtive glance upon the fields outside the window, but there was no sight of a soul in the emerald grass. “Is my father in?”

“Not yet. Shall I inform you of his arrival?”

“Please do.” But Iduna doubted that she would receive such notice. Even now, she glanced around the halls as if her father was waiting to catch her off guard.

Iduna’s footsteps echoed against the marble floor before softening against the violet carpet. The portraits of her ancestors coldly stared down at her, but she gave them no heed as she moved forward.

The parlor doors stood open. The firelight within the room was large and warm, casting shadows upon the lone figure sitting before it.

Her mother glanced up, a small smile stretching across her pale lips. Iduna tried not to think how small her mother appeared, like a ceramic statue that would break at the slightest touch. Even her blonde hair, once luscious and bright as gold, was now ashen pale.

Iduna stopped a few feet from the chair, feeling the warm glow of the fireplace dance across her face. “Mother.”

Her mother’s smile faded away somewhat. “You really are leaving.” Her statement held disappointment, yet her searching eyes were forlorn and beseeching.

“The train leaves in the morning.” Iduna ignored the imploring gaze. She wasn’t her mother’s daughter anymore. She hadn’t been for years. She saw no reason to entertain the woman’s false hopes. That was what her brother was for.

“Yes,” her mother conceded, biting her lip. “But the Scouts of all regiments?”

“You need not worry too much, mother.” Iduna sat in the large chair across from her mother, crossing her legs and propping her arm up. “The weaponry of the Scouts has evolved over the last decade.” Her abs were still throbbing from the training regime with the flight suit. Although it couldn’t really be called a flight suit, the weightless advantage it offered was useful for escaping trolls and chimera from the edge of a cliff.

“But you will come across unspeakable horrors. I have heard rumors that the trolls could swallow entire towns with their underground miners and that they control hoards of chimera.” Her mother’s eyes shimmered. “You may come back to us in pieces.”

Iduna closed her eyes, sighing briefly before placing her hand on the arm rest. Arguing with her mother would change nothing, so she chose the generic response every Scout delivered. “It is an honor to give my life for the freedom of our people and our king.”

The Scouts were a smaller section of the military, but their strength was greater than the knights guarding the king. More trolls and chimeras fell to the blades of the Scouts than had ever fallen to the king’s military might.

To join the Scouts was a cruel opportunity that offered a bleak existence in this constant battle between humanity and monsters, but it would offer her escape from this cage. Despite the many protestations of her mother, she could not see a future for herself anywhere else but the battlefield. Slighting her father’s plans and efforts to be another agent within the king’s court was an additional appeal.

Trolls, monsters, chimera: she feared none of them. They were nothing compared to the monsters within the king's court.

Her mother hesitated before rising, the blankets on her lap falling at her feet. "Then...can I at least give you a proper send-off?"

Iduna also rose from her seat. "You can do whatever you would like, mother."

Her mother did not flinch as she had expected. Instead, she withdrew a small red box with gold outlining. Holding it out to Iduna, she proffered it like a peace offering. "For your journey."

Iduna accepted the gift, her fingers briefly brushing against her mother's. "I appreciate it."

It was a simple box, yet the weight of the contents revealed its expensive taste. Even without opening it, she knew that her mother's gift was not something she could bring with her on the field.

Her mother waited, as if expecting more. When Iduna simply met her gaze, her mother sighed. "Your father is not pleased."

"I wouldn't expect him to be."

"He won't see you off."

"Of course not. As far as he's concerned, I've wasted years of his work."

Her mother looked down. Iduna ignored the stab of guilt in her heart. Her remark had not been an intention to belittle her own mother.

Still, her mother looked up with a resigned gaze. "When will you leave?"

"As soon as I can." She hesitated, tightening her grip on the box. "I was told that Perim might be back. Do you know where he is?"

Iduna tried to ignore how her mother's countenance brightened up. "No, but I can—"

"Don't bother." If her brother wasn't seeking refuge with their grandfather, he would have been in his room playing the violin. She tried not to mourn the loss of the music.

This may have been her home, but the upper levels of the mansion remained a mystery to her. As a child, she always followed the shadow of her father, hiding the dried blood flaking beneath her nails. But the lower levels her mother and brother were denied access to were her domain. Navigating the twisted corridors had become second nature to her.

The sweet melody of a finely-tuned violin sliced through her shadowed thoughts. Iduna's boots scuffed against the carpet as her steps faltered in her uncertainty. Iduna sharply turned in the direction of the music until she was lingering outside the music room. The door stood slightly ajar, providing her with a view of the boy lost in his own world.

Her brother's small form cast a shadow within the room in the fading light. Perim's gaze was most likely listless as his fingers danced across the vibrant instrument. His posture was certainly calm, a stark contrast to the rigid and tight figure he usually portrayed when facing her or her father.

The hurt within Perim's boyish gaze had hardened over the years, darkening to portray disdain for her very presence. She knew that the cause for his aloofness was a result of their growing separations, although she did not know what she had done to earn his reproach. She entertained a few unpleasant theories, but to confront her brother would reopen too many old wounds.

Iduna's fists tightened as the smooth, haunting melody of the violin turned harsh. With each pulse and stab of the bow, the music became stark, condemning, jarring and rapid. Her

brother's calm pose became stiff, movements striking with finality, much like how she herself would hold a blade and cut across flesh.

Iduna withdrew from the door, her brother's condemning music chasing after her. She should not have lingered. Seeing him had been enough. It should have been enough. Linger any longer would invite dangerous and unwanted thoughts about crossing the threshold of the music room and making her presence known to him.

Her room was within sight when she stopped. "Father."

Her father formed like a wraith from the shadows. Iduna had not heard his footsteps. Even the music from her brother's room had ceased, as if deprived of its spirit.

So, it appeared as though the butler had neglected to inform her of her father's arrival.

Morin smiled at her, seemingly sincere, if not for the emotionless depths within his eyes. Iduna hadn't even blinked and he was already standing before her, hands on her shoulders. Morin's gaze was searching, landing on every hidden blemish that tainted her face.

He pulled back. "I will miss you." His hand was on the small of her back, guiding her toward her room. "The family will not be the same without you."

"That is the opposite of what you implied the last time we met."

"Mere words spoken in anger," he dismissed. "But can you really fault me? Years of my investment into your craft will be wasted." He looked at her. "I know that this decision of yours is meant to hurt me."

She quickened her pace to feel the absence of his hand. She tasted the truth on her tongue and felt it dissolve with her strength. "My decision has nothing to do with you."

"I think it does." They had stopped outside of her doorway, and he lifted her chin. "You are my daughter. I have always done what is best for you."

She tried to pull away, but his grip on her chin tightened. “That’s not true.”

“When you leave me, your death will not be pleasant.”

She jerked away from him, her back hitting the wall. She wasn’t his subordinate now. The Scouts had claimed her. She had the approval of the king’s favored captain. The reminder was meant to give her comfort, but it was weak and stifled. Her father would always influence her actions. Every waking part of her existed because of his molding.

“At least my death will be swift, unlike the fate you had for me.” She tried to grin, but she felt her resolve waiver.

Morin sighed. “You should at least dedicate your body to something of more use. There is not enough of you to go around for the chimera to feast.”

Iduna’s trembling hand rested on the doorknob of her room. “My heart and body have been offered to the Scouts. I would gladly die for that.”

“If death is so certain, then we should play one final game before you leave.”

She ignored him and pushed at the door to her room.

The first thing she noticed was the bars on her windows.

She stared momentarily confused before the realization flooded in. It was a precious moment wasted.

The door slammed shut with the condemning ‘click’ of a lock sliding into place.

Her mother’s gift slipped from her fingers. The box clattered against the floor. Her hands scrambled against the wooden door.

“Father!” Her scream echoed in the stone room “You can’t keep me here! I’ll die before I kill for you again!”

“Then die.” Her father’s cold voice sliced through her, like she could hear him standing right behind her. She trembled, a child once again, with a knife in her hand and the bodies of the fallen soldiers hanging from the ceiling. She was in a dark cold corridor with other children, hands stained with more blood from countless killings than a grown man contained in his whole body. Worry and fear clogged her throat, depriving her of air as her father and many other nobles strode forward, ready to condemn and discard those they deemed traitors.

But she was not her father’s soldier anymore. She had broken ties with the assassins, but her father’s reach remained ever strong and possessive of her.

He meant to keep her here. She knew what would happen next. He would starve and weaken her body. Then she would be dragged down below the hidden corridors to relive her father’s desires.

She could tell herself that she would not break. But she knew better. Her father knew everything about her. He would remold her.

A quick look through her room revealed nothing. Her father had cleaned out everything. All of her tools, hidden weapons, even the meager jewelry, were missing. Anything she could have used to pick the locks at the door were gone. Her heart rate picked up speed once more and she felt the panic nearly set in. She was defenseless.

Iduna nearly tripped over her mother’s box, spilling the contents. Her frantic gaze focused on two hairpins, deadly and prestigious: a woman’s weapon and a fashionable accessory. Sharp and deadly, and with the right precision, it was just as lethal as a dagger.

She gripped the gift in her hands, recalling her mother’s sorrowful gaze before she left. She must have known, and this box was her way of helping her only daughter.

Her fingers danced over the gift. The hairpins were meant to be Perim's gift. Her brother had always admired their mother's hairpins. She could recall the memory of her brother safely secured on their mother's lap, the hairpins pulling her blonde locks back as rubies glistened upon the rare and sturdy metals of the lethal accessory. Within their estate and wealth, their father would leave Perim with nothing while their mother gifted him with everything. Her heart clenched at her brother's lost inheritance, the only thing he would receive from this family.

But his lost gift would be her salvation.

Iduna pulled up her neck gaiter. The thin Scout uniform concealed beneath her clothes had remained hidden. The black material clung to her skin with many hidden folds that could conceal any weapon. Though she did not have her flight suit, she could not see how she could use it within the tight corridors. The mask, a last defense to hide her individuality, marked her as a Scout. With narrowed eyes, she surveyed the door. The door could be tampered with now that she had her mother's gift.

As the fields darkened and the sunlight streaming through her window faded, Iduna readied herself for nightfall. Her father would have guards stationed around the grounds. Slipping out would not be easy, but the night would add extra protection.

She paced the room, stretched her legs, and felt her limber muscles tremble with anticipation. But this was not another kill, this was a matter of flight. Slipping away would be preferable, but she knew her father. She would have to kill if she came across anyone.

She listened outside the door, still and silent. She had heard the shuffle of two, possibly three, guards outside. If there were three outside the door, she wondered if there was another waiting in the rafters. If that was the case, then her father was employing his own students to

watch her. As the time passed, she studied the sturdy material of her mother's hairpins, measuring the lock of the door and the size of the pins.

Crouching low near the knob, she stilled her hands. Her mindset focused on the theory that she was dealing with her fellow assassins from the basement. If that was the case, then any loud tampering with the lock would alert them to her presence. She had to be swift, fast, and secure.

She released a trembling, deep breath and slid her mother's hair pins into the lock. Forming the proper angles took adjustment as her mother's pins would not bend, but she had worked with stiff objects before in situations such as this. She could feel the tension of the pick press against the lock. It took a second longer than she would have liked to move the pins and and down before the lock clicked out of place.

She leapt from her crouched position and kicked the door down before falling to roll past the first guard. He leapt up; she aimed for his throat with the hairpins before she turned to face the second one. He was larger and did not hesitate to draw a weapon. Iduna snatched up the first weapon she could grab from the dead guard on the ground, a dagger. She flung it at his abdomen, the memory of her father's voice whispering in her ear.

"Never waste a weapon."

She did not stumble at the memory. The second guard could still move despite a dagger in his gut, but he would slow down before eventually dying. Movement from above alerted her to a new presence, and she leapt back. She was right, there had been someone in the rafters.

He was faster, and she was winded. Her back slammed into the wall as he threw her back. Red hot fire burned into her side, and she realized she had been stabbed. But her assailant was closer, and she still had her mother's last hairpin.

The hairpin dug into his right eye. She twisted the weapon, but he did not release her. Iduna kicked out, feeling his grip on her loosen. She fell to the ground and scrambled away despite the blooming pain in her side. Grabbing the dagger from the fallen soldier, she turned and stabbed the last assailant in the back, watching as his body fell.

Breathing heavily, she stumbled against the wall, gritting her teeth as blood seeped from her uniform. She could only afford to grab her mother's hairpins and stumble to the nearest window before slipping out.

The trail of blood would betray her location, but she didn't plan to stay any longer. With her gaze fixed on the stables in the distance, she tightened her coat and moved forward.

Her father's greatest strength was his brutality, and that involved beating every weakness out of her. This included a fear of heights. Now she felt liberated at the edge of a cliff. She was at ease in the shadows as the hungry earth hoped for her fall, waiting to greet her.

She leapt from the window, taking care to remain in the dark. Talome Manor was a heavily fortified mansion, and she knew that no mercy would be shown to her even if she was the master's daughter.

The rooftop remained undisturbed as she speedily made her way across the peak of the mansion. Her skin tightened as the cold penetrated her clothing. Her fingers, already numb from tampering with the lock, stung as she gripped the stone of the roof to leap down. Her feet absorbed the impact as she continued to make her descent downward before she landed on the stiff grass.

The stables were in sight, and with it, her freedom.

She slipped into the stables and lingered long enough to snatch a worn cloth. Using the dagger she stole, she cut it into ribbons and did her best to wrap the wound. The makeshift bandage would have to do until she could properly tend to it.

It was easy to knock out the poor stable boy. She did not pause long enough to consider what his punishment would be in the morning. She could not afford to hesitate.

The silence of the stables was broken by her frantic rush to saddle her father's prized black stallion. She mounted her father's horse and galloped through the gates without a backwards glance. If all went well, she would be on the train before her father could send reinforcements after her.

CHAPTER 2

Even the harshest winters in her father's halls could not compare to the cold wind atop Sapphire Peak. She hadn't felt such a stiff chill in her three years of service in the Scouts.

Iduna gripped her ax, shifting her weight before moving upward. For a moment, she hung in the air, weightless, until her ax dug into the side of the mountain. Planting her feet firmly, she surveyed her new surroundings.

The land below her stretched endlessly in a sea of green and blue. In the distance, if she squinted, she could make out the form of a small village.

Turning away from the brief moment of distraction, Iduna surveyed the side of the mountain. There were many caves and crevices for weary travelers to rest within. Rangers had even taken to exploring the deep caves to map their depths. The shelter from which the caves offered also provided a safe haven for trolls waiting out the sun.

Her gloved fingers brushed against loose rock, the fibers chipping away, yet there was no sight of black onyx, the sign of trolls digging further into the mountainside.

"Anything?"

Iduna frowned at her companion's question, scanning once more for abnormalities.

"Nothing."

Dela swung forward. Despite the mask covering the lower half of her face, her expressive brown eyes betrayed her frustration. "Then they must have gone underground."

"Possibly," Iduna conceded. She lowered herself down from her perch. Checking her harness for security, she leaned back. "Trolls only burrow in mountains to set up residence. This mountain has been empty for some time. The Rangers would have alerted us."

"Is it possible that they just moved on?"

Iduna hesitated, her frown deepening beneath her mask. She knew the High Council within the cities believed that the conflict with the trolls was resolved with the newly formed treaty with the Fea. A treaty signified, in their eyes, an end to the forefront issue. An empty mountain to the dukes and lords would signify progress as the enemy has abandoned their posts. For a Scout, an empty mountain was worrisome. There was only one other method trolls utilized to conceal their movements, and that was underground.

“What did the ground troops have to report?” Iduna asked.

Dela’s voice was grim. “The ground is tumultuous.”

Sinkholes. She would rather face a troll atop the perilous mountain than the darkened caverns of the earth below.

“Red smoke!” The warning cry of a fellow Scout above had everyone stiffen. “Red smoke from OutRock!”

Iduna’s gaze swiveled to the village in the distance. Like the hungry flames of a high tower, red and black smoke crawled up to the sky.

Below her, Dela released the locks on her ropes and swung below. Iduna unhooked herself from the ledge and kicked off the side of the mountain. Arching her body to aim where she fell, she watched as the trees of the valley rapidly approached her.

Tugging on her flight suit, the leather of her wings caught the wind as she soared above her fellow Scouts. Landing near her horse, she quickly mounted. Dela was quick to join her a mere moment later.

“Ride to OutRock!” The captain’s cry tore through the tense air, and Iduna spurred her ride forward.

Even after serving in the Scouts for three years, Iduna could never overcome the nervousness swelling from within her at the sound of thunder. Iduna's grip on the reins of her steed tightened, and she pulled firmly to follow the formation. The quaking of the earth was not a result of the horses running. It had been years since she had escaped her father's captivity, but the nervousness she felt that night paled in comparison to what she faced now.

The silence of the night was instantly shattered by the piercing scream of volley fire. Red and orange light cast shadows upon the faces of solemn soldiers determinedly riding ahead. At the moment, the forest thundered with the roar of hundreds of hooves.

"Spread out now!" Jerald ordered, his voice carrying over the distance. "Scouts to the front!"

Iduna followed her captain's orders, approaching the field that bordered the small town of OutRock. She had never visited, only heard that they were well known for their fleece. It was supposed to be a thriving town with towering spires from the church and a crystal blue lake. Everyone could see the spires for miles.

But now there were no spires to be seen. All that remained was an overturned wall and a large gaping hole in the earth where the town once stood.

Iduna leapt from her horse, drawing her blade as she landed and approached the overturned structure of the wall. She could feel the silent presence of her companions following suit, their footsteps just as silent. Beside her, Iduna knew that Dela was straining to hear for any source of life, perhaps a survivor screaming or weeping. Iduna did not bother. The silence was a stiff condemnation. The entire valley was gone.

Fields of untouched corn swayed in the breeze as a rising cry from the lake drew her attention. Iduna saw boats in the distance desperately making their way to the destruction. Her face set into a grim line. The agony and fear of the fishermen coupled with the flimsy hope for survival rose in the air, but she knew that there was no hope for the town's residents.

The town had been swallowed whole by the earth.

"Damn trolls," Jerald swore, sheathing his sword. Even he had come to the same conclusion. There would be no rescue for the people of OutRock.

"Captain?" Dela ventured. Bright green eyes shone with worry and unshed panic.

"We regroup with the commander," Jerald ordered, voice grim. "The sun's coming up. The trolls would have been long gone."

Iduna remained still, eyes searching the overturned earth where it crumbled into the hole. Portions of the wall that served as protection for the town remained, albeit crumbling into the gaping mouth of the earth. She could just imagine the fear and terror of the residents as the earth split around their town before they sank into the troll's domain. She closed her eyes at the thought, knowing that any survivors would suffer a prolonged and brutal death.

"Should we head down there?" Iduna questioned. It was not uncommon for Scouts to venture into the destruction the trolls created on the earth's surface. Those expeditions usually yielded a handful of survivors.

But the captain shook his head. "Too deep, and it is almost daybreak. The trolls would not attempt such an attack so close to dawn. This was done hours before we got here. By the time we get there, we'd have lost more men and saved no one."

The crumbling of the rocks was Iduna's only warning that something was amiss. A large shadow burst forward. She brought up her sword to slice through the incoming fist of a snarling

troll. Warm blood sprayed on her face. Her arm quivered from the effort it took to cut through the thick flesh.

Even crouched down, the troll still towered over her.

All around her, the boulders of the fallen wall began to shift. Heavy bulks began to charge up the ditch of the remaining wall. Iduna's eyes widened as the trolls emerged. Why would trolls be so close to the surface when dawn wasn't even an hour away?

She abandoned her sword, still stuck in the troll's arm. Her flight suit would be of no use, but she could use the momentum from the air-jets within her boots to propel her up. She felt the sharp air push at her feet and launch her a few meters away from her attacker. She used that moment to rejoin her companions and put some distance between herself and the trolls.

"Incoming spikes!"

Iduna's eyes widened at the warning, and she ran. They were using the acid spikes this close? Depending on the explosion and the amount of acid, the weapons could eat away at anything that was downhill, including the ditch she was currently climbing over. At this rate, the acid would hit her before she could climb to safety.

Iduna lowered her mask and whistled, hoping that her horse would hear the call and come. Any chance at riding away at full speed would help.

"Iduna!" She saw Dela's dark form reaching for her from the ledge.

Iduna activated the air-jets on her boots. The extra few feet of air had her clasping Dela's hand, pulling her up to the surface. As soon as her feet touched the surface, she ran beside Dela, the horses reacting to their calls. Iduna grabbed and leapt onto the horse's saddle right as the spikes were launched.

The resulting explosion of the heat warmed her back. The scent of burning acid penetrated through her mask. The terrified screams of the horses were only drowned out by the enraged screams of the trolls as the acid burned through their tough skin.

Iduna breathed in, attempting to calm down the racing of her heart as her muscles quivered in anticipation of the resulting attack.

“Commander!”

Iduna looked up in the direction of Jerald’s shout. Through the haze of the fading dark, the forms of several horsemen galloped forward. At the front, Commander Kaiser surveyed the wreckage. “Captain,” he ordered. “Status report.”

“Yes sir!” Jerald straightened. “A group of trolls were attempting to rise to the surface. The volley of explosives drew them off. If the acid spikes didn’t kill them, the sun’ll surely drive them back underground.”

“Trolls do not linger near the surface this close to sunrise,” Kaiser stated. “They’re scouting for something.” Iduna watched as he dismounted from his horse, the ash and dirt springing from the impact. She stiffened at the movement, eyes tracing the area for any lingering threat.

She was not the only one who was uneasy. “Commander!” Jerald protested. “The surface may be unstable-”

“I have no intention of journeying too close to the site.” Kaiser kicked at the meaty remains of a troll’s severed and charred arm. “These are Scouting Trolls, not the typical miners we’d usually see near the wreckage of a town. They’re larger and actually armed.”

Jerald blinked and after some hesitation, dismounted to join Kaiser’s side. Atop her horse, Iduna stiffened, her hand lingering at her remaining weapons. Despite the rising sun

behind the hills in the distance, the near fatal occurrence with the trolls left her tense. By the rustling of cloaks and the impatient stamping of the horses, the feeling was shared among her companions.

“There is nothing to be found here,” Kaiser declared. “Maintain course, move out and patrol the forests!”

The stampede of horses was his answer, yet Iduna lingered for a moment with her squad. Beside her, Dela’s head was bowed, lips soundlessly moving in a mournful prayer. It was common to see new recruits so shaken by the destruction and senseless loss of innocent lives, but Dela had yet to forgo her frequent prayers for the victims they came across.

“Talome.” The commander’s voice stirred her from her musings, and she straightened within her saddle.

“Commander.”

Kaiser pulled up beside her, and she recognized her sword in his hands. He held it out to her with a chastising gaze. “This was among the fallen trolls. Take care not to lose it. We will need all the weapons at our disposal.”

She accepted the blade gratefully when the full context of his words hit her. “Sir?”

“The King’s Court may preach of the upcoming peace within our lands,” he said, “but we on the frontlines know that the terror of battle is far from over. Remain vigilant.” He spurred his horse forward to join the front of the group. He was soon lost among the sea of blue and gray cloaks of determined scouts. Iduna sheathed her blade, a newfound alertness settling upon her shoulders. Without a second glance back at the ruined town, she spurred her horse onward.

Dela was quick to ride alongside her, expression no longer solemn. “My family speaks of peace with excitement. I fear that my presence in uniform has become a drag on our gatherings.”

Iduna flicked the reins and scanned the deceptively innocent trees. “You could never be a drag, Dela.”

Dela’s smile was soft, gray eyes twinkling with an innocence rarely found on the field. Her short, childlike brown hair did little to mature her features, concealing the truth behind her experience.

“It will all change when you put the uniform aside for the last time,” Iduna continued. “A boring fate, really.”

“Not true,” Dela beamed. “I can finally marry. I’m surprised Eralt has waited for so long.”

“How could he lose patience when he’s engaged to you?” Iduna’s gaze softened, a teasing glint in her eyes. “Many hearts were broken when they heard of the engagement. We all suffered under Reese’s laments for days.”

Dela smiled, cheeks pink as she looked away. “And you? What would you do when you no longer need to wear the uniform?”

Iduna focused ahead, the commander’s words echoing in her mind. She readily believed Kaiser, and if his words were to be true, then this conflict was far from over and she would be needed in the uniform. Even Dela, despite plans for marriage, was apprehensive with the growing conflict. In Iduna’s eyes, there was no need to think about a life outside of the Scouts yet with the trolls making such bold attacks.

Truthfully, she wouldn’t know what to do when they were finally granted peace. Her brother had made it clear that she was no longer welcome in his presence, and she couldn’t fathom any insane reason why she would return to her father. For her, peace was never a luxury. The walls within her home were an untenable battlefield, one she had yet to conquer.

“I’ll pay my respects to my mother,” she finally said.

Dela fell silent, but Iduna did not miss the glance cast her way. She knew how cold-hearted it might appear. What daughter ignored her mother’s wishes and chose the battlefield over a sickly relative?

She had known that her mother's sickness had worsened since the winter. She had always been frail and prone to lucid fevers. Though her eyes had not gazed upon her mother’s form since the night she had left, her brother’s letters had been detailed enough. With each passing month, the pages containing her brother’s words had shortened until they contained brief updates.

The last letter her brother had sent her was bitter, filled with reassurances that their mother was finally free and laid to rest with her true family, as she should be. Iduna held no resentment toward her brother for rightfully shunning her. But not even the death of her own mother could influence her decision to return back to her father.

“She was laid to rest in a robe of red and white sparrows, a comforting, vibrant color. Father had insisted.”

Red sparrows. The one bird her mother despised.

CHAPTER 3

The camp setup was more for combat than for personal comfort with wagons of various explosives and weapons lined up. There were a few Scouts rolling out their sleeping bags, content to steal as much comfort as possible. Night time was when they had to be the most vigilant because of the trolls. A few hours of daybreak would be a chance for them to rest.

Iduna's fingers brushed against the hilt of the small sword at her side. Despite the comforting weight of her armor and weapons, she still felt disarmed in the middle of the woods. The open plains were a perfect hunting ground for trolls, but the woods concealed many other terrifying beasts.

But there was no threat, not just yet. With one last glance at the camp, Iduna discarded her cloak. The leather straps that kept the flight suit strapped to her body came undone as she skillfully undid the straps. Her back felt instantly lighter, yet she still felt exposed. She leaned against a log and began to undo her boots to check the air in the containers.

"Iduna."

Iduna glanced over to see Dela carefully make her way towards her. Despite the fading light, she could see how Dela's eyes shifted around as she clutched her bag close to her chest. Unlike Iduna, she still wore her suit and weapons. After a moment of hesitation, Dela eagerly opened her bag.

"Want to share a late-night snack with me?"

Iduna peeked into the bag and noticed the crumbled bags of small cakes. Beneath her mask, she grinned at the eagerness her companion displayed. "What is it?"

Taking that to mean her compliance, Dela sidled closer, voice hushed in a conspiratorial whisper. "Eralt packed these for me. They're raspberry buns."

“And they managed to survive a two-day trip?”

“Well, they might be a little dry, but the captain was always around and I couldn’t take these out without him confiscating them.” She held out a bag, smiling with such rare openness. Iduna pulled down her mask and accepted the offered treat. The buns were slightly crumbled, but she could smell the sugary scent of the crust and the tangy sourness of the berries.

“When did he manage to sneak these to you?”

Dela shrugged as she bit into her own treat. “When we were at the last station.”

Iduna hesitated. The last post in the city had been a pleasant stay for many scouts. Many were able to visit family members and sleep in a warm bed. It was a pleasing trip, one that offered an unattainable hope for a normal life free from bloodshed.

Biting into the sugary bun, she tasted the first bitterness of the berries before the sweetness of the crust masked the flavor. Still, the bitter taste lingered on her tongue, souring any hope of a normal life she dared to touch.

She didn’t sleep well, so Iduna easily woke to the desperate sharp ring of the warning bell before it was desperately cut off. Iduna leapt upward and pulled up her mask as she reached for her daggers right as the chilling howl shattered through the night.

Chimera. The trolls had sent their pets after them.

Her flight suit was within reach, but it would take her a good minute to put it on. Instead, Iduna grabbed for her bow with the acid arrows before she saw the first chimera burst through the trees. Its twisted lion head hungrily pursued anything that moved as the reptilian tail lashed

out like a whip. Its matted mane was already coated in blood. Blackened claws tore at the ground. She released the arrow, the face of the chimera bursting into flames.

She used the tree as a shield for her back. She pulled back the bow while surveying the chaos before her. The once quiet campsite was now ablaze. Scouts impulsively grabbed their weapons. Screams mingled with the hungry howls. Chimera shrieked as they tore through flesh regardless. The once dark campsite was now alight with red and orange flames. The tree before her shuddered, and Iduna leapt sideways before it splintered. A smiling chimera howled when it saw its first prey.

Iduna released another acid arrow, but the chimera saw and dodged it. The tree behind it exploded as a result of when the arrow hit.

“Iduna!”

She ducked at the call as a flaming arrow flew over her head and hit the chimera. The chimera howled in pain as the heat blazed at her back from the resulting, successful explosion. Iduna glanced behind her where the shout had resonated.

Dela’s face was marred with sweat, blood, and soot, and the precious moment she took to fire at one chimera cost her. Iduna saw the lurking chimera come upon Dela. Seeing the fear in Iduna’s gaze, Dela turned and was quick to draw her sword, catching the chimera in its jaws before the weight of its body dragged her to the ground and away from Iduna’s sight.

“Fall back!” Jerald screamed. “Fall back! Make for Westerion!”

Iduna scrambled, heeding Jerald’s order but also focusing on where Dela once stood. There were now two chimeras encroaching where Dela had fallen. She struggled beneath the weight of the fallen body, her face bloody and arm bent at an unnatural angle.

Iduna lit another arrow and aimed for the chimera lunging for Dela's throat. The beast erupted in flame. A rancid smell reached Iduna's senses. It was enough to make her gag. The remaining chimera backed away with a howl as the fire from its companion caught on its flammable fur. Iduna ran to Dela and dragged her from beneath the corpse.

Iduna looked up to see Jerald surrounded by the remaining chimera. She met her captain's expression before he lit the last canisters of the acid spikes. Her eyes widened. She hoisted Dela over her shoulders and hid behind a boulder as the chimeras burned. The crisp burn of the flames brushed against her back as the clearing was consumed as a result of the destruction.

CHAPTER 4

The heat scorched her back. With trembling arms, Iduna propped herself up. Her eyes burned as she blinked through the destruction. She resisted the temptation to pull at her mask as she realized that there was still smoke in the air.

And bodies.

Iduna stumbled to her feet as she looked at the unrecognizable faces of the people she trained and fought beside. Atop the mangled corpses of the chimera were the bloodied remains of her people.

Any search for survivors would be futile. From the destructive fire consuming the encampment, anyone she could pull from the wreckage would not survive the trip to the nearest village.

Still, Iduna's foot scuffed against the soiled dirt, desperate for the sight of life. The horses had either fled or were consumed. The dead of the chimera smoldered as they were devoured by the flames. She was used to the sight of dead bodies, even accustomed to leaving bodies behind after her father's orders. But now, this ambush, it was a deliberate attempt on the Scouts.

Breathing heavily, she focused on the horizon where the sun had painted the sky in vibrant, hopeful colors of purple and blue. The chimera sent here were mere scouts. The scent of blood and smoke would attract more enemies. She could only hope that the smoke would alert the other scouting parties.

Through the smoke, she made her way to where she last saw Dela fall. With narrowed eyes, she approached where Dela lay. But even then, she wondered if the young girl was still alive.

Iduna found Dela beneath the burned corpse of a fallen chimera. Her body was so still that she nearly mistook her for dead. She grabbed Dela's shoulders and pulled her from the beast, amazed that she had not been completely crushed.

There was so much blood, yet Iduna focused on rapidly tearing at her cloak to stop the bleeding and buy herself some time. The horses were gone, so she would have to make it on foot. Speed was of the essence. The smell of burning bodies and spilled blood would attract enemies.

Dela would be of no help. Even if she was conscious, she would be unable to move with the wounds all over her body. But she was breathing. And that was enough.

Iduna grit her teeth as she hoisted Dela over her shoulders and staggered upward. Legs burning, she breathed in and out even as her body ached for respite.

She fixed her gaze forward. She internally realized how close to the town she would be. The people were in danger. If the chimera were hunting them, the town would surely be an ample target for the beasts. She would have to warn them.

The thick foliage of the woods grabbed at her ankles. Sharp pine branches stabbed at her exposed face. Her breath was stolen from her lungs in a precious moment of weakness as Dela's body nearly slipped. Tightening her shoulders, she hoisted Dela up once more.

Bursting from the clearing, Iduna broke out into a sprint. Desperation clawed at her throat as she detected the faint tremors of the earth beneath her feet. She knew better than to cling on to false hope that the tremors were from her own body and fatigue. The trolls had unleashed their chimera on the land. She was being hunted.

But she had Dela to protect. And she had to warn the people of the town.

Iduna's lungs burned as her body screamed from the unchecked wounds. On more than one occasion, she felt Dela's body slip from her grasp. She couldn't break a stride. Couldn't

afford it. If she lost traction, she would never gain it back, and the pursuing chimera would be upon her, and she would doom Dela and the town.

Gritting her teeth, she summoned another burst of speed and strength. The swaying emerald fields reminded her of happier times when she was with her brother, racing across the meadows. She had always been the fastest, even in the Scouts. The back of her thighs burned from the blistered welts she sustained from her father's training because she had not been fast enough to outrun his steel whip. Those injuries had spurred her on until she had wings on her ankles.

Now she hoped that those wings were not plucked and that she could be permitted to fly across the lands once more.

But Dela's breathing grew ever more labored. Iduna wondered if she was carrying a corpse.

The rumbling beneath the ground increased. Iduna glanced back, seeing the unnatural sway of the trees in the far distance, a movement no natural wind could produce.

Her toe slammed across a rock. Her ankle twisted as she fell. Dela slipped from her shoulders. The ground was harsh and unforgiving, and Iduna's body screamed and heaved as if many boulders had crashed upon her. She couldn't even bring herself to rise up.

Iduna choked back a cry as she crawled forward, even as her body begged for rest. The tremors tore at her form, and she could taste blood from her tongue as the desperation mounted.

Breathing in deeply, she propped herself up and focused her energy on her upper body before transferring it back to her legs. She staggered as she collapsed beside Dela. Grabbing Dela's shoulders, she hoisted her up once more. Fixing her gaze ahead, she could see the fading town of Westerion, and her heart dropped. The chimera would destroy the small town, and the

inhabitants were unaware of the upcoming attack. The walls were not meant to withstand an attack, for the townsfolk were mere fishermen and merchants, armed with meager longbows and axes. With a town out in the open, they were defenseless.

They would be slaughtered.

Iduna swallowed her despair. Dela's body suddenly grew very heavy on her back. She picked up the hungry shrieks of the chimera before the resounding roar of its leader silenced them in the distance.

Her fingers brushed against the dagger on her hip. Disgust crawled at her gut as the horrible thought echoed in her mind. Her hand fell at her side, and she repositioned Dela on her shoulders and pressed on.

The ground continued to tremble as the chimera increased their pace. They had caught the scent of her blood, and now the hunt had doubled. As their speed accelerated, her strength continued to wane. The town was no closer.

Wasting precious moments hoping for a miracle, she wished the wind would change direction and the chimera would lose their scent. She prayed that any lingering Scouts would arrive on horseback.

But there was no such miracle.

Tears pricked at the corner of Iduna's vision, yet they did not fall. She stumbled to a stop, Dela's body falling to the ground. Withdrawing the dagger, she hovered over Dela's body. Words locked in her lips. She would not, could not, ask for forgiveness. She knew how to make a death swift, how to draw it out, how to inflict pain, and how to make her victims scream. She had never once killed as an act of mercy before.

The chimera would ignore the corpse. She could make Dela's passing quick and painless, unlike the chimera who would mercilessly tear her apart and feast on her living body.

The dagger slid across Dela's pale throat. Quick, clean, and over. Deep red blood, almost black, splattered on the ground and dripped from her dagger. Dela had not even shuddered as the breath in her lungs was cut off.

She wrestled with the despair, suffocating it before the emotion could be given life, Iduna slid the bloodied dagger back into its sheath.

Iduna did not even glance back at the body she was leaving behind. Her feet were lighter. The weight across her shoulders was now gone and she was cut free. She ran, sights set on the town.

Her body still ached and trembled from the exertion, but she pushed on. The people of the town needed to be warned. She would not see another town succumb to the attack of the trolls.

The chimera did not let up. Their roars transformed into screams. Panic shot through her as she realized how close they were. But she pressed on. The gods be damned if the chimera caught her and the people in the city suffer and her actions damn her to the hells.

Running uphill was exhausting. The guards from atop the towers saw her, their crossbows ready. She held her hands up with a scream. "Chimera!" Her voice, hoarse and parched from thirst, cracked and raked against her throat. She swallowed, coughed, screaming. "Chimera incoming!"

The gates were before her. Moving to the merchant's entrance would take her too long, but it took too long for them to open the gates. She burst through and fell into the midst of the wary guards and soldiers standing by.

“Chimera!” she gasped. “An entire pack!” Her uniform may be torn and bloody, but the stained colors remained and the rank upon her arm signified her purpose.

Iduna’s gaze searched for the signature of rank. She found it in the captain pushing through the crowd of wary soldiers. His gaze lingered on her crest before his eyes hardened, cutting off the sudden dread.

“Ready your stations!” he shouted. “Set the signal to warn our neighboring countrymen!”

Armor clashed together. Merchants nearby shouted with fear. Weapons were mounted on the stone wall. Chains groaned as bridges were drawn up and gates were sealed shut.

The hurried movements of soldiers blurred around her. Iduna leaned against the stone wall and felt her wounds finally catch up to her, the pain reminding her of the blood she had lost. She stumbled forward as one nearby soldier tried to help her to her feet. She allowed them to guide her indoors where she sat on a cot.

“I’ll do it,” she said stiffly, taking the proffered bandages and remedies. She had grown accustomed to treating her own wounds when she was under the employment of her father. However, her time in the Scouts had allowed her to open up to the idea of allowing her comrades to treat her wounds. But she would not let a stranger anywhere near her body.

She wondered how this small city would hold out. Chimera could assault the walls and tear it down. Their hard hides would make it difficult for any farmer’s arrow to pierce its skin. If the trolls traveled underground, they would face the same fate as the last town. They had maybe an hour to get ready before they were under siege.

She worked deftly and bit on a cloth as she attempted to stitch herself up. One soldier entered the room, the open door inviting in the scurry of noises of soldiers preparing for the assault.

He raised an eyebrow when he saw her strap on her weapons. “You are going to fight?”

“The chimera will tear this wall apart,” she replied with a wince as she shrugged on her cloak. Her skin stretched and stung, her newly stitched flesh spasming from the movement. “We will need every able-bodied soldier.”

“You can barely sit up,” the soldier protested. “You would be no better than bait!”

“We’re all bait.” She pulled up her mask, eyes narrowed. She brushed past him and stepped into the halls. The layout of the walls were similar to the ones she trained in, and she knew the location of the gates. Feeling the comforting weight of the daggers at her thighs and the sword at her hip, she tensed and waited for the upcoming onslaught.

“Hold fast!” Bow strings were pulled and swords drawn at the captain’s shout. Tense soldiers gripped the spears. Explosives were mounted on the walls. Iduna’s hand brushed against her sword as she stood before the gate. The chimera would target the wall with the larger ones guarding the smaller beasts. While the large ones would be shot down, they would provide a perfect shield for the others to tear through the wall and gates.

But there was no challenging cry. No roar and the earth had ceased to tremble. Iduna tensed, exhausted muscles quivering.

“Scouts up ahead! Open the gates!”

Iduna’s eyes widened at the cry of the captain.

Disbelief overwhelmed her. Had reinforcements come? She waited with the others in the crowd as the gates opened and an entire squad swarmed in. Kaiser was at the front, his weary face stained with dried blood.

She waited with the others and watched as he dismounted from his horse. Pushing through the crowd, she stood before him. Recognition shone in his gaze as his eyes swept over her form.

“Commander,” she started. “The chimera-”

“Have been taken care of,” he interrupted, voice stiff with gruff emotion. “Are there others with you?”

She stiffened. “No.”

“Then you are the only survivor of your squad.” He handed his reins to a waiting stable boy, and she moved away, face hooded to conceal what his words meant to her.

Yes, she was the only survivor.

But she shouldn’t have been.

CHAPTER 5

The scurrying of many soldiers milling about drowned out her senses. She knew that her lack of awareness could prove costly, but she could only focus on the dagger in her hand. Iduna remained seated, eyes focused on her boots. The dust had caked the brown leather to a dirty brown, worn and wet from dried blood.

A familiar presence entered the room. She sheathed the dagger and rose up to salute Kaiser. His dark hooded eyes focused on her, the tiredness displayed clearly on his face.

The small windowless room already felt constricting. Iduna positioned her body by the door out of habit where she could pick up the footfalls of soldiers passing by. The firelight of the torches provided a warm glow. Despite the early morning, Iduna felt a bone-weary fatigue cling to her figure.

Kaiser dragged a chair over before sitting down. Iduna followed suit, still near the door, hand pressed to her side at the new flare of pain.

“The chimera that attacked our squads were vanquished.”

Iduna blinked. “So there were more.”

“An ambush,” Kaiser responded. “We were targeted.”

“How did you survive?”

“The explosives from Jerald’s last assault alerted us. We were given additional time to prepare.”

Iduna looked down as the image of Jerald’s helpless expression, morphing into one of pain as the fire consumed him, wafted through her memory. She closed her eyes, the image forever trapped in her mind.

“The Scouts are to be disbanded.”

She looked up, startled. “What?”

Kaiser stared out the window where the troops were running below. “This was to be our last run.”

“Surely that must change because of the recent attacks. The people around the borders are not safe!”

“The treaty with the Fea may resolve that issue. At least, that is what those bastards in the palace hope. They don’t see the true nature of this conflict or what it is doing to our people.”

“But the king must know that a treaty with the Fea will not last.” She rose up despite the pain. “With the Scouts disbanded and the trolls still below, our people will be defenseless. The calvary are not trained to defend themselves against this attack!”

“Stop reminding me of things I already know.” Kaiser’s voice was sharp, back rigid and shoulders taught. Iduna stopped and saw the underlying pressure beneath his gaze.

She straightened. “I apologize for speaking out of turn.”

Kaiser glanced at her, the harshness in his gaze abetting somewhat. “I am to be at the capitol. King’s orders. It’s unusual, but an order is an order.” He stepped away from the window. “Perhaps it will shed some light on the situation.” He scoffed. “Or they want my head.”

Ice pooled in her veins. She had known that the Scouts were to be disbanded. She had assumed she had more time. Already, she was thinking about where to go. Anywhere but back to her father.

“Why tell me this now?”

“I know what you are running from,” he said. “You and a select few have nowhere to go. You at least deserve to know what is happening.”

Iduna could only nod. “I appreciate it sir.” This bought her, what, two days? Two days to prepare. Two days to formulate a plan.

Kaiser stepped forward. “I will be in the capital in a few days. Let's meet up to discuss our next move.”

Iduna nodded, though his words gave her no comfort. There was nothing a former disgraced captain could do for her. Her father would destroy him. However, she considered the possibility that her father would want nothing more to do with her since she last escaped from him.

She barely registered Kaiser leaving her presence. She sat down, hands clenched together as she considered her options.

She leaned against the wall and sighed as she flexed her fist. She could still feel the stain of Dela's blood on her hands. They would find her body in a few days. If they searched, they might even notice that she had not perished at the hands of the chimera. What would that mean for her?

She dug her nails into the palm of her hand. When Dela was found, her body would be prepared for burial and delivered to her family. They would question Kaiser about Dela, and they would find out that she had been with Dela because of her survival of the attack.

She could run. But run where? Her brother did not want her. She would die before she'd return to her father. She could disappear, vanish into the mountains and make use of the skills she had acquired over the years.

Hopelessness danced before her, for hope was elusive and always out of reach.

She closed her eyes, breathing in to steady her heart. She could hear the sound of many footsteps approaching the door, and she opened her eyes.

She looked up, not recognizing the uniforms. She straightened and winced at the stitches that pulled at her skin.

“Iduna Talome?” the first spoke. But it was the second she was watching, how his hand drifted to his hip. Their eyes met, and she saw the grim realization in his gaze harden just as his hand enclosed around his hidden weapon.

They were not kingsmen or Scouts.

She leapt forward, daggers drawn. But the first guard was ready and intercepted her. Fists dug into her side, and she felt the stitches reopen.

She lashed out with her dagger, staining the floor red. The guard responsible for opening her wounds fell, choking on his own blood. Iduna twisted and threw her dagger at the second guard. He fell, only for many others to rush in. The commotion would have attracted attention but Iduna knew of these methods. The section of the building would have been vacated so that no unwanted visitors would come.

A body fell. Her dagger was lost. Blood dripped from her side as she was restrained, pinned to the ground. The sweet scent of poison flooded her senses, and she bit her tongue to prevent herself from inhaling it. But the man on top of her punched her sides, and the air within her was stolen.

Her eyesight faded.

“...she killed Marco.”

Iduna stirred from her restraints, flexing her wrists around the steel. Steel, so not rope. They were under official representation. She steadied her breathing and felt the bumpy

movement of the cart. She caught pieces of information, the flow of the conversation of the four men in the cart.

“...with the execution.”

“-orders for...”

She focused on the accent. The two voices from the front had a resounding dialect of upper living. The third spoke in a clipped tone, no doubt trying to match the others, but the dialect betrayed his lower status.

“She’s awake.”

Iduna strained her arms at the warning, knowing that she would have to act quickly. There was a fourth? How could he hide his presence from her? Even drugged, she should have noticed it.

But her efforts were futile, and the sweet scent of the poison flooded her systems before she lost consciousness.

The damp earth smell wafted through her nose.

Iduna stirred within the cells and felt the chains dig into her wrists. The pain across her body was the first thing she registered. Lightning stabs of pain flared across her abdomen as she gasped for breath. Breathing in and out, she opened her eyes and blinked through the pain. Steel bars met her vision first, and as her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, she registered the setting of the cell.

She recognized this place. It was located in the lower levels of the castle. Hidden from view, those employed by the king and his court could work in the shadows of the law without the

scrutiny of the public. She would often accompany her father to interrogate prisoners and criminals against the crown. It was how she learned.

And now she was trapped in the very same cell where she would skin her prey.

She felt the pull of the chains and realized that the folds of her clothing had not been checked. She frowned as she gathered her thoughts. If that were the case, then someone wanted her to escape. If so, then the men who came for her were either paid to put up the front of escape or were unaware.

She recognized those men. Or, she recognized their skill and who they learned it from. They were employed by her father. Was this his ploy of getting her to join him?

After a moment's hesitation, she nimbly searched the cuffs of her sleeves. Her fingers felt the familiar cold pinch of steel and she withdrew the pins. She made quick work of the cuffs, the restraints falling from her wrists. Iduna braced her back against the wall even as her wounds ached from the pain. Standing up, she rubbed at her wrist and watched the cell doors, but no one came.

Her cell window was outside the courtyard. She knew where that was. It led to the execution block. By the sound of the people outside, there must be an execution. Prisoners kept in cells like her were awaiting execution where they could witness the death of their fellow prisoners.

Was she here for Dela's death? Was that her punishment? But no, that didn't make sense. It was too soon. She would have been apprehended by the royal guard. They would have no need for secrecy. She would have been presented before the public, ridiculed, her family name disgraced because of her actions.

The chains clattered to the ground as she stood up. Her wounds had been dressed again, and she grimaced as she lifted up her shirt to see the stitches. Her father's work, the red thread pulling at her skin.

The noise outside her cell continued to grow. She glanced up at the bars of the window. A rowdy crowd, filled with harsh jeers and taunts, only grated on her ears. Curious, she leapt up and grabbed the bars. Pulling herself up, she could see the gathered people. But on the platform, she saw the young man dragged forward. Beaten and bloody, she hardly recognized the person. Until he opened his eyes and the utter, familiar look of despair echoed within her mind.

Her hands slipped. She fell. But she still saw the image of the condemned prisoner.

She had not seen her brother in months. In such a short time, he had grown from boy to a man, shackled in chains, bloodied and beaten.

"Perim?" she whispered, shocked.

The roar of the crowd increased, as if the sight of her brother was the source of their fury, screaming for his blood. Calls for chains, for pain, for death, and the ring of the bells, shattered the stadium.

But the crowd quieted as the condemnation struck. "Perim Talome, state your status and condemnation. How do you plead for your crimes?"

Iduna stilled as her brother's haggard yet firm voice echoed within the courtyard. "I am Perim Talome, Duke of Isenhound and heir to Lord Razvon's legacy."

The wind pulsed. The bells and crowd fell silent, ready to strike at the following words.

"I stand before you to confess my treachery," her brother's voice wavered. "As the High Lords are my witness, my family conspired against the king. I alone shoulder the burden of their sins, as is my right as duke and heir of the Talomes."

The crowd screamed. Iduna leapt for the bars. “Perim!” This wasn’t right! Her brother wasn’t even of age to be properly tried!

Her brother had been silenced. The bailiff spoke. “As he has confessed to his sins and bore the burden of his family, may there be mercy upon this tainted soul, for no one should carry such a burden alone. As the king has commanded it for your crimes against the kingdom, you have been stripped of all your titles and duties.”

The roar of the crowd thundered as Iduna hastily scrambled for the cell door. The pins within her sleeves were swift like knives. She did not know what she would do once she reached the courtyard, but she had to get to her brother.

The cell door swung open. She ran, the voice of the crowd like a flood chasing after her heels. She knew the layout, knew where to go. The halls were unusually empty. Her first warning that something was wrong. She did not care.

“-dealt sixty lashes...”

Finally, she ran into one guard. She disabled him.

“-beheaded,” the judge declared.

The courtyard doors swung open. She looked over at the crowd. The sword was swung. Her brother’s head fell.

The crowd cheered. Iduna ran, but the sunlight didn’t even touch her face before she was pulled back. She spun, dagger lashing out. It cut through the palm of her assailant.

Her father stared down at her, hooded, golden eyes flashing. The courtyard doors slammed shut behind her once more. The sounds of the people in the courtyard were cut off.

“A pity, isn’t it?”

She had not heard his voice in months. Her body reacted as if stung, and she straightened at attention before she realized who she was with. She pulled back, dagger dripping with blood from his wound.

She trembled. “Why?”

Her father stared at her. “Why what?”

“Perim...he...what is-?”

“Iduna,” he soothed. “I cannot help you if you do not use your words. What is wrong?”

“He’s dead!” she shouted. “What happened?”

“Ah, yes,” her father nodded. “What happened is that the king has grown tired of my games. It is as the judge declared. Our family has committed treason for conspiring against the king.”

“Perim didn’t,” she retorted.

“But you know as well as I that when one within the family commits treason, the entire house must be wiped out.” His eyes glittered behind that promise. “And as a Talome, the king’s judgment will fall on you next.”

Her eyes widened. “What did you do?”

He frowned, the picture of genuine hurt in his eyes. She realized that his hands were on her shoulders, his blood staining her shirt.

“Iduna,” he soothed. “I am trying to protect you. If you had answered my letters, this could have been avoided.” He pulled her close, hand in her hair. “But it’s all right. I can still help you.”

She breathed in, just like she had been taught. Her father ran his fingers through her hair. “That’s right my dear,” he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. “Breathe in.”

She pushed him away, eyes burning. “What do you want?”

He smiled. He would not pretend around her. Not when she knew so much of his deceit. “I bought us some time in these halls. We have not talked in so long. We will not be disturbed.”

“Why?” she asked bitterly. “Why not save Perim?”

The shadows stretched out. She had grown accustomed to the shadows following her father and forming at his will. She had even grown accustomed to the bite at her heels. But a year in the field under the sun had revealed to her that shadows were not supposed to move like that.

“Because you left him. I did not think you would care when you abandoned your family for the Scouts. He was unbelievably heartbroken. But, he will serve us better in death,” he said simply. “They will deliver the body for burial.”

“The burial of a traitor,” she retorted. Perim would not be laid to rest with their mother, as should be his right. Instead, he would be given a shallow grave atop the hills where all traitors rested.

“But a burial nevertheless.” He smiled. “It is alright. I did this with your mother before.”

“What?”

“Prepping the body to serve our family.” He held out his hand, and though he had not touched her, she felt the wisp of a cold finger push back her hair. “You look so much like your mother. You will serve me just as well.”

The doors shuddered. Iduna turned back on instinct. The sound of many armored footsteps echoed all around the chambers. She could run through the corridors, but she did not know what her father had planned. She glanced back and was met with an empty hall, her father gone.

The corridors were rapidly filling up. Just as her father had predicted. She had nowhere to go. Just as her brother, she would meet the same fate their father planned out for them.

She hesitated, then kneeled down, waiting for the guards to flood in. She was roughly seized, taken by the guards. She wondered how many of them her father employed.

Thrown into a cell, she did not have to wait long before a guard came for her. Of course it was a guard. Her father would not come to see her. She held out her hands, for she knew she would be taken to see him.

CHAPTER 6

The crowds for the execution must have died down. There was no more shouting or demand for blood. The heralds had ceased speaking, and the bells had fallen silent. Instead, there were murmurs filtering through the bars. Head lowered, Iduna contemplated the status of her home. No doubt, the Talome estate would be seized. By who, well, she had a few names. She couldn't imagine her mother's family laying claim. Her father had no relatives. The king would most likely take back the land and the cursed Fea Forest with it.

Iduna paced the cell, body numb yet mind racing with what had happened. Would father leave her to be executed? If so, what did he hope to gain? Was she a distraction so that he could flee?

But no, that didn't seem right. The clothes he had worn were simple robes, not suitable for travel. If he had intended to flee, he could have done so without visiting her. Did he perhaps have a way to avoid execution? But the public was aware of the crimes the Talome's had committed. Her father would not be allowed to live in the kingdom without a trial.

She grit her teeth. Treason! What treason? She had no prior knowledge of her father's plots. She doubted he had any. Ambitious as he was, he had carved himself so carefully into the trust of the king's court. Treason would undo all of his previous efforts, efforts that nearly killed him and her.

Her eyes narrowed. No, her father would have carefully hidden any evidence of treason. For this to have been found out, he wanted their family condemned.

She knew the law. Any family head found guilty of treason condemned the entire family. It didn't matter if her brother had no knowledge of their father's treachery. He was guilty by blood alone.

But where did that leave her? Sitting alone in a cell, waiting for her father's next orders. Would he too leave her to death just as he had done with her brother?

Her gaze hardened, heart steady yet burning with anger. Anger that, in just one night, she had come across so many unexpected deaths, helplessly following the orders of a man she had longed to escape.

She listened for the footfalls of the new arrivals. Three young women, veiled and simply dressed in white and red garments, entered her cell. Their milky white skin appeared so frail that Iduna knew their necks would be easily snapped. They were followed by five more guards, dark and large, staring into the cell with pensive eyes.

One girl bowed her head. "My lady, please remove your garments."

Iduna's frown tightened. "No."

No expression of surprise or annoyance flickered on the girl's face. Instead, she and her companions approached her as if her words had no effect on them. Iduna stiffened and curled her fist even as she knew her options within this cell were limited.

"My lady, Lord Talome has instructed us."

Iduna's eyes flickered over to the guards. "Very well." She waited. "Leave me with the garments."

"We are to remain with you."

"I will break your necks if you do not leave."

Finally, a flicker of annoyance, perhaps malice, crossed the younger maiden's face. When she raised her head, her eyes were dark and hardened.

It was the older of the three who interjected. "Alright, we will leave you to it."

The garments were placed on the cell floor. She waited for the room to empty and listened to the footfalls. The guards did not tarry far. They remained out of sight yet nearby.

She inspected the robes and felt the heavy material. Soft red and white colors merged together to create intrinsic designs of vines and small sparrows. Iduna observed the marks and noted the inclusion of her father's favorite bird, a harmless sparrow and invader of their home.

The robes were heavy. She wondered if the girls here would have crumbled beneath the weight of the robes. There was nowhere for her to hide her weapons, if she even had any to begin with. Discarding the red slippers, she retained her soiled shirt and pants. She would entertain the pale maidens, but she would not disarm herself by wearing frail slippers.

She was approached by a guard. He held out a silver rope, and her hands were bound. She could still run, slip away. But the kingdom was crawling with soldiers, and her family was already branded as traitors. No, her best bet was to play along with whatever scheme her father had cooked up. He could safely get her out without detection.

She was familiar with the layout of the prisons. So she was not surprised when she was led through many hidden passages. Bright torches lit the way, yet she still took care where she placed her feet. The space grew narrow as they moved forward before emerging from the back entrance of the courtyard wall.

Iduna hesitated when she saw the carriage. It was inconspicuous, the servant of a duke's aide might even ride in it, but it was the destination that gnawed at her stomach.

"They move fast."

It was a soft whisper, but Iduna heard the maiden's quiet comment. She turned, already searching for the source of the maiden's words, and her heart froze.

Her brother's head, pale and lifeless, hung from the walls. The call of a raven's hungry cry broke through the silence as predators ventured forth.

Yes, the king had not wasted time to make an example. But her father's head should have been there instead.

She could not calm her heart. She could not tear her gaze away even as the first raven landed on the wall. She only moved forward when her shoulder was grabbed, all but throwing her forward and into the carriage.

Despite the walls of the carriage and skirts of the maidens in front of her, Iduna's eyes vividly recalled her brother's head. She had not seen the sword fall, had not seen her brother's head roll. And yet, a final example had been made, as if to confirm her fears and mock her for the inability to prevent his death.

She dug her nails into the palm of her hands. It should have been him. It should have been her father. Not her brother, not the one who played music and could best her on horseback. Not her brother, whom her mother strove to protect.

She stared at her robes, the red sparrows mocking her. Her eyes widened.

Red sparrows.

"She was laid to rest in a robe of red and white sparrows, a comforting, vibrant color.

Father had insisted."

She had ceased trying to understand her father's sickened games long ago, but even now, he still astonished her with his cruelty.

She straightened in her seat, muscles quivering. The veiled maidens watched her. Her family fortress remained dark and foreboding, but the forest of the Fea remained doubly so.

Even with her wrists tied behind her back, she was not entirely restricted. They had removed the pins from her sleeves, but her stiffened wrists slackened and she could feel the rope loosen beneath her skin.

Her heart was not yet racing as it should from the events over the last five hours. Her brother was executed. Her squad had been wiped out. And her father...

She squeezed her eyes shut. No, she could not think about her father. She could not become like her mother and fall victim to his desires. She would not. Dressed in the colors her mother had been buried in, she would not satisfy her father with this victory.

But as the carriage rumbled forward and the lands grew familiar with the place she once considered home, she knew that her time was running out.

She waited and tested the now loosened bonds around her wrists before she flung herself from the carriage. The force of her body connected with the door where she emerged from the constricting space. The harsh impact of the ground jolted her body. But her legs were free. She sprung up, heedless of the shouts, and ran.

The scream of an arrow leaving its bowstring cut through the air. It burned as the sharp blade pierced her leg. She jolted forward from the impact and pain. The crossbow's arrow protruded from her leg.

"I will have you brought back to me bleeding and broken if I must."

A growl rumbled from her throat, banishing her father's words.

The forest of the Fea loomed before her, a condemning sanctuary. Her steps faltered, burning from the arrow as the stories of her childhood haunted her. Her choices were not kind; it was between the known and unknown.

She crossed the border. The trees blocked the fading sunlight from view. She gasped and stumbled as the pain in her leg erupted in fire. But the sound of heavy footfalls behind warned her of her pursuers.

She fell to the ground and rolled into the brush. Gritting her teeth, she launched back up and used the trunk of a large tree as cover. Ripping at the long flows of her robe, she tested its stability.

Her pursuer was about to run past her. With a quick breath, Iduna launched at him. He fell with a scream, but he was larger and tried to kick her off. Iduna used the cut of the robe around his neck and pulled, so he stumbled back. Her body slammed into a tree, but she tightened her hold.

Fire erupted from her leg as he punched at her injury. Her grip slackened, Iduna was quick to try and regain her traction, but he flung her to the ground. Her back exploded with pain, the stun of the fall gathering in her chest to tighten. Iduna scrambled and launched back up right as his dagger landed where her neck was.

She snatched up the dagger. With precision, she threw it. In the fading light, he was not so quick to avoid the weapon as it was embedded in his gut. Choking, he stumbled back as she advanced.

Iduna withdrew the dagger and drew the weapon across his throat. She watched as the blood gurgled from his neck as his body fell.

Breathing heavily, Iduna pushed her hair back. She looked up and tensed, listening for other pursuers. But there was no other sound, no sound save for her heavy breathing.

She glanced back where she had come and was only met with the wide, dark expanse of the mythical forest around her.

CHAPTER 7

The Fea forest was dark despite the golden color of the sun streaming through the foliage. Regardless of its fading light, Iduna was able to scrounge the dead body for necessities. The weapons he held on his person were quickly acquired. She removed the cloak, testing the weight and set it aside. She could ignore the blood on the cloak; it would serve her well for the upcoming nights.

She turned the body over, only to stop when she realized that the gear he wore was the same as the Rangers. Pausing, Iduna retrieved the cloak, turning it over and as she searched for any symbol that would betray his allegiance.

“Odd,” she muttered. She reached to tug at her mask but stopped when she remembered that she no longer had one.

To possess the gear of a Ranger meant that he had prior Scout training. Although the gear strapped to his equipment was designed for mountain climbing and not mere combat. Rangers were explorers and rescuers; the last ones called in before the Scouts. What did her father have on the Rangers to recruit one of their own?

She checked his boots and saw the hidden crevices for the jets. Her fingers quickly skimmed over the crevices.

They were full! Disbelief filled her at the luck she was given. She removed the canisters, and strapped them onto her boots. If she conserved the fuel, it could last her three days.

She stripped him of all his weapons, layers, and equipment. Now that she was better equipped and armed, Iduna straightened up and surveyed the area to get a better view of the layout.

She might as well have been walking for hours. Walking forward, back from where she had come, did not bring her back out into the field of her family's estate. If anything, it only seemed as if she was traveling further into the forest.

There were no more shouts. No more flying arrows. It appeared that the men in her father's employment feared the forest more than their master.

Iduna breathed out, her thoughts crashing within her. She had no food or water. She was injured and unarmed. The forest of the Fea appeared, to her visual perception, empty and silent. Iduna remained still, attempting to pick up the sound of birds or other wildlife. She had ventured into deep forests before and could always make out the sound of an animal scurrying across the floor or the birds in the branches.

But there was no sound. Not even the wind. The air hung in stillness, the breath from her lungs suddenly thin.

She glanced upward at the sky where the trees towered over her. There were times during her treks where the branches blocked out all traces of the sky, yet the sunlight always managed to seep through. But here, there was a gray mist hanging overhead.

Iduna leaned against a tree, watching the shadows with wariness. She examined her leg and grimaced at the blood seeping through her clothes. Tearing at the robe, she wrapped around the arrow before snapping the length of the shaft.

Breathing heavily, she surveyed her surroundings. No one had come to follow her in, so she did not have any pursuers to fear. But she felt the many unseen eyes watching her from the forest. If there were Fea in here, they were already aware of her presence.

She suppressed a shiver and pushed herself up. She had heard stories of the Fea taking human slaves for their enjoyment. Children were a favorite of theirs.

She had no intention of going back. She could identify the large tree she had run past in her escape. The direction she had run in was north. If she continued in that direction, she might make it to the harbor. It would be almost a week's journey, and with the condition of her leg, she doubted she could make it.

No sooner did she take a step forward did she come to a stop. There was a boy sitting on the log in front of her.

Iduna stilled. She had not detected his presence. She should have been able to see him, let alone hear him. But she hadn't. He had been sitting on the log, possibly observing her movements, her vulnerable position, and noticeable lack of weapons.

He smiled. Gleaming, sharp teeth glistened despite the lack of sunlight in the forest. "I like your hair."

Iduna bit her tongue. The Fea were tricky. Despite the physical appearance, she knew she could be talking to one who was half a century old. He held no weapon, his small, dainty hands gripping the flourishing branches of the log.

Iduna brushed past him and limped through the shrubbery.

"What's your name?" The boy was beside her. She hadn't even heard him move from his perch.

Iduna pressed forward, wishing for her mask to hide her expression. The Fea did not yet touch her, though he was following on her heels. She refused to panic just yet. The Fea's immediate presence did not equal a threat.

"It's rude to ignore someone, human." The boy was still smiling widely. "Do you need help?"

“No.” To her startlement, her throat felt parched. When was the last time she drank? Her legs burned from the exertion, though she could not have been walking for that long. It must have been from the running, and her wound was still alight with fiery venom.

The fatigue in her body spread and pulled down at her like the chains in her cell. Shaking her head, Iduna forced herself to stay awake. The Fea child still followed her, his presence hidden yet still current, until finally, she could no longer see him.

Just as quickly as the persistent child arrived, he was gone. Iduna glanced back, but the shadow was missing. Hesitating, she pressed forward. If she continued south, she would have to reach the clearing eventually.

Eventually, she had to stop, the fatigue gnawing at her bones. As she leaned against a tree, she settled onto the ground, taking care to ease her leg down. Her breath hitched up as the stabbing pain flared on her leg. Squeezing her eyes shut, she stabilized her breath. When the pain subsided and she could breathe normally, she leaned her head back. Sleeping alone in the dark was not an unusual occurrence for her. She could go three days without sleep. But with an injured leg and magical predators as her enemy, she knew that a restful sleep was mere fantasy. She waited and watched as the gray light began to darken as night encroached. It was a blue night, calm and quiet, not quite dark. She detected no sound of wildlife, no rustling of the leaves or even the presence of another being. With one last tired and wary glance at her surroundings, she closed her eyes.

She didn't know how long she had been asleep. When she opened her eyes, the light of the woods was gray, and what she might have perceived as sunlight filtered through the leaves.

The trembling within her legs increased. The bandage around her leg was now soaked. Iduna grit her teeth and leaned against a tree, shaking. She could not have been walking too far.

It had not been that long since she had entered. Or was time enchanted much like the forest, and she had in fact been trapped longer than she was led to believe?

Her fingers brushed against the bandage, and she considered her choices. She needed food, water, and treatment. Treatment first. Walking with an arrow embedded in her flesh would only kill her sooner. Taking it out without the proper tools would also incur her death, or a long night of suffering.

Just as soon as she was about to move forward, she stopped. There was a child standing before her on the road. This one was different with long brown hair pulled back and bangs covering his face. Delicate wings fluttered against his back, the iridescent marks similar to that of a butterfly. He watched her with inquisitive golden eyes.

Iduna glanced away from those piercing stares. She recalled one story about the Fea using magic with just their eyes. Instead, she focused on his figure. Like the last one, he appeared to be a small child.

He held out his hand to display a small red flower, an offering to her. Iduna hesitated, once more recalling the stories of never accepting a gift from a Fea.

She swallowed. "I don't want it."

He blinked, and the flower slipped from his fingers and fluttered to the ground. Iduna watched as it turned to ash, gray and shriveled.

He held out another one, purple this time with red veins running through the petals. His gaze, young and earnest, beseeched her. Unlike the last one, he did not smile, though his youthful appearance portrayed a deceptive air of innocence.

"I saw her first Bem," a familiar voice snarled.

Iduna whirled around even as the long haired Fea appeared indifferent. The Fea with the fangs emerged, teeth gleaming and twisted in a snarl.

“She’s hurt, Fenrith” the second, Bem, answered, voice soft. For the first time since she arrived, Iduna felt the wind stir at his words.

“So? I can fix her.” Fenrith stared at her, eyes slitted. “Do you want me to fix it?”

“No.” Iduna backed up but felt the trunk of the tree halt her retreat. She glanced at the fallen branches, wondering how fast she would need to be to grab and use as a weapon.

Fenrith grimaced. “Gross. She has a horrible voice.”

Iduna withheld a retort as she positioned herself near the branches. The two Fea seemed at an impasse, staring at each other. But Bem’s eyes flickered toward her.

Iduna withdrew her new daggers. Brandishing the weapons, she turned, but both Fea were gone.

Breathing heavily from the air she had unknowingly been holding, Iduna felt dizzy. Stumbling, she straightened her spine. She turned to continue her trek, only to pause and realize she had lost her point of direction. Without the sun or a view of the sky, she could not tell where north was.

Her mouth was dry and the hunger within her stomach gnawed at her. She couldn’t even tell how long she had been in the forest or even where to go. Leaning against the tree ceased her trembling, but she knew that if she closed her eyes, she would not awaken

A branch snapped, and Fenrith was leaning over her with a smile.

“Hungry?” He held out a fruit dripping with juice, juice that would quench her thirst.

She had been starved before. She had been denied water during training. For her body to be that desperate, time must have been different in the forest then. She dug her fist in the dirt to prevent herself from grabbing the fruit, biting her tongue until she tasted blood in her mouth.

A branch cracked. The Fea looked up, for the first time something other than cockiness flashing in his eyes. The fruit dropped before her, splattering onto the ground, the juice splashing her face as the Fea ran.

She lunged for the fruit, salivating at the idea of food. A figure moved, and she should have intercepted the new arrival grasping at her wrists if it weren't for her hunger.

She lashed out, desperation driving her ferocity. Her fist hit the chin of her quarry, but her leg burned with pain and she could not move forward. But her attacker did not advance toward her. Instead, he kicked the fruit away.

"Please wait!" a distinctive male voice pleaded. Blue eyes stared up at her. "I'm human like you!"

Iduna tensed. The man slowly raised his hands to lower his hood. Long dark hair cascaded down his shoulders. He brushed his hair away to reveal his round ears.

Iduna narrowed her eyes. "Human?"

He smiled, hesitant. "Yes. And trapped like you. Or, your fate would have been worse had you eaten anything offered to you."

CHAPTER 8

The man had yet to move from his kneeled position. His hands were at his side, body relaxed yet eyes flickering with watchfulness.

Iduna's tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, her throat parched for any sort of liquid. The stabbing pain in her stomach nearly prevented her from straightening up. But any reprieve she could have received was smashed to the ground, muddled and soiled.

"Don't." The man's voice cut through her haze. "If you eat what they give you, you are their slave."

Iduna swallowed and nearly choked on the dryness. She braced her legs and leveled him with a glare. "Who are you?"

The man smiled. "If I give you my name, you realize that I am not a Fea, right?"

Iduna hesitated. Names were personalized and protected from the Fea as they held the connection and rights to one's soul. She tried to recall any text that warned of the Fea lying about their names, but even lying went against their very existence.

"All right," she conceded.

Slowly standing up but keeping his hands at his sides, his green eyes flickered at her. "I am Skander Ikrit."

Iduna's brow furrowed, yet in the haze of her mind, a name called out to her. "Ikrit of the Eastern Temple?"

A real smile flashed across the man's face as he brightened up. "Yes. Residents of the temple are to take on the surname of the First Follower. You know of the temple?"

"I know that it was destroyed fifty years ago."

Just as quickly as the smile arrived, it vanished. Sorrow shone in his eyes, yet she recognized the mask of acceptance. “I see.” He glanced down. “Well, time works differently here. Its destruction was expected.”

Skander carefully removed a canister of water from the straps at his hip. “Take this to hold you over.”

Iduna braced her legs to prevent herself from running for the water. “Hold me over for what?”

“Time is confusing here. You’ve been trapped for a few days, but nightfall, true nightfall, will come.” Skander continued to hold out the canister. “We will need to move quickly for safety.”

Iduna accepted the water. She waited, bracing herself so that she did not use up all of Skander’s water. As tempting as it was to give in and drink all the water, she knew that conserving it would be beneficial.

Once she was done, her lips wet and her mouth refreshed, she handed the canister back. “Where are we moving to?”

“My companion,” Skander confessed, strapping the canister back around his waist. “I left him to pursue your call.”

“My call?”

“We were informed by a Fea that there was a human in peril.” Skander laughed. “Imagine my surprise. No humans ever dare to come here!”

“Except for you,” she noted.

He smiled sheepishly. “Well, yes.”

“What Fea would tell you about me?”

“Bem told us that there was a human wandering the forest. He’s a quiet little one, very nice.”

Her mind flashed back to the golden eyed Fea. Unlike the other Fea she had encountered, the one Skander mentioned had appeared harmless. Still, she knew that the Fea were not above trickery. “Why would he do such a thing?”

“He’s different and finds you fascinating,” Skander replied. “And your fascination would have diminished if a Fea had laid claim to you.”

Iduna’s fingers curled, yet she resisted the urge to form them into a fist. A Fea, laying claim to a human. Slavery, riddled with magic and deception, had been a horror story she would whisper into Perim’s ear to sway him away from his fascination with the otherworldly.

Skander glanced up at the sky. “Well, we best be heading off then.”

Iduna also glanced upward. The fog remained gray, but despite the absence of the sun, the darkness began encroaching.

She followed Skander, only to wince in pain as the injury on her leg flared.

“What is it?” Skander asked.

She grit her teeth. “I was shot.”

“Where?”

“My leg.” After a bit of consideration, she added, “a few days ago.”

Skander’s sharp intake of breath was only cut off as he hurried over to her. Iduna grit her teeth to ward off the blossoming, burning pain that was now traveling up and down her leg.

Skander’s pensive frown and silence confirmed her reality.

“Impressive that it’s not that bad.” Skander pulled away. “Lean on me. We have to leave this area.”

Iduna did not hesitate. Her options led her to death either way. To stay and refuse help was certain death. At least with Skander, she had a chance.

Skander moved through the woods as if he had memorized every single dangerous outcrop. He sidestepped seemingly harmless shrubbery. He stopped and listened to the rustling of the trees. Not once did his pace pick up. Iduna had yet to see another Fea emerge from the foliage.

Gripping Skander's cloak, Iduna rightened herself to keep up with his pace. The forest continued to grow darker, but Skander had yet to make any comment about them reaching their destination. Still, a glance over revealed the tight tension in his jaw.

"What brought you into the forest?" Skander's voice was hushed.

Iduna breathed in. "The arrow in my leg should tell you."

Skander hummed. "Did you run from your own wedding?"

Iduna startled. Her grip on his shoulder slipped. "What?"

Skander glanced at her, a mixture of confusion and worry pulling at his green eyed gaze. "Your robes beneath the cloak. They are the wedding robes for unfortunate maidens to vampires."

Iduna stared. "Don't be ridiculous. There are no vampires." She lifted her head. "Besides, I escaped from my father." Her face felt bare and naked without her mask to cover the lower portions of her face. She schooled her expression, feeling the emotions bleed out from her skin. "My mother was buried in these colors, a cruel trick of my father."

But Skander's confusion only grew. "I apologize. Your father was the one selling you to the vampires?"

“My father wouldn’t-” She broke off and remembered her brother. She swallowed. “I’m his investment. He wouldn’t discard me like that.”

“He probably wasn’t. Discarding an investment I mean.” Skander tilted his head. “What would he receive in return?”

Iduna would have pulled away if not for the pain in her leg. She thought about it, about her father. She could only see death for him. If their family was proclaimed as traitors, he would have been executed alongside her brother. Was that why he was taking her back to the estate? Because it was his last form of defense?

She swallowed. “Survival.”

Skander hummed. But he said nothing else.

Their trek continued, and she continued to lean into him as her vision waned. She didn’t dare to think about the infections brewing within her wound. She barely concealed the grunt of pain as a twig stabbed at her calf when she stumbled to a halt.

“One moment,” she hissed through gritted teeth. Sweat beaded down her forehead as heat within her leg and head flared.

Skander’s grip on her remained firm. “It’s all right. We’ll be there soon.” He looked up, green eyes searching the sky as a soft smile touched his lips. “I just need a little help finding my way.”

Iduna stopped beside him. She watched as he surveyed the thicket. It all looked the same to her, and she realized how disorienting the thicket was.

But then she heard it. Music. She stiffened, legs tense and ready to run. But Skander’s hand at her elbow stilled her.

“Hush. There’s no need to fear.”

“But the Fea-”

“It’s not the Fea.” Skander strode forward, tugging on her arm. Once more, she was focused on his ears, round like hers. She did not know of any stories of Fea shapeshifting, but not much was known of them to begin with. She could run. But after that, what would she do? The forest played tricks on her. She would be a slave or food for the ravenous trees.

So she allowed Skander to lead her. Picking through the brush, she was careful to watch her step. She realized the sound she was picking up was not music at all but the sound of a song, one voice, melodious and enchanting. She was reminded of the birds that would sing to their mates and children, calling out in melodious voices.

A man stood in the center of the field. No sunlight came through the trees but there was a glow of light around him. Dark hair framed a pale face of beauty. Delicate lips were parted in song and green eyes opened in their presence. A smile, small and soft, stretched across his features, and Iduna stumbled at the unnatural beauty that smiled down at her. It was so unnatural that there was no way he could be human.

“You found me.” A voice, rich and warm, blessed her ears.

Skander grinned. “I took a detour.”

Green eyes flickered toward her, and Iduna had the overwhelming urge to sit down as that penetrating gaze fell upon her.

“That detour seemed to take a lot out of your guest.” The dark haired man silently approached them. “How deep is the injury?”

Iduna leaned against the tree. “It’s a few days old.” Her eyes flickered, but Skander was kneeling beside her.

“We can take that arrow out.”

Relief filled her at the thought of her agony ending, just as disbelief reared its head. “Are you a healer?”

“I have some healing experience,” Axis stated. His hand was cold to the touch.

Iduna stiffened beneath the touch but closed her eyes as the pain flaring within her leg spiked before settling beneath her skin. Breathing out, her muscles loosened as the tension was released. Unconsciousness spread beneath her vision, and she stilled as blissful slumber overtook her.

CHAPTER 9

She awoke with a start, panic at her defenseless state nearly blinding her.

“Hold on,” a voice soothed, but the presence was not near. “It’s just us.”

Iduna tightened her grip on the dagger as her eyes adjusted to the pitch blackness of the night. “Skander?”

Movement in the dark rustled with the brush. “Yes. And Axis.”

“You told me to step back,” a wry voice commented.

“Yes, because I did not want her to stab you.” Skander’s exasperated comment cut through her cloud of confusion as her senses returned.

Iduna’s grip slackened slightly on the dagger. “How late is it?”

“Approaching the twilight hours,” Skander replied. “Or I would assume so. Time is hard to determine here.” She saw Skander’s form move in the darkness. He was on the ground beside her, posture erect.

“Apologies,” Skander started, “but we try to avoid lighting fires here. The Fea like the glow and seem to think that it’s an invitation to harass us.”

“Oh.” Iduna sat up. She realized with a start that the pain in her leg was gone. Brushing her fingers against her leg, she checked what she could with the lack of lighting.

“Does it hurt?” Axis’ inquisition caused Iduna to jolt. Unlike Skander’s, the sounds of his movements had remained hidden to her. The heat of his body next to her’s revealed his startlingly close proximity.

Iduna swallowed. “No. It does not.”

Axis’ hum of satisfaction caused her fingers to twitch once more over the wound where the arrow had pierced her body.

“It’s like it was never there,” she continued.

“Axis has a talent for that,” Skander noted.

Iduna straightened up, her hands brushing up against the hidden weapons at her disposal.

“You once said that true nightfall is different here. Why?”

She heard Skander hesitate. “Well, time passes rather quickly for residents here. A mere month could stretch on for years. While the lights within the trees may dim and brighten as if it's the passing of day and night, true nightfall where peaceful beings rest and troublesome imps emerge is when true darkness descends.”

“I see.” Iduna glanced upward but saw no sight of the silver moon and stars. “How long have you been here?”

“I couldn’t say.” She saw in the darkness how Skander tilted his head. “Maybe a few years.”

Discomfort filled Iduna. “Have you yet found any clues for a way out?”

“We have one theory,” Skander supplied. “We were just making our way to the mountain pass. Walking in either direction of the forest yields nothing, and we have yet to find a way out from climbing the trees. Perhaps reaching the mountain pass and climbing over its peak will bring us to human civilization.”

Iduna straightened up. “A mountain?”

“Yes. I saw it when I managed to break through the trees during one of my climbs.”

Skander’s laugh was soft. “I nearly broke my neck a few times.”

“And yet you still want to climb the mountain.” Axis’ wry smile betrayed the soft reprimand lingering in his voice.

Iduna's fingers brushed against the dead Ranger's equipment. This would help her with climbing, should she need it, yet she had no reason to reveal its usefulness just yet. Who was to say that these two beings wouldn't kill her to take the equipment for themselves?

No, it was best to hold her tongue and follow along.

A shrill scream cut through the night. Iduna scrambled for a weapon, the daggers sliding into her hands with ease, but a firm hand on her shoulders pulled her back.

"Don't move." Skander's whispered voice held fear. "Any disturbance will announce our presence."

Iduna tensed, fingers gripping the hilt of her dagger. Finally, the curdling scream was cut off, and the creaking of the trees was silenced.

"What predator is out there?" Her voice was equally hushed as her eyes scanned the inky darkness.

"We don't know." She could feel the stiffness in Skander's body, and she wondered if his gaze held the same fright she felt. "But the Fea move within the True Night on a hunt. Sometimes the path of the trees change, the roots tremble, and the ground opens up."

"Are they hunting each other?"

"We don't know," Skander repeated.

They both stiffened at the sudden creaking and groaning of the trees. The rumble of the ground beneath the earth reminded her of the trolls digging under villages. Without any source of light from the moon or stars, Iduna felt as if she had been blinded.

"Rest here." Axis' voice was the only source of calm authority in the unsettled darkness. "I will take the first watch."

Iduna was uncertain if she could get any rest with the shrill screams and movement of the trees echoing throughout the night.

“Do you not have shelter or a means of defense?”

Skander shifted behind her. “We have made attempts in the past. At one point, we came across an abandoned cottage. Three days must have passed, and we woke up one morning in an empty field with no building in sight.” His voice, silent and breathless, was almost mystical as it carried over to her. “At one point, we came across Fea that provided housing, but with the Fea, nothing is free.”

“You’ve been trapped here for so long.” She pulled her cloak tighter around her. “Taking shifts all night, no shelter, no means of defending yourself, how has that not weighed down on you?”

“It has,” Skander said grimly. “But it helps that there are Fea like Bem who have taken a liking to us.” She felt more than heard him move, and she imagined that he was lying on his back. “I’ve spent countless days trying to remember the feeling of the sun on my face. I even stopped wondering when we might ever find a way out.”

Iduna remained silent, fingers clutching the fabric of the cloak. The possibility of entrapment in this mystical forest loomed higher than the trees, and she grimly wondered if the chances of escape were just as hopeless as she felt.

CHAPTER 10

She learned that Skander and Axis had been trapped in the Fea Forest ever since they had been run off by bandits. Skander was once a priest from a renown temple. Axis was a traveler. Both had stumbled into the Fea Forest in their effort to escape a shared enemy. While Axis had provided vague details of his life before the forest, Skander had openly shared his life within Ikrit's Eastern Temple.

"It was a busy city life," Skander admitted as they continued to trek forward. "The temple was not as secluded because of its central location within the city. Life so close to the nobles was a shock for me."

Iduna brushed a branch aside. "I could imagine." The Talome estate had been secluded, settled within the private green fields that most nobles were afraid to inhabit because of the close proximity of the forest. Though she had spent many nights in the city for her father, she always found a restful peace away from the chaos.

"What do you know of Ikrit's Eastern Temple?"

Iduna hesitated. She remembered stories of the temple's destruction and of the fires crawling up to coat the sky in red. Accounts of black smoke and white ash coating the city and suffocating its residents as they burned to dust had left her, as a mere bystander fifty years later, astonished.

"I know of its beauty," she said. "And how the white stone within the gray city was once a pillar of holiness." She stepped around a bright orange and white plant; she had learned from watching how Axis traversed. "But I heard that the singers of the temple," she continued, "possessed a holy melody, one that instilled strength within troops and carried teachings for the common folk."

“Did they not also share that it was that same melody that led to its destruction?”

Iduna glanced at Skander. She took account of his blue cloak, almost gray. “No. But I could imagine that their messages caused quite a stir for those who did not want to hear.”

“Indeed. Many priests had their tongues cut. The younger ones, I mean, the more ambitious ones. It was a quick lesson to learn that not all songs and messages should be sung.”

“Then is it true that the message of warning was also silenced?” At Skander’s startled stare, Iduna shrugged. “I once read that Ikrit’s priests possessed a talent of foresight since their temple was built upon a sacred ground for the god of time. It was the source of their foresight. Kings would seek the counsel of the priests before going off to war, and if promised great victory, priests would ride up to the frontlines to prove that success.”

“It was not just to prove success in battle.” Skander adjusted his hood. “But it was to also carry divine protection as priests were a connection between the mortals and the gods.”

“And have you ever rode off to battle in the name of divine protection?”

Skander’s lips twisted. A ghost of pain’s expression flashed across his handsome features. “Only once.”

Iduna fell silent. She kept pace with her new companions and glanced up at the hidden sky. The trees remained ever imposing and hid any persistent rays of sun. She could not determine what point of the day it was and she had ceased trying to keep track of time. There were moments where they would stop and rest despite the bright light within the trees. The only time they ever stopped their trek was when *True Night* fell. Iduna had experienced three of those darkened nights since she had been trapped.

“Would you say that every True Night equals a year?” she asked.

Skander grinned. “If that were true, then we have merely been trapped here for fifteen years.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because you informed me about the state of my temple. The last I saw of my city, her walls had been breached as enemies from the sea burned her gates.”

She swallowed. She could not fathom her life freezing over while everything she knew of her past life moved on. Her brother’s head would have been skinned to the bone. Her father should long be dead, and the Scouts...would be no more.

Her steps faltered. She wondered how her former comrades were faring and if they had ever found Dela’s body and given her a proper funeral. She wondered if the foolish hopes of the king’s court had flourished and that the trolls had been vanquished. She wondered if her fate would be as Skander’s was and witness a burning city, its demise incurred by its own people.

Iduna walked beside Skander, watching as Axis led the way. Axis always seemed to know where to step and what to avoid. She couldn’t explain his methods nor her reasoning for following his lead, but she silently mimicked his movements as she would her captain’s.

“Skander.” Axis’ rich voice stirred the silence, and Iduna instinctively stiffened, startled at the disturbance. “We’ll rest here.”

Skander’s confusion openly portrayed Iduna’s thoughts. “Here?”

Axis pointed up to the trees. “There’s protection.”

Iduna followed his line of sight, but she only saw the trunk of a tree with vines of purple and gold flowers. The entirety of the tree was enveloped with green vines with prickly leaves snaking around the trunk. The delicate, blooming flowers nestled between the prickly leaves, yet despite the multitude of petals, Iduna could not capture the scent.

She stopped at the base of the trunk. “What protection?”

Skander was already settling down. “There are specific flowers that offer protection against the Fea.”

Her eyes widened. “Flowers?”

“With an enchantment, of course.” He shrugged. “There’s a braiding technique used to trap spells. Coupled with the flowers, and the wearer is seen as undesirable to the Fea.”

“I was unaware that the priests of Ikrit practiced magic.”

“No,” Skander admitted, “though our divine entanglements are often labeled as such.” They both watched as Axis circled the wide trunk, disappearing amidst the greenery. In the silence with no swaying branches or footsteps beneath fallen leaves, Iduna was subjected to the eerie stillness.

“When you encountered Bem,” Skander started, “did he offer you anything?”

Iduna took a moment to recall her encounter with the young Fea. “He offered me a flower. The other tried to offer me food.”

“When Bem offered you the flower, you didn’t say ‘thank you,’ did you?”

Iduna thought back to her interaction with the golden-eyed Fea. She tried to recall the words she had used. “I do not think so.”

Skander’s expression was pensive. “The Fea could see any form of appreciation as an act of servitude. You would owe them something in return.” He paused. “But if Bem was the one to approach you, he might have held no malice. Still, his Fea nature would have compelled you to honor their customs.”

Iduna frowned. “How have you come to trust Bem?”

“He approached us when Axis and I were first trapped here. He did not try to offer us anything. He has had some quarrels with the other Fea before though.” He nodded toward the trees. “Look, he’s been following us.”

Iduna’s head snapped up, surveying the trees for any sign of the hidden Fea. Try as she might, she could not pinpoint his location anywhere. His movements remained silent, his presence undetected. Her fingers brushed against her dagger as unease grew within her gut.

“He won’t attack us,” Skander said. “Of all the Fea, he has no ill will toward us. It’s the others you have to worry about.”

“Fenrith,” she said, tone grim. Still, she searched the trees.

Skander’s smile was bitter. “Shame you could not learn his real name. You would have wielded great power over him.”

“Fenrith has no power to harm us.”

Iduna stiffened at Axis’ voice and turned to look as he emerged from the foliage. Even though she had detected no ill will from him, Axis’ ability to remain undetected continued to fill her with wariness.

He approached the fallen log that Skander was resting on. In his arms were the delicate flowers from the vine encircling the trunk of the tree. “This will offer some form of protection.” His pointed stare at Skander held the same untold warnings Iduna’s own mother would often give her young children.

With a sigh, Skander pulled back his hood, his long dark hair falling over his shoulders. Iduna watched as Axis settled behind him, pulling Skander’s hair back before intrinsically braiding it. She watched with growing curiosity as Axis’ fingertips seemed to glow, the light blending into Skander’s hair before fading away.

“My hair used to be short,” Skander stated, catching Iduna’s gaze.

“The length suits you,” Iduna heard herself saying, surprised at her honest and forthcoming tone.

“Agreed,” Axis said, satisfaction coloring his tone.

Iduna took that moment to observe the two men in her company. Yes, they were human, yet their sharp features, smooth face and ethereal movements often gave her pause about their humanity. She wondered if years of residence within the forest had taken a toll on their mortal features. They were not quite as otherworldly as the two Fea she had come across, but the similarities were striking.

She wondered, if she spent enough time in the forest, if she would begin to take on such features.

“Little one,” Axis called, not looking up from his work on Skander’s hair. “Do not sneak up on her. Her knives are sharp and quicker than your feet.”

Iduna detected the movement behind her a mere second later, but Axis’ unconcerned tone did not have her withdrawing her weapons. Instead, she merely turned her gaze to catch Bem’s golden eyes blinking at her from the foliage. He regarded her with curiosity. Iduna unflinchingly met his stare, and when no sharp movements came from either of her companions, her shoulders relaxed.

Sensing her ease, Bem emerged from the foliage. He settled on a fallen stump yet still maintained a respectable distance from the group. His iridescent wings fluttered at the slightest movement, and in his hands he played with the nearby vine of soft blue flowers. Noticing her stare, he plucked one flower and held it out to her.

“It’s blue,” he said.

Confused, Iduna blinked until she realized that he was referring back to the red flowers he had tried to offer her before. “There was nothing wrong with the color,” she said.

“But you despise red sparrows.”

Iduna hesitated as she recalled the red sparrows on the white robes she had been forced to wear. “The flowers were fine,” she repeated.

Bem still held out the blue flowers. “Want me to put them in your hair?” His gaze flickered behind her, and she noticed Axis’ subtle nod, eyes still trained on the Fea.

Iduna released some of the tension within her chest. “All right.”

She settled down on the ground, noting that the area around the large tree covered in vines remained clear, the green grass was soft and the moist earth was rich and wet. She felt how Bem’s wings stirred the air behind her. Slowly and carefully, Iduna released her hair from the meager tie holding her blonde locks back. To her startlement, her hair had grown in length, and she was reminded once more how time flows differently within the forest.

Bem’s hands were soft when they brushed against the tender flesh of her neck, just as she imagined the flowers on the vines would be.

“Do these flowers bring protection?” she asked amidst the silence.

Bem’s fingers ran through her hair. “With the right braids, they can.”

“And it will ward off unwanted magic?” She was about to say ‘Fea magic,’ but remembered who she had her back to.

“With the company you keep,” Bem started, “any unwanted magic will be kept away.”

Iduna kept her gaze fixed ahead. Nothing moved within the trees, and despite Bem’s presence behind her, she still felt unseen eyes focus on her.

“The sky darkens,” she heard Skander remark. Iduna looked upward until she remembered to keep her head still when she heard Bem’s quiet sigh at the disturbance.

“True Night is falling faster than usual.” Iduna stiffened at Axis’ wary tone, and she turned, despite Bem’s exasperation, to see Axis vigilantly looking around the trees, eyes narrowed and jaw tight. She had never once seen him portray anything other than serene watchfulness.

“True Night falls to reflect the king’s sorrow,” Bem said. With prodding, he had Iduna face forward once more. Iduna did as she was silently instructed, questions brimming on her tongue. “What happened?”

“The king is in mourning,” Bem said.

Iduna frowned. “Why?”

“His son died. Killed by the humans.” He stuck another flower in her hair. “Tomorrow, they go to war.”

The chill on her neck traveled down her spine. War with the humans. She wondered if that meant the treaty between her people and the Fea had been broken. She wondered how long the foolish nobles strove to make it last.

CHAPTER 11

Her head felt lighter with her hair up. She could not see the braids Bem had so carefully constructed or the flowers he had weaved into her hair, but she had noticed Skander's and how his long black locks flowed as the small flowers and braids pulled his hair back. The scent of the flowers in her hair carried the floral aroma of the blue and golden petals. Despite the braids, her hair felt secure; any sharp movements did nothing to dislodge the flowers Bem so carefully applied.

"It reminds me of the Telmen warriors," Iduna commented at one point, noting the braids.

Axis blinked. "Telmen?" He paused, gaze thoughtful before he smiled. "Ah, there was a family that took me in during my travels. All the noblemen and women who fought in the fields braided their hair. There were only two occasions when a warrior might cut their hair: to declare war or when they lost a battle."

Iduna hesitated, silently noting that the destruction of the Telmen people stretched over half a century ago. Her hand strayed to her head where Axis had incorporated a small braid to pin back after Bem had finished. "For the spells," he had said.

Contrary to her previous experience with True Night, this one had been quiet, almost soulless. She had rested not too far from Skander as Axis took the first watch, tense and alert for any of the usual calls and screams. But there had been nothing, save for the rustle in the trees that must have been Bem in his anxiousness.

Despite the unusual events, their trek toward the mountain continued. The straps on her gear grew tighter with every step as anticipation rose in her chest. She did not know what the mountain would provide, but it would be better than this aimless journey in an enchanted forest.

Axis raised his arm to block Skander and Iduna from moving forward. Iduna tensed, hands straying to her daggers while her eyes observed every suspicious shadow.

“What is it?” Skander whispered.

Axis knelt down, gaze inquisitive. “Purple Myst.” With a small knife, he swiftly cut at the stems of the plant in their path.

Once she realized that there was no threat, Iduna leaned in closer to Skander. At her close presence, Skander supplied. “It’s a healing flower, used to reduce pain and inflammation.” He hesitated. “But the flower has some...unpleasant side effects.”

“Like?”

“It’s called the ‘purple myst’ because of its color, but also because it brings misery and sorrow.”

Iduna watched his expression. “Have you seen its effects before?”

Axis carefully placed the little petals in a protective casing before transporting it into his satchel before he stood up. She noticed how Skander was watching his movements.

“I’ve felt its effects,” Skander answered finally.

Iduna recalled how the temple had fallen and how its priests were slaughtered on the battlefield, forced to participate in a war they warned their tyrannical queen against. She wondered at Skander’s survival and the means he used to escape his fallen city.

“The king approaches.”

Iduna stiffened at Axis’ words right as Skander’s hand touched her elbow, her worry mirrored in his expression. Still, Axis stood before them, expression impassive. Silently, Iduna withdrew her dagger, ears straining for the movement of brushwork or twigs.

The air stirred before it crackled. Iduna's hair stood on end, a warning jolted through her heart. Iduna withdrew her daggers and defensively turned in the direction of the supposed threat, only for a gust of dark smoke to cloud her senses. But it swiftly cleared as strong hands seized her arm, and Axis was standing by her side to pull her away from the new threat.

A being, tall with vivid green eyes that crackled with a hidden electric power, stood before them. Iduna stared at his impassive face and noticed his red-rimmed gaze. The hilt of her weapon burned her hand as if her father had struck it in hot coals, and she dropped her dagger with a cry.

"You wear the colors of my son," the Fea spoke.

Holding her injured hand as Skander's arms steadied her, Iduna glared. "What?"

"Human." The trees stirred at his words, "how is it that you know my son?"

Iduna's eyes flickered, but Skander and Axis did not yield in their place between her and the Fea king. The forest was enclosed around them. The path they once walked on was no more; now it was replaced with thick foliage of thorns and toxic plants. The only path before them was the path the king stood upon. From the trees stirred several more Fea, their leathery wings twitching and fangs glittering.

"I never served alongside the Fea," Iduna started. "I wear the colors of the Rangers, a small portion of the Scouts where I trained and served for three years."

"Yet the marks of your cloak are the same as that of my son's." The king did not step any closer; Axis stood in his path, but Iduna felt the invasion of her defenses as if he had moved to loom over her.

"She would not know your son." Axis' gaze was hard, yet despite the height difference between the two figures, the authority and fearlessness within his frame radiated oppressive.

The king's sharp gaze turned on Axis, taking in his presence for the first time. "I will come to know how she is connected to my son." The sharp shine in his green eyes glistened like the dew of the grass in the chilly early morning.

Iduna recognized that gaze, the gaze of being in mourning, carrying the ache of a throbbing heart from the absence of a lost love. Startlingly, she noticed it because she recognized the feeling in herself. How long has it been since her brother's death? Had she ever taken the proper time to mourn for him?

"I would not have known your son," she started, voice shaking. She hardened her voice. "But if he wore the color of the Rangers, then he would have been an honorable man. The Scouts trusted the Rangers and worked closely with them. Only the strongest and most adept of ambitious soldiers could ever join their ranks. If I had served alongside him, I would have trusted your son with my life."

Silence stretched on. The Fea king stared at her, eyes probing as if her words contained the memory he was searching for. He closed his eyes and released a shuddering breath before he inclined his dark head. Without a glance back, he melded back within the trees with his entourage. A few more precious moments hung in the air before Axis turned to finally regard her, his hand coming up to brush against her injured one. The burning sensation was gone, and Skander had knelt to pick up her dropped dagger.

Iduna released a breath she had not realized she had been holding. No, the air within her lungs had been constricted from an unknown force. The air had trembled, static as if awaiting the strike of lightning and the rumble of thunder. Now, the storm had passed.

She was good with a silver tongue. Lies got her everywhere when she infiltrated gilded palaces for her father. Yet the truth burned across her skin and she realized that the ache in her chest had yet to abate.

She bit her tongue, the lost memory of her brother's music filtering in her ears. His face, his soft features and the sound of his voice was distant, and she was startled when she could not recall the exact image of his smile. Her eyes burned as guilt and shame built up at that realization.

She moved away from Skander's hold, the chill of his absence draping over her shoulders like a shroud. Pulling at her mask, she walked down the path Axis stood upon with her head lowered.

They arrived at the base of the mountain. It was like coming across a stone wall. The mountain stretched upward, past the canopy of trees. Each way she looked, Iduna could only see the mountain. She wondered if they had come across a wall instead of a protruding force of nature.

"Well who's going to climb that?" Skander huffed.

"Doubting your own abilities now?" Axis teased, though his smile was wry as he looked up at the mountain, its true height hidden by the trees.

"I am wondering if there is even any top now that we are here," Skander commented. "This forest is endless. Who's to say this mountain won't be? The trees might extend forever and we might not even breach its branches."

Iduna hesitated before she removed her cloak. "I can scout the mountain. It's what I do." She adjusted the straps of her uniform and tightened where it was necessary.

Skander frowned, eyeing the Ranger's gear. "What is that?"

"Ranger equipment. It's similar to the ones we would use in the Scouts. It will help me climb the mountain. I reckon that after three days of climbing uphill, I will make my way back down with a report." She folded her cloak, the blue and gray colors of the Rangers catching her eye, and she was reminded of the Fea king's words.

"You would climb all that?" Skander asked dubiously.

"Heights don't scare me," she replied.

"Then when you reach the peak, jump."

She startled and stared at Skander. But he only smiled. "You speak of the Scouts as if they had wings upon their backs. Surely you must be eager to test those wings for yourself after this grounding."

She wondered what it would feel like. To jump, feel her feet leave the ground as she soared for the briefest of moments, the wind cooling her face, before the inevitable pull of gravity dragged her down.

Iduna adjusted her bag and shrugged. "Don't be daft." She considered the crossbow and wondered if there was any sense in burdening herself with any more equipment. She would need the sleeping bag and food and water. She already had her daggers as a means of defending herself should the need arise.

"Take it with you." At Axis' words, she met his gaze. He held the satchel of food and water, but he was looking at the crossbow. "You might need a weapon that can reach a long distance."

She considered his words before she strapped the weapon to her back. Glancing back up at the mountain with its crest hidden by the trees, she felt the swell of uneasy anticipation fill her.

Readying her equipment and adjusting her gloves, she breathed in and out before she began her assent.

When the trees blocked Iduna's form from sight, Skander settled for laying down. The grass around the mountain was untouched from thorns and prickly foliage. Turning over, he noticed Axis kept his gaze turned upward.

"She will be fine," Skander assured.

Axis only hummed before he moved to lean against the tree nearest Skander.

"She's from the mountains," Skander continued. "And her hands are worn. I wonder if she feels safer among the rocks than here on the ground with us."

Axis folded his arms, closing his eyes. "She'll be back, and our trek will continue."

Skander sat up. Dread filled his gut. "Is that a premonition?"

"No. Not yet. But the magic of the Fea is strong. It would require a large outburst to break free."

"Don't." Skander's voice took on a sharper edge. "If the Fea magic is so strong as to lock us within, then it is also strong enough to conceal our presence. Any influx of power on our part will only put us in danger." He moved closer. "Yes, we are trapped here, but we are not in any danger of being hunted."

Axis opened his eyes with a sad smile. "And what makes you think that the Fea would keep us hidden for long?" He leaned back, gaze thoughtful. "I would like to return home. I wonder if that mansion still remains."

"If it was built by the Telmen's, then it probably is," Skander offered.

“The garden would be nonexistent. I’ll have to start anew” Axis sighed as he folded his arms, and Skander knew this was not the first time Axis’ mind had wandered back to that stolen life, a life he barely gained before imprisonment and chains found him once more. “Do you think that she will come with us?”

Skander blinked. “Iduna? Why would she?”

“Why would she not? You said you would come with me. The life she has fled from will be no more. She could build a new life with us, the life you spoke of before your temple fell.”

“We cannot build a life beneath fire and brimstone.” Skander frowned. “Let us wait to see what Iduna discovers. She has yet to be tainted by the Fea magic. She could help us escape.”

Axis’ gaze glittered. “Indeed.”

CHAPTER 12

The mountain stretched on forever, but the trees had to concede defeat at some point. Climbing past the tallest oak had filled her with exhilaration, and she beheld the sight of the sky for the first time, greedily soaking up the rays of the golden sunlight. She could not have been climbing for longer than a day, but the height of the trees and the clouds below told her that she had to have reached a significant height. Hunger and thirst did not gnaw at her, despite the food and water she carried within Axis' satchel. The cold air did not break through the Ranger's overcoat, and she was once more thankful for the equipment.

She had given up trying to understand the intrinsic, broken time within the Fea's domain.

As she craned her neck upward, she could not make out the peak of the mountain. She knew of no mountains with such heights, but she supposed that the Fea Forest really did behold spectacular secrets.

Iduna adjusted her grip and paused to glance up at the endless mountain. If it took her another night to climb with no ledge in sight, she would have to make her way back down. Despite Axis' hopes, she had a feeling that Skander's skepticism would prove true. Of course the Fea would not grant their prisoners an easy way out such as a climb over the mountain.

Still, with her tense muscles quivering and the familiar tools in her hands as she scaled the mountains, she was reminded of why she had enjoyed this portion of her job as a Scout. Even under her father's tutelage, she was often taken out to the mountains to climb and scale the sharp rocks of their homeland. The breathless elation would fill her. As a child, she had no protective gear strapped to her body. Her father had always been beneath her with the promise of catching her should she fall.

She had only ever fallen once.

Iduna readjusted her grip and felt her skin prickle beneath the gloves.

She climbed up as the wind tugged on any loose fabric of her clothing. She breathed in and out, the cold air chilling her lungs. Stopping for a moment to adjust her grip, she allowed herself a chance to survey her progress.

The land stretched out before her in a sea of white and golden clouds, like the ocean of the docks. There was no land, no ground, no living creature, but the high reaching heavens. For a moment, Iduna wondered if she truly was the only one left in the world.

“Hello there.”

She startled and turned to the figure perched on the ledge. Bem stared at her with golden eyes, the fading sun lighting his gaze like a warm fire.

Iduna relaxed at the sight of the young Fea. “Hello.” She pulled at her ax and continued to make her way up until she was right on the lower ledge next to his. Bracing her hands at her sides to still their trembling, she leaned back against the rough surface. She could make out the tall trees cutting through the surface of the clouds.

Iduna withdrew the container of water and took slow, measured sips, feeling her body adjust to the much needed rest. But she could continue for a few more hours. Feeling Bem’s eyes on her, she placed the water down.

“What’s up there?” she asked, gesturing to the mountain.

Bem looked up. “No one knows.”

“No one has ever climbed?”

“Many have climbed,” he reiterated. “But for every attempt, blood and bone have rained from the sky.”

Iduna startled. “Something up there kills them?”

“Something, or someone,” Bem conceded. “An angered spirit or god.” His wings unfurled. “My father climbed this mountain.” He glanced up once more. “He left me right here on this ledge.”

Iduna was silent. She stared upward as if she could identify the mysterious being that would slay anyone who dared to crest the mountain.

“So should I stop?” she questioned.

“My father’s blood and bones did not rain down.” Bem’s wings jittered, drooping slightly. “I do not believe anything would befall you.”

“Oh really?” She raised an eyebrow. “And why is that?”

“Because Axis would not let it.”

“Well,” she stood upon the ledge and peered down. She recalled Skander’s teasing words about wings and heights and reckless abandon. “Axis is down there. I’m not sure how much help he’d be to me up here.” With another stretch of her muscles, she continued to climb.

The wind continued to grow colder as the air thinned. Iduna noted the glow of the fading sun and relished in its warmth once more. She recalled Skander’s words and how he longed to gaze upon the open sky and its sun.

As the sun began to set, Iduna began to mentally prepare for another night’s stay among the rocks. The bag against her back remained light, and though she had no qualms sleeping in the mountains, she did miss the constant safety of the firm ground. At least she had grown familiar with the predators lurking on the surface.

“Human.”

Iduna glanced up, but instead of Bem’s curious face, she stared at the guileless form of Fenrith. He smiled, and the sight of his pointed teeth had her guard up.

Head in his hands, he observed her like a vulture from its perch. “You shouldn’t be up here all alone. Did your master send you here?”

“I’m under orders.” Which, she technically, was not. This was a crucial component to her escape. Out of the three of them, she knew how to scale a mountain and both Skander and Axis relied on her to share information about her disappointing findings.

“Hm?” He tilted his head, yellowed, slitted eyes blinking coyly. “So has your master doomed you to your death?”

“I know my way around a mountain.” She quickly calculated a way around the Fea and adjusted her position accordingly.

“Are you sure? These mountains contain dangerous creatures that would love to take advantage of a lonely human. I could show you around.”

Iduna did not grace his comment with a response. Instead, she swung her body, bracing her footing against a ledge before she found another crevice and began her climb.

“No response? What a rude human.” Iduna shivered, and it was not from the cold. Both her hands were full, but she could probably spare herself her dominant one to grip a dagger.

Her hand moved to remove the ax from the mountain, but the sudden vice-like grip of the Fea grabbing her wrist stopped her. Iduna pulled, but the Fea would not release her. “Let me go,” she hissed, ice coating her words.

Fenrith smiled. “I could give you faster transportation.” His wings unfurled from his back, and Iduna realized just how large the Fea really was.

She pulled once more, but her wrist was trapped in his grip. “No. I’m not interested.”

“See, but without me, there’s only one way to go.” His claws drew blood from her wrist. “Down.”

Iduna lashed out and released her final hold on her remaining ax as kicked off of the mountain. The ax cut through Fenric's arm and he was quick to release her. The stabilizers around her waist tightened as she fell, and it took her a second too long to stabilize herself as she felt the wind stir from the movement of those enormous wings. She found her footing on a precarious ledge, and she flicked her dagger in hand, turning to face her adversary.

"What do you want, Fenrith?" She emphasized his name, hoping it would have some effect.

He grinned. "My fake name has no hold on me."

"What do you want?" she repeated.

His smile widened. "You."

A clawed hand covered her nose and mouth, and her senses were immediately overwhelmed with the sickeningly sweet taste of the dizzying spell. Her eyes widened at the familiar scent, and she kicked out, activating her jet boots and releasing the hold on her waist guard. She sprung upward and grabbed onto a ledge to pull herself up. With no stabilizers, the reality of the ground waiting beneath her flashed before her eyes. It had taken her three days to reach this crest. How long would it take for her to fall?

"Oh?" Surprise colored Fenrith's tone below, and the rustle of wingbeats filled her senses like thunder. "That didn't work?"

With trembling arms, she pulled herself up to see Fenrith hanging upside down to observe her. His eyes fell on the braids and intrinsic flowers within her hair, and a cruel smile split across his features. "I see. Someone is very protective of you."

Her mission to climb the mountain and find a way out had no chance of success now. Not when there was a vengeful Fea trailing after her. She wondered if she could fall to the ground faster than Fenrith could fly.

Her eyes betrayed her because Fenrith also glanced down before back at her. He smirked. “Oh, don’t worry about that. I’ll catch you.”

Iduna flung herself from the cliff. But no sooner had the wind began to pull her down did sharp talons embed themselves into her back. Iduna cried out and swung her legs upward to kick at the Fea’s chest.

Sparks of gold flooded her vision, and she caught sight of the familiar look of iridescent wings before Fenrith’s enraged screams shook her bones. She was released, but the weight of falling was halted as a smaller body caught her.

She was shoved back onto the mountain ledge, and Iduna latched onto the first foothold she could grab, Bem’s wings brushing up against her shoulders.

Bem’s small body trembled against her. “You’re heavy.”

“I appreciate it.” Gratified, Iduna tried to locate Fenrith, and her heart stilled. Hateful, yellow eyes were trained on Bem.

Despite the malice, Bem met Fenrith’s gaze.

Wind tore at the mountain, a wind that was once noble and firm was now ravenous and sharp. With no hook to anchor herself, Iduna grabbed a hold of any ledge that would remain steady.

With one burst of his wings, Bem flew from the ledge. Warm fire coated the sky, and Iduna’s eyes widened. The mountain appeared to move, shifting and groaning as the two Fea clashed.

Iduna gripped the edge. She looked upward but immediately abandoned the idea of climbing upward. She saw how large Fenrith was, and it would only be a matter of time before Bem was defeated. Her only option was to quickly make her way back down.

The scream of a Fea pierced her ears, and she saw Bem's small body crash into the side of the mountain. Iridescent wings fluttered with desperation, torn and bloody.

Hidden and out of sight, escape was presented to her once more. But she had stood by once before when an innocent life was taken away from her. Now, she was armed. She had her crossbow and arrows. She could fire. But with the violent movements of the two Fea, she did not trust her aim, not with the wind blowing so violently.

She saw how Fenrith flung Bem into the mountain once more. The larger Fea's bat wings unfurled, and she saw the disadvantage Bem was up against. His soft, iridescent wings did not appear strong or fast enough to outmaneuver Fenrith.

The mountain. She wanted to call out to Bem to stay and use the mountain as a form of defense, but any warnings from her would have been lost in the tumultuous wind. Instead, she scaled the mountain for a better perch.

But no warnings from her were needed. Bem scrambled up the mountain, his wings fluttering frantically to give him balance. He was a few meters from her, yet Fenrith's relentless torrent slowed down his escape.

Iduna grit her teeth and felt the skin beneath her fingers break. Fenrith had yet to continue his attack on the smaller Fea. She knew what it looked like when an attacker played with its prey.

But the Fea lost interest in the game. Even through the torrent of the wind, her ears caught the sound of an agonized scream. She threw a glance over her shoulder and saw Fenrith

rip Bem from the mountain. Like a small mouse in the talons of a predator, Bem thrashed in the larger Fea's hold as blood from his new wounds scattered in the air.

Iduna increased her speed to scramble for a hold. Her footing was precarious, but if Fenrith carried Bem any farther, she would never reach him.

Iduna stabilized herself and reached for her crossbow. Despite her precarious position, she steeled her footing. One wrong slip, or another torrent from the wind, and she would be plummeting from the mountain. She matched the wind and gauged where she should aim.

The arrow flew. She stopped breathing as, for a moment, she lost sight of the arrow.

Fenrith screamed. Bem's bloodied form slipped from his claws as he writhed in pain. Enraged eyes focused on her, but Iduna fired twice more and first aimed for his wings. The wind had stilled. She saw where the arrows landed, before she aimed for his exposed throat and took the shot.

She did not watch Fenrith's body fall. Her gaze was on Bem's falling form. His wings had yet to unfurl.

She leapt from the mountainside. Positioning her body, she reached his pale, limp form. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, she deftly worked to secure him to her chest.

She had only ever tried this maneuver three times before in the Scouts. When a companion was falling, most Scouts could not reach their comrade in time. She had seen more fallen, broken bodies that haunted her dreams than saved souls.

She remembered how to strap a body close to her gear. She felt Bem secure beneath her, but the trees continued to approach.

The wings of her flight suit unfurled. She soared upward, the descent rapidly changing as she was sent forward. Breathless for a moment, she hung in the air until she activated the remaining gas in her boots to guide the direction of their fall. The mountain was long behind her.

Bem tapped her, and she released him. She watched as iridescent wings unfurled upon his back, and Bem's wide eyes gaze turned to her.

But she would not fall. She unfurled her suit once more, the wind catching into the leather, and she glided alongside him. Her descent continued, the trees rapidly approaching. When the first brush of a branch touched her foot, she released her wings. With her feet pointed outwards, she crashed through the first bit of branches. Needles and twigs stabbed at exposed skin before her body tumbled against a trunk, and she was falling. Sharp talons grabbed at her shoulders and pulled her up through the leaves, before setting her down on a sturdy branch.

Pain blossomed around her body. For a precious moment, she couldn't breathe.

Breathless, sweaty, and bloody, she trembled. Until she heard the tell-tale sign of laughter. Fea laughter.

Bem weaved in and out of the branches, his laughter golden and bright. "My lady, you flew!"

Beneath her mask, Iduna managed a weak smile. "Yes." Straightening up, all of the past events crashed down upon her. "What about Fenrith?"

Bem's smile dimmed. He landed upon a branch beside her. "I antagonized him. His blood is on my hands."

Iduna nodded. "Will you be okay?"

“You’ll be with me, right?” He looked at her with helpless eyes, the loneliness and hint of worry shining in his gaze and Iduna was once more reminded of Skander’s words, how Bem was alone and outcast by his own people.

She nodded, fingers brushing up against her hidden weapons. “Yes.” Swallowing to conceal her moment of hesitancy, she brushed her fingers against his shoulders. “I promise.” Then, to avoid looking at his astonished face, she jumped from the branch and onto the forest floor below.