

# KING OF THE SATYRS

*Spellheart Book Nine*



MARVIN KNIGHT

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SPELLHEART

BOOK NINE

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# THE STORY SO FAR...

**M**y name is Theo, and I came from Earth. One day, I stumbled across a strange encounter. There was a building filled with real, flesh and blood elves from another world. One thing led to another, and the building itself turned out to be an interdimensional spaceship that took me to their home world with no means of return.

The transportation separated me from my friends, Sam and Dean, by more than four hundred years. I woke up alone in a magical forest, with only Mac, my AI companion and former cleaning drone, to guide me.

Or at least, I thought I was alone. The local elves soon proved me wrong. The natives of this realm, called the Ten Thousand Worlds, practiced an art of growing their power called cultivation. And it turned out cultivation was something humans were particularly well suited for. So much so that we could be a valuable resource to others through the excess vitality we emitted.

And so I was first captured by Sava, a beautiful alchemist who planned to strike it rich with my seed as her secret ingredient. Then I was captured by Nela, leader and heir to the Songstone Clan, and Melise, faithful companion of Nela and a skilled Spirit Healer. The two of them hoped to replenish the Songstone Clan's numbers with my seed.

But that wasn't to last. Under the leadership of a powerful elf cultivator with her heart set on True Mage, the Crimson Dragon Clan sought to drain me of my seed and life to fuel her cultivation.

So she captured me instead. It was all rather flattering to be so sought after, but I grew tired of being kidnapped so often.

In the end, I teamed up with all the leaders of the nearby tribes of elves and united them under my banner using the power of my human vitality. In other words, my seed.

Joined under one banner, all the tribes of the Hearthwood overthrew the Crimson Dragon Clan and united under me. I declared myself the Patriarch of our new Clan, which would span the entire breadth of the forest I awakened in.

Sava, Nela, and Melise all joined me as founding matriarchs alongside the other tribal leaders.

Yorik, an orcess far from home.

Eltiana, a nimble fighter from a hidden village of elven ninjas.

Assyrus, a sturdy warrior and leader of the Waterbeetle Tribe.

And we united just in time, too. I wasn't the only human on this world, and most of them were hostile to me. Many others who awakened long before me formed the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. Through subterfuge and years of effort, they had mastered the art of mind magic to such an extent that they convinced everyone else in the entire world that mind magic didn't exist. That gave them free rein to do as they pleased and secretly puppet the elven nations of the world from the shadows.

I captured one of their agents, Illiel, an apprentice assassin. She turned on her former masters, giving me greater insight into this evil organization of humans than anyone else in the Deanian Queendom besides my old friends Sam and Dean.

That was when the Cult of the Unblinking Eye's puppets started coming for us. First, it was the Corpse Collector Company under the leadership of Sharian Sakaku. An old rival of Nela's came to finish exterminating what little was left of the Songstone Clan.

We held fast, defeating her band of mercenaries and capturing Sharian alongside her chief subordinate, Korra, a catgirl from the World of Tooth and Claw.

The Sakaku Clan came for us, alongside their Cult of the Unblinking Eye masters. I had one brush with death after another, and many of my matriarchs really did die, but I was able to resurrect them all through the power of The Wanderer, an ancient space ship that once belonged to the creator of the elves and holds tremendous unknown potential.

But the true power of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye was not so easily matched. We would have been destroyed if not for me making a good impression on Baroness Jynna, the local representative of the Deanian Queendom's royal family.

Word of what I was doing spread to Deania's princess, Tivana. And she came in person with the full might of a powerful spatial Sorcerer to save us.

With Tivana's help and protection, my minted Hearthwood Clan was saved and flourished like never before. We spread our influence far and wide and came to rule over our neighbors thanks to our wealth, influence, and my personal talent for preventing rampaging hordes of orcs from ravaging the neighboring lands.

As I grew in power and the Hearthwood grew increasingly stable, I pushed my cultivation to new heights. Eventually, I became strong enough to look for my missing friends Sam and Dean, and I found them in the Primordial World. They'd been captured by a group of time-traveling, body-snatching, interdimensional spider monsters from the past. I saved them, and we blew up their den with a homemade nuke.

With my friends at my side once again, I'm feeling better armed than ever. But big things are happening in the World of Sanctuary and Serenity, and the Cult of the Unblinking Eye is still plotting against me.

Worse, recent encounters tell me of a new ally with a grudge against me. I'll have to do my best to negotiate for peace with them. I'm sure things will go smoothly.

After all, how bad could the King of the Satyrs be?



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## CHAPTER ONE

“Try to focus,” Dean said around a mouthful of snacks. “Feel the Primordial World and bend it to your will! Like bending a lovely elf girl you just met over—“

“That’s more distracting than helpful, Dean,” I sighed, cracking an eye open at my old friend. He tipped his bag of toasted snacks into his mouth, guzzling them down like they were water. Crumbs washed over his cheeks and made a small pile on the ground before he emptied the bag and dropped it with a mound of others right next to him.

Ever since he discovered the Hearthwood had reinvented junk food snacks, he’d filled a bag of holding every time he walked through my city.

“I admit, cultivation is more a natural thing for me. It’s tough to put into words.” Dean shrugged. “I’m not the kind of cultivator who sits crosslegged and explains what he thinks and feels. I just feel what I can do and get it done. That’s how I learned space magic. From what I hear, you have primordial aspects to your zeal already. So there’s no reason you shouldn’t be able to touch on the same thing.”

I’d already touched on the Primordial Aspect of Identity. It was one of the powers that had helped me defeat the Timeweaver Queen the last time I’d been in the Primordial World when I went to save Sam and Dean from a horrible fate at the hands of those skin-stealing monsters. Now, their cavern in the distant past was nothing more than an irradiated crater. We’d blown it up with a nuclear bomb.

Unfortunately, because time travel always makes a mess, I still had to guard against the spiders even though we'd killed them all. Thankfully, their time and ours weren't entirely unlinked. There was just enough linearity to the connection that I was hopeful I'd never see another Timeweaver again.

But if I did, I wanted to hone the power that had been so useful against their queen the last time we'd fought.

To that end, I'd recruited Sam and Dean's help. They were old friends of mine and had been happy to lend a hand. The only trouble came when Anya the Seer, one of Sam's old loves, came off to take him home again. After that, I was certain the two of them had a lot of catching up to do.

That left Dean to help me on his own. While Dean was lots of fun out on the town and plenty handy in a fight, he was a lot less helpful than Sam when it came to practicing cultivation.

"Be one with the rock, Theo!" Dean whispered directly into my ear as I held a stone in my hands.

The stone was the object of my current experiment. The Timeweaver Queen, who'd mastered the same ability, had been able to transmute one substance into another through mere force of will and the power of Identity zeal. After weeks of work, I was fairly certain I'd figured out what that was and what it meant. I should have been able to replicate her ability on my own. Only try as I might, it wasn't working.

"Run your hands up the stone's body, feeling every curve. Squeeze and knead it between your fingers. Taste the salt on its surface and imagine what it would be like to brush your lips against it..."

I cracked an eye open. "I'm thinking your subconscious is telling you to return to the palace. Thank you for your help so far, Dean."

Dean sighed and rolled off the boulder he'd been using as a seat, a couch, a bed, and a curling iron while I meditated in the Primordial World.

"Yeah, you're probably right. Somebody's got to stay here and ensure you aren't eaten by some giant Kun Peng while

you're meditating. I suppose if you really don't want me cheering you on anymore I can let you cultivate in privacy for a bit."

"Thank you."

"Oh, and the key to using these primordial zeals is putting your will behind what you want to do. Don't just imagine it happening. Imagine yourself making it happen," Dean said as he left.

I closed my eyes again as soon as Dean set his mind to building a grill and cooking some hamburgers. To my surprise, his parting words of advice were exactly what I needed.

I'd closed my eyes to focus, so I wasn't really sure what had changed or when. But when I opened my eyes again, the stone was a solid sphere of diamond as large as my fist.

It worked! I actually did it! I had taken an ordinary rock and imposed my will on it!

Through the sheer force of concentration, I had taken what was and replaced it with what I thought it should be! I shot to my feet in giddy excitement. I hadn't been this thrilled with myself since shooting my stone spike spell!

I admired the diamond a moment before tossing it into my Dimensional Storage. I'd show it off later. For now, I wanted to see if I could do it again.

So I snatched another stone up from the ground at my feet and set it in my lap. I tried my best to think the same thoughts I'd been pondering before, and sure enough, when I opened my eyes, the rock was the deep yellow of solid gold.

"Heavier too..." I muttered as I tossed the gold in my hand. My earth zeal penetrated it, and I knew it was pure all the way down to the core.

A few more tests, and I could perform the feat without closing my eyes. The transformation was gradual at first, like a ripple washing over the surface of a lake. As the ripple passed, the substance behind it changed from what it was to what I wanted it to be. Now, this was real magic!

I did find that I was unfortunately limited with what I could make. Minerals were easy, probably because of my earth affinity. Gemstones too, came naturally. So I could make all the iron I needed now with just a quick trip to the Primordial World. Or uranium for the reactors, for that matter.

Other things were harder. No matter how hard I concentrated on a rock, I couldn't make a butterfly. Nor a computer chip, even though the latter should have been possible since I could make crystals of silicone just fine.

I thought I was using the wrong source material, so I plucked a few strands of nearby wild grass and tried to change them. No luck. Worse, changing the grass into anything but the grass was incredibly difficult. I couldn't manage to turn it into anything fancy without a lot of effort.

After more experimentation, I found the best solution for me was to take the strand of grass, turn it into this plain, mottled gray stone, then turn that into whatever I wanted. Eventually, I turned the strands into a set of solid ruby spikes as long as my arm. Perhaps someone in the Hearthwood could find a use for them.

I went to fetch Dean. I found him chopping firewood around the corner with his axe, which was a tough thing in the Primordial World. The trees here made what we had back home seemed like twigs by comparison. Even a demigod like Dean had to put his back into splitting a log here.

“Ready to go? And here I was, setting up the campfire! I thought I'd catch a few fish or something, and we could relive those days you missed while you were napping.” Dean pointed to a few sharpened sticks around the campfire. “Heck, I could even reheat that one I saved for you!”

“...or we could go back to the Hearthwood and get a proper meal cooked by any number of professional chefs,” I said. “Let's just head home. My treat.”

Dean sighed and picked up the logs he'd split for firewood. They would no doubt be some sort of heavenly treasure back on the World of Sanctuary and Serenity thanks to their incredible strength and exotic powers from growing in the

Primordial World, but Dean would probably just burn them for firewood.

We returned home, and as promised, I treated Dean to lunch. He'd helped me quite a bit lately, and I owed him for everything he'd set into motion for when I eventually emerged from The Wanderer. We had a good time, and I nearly forgot my next appointment of the day.

She must have figured out where I was from Mac, because she came to the restaurant and sat down beside us just as Dean finished devouring a massive molten chocolate lava cake. The thing was the size of his body, and yet he ate every bite in minutes and licked the plate clean.

I turned to the instructor for my next appointment.

She was taller than most elves and more beautiful, too, though I knew I was biased. Her shining silvery hair hung straight down her back, contrasting sharply with the tight black outfit she wore halfway between leather armor and a dress. She had a blue sword on one hip, and her full lips were pulled up into a smile.

“Hello, Tivana, we won't be much longer!” I promised.

Dean blinked at his empty plate, frowning. I nudged him, and he turned to look at Tivana. He broke into a smile as soon as he saw his granddaughter. It was strange to think my friend had a granddaughter, but I'd been asleep for more than four hundred years. He and Sam both had legions of descendants that even they barely knew about.

Still, I was dreading the day Dean realized just how involved I was with not just one but two of his descendants.

“If it isn't my perfect, pure, and innocent little granddaughter!” Dean laughed as he tossed the plate aside and rubbed Tivana on the head like she was a little girl. The gesture was a little odd on a grown woman, but Tivana accepted it with all the grace of a well-trained princess.

“It is an honor to see you again, grandfather. When you return to the capital, please pass along my best wishes to my mother and Captain Amisra.” Tivana bowed.

I wasn't quite sure what the Deanian Royal Family had worked out for their internal pecking order, but Tivana was treating him as though he was still the king he was before he left. That would probably work out fine since I couldn't picture Dean doing any actual ruling. He was more of the delegating kind of king. Truth be told, I suspected his daughter mostly delegated as well. It was a wonder Deania had stayed together as long as it had.

I grimaced as Tivana bid her grandfather goodbye and didn't feel at ease again until he left for the capital. I didn't dare wrap my arm around Tivana's waist until he was far outside the borders of the Hearthwood.

"Now that your gramps is finally out of the picture, what do you say you and I spend some quality time together again?" I planted a kiss on her cheek, and she blushed.

"Not so fast, patriarch." Tivana tapped me on the nose. "You have flying practice today."

"Aww, can't it wait? At least long enough for you and me to visit some quiet, secluded room with a very durable bed..."

Tivana planted a kiss on my cheek, just as I'd done to her a moment ago. Then she whispered in my ear, "If you can make it work, I'll give you a reward."

"Now that, my dear, is wonderful motivation."



CHAPTER  
TWO

Tivana led me on a chase out of the city to one of the nearby northern mountaintops. It was familiar to me since Sam, Dean, and I had played board games here just a short while ago. The slope was too steep to climb, but those of us with flying swords had no trouble getting to the plateau on the top.

And that was the crux of the issue and why where we're here today. While I had to ride Spell Eater to the top, Tivana merely concentrated on her spatial zeal and flew to the top, unaided by any external power. That was an ability all sorcerers were supposed to have.

All sorcerers except me, it seemed. Try as I might, I just couldn't take to the air without an aid like Spell Eater. With a tool, I was faster than just about anyone else, but without one, I was as ground-bound as any non-magical human.

"Alright, I want us to fly from this mountaintop to that one!" Tivana said. "And if you cheat, you don't get your reward."

I muttered something about having countless secrets elf-kind wasn't meant to know. Tivana had a soft spot for me, and I knew even if I failed, my consolation prize would probably be just as good as the real reward. But that didn't mean I wasn't going to try my hardest.

Being able to fly without any aids was a mark of prestige for those at the sorcerer realm like myself. I needed to be able to take to the air if I wanted to hold my head high at my cultivation level, and that meant being able to fly. Otherwise,

I'd be sitting on the ground while a bunch of sorcerers looked down from above. Either that or I'd need to resort to pulling out Spell Eater. It would look weak, which wouldn't be good for the Hearthwood Clan.

The trouble was, I was at a natural disadvantage. Some types of zeal were naturally good at flying. Wind or storm zeal users could drift through the clouds at true mage, let alone at sorcerer. They had a natural advantage because of how well their powers were attuned to flight. Even more standard aspects like fire, lightning, water, or blood could take to the air without anything holding them back.

Only earth cultivators like myself were truly at a disadvantage. Our powers were all associated with the ground. It wouldn't be too hard to imagine a future where I couldn't fly at all. Tivana kindly told me it was a common problem for people of my aspect. Perhaps I would have to wait for my mind magic to catch up if I wanted to fly. That aspect didn't have anything special with regard to taking to the air, but it at least wouldn't be holding me back.

But I didn't want to wait. I knew earth cultivators could fly. Sorcerers of my aspect had taken to the air before, which meant I would too.

"It took some of them until the end of the sorcerer ranks to have the control to manage it, though!" Tivana protested when I complained aloud to her.

"I'm powerful enough to match someone at the end of the sorcerer ranks blow for blow. I should be able to match them in this, too," I grumbled.

Tivana gave me a warm pat on the back and explained the process again.

"For me, I feel the spatial zeal around me. It fills the air, the earth, and the empty void above us all. Then, I bend that zeal around me, letting my body become a part of it. To me, it feels as though I am standing still and that the universe is moving around me. Because of that, it takes very little energy for me to hover like this." She gestured to her heels, which

floated a meter off the ground. She drifted around me in a lazy circle while I focused.

I had tried her technique step by step myself, but earth zeal didn't respond like spatial zeal did. I could do exactly as Tivana was suggesting if I was flowing through the ground. Her technique described what I did when I used my Unearthly Movement skill to travel through a ley line. But I couldn't repeat the process above the ground.

That was for one simple reason. There was no earth zeal in the air!

How could I reach for the zeal around me when there wasn't any?

I shook my head. There had to be another solution. Others had figured this out before. What had they done? Did they take the earth zeal with them?

A bit of experimentation helped me puzzle something out. Like a rocket shooting skyward, I could gather a massive lump of earth zeal and throw it down behind me to fly. But that process was both tremendously inefficient and energy intensive. It also provided me with very poor control. Tivana would be able to fly indefinitely at her level, and even though my reserves of zeal were many times larger, I would run out of fuel long before she even began to get tired. And worse, she'd be flying circles around me the entire time.

There had to be a better solution. I just wasn't seeing it yet. It was there around the corner. All I needed was one little spark of inspiration...

Perhaps throwing out larger chunks of zeal? Or maybe gathering up fistfuls of dirt to anchor the zeal to? Maybe I could capture an earth-aspect monster and force-feed it zeal, which I could then extract and throw downward to power my flight while riding it?

I tried the first two ideas. The third one was a bit too close to how a flying sword really worked. The elves of the last golden age were quite gifted to be able to mass produce an item that would allow people of any zeal aspect to fly. If not

for all the relics of that bygone age left around, flight would have been entirely restricted to wind-aspect cultivators and those at the sorcerer realm or above. Without them, I suspected nations like Deania would be a lot smaller, and local clans would have far greater control over their regions.

“That flying technique looks a bit...”

“Clever? Incredibly impressive?” I asked, teeth rattling as the continuous explosion of grains of sand at high velocity kept me hovering fifteen meters off the ground alongside Tivana, who glided gracefully beside me.

“I was going to say painful, but I suppose it qualifies as flying if you want your reward now.”

I let myself drop back down to the ground. I wasn't flying, not really. I was just preventing myself from falling with constant kickback. Being able to fly without help was supposed to look impressive and awe-inspiring. My technique didn't meet those goals. If I flew through the streets of the Hearthwood like that, people would stop and ask if I was alright.

There had to be another way.

I spent nearly an hour making attempt after attempt. Many of them worked, but they didn't work the way I wanted them to. The answer was just around the corner though. I could smell it.

Eventually, after going through my list of spells, I came across my gravity manipulation spell. I could make things heavier. Could I do the opposite?

It turned out that I could, albeit with a great deal of work and energy, to sustain the spell. The trouble came from my momentum, though. I was too heavy to change directions easily. As it stood, I was like a flying mountain compressed into the shape of a man. I'd need a kilometer just to turn.

I was heavy thanks to my body cultivation. The World Titan Fiendbody had made me denser than any human body should have been, almost like every gram of flesh in me contained ten times the mass it should have. I wasn't entirely

sure how it worked, but it certainly made surviving lethal blows a lot easier.

If someone shot me with a gun to the face, I was confident the bullets would bounce right off my eyeballs with scarcely more than a tickle. And even if they did hurt me, I'd healed from having a hole in my chest the size of my fist where my heart should have been. A bad blow to the skull would probably just have me feeling punch drunk for a few hours. The worst effect would be memory loss.

I thought those powers came with the unfortunate downside of making it much harder to fly, but what if I could negate that entirely?

Hells, I could turn stone into diamonds or gold. What if I just told the universe I wanted the benefits of being as dense as I was, but none of the downsides?

"I'm going to need a minute," I told Tivana as I sat down cross-legged.

Would this be easier in the Primordial World? Possibly. But at the same time, the body of a living being was like a universe unto itself. The magic inside of me was mine, filled with the vitality of my own creation. I was the supreme god within my body, and my will was as mighty as the force of gravity.

And so I reached inside myself and made one tiny change. My mass would be one-tenth of what it was, but nothing else would change.

Why? Because I said so. That's why.

And my body obeyed. I felt the weight like a heavy burden lifting off my shoulders. I hadn't even realized how deeply I'd been sinking into the ground beneath me. The weight had come on gradually over time so I didn't even realize I'd been putting it on. I supposed that was how this kind of thing usually went, and chuckled to myself.

Tivana frowned at me, tightening her brows as she tried to figure out what I'd just done.

“You’re flying much smoother now,” Tivana said. “How? I’m not seeing any change to your technique.”

“I took what is and what should be and switched them,” I said, voice smug. That would make little sense to her, but she’d let me live in mystery long enough that it was about time I repaid the favor.

“Not going to tell me?” Tivana pouted.

“It’s a grand unlock-the-mysteries-of-the-universe sort of deal. Tell you what though, if you can beat me in a race, I will give away all the mystique and explain it to you right away. If you fail, then you’ll have to wait for the next time I’m feeling like sharing my secrets.”

“And what do you get if you win?” Tivana asked.

“If I win, then you are mine until dawn rises tomorrow.” I reached to brush a strand of hair out of her eyes, leaning close as I did so to cup her chin in my hands and tilt her head up, so her eyes met mine. “I get to do whatever I want to you, and you’ll be my obedient little pet princess.”

Tivana blushed, and she shifted from heel to heel. The gesture looked odd given that the two of us were hovering in the air. Biting her lip and staring back at me, she nodded.

“A-alright. It’s a deal!”

“Fantastic. Race you to the Myriad Monsters Sea. Ready, set go!” I took off like a rocket, and Tivana was left far behind before she realized I’d even started.

With my mass reduced, my immense strength was even more apparent. I sprung off my heels with the force of a... well... I couldn’t quite think of anything that matched the kind of acceleration I could put myself through when exerting my full power. I did know that the side of the mountain shattered as I sprung off it, and they probably felt the tremors throughout the Hearthwood. I wasn’t too worried. Mac had long since worked to stabilize the city against earthquakes. He had to when we had an earth cultivator as powerful as me hanging around.

The kind of speed I hit was on a scale high enough to get into orbit, which was exactly what I did. I broke the sound barrier several times over as I shot upward, and the atmosphere thinned into nothing. The World of Sanctuary and Serenity sprawled out before me like a map, and I spotted the finish line.

Tivana was left far behind before she realized I'd even started. I sensed space shift behind me and knew she was doing her best to catch up. I spotted a spatial distortion beneath me as she raced east. I wasn't quite sure how her spatial flight skill worked, but I knew mine would be best if I got rid of that pesky air friction, hence heading so far upward.

At the apex of my flight, I reached into myself. Like flipping a lever I'd already changed, I manipulated my mass again, as well as my gravity spell. My mass became ten times what it was unaltered, and the force of gravity pulled on me a hundred times greater than it should have.

Between the two, I descended with a thousand times the force I should have.

The air hissed around me as I reentered the atmosphere. The threads on my clothes burned from the friction and shot flames behind me, but my body was too tough to be harmed by a little heat. I pointed the tops of my toes downward and held my hands crossed against my chest as I tried to make myself as streamlined as possible. The ground approached with tremendous speed, but I could see Tivana nearing the destination. She was skimming across the Sakaku Clan orchards, now under the management of the Hearthwood Clan.

But she was too slow. I quickly changed my mass again to lighten myself and reversed the pull of gravity, but this was the first time I'd done something like this. I underestimated the amount of energy I'd built up in my fall and was only able to slow myself down a little. Fortunately, I was headed for the water in the Myriad Monsters Sea, so I wouldn't be hurting the orchards Tivana was crossing over to the west.

With a tremendous splash, I sank into the sea. In this region, the water turned deep just a few kilometers from the

coast, and I sank and sank all the way to the bottom. Given my speed, I quickly sank so deep that not a speck of light from the surface reached the ocean floor. Strange monsters roamed around me, and when I finally struck the bottom, I kicked up so much silt and dust that the water turned cloudy all around.

A few small monsters who didn't know what was good for them tried to take a taste of me, but even though I couldn't see, my senses were keen enough that I could tell what was in the water around me from feel and sound alone.

I brushed them aside, then urged all the sand in the water to settle quickly. Then, I stepped into the nearest ley line headed in the direction of the coast.

I emerged by the beach just as Tivana touched down.

"I win!" I declared.

"You're naked." Tivana gestured to me. She was right. My clothes had burned on re-entry.

"I still won. Besides, this saves me time getting undressed. After all, you're mine until next dawn." I grinned from cheek to cheek.

Tivana let out a laugh. "I suppose I am. So how can the crown princess of Deania serve you, Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan?"

"How about you join me for a romantic stroll through the solar system?" I asked.



I flew the two of us out of the atmosphere again, though this time at a much more sedate pace. Once in space, Tivana flew on her own beside me, though I kept my arm wrapped tight around her.

After a few minutes, though, it became apparent that her method of flight worked just as well in space as it did on the surface of a planet, so I didn't have to worry.



She wasn't nearly as fast as me though, which meant a flight to a nearby celestial body would have taken her at least a month, even as close as they could be in the Ten Thousand Worlds. Other planets sometimes got close enough that they filled a quarter of the sky on the World of Sanctuary and Serenity, which put them near enough that the atmospheres started to mingle. That was how early orcs and elves flew between worlds to visit one another.

In any ordinary solar system, all these planets would have crashed into each other long ago and formed a handful of super planets too massive to contain life. But there was magic at work here, adjusting orbits day by day to keep all the countless worlds in motion and prevent them from colliding with one another too often, and enough civilizations had the means to clear out spatial debris that the space between planets was largely empty.

That was a good thing, since it meant I could really push my new flying spell to its absolute limits. Tivana glared at me when she realized we were headed for another planet and realized what I was doing. She was mine until dawn, but it just so happened that I'd chosen to explore a planet that was tidally locked to its closest sun. Dawn would never come.

To my surprise, the planet seemed habitable, at least in the zone locked in the twilight between night and day. There was an atmosphere. Admittedly, it smelled like a dark, dank basement full of rotting eggs instead of the healthy fresh air I was used to, but it existed. That meant Tivana could finally take a breath again and talk.

"You cheater."

I chuckled. "Not so fast, my little princess! I only want to hear compliments from you. You're mine, remember?"

"You have cleverly and deviously outwitted me again, Theo." Tivana rolled her eyes.

"Better. Now let's go find somewhere with a view."

I found a place overlooking a sprawling ocean of pure quicksilver, as vast as the eyes could see. It was what had

caught my eye about this planet in the first place when looking at it from afar. It had been near enough to the World of Sanctuary and Serenity that I could see our planet's reflection on the surface of this lake.

"Beautiful..." Tivana muttered as we both took in the view.

"And highly toxic. I wouldn't recommend breathing any more than necessary. In fact, I imagine just being here would kill anyone beneath the wizard rank in a few hours. We should be fine for a short stay."

"And here I thought you were going to keep me here forever as your pet princess," Tivana teased.

"Keep tempting me, and I just might. There are ten thousand worlds to visit, after all."

With a wave of my hand, a plush blanket from my Dimensional Storage covered the cliff top, and I tore off what remained of Tivana's clothes. They'd worn thin in our flight out of the World of Sanctuary and Serenity, and again with our entry to this world. The threads came apart in my hands as easily as dry straw. Soon, Tivana's bare, bountiful, and beautiful bosom bounced before me.

My fingers roamed her chest, toying with her breasts and nipples. I gently pushed her down to the sheet I'd laid out for the two of us, and she lay back and closed her eyes.

I explored her body, as I'd done several times so far. But today, I had something special in mind.

I'd be the first to admit that I liked to spice things up a little in the bedroom. With as much sex as I had, I needed a little variety. Vanilla ice cream is great, but sometimes you want sprinkles, and sometimes you want chocolate fudge.

Me? I found there was nothing sweeter than a desperately horny elf girl begging her Patriarch to do whatever he wanted to her.

When Tivana's mother had ordered her daughter to make grandchildren with me, Tivana had been completely inexperienced in the bedroom. She was a fainting, blushing

maiden who would have been modest back on Earth, let alone here among elves.

The elves of the World of Sanctuary and Serenity were primarily female, so many of them walked about nearly naked all the time without a care in the world. Tivana, however, had always worn these long, business-like armored coats that looked more like a gambeson than a dress. It gave her the appearance that she was a warrior princess, which was true, though it belied her skill at administration and leadership. She was just as talented a leader from the rear as she was from the front.

But in all her time as a princess, she'd never once taken to satisfying her more base urges. Many elves took on a female lover since their men were so scarce. Others paid the Temple of Fertility, where the few men the elves did have congregated and sold their services for hire. But not Tivana. She kept herself quietly tucked away and never even learned about much more than the very basics of how making new elves worked.

I had been giving her a bit of a crash course on how to have fun. There was a lot more to sex than just me sticking my prick inside her again and again. Before long, she would be just like the rest of my women, moaning and mewling beneath my skillful touch.

I spread her legs, and my fingers ran up and down her body. Her breath was hot. Mine was fierce. I dug into her plump round flesh, claiming every centimeter of it. She was my woman, now and forever. She'd promised as much to me, and I wanted to show her just how seriously I took that promise.

"Mine..." I whispered in her ear as I pressed my chest down on top of her. She felt my presence and nothing else. I was making sure of that. The earth beneath us was flooded with my zeal.

"Mhm..." Tivana moaned, biting her own lip, nodding as best she could while my hand found its way between her thighs.

I traced along the skin of her abdomen and the upper bits of her legs, circling the dampening wetness I felt there. My finger graced her lower lips and her back arched. I circled closer, moving faster and quicker. Her breathing quickened with my touch, and I felt her body tense and spasm. What a good little princess, already so desperate for me and I'd hardly begun.

“W-what are you waiting for?” Tivana panted.

“I'm waiting for you to say please.”

“P-please.”

I clicked my tongue. “Not like that. Ask properly.”

“P-please, Patriarch?”

“Good girl.”

And so, to reward her, my fingers entered her tight, waiting slit. She parted before me eagerly and would have let out a sharp cry if I hadn't planted a kiss on her lips. This was going to be a fun night.

For the next few hours, I teased Tivana over and over. She grew rather used to calling me her Patriarch. It was a bit embarrassing for her at first, since she was a princess, and the Hearthwood Clan was by most measures part of the Deanian Queendom, though we had special privileges no other clan had.

Years of upholding her family's pride had taught her to hold her head high. And yet here I was, teaching her to beg and plead my name. It was a rather exhilarating feeling. I couldn't wait to see the look on my other women's faces when Tivana finally slipped up and called me Patriarch in front of them. It was going to be a beautiful sight.

But between then and now, I had a lot of work to do on my beautiful little princess.

I was satisfied with the progress I'd made for now, and for her sacrifice, I gave her the reward she desired so much. I plunged my fingers deep inside of her, penetrating her soft

folds and touching the plump bud at her opening as my fingers ran along her skin.

I felt her convulse around me, and I brought her right to the edge of pleasure. And then I stopped.

“W-what’s wrong?” she asked.

“Your mother wanted a hundred grandkids, didn’t she? I’m not sure if they teach you this in princess school, but a man’s fingers can’t make little elves. Turn over.”

Tivana obediently flopped over onto her belly, and I wrapped my hand around her chest to pull her tight. With my other hand, I positioned myself at her entrance and pierced her. She shuddered as my hard cock sank into her flesh, filling her up completely. One of the benefits of body cultivation was the fact that the tool I was packing was adjustable, and I’d sculpted the size and shape of my cock just for Tivana. It filled her completely as I hilted myself inside of her without so much as a scrap of extra room.

In my arms, Tivana’s back twitched, and she would have bucked if I wasn’t holding onto her so tightly. My firm grip and the heat of my chest pressing against her only aroused her all the more, and I could feel her pushing back off the ground and further against me.

I held the moment and breathed in her sweet scent from the nape of her neck before pulling out and thrusting again. I went slow and steady at first, but as the moments passed, I picked up the pace and gathered steam. Tivana started desperate for more, but by the time I reached my rhythm, all she could do was grip the sheets as her eyes rolled up in her head and all thoughts left her mind. This was just where I wanted to keep her, and I planned on holding her right where she was for a few hours at least.

The feat would have been impossible for any normal man, but my powers over my body and my extraordinary senses extended deep into Tivana’s very being. I could feel her senses and sense what she felt with each passing moment. If she was close to orgasm, I would know before she did. If I wanted to

tip her over the edge, then I would, and if I didn't she would stay desperate and pleading as long as I wanted her to.

Hours passed. I switched between cock, fingers, and mouth, one after the other. By the time I was finished warming up, the most Tivana could muster up was a bit of wordless blubbing. Eventually, I decided she'd been a good princess for me, and I flipped her over again.

I plunged my shaft all the way into her, timed perfectly so that she would climax from that single thrust. Just as planned, it sent her over the edge, and the twitching of her insides drove me to join her in climax.

I held her tight, buried up to my hilt as thick globs of cum gushed into her deepest place. I held that position for a full minute, and by the time I was done, Tivana's stomach looked slightly bigger than it had before. My cultivation powers gave me the powers of a thousand men in all aspects.

Tivana's face looked drunken, and drool dripped down the corners of her mouth. I held her in my arms and pulled a large cushion from my Dimensional Storage. I left myself inside of her, keeping my seed deep within her as I cradled her in my arms, and we stared at the alien lake.

"Your mother will be happy. I'm certain that one did the trick," I chuckled. "Only ninety-nine more to go."

"Passing an egg doesn't hurt, does it?" Tivana asked worriedly.

I laughed. "What are you asking me for? Talk to any of my other women, though. They'll know. I wouldn't worry too much. Everyone else was fine afterward. If you're really nervous, I'll have Mac knock you out in the Medical Bay, and we'll do the whole thing while you're asleep. I'd rather you not though, since the egg-laying process is a lot of fun for me."

"That makes me more nervous, Theo."

I chuckled.

The two of us planned to bask as we were a while longer, but the surface of the quicksilver pond shook, and some of the

metallic liquid splashed onto the rocks.

Both of us sat upright. Nothing on the surface had made that splash, which meant it was something beneath the surface.

“I thought this was a dead world,” Tivana said.

I grimaced. “Apparently not.”

Then a shiny metal tendril shot out of the lake.

Tivana and I both tried to dodge it. Under any other circumstances, it would have found us already out of the way. But we’d both been caught with our pants down and more.

CHAPTER  
**THREE**

I still had my entire length deep into Tivana. She tried to go left, and I tried to go right. With the two of us attached as we were, we ended up sprawling on the ground.

Fortunately, I'd cast my Layered Durability spell on the area before we'd even gotten started, and the spell was still in effect. It was only three layers thick, but that was enough to buy me the time to act against any foe I was likely to face.

The first barrier shattered as soon as the metal tendril struck it, as did the second. This creature had to be immensely strong to shove liquid mercury out of the way as fast as it did and shoot it into the air like water. But I was stronger. I pulled Tivana tight and protected her with one arm while I held the other up just in time to catch the tendril as my final barrier gave way.

It pushed against me, but I held firm. My earth zeal filled the ground around me, and I ensured my footing held no matter how massive this beast was beneath the lake. Weight like nothing I'd ever felt pressed against my palm.

"Ouch!" Tivana cursed as a thick dollop of slime dripped onto her head and ran down her cheek. She wiped it away and healed with supernatural speed, but the goop still burned her like acid.

I had plenty of the stuff on my palm, but it wasn't affecting me. The fact that this monster lived in a toxic world and dwelled in a lake of liquid mercury, I figured the food chain had a lot of metals in it.



As luck would have it, the slime the monster secreted was iron-based. That meant it would be as deadly as a Shadowblade Beast to any elf who fought it.

### **Mechanobeast Elemental (Mid Sorcerer, Level 45)**

- **This deadly monster of metal spawns wherever both large quantities of metal and magic. It is exceptionally strong and dense for its size, and it can integrate abilities otherwise only possible through high technology.**

The warning flashed in front of my face just as the tendril opened up a circular hatch. That circular hatch glowed the distinctive red of an energy weapon. I pulled Tivana and me aside just fast enough to dodge a laser beam.

“Theo! You’re too hard. I’m stuck and can’t get off!” Tivana said. “Let me help you!”

“It’s too dangerous! The monster has iron in it! Let me handle it!” I replied as I kept one hand wrapped tight around her.

I cast *Might of a Giant*. Fighting a giant metal monster would be much easier if I was on the same size scale. Zeal took form around me, and I felt myself grow.

There was one key difference this time. Usually, all my senses transferred to my new giant form, but with Tivana bouncing along my shaft with every step as I held her tight to my chest, I felt more in touch with my real body than usual. It resulted in an odd sense of bilocation. I was the giant, but at the same time, I was the man within the giant.

I had fought with distractions before though, and this was no different.

The monster’s enormous head emerged from the silver waves, and I saw the true face of my foe.

I had been wrong to call it a tentacle monster at first sight, though it certainly had tentacles. Its lower half resembled the giant squid I fought, but from the base up, it had a more

humanoid form. A pair of six-fingered arms of jointed steel emerged from the surface, each rippling with metal cables. It resembled a massive armored robot from the waist up, and its hinged jaw was elongated like a shark. It opened its maw, and out of it came thick black tar, which coated me and the landscape in all directions.

“Yuck.” I grimaced as I wiped the goop off me. There was plenty of iron in this, along with hydrocarbons. Neither did much to me, but presumably, they poisoned this creature’s enemies. Too bad for it. I was protecting Tivana. It couldn’t harm her in the slightest, surrounded by my Might of a Giant spell as she was.

Then it pointed its laser-powered tentacles at me, and I realized the gunk I was soaked in was quite flammable.

I wasn’t sure how the oxygen concentration in the air here compared to the concentration I was used to, but I would have been willing to bet that the percentage in the air was much higher. I knew this because what should have been a bright and sudden flame that burned with vigor was instead more on the order of a massive explosion that vaporized a huge chunk of the liquid mercury lake and the surrounding terrain.

Gritting my teeth, I weathered the flame. The fire burned all around me, but I was ready to cast Layered Durability again, and I used it to strengthen my defenses. Each layer had a small gap between it and the next. I expanded that gap without opening it up to the atmosphere. That created a vacuum as strong as the void between worlds in just a fraction of a second. Layering it upon itself between each of my shields, I created insulation so thick it would last for some time against heat like the surface of a star, let alone some chemical explosion. I had survived standing at ground zero of a nuclear blast. It would take more than this to do me in.

But while I evaded the explosion, the tendrils hammered on my shields. Creating the vacuum between them helped to shut out thermal energy, but it made them weak to kinetic strikes. My opponent exploited that to its fullest. As my last shield shattered, I held my breath. I didn’t want to lose brain

cells to mercury poisoning now that so much of the lake had been vaporized right before me.

With my real body, I pinched Tivana's nose shut to protect her. She couldn't see much inside my giant form, but from the way she was clinging to my real body's shoulders, I was pretty certain she'd taken my advice and was going to stay right where she was.

Good. I wanted this enemy all to myself. After all, I had a new power to test, and an opportunity like this one didn't come often for someone at my level.

And so the fight began in earnest. How did I want to take this beast apart?

Aggressively? Should I head in with fists and fingers and pound it into the dirt?

Nimbly? Should I dance around its attacks and deal a few critical blows?

Relentlessly? Should I slay it with a thousand cuts?

In the end, I decided on a combination of everything. With the amount of iron in the monster, there were quite a few skills in my arsenal. I might have been able to tear chunks off it with my Sword Storm spell and use parts of its own body as weapons against it. I might even destroy the beast from the inside.

But I wanted to try my new transmutation ability and push my body and my new power to its absolute limits.

It struck at the earth nearby with a pair of massive tendrils. I stepped aside with agile grace. The suckers on the end opened up to reveal hundreds more laser weapons, but I slammed my heel into the ground and kicked up a curtain of dust. That was all it took to render the weapons useless and hopefully blind any visual sensors the Mechanobeast Elemental was using to track me. After that, I would be fine even if the dust grew so thick it blocked out the sun since I could just switch to using my earth zeal to feel its presence on the surface nearby.

I could feel its confusion growing as it tried to track me. Metal whirred and gears ground. It was busy adapting to this new environment, but that would take time, and I planned to use that time to maximum effect.

I'd tried to use my transmutation ability from afar, but I couldn't change the metal of the elemental into something else. Even my petrification skill was of limited use. This thing had some iron-based aura fragment that devoured my spell the moment it touched its body.

But I wasn't out of tricks. I was confident that my aura was stronger than its aura, and all I needed to do was get into physical contact with the thing to prove myself its superior. A light brush was all it would take.

And in the fraction of a second it took for the monster to adjust its sensors, I brushed my hand against it three times. Once, I hit the main joint in a tendril. Then, I brushed against an exposed gear. Finally, I lightly grazed against a single wire running down what I assumed served as its spine.

The effects were instantaneous. On the joint, the pin running through it turned to brittle stone. The next time the monster tried to use that tentacle, it shattered under its weight.

Then, the lubricant around the gear I brushed against started grinding against the gear it was meant to protect. I'd turned most of it into tiny little diamonds, and as the gear spun, it ground itself against its neighbors. Every tooth would be gone in mere moments, and it would be nothing more than a spinning wheel.

The wire I brushed against was the worst of all for the monster. Electricity crackled through the wire, only to crash into an insulator where it should have found a conductor. As a result, whatever signals this monster's brain was sending to its body were cut short, and everything below the waist became completely useless.

Robbed of its tentacles, the monster swept at me with its brawny metal arms. I probably could have matched them with raw strength, but instead, I skipped just out of reach as it tried to grab me, then darted back in after it had passed to slap the

back of my hand against the inside of its elbow. Like the other hinge, that one froze up. It tried to force the limb to move anyway, and one more smack from me meant the whole thing broke free, and the monster was waving a stump.

Far from deterred, it swept its other arm at me, and I broke it in the same manner.

Most biological monsters would have learned their lesson by now and cut their losses to flee for their lives. Elementals were an odd lot, though. They ran more on instinct than actual consciousness, and despite this Mechanobeast's robotic appearance, there was definitely no supercomputer upstairs. With all its tentacles and legs disabled, it still opened its metal jaw and tried to bite my head off.

Even if it landed the strike, it would have done nothing more than disperse my Might of a Giant spell. My real body was located in the giant's center of mass, so the head on this body was purely for aesthetic purposes. I stared down the rows of metallic shark-like teeth without fear. This fight was as good as over.

I felt a rush, unlike anything I'd experienced as of late. Exhilaration at such a victory? Endorphins rushing to my brain from the sheer unbridled power I felt coursing through me? I wasn't sure what it was, but it felt nearly as good as unleashing myself deep in Tivana's warm, wet sex.

I wrapped both arms around the monster's neck and held them there. This time, instead of targeting one component, I attacked everything within my grasp. Doing so required longer contact, but I planned to finish the monster with this blow.

Beneath my hands, the metal turned to stone. It froze, and the light in its eyes faded as its central computer lost power. I snapped the head free and pulled it into my Dimensional Storage. Perhaps Mac could make use of some of the components. I'd also have to recover the rest of the body. There was a lot of metal in here, and that was hard to get on a world full of elves. They weren't the most talented miners and usually preferred raw materials that grew as plants or trees.

That was the point where I remembered Tivana. She was still clinging tightly to me, but that fight involved a lot of jumping. It would take more than a few bumps to hurt someone of her level, but I was concerned she wasn't saying anything.

I dismissed my Might of a Giant spell and let my real body fall to the ground. I sent a quick message to Mac, and he sent over some clean air from the Hearthwood, and I used it to fill a bubble. We didn't need to breathe, since the two of us could both hold our breath for a month or more if we needed to. But the fresh air was nice, and I was hoping she and I could pick up where we left off.

But I underestimated just how much jumping around I'd done during that fight. I'd been hopping left and right, and within my giant body, Tivana had been bouncing up and down my cock the entire battle. Now, her face was slack-jawed and dazed again, like she was three barrels of alcohol deeper than she should have been.

"T-Theo..." she drooled on my chest, cheek flopping against me as she batted lazy eyelashes up at me. "I'm... I'm going to help you fight soon..."

I planted a kiss on her forehead. "I'm all done. You just nap a while. When you wake up, we'll be back home."

Apparently, the rush of battle or the waves of endorphins hadn't been what thrilled me so much about the fight. I must have climaxed again while striking the final blow and not even realized it. Truth be told, it was a bit of a relief. Fighting had felt good, and I would have scared myself I've I'd gotten that much of a thrill out of a fight. I would have had to look at myself with mind magic to make sure nothing was wrong.

But no. Battle was still far behind beautiful women on my list of priorities. If Tivana didn't have an egg in the oven before, she would now.

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

Tivana was tired from the day's escapades, so I took her home to sleep it off. I'd been hoping to spend a romantic couple of days exploring this alien world, but she seemed like she really needed a bed. Getting home was far easier than going to this world since all I had to do was open a Pocket World Passage and walk right through to return to the Hearthwood.

Immediately upon my return, I was mobbed by three of my children. Two of my daughters, Argona and Comela, stood before me with amazed and giddy faces. Behind them, their younger brother, Dulik, loomed. He only looked mildly interested, but his stern and orcish countenance meant that he might as well be jumping up and down with giddy excitement, like his sisters.

"Father, what was that beast you just killed!?" Comela said excitedly. "Mac just had us pull the head from the Dimensional Storage warehouse."

"It was something called a Mechanobeast Elemental." I shrugged. "It was a strange world. I'd take you, but it's a bit too dangerous for a true mage. Maybe after I've done a little more exploring to find somewhere safe."

"There was a lot of metal and strange technology in that Elemental!" Argona said giddily. "I bet I could take it apart and discover all sorts of uses for its components!"

"Well, have at it then, my dear. If you find a good enough use for these things, I'll go out of my way to hunt down a few

more of them for you.”

Dulik nodded slowly at me. “It must have been a tremendous battle. I see the marks in the beast’s thick metal armor and the strange weapons adorning its tentacles. I wish I could have seen the fight.”

I chuckled. Considering I’d fought the entire battle with Tivana bouncing up and down my shaft, I was rather glad nobody had been there to witness it. Still, if Dulik wanted to see a high-level fight between a body cultivator like him and a monster, I would be more than happy to take something down while he watched.

“Set a slot in the Simulation Chamber for me. I’d like to keep my high score. You and I can go there together.”

“Sounds like fun. Can I come?” Comela asked.

“Sure! And grab Segolas too. I heard he’s up on his feet again!” I said.

Comela’s smile turned tight. “Right, Segolas...”

I raised an eyebrow. “Is something the matter with him?”

“No, nothing...” Comela’s voice trailed off. Dulik cleared his throat.

“Eldest brother is a bit... frustrated. As I understand it, he was considered a genius before he was wounded. He was also by far the strongest of your children. That is no longer true. Comela and many of the others have left him far in the dust. Mage Acolyte is no longer all that impressive in the Hearthwood. He is used to thinking of himself as a genius among cultivators, but that is no longer true.”

“So?” I asked. “What’s going on with him?”

“He’s been training as often as Sava and the Spirit Healers will let him. And even then, he was sneaking it a little extra time when they weren’t paying attention. He’s hurt himself a few times and slowed down his recovery because of it,” Comela said. “He acts weird whenever I’m around though, like he’s ashamed to be in my presence.”



“I see. He’s having some trouble adjusting after his long coma.” I let out a deep sigh. “I guess I’ll have to talk to him myself. I suppose it’s past time he and I go on a father-son adventure. There’s still one nexus seal left in the dungeon to hunt for!”

Argona recruited Dulik and Comela to help cart the Mechanobeast Elemental somewhere she could take it apart, and I left them to their activities, though I promised I’d help Argona analyze the monster components later. I was much more accustomed to working with technological components than she was, so she’d need my help making sense of the lasers and other odd gadgets in the Mechanobeast Elemental.

But for now, it was time to see my eldest son.

He wasn’t in the Medical Bay like he was supposed to be, and the Spirit Healer who was supposed to be looking after him nearly fainted at my approach.

“P-patriarch! I’m terribly sorry. I shouldn’t have let him go, but he was insistent! I’m so, so sorry. I should have put my foot down and called for the guards. If I’d known—”

I cut her off and held up my hand. “Where is Segolas now?”

“Sir... he left for the dungeon an hour ago.”



My first reaction as I ran toward the dungeon was anger. Why would Segolas do this? When Sava found out, she would go mad with worry.

But as I passed the entrance, my anger cooled. I knew why Segolas was desperate to get stronger. His friends, lovers, siblings, and family had all surpassed him while he was left behind. Stuck in his coma, he hadn’t progressed in the slightest. It was a tragic end for someone once heralded as the genius of the Hearthwood Clan, and not one his pride could tolerate.

I remembered what Segolas said to me that day he sacrificed himself for our clan. He was brittle, and he'd break before he bent. He was used to being the best, and now that he wasn't, it probably ached him worse than any physical wound. He was desperate to make up so much lost ground. The fact that he had so many younger siblings who'd become stronger than him probably hurt.

So I knew why he was desperate to grow stronger, and if I were in his same position, I'd probably be the same. By the time I came to that realization, I also realized that I could just ask Mac how he was doing.

"Mac? Where's Segolas?" I asked, trying to hide the worry from my voice.

[He is on the outskirts of the northern end of the dungeon, north of the ancient caverns where you first emerged,] Mac replied.

"Why didn't you warn me he was going into the dungeon?"

[He asked me not to.]

I was silent at that. Other than occasional directions from Mac, I kept to the insides of my own head.

[He should be just ahead of you,] Mac said.

"We've never explored this part of the dungeon," I said as I looked around.

The walls had writing on them, but now the script wasn't so strange to me. These catacombs were from the sixth golden age, as were the weapons and all the death spellhearts within them.

[You haven't explored this part of the dungeon, but plenty of your people have, and we know all about it. During the last golden age, a small school of death-aspect cultivators called the area above this dungeon home, though tectonic movements suggest that the dungeon was further north at the time. Powerful dungeon cores from the Devilbeast Wilds probably drew these catacombs all the way to the Hearthwood over the years.]

“I see. It would make sense that the powerful monsters slain here would leave behind powerful spellhearts, which would go on to create the powerful dungeon cores spread throughout this entire region.” I crept behind a rock, peeking my head out to make sure Segolas wasn’t looking. He was on his guard and ready for a fight, as one should be when traveling through a dungeon full of undead monsters alone.

Not that I was particularly impressed with anyone dungeon diving alone. That was a task best suited to an entire party. But I’d fought that mid-wizard-level Mindslaver Lord on my own, so I didn’t really have room to criticize Segolas here.

I wasn’t really sure what to do now that I’d caught up to him. Was I supposed to barge in there and drag him to his room so he could rest up and heal the rest of the way?

That was probably what Sava would have wanted me to do, but the boy was my son too. There was a certain sense of peace a man could gain only through the knowledge that he’d faced challenges and overcome them with his own wit and skills. I wasn’t sure if elves felt the same, but if he did, dragging him away would only make him furious with me.

I remembered the relationship we used to have, where I’d tried to make things work with him and failed. Things had been different then. The Hearthwood was constantly under siege, and threats bigger than anything everyone in the Hearthwood had ever known loomed on the horizon.

Looking back, I don’t know how we survived through it all. One threat after another came for us, and we constantly lived on the edge of life and death, where one wrong move would mean not only my death but the death of everyone I loved and their entire clans.

That wasn’t true anymore. I was strong now, and our enemies were either dead or groveling at our feet. I was no longer desperate, and with that freedom, I felt a burden fall off my shoulders. I’d seen my family grow and my children thrive. I still didn’t really think of myself as a dad, but the numbers couldn’t lie. Now, with the luxury to think about these things, I was starting to realize where I’d gone wrong.

And so I stayed in the shadows, even when a monster jumped up from one of the sealed catacombs and attacked Segolas from behind. At first, I thought he hadn't seen it, but I should have known better. By the time the undead skeleton climbed out of its grave, it was fully under Segolas' control. He hadn't been called a genius of death zeal for nothing. Taking control of a rogue undead at the heartwielder level was probably one of the first things Xoreda taught him. It was easier than summoning a skeleton from death zeal.

That aspect of necromancy had always fascinated me. Elves didn't leave bodies behind, as their corpses dispersed into zeal. But death cultivators could draw on that zeal to pluck the bones that should have been left behind from the air, already clean of flesh and ready to be reanimated. It certainly helped make being a necromancer a lot cleaner. If they smelled like rotting flesh, it was entirely by choice.

"Minerva, can you tell me what he's doing?" I whispered.

Minerva yawned. She was still busy reconstituting herself from the battle with the Timeweaver Spiders, and she wasn't yet back to full health. For an elemental spirit like her, that meant she was physically weaker, and to my senses, she felt like a true mage. Since she represented a part of my cultivation just as much as my World Titan Fiendbody. Having her so weak bothered me a bit, but with all the death spellhearts and zeal crystals I'd been feeding her, she assured me she'd be at full power again soon enough.

[Ah... my head's still a bit fuzzy, but your son's spells are simple enough. He's just injecting death zeal through the—]

I cut her off. My talent for necromancy had always been sadly lacking, despite my hopes and dreams as a new cultivator. Getting Minerva had been my way around that. I didn't need to be a talented necromancer as long as she was, since her power was as good as mine. In a way, she was like a sentient spell that existed to act out my will whenever death zeal was involved. I trusted her to see to my interests.

She kept a careful magical eye on where the threats were and what spells Segolas was using to counter them. It was a

rather informative conversation, even though all my death-aspect spells were cast through Minerva herself, so I didn't really need to know any of it.

So far, Segolas had been walking through the upper levels of the dungeon and building himself a little army. By now, he'd surrounded himself on all sides with two dozen skeletons.

I wasn't particularly confident in the fighting ability of the skeletons. Most of them weren't armed, and they had no additional powers at all. The most they could do was fling themselves at an enemy and try to rip them apart. That might work on heartwielder-level threats, but anything at mage acolyte and above would tear through them.

"I want to see how he reacts to a low-level skeleton that he can't just take over," I whispered to Minerva.

[I thought we were trying to be sneaky and unnoticed, not mess with him?]

"I changed my mind. Attack him from above. I should teach him to look up."

And so Minerva dutifully spawned a skeleton clinging to the ceiling above Segolas' head. By attacking from above, I not only bypassed the horde of skeletons surrounding him, but I also gained the advantage of surprise. Segolas was probably counting on his small army of undead to shield him from those kinds of attacks, but if I could attack from above, so could his enemies. He needed to be prepared for just such a surprise.

"Hells blasted!" Segolas shouted as the skeleton under Minerva's control jumped on his head. Like his own skeletons, it was armed with nothing but bony hands, but those could still be painful. Skeletons didn't hold back in the slightest, and sometimes their blows could be strong enough to break their own bones.

"Go for his neck. I think that's where a smart skeleton would attack. Throw a bit of teeth in," I instructed Minerva.

[He's trying to take control of the skeleton.]

"Block him. He's getting past this one the hard way."

[Done. He's confused and probably more than a little nervous. He knows something powerful and intelligent is behind this skeleton.]

“We'll blame it on the dungeon core. There's got to be one around here somewhere.”

Segolas tried to throw the skeleton off himself, but Minerva was persistent. She wasn't shy about having her skeleton bite my son's slightly pointed ears. But to his credit, Segolas adapted.

His strength wasn't what it used to be, so he couldn't just tear the skeleton off himself and smash its skull. But he could throw himself to the ground and curl up in a ball so the undead couldn't reach his vitals, no matter how it tried. That left it clinging to his back while a dozen of Segolas' own skeletons pounced and smashed it until it was nothing more than a broken pile of bones.

“Give him a big death spellheart as a reward. Don't worry. I'll give you more zeal crystals, so it doesn't slow your recovery down.”

Minerva condensed a mass of her own death zeal, and it was far purer and more vibrant than anything Segolas had collected so far. It materialized within the dead skeleton, and Segolas bent over to pick it up with a smile on his face. It would be a good find for any mage acolyte.

After that, he set about patching his wounds up. His back had a few bruises, and his ear was a bit cut up, but he had healing pills, salves, and potions aplenty. I was glad to see he'd come prepared on that front.

He took his time making sure he was fit for battle again, and I resisted the urge to have Minerva spawn ten more skeletons just like the first.

“Alright, alright,” I said when Minerva asked if I was certain for the third time. “We'll just drop three skeletons on him.”

And so that's just what we did. This time, Segolas was looking up, and he saw the skeletons forming well ahead of

time. He moved out of the way, so they landed among his undead minions, who attacked as one.

From the rear, Segolas was much more effective. His skeletons bore the brunt of the damage while he was free to fling smaller death spells to rot away the bones of his attackers or slow their movements by fighting Minerva over the death zeal that controlled them. Minerva could have completely overpowered him, even in her weakened state, but it would be unfair for someone of Segolas' level to go up against a spirit of her power, so I had her pretend to be at late mage acolyte. That would be strong, but not insurmountable for the boy. Additionally, that was the strongest death dungeon core Mac knew about in the area, so if I had her fake anything stronger, he'd be suspicious.

After overcoming my surprise attack, Segolas headed deeper into the dungeon. Soon enough, he came to a crossroads, and he stood there a moment as he tried to decide which way to go.

“Mac, which path is more dangerous?” I asked.

[Left leads downward to the second level and ultimately to the dungeon core,] Mac replied.

“Good.”

[Master, should I lure him down the safer path?] Minerva asked.

“Hmm...” Minerva interpreted my dissatisfied mumble as approval, so she created five skeletons down the more dangerous path. They waved their arms threateningly, like they were ready to attack him the moment he approached.

But far from being discouraged, Segolas took their presence as a signal that said that was the path worth fighting. I should have guessed he'd respond to danger that way. After all, he was in this dungeon to fight. Wouldn't he want to go where the monsters were?

“Ha, that's my boy. Minerva, you can lighten up on the skeletons. I don't want you to deplete his energy reserves or

destroy too many of his undead before he faces a real threat. Mac says there are some monsters up ahead.”

I followed Segolas in relative silence for the next few minutes. This entire region of the dungeon seemed to be undead-themed, which was likely why Segolas chose it. It was also probably why I’d never explored it. Before getting Minerva, death zeal had been completely useless to me.

Segolas wandered through the caverns, picking up quite a few trinkets that he found interesting. The elves of the sixth golden age sure were rich, because a lot of the items in their catacombs were very well made. Segolas picked up an amulet and a sword, both of extremely high quality. Argona could probably have made something similar, but I wasn’t aware of any other craftsmen in all of Deania who could match the quality of the two items Segolas just picked up.

#### **Lens of Shattered Fate (True Mage)**

- **This item glows whenever vibrations in the web of fate suggest an increased probability of the user’s death.**

#### **Sword of the Fallen King (Wizard)**

- **This blade was once wielded by a powerful male elf necromancer at the wizard level. The battle that killed him destroyed most of the blade and its power, but the crooked remains are usable even at the mage acolyte level, and the lingering sense of death within the sword provides a constant source of death zeal. Pouring death zeal into the blade can allow it to utilize several basic death-aspect spells.**

I wasn’t sure how much those two finds were influenced by my luck-enhancing spell. Just following behind Segolas like I was meant that he was likely to pick up items of tremendous value. That was one of the biggest reasons my other children were so quick to invite me along with their dungeon runs.



I was wary of accompanying them all the time though, as I thought they needed to experience real danger to grow as cultivators. I knew they took risks when I was there that they otherwise would have avoided, and that was a bad habit to get used to. Maybe I would need to start following them all around in secret like this since I still wanted them to find good stuff. There was nothing quite like clawing your riches from the corpses of a dozen monsters.

Segolas stopped here and there to squint at the inscriptions on the catacomb walls. I approved of that, at least. The ancient writing over sealed catacombs often described the favorite spell of those buried within, and in rare cases, it illustrated their entire spirit cultivation art. Those kinds of things were immensely valuable. I really had to send someone down here to transcribe everything and add it to the Hearthwood Clan's library.

Before long, Segolas found himself in danger once again. This time, the threat was a level greater than the skeletons I'd been throwing at him to warm him up. These were the Barbed-Tooth Raptors I'd fought when I was at his level. Only instead of being green-hided feral beasts, these were undead feral beasts.

They snapped, bit, and clawed at his undead, and bone clattered against bone in a fight without a single scream, roar, or battle cry. It was a bit eerie to watch undead fight undead. The only sound was that of cracking bones and gnashing teeth. Even Segolas was silent as he tested his sword on some of his opponents.

There were advantages and disadvantages to fighting undead like the raptors. They weren't as strong as their living counterparts since they relied on death zeal to animate them instead of flesh and blood. With so much of their energy invested in just being able to move, they didn't have much power left to enhance their abilities to supernatural levels or use offensive spells of their own.

They did, however, have an undeniable tenacity. A real raptor knew when to run. These just kept attacking like mindless robots. A real raptor would also be in a lot of pain if

you cut off its tail with your sword. These weren't bothered in the slightest. Still, Segolas wasn't a necromancer for nothing, and he converted as many undead raptors to his side as he slew. That was one of the main advantages of death zeal. Fights like this one empowered him rather than weakened him.

[He is doing very well,] Minerva said.

“The dungeon core is up ahead, though, and it's guarded by a particularly powerful undead raptor. Since it's controlled by the dungeon core itself and serves as the last line of defense, it's likely to be both intelligent and strong.”

Sure enough, my instincts proved true. After wiping out all the undead raptors, Segolas discovered another room just behind them. Living raptors would normally have their nests somewhere around here, but these were undead and so were nothing more than guards meant to protect the ancient doors leading to the dungeon core.

The doors were made of rotten wood latched together with iron, a horrible toxin for elves. I expected Segolas to carefully push the door out of the way. He was half human, so the iron didn't hurt him as much as it would his mother, but it would still burn.

To my surprise, Segolas just grabbed the iron door, ignored the pain in his hand, and threw the doors wide as though the iron could do him no harm. Looking back, I'd probably done the exact same thing when entering the other iron-clad doors beneath throughout the dungeon. Had Segolas seen that?

As soon as he was past the entrance, I crept around to follow close behind. I couldn't quite enter the room with him since there was only a single main chamber, but I could peer around from the edge. Minerva's control over death zeal was enough to let me blend into the surrounding background zeal, and my mastery of earth cultivation let me sink into the ground and vanish from one corner of the room only to reappear in the other.

Normally I had a hard time using my Unearthly Movement skill within a dungeon due to the power of the dungeon core, but this dungeon core was so weak relative to me that I

brushed off its hold on the zeal around me as easily as brushing a fly off my shoulder. Still, remaining unnoticed by both the core and Segolas proved to be a better training exercise for me than stomping through the dungeon and killing everything in my way.

The dungeon core's guardian was a massive undead raptor far larger than any of the others. It stood as tall as a building, more on the scale of a tyrannosaurus than a raptor. Though its front arms were scrawny compared to its powerful hind legs, they definitely weren't useless. Instead of claws on the end of its hands, it bore two metal blades fastened to the bone and stretching down to the floor. From the rust on the edges of the blade, those weapons were made of iron.

Someone had actually fastened a pair of iron swords to the corpse of a giant undead raptor. This was probably a very special project for the clan of death cultivators who lived in these catacombs, as getting that much iron would cost elves a fortune. They had a tough time working with it, given how dangerous it was for them to touch, which meant they probably had to trade for it with one of the other races throughout the Ten Thousand Worlds.

Segolas took one glance at his new Lens of Shattered Fate. It glowed ever so slightly, which I took to mean the threat to his life was minimal. That wasn't nearly as good a threat detection system as what The Wanderer could do for me, but it was better than nothing, especially at his level.

### **Death Raptor King (Late Mage Acolyte)**

- **Crafted by the finest death smiths, the death raptor king's bones have been dipped in bronze filled with earth zeal for additional strength, and the death zeal its bones were made from came from a true-mage-level monster. The iron weapons on its arms were gifted to the Deathless Ravager Clan by a pair of traveling dwarves and are well suited to decapitating elven victims.**
- **This monster is under the direct control of a semi-intelligent dungeon core and thereby exhibits**

**intelligence far greater than that of the usual undead.**

Segolas couldn't see what I could about the monster he was about to face, but he was undeterred by its fearsome visage. He raised his new sword and pointed it forward. Like troops obeying their general's command, his undead horde charged at the Death Raptor King with complete disregard for their own undead lives. I wasn't surprised. Undead at the heartwielder level were scarcely more intelligent than a fireball from a fire cultivator. It took death zeal at the wizard level to craft sentient spells like Minerva, and even then you needed a real elven soul at the heart of the spell.

The battle between Segolas and the Death Raptor King was incredible, at least as far as mage acolyte-level fights went. It lashed out with tooth and claw, and he nimbly dodged each blow. The dungeon core was smart enough to aim for the necromancer instead of bothering with his undead horde, and Segolas used that to his advantage by creating openings for his minions to attack. Far from being content to stick to the rear, Segolas drew his sword and joined his skeletons in the fray. When his opponent looked like it was deciding to deal with his undead after all, Segolas fired spells and darted in close to remind the dungeon core of the threat he posed.

And he did certainly pose a threat. Making minions was just one of many spells in a good necromancer's arsenal. Segolas could lay hands on the Death Raptor King's bones and cause them to rot as he broke down the death zeal within them and stole it for himself. Sufficiently weakened, his new sword could hack through those same bones, and with a couple of slices he cut off one of the Death Raptor King's legs.

That crippled the beast and brought its head down low enough that Segolas' minions could jump on top of it and pry at the vulnerable joints that connected its skeletal head to the rest of its body.

In my estimation, the fight was rather well executed. It had been quite a while since I was a mage acolyte myself, and my fights had been anything but ordinary, but Segolas probably

could have beaten Sharian of the Sakaku Clan, and she'd been their little genius and rising star. If the Hearthwood Clan was still just on the level of one of Deania's normal clans, he would have been the Hearthwood Clan's most celebrated young member.

He would have been a tough opponent to beat for me back then. I probably wouldn't have risked fighting him on my own. I would have lured him far from any sources of death zeal like on the surface, where the Hearthwood was teeming with dangerous lifeforms. Then I could have let the forest creatures whittle down his army and fight him without his minions. I'd have to talk someone into using that strategy against him during a training session since if I could think of it, his enemies would as well. Maybe I could have Mac create a lifelike golem shaped like a monster at the mage acolyte level and control it to chase him around for a few days to give him the life-and-death experience he came into the dungeon looking for.

[That appears to be the final blow. Segolas has defeated the Death Raptor King,] Minerva said as I plotted against my own son.

She was right. Segolas' minions had bogged the Death Raptor King down enough that he was able to jump on his skull and plunge his sword into it, permanently disabling the undead. With the guardian defeated, the dungeon core was his, and he approached the dais it rested on with a bloody smile on his face.

“Good. We'll just wait for him to grab the dungeon core and then head up to the surface. I'll pretend to be a little mad, then congratulate him on a good dungeon run. We'll throw a little party, and I can give him a few potions from Sava's stash that'll help him push right to the peak of mage acolyte. I think that he could really use a—”

Segolas tucked the dungeon core under his arm, but instead of turning like I expected him to, he tapped on the dials themselves. It made an empty hollow sound. He rapped on the display with the hilt of his sword, then on the wall behind it. There was definitely another chamber behind that wall.

“Tear this wall down.” Segolas waved at his remaining undead, and they picked up broken chunks of stone and bashed them against the wall until cracks started to spread. Now that the dungeon core had been removed the earth zeal running through all the surrounding structures had grown less stable, and some of the power was already flowing away to other dungeon cores nearby. Soon, Segolas broke through the wall to reveal a chamber hidden beyond it.

A faint purple glow lit the hidden chamber, and I instantly recognized the color. That was the color of zeal crystals. Segolas had found the last nexus seal.

But instead of being joyous, I grew worried. Nexus seals had dense, magic-rich environments, and all the ones I’d opened had a particularly deadly creature already in residence.

From where I was all the way to the rear of the room, even I wasn’t quick enough to block the beam of energy coming out of it. If that energy beam struck Segolas, the best I could do would be to haul him to the Medical Bay and patch him up after I dealt with the threat.

But Segolas’ new necklace had warned him in advance. It started glowing with bright, brilliant light as it sensed a deadly energy beam, and he rolled to the side just in time to dodge it.

### **Death Eye Observer (Late True Mage, Level 29)**

- **This monster is created when the energies of a Crimson Eye Observer are corrupted by death zeal. All of its eye beams are converted to generate beams of death that rot and disintegrate everything it targets. Anything destroyed by its powers has a high probability of transforming into an undead minion to serve the Death Eye Observer.**

Segolas shot a glance at his necklace. It still glowed brightly, though not quite as bright as it had when he was nearly taken by surprise.

I expected him to turn and flee. This wasn't a foe he could fight. But then I heard the words he spoke to himself.

“Father killed one of these at mage acolyte. I have to as well.”

CHAPTER  
FIVE

I could hardly believe it. Segolas was going to fight the Death Eye Observer, despite the danger. All for... what? So he could compare himself to me?

[It would seem that is the case, Master. He wants to be just like his father.]

“Except I didn’t defeat the Crimson Eye Observer alone. I brought Sava, Eltiana, Assyrus, Melise, Illiel, and Yorik along to fight by my side!” I growled.

[The tale has grown in the telling. Remember what those women you helped in the simulation chamber said? The current rumor is that you slew the beast single-handed with nothing but your unbridled masculine energy.]

I would have laughed if the sight before me weren’t so serious.

[Do you want to intervene? I may be weakened, but it still wouldn’t be too hard for me to take over that undead’s mind.]

“Infiltrate it and be ready to freeze it at a moment’s notice when it looks like it’s about to deal a lethal blow. The kid needs to understand there are limits to what he can and cannot fight.”

Segolas impressed me once again with his resourcefulness and capabilities in battle. His skeletons wove around him in a practiced formation, with half of them on the offensive and the other half guarding him. Those on the defensive had large shields or skulls that they were using as shields. They would have been better off with something shiny though, assuming



the Death Eye Observer's beams worked in the same way as a living Crimson Eye Observer's beams.

"Come on, son. Withdraw while you still have forces to cover for your escape..." I whispered, but I could tell from the look in his eyes that he didn't plan to run. Just like he said, the young half-elf had a certain brittleness in him that would accept nothing less than total victory.

It was a noble goal, and he was the hero of some story. It might have worked out well for him. But this was no myth in the making. This was his life offered up on the chopping block.

[Your son appears to be running out of death zeal.]

I nodded when I saw him cannibalize some of his undead. If he could make it back to some of the giant raptors he'd just killed, he could replenish himself far faster that way. But the Death Eye Observer's beams shot out one after another in the blink of an eye, and they had enough range to stretch across the entire cavern. Giving his opponent more range to work with would only be to its advantage, and Segolas knew that.

So he fought desperately for every meter he could gain on the monster. With sword in hand, he worked his way across the cavern floor one jump, leap, slide, or dodge at a time.

Three times he was nearly struck, but three times he sacrificed a talisman from a pouch on his waist. I recognized the design on them. They were Argona's work. I wished I had something half that good when I was fighting the Crimson Eye Observer.

Bit by bit, he gained a few steps' worth of ground on the Death Eye Observer. The battle grew more intense, and I crept closer. Even though this fight was entire realms of power below me, it was incredibly intense for a mage acolyte. Segolas' senses had to be completely overloaded, and he probably wouldn't have detected me even if I'd stood right behind him.

Rather than being quite that bold, I snuck behind the Death Eye Observer instead. I kept my aura carefully reined in, lest

the Death Eye Observer sense my presence behind it and panic.

I wondered what it was thinking, and Minerva answered. She was already in the creature's mind, though it didn't know it yet.

[It is growing increasingly confused. It doesn't understand why he's still fighting. Any other mage acolyte creature would have left its territory the moment it realized it could not easily win this fight. And yet Segolas continues to fight.]

I wondered that myself. Segolas should have run away, but I saw the decision in his eyes. His undead were blown away by beams of corrosive death energy, and by now, there were only half a dozen left. He could still use them to cover his escape and leave if he really wanted.

But I saw the determination in his eyes, and I sensed him reaffirm his decision to slay this beast or die trying.

“You're finished!” Segolas shouted, suddenly channeling all his remaining death zeal into one ultimate attack. Death zeal filled the air around him, and an ephemeral skeleton ten times as large as he took shape around him, stretching out his arm in line with Segolas thrusting out his sword. Two more abilities shot out from either of his hands, one in the shape of a ball of purple light and the other lining the length of his sword.

As one, all six of his remaining skeletons charged forward, dead ahead. He was throwing them at the Death Eye Observer all at once, hoping to buy a moment or two for himself while the Death Eye Observer destroyed them or let them get a few hits in while the Death Eye Observer targeted him.

The Death Eye Observer didn't have nearly as many smaller eyes as its living kin, so most of its damage came from the main central eye. It locked that eye on Segolas himself, pouring all of its power into stopping what it saw as the largest threat.

The glowing spectral image of the giant undead humanoid surrounding Segolas weathered the blow in his place, and the laser shattered the massive bone ribs stretching around him.

As it was destroyed, the spectral image faded. If he had any power left, Segolas might have been able to reinforce it to help it hold a little longer, but he'd already thrown all of his remaining reserves into one final attack.

The Death Eye Observer grew increasingly panicked and shot its beam of energy at him with reckless abandon. The blackened-withered skin covering what must have passed for the creature's skull shriveled up as it exhausted its own death zeal. That my son could press a true mage-level monster to the edge of death like this did me proud, even if picking the fight had been a poor decision on his part. He could fight above his level and hold his own, and with that kind of unyielding determination, it was no wonder Xoreda had wanted him as an apprentice.

The Death Eye Observer made its first sound of the entire battle as it opened its maw to reveal yellowed, jagged, and bony teeth. Most of them were broken into shards, but that only made them all the sharper if used against something like a half-elf's tender flesh. It realized Segolas would reach it before its energy beam broke through his defenses and that it would have to resort to something a bit more barbaric to defeat him.

Segolas' sword struck first, and it unleashed all the spells he'd channeled into the undead monster's eye. Despite all the speed and strength Segolas put behind the blow, he was facing a true mage-level monster, so his weapon only sank a hand's breadth into the eye. That wasn't enough to finish it, but it was enough to blind it and cut off that beam of deadly energy.

[Master, should I freeze it?]

I gave Minerva my approval as I made my presence known just as the Death Eye Observer latched its teeth around Segolas' head. The tips of those teeth had just barely pierced the skin on the back of his neck. Segolas squirmed within its maw, trying to break free, then suddenly confused at why the Death Eye Observer had suddenly stopped.

I stepped up from behind Segolas and made my appearance, releasing the aura of power that surrounded me.

All of a sudden, Segolas froze just as surely as the Death Eye Observer.

“Hey son. Need a hand?”

I didn't bother waiting for an answer as I tore him free from the Death Eye Observer's maw. I looked him over for wounds, and he had a couple of deep gashes. I had a number of pills that could have him fully healed in moments, but I wanted him to remember how close he came to death. Fixing him up too soon would be counterproductive.

Segolas' eyes darted between me and the ground. He fought a war with himself, confused at what to say. At first, I thought he'd be mad at me for saving him, but he had more sense than that. Eventually, he settled for a quiet mumble.

“Hello, Father.”

“Hi yourself. Your mother is already worried sick about you. If you'd actually gotten yourself killed, I would have never heard the end of it. You know the lengths we went through to pull you out of that coma.”

Voice quiet, Segolas replied, “I know.”

I glanced back at the Death Eye Observer. A single undead had survived Segolas' desperate last-minute charge. After Minerva stunned it, the undead continued to follow its last orders. It used the shard of bone it had been holding and stabbed it into the back of the Death Eye Observer's giant eye over and over again. One blow rained down on the beast after another, and I could sense the Death Eye Observer fading away. Even a true mage-level monster like this one could die to a heartwielder skeleton if it wasn't allowed to defend itself and was already heavily wounded from Segolas' sword running through its eye.

“If it's any consolation, I think you did it,” I said as I took in the Death Eye Observer. “A sword through its central eye would be pretty rough, especially considering it has no arms to remove the sword. Its main weapon would be permanently disabled, and it'd be easy prey to the next thing that entered this place. And that's assuming you couldn't buy enough time

while being eaten for your minion here to deal lethal damage on its own.”

“You really think so?” Segolas brightened a little. “It still isn’t close to what you managed.”

I snorted. “You shouldn’t believe everything you hear. It was Eltiana who dealt the final blow, not me. A lot of those stories from my early days are greatly exaggerated.”

“But you faced off against entire armies dozens of times, risking everything to establish the Hearthwood Clan as the power it is today.”

“Yes...” I replied carefully. “But I never took a risk like this one. Well, there was that one time against Tim where I really had to roll the dice, but I prefer not to.”

“But then how...”

“I won all those battles by stacking the odds in my favor well ahead of time. If I have any choice at all, I don’t pick fights unless I know I can win them. That’s how I lived long enough to get as powerful as I am.”

Segolas was silent. “I didn’t know that. I just heard the stories...”

I nodded. “Tell you what. Once you’re better, we can come back here, just the two of us. I’ll show you how I fought at your level and give you my best advice so you can do even better at yours.”

“But... if I waste any more time, I’ll fall even further behind...”

“Did I ever tell you the story about the tortoise and the hare?”

Segolas looked confused. “Tortoise, hare? What?”

“Right. How about the story of the Iron-Shelled Stone Pig and the Silverwing Hawk?”

“No... I’m not aware of any such story.” Segolas frowned.

“Well, it’s something every father should tell his children. Two animals race. One is quick. The other is slow. But the

slow one keeps going long after the fast one has stopped to take a break. In the end, the slower animal wins because he doesn't give up."

Segolas was silent, and I feared I hadn't done the story justice. But he spoke up again a moment later.

"You're... saying that I don't have to worry about my siblings racing ahead. I just have to keep cultivating at my own pace?"

I grinned and gave him a pat on the shoulder. "You're not competing with your sister, or your brother, or even me. The only person who can stop your progress is yourself. If you must overcome something, overcome yourself so that each day you're a better person than the day before." I hauled Segolas to his feet.

"I didn't know you were a scholar as well as a cultivator, Father."

"Ha! Well, I wouldn't go that far." I ran my hand through the hair along the back of my head. "But I've been around the block before. Tell you what, how about we run through this dungeon once or twice, you and me? I did that with a few of your siblings already. And don't spread this around, but I've got an ability that helps those adventuring near me get lucky while adventuring. Odds are, we'll find some good stuff for you! And if we don't, I'm sure I've got something in the clan's stores."

Segolas had a grimace on his face at the sound of free handouts. Unlike Comela and my other children, he wouldn't take kindly to handouts. He wanted to earn his power, just like I did. In that way, at least, he was the most similar to me of all my children.

"Get your mother off my back. I just know she'll be a mess when she hears what happened. Make her happy, and we'll call it even."

Segolas raised a skeptical eyebrow. "That's it?"

"You underestimate how important your mother is to me. Compared to seeing her upset, a few cultivation supplies for a

mage acolyte are practically worthless. Don't think I wouldn't give any other mage acolyte in your position the same deal."

"Even if they weren't your son?"

"Yes, even if they weren't my son."

"Alright. I'll do it." Segolas dusted some of the blood and gore off his shirt, looking uncertain of what to do next.

I pulled him into an embrace. "But remember, you are my son. And you did just take down a true mage monster on your own. Even if you gave up fighting and gaining power here and now, I'd always be proud of you."

"Thanks, Dad."

CHAPTER  
**SIX**

Sava had been terribly worried from the moment she heard Segolas went all alone, but Mac had informed her I was keeping an eye on things. That was the only thing that kept her from tearing her way through the dungeon herself.

She gave Segolas quite a talking-to when we finally got to the surface, and I knew he would be in trouble for a while. But true to his word, he promised to rest and recover and not do anything too strenuous.

“To think, I’d been working all day and night to craft the perfect potion for your death zeal, and you went off trying to get yourself killed collecting a few petty trinkets!” Sava fumed.

“I’m sorry, Mother. I’m just sick of lying around like a useless lump. I’ve done enough of that for a lifetime already.” Segolas shrugged.

“I’m just glad you’re safe. But if you still want my potion, you’re spending the rest of the week resting and recovering!” Sava said.

Segolas hung his head and walked off. As soon as he was out of sight, Sava’s scowl brightened into a smile.

“You were watching him the whole time, right? Did he fight well?”

“He did. He pulled some rather impressive moves for a mage acolyte. I’ll take him for a real dungeon run in a few weeks. Maybe it’ll help prepare him for true mage.”



“Ha! I knew it. Now, unlike our son, you have no need for bed rest at all. And neither do I...” Sava smiled coyly at me as she tugged at my shirt.

Before long, the two of us were back in my personal chambers. As nice as my quarters in Castle Mac were, I missed some of the comforts of technology. Elven beds tended to be hard, sturdy things. They worked well enough for sleeping on them, but they didn't have the rhythmic bounciness I needed. The Wanderer knew just what I was going to be using this bed for most of the time, so its spring exactly matched my natural frequency during certain intimate activities.

After I was satisfied and Sava was well and truly exhausted, the two of us shared a shower. That, in particular, was something I'd missed. A bath here or there was fine, but they got old when that was all you could get.

I spent more time with Sava, and she filled me in on everything she'd been doing. A lot had been going on right under my nose over the past few weeks, and I realized I'd have to bring each of my women into my chambers for a little personal time if I wanted to stay up to date on everything that was happening in the Hearthwood.

Thankfully, I had plenty of time for all of that between my usual slow and steady cultivation. For once, things were looking calm in the Hearthwood.

The days passed smoothly for me, and once again, I was feeling like I was on vacation. Compared to my hectic life when I first arrived on this world, long moments of calm like this one seemed unnatural, and each time they happened, it took me days to overcome the stress of not doing something.

I'd been getting better at that lately, though. It helped to have my women close at hand to keep me company. Not just Sava and Tivana, but Assyus, Eltiana, Melise, Yorik, Illiel, and Nela as well. All of them were as important to me personally as they were to our clan. Thankfully, now that things were calming down, I could pull one or two of them

away from their duties on any day to keep me company for a while longer.

Still, just like before, the endless relaxation was wearing on me. Perhaps those days of intense stress had changed something within me because the longer I relaxed, the more I felt like there was something I needed to do. Cultivate? Surely, but I was already as on top of that as I could be. Destroy the clan's enemies? The Cult of the Unblinking Eye was keeping to themselves for now, and all the minor enemies throughout Deania had either been destroyed or bent their knees and acknowledged our supremacy.

I even got to see the small scattered remnants of the Demon Star Clan come together again. Tivana kept me apprised of the situation as one of the surviving mage acolytes reached true mage and tried to reform her broken clan. I'd slain their matriarch in battle, which had ended their clan's rise to power as they attempted to fill the vacuum left behind by the Songstone Clan.

I hadn't expected the survivors to make anything of themselves. It wasn't like there was room for another great clan in Deania now that the Hearthwood Clan had gobbled up all the Songstone Clan's old territory and then the Sakaku Clan's territory as well. A year ago, they had made good foes, but now they couldn't hope to oppose us even if every one of their mage acolytes became true mages.

Still, I'd been prepared for a big fight as their true mage challenged my clan and me for what was ours. Comela rode out to meet them on her wyvern, and I followed in secret just in case she needed support.

But no fight happened. It turned out the true mage, and the survivors of the Demon Star Clan were only heading our way to grovel at my daughter's feet and beg her to let bygones be bygones, offering everything her clan had left, including herself and all six of her daughters as a gift to make sure there was no lingering resentment between her family and the Hearthwood Clan.

I almost chuckled to myself when I heard her begging. To be honest, I'd completely forgotten about their clan. They were such an insignificant problem to me that even if they'd declared themselves my sworn enemies, I probably wouldn't have bothered taking care of them.

It was disappointing that my daughter got to deal with them instead of me, but seeing how scared the newly minted true mage was in Comela's presence, she might have a heart attack if I showed my face.

"Alright, alright. We accept your heartfelt apologies. Another elder from your clan already said something similar. I'll take two of your prettiest daughters to be raised in the Hearthwood Clan to ensure the Demon Star Clan's next generation is more amicably disposed to us. You can keep all the other stuff," Comela declared, much to the heartfelt pleas and thanks of the new Demon Star Clan matriarch.

"Thank you, honored Lady Comela of the Hearthwood Clan! And please tell your father that I and any other woman of the Demon Star Clan are at his disposal. I hear how he likes to assert his dominance over conquered women like us by stripping us naked and having us cr—" The true mage was cut off by a raised hand from Comela.

"Some rumors about my father are greatly exaggerated. I don't think he'll require that service of you," Comela said.

I shook my head. Had the whole Chief of the Blackgorge Tribe thing really done that much to shape my reputation into that of an insatiable despot?

Comela leaned forward conspiratorially. "But just to be safe, make sure your two daughters make themselves presentable for him."

Sure enough, I returned to my room to find two mage acolytes from the Demon Star Clan bound in ribbons, sitting on top of a chest of gold coins and waiting for my arrival. A man of lesser moral fiber would have taken the gifts for what they were, but I ended up just taking the gold. I'd just spent the entire day with Eltiana and Assyus, so I was feeling rather satiated already. The pair of mage acolytes went to the

Whitewood Clan, who would give them jobs as castle maids until they found their feet in the city.

I'd have thought spending time with my women and my children would eventually relax me, but things hadn't quite worked out that way. I suppose I was used to needing to protect them. The thing that really fixed the endless tension between my brows was resuming game nights with my friends.

Back on Earth, Sam and Dean used to come over every weekend. Sometimes we would go out, but other times we would just hang out at my place and play board games or watch a movie. It was a fun, relaxing pastime from days gone by.

"Ouch, looks like a bad roll for you, Sam," I chuckled as Sam rolled a natural one. "Your archer trips and falls on his face. The arrow he was holding cuts his fingers, and now he can't hold his bow properly."

"Ha, don't worry, I'll save the day!" Dean promised as he rolled his own dice. "Ha! A three!"

"Your barbarian hits the wild boar with a glancing blow and does three damage."

"Aw, come on! You saw me cut the top of that mountain top off with my axe! Surely my character can kill a stupid boar..." Dean grumbled.

"The rules are the rules, Dean. You've got a level two barbarian."

"I forgot how lame being low level is," Dean grumbled. "Can't we just resume one of our old games with our old characters?"

"The character sheets are back on Earth, Dean. Besides, it's been over four hundred years since we last played that session. I'm not sure I remember the plot anymore," Sam replied.

It had been considerably less time for me than it had been for the two of them, but it had been a rather hectic year, and I

wasn't sure I could pick the game back up again, either. So we'd started fresh with new characters.

"I think there are a few inaccuracies with your game, Father," Comela said as she stared at the figurines and the map I had Mac print up for our gaming session. "The monster names are all wrong. And why do people get stronger by leveling up instead of cultivating? It strikes me as wisest for these characters of ours to focus on collecting herbs to barter for early cultivation supplies. Once we reach mage acolyte, adventuring will become both safer and easier."

"There's no cultivation in this game, I'm afraid."

Comela grumbled again. I suppose the game was a bit confusing for her without the background Sam, Dean, and I had. But with me acting as Dungeon Master, we really needed at least one more player to have fun. Tivana, in contrast, had taken to the game much quicker.

"My cleric shall use her healing spell to cure Honored Fateweaver Samuel's archer," Tivana announced.

"You cast your spell, and Sam's archer's fingers are healed. He can fire his bow again."

"Princess, how are you so good at Father's game? It doesn't make much sense to me. The way the spells work is all wrong," Comela protested.

"I have studied my grandfather's ancient manuscripts. They talked at length about this game, and as a newly manifested elf, I was convinced that there were profound secrets to great power hidden within the stories he wrote there."

Dean, meanwhile, was trying to balance his axe on his nose. It made quite a comical sight.

"I have since reconsidered that position."

We eventually made it through the encounters I had in mind, which proved to be stressful on the group, mainly because they'd lost badly against a group of giant rats.

“In real life, I could crush them all with one stomp,” Dean said as his barbarian fled the battlefield with a single hit point left.

“There’s still one rat clinging to your barbarian’s loincloth. You need to make a saving throw before it bites something vital,” I said.

“Crap!” Dean swore and threw his dice. In the end, the last rat took him down, but Tivana’s cleric was able to save him. I thought it was a good gaming session.

We were just getting ready to set things aside to continue the game at a later date when Sam sat bolt-upright.

“Sam?” I asked curiously.

Dean must have recognized the expression on Sam’s face because he groaned. “Oh no, not again.”

“What?” I turned to Dean.

“Sam gets like this whenever his fate magic warns him that something bad is going to happen soon. Let me guess, it’s either an interplanetary monster attack or a demigod meeting. Please tell me it’s an interplanetary monster attack...” Dean pleaded.

Sam blinked, and a moment later, his eyes returned to focus again.

“Looks like you’re going to get your wish. There’s a dragonswarm due in on one of the other continents. They’re being led by a pair of early demigod-level space dragons. I detected them before and thought they’d just fly over, with only a few of their clutch at the wizard realm or below swooping down to pick fights or grab lunch, but something’s changed. Apparently, the demigods have decided the World of Sanctuary and Serenity is a good place to roost for a few weeks.”

“Does a dragonswarm mean what I think it does?” I asked. “As in, a swarm of dragons?” It reminded me an awful lot of something I’d heard about on Yorik’s world. Her father had died trying to fight off a dragonswarm, and it had been the ruin of the Blackgorge Tribe before my arrival.

A smile had replaced Dean's groan. "Oh boy, you're in for a treat, Theo! Yep, it's exactly what it sounds like. There'll be thousands of hungry elf-eating dragons descending on this planet at any moment! Looks like we're going to fight them off!"

CHAPTER  
SEVEN

“Thousands of giant dragons that fly through space?” My mind returned to the massive dead dragon in the center of the Hearthwood. It had been the center of Segolas’ cultivation path, and the entire Circle of Necromancers to the north had coveted the amount of death zeal it emitted. And that was just a dead juvenile. I shuddered to think what a live, fully grown dragon of this type could do. Especially if it was in a swarm with thousands of its kin. I took a deep breath, dreading the answer to my next question. “Is it anything like the one you killed in the Hearthwood?”

Dean shook his head. “Oh no, definitely not. That was a small juvenile dragon, traveling alone. It was a powerful individual because all the fights it had enhanced its Bloodline Origin Awakening cultivation—” I was just breathing a sigh of relief when Dean continued. “—But this dragonswarm will be way more powerful. There will be adult versions of that same dragon along with thousands of offspring not quite hungry enough to set out on their own but hungry enough to devour an entire planet’s worth of elves if we give them a chance!”

“You sound entirely too happy for what will likely be a tough battle.” I grimaced at the thought of the cities that didn’t know they were about to be destroyed.

“Oh, it’s not that bad. With Sam’s Fate powers, we can usually reverse time and save the people who get eaten. They’re more likely to survive than those struck by collateral damage!”

“Collateral damage?”



Sam cleared his throat. “When a dragon large enough to have its own atmosphere crashes into the ground from a supernaturally powerful blow, the entire planet can wind up destroyed by the impact. Fortunately, the old Planetary Defense Array surrounding the World of Sanctuary and Serenity is still active in mitigating the worst of the projectiles. Still, we’ll need all hands on deck to keep the earthquakes to a minimum. But that should be far easier now that we have you, an earth-aspect cultivator.”

Dean chuckled. “You should have seen the time we helped the orcs with their Dragonswarm! One of those big buggers splattered down and shattered a continent!”

“That was your fault, Dean.” Sam cast him a look of annoyance.

“But Grognak still paid out!”

“If by paying out, you mean he implemented the displaced elf restitution program to allow any elves unhappy on the World of Struggle and Strife to return home during their regularly scheduled pilgrimages, then yes, he paid out. The pay we were supposed to get went to damages for the destroyed clans to rebuild their cities.”

“So I take it once the little guys are taken care of, I’ll play support while you drive back the demigod-level dragons?” I asked.

“That about sums it up. If there’s anything more powerful than the two of us can take, we’ll have to hide behind the Planetary Defense Array and hope it holds without expending too much energy. Those things have taken quite a beating over the past few years.”

Despite my earlier comments, I licked my lips with anticipation. At first, I thought I just wanted some points, but these days the nuclear reactors spread throughout the settlement were all funneling straight into the mana generator, creating as many points as I needed with no effort on my part at all.

When was my last good fight? Not since the Timeweaver Spider Queen, and I'd been working hard on my abilities. I was more powerful than ever before, and I wanted to test how much my hard work had really paid off.

That explanation would have disturbed me if I'd still been the same Earthling I was when I arrived. But those days were over, and now I was the Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan. The only laws of this land were those the strong enforced with their personal power, and to protect my family, I would need to be as strong as I could be.

And so, like Dean, I smiled at the thought of battle. "When do we leave?"



Sam had to return to the Fateweaver Society to figure out the exact location of the attack. He would alert all the other Fateweavers to the danger. With their help, they'd identify each major disaster before it was going to happen.

Dean headed to the capital, and Tivana and I accompanied him. We huddled in one of the capital's smaller restaurants while waiting for news from Sam. I'd have suspected our presence would draw attention. Still, either Dean or Tivana must have hidden our presence because nobody paid us any more attention than they would an ordinary trio of heartwielders chatting after a long workday.

Sam arrived late with a tired and worried expression on his face.

"I have bad news and good news," Sam said.

"Aw crap. Is nobody else showing up?" Dean asked. "I want to fight the big guys, not spend weeks mopping up little critters because all the powerful elves and those Unblinking Eye chumps are sticking their heads in the sand."

"They are showing up. However, someone recently nudged fate so the dragonswarm would touch down on this side of the planet, right over Deania." Sam's face was grim.

“Wait, they changed where the attack would happen?” My eyes widened. Fate zeal didn’t have as many direct uses for combat, but with enough time to prepare, it seemed there was nothing it couldn’t do.

“Pretty much. Obviously, we can’t let that happen, so we’ll need to nudge it back into position. We’ll hit it from multiple angles. Dean will drop some snacks to distract the Dragonswarm for a few minutes. I’ll work with fate zeal to set things straight, and Theo can speed up the planet’s rotation. Between the three, we should be able to aim the Dragonswarm at the ocean. Even if they alter fate again, what we’ve done should be too much to counter.”

“I’m sorry, you want me to what?” Did I just hear him ask me to speed up the rotation of a planet? I was an earth cultivator, not a planetary terraformer.

“Our divinations say that you make it happen when we ask you to do it. I don’t know how, but apparently, you find a way.” Sam shrugged.

“Any hints?”

“Not a clue. Which I suppose is a hint unto itself. It means whatever you do is some powerful magic.”

I grumbled to myself a little. “Alright, I’ll do it. But don’t blame me if I can’t figure it out.”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll need to take care of things on my end starting now. There’s no time to waste.”

“Wait!” Dean said. “Do you think dragons prefer giant hamburgers or hot dogs?”



Dean had to settle for a collection of giant monster corpses obtained courtesy of the hunters of the Hearthwood. I didn’t know what they were, but according to Mac, they were the only things that were both dragon-sized and readily available in bulk in our local market. So, after buying a few more for sale in the capital, Dean was fully equipped for his mission.

Sam returned to the Fateweaver Society, which only left Tivana and myself figuring out how to speed up the rotation of a damn planet.

I wished Sam had at least been able to give me a hint. But he hadn't.

Unfortunately, Tivana wasn't of much help. She was a space cultivator, and other than suggesting I push really hard, she didn't know how to make what I wanted to happen work.

If this were merely a problem of brute strength, Dean would have handled it. And if it were merely an application of earth zeal, surely Sam could rally a few thousand earth-aspect cultivators of a high enough cultivation to make some change happen.

I already had a hunch that the solution had something to do with science rather than magic, so I conversed with the only mind I knew who had the background to help me.

“Mac! How do I speed up a planet's rotation?”

[We could try cleaning and lubricating the bearings. That usually works for spinning things.]

Mac chuckled at his own joke, and I grumbled.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized maybe Mac was right. Maybe speeding up the planet was as simple as making what it rotated on rotate faster?

That this was a planet and had nothing resembling bearings was of some concern, but not the end of the world. If the world had an iron core, maybe I could speed that up. My aura fragment gave me far better control over metal than I had over earth. But who knew what increasing the speed of the planet's core would do? Sure, I could probably slow it back to normal after the danger passed, but it still seemed like a big risk. Plus, it would take days of continuous effort on my part, and I wasn't sure how much time Sam and Dean's efforts would buy us.

“Mac, how far does the deepest dungeon you're in contact with go? I'll need to get as close as I can to these bearings to clean them.”

[Several go fairly deep, but only one that isn't filled with endless hordes of exceptionally powerful dungeon-dwelling monsters. Things get quite dangerous close to the core.]

“Perfect. Give me the coordinates.”

[Certainly... but... Theo, you know a planet doesn't spin on bearings, correct? I am attempting humor. Either my logic processors have gone faulty, or yours are.]

“I know, Mac, but I suspect you were closer to the solution than you thought.”



Mac's path down to the center of the planet was half a continent away at the very edges of his perception. I wouldn't have found it if he hadn't guided me to the exact location.

The dungeon within it was relatively weak, and the monster under the direct control of the dungeon core was only at the wizard rank. It was, however, of the Earth aspect, and its power was above what I'd been expecting for a dungeon at its level. Fortunately, with my current abilities clearing the dungeon only took a few hours, and I soon reached the real prize.

“Here we are, Minerva. A hole in the ground.”

Minerva suggested I drop a stone down to gauge the hole's depth. I did so, and even after an entire minute of waiting, I didn't hear a clink.

[It narrows down no larger than a mouse hole after a few hundred meters and then to something the size of the head of a pin. There are a few blockages on the way, but the real benefit is the fact that there is both a chamber at the bottom and there is a continuous ley line of earth zeal leading straight downward. Your Unearthly Movement skill should take you all the way to the bottom with relative ease,] Mac explained.

“How deep is it again?”

[Just shy of three thousand kilometers.]

“Pretty damn deep.”

[There may be another solution we haven't thought of yet.]

“No, this is the only thing we've come up with, and I have no more time to dawdle. If I don't go now, I never will. Wish me luck!”

[Good luck.]

And with that, I dove nose-first into the bottomless pit. On the way down, I stretched out my hand and sank myself into the ley line.

The feeling was odd at first. In the past, I'd traveled horizontally across the surface using this ability. The one exception had taken me to the bottom of the Myriad Monsters Sea, where I'd had to fight off a bunch of sea creatures. Heading straight down carried a distinct sensation with it. It wasn't one I cared for.

On top of the disorientation was the feeling of the earth calling me. This happened every time I used Unearthly Movement, and it was one reason I wasn't regularly making trips across the planet using the skill. My body was a bit too attracted to the call of the zeal, and for a long time, I'd worried that I'd merge with it permanently if I let my guard down. The last time something like that happened, it had resulted in my evil robotic twin.

That was a foe I wasn't looking forward to facing. I'd always thought a copy of me would be a logical, reasonable creature. Or at least someone I could work with, sort of like Sam and his temporary clone. But alas, it seemed my experience with duplicates was more of the evil twin variety, just like Dean. If my twin had left the planet, I might have been able to ignore it, but instead, it was in a pocket dimension in what remained of the Devilbeast Wilds. I wasn't sure what it was up to, but I was certain I wouldn't like it. From our brief encounter, it seemed like this planet wasn't big enough for both of us.

But that fight would wait for another day. For now, I had a planet to spin.

On the way down, I felt other presences besides myself swimming through earth zeal like fish swimming through the sea. Most scattered at my slightest touch, but a few swam closer to investigate. Mac hadn't been lying. There really were some powerful creatures down here.

Almost all of them were some variant of earth elemental. There was nothing but sheer bedrock around me, and that was rapidly giving way to magma. There were creatures that could survive a swim in magma, but only elementals could survive without any sort of food.

They were far more powerful than any of the naturally occurring elementals I'd seen on the surface, too. I couldn't make out their true forms since we were all simply energy flowing through the stone, but I was certain if any of those creatures ever came to the surface, they would be massive and powerful. It would take someone at Tivana's level, at least, to drive them back.

The elementals nipped and bit at each other. Though there was no food down here, perhaps they could grow a little stronger by consuming one another and combining their energies, slowly climbing the food chain until one supreme elemental existed with the combined power of millions of lesser creatures. I would have to make this trip quick because I had no intention of running into such a creature.

Thankfully, my World Titan Fiendbody had enough earth zeal in it that I could feign the appearance of a powerful earth elemental, as that was enough to send anything beneath the sorcerer realm running in fear. Even the bigger sorcerer elementals were wary of me, and I suspected clashes at the sorcerer level were rare. I'd never had to fight while submerged in a ley line before, but after observing the elementals around me, I quickly got the hang of it.

Minerva had been a death spirit for a long time, so she had a good idea of how to fight like this. I couldn't really speak to her as I didn't have a physical body, but my will alone was enough for her to take action and defend the two of us against minor elements. While she wasn't used to fighting with so much earth zeal pressing down around her, these elementals

were equally unfamiliar with death zeal, and so she took care of the little ones quite handily.

That gave me the time I needed to study the elementals' fighting techniques in this underground place. A battle like this was a bit like two blobs of slime wrestling as one elemental's energy tried to devour the other. The strongest of them was at the peak of the sorcerer realm, and it must have thought it could take me. It nibbled at what felt like my shoulder, and I turned it on in an instant.

It had already detected my World Titan Fiendbody, but I'd withheld my Earth Cultivation for just this sort of scenario. My body cultivation wasn't my only source of power. Using my other abilities, I wrapped around the elemental and squeezed. The thing exploded in my grip into a cloud of energy that scattered in all directions. I couldn't possibly chase it down, but I didn't need to. My grip had held on to a substantial quantity of earth zeal, and I kept it with me, curious at what form it would take when I became flesh and blood once again.

I re-emerged in a pitch-black cavern, just as Mac promised.

"I hope that wasn't too uncomfortable for you, Minerva." At heart, Minerva was an elemental spirit just like those earth elementals. But unlike those earth elementals, she was of the death aspect. The only reason she could travel through stone like we just had was that my powers wrapped around her completely. To anyone studying my body, she would just look like another part of my cultivation, and that was just how my Unearthly Movement skill treated her. "I'm sure you felt quite helpless there."

[Yes.] She whispered that one word in her mind, and somehow I didn't think she'd mind going through that again. She always did like a warm, tight, magical embrace.

I was equally glad for her presence. We were on the edge of Mac's range, so talking with him would be difficult. This hidden cavern near the planet's core would have been quite spooky if I had been completely alone. I debated opening up a



Pocket World Passage up to bring some people in from the Hearthwood. The cavern I was in was certainly big enough.

The cavern ceiling stretched high overhead, and the ceiling was rounded instead of made of natural stone. Someone had built this chamber. No wonder there had been a tunnel leading all the way to the surface. It had probably been some sort of air vent once upon a time.

I detected metal around me, which was odd for anything constructed by elven hands. Alloys of iron could be even more dangerous than pure stuff to them.

My enhanced senses could see in even the dimmest of light, but down here, so deep, there was no light at all. My magical senses meant I wasn't hindered in the least, but if I brought others down here, they would be. Besides, there was something different about being able to examine an area with your own eyes that made everything feel more real.

Unfortunately, despite my profound magical powers, I'd never mastered a single ability that could create light.

“Minerva?”

[No light spells in my arsenal either, master.]

“Well damn.”

And so I was reduced to sending a note through my Dimensional Storage to Mac for help, and he sent back a bundle of tablets with a light enchantment on them. I still preferred flashlights since these square things needed two hands to hold, but they worked well enough, especially when I used earth zeal to stick them to the walls of the room. The zeal here was dense enough that those enchantments would keep running for a long time.

[It looks like an enchanter's workshop, but I don't recognize the devices.]

“Close,” I replied. Unlike her, I did recognize the devices. There were microscopes, centrifuges, incubation chambers, and a microwave. Complete with all the glass beakers and the cabinet full of long-dried solutions, I knew what this was. “It's a laboratory.”

[Like the Alchemist's Laboratory you let Sava use?]

“Exactly, though this one seems to be based on more science than magic.”

I found a notebook sitting in the center of the room. There was a primitive drawing of an elf there. She seemed different from the elves I knew and loved. Her eyes were wider, her brows drawn sharper. Her ears stuck far past her head, and her cheekbones were sharper than I was used to. An early iteration, perhaps?

Looking further, that was certainly what it appeared to be. I'd known the elves were a created species, but this was the first time I'd seen such clear evidence of it. The distant ancestors of the elves I knew could have been made in this very laboratory who knew how many years ago.

I decided to leave the investigation to my people in the Hearthwood. I sent a message back that I was opening up a Pocket World Passage and anybody who wanted to come look around at a piece of forgotten history was welcome to come. I didn't expect many. All the metal in the place would mean they'd have to wear environmental hazard suits. We had plenty because I sometimes needed elves to help out in the Smith's Workshop, so I told Mac to make those available to the public for anyone curious and willing to do a little research to contribute to the clan's libraries.

I suppose I shouldn't have left the invitation so open because the moment the door opened up, an enormous crowd of elves was waiting on the other side.

“Theo! Theo!” Sava said, licking her lips. “Where's the best stuff in this lost and forgotten ancient ruin? Quick! I need to grab anything related to alchemical research!”

I should have guessed this would happen. To the elves, ancient ruins often meant free cultivation supplies and riches to whoever explored them first. It was only natural that they'd be eager to look around themselves.

Unfortunately for them, this laboratory had little in the way of cultivation supplies at all. In fact, it seemed like the

people who worked here hadn't known cultivation would be important to the elves they were creating because it wasn't even mentioned in the notes I'd been reading.

I passed along the bundle of notes to Sava before turning my attention back to the reason I'd come here. Now that a Pocket World Passage was open, I could converse freely with Mac again, and he pointed me in the direction of the tunnel leading downward.

There was a hatch at the edge of the laboratory, and it looked like once upon a time, it had been air-tight. Looking at the laboratory from the outside, it felt like the place had been designed to exist in space, not deep beneath the earth. In fact, it was rather reminiscent of the crude space stations I'd been creating in orbit.

Unlike the cavern, the tunnel leading downward was purely natural. It was also quite slippery.

At first, I thought it was wet, but that wasn't right. The cave was far too hot for liquid water to adhere to the surface. That was when I realized the stone had smushed under my boot. Prodding it again with my foot, I realized the rock was as soft as butter.

The stone was nearly molten. I was close to the planet's core. I probably should have guessed as much from the heat, but I was still adapting to just how durable my new body was. In my head, a candle flame still felt like it should be hot enough to burn me. But these days, dipping my hands in lava would be no worse than dipping my hands in a bowl of hot soup would have been when I was an ordinary human.

The environmental suits the elves behind me were wearing were designed mainly to keep iron dust out, not heat. I shut the door tight behind me and latched it closed before moving a rock in the way so an overly curious elf looking to see what was behind the metal hatch wouldn't roast herself by stepping into this blistering heat.

Then I strode down the tunnel, stepping with arms held wide to keep from falling. It felt a bit like walking downhill over a mountain of snow.

Like snow, I eventually decided that sliding down would be faster than walking. I checked behind me to make sure nobody was looking, and then the illustrious Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan tore a chunk of stone out of the wall, reshaped it into a sled, and let out a long cheer as I rode it all the way into the magma lake below.

I landed in it with a splash, sending a fountain of lava in all directions. The magma was no doubt letting out a huge amount of noxious fumes, but I, fortunately, didn't need to breathe all that often anymore, so the smell didn't ruin the experience.

Then I got to work. The first thing I did was try to shift the flow of the magma to make it rotate faster. If I made the magma spin faster, it would presumably carry the crust with it. That would, in turn, make sure the place this dragonswarm touched down wasn't in Deania.

But I had no luck. Even for someone of my prodigious power, it wasn't working.

Could I try making a barrier of stone? Maybe I could slow down the flow instead?

But the current fought me. For all my power, I was like an ordinary man trying to stop a train with my bare hands.

I scrunched my brows in concentration. There had to be a way.

And at that moment, I realized what I had to do. There was a reason why Sam said I had to be the one to handle this task. Lately, I'd been experimenting with the aspect of Identity, and its power was what I would need to use.

Using Identity, I could do things even magic could not. There was only one workable solution I could come up with on short notice, and that was to change the material the planet was made of.

By lowering the density of regions of the mantle, I could reduce the planet's mass. The angular momentum of the planet would stay the same. If measured, that momentum would be equivalent to the planet's mass, velocity, and radius all multiplied. I planned to decrease the planet's mass, but the

angular momentum would stay the same. Since the radius wouldn't change, the velocity would have to increase the further I lowered the mass. And that meant we would have one slightly faster rotating planet!

...In theory, at least. Nobody I'd ever heard of had tested this sort of thing in practice. But Sam said I succeeded when he asked me, and if this wasn't the trick I was fated to use, I didn't know what was.

Finally realizing what I needed to do, I got to work.

I sank my hands into the magma, willing it to change. Affecting things outside of the Primordial World was both easier and harder than doing so within it. It was easier because things within the Primordial World were sturdier. Everything within it was solid, and the dense higher-level energies rendered it much like this world had been when I'd been weaker.

In contrast, the World of Sanctuary and Serenity was like wet clay within my hands. It was easily molded and reshaped according to my will. The trouble was, it had a certain bounciness to it. There was a resilience to the matter that pushed back against me. It was soft and easily shaped, but it almost felt like something else was fighting me. Its attention was weak and distant. Wherever I looked, I could win, but I knew as soon as I turned my attention away, the planet would go back to the way it had been before.

That was odd. I hadn't felt this pull with individual objects on the surface, but perhaps affecting an entire planet was different. I had noticed how excruciatingly precise the strange orbits of the Ten Thousand Worlds had to be to avoid colliding with one another as the eons passed. Perhaps I'd finally brushed up against the force maintaining that harmony.

Regardless, after fighting it for a few minutes, I realized I didn't actually need to fight it. I didn't want to permanently alter the planet in any way. That sounded like a disaster waiting to happen. I just wanted to tweak things for a few hours so Deania wouldn't have to deal with a bunch of dragons attacking it. If I could keep the force trying to restore

things to normal at bay for a few hours, my work would be done.

So that's what I set about doing.

Another problem soon arose when I realized I couldn't use my ability too deep within the magma. As a result, I wasn't in the exact center of the world. I was off to one side. That meant I was decreasing the mass of one portion of the planet, effectively shifting the center point of the world away from me. This would result in a serious wobble to the planet's rotation until we restored normalcy. I did my best to counter the effect, but I was certain I was the cause of more than a few earthquakes on the surface.

At the end of the day, all I could do was hope for the best. Especially when I sensed a few creatures within the magma set their sights on me. Unlike the earth elementals from up above, these creatures were more like fish than golems.

They were beasts that swam through a world of molten iron and stone, each deadly and ferocious. As I was concentrating, a metallic claw rose from the magma lake, reminding me of the Mechanobeast I'd fought rather recently.

### **Ironclaw Magma Ravager (Late Sorcerer, 49)**

**This monster was born deep within the planet's core. Its true body stretches more than a hundred kilometers long. It survives by consuming smaller metallic organisms that thrive on the heat and light the molten metal of the planet's core produces. Its blades can sap zeal from anything it touches. Upon death, it divides into several smaller and slightly weaker monsters.**

"Crap." I sighed. Sam hadn't said this was going to be easy.

CHAPTER  
**EIGHT**

**M**y previous experience fighting on water hadn't been particularly pleasant. As an earth cultivator, I was used to having the home field advantage wherever I fought. Sure, earth zeal wasn't the best for speed or to produce magical effects, but it was second to none regarding utility, at least while on land.

At sea, I lost access to the vast reserves of earth zeal below my feet.

This was an even more frustrating experience. I was sitting on a slowly melting stone raft atop a lake of magma, and I couldn't lay claim to the zeal beneath me. There was so much fire and heat within it that the zeal only reluctantly obeyed me. And that was only when I grabbed onto a bit of energy that hadn't already been seized by the Ironclaw Magma Ravager. The thing was so massive that most of the magma supporting my raft was directly adjacent to its body.

On top of that, I was still using my Identity ability to modify the density of the magma around me. That must have been what had drawn the monster's attention. It didn't like what I was doing to its home.

All this added together meant that I was in for a rather rough time. I couldn't stop the process without losing all my progress. But at the same time, I couldn't take this monster out without taking it seriously.

[I've got this, Master!] Minerva promised, though I felt that she was seriously outmatched.

I warned her as much, and my point was proven a moment later when the giant skeleton she manifested immediately dissolved in the lake of magma. The bones caught fire and turned to dust after getting no more than a single stab at the massive metal claw. The clan remained completely undamaged. The Magma Ravager hadn't even seemed to notice the attack.

[Nevermind, Master. I don't got this.] Minerva blushed sheepishly. She'd been overeager in her desire to take out the thing annoying me.

"It's the thought that counts, Minerva."

And so began yet another legendary battle between the Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan and a giant mangy beast. The claw finally struck my raft, and I reached out with one hand to catch it. I could barely claim enough zeal to transform the magma I was standing on onto a solid platform. That only worked because I'd been doing as much for the past few minutes to keep my raft from melting. That platform gave me the leverage I needed to use my full strength.

Despite the disparity in size, I was stronger than the Magma Ravager. My World Titan Fiendbody was unmatched in terms of power, and with that power, I planned to show this beast why getting in my way was a terrible idea.

"Hey, if there's any intelligence in there, hear me out!" I shouted. "I just need to do this for a few hours! After that, everything will go back to normal! Promise!"

The monster roared in response, and a giant head like an eel shot out of the magma. Its circular maw was lined with millions of teeth the size of my arm, and its eyeless face shattered bits of stone off the ceiling above the magma lake. A moment later, those teeth were coming for me.

"I guess we're doing this the hard way," I sighed.

I tried pulling my hand out of the magma in preparation for a solid monster beatdown, but the moment I did, so I felt myself lose progress. I had to stay in constant contact with the



magma, or all this effort so far would have been completely wasted.

Maybe this was going to be a little harder than I thought.

The monster's tendrils whipped across the surface of the magma, and I hopped along my pad of solidified magma like a crippled bunny dragging its hand along the ground. I couldn't dodge like this, so I erected a Stone Obelisk to block the incoming attack.

There was a tremendous boom as metal claws struck magically summoned stone. My temporary raft swayed, feeling unnatural as I rode on the odd ripples. My brain expected the sensation of floating on water, but the magma was far denser, and the sway of the current had an odd feel to it.

I did my best to get my lava legs as fast as possible because I needed to block three more metal claws in short order.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

They cracked against my pillars one after another. I sprouted more pillars around them to trap the things in place. The beast struggled, but it must not have had a good angle on me because, despite its massive size, it couldn't simply tear my entire raft under the magma sea. It would destroy my Stone Obelisks eventually, but that was alright. Having them present for a little while helped me rob what control I could over the surrounding area from the beast.

And trapping some of those monstrous limbs in place helped as well. Even hobbled, I stumbled over to the largest of them and produced Spell Eater from my Dimensional Storage. Whatever alloy the beast's claws were made of was primitive compared to the adamantium I'd made my weapon of choice out of, and I shattered each claw with one swing.

It responded with a mighty roar and a dozen more tendrils, which were blocked and trapped by a dozen more Stone Obelisks. These were further out and a little bigger than before

as I devoted an ever-increasing quantity of my power to trapping more of this monster's limbs.

"I can keep this up all day!" I shouted to the beast, still hoping it would be intelligent like the Shadowblade Beast. The stronger a monster was, the greater the odds were it could understand me. But I detected no semblance of reason or attempt at communication in its actions. No matter what I yelled, it kept throwing more claws at me.

A more rational being would have realized this strategy wasn't working, suggesting that I was dealing with nothing more than an ordinary unthinking monster, no matter how powerful it was.

We played this little game of cat and mouse a while longer, and I probably looked like an idiot the entire time. I ran around the surface of the magma lake with my hands dragging beneath me like some sort of knuckle-dragging ape.

Fortunately, Minerva was the only one to witness my rather embarrassing fight against this big lava monster.

More metal claws shot out of the magma, and I blocked and trapped all of them. This continued for half an hour as I desperately hoped the monster would get bored and leave me alone. I figured a little pain would make this creature finally go away, but it only got more aggressive the more claws I snapped off.

Just when I was certain it was going to finally give up, it found a new way to attack.

The giant head I saw before shot out of the magma once again. I waited for it to lean in and bite me. If I could lock that head down, I could kick its skull in and finish it. But instead of trying to bite me, it opened its mouth and sprayed me with a faceful of magma.

This was far worse than getting hit with a spray of water. The heavy weight of the molten stone would have crushed a normal human to powder before burning them alive. Fortunately, my body was exceptionally tough, so it only felt like getting sprayed with a hose.

“Piss off already!” I sputtered as I wiped the dripping magma off my face. If I could pull my hands out of the magma, I would have shaken my fist at it in anger.

[Master, I believe that monster just spit on you.]

“And it’s going to pay for that! Mark my words!”

The monster spit at me again.

After wiping my face and cursing once more, I realized now I was the one that needed to come up with a new tactic.

I nodded my head at the Stone Obelisks, and in response, my magic propelled them at high speed toward the monster’s head. But the moment they appeared, the monster ducked its head beneath the magma, and all the obelisks soared uselessly by.

Then, the head popped up a few seconds later and sprayed me in the face again.

“Damn you, you giant worm!” I yelled as I shook the magma out of my hair.

I slung more Stone Obelisks, but once again, they missed. I was sprayed in the face again.

My strategy was ineffective. I needed another plan. You know what they say: if you can’t beat them, join them. So that’s just what I planned to do.

I stooped over and slurped up a big mouthful of magma. When the beast reared its head next, it clearly expected another wave of Stone Obelisks flung at it. It didn’t expect me to spray it in the face with its own trick.

Though my jet of magma was no larger than a finger, it had been propelled with all my strength. The force of the magma cut a deep gash in the monster’s face and dug into the cavern wall behind it.

“Ha! How do you like that, you big, dumb beast?” I laughed as I finally did some real damage to the monster that had been troubling me so much.

That's when the monster's other end reared up, and something shot out of it at high speed. Before I could react, I was once again covered in dung.

This wasn't the first time an enormous and incredibly powerful monster had pooped on me, but it was certainly the most infuriating. The dung hardened in moments, cooling from a liquid into something approximating concrete.

"Oh yeah? That's the game you want to play! Fine then!" I shouted back at the beast, fully intent on destroying it once and for all.



A few hours later, I had judged that I'd sped the planet long enough to accomplish my mission, and I let natural forces resume once more. A lot of elves were going to be confused at why today was a lot shorter than yesterday.

The Ironclaw Magma Ravager had unfortunately gotten away, but I gave it as good as I got. It would be licking its wounds.

"Minerva, you will never speak of this adventure to anyone," I said sternly.

All I heard in reply was a quiet giggle.

I returned to the underground station once more and slammed the door shut behind me, muttering threats at the monster that had debased me so the entire time.

I found the research chamber surprisingly empty. It hadn't been stripped bare either, which was odd. The elves had found nothing to their tastes, and now only four figures roamed the room as they listlessly poked the various objects around them.

Sava was one of the few elves remaining, and she jumped to her feet as soon as she saw me.

"Theo! I have a complaint!"

I furrowed my brows. "A what?"

“This book, written by fellow humans just like you! It claims they created an early version of elves. It’s three thousand pages long,” Sava said.

“Bring them home and have someone copy them so you can read them at your leisure.” I shrugged.

“My complaint is that there are only ten pages dedicated to brains, personalities, and senses. The other two thousand nine hundred and ninety are all endless notes and revisions on boobs and butts!”

Sava held up the notebook in question and flipped through a few pages. There were countless diagrams on the subject in question, and not all of them seemed to be of an entirely scientific nature.

“Interesting,” I said as I snatched the papers from her hand. “I completely understand your complaints. I will study these in great detail later.”

“And I have another complaint!” Sava raised a finger to the air. “This ancient ruin doesn’t have any cultivation supplies! There aren’t any hidden spells or techniques! No ancient cultivation manuals! No forgotten herbs or pills long lost to the world! It’s just an ordinary ruin with nothing magical about it!”

“I see... I see...” I said as I flipped through the notebook. There were some incredibly well-drawn diagrams in there. Really impressive artistry. And the scientist within me told me that I should spend the time to transcribe these drawings myself in order to gain a full understanding of what they contained.

“—And so everyone left when we realized there wasn’t anything useful here!” Sava said. I’d only been half paying attention as I looked at the notebook in my hands.

“Yes, fascinating...” I put the notes away for later study. I turned my attention back to Sava. “Well, tell whoever wants to explore the place that they’re free to do so. Just warn them that the only thing they’ll find is forgotten history, not any lost

cultivation supplies or grand means to boost their powers. Anything they discover will be purely academic.”

Sava grumbled under her breath, and I joined her as we returned to the Hearthwood. As we walked, I pulled her a little tighter to my side. And then a little tighter again.

“I’m covered in all sorts of grime, and I’m sure you’re sick of being in that environmental suit. How about the two of us head to the castle baths to clean up a little?”

Instead of responding, she led the way. Before long, the two of us were undressed and clean enough to get dirty again, which required another bath. I was debating calling in a few of my other women to join us when I received word that Sam and Dean had arrived in the Hearthwood once again. Apparently, they’d also accomplished their missions. So I kissed Sava goodbye once again and rejoined them to help save the world.

“How did your missions go?” I asked.

“Marginal success.” Sam shrugged. “Someone else was fighting us over control of fate. I only diverted things slightly, and most of that was due to you swinging the planet about faster than it should have.”

I turned to Dean. His clothes were ragged, and his body was covered in cuts. A bite mark as wide as his torso dug into his bare chest.

“The dragons took me for another snack as well,” Dean laughed. “Don’t worry. The wounds aren’t as bad as they look. I’ll be back to full health by the time we have to fight them for real.”

“Good,” Sam said, “because I have the new location where they’ll touch down. We’ll be heading east to the Fimblesea Continent. It’s one of the less populated regions, so that’s for the good. The end of the last golden age hit the place hard, and it never really recovered.”

“Shame. They used to sell these taco things I loved.” Dean sighed.

“We weren’t able to position them to hit the ocean?” I asked. Even though that would make the dragons harder for

me to fight, fighting them there would mean a lot fewer casualties.

“It doesn’t look like it. Whoever was tugging on Fate really wanted these dragons to touch down in Deania. We were lucky to move them away at all, and most of that was due to Theo’s efforts. Whoever it was hadn’t expected us to move the planet to get our way.” Sam chuckled, and I was glad I’d screwed over whoever had been trying to screw us over in turn. I only wished I’d been able to land the dragons on their head instead of targeting an innocent continent of modest means.

“We should get going and scout the area,” I suggested. I was rather eager to see this Fimblesea Continent. I’d seen the other continents on the World of Sanctuary and Serenity from a distance while off-world, but almost all of my time here had been spent on the Groveguard Continent, where the Hearthwood was. This was like seeing a part of my own backyard that I’ve never been to before.

“We’ll take your teleportation array to the capital. Dean, set one up on the Fimblesea Continent a century ago,” Sam said.

“That was when I could still get those tacos...” Dean sniffled a little in sorrow.

“Anyway,” Sam continued, “it’s still operational, even though the palace it once led to has been destroyed. Gather up a few minions to help out. We’ll need people on crowd control and maybe even to help fight some of the lesser dragonspawn. Though if we’re lucky, the place will still be as empty as I remember it.”

I brought along my crew. Sava wouldn’t want to stray too far from Segolas lest he run off to get himself killed, so she’d stay to watch things from the rear. She’d have the support of the Whitewood Clan sisters, Yavilla and Tavilla, so I wasn’t worried. Illiel also volunteered to stay behind to keep the Hearthwood running smoothly, which freed up some of our children to come without the danger of the clan grinding to a halt without leadership.

Assyrus, Eltiana, Melise, Yorik, and Nela all volunteered, which meant I'd have at least five wizards with me. Tivana would want to go as well, which would be perfect. Having a spare sorcerer of the space aspect would reduce the level of danger for everyone else.

Tivana could pull them out of trouble if things started getting too tough. Korra was also coming along. Her cultivation had stagnated since she was off of her world for so long, but she'd restarted from scratch with the elven Spirit Cultivation technique and had reached true mage with a second magic system. She might not be as strong as the others, but I was certain she had tricks the rest of them didn't.

Besides them, I'd also be drawing on my prisoners of war. Heavens knew I had enough of them by now, and most of them were rather well behaved. The Sect Leader of the Golden Sword Sect would be released from her restraints to fight by our side in exchange for more freedom. Truthfully, I had expected her to negotiate for a full release in exchange for her help, but she didn't even try to bargain.

The 'ne-sided nature of the deal had me feeling a little bad. She'd done a splendid job of training Comela so far, and she really was a talented teacher. After this, I'd ensure she was a prisoner in name only.

Yillinarena, sovereign of the Auqualian Isles, would be coming as well, along with no small share of her wizards. Like the leader of the Golden Sword Sect, she was a Sorcerer and my prisoner. Unlike the Golden Sword Sect leader, she'd already made herself quite comfortable, even as a prisoner. Asking her to earn her keep was more than fair.

Xoreda would be coming too, along with a few more wizards up north. I debated asking Teilinith and Feilinith of the Ancient Tree Temple to come along as well, but I wanted to guard our rears as well. One of them would stay in their lands, the other would hang about in the Hearthwood just in case something happened.

Quite a few of my children and the clan's promising warriors wanted to come along to the Fimblesea Continent as



well. Since we were using teleportation arrays, I could only bring true mages and above with me. Otherwise, the promise of traveling to a lost and forgotten continent filled with ancient ruins would have had the same effect as inviting people to explore that underground laboratory.

Comela was coming, of course. There was no way I was keeping her down. With her were a few faces I recognized, like Ullua. There was also Mayatania, who'd been a true mage with some half-forgotten connection to Sava we still hadn't completely worked out. She was nice and had been living in the Hearthwood Clan, helping out the Whitewood Clan whenever she could.

I'd seen her sweeping the palace floors with the Whitewood Clan in an incredibly skimpy maid outfit, and I'd wondered a few times if any of those eggs from the Whitewood Clan waiting to hatch were from her. Kysalian and Shakaran from the Sakaku Clan were coming as well.

Their clan was still a fraction of what it had been before being taken over by Tim, but they were determined to earn their keep in the Hearthwood Clan. Besides them, there were a few other veteran members of the Hearthwood Clan, all eager to join me as true mages.

When Comela showed up, I was surprised at how many other members of my family were tagging along behind her. She was the strongest of my children, but she wasn't the only one of them who'd reached true mage. At her side was her younger brother, Dulik. He wasn't a true mage, but his body cultivation had reached the level that I was confident he could take a hit even better than his sister. He might not do as much damage as Comela could on her wyvern's back, but I trusted him to keep himself alive.

Salura and Saesca had both been trained under their mother, Sava, as alchemists, and I knew they'd be tasked with bringing home anything Sava might find interesting. The two were only early true mages, and most of their cultivation was the result of drinking potions rather than fighting. Still, I trusted them to support their siblings and keep to the rear.

They were less likely to charge headlong into danger than some of my other kids. Their elder sister Salica was coming along and was a little stronger than the two of them. She'd grown up when times were tougher for the Hearthwood, so she looked a little more somber at the thought of battle than her younger sisters. I pulled her aside and asked her to look after her two younger siblings for me.

Pyriana and Darana from Eltiana looked like they were eager to stab some dragons. The pair of them twirled a long whip, and a pair of slender daggers tipped with iron, respectively, and from the way they held them, I could tell they'd been practicing.

The two of them hovered around Argona, who was dressed considerably more practical than her sisters. Pyriana and Darana both wore a few skimpy bits of cloth and skin-tight ninja wear. I wanted to complain, but their mother was right next to me wearing a matching outfit which I appreciated very much, so I held my tongue.

Argona, on the other hand, was covered head to toe in plates of enchanted adamantium and would be remotely controlling two dozen powerful golems from a distance. Between that and her plate armor, she'd be as safe as she could be. That was how a child of mine should go into battle. I was a bit worried about her making it through the teleportation array, since she wasn't a true mage, but the enchantments on her armor allowed me to waive that rule just for her.

Tanela and Lyrela from Nela were both coming as well. The two of them were the most formal of the lot, dressed in military uniforms I didn't even know the Hearthwood had. The army hadn't seen much use these days since it was usually faster for me to simply crush anything that threatened the clan with my own two hands than to assemble a squad to take care of the problem. But people like those two had kept the military traditions from our early days alive so if we ever needed them again, they'd be ready.

From Illiel, Aminel and Laminel were both armed and equipped for battle. They weren't the strongest among their siblings, but they both had good heads on their shoulders, and

I knew the rest of the family could rely on them. Which was why I tasked them with protecting Pelise and the rest of Melise's kids.

Melise's children had taken after their mother with regards to spirit healing. Between them and the vitality potions, I was confident we could ward off even the heaviest wounds. Pelise, Altease, and Jatese were all coming along, and all of them were skilled in their own kind of healing.

Jatese was even hauling along her pet queen from the Rakaren Queendom, a vassal clan under the Hearthwood's control. Their queen had sworn absolute fealty to my daughter, so I didn't even have to get my hands dirty showing up in their city. It turned out they had a few more true mages, which supplemented our forces.

Altogether, I had seven of my lovers and fourteen of my children, all coming along for battle. Besides them, I had another thirty true mages from the rest of the clan to draw on. It was a force that would have made the threats that had tried to destroy us before begging for their lives.

When we teleported to the capital, I was proud to note that the forces I was bringing along were roughly equivalent to the two Sam and Dean had each gathered from their own respective factions.

"Looks like we have about two hundred of Deania's elite all gathered here," I chuckled as everyone mingled and introduced themselves.

We thought it best to build squadrons based on abilities rather than keeping our people to their respective factions. For Dean and I, it didn't really matter so much, but Sam's people would be most effective when divided up among the rest of our forces.

They weren't the greatest fighters individually, but Fateweavers were second to none at making predictions about where the next attack would come. The strongest of them could even reverse time to undo lethal wounds. That kind of support would be most effective with more combat-focused warriors to back it up.

Sam had already arranged for travel supplies, so we loaded up. I had people back in the Hearthwood doing the same thing. Only anything we needed would be sent through my Dimensional Storage and delivered in the field. Between both of us, we'd thought of pretty much everything.

"Indeed," Sam laughed as we looked out over our forces and the rest of the city. "I'm sure the people of the capital are spreading rumors even now. What could so many powerful figures be doing? Where are they going?"

"I'm sure Dean's daughter will make an announcement to calm everyone down."

Sam looked doubtful. "If anything, she'll be the one spreading the rumors. She always was a bit of a troublemaker, that one. Gifted, but always a handful. But I'm glad to have her watching our backs."

"Come on, it's almost time to get going."

CHAPTER  
NINE

I arrived on the Fimblesea Continent in a flash of light, with Sam and Dean at my side. Dean was worried there might be danger, so it made sense for the strongest fighters to go first and clear the way for everyone to follow.

“I told you we wouldn’t encounter any danger.” Sam rolled his eyes. He’d predicted our arrival would be safe with his fate magic, and he was proven right.

We stood in an open field. Whatever civilization of elves lived here was long gone. We were surrounded by mountains that stretched into the distance as far as the eye could see. The air felt thin and cold; like being underwater without breathing through your gills. There wasn’t much vegetation around us either, but what little remained looked healthy enough.

The sky above had been empty when we arrived, now it seemed to have filled up with clouds. They swirled around us in circles, forming patterns in the skies.

“Wasn’t there supposed to be a city near here?” I asked Dean. This was his teleportation array.

He nodded. “There’s nothing out there anymore. My poor elven tacos are lost to the rivers of time.”

A single tear dripped down the side of Dean’s face.

“What direction was it in?” I asked.

“The ruins should be that way.” Dean pointed east.

“Well, seeing as how we’re going to need to scout the area, I call dibs on checking out the ancient abandoned ruins!” I

started flying toward them before either Sam or Dean could protest. They could scout the boring mountains and plains. I wanted to spend this time looking for something a little more interesting.

My keen senses immediately picked up traces of life within the old structures. A few dozen people must have once inhabited these buildings, but they weren't anywhere nearby. There was just the faintest trace of vitality there, which suggested they either weren't too strong or they'd been gone for a long time.

This was just a building on the outskirts though, and I could see the collections of old rubble and vine-covered structures grew denser the further I went. Most of the buildings here had been made out of some sort of zeal-enhanced wood, similar to what the elves of the Whitewood Clan produced.

It could last a long time, but was still more easily reclaimed by nature than stone. If I was going to find any buildings intact enough to keep using, they'd be deeper in the city toward what must have formerly been inhabited by the city's residents with the strongest cultivation.

After traveling several kilometers, I landed next to one building that still bore signs of recent habitation. Some furniture had been left behind, along with some food supplies. If anyone was living in this place, they hadn't come back yet.

I flew over the rooftops, searching for anything else worth investigating. Just then, I spotted a pair of figures coming down the street.

They didn't seem hostile, and they didn't even have auras, which meant they couldn't be true mages or above. They were probably just normal elves looking for treasure in this forgotten city. I knew my own children would be here doing the same soon enough.

I hid myself among some vines growing across the roof line, waiting until they passed me by below. Then, I jumped off the edge, landing silently beside them.

My fall was so quiet neither of them noticed me. I wasn't sure if it was my skill or their poor survival instincts, but the pair of elf women had their eyes fixed on the ruins before them, studying the text carved into the wall of a pillar.

“What do you think? Is there anything useful in there?” one of them said. She wore simple robes and her hair was pulled back into a ponytail to reveal her pointed elvish ears. They came to sharper points than I was used to for elves from the Groveguard Continent, and her skin had a deeper, almost purple hue to it that made her look more exotic than the elves I was used to seeing. Her eyes sparkled with curiosity as she and her companion stared at the pillar.

“Yes! I can feel a magical energy flowing through it,” the other woman replied excitedly. “But I'm not quite sure where exactly it comes from.”

“You don't know?” The first girl sounded disappointed.

“No, I only sensed it faintly earlier today. But since then...”

She trailed off as she focused intently on the column.

“Can you tell if it has any connection to the power source in the ruins?”

The two tried to figure out how the pillar worked with furrowed brows and desperation on their faces. Really, it was a cute look on them. Of course, I could read Sixth Era Golden Age script, so figuring out what the pillar did was no issue for me.

“It's a zeal condensation talisman. The power source is probably underground, but it's broken now. The text is a warning not to touch it or you'll get zapped by a blast of random aspect zeal,” I explained as I leaned in behind them.

Both elves screamed in shock and terror at the stranger in their midst.

“Who are you?! What are you?!” the first one shrieked.

“Sorry about that,” I apologized. “I couldn't help myself.”

The two of them turned to bolt in either direction, but I grabbed them by the arm and held them in place. Checking their cultivation level once again, I realized I had a pair of mage acolytes on my hands. That was just barely strong enough to leave the tribes they grew up in, but not strong enough to fight the real monsters that lurked in the wilder places of the world.

“Please let us go,” the second one begged.

“Of course, I won’t hurt you.” I released both girls’ arms.

The first girl ran away while the second continued staring at me with wide eyes.

“I have a few questions about the area. I hope you don’t mind answering them,” I said.

“Oh... well, um, okay.” The young elf nodded nervously.

“What’s your name?”

“Mia.” Her voice was quiet and small.

“Nice to meet you, Mia. Where did you grow up?”

“In the forests north of here, close to the Great Forest.”

“Did your people visit this city often?” I wanted to know how many explorers I could expect.

“Not really. We rarely venture farther south than the forest,” Mia replied. She tried to pull her arm free of my grip, but her strength was pitiful compared to mine.

“Do you remember when this city was built?”

“Nope.” She didn’t dare to meet my eyes. She sagged in my grip, realizing her struggle was hopeless.

“How about your home in the northern forests? Would you call it a city? Is it larger than this place?” I asked.

“Not like this one. Our tribe has about three hundred elves in total. I can’t believe anyone could ever build a place like this.” Mia looked around herself in amazement, forgetting her terror of me for a moment. But then her eyes returned to my hand around her wrist.



“Are there any other cities around here?” I wondered.

“I’ve heard of some further west, but I’ve never been there.”

Mia was a gold mine of information about the region; even if she didn’t know much, she knew far more than me. She’d make an invaluable guide for my children to help keep them out of trouble. Realizing how much use she’d be, I realized I needed to grab her friend too. There was no sense in letting a resource go to waste.

“Wait a moment for me please, Mia. I’m going to grab your friend before she hurts herself. I just heard her trip three blocks down.”

To Mia’s vision, I must have vanished from sight in an instant. When I appeared again a moment later. I was holding her friend, who was still in the middle of screaming.

I set her down on the ground, and she fell on her face. A moment later she scrambled to her knees and then back to her feet, and then she started running again.

I shared a look with Mia. “You think she’d realize running away is pointless.”

Mia looked at me nervously. “You won’t hurt her, will you?”

I shook my head. “Just give her a minute so she can tire herself out. I’ll pick her up again before she gets too far away.”

Mia bit her lip, worry furrowing her brow. “You... sorry if this is rude... but what are you? You’re not an elf.”

“You’re right, I’m not an elf. I’m a human,” I explained.

“A... who-man?”

“A human,” I carefully sounded out the word for her.

“What an odd name for a race. Wait, you’re not a type of monster, are you?” Mia started making herself nervous again.

I chuckled. “Monsters would probably call me a monster. I’ve killed a lot of creatures. Including a lot of elves.”

The worry on Mia's face reached a new level, and beads of sweat trickled down her brow.

"But don't worry. I've probably made nearly as many elves as I've killed. And mine are better. So all in all, I think I'm a net benefit to elven society."

Mia blushed. "B-by made, you don't mean..."

I turned my head to the distance, where Mia's friend was starting to get away again.

"One moment. I don't want her to get out of sight."

I vanished, once again reappearing with Mia's companion in my arms.

I set her down on the ground, and she got right up and looked like she was about to run again. She probably would have if Mia hadn't grabbed her and pulled her back.

"I swear, I'll give you anything! My bag of holding is yours! Let me go! Take Mia instead, I bet she'd make an excellent slave, way better than me! She's a bottom!" Mia's companion pleaded in desperation as she tried to tear herself free.

"Ema, stop! You can't run from him! He's some sort of wizard!" Mia leaned in, pulling her friend close. She whispered in her friend's ear, which was more proof that she wasn't really familiar with the higher cultivation ranks. Whispering would do no good when someone with my hearing was standing nearby. "And... he's really hot."

Ema immediately stopped her struggles and opened her eyes, wiping away the tears that had been rolling down her face a moment before. She looked me over, and her desperate expression vanished to be replaced by swagger and false bravado.

"Did I say take Mia?" Ema said, approaching me with a cautious swagger. "Ha, that was me just joking around. You know, I think you should come with me back to our tribe. I'm sure—"

Mia elbowed her friend in the ribs. “What did you not understand about me saying ‘he’s a wizard?’”

“Right... what’s a wizard again?”

I let the two of them bicker. I figured now wasn’t a good time to tell them that I was actually far more powerful than a wizard. Instead, I asked them about the region.

All in all, the area around the city was sparsely populated. Only one village existed within five days’ travel of the ruins. As such, they were fairly isolated, which meant there weren’t many other people to worry about. Their village had a single true mage matriarch, and she was the most powerful elf in the region.

I would have to borrow her while my children explored the ruins and secured the region in preparation for the dragon attack, since a local true mage would probably know even more than the pair with me now. Mage acolyte guides might be enough to keep Argona out of trouble, but I was certain Comela and Dulik would be looking for more excitement than the likes of Mia and Ema could handle.

“I’ll be sending some people to the city soon. Some of them are daughters of mine, so please give them a tour,” I said, tossing a zeal crystal to Mia and Ema each. I had things far more valuable than those for mage acolytes, but I was worried they wouldn’t be able to identify Sava’s pills at a glance. These zeal crystals would be immediately valuable to any mage acolyte who could feel the power in them.

“This... it’s a zeal crystal!” Mia exclaimed with shock.

“We’re rich!” Ema yelled, hugging her friend.

“And you’ll be richer still if you stay here and help me out later. Come with me and there’ll be ten more of those for each of you, along with a few things you might find even more valuable.”

The elves needed no further encouragement. Soon, the two of them were riding on either side of me as I flew us back to the teleportation array, where the teams from Deania were just starting to set up camp.

When I returned to camp, I sensed several powerful auras I didn't recognize, and some that I did.

Melise's master was there, as was Tivana's mother. Both of them were powerful demigods and could no doubt hold their own in a fight against the dragons. There was a purple-haired elf hanging around near Dean who I thought was vaguely familiar as well. I had a feeling she might have been one of the two that hung around him back on Earth.

"Theo!" Dean waved me over. "Let me introduce you to a few friends. Everyone, this is Theo, the Patriarch of that new Hearthwood Clan you might have heard about."

"Nice to meet you all!" I said, smiling as I bowed.

"Oh, polite too! It's rare to see a young man without an ego that grew as fast as his cultivation!" A silver-haired elven woman laughed. "If I were two thousand years younger, I'd snatch you up for my harem!"

Dean laughed. "You'd have to fight his harem over him! Theo here has quite a few eyes on him already!"

"Including my daughter!" Tivana's mother stepped in front of me protectively.

"Oh, you spoilsports..." The silver-haired demigod shrugged her shoulders. Soon, she changed the subject. "Say, I see you three are here, but none of the human men from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye bothered to show up. Such a shame. They're usually quicker to flirt."

"The Cult of the Unblinking Eye probably won't be showing up," Sam replied. "In fact, we have reason to believe they are the ones that lured the dragons here. The dragons were originally destined to land on the Groveguard Continent."

"I take it you did something?" The silver-haired demigod wrinkled her brow. "I was worried we'd entered another peculiar orbit, considering how much higher in the sky the sun was than it was supposed to be back home. You caused quite a panic among the heartwielders and mage acolytes."

“Not as much of a panic as they would have felt if these dragons landed in Deania.” Sam shrugged. “It’s better to have them land here in this mostly empty continent.”

“About that,” I interrupted with a raised hand. “This continent isn’t empty. I ran into two locals while exploring the nearby city. Apparently there’s a settlement near here. We need to evacuate them otherwise they’ll get caught up in the cross-fire.”

“Hmm... I didn’t sense any wizards. Losing true mages and below won’t matter much in the grand scheme of things. We could just let them live out the rest of their short lives in blissful ignorance.” The silver-haired demigod shrugged dismissively.

I gave her a flat disapproving stare. “We will be evacuating them. Your advice is appreciated, but not required.”

The silver-haired demigod yawned. “Oh fine. Normally I love a passionate man, but this just seems terribly dull.”

Despite her words, she agreed to send some of her disciples out to scour the lands in search of these locals and warn them of the coming danger. Though there were only six demigods, all of them had at least a handful of followers at the sorcerer realm, and dozens at the wizard realm.

Those wizards and sorcerers had followers of their own, which meant there were thousands of true mages available for the task at hand. I didn’t even need to send out any of my children to help, which freed them all up to explore and prepare.

My children soon secured the city. Any riches or secrets left to claim would be theirs for the taking. I dropped Mia and Ema off so the two of them could help them out. Oddly enough, they seemed even more terrified of Comela than they had been of me. The two of them knew what a true mage was.

I found the highest building, looking into the far distance as I searched for the dragons on the horizon Sam warned about. With ordinary human eyes, I would have no chance at spotting them, but with my enhanced body and vision I could

peer all the way into the depths of space beyond the world's atmosphere.

I searched the night sky, scanning the stars for my enemy. At first, I saw nothing out of the ordinary, but then my gaze settled on four red stars streaking across the horizon, like angry flames burning through the darkness. And there was a fifth, larger point of light directly between them. I felt a glimmer of relief – only five dragons?

But then, more points of light began to appear around the five largest dots. I squinted, focusing my eyes, and realized the terrible truth: it wasn't one large dragon and four smaller ones. It was one dragon the size of a moon, four massive dragons as big as asteroids, and thousands of smaller ones. And there was something even bigger lurking just behind them. The lights of distant stars were disappearing one by one behind it, as if being devoured by a monster.

When I found Sam and Dean, they were both staring up at the sky. "Yep, this looks like a big one," Dean said, his face grim.

"This one's as large as the one that attacked the World of Struggle and Strife. Too bad we don't have an Immortal Ascendant like Grognaak to fend those things off. But the Planetary Defense Array should keep the big ones from landing, so we only need to deal with their progeny," Sam added.

"What do you need from me?" I asked.

"Run support and be backup if either of us look like we're going to be overwhelmed. Otherwise, feel free to deal with any of the wizard-level dragons. Just focus on enemies you can take down quickly. Leave anything that's going to put up a real fight to me and Dean," Sam replied.

I nodded, steeling myself for the battle to come. "Alright then. I guess it's time to give your scaly guests a proper welcome," I said, ready to face the dragons with all my might.

## CHAPTER TEN

The dragon appeared suddenly, its deep brown scales catching the light of the nearest sun. To call this dragon massive would be like calling a boulder a mountain. It was a world unto itself. I had thought it would wield gravity magic like me, but as I looked up at the beast whose wings stretched from horizon to horizon, I realized I was staring at something truly otherworldly.

Rivers, forests, and storms adorned the dragon's scales, crossing the ruddy brown in lines of blue and green. Clouds passed over them like the dragon was a living, breathing planet. Its size defied all expectations, and I couldn't help but wonder if it consumed entire worlds to sustain itself. Perhaps that was why it was here.

As I looked upon the clouds, I saw flickering figures drifting around them, each one a miniature version of the massive dragon that was their home world. Millions of smaller dragons darted and flitted about, some meandering and scouring the terrain of their homeland, but many others had turned their eyes toward us.

The sight was overwhelming, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of dread as I saw the sheer number of them. There had to be millions of the creatures, and all of them were headed for us.

"Looks like an earth dragon. No wonder it's so big." Sam shaded his eyes as we both stared up at it. "As big as it is, it probably has the mass of something ten times larger. It needs to if it's keeping those continents in place without magic.

Though I suspect there's some sort of space manipulation on its scales. Watch out for gravity attacks."

As though Sam's words were a prophecy, the dragon opened its maw, and I felt a tingle run across my entire body.

"Now that you mention it, I think I feel a little lighter than I should..." I frowned as I bounced on my heels.

"That would be its gravitational field. Dragons of that size can lift things right off the surface of a planet and draw them into its maw. If we weren't here, it would probably sweep that field over every major settlement it found, swallowing up millions of elves."

I grimaced. "Every true mage of mine has either a flying sword or can fly under their own power. And everyone below that has an earth golem to work with. Between the two, nobody should fall for some petty gravity trick."

"The Planetary Defense Array should activate any moment now. Besides the extra gravity, we shouldn't have to deal with that big girl at all," Dean added. "Which is a damn good thing, because nobody here would last long against an Immortal Ascendant-level dragon."

We waited patiently while the air around us began crackling and shaking. The sky darkened, and black clouds roiled above us like an angry storm. As they grew closer and darker still, it became clear they were being sucked toward the sky by the giant dragon's pull.

"Brace yourselves!" I yelled to my women and Comela behind me.

The sky above me twisted and writhed, as if in agony, forming a vortex that soared upward. Like water rushing down a drain, the dragon was devouring the very air around us. But that was only the beginning. The tingling sensation that ran up and down my body grew stronger, and the vortex overhead intensified. It reached the ground and sucked up dirt, trees, and even some of our people.

I watched in horror as several elves were caught in the dragon's pull and swept off their feet. The Hearthwood Clan,



with our abundance of flying swords, could keep themselves aloft, but others were not so lucky. I saw the banner of Deania flapping wildly in the wind, and I knew that Tivana's warriors were in grave danger. So I called upon my magic, summoning the spell I used for my Sword Storm ability to levitate large rocks toward them. They grasped at the makeshift lifelines, and I could pull them back to safety.

But not everyone was so fortunate. I saw members of the silver-haired demigod's faction disappear into the dragon's maw, and I knew there was nothing I could do to save them. I had to stay at my post to protect my people. My heart heavy, I turned my gaze away, hoping that the Planetary Defense Array would activate in time to save them.

Perhaps if the fall killed them instead of the dragons, their wisps would have the chance to form new bodies again.

The sky above us erupted in a symphony of light and magic as the Planetary Defense Array activated. That ancient network of magic and technology, left behind by the old Elven Star Dominion, came to life all at once. Constellations formed in the sky, sketching strange patterns across the darkness. Beams of light shot up from the ground, and I saw more than one coming from the Hearthwood Forest.

The beams of light struck the massive dragon like lances, cleaving through the landmasses on its hide and bearing deep into its flesh. The dragon roared in fury, its massive tail whipping through space behind it. But that only caused more weapons to activate as they orbited the world and opened fire on it with automated spells, one after another. Any one of those attacks would have smote a sorcerer in an instant, but the dragon was taking thousands of them with little more than a roar of fury.

I spotted hundreds of tiny whirring things darting back and forth. They were so small from this distance, but they were probably massive up close. Squinting at them, I could just barely make out a humanoid shape. Instead, every one of those figures was a Planetary Defense Golem, just like my daughter Argona had taken control of. The Planetary Defense Array

sent thousands of them to land on the gargantuan dragon's back and attack in force.

But the massive dragon would not lie down and die. It cut off its gravity beam attacking us and unleashed a wave of fire that swept over the incoming golems. Thousands were destroyed in that one attack, but the Planetary Defense Array didn't care. It kept attacking. It was clear that this was a fight far beyond our level.

Fortunately, we didn't need to fight it. All we had to deal with were the millions of lesser dragons, along with those five big ones Sam and Dean had spotted earlier. Hopefully the demigods could hold their own against them, because even from this distance, I could sense their power.

I would only be responsible for battling the millions of smaller dragons headed our way and keeping as many of our people alive as I could while we did it.

Thinking it through didn't make my job any easier, but it was too late to back out.

A dragon the size of a skyscraper was headed right towards us. I planned to meet it head-on. The ground trembled beneath me with every beat of its wings, and I sensed some of the elves nearby shy back in fright. But at the same time, others rose up to return this fearsome beast's gaze.

Behind me, I sensed Amisra, Tivana, Comela, and Nela all standing strong. Comela's Wyvern Queen looked diminutive compared to its larger cousins nearby, but beneath my daughter's heels, it stayed steady.

### **Mature Sunwing Dragon (Early Sorcerer, Level 42)**

**This fire-breathing dragon exudes solar zeal from its scales and can scorch the land beneath its wings. Beware its sweeping area-of-effect attacks.**

It opened its wings wide, and I knew what was coming. I threw all of my power against the dragon, ready for the fight of my life.

I pulled it closer to the ground with gravity manipulation, forcing it to heel. I gestured wide, calling upon my iron-tipped

Sword Storm blades resting around me.

It opened its maw, and I sensed my opportunity to strike. I used what I'd been practicing in the Primordial World. I focused, channeling my will and all the power of my very being.

The saliva within the dragon's maw wasn't saliva. It was C4 Plastic Explosive.

The moment I convinced myself of that fact, the dragon's mouth exploded in a fountain of blood and gore. Teeth as large as my entire body went flying in all directions, and I flung some of the Stone Obelisks I'd conjured over the surrounding terrain in their direction to block the collateral damage.

"Father, you slew it with a single spell!" Comela laughed in jubilant excitement. "These dragons don't stand a chance!"

But I shook my head. "Hold the celebration, Comela. I don't think it's dead yet."

My surprise attack had nearly knocked the dragon out of the air, but now it swept its wings out and caught itself. Blood dripped from its shredded maw, and it locked eyes with me. The dragon's gaze was filled with hatred and a burning desire for revenge.

I knew this dragon wouldn't go down without a fight. So I pulled Spell Eater into my hand, ready for battle. Fire, space, light, and stone all rose to meet the dragon, battering its already ragged form. But it didn't let up its hate-filled stare as it flew towards me.

I had tried my new trick again, but it proved futile now that the dragon was focused on me. It wasn't as good as the Timeweaver Queen, but here outside of the Primordial World, that trick I'd just pulled had put a lot of strain on me.

I wasn't ready to do it again, even if this thing would not fight me over it.

The battle was fierce, and I felt the dragon's rage and hatred as it fought me with everything it had.

With my spear in hand, I fought the dragon. Its teeth met my steel, and its eyes met my glare. Its scales held at first, but my unstoppable barrage of thrusts shattered them to dust. Each of those blows would have sundered a mountainside, but they were barely enough to slay this dragon.

I landed among my friends, lovers, and family once again. I turned, seeing a dozen more dragons heading toward us like the first. “One dragon down. Only about a million more to go.”



The fighting was long and bloody, and the dragons were relentless. We were spread out across a good chunk of the continent, so even with superhuman speed, it took a while for reinforcements from one group to reach another. The Hearthwood held the abandoned city we'd found. Its towering spires proved good cover for our lower-level fighters to duck and hide from dragonfire.

Though the modern inhabitants of this continent had been reduced to a primitive state, their ancestors knew their earth magic. I was shocked to see how durable the ruins were. Even dragonfire couldn't crack the stone or topple the towers with anything short of a direct hit.

Deania was stationed nearby, with each clan spread across the area in defense of certain sectors and Tivana holding the center with the bulk of the royal family's forces. Deania lost more wizards than they had fighting against the orcs and even more true mages and mage acolytes.

The dragons were relentless. They breathed beams of fire, lightning, death, and annihilation down on us from all directions. But the elves of the Hearthwood fought bravely. I was more than a little biased, but I would have sworn that we killed more dragons than any of the demigod factions.

We had more wizards than any other clan on the field. With me, Melise, the Golden Sword Sect leader, and Yillinarena from the Auqualian Isles, we had four full-blown

sorcerers. Plus, Argona had her Planetary Defense Golem with her, which effectively gave us a fifth sorcerer. In short, we were better outfitted than most of the Demigod factions, and it was showing in our results. With that power, we slew dragons in droves while still keeping Yillinarena in reserve as a surprise in case something unexpected happened.

With the human and elven demigods locked in furious combat against the dragon demigods, that meant sorcerers were the strongest fighters on the field, and our group was the only one able to take sorcerer-level dragons reliably. Elsewhere, they were wreaking havoc and shattering defensive lines, but we held strong.

Assyrus fought like a demon possessed. Whenever water magic flared across the battlefield, I knew her sword was cleaving down another foe. Few elves could take a direct swipe from a wizard-level dragon's tail either, but she was one of them. Her ability to redirect force was second to none, and every dragon that hit her only ended up hurting itself.

The only other wizard-level fighter that could take a blow from a dragon and live was Yorik. Her body cultivation made her a difficult foe under ordinary circumstances, and one unfortunate dragon who thought he'd swallowed a hapless elf found my fearsome orc warrioress cutting herself free from inside its belly.

The dragon could count itself lucky because if Yorik hadn't cut herself free so quickly, I would have given that dragon a piece of my mind, and its end would have been much more painful.

Wings were of no use against Eltiana's nimble moves. She leaped from dragon head to dragon head, skewering them with a long poisoned dagger right at the base of the skull. Her blade was a weapon custom designed for delivering one of Sava's most deadly poisons, so whenever Eltiana could line up a stab between a set of scales, that dragon was doomed to die. Most fell from the sky without ever knowing what killed them.

Nela stood proudly with her spear in hand. She looked just like a sterner and more world-weary version of Comela,

standing like that with a fierce glare in her eyes. More than one wizard had assumed Comela was her younger sister instead of her daughter, so fierce was their shared gaze.

Nela guarded our flank with implacable resolve. No matter how many foes battered our line, they were met with beams of golden light and one deadly thrust of her spear after another.

Melise and Korra stood back toward the rear. Melise thought her skills were better suited to fixing damage than to causing it, and her personal efforts were part of why the Hearthwood had so few casualties relative to other factions. Plus, as a powerful sorcerer herself, Melise was strong enough to reinforce our lines anywhere there might be danger. She could even help me out if I started to get overwhelmed. Her recent training with Anya the Seer had given her a huge boost to her power, and she was in the mid sorcerer realm with her fate zeal, which was even higher than I was with earth.

I was immensely pleased to see that she'd picked up some new tricks living in the Fateweaver Society. Now she knew the same trick that I'd found so frustrating coming from the Timeweaver Spiders. She could reverse the flow of time around an injury, healing it completely. Done quickly enough, she could even resurrect the recently deceased. Not that she was limited strictly to healing. When Mayatania took an injury to her side, and a dragon refused to let Melise heal her, that unfortunate dragon experienced the full might of Melise's new and improved Starfire Crucible. It was much stronger now that she was a Sorcerer, and far more beautiful. It was like watching a starry night vanish into a black hole, both glorious and terrifying to behold.

Korra clung to the shadows, working at the dragons like Eltiana, though on a lesser scale. She slipped between true mage dragons one after another, claws digging in and tearing free scales that left vulnerabilities for others to exploit. While not as flashy, her efforts drove off dragons before they truly committed to fighting us. More than one flew home with their tails tucked between their legs after feeling Korra tearing a few scales free.

Tivana split her time between helping us and protecting her subordinates in the wider Deanian Queendom. As the battle wore on, those forces moved closer and closer to us until most of their forces were within eyesight of us. The rest of Deania's clans weren't far behind. More than once, I caught a proud matriarch of one of our neighboring clans diving toward the Hearthwood Clan's sector for cover.

Not that I minded. Thanks to Layered Durability, I covered most of our forces in a shield that would let them shrug off most forms of dragon fire. Only the sorcerer-level dragons could break through our defenses, and I fought those personally.

Besides Argona, Comela also made an excellent showing. Her Wyvern Queen took a bite to the neck and had to be sent back to the Hearthwood for care, but that didn't stop Comela from jumping on the back of a true mage-level juvenile dragon and blasting it with every spell she had from right on top of its head.

I had to rein her in a few times because she started straying from the group more than once in pursuit of more dragons to kill. The other factions weren't doing nearly as well as we were, and if not for me hauling her back to the Hearthwood's region, she might have run off to help them.

This battle was going on with no sign of stopping, and pretty soon, we would have to start pulling people back to rest and recover. I wanted everyone on our side to be in top form just in case the unexpected happened. My kids were young, but if things went badly, they'd soon see the wisdom in what I said.

The fighting lasted hours, and as it did, the massive dragon in the sky drifted steadily across the horizon.

"Father, it looks like it's leaving! You think we chased it off yet?" Comela pointed at the massive sky dragon.

I shook my head. "Not yet. And that dragon isn't moving. The planet is rotating beneath her."

Sam and Dean had given me a fairly extensive briefing as to how these fights went, and I had the Blackgorge Tribe's records from a battle with a Dragonswarm just like this one. It might have even been this very swarm.

Yorik's father had died fighting a battle just like this one, and facing it now, I could see why. When I thought of dragons, I thought of a giant gold-hungry beast with teeth, claws, hardened scales, and fire blowing from its maw. As scary as that might have been to an ordinary human, I didn't fear teeth, claws, or any normal fire. An ordinary dragon was just one more monster to slay.

But the dragons in the Ten Thousand Worlds were on another level. The ferocious beasts shot beams of fire and ice that could stretch across kilometers, and the powerful among them were large enough to alter the gravity on the surface of a planet. The swarms coming our way seemed endless, and this wasn't even all the dragons living on that world painted across the massive dragon's scales. If we were to truly face the full might of this endless draconic hive, I doubted even the almighty Planetary Defense Array could save us.

But while the demigods had to continue their fight against the higher-level beasts, the approach of the smaller dragons slowed. With their matriarch growing further away, fewer were landing near us to attack.

I was worried about the other regions of the world for fear that the dragons were landing there instead, and word back from the Hearthwood was that they were spotting a few stragglers. But whatever fate magic Sam and the other Demigods had woven to confront them here was working, and we had a genuine reprieve from the fighting for a few hours.

The sun set, and I made sure everyone took some time to rest and recover. Even though few of us needed much sleep, we still had to recover zeal and heal our wounds. Tomorrow would be another long day of battle.



CHAPTER  
**ELEVEN**

Everyone was exhausted and wounded, but one benefit of bonding with a magical transdimensional spaceship like The Wanderer was that I could always sleep in my own bed no matter how far from the Hearthwood I was. The Personal Chambers were still a wonder to behold, and while I rarely slept these days, today, I always did so in its warm confines. The modern furnishings reminded me a lot of life on Earth. While the elves had substitutes for indoor plumbing, I would always be a sucker for the real deal.

The room had been used to lock up Tim for a long time, so my companions and I were still getting used to having it back again. It had been cleaned and refurnished by The Wanderer though, so there were no signs it had been used as a prison for nearly a year. I took a quick shower and was surprised when I heard a knock on the shower door midway through.

“Hi, Theo...” Tivana said. “Mac said I could find you here.”

She opened the door and slid into the shower without another word. The shower in the Personal Chambers was only meant for one, but I didn’t mind getting cozy with Tivana. At least I wouldn’t after she washed off the grime of battle.

She helped me finish cleaning up, and I found more than one dragon scale in places they had no business being. Tivana had a few caught in her hair as well, but like all elven hair, a few brushes was enough to free all debris no matter how barbed or sticky, and soon her curtain of silky smooth silver hair was clean and glossy once again.

“That was some intense fighting,” Tivana said as she gently took the towel from my hands and started patting my back dry. A moment later, we switched, and I did the same for her.

“It was. Fortunately, the Hearthwood’s losses were negligible. Two dead, but we recovered both wisps and should be able to resurrect them with most of their memories intact,” I explained.

“Deania wasn’t so lucky. But we would be even less lucky if it hadn’t been for your support,” Tivana replied. “We are truly fortunate the other Demigods let us treat the Hearthwood Clan as one of Deania’s clans, despite your power and the number of wizards you wield. If the other demigods had pushed to make your forces hold their own region, you wouldn’t have been able to reinforce us, we would have had trouble.”

“I wouldn’t have abandoned you. Not ever,” I promised as I placed a kiss on Tivana’s brow. While I didn’t care all that much for Deania’s other clans, the royal family was important to me. If there had truly been trouble, I would have called them to our side, whims of the demigods be damned.

Tivana’s cheeks flushed red, and she wrapped her arms around my waist to hold me tight. She got a pat on the head from me.

“I’m terribly lucky,” Tivana said. “I always expected to end up with some useless man of good breeding from one of the major clans of Deania who’d do nothing more than sire a few children on me and lie about the castle until he died from failure to reach True Mage.”

I chuckled. “I’ve tried that. Lying about all the time siring a big clan is fun for a while, but it quickly gets boring. I don’t think I could do it for long.”

Tivana kissed me under the chin. “I wouldn’t change a thing about you. But I wouldn’t mind having you lie about a little more often.” While she whispered in my ear, her other hand reached lower and ran across my stomach before touching my growing manhood.

“Don’t you want to sleep?” I chuckled.

Tivana smiled. “Sleep is for the dead. Besides, a little dual cultivation will help me replenish my zeal reserves a lot faster.”

I chuckled. “Alright then, princess. I suppose I can help you cultivate a bit.”

Pretty soon, the two of us needed a second shower. This one was quicker than the first. By the time we were done, Tivana had recovered enough to lick her lips and give me such a sexy look that I was wondering if we’d need a third, but I heard noises emanating from outside in the rest of my Personal Chambers.

I opened the shower door to discover the bed was already filled. Either my Personal Chambers were getting popular again, or Tivana wasn’t the only one who thought to come to see me after the battle.

Assyrus sat by the foot of the bed, eyes closed as she meditated. When I emerged from the shower, she cracked open an eye and smiled. Eltiana lay with her head in her lap, looking at me through half-lidded eyes that suddenly became more excited when she saw my still-hard cock bobbing before me as I carried Tivana in my arms.

Melise, Yorik, Nela, Korra, and even Amisra were there as well. And every one of them was completely naked as they sprawled along my bed, each gazing at me with needy eyes.

“T-Theo...” Amisra began. “I’ve also been practicing the Deanian Royal Family’s dual cultivation technique under Tivana’s guidance. I would not ask so soon, but I could really use the boost to recover my zeal before the fighting starts up again...”

“Me too!” Eltiana said. There were nods all around.

I chuckled. “Well, I guess I didn’t really need sleep, anyway.”

Most of my women hadn’t had enough time to truly master Tivana’s family technique. In fact, I was pretty sure they didn’t

really know it at all and were just horny as usual. But I was willing to play along.

“Well then, let me see what you have learned,” I chuckled as I reached down and picked Eltiana up. She nimbly twisted in my grip, and pretty soon, I was gripping her ankle, though I did not know when I grabbed it. A moment later, I felt her warm and wet lips wrapped around my cock.

I set Tivana down on the bed. She blinked, yawned, and stretched while the rest of my lovers reached out with desperate and needy hands for my body hovering over them. They pulled me toward the bed, drawing me closer even as Eltiana bobbed her head up and down on my cock. Hard as I was, the power of my body cultivation meant I could always grow harder, and my cock grew even larger than it should have been possible.

Eltiana continued to suck me down her throat all the way to my base. I had no idea how she fit something so large so far down since my cute little elf ninja was a petite thing that should never have been able to gobble down so much of my prodigious size. But gobble it down, she did.

She didn't let up until one of my other lovers shoved her head out of the way with her own and soon took her place.

“Ladies, there's no need to fight over me,” I chuckled. “I'll be around all night.”

A bit of experimentation soon proved that I could get the lips of all eight women pressed against my shaft if I really tried, though the position was awkward for all of them. Yorik, in particular, was bigger than the others, so I opted for exploring her mouth with my tongue while the others enjoyed themselves and warmed up their dual cultivation techniques.

Though Tivana was the shyest with sex, she was the undisputed master of dual cultivation. Her mother had forced her to study it from an early age since the powerful technique designed by Dean formed the basis for her family's incredible power.

The others were studying her with a careful gaze, eagerly mimicking whatever she was doing both with their bodies and with their zeal.

I was right to think the others weren't as practiced as they claimed, but with an example to study so readily available to them, they picked up on what to do quickly, and I was pretty sure they might actually gain some cultivation benefits from the night's session.

While I wasn't as well-versed as Tivana in dual cultivation, I was a quick learner. I had gotten a truly enormous amount of practice with her since she moved in with me in the Hearthwood.

The trouble I encountered now was the fact that dual cultivation was meant for two people. It was even in the name. Perhaps there was a way to make the process a bit more efficient.

I started spreading my zeal around a little further. It was easy in The Wanderer. This place was my personal domain, and the zeal in the air and structures around me responded as easily as they would have if I had Stone Obelisks around every corner.

I touched the bodies of each of my women as they knelt with their mouths on my cock at the foot of the bed. The act of intimacy was just as important to making dual cultivation as the magical aspects of the technique, but perhaps I could push it a little further.

The sight of so many powerful matriarchs, each of them a powerhouse in their own way, kneeling before me with gazes of adoration lit a fire in my heart, and I wanted to share that brewing storm of energy with them.

I picked Amisra because she was the closest to the Sorcerer realm. That was a barrier I was familiar with, having crossed it recently myself. She had spent years as a peak wizard, never able to take that final step into a new realm of power.

She had long since consigned herself to never becoming a nation-level power and instead was relegated to the greatest peacekeeper among Deania's royal guard. With such power, no clan besides the Hearthwood could stand against her, but she couldn't bring other nations to heel like Tivana, Queen Lyanva, or I could. Doing so took a Sorcerer's might.

What if I could change that?

She had struggled for years to break through, but I had broken through to the sorcerer realm on my first attempt. If I were given rulership over her body and spirit for long enough to make the process happen, perhaps I could do for her what she'd never been able to do on her own. I had done something similar for Korra recently.

"Amisra, on the bed." I nodded with my chin. The other women all nuzzling my cock with their lips and cheeks pouted in disappointment, but I planned to get to all of them before the night was through.

Amisra stood, a shy smile on her face as she stood and sat on the bed. I placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and pushed her down into the sheets, looming over her all the while. The dim yellow lights overhead cast my shadow over her adorable elvish frame. She had the muscle tone of a warrior, at least so much as an elf could be muscled. Compared to Yorik or myself, even the most muscular elf would be a petite thing, but they could get quite toned.

"W-what do I need to do, sir?" Amisra asked, voice soft. She bit her lower lip and stared up with adoring eyes. My heart melted just looking at her.

"Who do you belong to?" I asked.

"Y-you..." She tried to avert her gaze, but I took her chin in my hand and ushered her gaze to meet my own.

"I want you to hold that thought while we dual cultivate. I have an idea," I said.

Amisra nodded, closing her eyes as I pushed her down into the sheets with both hands. Guiding myself into her might have been troublesome if not for the help of my other women.

Melise helpfully pointed my head into Amisra's dripping slit and then joined us on the bed. My other women piled around Amisra, and soon my vision was filled with panting feminine flesh as far as the eye could see.

I pushed into Amisra, and her tight walls gripped my shaft all the while, tightening around me in response to the power flowing from her body into mine. I was draining her of zeal, and she didn't resist in the slightest. It occurred to me again how much trust this technique required, especially for her. With my superior power, it would be easy to take her power for myself. Not that I could do much with her aspect of zeal, even if I wanted to steal it.

True to her word, Amisra's mind was completely focused on being as obedient to me as her mind could manage. Just like with Korra or Minerva, I found I could exert some level of influence over her power, using her mind as a medium and her submission to me as the conduit. While we were linked like this, and she made her will so utterly subordinate to her own, I could use her like an extension of my will. And I planned to put my will to use.

She gasped and shuddered in delight as I felt the familiar rush of connection between our bodies. We were bound now. It wouldn't last forever, but it would be enough time to do what I wanted.

I reached deep into the center of her cultivation, that little nexus of power at the base of her spine that the elves called a dantian. Needling it, I pushed for greater and greater access. Her zeal was sluggish at first, but as Amisra's will came ever more subordinate to my own, I felt the threshold I meant to cross.

It gaped as wide as a chasm in my mind, enormous and implacable. My breakthrough to sorcerer must have felt the same, but for Amisra, I felt a certain sense of despair at the mere idea of it. She had tried to cross that threshold so many times and failed that there was a mental block that prevented her from ever dreaming of crossing it.

She had given up trying long ago, even if she didn't yet realize it herself. If I had never met her, she would have lived her entire life making no further progress in her cultivation. But I would change that.

My resolve took her broken will and reshaped, structuring it into a tool to support my own desires. And I desired another sorcerer at my beck and call. For the first time in who knew how many years, Amisra's core rallied itself for another attempt at the sorcerer realm.

Amsira had many concepts unlocked already. She had to in order to reach the peak of the wizard realm. But all her understanding so far wasn't enough to push her over that edge into the sorcerer realm. For that, she needed more. She needed that spark of true understanding that united her will to the world around her. She needed the power to take reality and make it her plaything.

Amisra didn't have that ability. Her will to reach for that power had broken long ago.

But I had that power already. The world would mold to my will, just as I molded Amisra to my will. To do what I wanted to do with her, I couldn't just show her the way forward.

I needed to forge part of Amsira's own zeal into a facsimile of myself that would be with her even after I pulled out of her. That facsimile of me would reinforce her own will with her own, allowing her to achieve what she never could on her own.

I wrestled with the concept for a while, trying to force Amisra's zeal into shape. It was like putty in my hands, easily shaped and molded as it submitted to my every whim. It was easy at first, and for a while, I thought it would be no more complicated than enhancing Korra's abilities had been.

But the sorcerer realm was in another league entirely. Despite all the enhancements provided to my mind by my immense cultivation, I couldn't wrangle with so many problems at once. Just when I feared what I wanted to do wasn't possible at my current level of power, I sensed another presence in the corner of my mind.



It was Tivana. In the real world, her head was resting on my shoulder as she gave me a peck on the cheek and ran her hand up and down the toned muscles of my stomach. She was even better versed in dual cultivation than I was, so it wasn't too surprising to find she, of all people, had figured out how to get in here with me.

Silently, as though reading my mind, Tivana took hold of Amisra's cultivation. Like an extra hand, she held on to one of Amisra's concepts, leaving that much more of my will free to work.

My burden lifted immediately, and I could push forward once again. I shut out the real world while I focused, but Tivana must have been instructing the others because, one after another, I sensed more presence within my mind.

Assyrus, Eltiana, Melise, Yorik, Nela, and even Korra were all reaching in to lend a hand. Tivana's help was still far and away the greatest since, unlike the others, she knew what it was like to become a sorcerer. But the other minds working within Amisra's body were still of enormous help.

With them holding all of Amisra's wizard concepts in position, all I had to do was focus on the big realization that would push her to the sorcerer realm. What could be so primal to Amisra's soul that it would resonate with her cultivation and push her to the next level?

I spent a while thinking. Normally, she'd be doing something related to reaching the sorcerer realm, and that realization would be what pushed her over.

That was when I realized Amisra *was* doing something. She was thinking about being mine and what that meant to her. About how both she and all her power were mine to use, and in return, I would protect and care for her like no other could.

I seized upon that idea, toying with it for a while. To my surprise, it resonated with Amisra's cultivation, unlike any other. Had I stumbled upon what Amisra had been missing for so many decades? Or was my will, combined with Tivana's and all my other women, simply so great that we could dictate what Amisra needed to become a sorcerer?

In the end, the reason didn't matter. I sensed an opportunity, and I took it.

I pushed on her power, exerting my will and influence on her core until it exploded with voluminous power. Her spirit underwent a transformation, and her zeal folded in on itself, becoming more complex, denser, and more powerful. That facsimile of me was carved on every particle of zeal, imprinting the feeling of this level of intimacy and submission onto her very spirit.

That I'd imprinted myself on Amisra's soul so thoroughly was as exhilarating as it was erotic, and from her convulsing around my shaft, Amisra felt the same. I wasn't sure when she'd reached her first orgasm, but one had flowed neatly into another and then another.

The apex of her pleasure stirred my desire, especially combined with what we'd just done together. Amisra was mine, whether in this incarnation or the next. That would be true even if she died, became a wisp, and was born again.

And she loved that feeling. Sensing her joy was just too much for me to take. Normally I could go all night without reaching my climax if only I devoted my will to hold it off, but the touch of Amisra's soul against my own was just too much to bear. I gushed a heaping load of seed deep inside her, filling her with my vitality and power. If nothing else, that would help her body adjust to her heightened level of power a little faster.

Blinking, my eyes returned to the real world. Six naked women were all staring at me with looks of amazement and wonder.

"Oooh! Me next!" Eltiana said.

The others all shouted for their turn, and I realized I'd have to fight them off long enough for my buddy down below to get ready for another round. It was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER  
TWELVE

A misra was the only one I could push all the way to the sorcerer realm, but my other women all benefited from my guidance. I still remembered what it was like to imprint myself on Amisra like I had thought. I'd never climaxed that hard before. I could hardly wait till some of my other women were strong enough to make an attempt. Maybe I could repeat the experience.

The battle picked up the next day as soon as the big dragon came into sight again. The rest of us would have to join the fight again, though the battle never stopped for the demigods battling the six dragons in the sky. Their fight had lasted straight through the night with no signs of stopping. I cast best wishes to all my allies and companions up there, hoping the battle was going their way. They only needed to hold the enemy off, not slay them.

“Heads up, here they come!” I shouted as I spotted the first of the incoming wave of dragons streaming down from their mother's body. Slavering mouths flapped in our direction by the thousands while under the protection of both their mother overhead and their older siblings battling the demigods up above.

The Planetary Defense Array had also stayed active through the night, and the mother dragon continued to battle the many laser beams being fired at her from all the defense arrays in orbit. To my surprise, she was destroying quite a few of them in her retaliatory attacks.

Those defense platforms were the only thing that protected the World of Sanctuary and Serenity from Immortal Ascendant-level threats. If this dragon was destroying the platforms, eventually none would be left, and the world would be vulnerable. I hoped I would be an Immortal Ascendant long before that happened, but how had this planet survived until now? That was certainly a mystery, and it was one I would have devoted a great deal more time to solving if Comela wasn't currently charging a true mage-level dragon head on just off to my left.

“Hyaaaaaaa!” Comela screamed in a pitched battle cry, bright golden hair streaming behind her as golden beams of light extended from the tip of the spear in a charge that probably looked very heroic.

I rolled my eyes. I already told her I'd handle everything at true mage and above. She'd just have to satisfy herself with the mage acolyte-level dragons. Her teacher, the Golden Sword Sect Leader, was close behind her, so even if Comela went chasing a powerful dragon, she wouldn't get to fight it.

I flicked my finger, and a sharpened rod of steel flew through the dragon's skull and passed out the other side. Its ferocious roar was cut short, and it started plummeting out of the sky long before my daughter could reach it.

Everyone got in on the action, but the show's true star was Amisra. I wondered why she'd hid her new cultivation for a while. But when Tivana was off helping one of the other clans hold and the Royal Family was left to fend for themselves, she entered with a bang.

A sorcerer-level dragon was flying straight toward them. The Golden Sword Sect Leader was already fighting another dragon, so if this was yesterday, I would have needed to rush to their side, which would have left the Hearthwood's factions vulnerable. I would have needed to call Yillinarena out, who until now I'd been keeping as hidden backup. But I knew Amisra was holding back for this moment.

Her power blossomed all around them, and the heads of royal guards turned left and right in shock as they sensed a

new sorcerer in their midst. The fiery beam of destruction the sorcerer-level dragon was trying to hit them with was stopped in its tracks, and with Amisra absorbing the bulk of the blow, the rest of the royal family could start taking chunks out of the dragon's hide. They brought the beast down before Tivana even returned to join in on the fun, much to the cheering and celebration of everyone involved.

While dragons loved to consume powerful elves, that relationship went both ways. Every part of a dragon was a valuable alchemy and crafting ingredient, and that one fight had earned the royal family quite a haul.

But they would still have a long way to go to catch up to all the Hearthwood had won so far. I checked my Dimensional Storage, where the people back in the Hearthwood were hard at work processing two sorcerer-realm dragons. Sava was going to be a very busy alchemist.

And for every sorcerer-realm dragon slain, we had a hundred wizard-realm dragons. And for each of those, we had two hundred true mage dragons. I was going to have to get used to dragon steak, because we were going to be eating it for the next couple of decades. Mac was already busy constructing entire storage complexes for the broken-down dragon part everyone was taking apart.

In that regard, we were quite lucky. Few other factions had the logistical supply chains put together to do what we did, and none had access to my Inventory. I would offer the royal family and the clans of Deania a hand transporting and processing their haul... for a small fee, of course.

The next week of battle happened much like the first two days. We fought, bled, and then retired to my Personal Chambers battered and exhausted. The fighting was intense, particularly for those at true mage and below. Sava rotated in, as did the Whitewood Matriarchs. That let most of my women get in a day off, and a few of the true mages who sustained heavy injuries returned to the Hearthwood. Some of Deania's royal family also took me up on my offer of transport back home through my Pocket World Passage.

Every night when we retired to my Personal Chambers, all my lovers practiced their dual cultivation techniques again. Tivana was still far and away the best, but this sort of hands-on practice was helping the others get better quickly. Before too long, we could put the technique to full use. Several of them even made cultivation improvements throughout the constant fighting.

The fighting lasted a week, and I was fearing it was going to go on forever. We'd settled into our routines, but this much fighting was starting to wear even on me.

But then it happened.

I wasn't sure what triggered it, but it probably had something to do with the big fight going on overhead.

The dragon with an entire planet on her back roared in defiance after a particularly lucky shot from one of the defense array systems struck her in the eye.

Something shifted in the dragon's posture and the zeal flowing through her body. Up until now, she was just casually swatting aside defense platforms whenever they came too close or struck too hard. While the sheer scale and continuous nature of the attacks and all the sorcerer-realm golems were no doubt annoying, the massive dragon wasn't using all her power to fight back.

That changed now. The dragon roared far above the sky. It was beyond the world's atmosphere, so there should have been nothing but silence on our end. But somehow, the tremendous sound traveled across the void to our world, where a deafening sound rang out across the entire planet. Every elf and monster on the entire World of Sanctuary and Serenity stopped what they were doing to cover their ears and shudder in terror.

The spite and anger in that ferocious roar made tingles run up my spine. It was like my subconscious knew a hungry beast was hovering right over my shoulder, and there was nothing I could do about it.

A moment later, the sky lit up with thousands of explosions. The dragon used some manner of Immortal

Ascendant power to destroy every defense platform and golem overhead simultaneously. The attack was so powerful and so absolute that I didn't even sense the zeal being used. Perhaps the attack didn't rely on zeal at all and was merely an expression of the concept of destruction.

Whatever the case was, fear gripped my heart as I realized the World of Sanctuary and Serenity had been left utterly helpless before this terrible beast.

"To the Pocket World Passage, now!" I yelled, voice growing hoarse. If the planet's defenses had truly failed us, the best I could do was evacuate everyone I cared about to The Wanderer. After it was done, we'd need to scout for a new planet to live on. That would be painful, but I was already preparing for the worst. The glowing blue barrier surrounding the planet shattered like broken glass, and the only thing keeping that thing out in the void was gone.

But then the World of Sanctuary and Serenity replied to the dragon's ferocious attack.

A voice echoed throughout the entire world, just as loud as the dragon's voice. It was dry and mechanical, perfectly calm and collected in the face of the monstrously powerful dragon's overwhelming might.

*"Threat exceeding passive defenses' combat rating detected. The Planetary Defense Array will now enter active mode."*

For a moment, everything turned black and white. The sky shuttered, and the stars winked out. Everything was terribly, eerily still.

Then light shot up in great pillars from the planet's surface, and from those pillars, new defense platforms emerged one after another. The orbital stations were being carried upward on those beams of light like they were riding a reverse waterfall. Those energy beams must have been some sort of magic-powered space elevator.

All those in the sky that had been destroyed in the battle so far were replenished instantly, but they kept coming after that

with no end in sight. The question I had when this fight began was finally answered. Now I knew why the World of Sanctuary and Serenity had never run out of defense platforms. When their numbers grew too thin, the Planetary Defense Array simply made more.

More sorcerer-realm golems emerged as well, just like the one Argona had taken control of. Some of those stepped into the beams of white light and rode them up into orbit. But not all of them took the ride upward. Others emerged early and landed on the planet's surface, locking what passed for their eyes on the nearest dragon. The golems pounced on those dragons, regardless of level, and attacked them without hesitation.

Those dragons at the wizard realm and below died instantly under the assault, but those at higher levels lived long enough for the golems to unveil a type of attack I'd never seen before. They piled onto the dragons and turned their bodies into an amorphous blob of clay. That clay wrapped around the dragon, binding it in place.

Under just one such attack, a sorcerer-realm dragon might break free, but at the rate these golems were emerging one after another, they were soon facing two or three of them at a time. When all of them piled onto a dragon together, they could engulf the giant fire-breathing lizards entirely, binding them until not a single scale shone through the earthen-colored clay. When the pile of heaving earth went still, I knew the trapped dragon was as good as dead.

The golems and defense platforms were just the beginning. A few pieces of bright, shining pieces of metal emerged one after another, each looking like a flower petal. They hovered in the air until enough of them accumulated. They formed together into something akin to a lotus leaf big enough to cover a country the size of the Rakaren Queendom in shade. In the center of the metallic flower, a glowing sphere of crimson energy came to life. Beams of red light shot down and swept over the earth, purging every dragon the light beam came across. That was a weapon capable of slaying Demigods.



Besides the flying lotus machines and the armies of extraordinarily powerful golems, I also witnessed magical artillery firing from nearby mountaintops that I never would have guessed concealed ancient buried weapons. They fired upon the dragons, cutting down a number of them that would have taken us hours to slay, in mere moments.

When all the dragons of our caliber were slain, those same guns pointed upward at the six dragons the demigods were battling. A barrage of attacks struck all six of those ferocious beasts, and I watched Sam, Dean, and two of the elves put the opportunity before them to good use. A crimson dragon they were battling had to defend against an incoming barrage of missiles and erected an energy shield before itself, but Dean shattered that shield with a swing of his axe.

The energy beams struck the dragon again and again. The wounds healed within moments, at least until Sam waved his hands and reversed the dragon's own healing to make the wounds appear again. The two elven demigods attacked from either side while Dean went for the head. All the while the dragon desperately fought to erect the energy shield meant to protect it from the barrage of magical artillery.

Amidst the defenses, something else was forming. It was a golem, but it had a giant eye in its center. It shifted in and out of space ominously as though most of its bulk lay beyond reality. Tentacles whipped back and forth across its body. At first I sensed the power of a Demigod coming from it. But the power grew stronger moment by moment, and soon it was closer to the might I'd only ever witnessed from Grognaak, ruler of all orcs. That thing was an Immortal Ascendant-level golem.

In the end, the combination of attacks and the monstrosity the Planetary Defense Array was forming was just too much for the dragon. Its kin turned to flee, abandoning the lone demigod dragon to its fate while the human and elven demigods ganged up on it. Even with such a sharp advantage in numbers, it took the demigods a while to put the dragon down, but when it finally came toppling out of the sky and crashed to the earth, our forces cheered loud enough that for a

moment our voices could be heard over the noise of the battle in the sky overhead.

The awakening of the Planetary Defense Array's full capabilities turned the tide of battle. Whatever trick the dragon matriarch had pulled before to wipe out all the available defense platforms wasn't something she could pull a second time, and she swerved to turn away. I hoped that meant she would be off looking for easier prey elsewhere, and that the World of Sanctuary and Serenity would be safe at last.

The enormous golem that had just started forming started to phase out of existence again, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn't like the look of that thing.

"Did you see that, Father?" Argona yelled, abandoning her massive golem to land by my feet now that the fighting was over. "Those arrays appeared out of nowhere and kicked that giant dragon's ass!"

"Yes, it did, dear." I nodded. "But hop back in your golem! We're not done yet!"

"But all the dragons are running, Father?" Argona asked.

I grinned. "And leaving their dead behind. There are thousands of zeal crystals' worth of dragons lying there! We can't let the other clans harvest them all first!"

After all, too many dead dragons in the hands of the other clans would drive the market value of the Hearthwood's haul way down. There were lots of people in the Hearthwood counting on this little expedition turning over a pretty penny, including Sava.

Argona hopped back into her golem, and I directed the Hearthwood in looting every dragon up for grabs. This was something my family and I had practiced many times before, so we were a lot better versed than the other clans. Between the number of uninjured fighters we had, the extra experience, and the help of my Dimensional Storage, we easily gathered ten times as many dragon corpses as the other clans. Even the demigod factions would walk away with far less loot than we had.

For a while, I was worried the demigods would compete with us, but Sam, Dean, Tivana's mother, and everyone else was all focused on the one demigod-level dragon they'd killed. They spent half an hour arguing over who got what cut of it, which the rest of us happily spent cleaning up the rest of the continent. I did note with sadness that a few of the settlements on this continent I'd spotted from the air earlier had been destroyed.

The strongest matriarchs in those settlements were only true mages, so all it took was one stray dragon wandering across them to devour half the town. For the average elf, the only saving grace was that the dragons were too busy devouring matriarchs to hunt down all the heartwielders cowering in fear.

The dragon corpses around their village might be useful to them in getting new matriarchs, but they wouldn't have the slightest idea how to use them. Still, I felt a bit bad stealing their good fortune, so whenever I spotted locals near dragons we were harvesting, I tossed out a handful of zeal crystals and spellhearts.

"You're now in the employ of the Hearthwood Clan!" I shouted at them. "Help guide my people through your forest while they look for dragons, and there will be more where those came from!"

Most rapidly turned from terrified to bowing and groveling once I started throwing riches their way instead of threats of annihilation. I suspected most of them just wanted shelter after seeing their entire tribe or village get wiped out, and I was giving them a foot in the door with a group of powerful strangers capable of slaying the same monsters that devoured their matriarchs.

We'd probably get a few of them sneaking back to the Hearthwood with me, not that I minded. Though I favored my family, the rest of the Hearthwood was a meritocracy. We gave no handouts, and those willing to work could do very well for themselves there. Any criminals would be quickly executed before they could cause too much trouble.

I was happy to see the larger city I pointed out earlier had been evacuated, even if so many of the smaller villages had been too numerous to bother with. My earlier efforts hadn't fallen completely on deaf ears.

Soon I'd finished bringing the last true mage dragon home to the Hearthwood. There were plenty more at the mage acolyte stage worth harvesting, but those had hardly even been dragons at all. In fact, the Universal Analyzer had called them drakes, and I hadn't even bothered to kill them during the fighting. I left them to my subordinates then, and I left harvesting them to my subordinates now.

I returned to find Sam and Dean with grim looks on their faces, drawing a sharp contrast to my own exuberant smile.

"That was some light show, wasn't it?" I chuckled. "I didn't know the Planetary Defense Array could do that! And what in the blazes was that big thing at the end?"

Sam's voice was hoarse and full of exhaustion, brows lowered as he stroked his chin and sighed. "They can and do. It happens ever so often. That big thing you saw is bad news. Apparently forming it burns centuries of power every hour it's active. Its appearance means the Planetary Defense Array is running at full capacity now, with no eye toward conserving energy."

I felt my smile fall from my face. "I take it from your expression that it isn't a good thing."

Sam shook his head. "No, quite the opposite. This happens every few hundred years. We usually call it the end of a golden age."

CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**

“The end of a golden age?” I asked, my heart clenching tight in my chest.

“Yep.” Dean chuckled grimly. “We’re in some deep shit. This wasn’t supposed to happen for at least a hundred more years.”

“Dean and I have only lived through one of these, but a few of the elves have endured several. It’s a tough time for every elf on the World of Sanctuary and Serenity,” Sam began. “You see, when the Planetary Defense Array is in its dormant state, it is just a series of defenses that repel invaders. But when it’s in its active state? That brings disaster.”

“Isn’t the Planetary Defense Array protecting the planet?” I asked. “Why would that be such a bad thing?”

“All those defenses you saw shooting up? They don’t make themselves. The Planetary Defense Array needs to harvest a lot of raw materials to build all that stuff. Crucially, things like the golems, defense platforms, and the annihilation blossoms especially.” He pointed to the giant flying lotuses. “The Planetary Defense Array doesn’t know how to mine and refine raw materials. So it just strips them from every civilization it comes across. We think the elves of the Elven Star Dominion just kept the right stuff on hand, so their infrastructure never suffered damage, but we aren’t so lucky. We barely even know what the thing needs. But worst of all is the core material for all the defenses. You’ll notice it favors things like golems, defense platforms, flying ships, that sort of

thing. All things that act with some sort of networked intelligence.”

“Is there some sort of AI hidden deep within the planet?” I asked. Perhaps I could find it and get Mac to talk some sense into the thing. If we could take control of the Planetary Defense Array, I’d feel a lot more comfortable.

“Perhaps for the main core,” Sam allowed. “The shield is separate from the fleet of golems. It is simple, but powerful and impenetrable even to immortal ascendants. As a gift from their creator, it shielded early elven civilization for many years, all the way until they crafted the Elven Star Dominion.”

Sam paused, voice turning grimmer by the moment. “It was then that the problems we now face arose. The Elven Star Dominion sought to tap into the power their creator left them for their defense and turn it into a sword against their enemies. They are the ones who crafted the armies of golems that you saw spill forth. And it is the creation of those same golems that have caused problems for this world ever since.”

I frowned. The golem Argona had taken control of was both powerful and skillfully made. “What kind of blunder did the Elven Star Dominion make? Did they anger whatever AI operates the shields?”

“No. Binding their golem fabrication magic to the Planetary Defense Array’s existing shield equipment went all too smoothly. The onboard AI even upgraded the quality of their golems after it accepted the new mission parameters. The problem stems from the fact that Elven Star Dominion never invented artificial intelligence the way we understand it, so they could not fill their golems with it. And the more powerful a golem is, the greater its need for a consciousness to direct it. So, they simply utilized natural intelligence.” Sam cast me a grim stare.

I frowned. “I don’t follow.”

“Brains!” Dean said. “The dumb thing is going to run around harvesting the bodies of powerful elves to rebuild its

fleet of defensive weapons. Between that and all the infrastructure those golems destroy searching for raw materials, it's pretty much the end of elven civilization whenever it happens. Everyone who is anyone is hiding for dear life lest they be harvested. The ancient texts say the Elven Star Dominion sacrificed slaves from conquered enemies to power the golem fabricators they made and attached to the Planetary Defense Array's power source and control center, but we aren't so lucky. It means powerful people like us are targets. We're only in the earliest stages of the process, but once the stupid robot runs out of raw materials from its last harvesting session, it's going to start coming for people like us."

"So the elves added a gun to the shield they were born with, and never stopped to think they might someday run out of ammunition to load it with." I let out a sigh. "These golem fabricators attached to the Planetary Defense Array. They hunt humans too?" I asked.

Sam shrugged. "We don't actually know that. The last time a golden age ended with a Demigod hunt, me, Dean, and all the cult guys were just mage acolytes. Maybe the golems didn't come for us because we were too weak, and it had already satisfied its mage acolyte soul quota. Maybe they don't care for humans. The point is we don't know, and it isn't exactly the sort of thing any of us are willing to test."

I went silent for a long moment, weighing what this meant. Yet another attack was coming for the Hearthwood, and worse, they didn't think this was the kind of attack we could withstand, even working together.

"What do the big clans normally do?" I asked. "I can't imagine the Demigod factions just letting themselves get wiped out."

"The easiest solution is to get your entire clan off world for a few years," Sam gestured to the sky. "The orcs and dwarves are always willing to take elves in, and there's always an empty planet somewhere to camp out on if you're willing to rough it in the wilderness. But with how suddenly the activation happened this time, we didn't have time to catch the

signs and leave. See the barrier in the sky? It keeps things in just as easily as it keeps things out. Wizards, sorcerers, and demigods take shelter in the Primordial World, and that's what we plan to do this time. Pretty much everybody who's anybody does that if they can manage it."

"They abandon their families?" I frowned in concern. I couldn't see myself running off to the Primordial World and leaving all my kids in jeopardy.

"Staying too close makes your family a target," Dean interjected. "After all, it's your brain they want, not those of a bunch of heartwielders and mage acolytes. Though they need to harvest a huge number of low-leveled people, there's enough of those to go around that those requirements are met pretty quickly. It's the hunt for wizards and above that makes this process last years. Maybe decades."

"What you need to do, and what all the other clans will do, is find a place to stash everyone you care about. Someplace harder to find than anybody else's hiding spot. That way, your family will still be around when the dust settles," Sam explained. "I'm going to spend some time upgrading the time-distortion effect on my Pocket World so that it can hold the Fateweaver Society and hopefully a good chunk of the capital as well."

"And I'm going to build a really big bunker," Dean said. "We'll shove all the kiddos in a hole with some books and some TV and check back in on them in a few years."

I clutched my temple between my brows. This was a major headache I really didn't need.

"So, how much longer do we have?" I asked.

Sam shrugged. "Normally, we get a full year. But the dragon attack forced the Planetary Defense Platform out of its dormant state early. Maybe it will take extra time to get ready. Or maybe it will start operations sooner than usual. You have time to spend, but not to waste."

I nodded. "Agreed. Well then, gentlemen, it seems I have preparations to make."





I regrouped with my children and followers, expecting to find things much as I left them. I would have thought they'd be ranging far and wide looking for dead drakes to take home or failing that, pillaging the ruins of destroyed civilizations all around us in search of ancient, powerful cultivation techniques lost at the end of the last golden age.

But I was wrong. When I appeared, I saw Tivana and Amisra busy recalling all of her forces. Nearby, Yorik and Assyrus were doing the same for those from the Hearthwood. Everyone was racing back as quickly as they could, though some were certainly quicker than others.

“What’s going on?” I asked, appearing between Yorik and Assyrus.

Assyrus turned and answered. “Those giant golem things? Yeah, turns out they’re not friendly after all. They attacked Eltiana. At first, we thought it was because she was trying to steal something from it, which was true, but then they attacked Melise as well.”

“I just got word from Sam and Dean. This is within expectations. Tell everyone to retreat. We’re returning to the Hearthwood with what we have. It’s too dangerous to stay on this continent much longer.”

“Many locals want to join us,” Yorik added.

I nodded. “Considering most of the villages and tribes around here are in ruins, I’m not surprised they want to come. Tell them to convince one of our soldiers to take them under their wing and teach them our laws and customs if they can. That’ll make adapting to life in the much more complicated society of the Hearthwood a lot easier for them.”

Elven relationships between two women often featured a bit of an unequal partnership, where the lesser partner served a role that was a combination of apprentice and cuddle companion. It worked, and it seemed instinctual enough to

elves that it had served us well integrating other large groups before, so we'd take advantage of it again here.

Most of our people were through quickly, and Assyus ducked through to the other side. Yorik stayed with me, as did Tivana and Amisra. The royal family made it through our passage, but the other clans of Deania were slower to return home, and even though Tivana wasn't acting as the ruling princess anymore, she still felt responsible for sheltering her vassal clans, especially considering what was to come.

"You spoke to the ancestor?" Tivana asked.

I nodded. "Yes, both Sam and Dean. I'm not sure if you know what the end of a Golden Age means, but that's where we are."

Tivana bit her lip. "The last time one of these rolled around, it was just him and the founding matriarchs. And none of Deania's vassal clans were around. Truthfully, I doubt many of them will make it unless we invite their people to stay in the royal family's shelter. But if we're doing that, it would be unfair for the common folk if we did not invite them in as well. And if we include them, we'll make our own people a far larger target. It will be a difficult balancing act, deciding who can stay with us and who cannot."

"You don't expect the survival rate for this to be very high, I take it?" The furrow between my brows deepened.

"The power vacuum that opened up when the old civilizations of the Groveguard Continent were wiped out was what allowed the ancestor and Sam the Fateweaver to found their respective organizations," Tivana explained. "The old kingdoms from the last golden age didn't make it. The Moonbow Clan traces their lineage back to a kingdom that existed prior to the end of the sixth golden age, but they never recovered. And considering their tattered state of them now, they might not make it through this one at all. The same goes for all the other clans."

We stared out over our surroundings, fretting and worrying. I would have liked to offer my assistance, but I had a lot of kids and even more vassals. I had a lot to do, just

saving the people who were my responsibility. Could I take on others? And if I did, would I be placing my own children in danger for doing so?

“I’ll check in on them, but that’s all I can promise for now. At least until all my people are taken care of.” I gave her a kiss on the cheek. I reached out with my other hand and gave Amisra a pinch. The two women blushed, though neither were all that shy now that the two of them had seen one another in the throes of passion every night for the past week. “I’m looking after the kids first, though. Amisra, yours are staying with me.”

Amisra nodded, cheeks red as she nuzzled up against my side. “The young ones are safer in the Hearthwood than in the capital anyway. You have a good school here for them, and I know I can see them whenever I like.”

The last of Deania’s people were through, and Amisra and Tivana followed them to the Hearthwood. The sheer number of people would make keeping order hard, made worse because so many people were hauling around giant dragon corpses. There probably wasn’t even room to stand back home.

I forwarded my plan to offer to process them to Mac, and he’d relayed my terms to every clan or tribe who didn’t have the capability to do so themselves. We actually ran out of Queensmarks after buying the dragons from all the people who wanted to sell them directly, and pretty soon, people had to take the plastic Macmarks that Mac and I printed up as the Hearthwood’s local currency.

We ended up opening up part of the clan libraries for outsiders with enough coin to spend. The sad truth of the matter was that most of these elves would not make it through what was coming, so I wasn’t shy about giving away clan techniques. Besides, at my current level, I could spend a few months brainstorming and fill the library with a bunch of new techniques at true mage and below.

I briefed Mac on what I knew, and at his suggestion, we started reorganizing most of the dragon meat for long-term

storage. We'd still turn most of them into alchemy ingredients, but I wanted supplies that would last decades.

If my kids had to stay cooped up in The Wanderer for years with nothing but Mac and the simulation chamber for company, I wanted to give them everything they needed to emerge as true powerhouses once the dust settled. The Hearthwood Clan was late to the party during this era of the Groveguard Continent, but we'd be off to a much stronger start this time.



The next few weeks in the Hearthwood were quite hectic. It took a while for the streets to empty out to anything regarding normalcy, and even then, it soon became apparent that a few minor tribes planned to take up residency permanently. I ended up widening the roads again and reorganizing the buildings and trees to accommodate the larger population. It was a lot easier to rearrange the city at my current level of power.

Having already done it once, I thought everyone would be used to it. But the newcomers hadn't seen my last display of power, and I was greeted by a lot more groveling on the streets for a solid week.

Sava and the other alchemists were brewing up a storm, and the scent of alchemy filled the air around the settlement with no sign of stopping. The newly cleared fields around the Hearthwood had been planted, and the major factions were buying up grain and other foodstuffs in tremendous volumes.

Rumors were traveling through the streets, but the common elf was clueless as to what had just happened. They'd all seen the light show in the sky during the battle with the dragons, but none of them guessed it was just the beginning.

As for me, I was debating whether the others would be mad if I spilled the beans. It seemed a bit unfair that the major clans were able to prepare ahead of everyone else. I held myself back because Tivana warned me that news of the coming apocalypse would cause mass chaos and unrest if it

spread. Dean and her family records had information from the last golden age.

The looting and pillaging that followed spreading the truth was uncondusive to recruiting large labor forces to dig secret bunkers for the wealthy elven elite, so everyone who was anyone tried to keep a lid on things.

The major clans were in a bit of a tizzy, all of them hustling around as rapidly as they could figure out a way to save themselves on short notice. A few high-ranking wizards had disappeared. Whether they'd gone to save themselves in the Primordial World or whether they were off digging secret bunkers for their descendants, I couldn't say.

I waited a while longer, if only to keep things organized. I would gather as many resources as I could. While I wasn't about to risk my kids by letting strangers into The Wanderer where they'd be staying, it might not be too hard to build a couple spare bunkers for other people to stay in. I had a bunch of vassal clans who probably wouldn't survive on their own. Once all those under my care were secure, I'd extend a hand to those in need and start spreading the word of what was really happening.

I had a lot of points from the fighting with the dragons. We'd killed so many that I'd taken to ignoring the notifications. With the battle won and the Hearthwood grown another notch, it was up to me to grow The Wanderer's capabilities. It, above everything else I had at my disposal, was probably more secure than any fortress anyone on this world could build, so it was definitely worth upgrading as much as possible.

### **Assets of The Wanderer**

#### **Training Facilities**

- **Cultivation Chamber: Level 6. Cost to upgrade: 10,000 points.**
- **Allows the user to instantaneously learn spells and allows any of the user's companions to maintain a steady, focused mental state indefinitely. It can also**

**alter the flow of time within the chamber, giving them days to work in only hours. 10x Time dilation.**

- **Training Grounds: Level 4. Cost to upgrade: 7000 points.**
- **All practice done on the training grounds yields results far faster than elsewhere. Current level allows each day of practice to be the equivalent of two weeks of practice without it.**
- **Simulation Chamber: Level 2. Cost to upgrade: 2000 points.**
- **This chamber allows the user to run various entertainment and practice programs, usable by anyone The Wanderer's owner permits. Currently, this chamber is set to simulate arena-type survival battles where combatants must survive waves of illusory enemies.**
- **Weight Training Chamber Level 4. Cost to upgrade: 10,000 points.**
- **Body Cultivators require unique conditions and items to strengthen their physical bodies. This chamber provides weights and equipment with sufficient strength to allow even the strongest body cultivators to continue their physical exercises.**
- **Chamber of Tranquility Level 2. Cost to upgrade: 20,000 points.**
- **This room soothes the minds of those afflicted by terrible thoughts and ideas. Spending time here slowly improves mental state.**
- **Waters of Clarity Level 2. Cost to upgrade: 20,000 points.**
- **This small pool allows those who are not followers or the owner of The Wanderer to benefit from the effects of the Pool of Reflection by consuming some of the water that accumulates in the pool.**

### **Settlement Buildings**

- **Medical Bay: Level 7. Cost to upgrade: 12,000 points.**

- **This medical bay possesses everything needed to utilize fully automated medicine.**
- **Enchantment Core Level 2. Cost to upgrade: 10,000 points.**
- **This chamber was enabled upon examining the Ancient Statue of Alasir, the Scriptor. It enables the controller to create their own custom language for structuring enchantments. Enchanted objects will function so long as they are within range of The Wanderer or its owner.**
- **Pocket World Level 3. Cost to upgrade: 16,000 points.**
- **This small pocket world is connected to the Dimensional Storage. It can be used to store items or entities in a time-locked environment or to provide a bridge between an external location and The Wanderer. Level 2 allows the opening of two distinct entrances simultaneously. Further levels will increase the size of the pocket world and the number of entrances that can be open at once.**

### **Personal Estate**

- **Personal Chambers. Level 4 Cost to upgrade: 800 points.**
- **This chamber contains a bed that allows the user to feel fully rested and refreshed after a brief stay within it. It also has a shower and running water, both sterile and well stocked despite any conditions outside.**
- **Throne Room: Level 5. Cost to upgrade: 3500 points**
- **This item allows the user to accept new followers with access to The Wanderer, secondary only to the owner and the human interface unit.**

### **Nursery**

- **Follower Reincarnation Chamber: level 5 Cost to upgrade: 10,000 points**
- **The tree within this chamber can reincarnate the wisps of the fallen at rates far faster than natural, and the expenditure of blood crystals gathered from fallen enemies allows the user to reincarnate them without loss of memory or the sense of self.**
- **Egg Incubation Chamber: level 5 Cost to upgrade: 4000 points.**
- **This chamber raises eggs in ideal conditions, ensuring maximum survivability rates.**
- **Wisp Maturation Chamber: level 5 Cost to upgrade: 4000 points.**
- **This chamber feeds wisps zeal from sources provided by The Wanderer and within the chamber, dramatically increasing the maturation rate and increasing successful manifestation rates.**

### **Utility Rooms**

- **Scanner: level 17 Cost to upgrade: 8000 points.**
- **Allows the human interface unit to scan the surrounding area and increase the range of communication between the user and the unit. Increasing the level of the scanner will increase both of these functions.**
- **Universal Analyzer level 4 Cost to upgrade: 6000 points.**
- **Allows the user to identify any item or object in their presence. Points will be expended based on the difficulty of identifying the item.**
- **Teleportation Array: Level 6 Cost to upgrade: 8000 points.**
- **This array allows the user and any they permit use of an energy-efficient long-range teleportation array. This is compatible with local teleportation arrays. Increasing the level will increase the number of individuals who can be transported and increase the efficiency of each transport.**



- **Dimensional Storage: Level 8 Cost to upgrade: 10,000 points.**
- **The Dimensional Storage allows for the storage of items in an extra-dimensional space accessible both by The Wanderer's owner and by permitted individuals with access to the ship.**

### **Resource Production**

- **Hydroponic Farm: Level 9. Cost to upgrade: 8000 points**
- **Grows expensive edible plants capable of increasing the powers of all those who consume it.**
- **Mana Generator: Level 6. Cost to upgrade: 8000 points**
- **Maintains all the power requirements of nearby rooms and provides a small trickle of points passively. Local magical items can also be sacrificed to the mana generator to create points.**

### **Craft and Construction**

- **Alchemist's Laboratory: Level 6. Cost to upgrade: 6000 points**
- **This laboratory can be used to easily create four-star potions and below. A very skilled alchemist can use the tools here to make a five-star potion.**
- **Substance Analyzer**
- **Can identify the components of a pill or magical item and assist in generating new recipes.**
- **Substance Replicator**
- **Can generate any raw ingredient, though ingredient generation will always be more expensive than obtaining or producing them the hard way.**
- **Drafter's Study: Level 5. Cost to upgrade: 4000 points**
- **This room allows for the creation of enchantments and enchanted items.**

- **Smith's Workshop: Level 6. Cost to upgrade: 7000 points**
- **This workshop allows for the production of powerful metals and items made from them.**

### **Monster and Dungeon Rooms**

- **13 Monster Dens Cost: 250 points each**
- **Two in use by the Claw Tamer Tribe**
- **One empty, previously containing the Blightstone Elemental**
- **One containing an Axe-Beaked Salamander**
- **One containing four Stone Watcher Basilisks**
- **8 containing assets of the Claw Tamer Clan.**

### **Intelligence Assets**

- **Trans-Reality Oculus Level 2. Cost to upgrade: 12,000 points.**
- **This observation post allows the user to identify locations ordinarily outside of traditional time and space and peer in on them.**
- **Celestial Map Level 2. Cost to Upgrade: 12,000 points**
- **This three-dimensional map charts the movements of the Ten Thousand Worlds, allowing users to view the locations of planets in both the past and future.**

### **Security Buildings**

**Defenses: Level 3. Cost to upgrade: 600**

- **The defenses upgrade allows for the integration and creation of advanced active and passive weapons meant to defend The Wanderer or any encampment around it.**

**City Walls: Cost to upgrade: 1000 points.**

- **Integrated walls created by local builders and the human interface unit's Dungeon Core abilities. Now integrated with The Wanderer's systems for easy repair and maintenance.**

**7 Sturdy Sentry Towers. Cost to upgrade: 175 points**

- **These Sentry Towers are capable of housing several elves behind fortified defenses.**

**6 Level-Reducing Sentry Towers. Cost to upgrade: 500 points**

- **These towers are controlled by the human interface unit and are capable of temporarily reducing the cultivation level of anyone struck by them.**

**3 Obstacle Rooms in Dungeon. Cost to upgrade: 400 points**

- **These obstacle rooms exist in the human interface unit's dungeon and must be circumvented by any intruders hoping to gain access to the lower levels of the city without permission.**

**Ship Camouflage: Level 2. Cost to upgrade: 600**

- **This ability allows the user to conceal The Wanderer by modifying its color, shape, size, and structural materials as viewed from outside.**

I looked over the list. My recent fights had given me quite a bit of points to work with, and when combined with the passive point generation I was getting from the mana generator, I had room for a few upgrades and still have points left over in reserve for any unexpected circumstances that might crop up from dealing with an apocalypse.

**Points Available: 750,294**

I decided to do just that.

**Cultivation Chamber now upgrading to level 8.**

**Training Grounds now upgrading to level 5.**

**Chamber of Tranquility now upgrading to level 3.**

**Waters of Clarity now upgrading to level 2.**

**Medical Bay now upgrading to level 8.**

**Enchantment Core now upgrading to level 3.**

**Pocket World now upgrading to level 4.**

**Personal Chambers now upgrading to level 5.**

**Throne Room now upgrading to level 6.**

**Follower Reincarnation Chamber now upgrading to level 6.**

**Egg Incubation Chamber now upgrading to level 6.**

**Wisp Maturation Chamber now upgrading to level 6.**

**Scanner now upgrading to level 18.**

**Universal Analyzer now upgrading to level 4.**

**Teleportation Array now upgrading to level 7.**

**Dimensional Storage now upgrading to level 9.**

**Hydroponic Farm now upgrading to level 9.**

**Mana Generator now upgrading to level 7.**

**Alchemist's Laboratory now upgrading to level 7.**

**Drafter's Study now upgrading to level 6.**

**Smith's Workshop now upgrading to level 7.**

**Defenses upgrading to level 4.**

**City Walls upgrading to City Bastion.**

**You have purchased 13 additional Sturdy Sentry Towers. Now under construction.**

**You have purchased 14 additional Level-Reducing Sentry Towers.**

**You have purchased 7 additional Obstacle Rooms.**

**Ship Camouflage now upgrading to level 3.**

For once, I had more than enough points to do buy everything I wanted, and probably a little more on the side. After my adventures in the Primordial World I'd accumulated quite a few of them, and now I had even more from fighting the dragons. I wasn't sure what would help best with the threats the Hearthwood would soon face, so I decided to just make everything better across the board.

That settled, I kicked back and settled in for some heavy-duty delegation. My role was primarily managerial since, even with my tremendous powers, I couldn't compete with what a massive organization like the Hearthwood Clan could do. At first, I thought I'd be at use digging holes, but Mac had already taken control of most of the dungeon beneath the Hearthwood, so that wasn't needed. I offered to hunt monsters, but truthfully our stores were already overflowing with dragon parts, so I couldn't do anything more on that front.

There was one thing I could do, however. And it was something that kept me busy every night. I wanted all my companions to be as strong as possible, which meant I was spending an ever-increasing quantity of time in the bedroom. The dual cultivation technique of Tivana's family had spread far and wide through my harem, and by now, every one of them could eke out at least a little in the way of benefits from it. I was pretty much constantly confined to the bedroom, with Mac's reports my only tie to the real world.

I'd set the Hearthwood up well enough that short of disaster, it could manage itself, so things ran fine without me once I gave out some general directions. Things were progressing smoothly, and despite the trouble heading our way, I was paradoxically feeling more and more at ease. We were ready for this, and we'd finish our preparations with time to spare. There was nothing that could possibly go wrong.

CHAPTER  
**FOURTEEN**

**D**espite the pressure on me, the Hearthwood was rather peaceful. I thought people would be more curious at all the Macmarks I was throwing around to make preparations happen across not just the Hearthwood but also our vassal territories.

But people were used to me having one hare-brained scheme or another in the works, so they took my orders in stride. I kept my lips tight about the end of the world as promised, though the Hearthwood's matriarchs were all in the know by now, as were the most responsible of my children.

Argona had nearly panicked when I told her she was going to be locked in a bunker for years, at least until I told her that The Wanderer was probably the most secure place I could find for her.

"Oh, so I'll still be able to get to my workshop?" Argona asked.

"Yes, you'll still have your workshop. You just won't be able to go outside. You'll have to get your sunshine in the Pocket World and your entertainment in the Simulation Chamber," I replied.

Argona shrugged. "So it's just going to be the same as normal."

Comela was a bit more distraught at the thought of having to get all the adventuring she could in ahead of time since she'd be cooped up for a few years.

“But you and my moms will all be free to roam the Primordial World?” Comela asked.

“That’s right. We’ll probably spend our time there. But you can’t come along. Not until you’re a wizard. And even then, you’ll be restricted to staying on one of the settled islands. The Primordial World isn’t safe for people at lower cultivation levels.”

Comela nodded solemnly. “I guess that’s just one more reason to finish building my aura so I can reach the wizard realm!”

Despite the increased activity, the Hearthwood was peaceful. I took great pride in the fact that we were able to preserve the majestic wild beauty of our home while also creating a dense metropolis of civilization. Layers of activity built upon one another, with a big chunk of the city fully underground and another nestled among the branches of the enormous trees overhead. In many ways, the Hearthwood was three cities stacked on top of one another, and each of them had countless shops and luxuries for any enterprising elf.

The monster population outside the city had been cut down to size, and what was left were harmless fluffy things that wandered around the verdant green woods and danced in the gentle breeze for the entertainment of those walking the well-groomed forest paths.

A crystal-clear stream ran through the heart of the city, and my original attempt at a shelter had been preserved along its banks like a historical monument.

Truthfully, it was a bit embarrassing to see so many people gawk and stare at it. I hadn’t really known what I was doing back then, and I certainly didn’t have any mastery of Earth magic like I did now.

But as with peaceful moments, one sudden event brought it to an end.

I was examining the delicate blossoms of the wildflowers just outside the city. Eltiana was tucked into my arm on my left, and Melise was on my right. Behind the two of us,

Assyrus was struggling to cook lunch. I'd taken a brief outing with a few of my matriarchs to relax and get some more dual cultivation in. Each of them had made an impressive breakthrough, though I couldn't yet say the same.

That was when Comela came for a message.

"Father, Father!" Comela yelled from above. She was riding her Wyvern Queen again, freshly healed from her fighting against the dragons.

I jumped up in a start. "Pants! Pants! Where are my pants?" I yelled as I scrambled through the grass for my clothes.

Eltiana was a lot faster than me. The nimble elf ninja just rolled onto her messy heap and slipped into her garments a lot faster. Melise used a bit of magic to reverse time where she stood, and it was like she'd never taken them off. Only Assyrus lacked a trick to get dressed quickly, and she ended up wearing her shirt over her legs and her pants over her head when Comela touched down.

"What is it, dear?" I asked, shifting from lover to father as quickly as I could.

"Sorry, Dad. I know this is a bad time..." Comela shot a glance at Assyrus, who stood awkwardly with her pants on her head. "But I wouldn't have interrupted if this wasn't an emergency."

I frowned. "What is it?"

"An envoy arrived!" Comela's brows drew into a nervous frown. I noticed her nails digging into her palms.

"An unannounced envoy? Just have them wait in the castle until I'm done. I'll see them in a few days." That's what I normally did when one of our vassal clans and kingdoms needed to get a hold of me. I was the liege lord, not someone at their beck and call, and Mac was always around to warn me if they had a real emergency.

"That's what we tried to do! He turned furious and smashed part of the castle, then knocked over a chunk of the



city. We didn't realize until after, but he's a demigod!" Comela yelled, voice frantic.

My face went pale, and I felt fire blossom in my gut. "Why didn't Mac warn me?" I was on my feet in an instant, and Spell Eater was in my hand.

I pulled Comela up behind me so we could keep talking as I flew. Melise, Assyus, and Eltiana boarded their own means of transportation and were quick to follow.

"That's the thing! Whatever he did knocked Mac offline. We think it was one of his demigod powers."

I cursed. "Demigod powers?"

"Princess Tivana said she was outmatched," Comela replied.

I growled under my breath.

"Alright, dear, I need you to do something. As soon as we get back to the Hearthwood, I want you to take the teleportation array to the capital. Remember my friends Sam and Dean? I want you to get them both and tell them everything you told me."

"Understood, Father."

Normally I would want to do something as important as this myself or have one of my matriarchs handle it, but I feared I might need all my matriarchs to fight. Comela was not strong enough to help, but strong enough to use the teleportation array and resourceful enough to worm her way through the royal bureaucracy in minutes instead of hours. Plus, I'd introduced Comela to Sam and Dean so they'd recognize her and know she was my kid. Hopefully, they'd arrive sooner than later. Otherwise, I'd have to resort to something a bit risky if I wanted to take on a demigod.

I spotted the smoke and the ruins long before I arrived in the city. My mood turned darker the instant I saw it, and the only thing keeping me from crying out in rage was my need to stay in control for my daughter behind me and the rest of my people who needed me.

“Father...” Comela said, sensing my anger.

“The teleportation array is up here. I’ll drop you off,” I replied, gritting my teeth all the while.

After setting Comela on the ground, I took to the air again to survey the damage. The homes and buildings that once stood tall were now reduced to rubble. Several trees that were previously proud and tall were now shattered stumps. The massive trunks rolled over the settlement, crushing smaller buildings into rubble. There was even a chunk missing from Castle Mac. The stone broke off abruptly there as the rock facade crumpled away, leaving behind only the part that was actually part of The Wanderer.

Anger boiled inside me, growing stronger with every moment.

“Mac!” I called out, both mentally and aloud. There was no reply.

“Theo of the Hearthwood! I ask for a second time, where is your hospitality? The king of the satyrs graces you with an envoy from his royal presence!” a voice boomed overhead, shaking the Hearthwood.

I ignored it. I had more important things to do.

I found the remains of the nearest entrance to Castle Mac and barreled my way inside. I kicked aside the rock and debris, fury building as I noticed several members of the Whitewood Clan scrambling to remove toppled debris.

I waved my hand, taking control of all the earth zeal within the castle and forcing the stone back into its former shape as a wall along one side of the castle. Beneath, I spotted the bleeding and battered form of Pelise, my daughter by Melise. She was a healer by trade, and to lose her at a time like this was a terrible misfortune.

“Take her to the Medical Bay,” I instructed.

“Sir, the Medical Bay is still undergoing its upgrade!” the maid from the Whitewood Clan replied.

I growled under my breath.

“Mac, cancel the upgrade! We need that Medical Bay operational!” I shouted.

There was no reply.

My heart leaped in my chest, and I remembered Pelise was not the only one who needed my help.

“Argona! Where’s Argona!” I demanded from the maids. “Is she alright? I need her now. And where is Tivana?”

The maids each pointed in opposite directions, one to Tivana and one to Argona. I followed the latter first and found my most technically inclined daughter in the Drafter’s Study, slowly making her way to her battle golem.

“Argona, get to the Command Center and find out what’s wrong with Mac,” I ordered.

“But, Dad!” Argona protested, still heading for her battle golem. “I can help!”

I had no time to argue, nor was I in the mood to. “Argona, as the Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan, I’m ordering you to fix Mac!”

Argona stiffened in surprise. Ever since she’d manifested, I’d doted on her far more than her mother. She hadn’t been born during the early days of desperate fighting for the Hearthwood’s survival and knew me only as the laid-back king who was happy to let his people live as they pleased and looked out for them as best he could. She didn’t know how hard-nosed I could be when the going got tough, but she’d see a glimpse of it today.

“Understood, Patriarch,” Argona said. She changed directions and started jogging toward the Command Center.

I went the other way to rendezvous with Tivana. Our many sessions of dual cultivation meant I was well antiquated with her aura, and I found her soon enough.

“Tivana!” I yelled when I found her wiping blood from her lower lip. Her clothes were tattered, and it was pretty clear she’d been on the wrong end of an attack. My anger bubbled all the greater. Hot blood pumped through my veins, and if I

didn't have my body cultivation, I probably would have blown a blood vessel from the pulsing of my temple.

"I'm alright, I'm fine." Tivana waved me off. "But I'm not enough to deal with him. And you probably aren't either."

Tivana pointed, and I saw the man responsible for my growing fury.

The despicable cretin floated lazily above me, a pair of horns that were probably traditionally handsome masculine features. He had a beard and a sharp jaw that accompanied a tall and muscular build. He wore a finely tailored suit that would have been old-fashioned on Earth, but looked brand new on him. It was adorned with gold and jewels, no doubt of incredible value. The man made no attempt to conceal his demigod aura, and he looked down at the Hearthwood as though trying to see it past his own nose.

"Where is this so-called king of the Hearthwood Clan? I won't ask a third time," the envoy hollered over the screams of the people down below. He glanced down in annoyance and raised his boot like he was preparing to smash a particularly annoying insect. Only in his case, that insect was another chunk of my city.

My blood boiled at the sight, and I decided then and there that whoever this Satyr King was, he'd earned my ire. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not the day after, but I would pay him back for this sooner or later.

The Satyr envoy lowered his foot, and I sensed a tremendous weight behind it, like he held back the force of a mountain with that one motion. He was using a demigod power to charge his attacks far beyond their normal might.

Grimacing, I knew I was the only one who could take an attack like that in the entire Hearthwood and make it out okay, so I dove beneath the Satyr envoy's foot.

I reached up and caught his boot with my outstretched arm. The attack knocked me out of the sky and sent me slamming into the ground. I bent my knees and held strong, absorbing the incredible force of the casual attack. I'd underestimated the

might of that stomp. There were two mountains' worth of weight beneath that boot, not just one.

When the dust cleared, the Satyr envoy blinked down at me while I glared back up at him.

“You just made the biggest mistake of your life,” I growled. Demigod or not, I was furious with this man.

He laughed off my anger like a true mage might laugh off the anger of a mage acolyte. He waved me off like I was inconsequential, and my anger nearly bubbled over.

“Finally! I was wondering what was taking you so long to show up. You must be Theo, leader of... this...” He gestured to the ruins around himself with disdain written plain on his features. He ground his boot against my palm like he was trying to crush me underfoot despite the fact that I'd already put a stop to his stomp. I didn't budge.

There were a thousand things I wanted to say to this man, but most of them would immediately start a battle to the death, so I held my tongue. The best thing I could do for the Hearthwood now was buy time for reinforcements to arrive or for Argona to figure out what was wrong with Mac. So long as one of those things came true, I could deal with this bastard. But to get there, I had to keep him in the Hearthwood without causing any more damage.

“Who are you?” I demanded. It came out as an angry bark, but it was the most pleasant thing I could think of.

“Me? I come as an envoy from the Satyr King. The man you are so crudely attempting to imitate with your own title of king. Know that the lord of the World of Woods and Wilds has seen your laughable attempt to mimic his title and is greatly amused. I, his third son, Prince Tivar of the World of Woods and Wilds, do bear his greetings on his behalf,” the satyr envoy said.

“He was... insulted because some people call me a king?” My brows furrowed. There was more to this. I remembered that time I'd caught the Cult of the Unblinking Eye speaking with a handful of satyrs who looked just like the man before

me now. They were up to something in this world. I just wasn't sure what.

“No, no. He was insulted because you have something that belongs to him,” the satyr envoy began. “An elf whose wisp originally belonged to the World of Woods and Wilds before she fled to this backward world whose day in the limelight is long gone.” He looked around himself with a sneer.

“What are you talking about?”

“I'm here for one thing and one thing only. To retrieve my father's lost property. Hand over the elf, and I'll be on my way,” Prince Tivar said. “I'm not sure if you've heard, but things have changed on the World of Woods and Wilds, and all the elves that once sought protection under the Fairy of the Immortal Glade's banner are now the personal property of the Satyr King. You are harboring several such elves. Mayatania, I believe one was called. The other was Savatania, though the latter left the World of Woods and Wilds centuries ago. It's long past time someone reclaimed that long-lost keystone elf.”

CHAPTER  
**FIFTEEN**

**M**y expression darkened as Prince Tivar continued.

“She belongs as the crown jewel of a Sacred Grove, not as some half-baked attempt at recreating long-lost elven spirit cultivation!”

“Whoever this elf is, I’m sure she prefers to make her own choices,” I replied.

Prince Tivar snorted. “Elves are silly little creatures.”

Mayatania had told me something of leaving the World of Woods and Wilds in search of Sava under her former identity. I had hoped that would be the end of Sava’s past coming to haunt her, but apparently not. I would have to get the full story out of Mayatania after I’d dealt with this guy.

I felt my blood boiling to even greater heights at his words. There was surely something clever I was supposed to say. I should trick him into thinking I would give up Sava and Mayatania, buying enough time for Argona to get Mac operational again or for Sam and Dean to arrive.

But even as such thoughts flowed through my mind, my body was already moving. In all the Ten Thousand Worlds, no man or monster would make me even think about giving up one of my lovers. Yet, even implying that I would do such a thing lit up fury enough within my heart that this Prince Tivar had to die, demigod or not.

He didn’t expect me to be as fast as I was. That was a common problem with people who considered me a normal sorcerer. Elven Spirit Cultivators tended to be slower and

avored hurling long-ranged spells of various sorts. But I also had my Orcish body cultivation, a much more brutal cultivation system for fighting up close and personal. An orc warrior got right up in their enemy's face and matched their brawn with a brutish strength of their own.

I suspected whatever magic this Prince Tivar used was more akin to those of elves than those of orcs, so he was caught entirely by surprise when my fist connected with his jaw.

The impact was thunderous, and I felt his teeth rattle in his skull. The sonic boom followed moments later, and the gust of wind stripped the leaves off the nearby trees.

Prince Tivar was sent flying backward. He struck a broken building, was carried bodily through the remaining walls, and flew out the other side. When he finally came to a stop and left a crater twice his own height in the city street, he shakily climbed to his feet and rubbed his jaw.

“You... you hit me?” Prince Tivar said, more surprised than angry. “Well then, I suppose we'll have to do this the hard way.”

I cracked my knuckles. “Funny. I was just about to say the same thing.”

Stone Obelisks rose from the earth in all directions, surrounding Prince Tivar like a cage. I squeezed my fist, and the sharpened points of each obelisk shrunk inward and created a shell of many spikes. I squeezed with all my magical might, hoping to skewer the demigod a thousand times.

But just when I thought I had him, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“My turn,” Prince Tivar said, appearing behind me through some magic I couldn't place. He cocked back his fist and threw a punch every bit as powerful as the stomp I'd intercepted earlier.

Unlike him, though, I was prepared to take a hit. I twisted and took the blow on my shoulder, deflecting much of the force. I was still thrown backward and sent hurtling toward the



intact portion of the city, but I threw up a wall of earth to catch myself and land on my feet. Then, a moment later, I was back in the fray again.

We exchanged blows, and I threw my all behind each punch. Earth zeal and body cultivation intertwined and reinforced one another, making each stronger than the sum of their parts. That was something I'd been practicing more of lately.

I was surprised to find myself able to match a demigod, though. For so long, their grand powers had seemed like an elusive, unreachable height, and here I was, repeatedly punching one in the face. Maybe I just liked wiping that smug grin off this guy's face, but it was just something satisfying.

After a flurry of exchanged blows in the blink of an eye, the two of us backed away to catch our breath and survey one another.

"You're tough for a sorcerer," Prince Tivar said. I noticed with satisfaction that he had to wipe a drop of blood from his chin. He scowled at the stain it left on his sleeve.

I reached into my Dimensional Storage and withdrew all my Sword Storm blades. Hundreds of steel-tipped weapons appeared around me and swirled in a cloud that promised violence.

"You have seen nothing yet," I snarled.

I waved my hand, attacking with all my flying weapons at once. Again, Prince Tivar's form shimmered, and he disappeared. This time I was ready, though, and I turned just as he appeared behind me. When his form solidified, I had one hand around his throat, and the other cocked back for another punch to his jaw.

This time I aimed him straight for the ground, and the crater his impact left was even greater. He was bleeding from more than just his lip now. His eyes were bloodshot, and the fine suit he'd arrived in was shredded down each side.

I panted as I loomed over him, grinning all the while. Then I lifted my boot and slammed it down on his chest, cracking

the earth in all directions.

Prince Tivar coughed and spluttered. His entire body shimmered and disappeared. He appeared in the air again, and I whirled to face him once more.

“Alright, you asked for it. Here I was trying to play nice...” Prince Tivar growled.

Tivar’s eyes glowed with otherworldly light. He muttered something under his breath, and the air around us grew thick and oppressive. The very earth beneath my feet trembled with the force of whatever he was doing.

The earth zeal I thought I’d laid claim to rebelled against me, and it took all my concentration just to maintain control. I wasn’t sure what he was doing, but it was like no magic I’d ever felt.

“Prepare to face the full power of my Sacred Grove!” Prince Tivar growled.

The ground around me split, and a massive, otherworldly tree split the cobblestone street. It had red bark and blood-colored leaves shaped into sharpened points. It was even larger than the massive trees of the Hearthwood forest, and just looking at those leaves, I knew that every one of them was as sharp as a razor blade.

Though no wind blew, those leaves fell from the tree and whipped around Prince Tivar, spinning around him in a cyclone before heading straight for me.

I held up my hands to shield myself, but the sharp leaves cut tiny paper cut-like lines across my hands anyway, despite the toughness of my body.

“Ha! Death by a thousand cuts! Many an orcish warrior has fallen to this power!” Prince Tivar grinned.

I scowled back at him and cast Layered Durability. The sticky barrier stopped the leaves immediately, trapping them in place and preventing them from touching me.

“I have more tricks than body cultivation,” I growled as I launched myself toward Tivar again for another punch.

Prince Tivar crossed his arms to catch my incoming blow.

“Not bad. Maybe you’re immune to my attack, but can you say the same for your children?” Tivar pointed his hand toward Castle Mac, and the needles swarming around me flew toward the open windows.

“No!” I growled, and my assault redoubled in intensity. I had to put this bastard down, and I had to do it soon.

In my fury, I’d almost forgotten I wasn’t alone. Tivana had exchanged blows with this demigod before my arrival. My fighting had given her a few moments to patch herself up and drink a vitality potion. I’d also seen Melise’s magic at work, reversing much of the damage the attack had done.

As someone with control over fate, she could even reverse death if she got to the scene quickly enough. She’d been using her spells to restore Castle Mac and everyone inside it to their former state. By now, she was nearly finished and was making moves to join the fight against Prince Tivar.

With them joining the battle, he wasn’t fighting one sorcerer, but three of us. Well-versed in fighting together, we all attacked as one. Fate, space, and earth zeal all struck together, and just when Prince Tivar thought he could count them all, I started mixing in my new concepts of gravity and identity. The spell he wielded guttered out as I converted whatever energy he’d been working with into a type of earth zeal usually found in animal dung.

A sticky brown ooze dribbled out of his upheld palm. Then all three of our spells landed direct hits on him, completely unimpeded by any defense.

“Agh!” Prince Tivar cut back a cry of pain as he was thrown backward yet again, only this time, he was battered far worse than before. With two additional sorcerers to help me, we’d put the demigod on the back foot. I was starting to think we were really going to beat him.

But when we went to hit him with our follow-up attacks, we were greeted with a shimmering wall of energy. Fluttering flower petals wound around Prince Tivar, and as we beat on

the barrier, a few of the petals shriveled up and fell to the ground. But new flowers blossomed at Prince Tivar's feet one after another and replenished the shield.

"My father warned me that using my full power on this world would be dangerous," Prince Tivar began. "I didn't want to wake up your Planetary Defense Array. But I suspect someone already did that for me, so it shouldn't be too risky to do this!"

Strange energies billowed around him, and that same otherworldly light blossomed in Tivar's eyes again. Power filled him, this time far greater than ever before.

"Brace yourselves!" I yelled.

I spread Layered Durability over the entire settlement to shield the Hearthwood from whatever was about to come. Meanwhile, I kept up a constant barrage of attacks with my Sword Storm blades to nip away at his shields and prepared every other spell and technique I could muster to throw at this man. Finally, he drew a small knife from his belt with a teardrop-shaped ruby in its hilt. Just the sight of it set me on edge.

#### **Universal Analyzer Analysis:**

**The Satyr Sacrificial Dagger is an integral part of Sacred Grove magic. It allows a satyr to consume all the energy of an entity that is bound to their Sacred Grove, expending their entire lifetime of power to charge one attack.**

"He's preparing something big!" I warned.

Then Prince Tivar reached into his coat pocket and drew out a glowing ball of light. I recognized it immediately. It was an elvish wisp left behind after an elf died or had yet to manifest. It was a brilliant glowing green, just like those the Greenstem tribe of elves often left behind.

Prince Tivar plunged his sacrificial dagger straight into the center of the wisp, and the ruby in the dagger's hilt absorbed the wisp entirely. Whatever elf that wisp had been or might have become had been utterly destroyed.

My heart leaped at the sight. I'd seen plenty of my elven companions reduced to wisps at one point or another. But, from the depth and color of that wisp, it had come from an elf in the early wizard realm.

The air shuddered in all directions, and nature zeal filled the air. Yet, it had a lingering flavor, like it was not just the zeal that someone had seized control over, but the very zeal from their bodies. Though it was only at the wizard realm, the pressure I felt from that power was astronomically greater. I almost felt a gentle elven hand resting on my shoulder for a moment.

“Attack!” Prince Tivar growled. Roots and vines sprung from the ground, and for once, my beloved Hearthwood forest turned against me. All the nature zeal in our surroundings poured forth in an unending barrage of attacks. Though each attack on their own was only in the wizard realm, there were so many of them, and they were cast so frequently that they came one after another.

A thousand questing tendrils of angry vines whipped across the three of us, finding gaps in even my Layered Durability Shields to attack us. As quickly as they appeared, I cut through them with my Sword Storm Blades, but more grew to take their place. Even the grass turned as sharp as razors and nipped at my heels.

I saw Sava standing on the balcony of the castle. Though she was only in the wizard realm herself, she was the Hearthwood's strongest nature cultivator. She would be best suited to wipe out the growing tide of nature zeal and the plant life it puppeted.

Moments passed, and my other matriarchs joined her. Alone, Sava was outmatched. But Eltiana, Assyus, Nela, and Yorik soon joined her. With more wizards joining the fray, they were able to reinforce my shield spell and brace against the constant barrage of attacks. We were gaining ground.

But Prince Tivar was already making another move.

From his pocket, he withdrew another wisp, brown like the color of stone. He thrust his sacrificial blade into it, destroying

it just like the first. This wisp was slightly weaker than before and was only at the peak of true mage. Throwing another aspect into his barrage of attacks made fighting all the harder.

The next few minutes were fierce as me and my two sorcerer companions battled our way to Prince Tivar, weathering all manner of attacks across various aspects. The power from the wizard he'd sacrificed guttered out as it ran out of power. I sensed the lingering feeling of will I had been feeling from it disappeared as the elf who had owned that power vanished forever. The earth aspect of energy followed soon after, but Prince Tivar had sacrificed others to replace them.

He reached into his pocket for yet another wisp, and from the glow of this one, it looked like another wizard. I wasn't willing to let that happen.

[Minerva, are you close enough now?] I asked.

[I'll have to be...] Minerva shot back in reply.

I felt her concentrating, and a skeletal form manifested behind Prince Tivar's back. It was a Corpse Lord, one of the most powerful undead Minerva could manifest. Generated on such short notice, this one took tremendous power and was weaker than usual, but it would do.

Minerva's Corpse Lord reached out and snatched the glowing wisp from Prince Tivar's hands. Someone more used to fighting their own battles would have reacted to the unexpected turn of events instantly. Still, Prince Tivar seemed the sort of princeling more used to winning through overwhelming power. Now that his power wasn't overwhelming us, he was on the back foot.

He had only barely turned to kill the Corpse Lord with a stab to the skull from his dagger before snatching back the wisp and moving to sacrifice it by the time I got to him. One of his sacrifices had erected a shield around him, but it was only at the wizard realm, and I tore through it like wet paper. Prince Tivar's eyes went wide as I bore down on him with Spell Eater, and I lashed out with a stab straight for his heart.

Prince Tivar tried to dodge, but I grabbed his arm by the wrist and held it in place. Then, I felt my spear point hit home, and the many enchantments running down the length of the latest generation of my weapon went to work.

I'd lost count of how many improvements Argona and I had made to my trusty spear. Still, as the adamantium point siphoned the zeal and vitality from Prince Tivar's body, I knew they were working. Power flowed into the spear in great heaving waves in time with the beating of the prince's heart, and with each pulse of power, the siphoning force grew all the greater. Lines of purple poison spread throughout Prince Tivar's body, and I realized I'd gotten lucky for once. It seemed that satyrs were as vulnerable to the poisoning effects of cold iron as elves were.

A loud beep played out in the back of my mind, and I heard a pleasant jingle I hadn't heard in a long time. It was the sound of Mac rebooting.

[Argona's getting me online again. Wow! I nap for five minutes, and you make a mess of the entire city!] Mac said.

A grin split my face. [Glad you could finally join us. You're just in time for cleanup. Let me just finish taking out the trash...]

By now, Prince Tivar's eyes were wide, and he knew he was in dire straits. The smug, condescending look was gone from his face and replaced by a look of wide-eyed terror. I hadn't thought I'd see such a look on the face of a demigod so soon.

[How can I help?] Mac asked.

[Are those Sentry Towers online?] I asked.

[I've halted the upgrades. Argona is getting them operational as soon as possible,] Mac promised.

I dug my spear point deeper into Prince Tivar's chest, and blood spilled down his shirt, staining his suit. He gripped the head of my spear with his hand, and the flesh there smoked and smoldered. There was a lot of resistance as I tried to shove my spear deeper, and I wasn't sure if it was his chest, his hand,

or some sort of energy barrier at work. Likely a combination of all three.

But I didn't catch what Prince Tivar was doing with his other hand until it was nearly too late. He rubbed his thumb against one ring on his finger. I noticed it had the same droplet-shaped ruby that his sacrificial dagger had, but this one was much smaller.

"You've truly forced my hand," Prince Tivar wheezed, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth as he did so.

Another elven wisp manifested in his palm, larger and greater than all the others before it. It was the brilliant amber of fate zeal, like Melise's hair. She spotted it at the same time I did.

"Get back!" Melise warned.

He squeezed, digging that ring into the wisp until it popped.

I let go of Spell Eater and jumped aside. If I hadn't, I might have died then and there.

The shimmering golden light of fate enveloped Prince Tivar's body, and when it faded, Spell Eater fell to the ground. I used my Sword Storm abilities to send it back to my hand, and when I did so, I noticed the tip was rusty, like it had aged a hundred years in the mud.

With my growing control over the zeal in iron and all the metals that came from it, I forced all the rusted metal to flake off and fall to the ground, leaving my weapon pointed and ready for battle again.

"What spell was that?" I called Melise.

"The Fury of Days Yet to Come!" Melise called in reply. "This is bad. We have to interrupt it before it finishes!"

"What is it?" Tivana yelled over the magic roar even as she fired off a slicing thread of space zeal at Prince Tivar's form.

"He's allowing himself to be possessed by his future self, granting him access to power he'll have a hundred years in the



future! Sam the Fateweaver invented the spell. I don't know how he learned it!" Melise shouted.

Borrowing power from his future self? I grimaced. The next time I saw Sam, I would give him my thoughts on fate magic. Namely, it was way too frustrating to fight against for a non-combat aspect.

Of all of us, Melise had the best chance of interrupting the fate spell. But I could tell at a glance even she would have a tough time. Between the brilliant glow of that amber-colored wisp, I would have been unsurprised to discover it had belonged to an elf at the very peak of the sorcerer realm. Perhaps even at the beginning of demigod. For all her recent gains in power, she would have a tough time unraveling a spell at that level under ordinary circumstances.

Now that the entire wisp's being was being expended at once by Prince Tivar's sacrifice, she stood no chance at unraveling it.

The light faded, and all evidence of Prince Tivar's wounds disappeared. His suit was back in place, just as fine as it had been before, only now the top few buttons were undone. Prince Tivar's hair was a little longer and his beard a little scruffier, but that was nothing next to the manic look in his eyes.

"Hearthwood Clan, we meet again," Prince Tivar chuckled. "I've spent the last hundred years preparing to finish this fight and spent no small share of resources. Even when I harvest every wisp in this forest to replenish my Sacred Grove, I'll have barely restored what I've spent here."

"You haven't won yet," I growled in reply. I was going to say something more, but I suddenly had the wind knocked out of me.

I blinked, and I was tumbling through the air. I had to review my senses from moments before figuring out what had happened.

Prince Tivar punched me. He was so fast that even my keen senses had missed the near-instantaneous action.

The next blow came a moment later as Prince Tivar faded and appeared behind me, but this time I was ready. I sliced through the air where I suspected he would appear with Spell Eater, forcing him back and giving my internal injuries a moment to heal.

He'd done quite a number on me with just that one punch. I had broken bones and bruised organs aplenty. But these days, I was far too tough to be put down that easily, and internal damage especially was something my body could heal in moments.

A heartbeat later, it was like I'd never been struck in the first place, but that only lasted a moment. Prince Tivar came at me with his Sacrificial Dagger. He wielded it with a deftness he'd lacked during our last exchange. Now it wasn't just a tool for slaughtering helpless wisps, but a weapon he wielded in battle.

He parried Spell Eater's edge, bringing it to a stop so he could catch the spear's handle with his sleeve-wrapped hand. I expected him to go for my throat with his blade, since that was the obvious target. But Prince Tivar aimed lower, straight toward my core at the base of my spine, my dantian.

I twisted my hips, so he stabbed me in the hip instead. The pain I felt was immense. Agony flowed through my body, and it felt like my very soul was being sucked out of my body into that dagger. I shuddered to think what would have happened had he actually struck what he was aiming at.

"Doesn't feel so good, does it?" Prince Tivar chuckled as he twisted the knife deeper. "Have a taste of your own medicine and know that your weapon is a crude imitation."

I tried to wrench Spell Eater free from his grip to stab him, but it was useless. Then, realizing I was trapped, I activated Molecular Rearrangement to try to slip away. My body turned to smoke, but when I manifested again, I was in the same place, tethered to Prince Tivar's dagger by the wound in my hip.

He was doing something. I either had to break free or figure out what.

His grip on Spell Eater was far stronger than before, and he grinned when I noticed.

“Like that? I planted a thousand iron-root trees and watered their roots with the blood of the strongest orcish body cultivators my father’s forces could capture.” Prince Tivar grinned. “The cultivation methods of the inferior races are but fertilizer for the Sacred Groves of the Satyrs!”

I was feeling desperate, so it was time to dig deeper into my more unusual abilities. I had already hit him with every passive skill, but now I threw my mind magic and Minerva’s full power into the mix. She began draining the vitality from him and transforming it into death zeal.

[He has a lot of power! I could make a hundred corpse lords from him!] Minerva said as she drained the Prince.

I gave her a wordless grunt of agreement. Anything she could do to help would be a welcome reprieve. Meanwhile, I used my mental manipulation spells to target Prince Tivar directly.

Even though that aspect was far weaker than my earth cultivation, Prince Tivar winced when my mind brushed against his. He hadn’t realized I had mental powers and had done nothing in his hundred years of preparation to ready himself to counter them. My mind brushed his thoughts aside effortlessly, scouring his mind clean and causing him agonizing pain.

“Get out of my head!” he yelled, letting go of his Sacrificial Dagger to claw at his temples. Meanwhile, Tivana and Melise peppered him with spells from behind.

I put some distance between him and me and tore the dagger from my hip. Immediately, I felt much of my lost energy flow back into me. My hip was functional again with a moment of healing, and though I was tired, I wasn’t out of the fight yet.

A tinge of madness filled Prince Tivar’s eyes, and blood dripped down his cheeks like tears. Rage and humiliation

billowed off him in waves, and I joined Tivana and Melise in peppering him with spells.

Prince Tivar scanned his surroundings, and to my surprise, he ignored the three of us even as we bruised and battered him. Instead, his eyes locked on a mage acolyte peering through a window behind my Layered Durability spell. I had a sinking feeling in my heart.

He dove right for her. He pierced it easily with my barrier spread as wide as it was. When he reached the mage acolyte, he jammed his open hand like a blade straight through her center. That same hand wearing the ruby ring pierced her core. Her body disappeared in a puff of white light, leaving behind only her wisp. He clenched that wisp in his hand, just like all the others.

The wisp popped like a balloon, and he turned all the power that poor mage acolyte had acquired throughout her entire lifetime of cultivation to his own dark purposes. A hundred spells headed our way, many of which I recognized. They were Waterbeetle tribe spells meant for durability and deflection. Though they were only at the mage acolyte level, the fact that their specialty was defense made it much harder to land clean hits on Prince Tivar. We couldn't stop him from landing on another mage acolyte and doing the same thing over again.

We chased him through the city, but within a settlement as dense as the Hearthwood, there was always an elf within reach. He cut through a dozen more mage acolytes in moments, sacrificing them one after another to throw spells at the three of us and slow us down. We were making progress until he grabbed hold of a true mage. Unfortunately, I didn't recognize the mage in question, which meant she was probably a recent arrival.

She let out a sharp shriek of pain, and my eyes met hers briefly before Prince Tivar killed her.

Then he set his sights on someone I recognized, and my blood turned to ice. Argona was helping Mac get the sentry

towers online. But, to my horror, I saw Prince Tivar's eyes lock onto her at the same time mine did.

"No!" I shouted. Prince Tivar ran forward, but I did the same.

I no longer cared about the many defensive spells surrounding the Satyr. I had to get to him before he got to Argona.

But despite all my strength and speed, he made it to her first. His shadow loomed over her, twice her height and full of mad fury. Argona didn't even have time to blink and figure out what was happening when Prince Tivar jammed his fist through her stomach in search of her wisp.

[We're online. Activating Sentry Towers!] Mac said in my head.

The Level-Reducing Sentry Towers hummed to life, power blazing through all of them. Then, just like before, Mac targeted them on Hearthwood's enemy. Six arcing beams of energy struck Prince Tivar and drained him of his strength.

The defenses that had battered me moments before evaporated as the zeal within them was drained away. I tore through what was left of them with bloody hands. Then I reached Prince Tivar, hand still wrist-deep in Argona's stomach, with a frown on her face. Her half-human nature was more apparent on the inside, and prying out her wisp took longer than expected. That little vestige of her heritage from me was probably the only thing that saved Argona from utter destruction.

CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

**M**y daughter lay in a puddle of her own blood, and the man who did it was within my grasp. The next few moments were a haze of blistering fury. I wasn't sure how long had passed, but Melise tapped me on the shoulder.

“Theo, Argona's in the Medical Bay. I was able to reverse most of the damage with my fate magic, but she'll still be out for a few days...” Her words came slowly and cautiously as though she was handling a frightened beast that might bite her at any moment.

I blinked, clarity returning to my eyes.

It was only then that I was able to observe my surroundings.

Why was it so dark? Hadn't it been sunny out moments before?

I was kneeling in a hole five times my own height. My entire body ached, and my knuckles felt raw and bloody. Beneath me, there was a formless red and black smear. I couldn't tell what it was at first. But then, in the top corner, I spotted the remains of a finely tailored suit.

That was Prince Tivar. Or rather, what little was left of him.

“It seems I don't have the best luck with envoys...” I chuckled.

I shook my hand to get the dust and bloody chunks off. The Level-Reducing Sentry Towers had always been

something of a secret weapon up my sleeve. With their help, even a proud demigod could be reduced to nothing more than a smear in the dirt.

Shaking, I climbed to my feet and jumped out of the hole. People were staring. I did my best to ignore them. I excused myself and hastened my way to the Medical Bay.

Each step felt like a lifetime as I reflected on how close Argona had come to death. The guilt of letting that nearly happen while I was standing right there weighed heavily on my heart. Would she look at me the same, knowing I hadn't been quite fast enough to protect her?

I soon reached the Medical Bay, and I hesitated for a moment outside the door. I took a few deep breaths to steady myself before I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The room was brightly lit, with that biting undertone of bleach filling the air. There were a lot of injured elves scattered around the room, and I scanned the cots until I found Argona. She lay on a bed in the center of the room, and I rushed over to her. People tried to clear the way, but I used the full might of my cultivation to weave around them and appear at her bedside.

Bandaged and sleeping, she looked so peaceful. Her half-elven features were a bit paler than normal, but besides blood loss, there seemed to be minimal damage.

Mac had already performed any surgery that needed to be performed, and traditional elven healing magic could restore her the rest of the way.

I took her hand in mine, feeling the warmth of her skin. I leaned against the frame of her bed and whispered. "Argona," I began, "I'm so sorry. You shouldn't ever have to be afraid when I'm around to protect you."

Bitter tears welled up in my eyes. I felt something I hadn't for a long time. It was a mixture of anxiety, fear, and a burning drive. I needed more power. I couldn't ever allow something like this to happen again.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there holding Argona's hand. She didn't stir, but I felt the warm pulse of her heartbeat through her fingers. My thoughts drifted to the future. Prince Tivar had just been one of many. Who knew how strong he was compared to the rest of his kin?

Just when I thought peace had arrived to my life at last, it was so quickly shattered. I had to prepare.

My resolve solidified at that moment, and a part of me I'd thought buried when the Hearthwood was safely returned to my grasp. The elders among the elven tribes knew how I became the Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan, and it wasn't through holding feasts and smiling jovially at passersby on the street.

It was through blood, sweat, and overwhelming power. It was time to show that face to the world once again.

I left Argona to sleep off her wounds. I checked in with Mac to make sure none of my other children were hurt. There were a few bumps and bruises in Castle Mac, but my children were a tough lot. The human blood flowing through their veins meant that each and every one of them had been blessed with greatly expanded reserves of vitality. Unlike elves, who had to collect the precious life zeal from pills, potions, and the food they ate, humans could generate that same power internally. It was what gave us such an advantage cultivating here in the Ten Thousand Worlds.

My children didn't have that blessing on the level of what Sam, Dean, or myself had, but they had some measure of it. It had helped them cultivate to their current level and enhanced what natural talent they might have inherited from their mother's side, and now it would help them heal from their wounds.



After meeting with Argona, I emerged to find the city fully repaired. That was faster than even Mac could work, but I soon realized why. My friends appeared.



“Theo!” Dean waved as he floated above me. “We didn’t want to disturb you. How are you doing, buddy? Those satyrs are assholes, aren’t they? Especially the nobility.”

Behind him, I could see Sam casting his time reversal spell to fix broken brickwork and shattered buildings. A few dead elves sprung back to life as he worked. It was quite a sight to behold.

I shifted gravity beneath me, using the full might of my Sorcerer powers to float. Earth zeal wasn’t suited to flight, not like spatial zeal. But a Sorcerer was supposed to be able to hover above lesser cultivators without a flying sword or any other trappings of magic.

“The guy said his name was Prince Tivar,” I explained.

“Was?” Dean raised his eyebrows mischievously. “Sam said you got him, but I didn’t believe it. You killed a demigod one-on-one?”

I chuckled. “It was hardly one-on-one. Tivana was there. So was Melise.”

“I already talked to them. They said you were the guy who smashed him into a puddle. I didn’t realize you’d gotten tough enough to take on demigods! Maybe we should start sparring sometime?” Dean waggled his eyebrows.

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “But I took care of him through some secret methods I keep in reserve to preserve the Hearthwood against danger.”

“The glowy energy beam tower things everyone was talking about.” Dean nodded. “I heard about that one too. Don’t worry. We’ll wipe some memories and sow some disinformation to cover that story up. You can’t have hostile demigods knowing about your trump card!”

“I appreciate it.” I sighed, and a burden I hadn’t even known was on my shoulders was gone. But another one soon took its place. “So, this Prince Tivar guy. Who was he?”

Dean shrugged. “You think I keep track of every chump who reaches demigod and thinks they’re a badass? I have no idea. Sam might know, though.” Dean cupped his hands,

though the voice that came from his mouth was loud enough to be heard from a country away without any need for further amplification. “Hey, Sam! Who’s the dead asshole? Theo says his name was Prince Tivar!”

Sam finished casting his latest restoration spell, then flew up to join us.

“I don’t mean to interrupt your resurrections.” I waved him back down.

Sam shook his head. “Don’t worry, that was the last one. Anyway, Prince Tivar... yes, I think I met him once. It was at one of the meetings the Cult of the Unblinking Eye held, back when all of us humans thought we would stay on good enough terms to hold a human get-together every decade. It didn’t last long, but Prince Tivar was staying with the cult guys. He was an envoy for his father. A bit of a superiority complex on that one. He had trouble treating elves normally too. On their world, elves are less than slaves. They’re like plants they farm to expend for spells.

“Basically livestock, except for those under the protection of the Fairy of the Immortal Grove. To be honest, I think the Cult of the Unblinking Eye’s mistreatment of elves began when they formed relations with them.”

I snapped my fingers in recognition. “He said something about that person as well. The Fairy of the Immortal Grove. Apparently, something big went down. A fight that the Fairy of the Immortal Grove lost.”

Sam grimaced. “A shame. She was by far the nicer of the World of Woods and Wild’s two Immortal Ascendants. I wonder if the Satyr King killed her or enslaved her. If he killed her, we don’t have much to worry about. The Satyr King’s power will grow a bit as he turns all of the Fairy’s former domain into a Sacred Grove, but it won’t be much.

“But if he enslaved her? If he managed that, then he’d be supercharging his magic like nothing else. He’d have direct access to another Immortal Ascendant as a source of power. Normally, the Satyr King hides in the shadows since he’s not particularly strong for an Immortal. The last time they fought,

Grognak handed him his ass. But if he's got the Fairy under his thumb, he might have suddenly reached a new level of power."

"Damn it," Dean cursed. "And they did it with stupid farming. I can't believe those chumps get more powerful by planting shit and letting it grow in their Sacred Grove. Such a lazy way to grow more powerful."

Sam chuckled. "If we could have started Sacred Groves, we probably would have. It seems a damn sight easier than what we went through. The same goes for you, Theo. Imagine just planting some crops and waiting around a few hundred years. Seems like an easy way to get fat and lazy. You'd think the satyrs would spend their days having fun, but I guess all the idle time from not needing to cultivate turns their minds to sadism."

I let out the breath I'd been holding, shoulders slumping. "So you guys are telling me I've got an Immortal Ascendant on my ass. And he may or may not be more powerful than ever before. Just great."

Dean scratched the back of his head with his axe. "You find out what he wanted?"

My mind went to Mayatania. "Not yet, but I'm about to."



Mayatania wasn't in her alchemy shop. That didn't surprise me, since she'd been spending more time working with Sava as of late.

I found Mayatania and Sava in the latter's private study. The room was near the alchemy lab and originally intended to study experiments before performing them. Some equipment from inside the lab had leaked out into here though, and there were beakers and test tubes of various shapes and sizes adorning every shelf. Truthfully, it reminded me of Sava's shop and home from when we first met.

The two of them were leaning over a pile of ancient scrolls and books as tall as I was, both with grim and serious expressions on their face as they spoke in hushed whispers.

I rapped on the door frame to catch their attention, though it was already open.

“Sava, Mayatania, we need to talk.”

Sava turned to me and forced a smile onto her face. “We’ve been expecting you. Come on in, Theo. I bet you have a lot of questions for the two of us.”

I let out a grim sigh and sank into a third chair. It sat near the two of them, empty and positioned as though awaiting my presence. They’d probably set it out for me before I even decided to go looking for them.

“It’s about the Satyrs and the former Prince Tivar,” I began. Sava’s expression shifted to one of guilt for just a moment. It was fast, but I knew her well. There was no way I would miss it. “Before I killed him, he mentioned you by name.” I glanced between Mayatania and Sava. “I need to know everything the two of you know about this. It isn’t just your lives at stake, but those of the entire Hearthwood.”

Mayatania glanced at Sava before sighing, her shoulders sagging. “Sava didn’t want to worry you, Patriarch. Don’t blame her.”

“And don’t blame Mayatania either,” Sava pleaded. “She just wanted to protect me. She knew I was happy here and was afraid you’d give me away if you knew.”

I shook my head. “Sava, if you ever thought I would give you up for anything, you were very mistaken. And I promise I won’t be mad at either of you if you tell me what I need to know right now. Spill it. I want everything you know that could be even remotely related to Prince Tivar and the Satyrs. How are the two of you connected?”

Sava took in a deep breath and leaned back in her chair. “Remember those Bloodline Origin Awakening potions we all took when we found those dragon eggs?”

I nodded. “I remember. Pretty much everyone got a big boost in potential from those things. I doubt I’d have so many wizards among my matriarchs without them. You might have all reached your natural limits long ago if not for those potions.”

“Well... as I mentioned before, those potions awaken memories of prior lives. Something that I ended up having a great deal of. Far more than expected. I knew my wisp was recovered by the Riverweed Tribe after drifting through the forest for who knew how long. I used to be pretty powerful, Theo. Even stronger than I am now, to be honest. I was a pretty strong wizard once upon a time. Nearly a Sorcerer.” Sava twirled her fingers through her hair, glancing shyly at the ground before continuing.

“But I didn’t come from the World of Sanctuary and Serenity. I escaped here after fleeing the World of Woods and Wilds, the home of the Satyrs. That was where I was born and bred. Like my mother and her mother before me, I am something called a Keystone Elf.”

I raised her chin, so she met my gaze. “I’m not mad at you, Sava. I only wish you had told me sooner. Tell me, what is a Keystone Elf?”

It was Mayatania who answered this time. “Keystone elves are rare and valuable assets for the Satyrs. They have the ability to spawn an entire Sacred Grove, fully populated by elves all on their own, as well as focus all that elven power into a single set of spells. That’s more valuable than you think. What Prince Tivar was doing was expending wisps completely to power his spells. A Keystone Elf is much like that. Only she can be used again and again. My bloodline was raised to be something of a minder for a Keystone Elf. Think of me as a handmaiden or something. I was actually born and raised to take care of Savatania or her daughter, but she disappeared. I was able to convince the Satyrs to let me come after her on the assumption that I would report her location back to them when I found her. Only I used it as an opportunity to escape the World of Woods and Wilds just like she did and make a new home for myself here.”

“In other words, something the Satyrs are going to want very badly.” I grimaced.

Sava nodded, face solemn. “If you think it’ll help, I’ll leave and go into hiding elsewhere, far from the Hearthwood. I can reveal my location and hope they go straight for me and ignore our home.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “I think it’s too late for that. I just killed the prince. The Satyrs probably want me dead as much as they want you alive. Too bad for them, they’re going to get neither.” I wrapped her hand in my own and held her right. “No matter what they throw at us, you’ll stay safe by my side. We’ll protect our family and home. Soon the World of Woods and Wilds will regret making an enemy out of me.”

CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**

With newfound determination burning in my heart, I realized I had to protect the Hearthwood and my family from all the powerful enemies coming our way. I could afford to rest on my laurels no longer.

Instead, I focused on growing my power, and that of the Hearthwood in general. Mac was still busy diagnosing himself and figuring out exactly how Prince Tivar shut him off. So far, we didn't think it was something intentional that he'd done, just a side effect of the magic he was using. That was something we couldn't allow to happen again.

Meanwhile, my goal was simple. I needed to become a force to be reckoned with once more, not only as the Patriarch of the Hearthwood or one of the most powerful cultivators on the Groveguard Continent, but a power whose reach and influence could stretch between worlds. I needed to fully use both my own abilities and the powers of The Wanderer.

I used my Enlightenment hint. I was surprised to find it ready and waiting for me. I dimly remembered Mac reminding me that it was available again, but with all the things happening, I had placed it on lower priority than usual, and it could sit there, wasted and unused. No longer.

I gathered the powers of the Hearthwood. That meant everyone who was at true mage or above. My matriarchs were among the foremost among those gathered and were the most powerful of those settled in the Hearthwood.

But the Hearthwood represented only one small cornerstone of our sprawling network of vassal clans and nations. The Rakaren Queen was there and at the wizard realm. Despite being a queen, she followed one of my daughters like a lost puppy.

There were others under my sway as well. The twin sorcerers from the Ancient Tree Temple, Teilinith and Feilinith, were present. The two of them had come a long way since they'd first come under our care in the Hearthwood, and they could mostly function on their own now. Whatever the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had done to strip away their free will and turn them into little more than puppets had been nearly fixed. They still seemed to feel like they owed me for saving them, though and had remained quite devoted to the Hearthwood and its cause, despite me telling them they were free to leave.

The leader of the Golden Sword Sect was present too, with Comela standing beside her. Going from leader of one of the most powerful factions on the Groveguard continent to my daughter's private tutor had been a steep downgrade for her, but she'd taken the demotion in good grace and had held exactly to the spirit of her promise. I was tempted to remove that zeal-restricting collar I had on her, but then I might end up having to do what the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had promised and never delivered, giving her a powerful child. If I made her mine like that, I would never let her go.

Yillinarena, the former Sovereign of the Auqualian Isles, was in a similar position.

She'd been ousted from her former throne after being defeated by me, and Illiel and a few of my daughters were taking turns administrating her territory in my name while she remained my willing captive in the Hearthwood. And, much like the leader of the Golden Sword Sect, she also expected to become my breeding stock.

Really, these elves had very high expectations. I had enough women to please as it was. Did they really think giving up control over factions they spent a lifetime building and surrendering to me unconditionally would be enough to worm



their way into my harem? That was the position that took loyalty and friendship to earn. Not just mountains of gold, vast swaths of territory, and an admittedly very tempting body on both of them.

Tivana's friend, the Sunspire Princess, was there, looking at me with thankful eyes. I'd saved her from a horrible fate at the hands of her family's usurpers, and now she was rebuilding the nation that had been stolen from her. With the aid and resources of the Hearthwood Clan, of course. Aid which the Sunspire Princess and her vassals repaid with vassalage, like the others.

Xoreda was there, as well as the representative of the Circle of Necromancers. After my little stunt reorganizing their entire society to make a few functional cities, they'd started seeing me as something of an important person up there. They'd even started asking me for advice mitigating disputes and offering troops to my banner should I ever call for them. They'd even taken to putting my clan symbol on all of their flags, which was very flattering. They were welcome here as well.

A few years ago, it would have been impossible to get them here when wizards from their extremely hostile neighbors, the Lifekeeper Sanctum, stood there next to them. But the Lifekeeper Sanctum had also been brought under the Hearthwood's wing. Most of their wizards had unfortunately been skinned and replaced by Timeweaver Spiders, but the few who survived were collared, chained, and working off their demerits to the Hearthwood with their labor, sort of like a prison sentence, but if they worked hard, they could earn their release a little sooner. In the meantime, a few of my daughters had taken charge of their territories and settlements and were administrating them accordingly.

We had an entire host of elves from across the Groveguard waiting on my every word.

Those who'd seen or heard about what happened here in the Hearthwood and knew what it meant had gone pale from the disaster that had nearly befallen our settlement. A demigod was as fearsome as foes came on this world, and slaying one

who was a member of an even larger faction on another world could only bring down a calamity the likes of which they had never seen before. That was especially evident on the faces of the older council members who had been with me from the start. Elves like Ullua from the Waterbeetle tribe.

A few of the younger elves had the opposite reaction, though. They looked at me with wide eyes full of adoration that bordered on worship. I'd killed a demigod, the most powerful type of being they knew of. In their eyes, I was practically a god myself.

"Listen up, everyone," I began. "I'm sure you've all seen the dark omens in the sky as of late. Things brew that have not occurred since the end of the last golden age. Powers from other worlds are coming to challenge us, and I shall soon fill our own world with blood and strife."

I measured my words carefully. Of course, I couldn't spill the beans about the end of the Seventh Golden Age quite yet. However, I could still give everyone a warning and instructions that would help them prepare nonetheless.

"I have a short-and long-term plan to help us prepare for both. First, I will distribute resources from my own coffers. These are hard-won prizes collected during our recent fight against the dragons, along with no small share of trinkets from my adventures in the Primordial World. I will be handing them out as rewards for good service rendered. Then, afterward, you may all trade what you don't need among yourselves to make sure everyone leaves the Hearthwood a little wealthier and a little more prepared than they entered it."

Yillinarena stepped forward and raised her hand to speak. This wasn't our first meeting, and it had been a bit tough for all these former heads of state to learn they only had the chance to speak when I gave them the floor. It was tedious but worth it to ensure these meetings happened in an organized matter.

"Yes, Yillinarena?" I asked, acknowledging her.

"These items and rewards you're offering up. Are they for... everyone? Including, you know..." A blush covered her

face as she wrung her hands together. “Your... playthings?”

The leader of the Golden Sword Sect leaned forward in interest.

I nearly slapped my palm against my face. “Both of you, quit it. You’re political captives. I’ve made no promises of anything more! But yes, I’ll be distributing rewards to everyone here.”

One of the wizards from the Lifekeeper Sanctum stepped forward and raised her hand. They were the one group I didn’t know by name yet, so I just pointed. “Speak.”

“Can we use these rewards towards our demerits?” she asked.

I considered that thought. I’d put together a bit of a system for all the naughty elves now under my care. These ladies had demerits to work off proportional to their crimes. Service on behalf of the Hearthwood Clan eliminated a few of those demerits. I’d actually given out a gold star sticker worth ten demerit points to all those who helped fight the dragons with the Hearthwood Clan, and the system seemed to work rather well thus far.

Eventually, I nodded. “Alright, sure. I’ll let you buy off a maximum of five demerits with my gifts. But no more than that. You’re supposed to work to autonomy and prove you’ll be a valuable member of society. You don’t just get to use the money to buy yourself to freedom. But frankly, I don’t recommend buying yourself out of any demerits. The prizes I’m giving away are quite good.”

Rather than draw out the suspense any longer, I decided it was time to just reveal what I had. So I opened my Dimensional Storage to all onlookers, and chests upon chests of exotic items and doo-hickies not even I had identified appeared on the ground before me.

“This is a Nine-Heavens Rainbow Gem! Where in all the realms did you get something like this?” an elf exclaimed as she identified what seemed to be a colorful rock. I recognized it as one of the items I’d picked up in the bargain bin in the

Primordial World. That's where most of the items I was giving away came from, though a few had been sifted out of Kun Peng dung by hand. I kept both those facts to myself, though.

"I found it on my many exciting adventures," I replied as cryptically as possible.

"Give me that! I need it!"

"Fat chance, it's mine!"

I shook my head and raised my voice. "Quiet!"

Everyone went silent. A few muttered voices of 'yes, patriarch' were scattered throughout the room.

With order restored, I handed out free gifts of tokens printed by Mac, especially for this event. Of course, the amounts I handed out were completely biased, but I made sure everyone got enough to bid on something. I did want to strengthen the entire Hearthwood.

I'd held back before because I wasn't nearly as sure of the loyalties of these elves as I was of others, but times like these called for taking risks. I'd already stuffed myself, my women, and all my kids full of as many resources as we could consume. There was no sense in letting things gather dust in the Hearthwood Clan vaults when they could be put to work today.

I included no small share of secret spells and techniques among the rare items I freely gifted. While not uncommon in the Primordial World, most of the elves present had never had the chance to visit the Primordial World. And even if they did, their powers wouldn't let them last too long there. So to them, every secret of the forgotten past I freely gave away was a treasure that could reshape their entire path.

The auction lasted hours, but I was in charge of the Hearthwood, and I figured it would do well for all of our vassal clans and organizations to remember that. Holding a position of power here and now would cement that fact in their minds a little further.

Eventually though, the auction was done. Finally, my children got some good practice experiencing what some of

the more cut-throat markets in the world were like. I saw more than a few glares thrown Comela's way when she walked away with some exceptionally coveted prizes. I even suspected a bit of trouble later that day as a few of the wizards from the Lifekeeper Sanctum eyed one of Xoreda's prizes.

I would intervene if it got too violent, but there was no need to tell anyone now. After all, if I caught those Lifekeeper Sanctum wizards red-handed breaking the laws of the Hearthwood, I would get to tack a few more demerits onto their names. It was pretty useful to have a few spare wizards at my disposal, and I could give out an infinite number of gold stars.

But until then, I had other plans.

"Now, I have one last announcement to make before I let you trade among yourselves for what's left," I announced as soon as I got everyone quiet again. "Listen up, because this is going to be important. I'm going to be cultivating hard for the next little while."

There were a few mutters all around. "You're going into seclusion?"

I turned to the speaker, the leader of the Golden Sword Sect.

I nodded. "That's right." Seclusion was a popular technique used by the elves of the World of Sanctuary and Serenity when they wanted to focus on getting more powerful. I'd done it plenty of times, though usually with the help of the Cultivation Chamber's Time Dilation effect, so the Hearthwood had never been without me for too long.

The obvious question followed moments later. "How long?" Assyris asked.

I shrugged. "Until I'm satisfied with my progress. The Hearthwood should be able to run itself just fine in my absence."

"It will be difficult without you..." Sava said, voice full of lonely longing. She was cast no small number of jealous glares, particularly from Yillinarena, Teilinith, and Feilinith.

I let out a chuckle. Sava wasn't quite sure of my plans yet.

“It may be difficult for some of you to be without my presence, but not for you, Sava. In fact, not for most of my matriarchs. I'm not the only one who needs to get some cultivating done. So I'm taking a bunch of you with me into seclusion. When I said I would be working hard, I meant I would be working hard. And right now, that hard work means dual cultivation.”

A few eyes lit up around the room. “Dual cultivation? The legendary secret technique of the Deanian Royal Family?” one of the nearby elves asked.

I nodded. “The same. Sorry, but that technique isn't mine to sell, so I won't share, no matter your contributions. It's for my family and me only.”

A few elves licked their lips. Yillinarena stared at me with hungry eyes. “And by family, you mean anyone you like?”

I shrugged. I thought she'd given up on cultivation after reaching the sorcerer realm.

She'd only broken through thanks to a pill given to her by the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. A pill that had likely ruined her from making any further progress, but had doubled her remaining lifespan, increasing it to the point that she didn't care.

“Let's just say the option is only open to Tivana and the Hearthwood Clan's official matriarchs for now.” I stepped off the stage and waved goodbye to everyone. “Ladies, I think I'm done with this auction. If you don't mind?”

Nela appeared under my arm in a flash. Moments later, so did Tivana, Assyus, Eltiana, and Sava. The others were too busy to attend this little meeting, but that was alright. I'd leave a message with Mac for them to show up later.

For now, I had some serious work to do.

CHAPTER  
**EIGHTEEN**

I left for the cultivation chamber back in the castle, Nela, Tivana, Assyus, Eltiana, and Sava trailing behind me. All five women had a heated flush to their cheeks, already knowing what was to come. Cute elfin heads of gold, silver, blue, purple, and green skipped into the little isolated chamber.

The accommodations had visibly improved since last I was here. Before, the room had been plain wood boards and a narrow, windowless chamber with a tiny cot and a small bed. It would have been cramped with so many of us packed into it. The cultivation chamber was only meant for one person, as the presence of others within it could throw off the delicate harmony of energies swirling in the air. The room itself was nothing more than a box insulating against infiltrating aspects of zeal. That way, valuable elixirs and cultivation materials couldn't leak out, nor aberrant aspects leak in.

That was great for people using the chamber strictly for standard cultivation methodology. But my women and I needed something a little more luxurious.

With a few upgrades and a couple of nudges in Mac's direction, we had what we wanted.

The walls were adorned with exquisite tapestries depicting captivating scenes from ancient elven lore. At least, that's what Mac called them. For me, they were just inspirations.

One depicted the creation of the first elf, wondering at the world in all her naked beauty. Another depicted the first group of elves discovering the pleasures of the flesh. Another

showed the first elf conqueror having her way with the leaders of a group of enslaved clan leaders.

Another showed that same elf conqueror experiencing the other side of the same situation after losing her throne to another aspiring warlord. So it went on for thousands of years and thousands of tapestries. The moral of it all was that elves really liked to fuck.

Besides the tapestries, the once narrow and plain windowless chamber now boasted a stunning stained-glass window that stretched across an entire wall, featuring naked elves basking in the sunlight. I had no idea how Mac got sunlight in here. The Wanderer presumably synthesized the sunlight elsewhere on the ship, but where, I had no idea.

In the center of the room was a large bed that could accommodate all of us comfortably. Beside the bed, a beautifully carved wooden table held an assortment of decadent treats, fragrant oils, and elixirs.

Good. Though all of us could do without food, I suspected we'd want snacks and water later, considering how long we planned to be at this for.

To one side of the chamber, a bubbling hot spring was nestled into the floor, its steamy waters surrounded by polished stones and exotic plants that added a touch of nature's beauty to the room.

I'd stolen that idea from Dean's cultivation chamber beneath the palace in the capital of Deania. He'd also installed a bowling alley, but I'd opted to remain a little more focused.

"It's a lot warmer in here than I remember," Eltiana said as she looked around.

I smiled. "That's by design. Given the way we're going to be cultivating, you're all horribly overdressed."

Eltiana's eyes widened and then were soon replaced by a lewd grin. She stripped off her clothes, and the other girls all followed suit.

I gathered up everyone's clothes and stuffed them in a chest in the far corner of the room. There was a key to lock the



chest, and after including my clothes, I locked the chest and tossed the key into my Dimensional Storage. This was supposed to be a serious and intense cultivation session, and I didn't want anyone chickening out early.

“So... how do you want us?” Tivana began. “I think we should—”

I wanted to start things off on the right foot, so rather than waiting for her to finish, I grabbed her by the back of the neck and placed a wide kiss on her mouth, cutting her off before she could finish. My tongue pushed past her lips, plunging deep into her in a way that had her flushed cheeks burning with heat.

I pulled her close with a hand on her back, and I felt a drop of wet fluids drip from her cunt onto my thigh. Far from the shy girl she'd once been, I felt her press her crotch against my thigh and gyrate up and down, slickening my leg as she did so.

I had two thighs and several elves standing around rubbing their clits, which was just a waste of cultivation time. So I reached out and grabbed the closest elf I could. That was a harder prospect than it should have been since all three of them were crowding close and shoving one another aside to be the one I grabbed. Eltiana eventually proved the fastest, and my hand ensnared her forearm. She let out a giddy squeal of girlish delight as I pulled her twice and slipped her over my other thigh.

I carried the two of them. Their slight elven frames would have been light but with my strength, I hardly even noticed them at all. I flopped down on a nearby wide-armed recliner and only then broke my kiss with Tivana to do just as I had been with Eltiana.

They touched my hardening cock, stroking it up and down until it was hard and stiff. My thick shaft looked as wide around as their wrists, and I couldn't believe my cute and lovely elven women could take such a thing. But deep within their distant histories, elves had been designed from the beginning to wield such power. Their inbuilt flexibility meant even my prodigious size was well within their capabilities.

When we finally came up for breath from our kiss, I raised an eyebrow and looked at the two of them as they stroked me. We'd all forgotten something.

“Oh, right. The cultivation...” Tivana let out a melodious laugh.

I winked at her, then turned to Sava and Assyus looming over our shoulders. “Just because I'm not holding the two of you doesn't mean you shouldn't be hard at work either. I want you both to gather zeal and hold it within yourselves. Focus it as best you can.”

In theory, that would make the dual cultivation even more explosive when I had Tivana and Eltiana swap positions with the two of them. It was a tip Dean had shared with me. Unfortunately, he'd been a little too happy to share advice with me detailing his carefully honed dual cultivation techniques.

Eltiana and Tivana held me close in a passionate embrace as their hands roamed over the taut skin of my stomach. The heat of their desire was almost palpable in the air around them. Their breathing grew more ragged as their arousal levels rose, and I felt a wave of warmth wash over me from the energy being created in the room.

The two intertwined, perky breasts pressed against one another as they fought to be closest to me. It was an intoxicating sight, and I felt my heart beating faster.

I sat back and closed my eyes to better focus on holding zeal within myself, intensifying the experience even further with every passing moment. As Eltiana and Tivana moved faster and faster as they ground themselves against me, I could feel the passion radiating outwards from them as zeal of their aspects. They were building up energy, what I would soon harvest in the next part of our dual cultivation.

My arousal swelled as I watched them, and soon enough, I was ready for the next step.

I grabbed them both by their waists and pulled them tightly against me. Eltiana was first, slipping her legs around my waist and sliding my cock into her dripping wet slit.

I was deep inside her before I could so much as thrust, and Eltiana bounced up and down, nuzzling me back as she circulated her zeal from me to her and back again.

She pushed me inside her tight wetness until they were both filled with my manhood. Eltiana closed her eyes, and her grip on her zeal slackened as she focused more on the pleasure than the cultivation.

But that was unacceptable. We were here for serious business, after all. As nice as my ladies were, most of them got far too horny quickly for a delicate matter like this. So I would need to take charge.

I stood, pulling Tivana off my other thigh and flipping Eltiana down on the seat I'd been sitting on. I pressed down against her and pushed my full length down into her. I slipped inside quickly and easily, and Eltiana let out a dull, muffled moan.

Like grabbing ahold of discarded reins, it seized the energy that Eltiana had been gathering. I pulled the zeal she'd been gathering from her grip and, dazed as she was, she barely held on. Instead, her fingers gripped the fabric beneath her.

With other women, I might have been gentle. But Eltiana liked things fast and intense. So my thrusts became faster and more powerful as our combined energies created an amazing experience that only intensified with each passing movement.

She moaned beneath me, back arching and toes curling as I pounded her into the bed beneath her.

“Yes, yes,” she let out in a shrill voice. “Don't stop, don't stopppppp.”

She didn't need to beg me for that since I had no intention of stopping. Instead, as the dual cultivation technique worked its magic on the two of us, I could feel her energy and zeal rising to a point I'd never seen before.

I continued to fuck her, hard and fast, until she was screaming beneath me, unable to hold herself back for even a moment longer.

But by now, Tivana was squirming over my shoulder. It wouldn't be fair to tease her longer, so I grabbed her by the waist and pushed her face-down against the cushion next to Eltiana.

Tivana squealed in delight as I pressed myself down against her from behind. I wasn't too worried about hurting her since she was a strong cultivator.

I felt her gasp as my cock slipped straight into her wet and waiting slit. She was sopping wet and just as ready and willing as Eltiana to deal with my hard and fast thrusts. I felt all too eager to lay claim to her once again and realized I might have waited too long for something like this.

I felt my orgasm beginning to build as I released wave after wave of energy inside the two of them. But I would not allow myself to fall into such a pleasure, at least not yet.

I continued to thrust between them, switching between the two dripping slits so quick and fast that they hardly felt me swapping between them.

I pushed them even further until they were panting and writhing in pleasure beneath me. Finally, when I felt they had reached their limits and could handle no more, I pushed them both over the edge.

Tivana and Eltiana were left limp and senseless on the cushion beneath me, having been thoroughly fucked into blissful submission by our long session of dual cultivation.

They moaned and twitched, still riding the aftershocks of their pleasure. I felt my connection to them deepen as the dual cultivation technique siphoned the energy they'd been gathering from them and into me. I poured it all into my Mind Cultivation. That had remained behind a little too long. From the recent trick with the dragons, I suspected I'd be facing the Cult of the Unblinking Eye again sooner rather than later. I wanted the power to resist their mind magic.

But while Tivana and Eltiana had been well-fucked, I stood over them with a cock standing hard, and ready for

more. I was just getting started. Fortunately, two more elves were eager and willing to finish me.

I turned to Sava and Assyrus. There was a stack of pillows on the ground nearby, and turning, I swept the two elves up in my arms and pulled them together in a tight embrace. Then I flipped the two over and pressed them chest to chest.

By now, I was too anxious to kiss just one at a time, so I pressed their cheeks together with my hands behind their heads and kissed them at once.

That worked so well that when I tossed them down on the pillows, I left them piled atop one another. They squirmed and writhed, the two of them both reaching for their wet cunts to finger themselves, but each unable to do so with the other on the way.

They left me with the glorious display of two clits, each eager and dripping. I shoved my cock into the space between them, running my shaft along both their clits at once.

They gasped in pleasure and in their delirious lust, squirmed against one another, heightening each other's lust all the more. Their tight elven stomachs formed a gap narrow and tough as they squeezed against my shaft, especially as they tightened their cores as I picked up speed. I drove myself into them harder and faster and felt the total pleasure of the act nearly overwhelm me.

I took control of their zeal immediately, gathering it all and drawing it into me. I returned some power to them, and my dominant position allowed me full control over the magic in their body to twist and reshape it into my vision of what the next stage of their cultivation should be.

My skill at such things had grown, and with my heightening understanding, I knew that any woman I claimed would one day be a sorcerer, whether she had the talent for it or not. The feeble concepts of age and time would not be enough to steal someone I laid claim to.

Like Eltiana and Tivana, I poured all the energy I gathered from the dual cultivation session into my mind magic. The

hazy cloud of mental energy that represented my mind cultivation grew in volume and power. Soon, I felt myself pushing against a threshold as I reached my climax.

Nela stood nearby, looming over my shoulder and caressing my ear and cheek. I grabbed and flipped her around, stacking her atop Sava and Assyrus as I buried my face in her wet cunt.

My mouth worked with magical speed and skill, licking her clit in a frenzy. My fingers worked her tight lips, teasing and pleasing as I sent waves of pleasure rolling through her helpless body. She moaned and drooled as she reached the peak of pleasure before me, before collapsing into a blissful heap atop the other two elves.

I felt yet another surge of energy being pulled from her, and I drew it into me like all the others. She had the most energy, and I noted with surprise being left anxious and frustrated while building zeal seemed to enhance the effects of dual cultivation the most.

Beneath Nela, Sava and Assyrus could take no more. Their orgasms blended against one another, and I was pushing close enough to my climax that I knew I'd cum any moment.

I would not waste my growing load, and I plunged my cock straight into one of the two elves before me and held myself at full depth.

Assyrus was the lucky girl this time to make me burst. As her inner walls pulled tight around me, I felt like a dam broke inside me. I exploded deep within her, gushing a load so thick and creamy her belly swelled and her eyes went wide with the growing pressure.

Nela, Sava, Assyrus, Eltiana, and Tivana were all exhausted by the end of our session. Their eyes had rolled back in their heads from pleasure so intense it left them completely spent. I kissed each of them on their forehead lovingly before laying them down to rest, feeling the precise amount of energy I'd taken from each of them and knowing exactly how much I'd given in return.

I felt my mind magic pushing against the limits of my power, and focusing, I concentrated upon it. Finally, something clicked in my mind, and I pushed at it.

My vision blurred, and suddenly I was standing in a realm of pure mind energy. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before and filled with a strange sense of wonder. It was like that dream state I found myself in when I traced threads of mind zeal and entered the mind of another. Only this time, I sat within the fuzzy cloud of my mind zeal. And that mind zeal was growing.

The vision faded as quickly as I began, and it felt like my brain and swollen in my skull. My thoughts came slightly faster, and I felt keener than before.

**You have discovered the aspects of Domination, Protection, and Ownership.**

**Your Mind Cultivation has grown accordingly.**

**Congratulations on reaching the late wizard realm with mind zeal.**

**You are now a level 37 mind wizard.**

Success at last! I had cultivated to the end of the wizard realm with mind zeal. At this rate, the sorcerer realm was in sight. Through sheer brute determination, I'd broken through once again.

I took a moment to catch my breath and marvel at my work as I watched the beautiful elven bodies sink into a deep sleep beneath me.

But then, a thought occurred to me. Why stop here?

“Hey, girls. Didn't I say we were doing some serious cultivation? We're just getting started!”

It took a while to get them all moving again, but I was serious about doing some real cultivating. Time dilation was no excuse to spend the day sleeping when we were supposed to be cultivating.

I shook each of them awake. “We've got a new plan, girls, and it's time to get serious. I want to cultivate even more zeal

than before, so I will need your full cooperation. If you want to back out, tell me so now. I won't lie. This is going to be rough on all of us. Me especially. But I have the will to push myself to the next level. Do you?"

"I would like to make some progress as well," Tivana said. The others nodded in agreement.

My grin widened. "You've all been warned, and you can back out whenever you want. But from now until we leave this room, you're no longer matriarchs or a princess. Instead, you'll all be my precious zeal batteries. You'll give me the energy to push forward and further our cultivation. The process will be frustratingly horny for all of you, but that's a price I'm willing to pay."

The elves looked at each other with wide eyes and then back at me in confusion, but they nodded in agreement.

I sent orders through my Dimensional Storage to have some of my creations from the Smith's Workshop brought over.

With a wave of my hand, they appeared. A series of intricate devices designed with one purpose: To bring out the full extent of my companions' pleasure and push the zeal they could produce for dual cultivation to its maximum extent.

Whether it was titillating tickles or contraptions to leave them helplessly suspended in the air, I had an arsenal of homemade contraptions at my disposal, ready to transform each of these delicious elven companions into drooling, submissive zeal batteries.

They did the final assembly of my creations, tying one another up within the bonds provided.

First, Sava tied up Tivana with a pair of silk ropes, pressing her body against a metal horse crafted from special wood from the Primordial World. I had to cut the beams myself since no one else in the Hearthwood was strong enough to scratch such things. Though it looked like ordinary wood, it could restrain even a sorcerer like Tivana.



Her curves looked delectable as she lay there helplessly, unable to move and fully at my mercy.

Assyrus was next, and she was fixed onto a triangular board she rode like a wooden horse. The strip of exotic leather was just rough enough to tease her most delicate bits as Eltiana weighed her legs down with stones also retrieved from the Primordial World. She was restrained just as thoroughly as Tivana, with her arms behind her back and her chest thrust out.

Eltiana moved to bind Sava next. My beautiful green-haired alchemist soon found herself bundled to a tight leather swing with her legs pressed forward and her arms behind her back. She stared at the floor as she swung back and forth, perfectly level with my waist.

I handled the last two myself. I had something artistic in mind for Eltiana. She was a remarkably flexible specimen, even for an elf. Soon I had her suspended in the air by one ankle, with the other tied across the room.

She was bound just behind Sava, and if Sava learned to use her swing, Eltiana might just be able to give her clit a kiss. The rope for Sava's swing was tied to a rope that ran between Eltiana's legs, ensuring Eltiana would get a little reward for encouraging Sava to try.

Finally, it was time for Nela's turn. For an experiment like this, I needed a control group, which was the role Nela would serve. With leather and silk, I bound her to my chest, arms, and legs tied to leave her helpless and unable to stimulate herself and interfere with my experiment. She would bounce up and down on my cock exactly how and when I wanted her to, and I positioned myself inside her as she settled into place.

"This wasn't in the dual cultivation manual that Tivana shared with us..." Nela asked skeptically.

I held a finger to her lips. "Shh... don't think, my precious little zeal battery. Thinking is for matriarchs of the Hearthwood Clan. You just bounce on my cock and make zeal for me."

Nela giggled and soon went quiet as I led her in doing exactly that.

Finally satisfied with our arrangements, I returned to survey my work before nodding in approval. With our preparations complete, it wasn't long before we were fully equipped, and the ladies were utterly helpless under my control. Every part of their bodies was left vulnerable and open for exploration as I slowly fine-tuned each device and took us closer to unlocking even more potential from our cultivation.

I mercilessly teased and tortured each woman, pushing them to their limits until they were ready to unravel. The air was filled with intense energy as they convulsed in pleasure under my touch. Moans of pleasure echoed through the cultivation chamber, and I was thankful for the velvet curtains.

Their zeal vibrated through the air, filling the room with powerful energy. They all looked so beautiful as they writhed in pleasure, begging for more as I took them to new heights.

While not as intense as our initial session, this was more sustainable. I spent longer building each woman up to the state I needed them in when we were to join our cultivation together again. In addition, if this new technique worked as planned, I would have something to teach Dean the next time we ran into one another.

Sava squirmed as I flicked my fingers between her legs. I toyed with her for a while, then set her in motion. Sava kicked her legs what little she could to keep the swing going, drawing the chain of bead-studded silk between Eltiana's legs as she did so. Eltiana rewarded her with gentle pecks on the clit with every pass. It wasn't enough stimulation for either woman to orgasm. Still, it kept them close enough to the edge that the zeal they were collecting for me continued to build.

Assyrus was surprised when her wooden horse started rocking back and forth. She struggled to stay upright as the exotic strips of leather swept over her dripping cunt repeatedly.

Besides Nela tied to my chest, Tivana got most of my personal touch as I ran my fingers over her body. She was the least used to my kinkier desires, so she had things the mildest with only her wrists and ankles bound.

“My my, Tivana. And here I thought you were a pure and innocent princess. Perhaps you’ll need to take a turn on my more intense toys as well, hmm?” I laughed as Tivana blushed beneath my touch.

Finally, after ages of indulgence and torment, I stepped away with a satisfied grin. We had achieved even more than I had hoped for. The ladies were panting with pleasure and anticipation.

Only when they had built up a tremendous zeal for me did I finally begin the dual cultivation process again.

Being the closest at hand, Nela was the easiest to bring to climax. I pushed her to the peak while still teasing the others. In return, I extracted the energy she’d gathered while providing her with my naturally produced vitality.

“Oh, ancestors!” Nela moaned as her gathered energies poured into me. It was about the same as before since she’d been riding me all the while. Through her, I had a good baseline measurement.

My experiment was only proven successful when I also pushed into Tivana. I untied her arms and let her fall forward as I positioned myself behind her, taking her and draining away the energy she’d gathered within herself.

Results from her were roughly ten times as great as those from Nela. Part of that was because Tivana was a sorcerer, but part was my new process. So was this a success or not? I would know for sure soon enough.

I untied Tivana and Nela and tossed them on the bed. This time they really had earned a little rest. Then, I switched from Tivana to Assyus, who was just as panting and eager.

“T-Theo...” she gasped as my fingers ran along her long-teased body. I plunged into her just like I had Tivana, and

when our dual cultivation reached its peak, I received roughly three times the results I had from Nela.

“Eureka! I’m a genius!” I laughed in delight as I untied and tossed Assyus onto the bed with Nela and Tivana.

I replicated my findings twice more with Sava and Eltiana, grinning with delight as dual cultivation with them completed. Finally, I divided the power that came from the process evenly between my mind and earth cultivation.

When I’d gathered all I could, I pushed the last few scraps into Minerva to grow my death zeal. I planned to be stronger across all aspects when I emerged from this cultivation chamber.

“Well done, my lovely zeal batteries,” I said with a smile. “Rest now and enjoy your experience. Then, when you awaken, we’re doing it all again!”

CHAPTER  
NINETEEN

I experienced a complete transformation over the rest of my dual cultivation session. I wasn't sure if it lasted days, months, or even years. Frankly, so long as that time dilation feature kept working, I didn't care.

I've often heard it said that if you choose a job you love, you'll never work a day in your life. If you find a way to cultivate that you love, it won't feel like cultivating at all.

Looking back, I shuddered at the long meditation sessions I'd sat huddled in this chamber, thinking about the flow of zeal through my body and how to maximize any effects I might gain. If only I'd come up with this sooner! If I wasn't worried about the upcoming calamity for the Hearthwood Clan and wanted to check in with my kids, I could see myself doing this for centuries before taking a break.

Before, I thought sorcerers and demigods who secluded themselves for cultivation were a bunch of asocial shut-ins lusting only for power. But in truth, I bet many of them just found something fun to do. I wouldn't have been surprised to find some of the most powerful elves who'd hidden themselves away from the world, busy reading books and playing games, not caring what happens outside their hidden cave buried deep beneath the palace of some kingdom they founded generations ago.

At least, that's how it was for me as I dual cultivated with my women. Each precious matriarch in my grasp became a mana battery that served my every whim, and I grew a little stronger for it.

Unlike me, most of my women had duties to attend to at one point, so they swapped in and out several times. Tivana, Sava, Eltiana, Nela, and Assyus were replaced by Melise, Yorik, Amisra, and Jynna. We had a merry time. Or at least I did. They were quite sore and exhausted when I was done with them, though they were all more powerful for the experience.

I couldn't help but wonder if I would make even more progress if I was slightly less stingy with the dual cultivation technique Tivana's mother gave me. I'd promised not to spread it too far and wide, but surely I could trust Korra with it. Maybe Yavilla and Tavilla as well. Those two were adorably cute when dressed as maids. And Mayatania while I was at it. Perhaps Sharian too. She wasn't technically a prisoner anymore, and she seemed to like the things I liked to do to cute elf women.

Though if I was looking strictly at who would provide the highest uptick in power draw, I would have to consider the leader of the Golden Sword Sect and the former sovereign of the Auqualian Isles. They were both powerful sorcerers who were already under my thumb.

Teilnith and Feilnith were losing that creepy mindless puppet thing the cult had imposed on them. Once they had a bit more personality, I wouldn't be against them showing their gratitude in the way they seemed to be offering at every opportunity.

And Tivana's friend, the Sunspire Princess, was looking absolutely delectable now that she was healthy and whole. Should I try to sweet-talk her? She probably needed help to rebuild her royal family and might come to an arrangement a little more fun for both of us than the traditional vassal and overlord relationship we found ourselves in.

Hell, there were plenty of wizards in the Circle of Necromancers who still had a feud with the Lifekeeper Sanctum. Quantity had a quality all on its own, and both factions owed me. I was certain it wouldn't be...

I cut off my train of thought. I'd been cultivating mind magic quite a bit lately as I pushed myself to the very edge of

the Sorcerer realm. Between the occasional Enlightenment Hint and constant dual cultivation, I'd pushed myself to the very edge of the wizard realm in no time at all.

I could have pushed past it to the sorcerer realm, but I'd opened to turn my attention elsewhere, first to break Minerva through to the sorcerer realm, then to push my body and earth cultivation a little further ahead each. Mind magic seemed to do something to the psyche when used to aggressively. It was something I'd experienced before, but never so acutely as this. No wonder all the Cult of the Unblinking Eye's human men were a little megalomaniacal. They were all high off their own magic.

**Congratulations on reaching the sorcerer realm as a death cultivator!**

**You are now a level 40 sorcerer!**

I felt a bit guilty getting that notification from The Wanderer.

"You deserve this one, Minerva. Not me. It was all your hard work," I muttered aloud.

Minerva didn't respond, and at first, I thought something was wrong with her. But then I remembered she was just as bound up as all my other women. The whole reason I stuffed the cute little death spirit into my body was so that way I'd have someone to play with all the time, and now with the dual cultivation technique, that plan was finally bearing fruit. Minerva lay helplessly engulfed within my earth zeal from the combined might of my spirit and body cultivation. Even though she'd reached the sorcerer realm, she was still no match for me.

I'd re-envisioned the shell of energy I had around her several times, and currently, they took the form of an apparatus so complex I could only dream of building it with my current crafting skill. Only here, in this mental space, I envisioned inside myself, could I turn ideas into reality with a simple thought. It was a machine like the kind I used to work on back on Earth, large enough to wrap her entire body up in. Her arms, legs, and torso were all restrained in constant

stimulation. For something called a death spirit, the short white hair and pouty red lips on her looked positively adorable, wrapped around a gag of concentrated earth zeal.

I wasn't really sure what was happening on the energy level. Still, from the way I was visualizing things, Minerva was mine for the taking. You could even argue that I was taking her every moment of every day since the device she was strapped to was made from my own power, and she was nestled inside my body.

"You look too cute like this," I said as I pulled out the gag.

"Thank you, Master." Minerva blushed at my touch. "A-and thank you for allowing me to reach the sorcerer realm!"

I ran my fingers through her hair. "I almost wish you weren't so fun to tease. Good girls like you deserve rewards more often. Why don't more people keep cute elemental spirits like you around?"

Minerva smiled. "Korra's people do. But most don't because we try to take over our host bodies and puppet them from the inside."

I chuckled. "Some spirits do that. But not my cute little Minerva, right?"

Minerva squirmed a little in her bindings, showing she couldn't take over much of anything even if she tried. It was a little too much for me, though, and I had to take her again for a little quickie. Minerva was more than happy to comply, and the extra power she generated through dual cultivation empowered us a little further.

"Pick some good death spells yourself, alright?" I instructed.

"I understand. I will pick what I think will be the most useful to you, master," Minerva panted.

I closed my eyes and brought my attention outside my body once again.

**Congratulations on advancing your World Titan Fiendbody to the Gold Bone stage!**



**You are now a level 47 Gold Bone body cultivator!**

**Congratulations on advancing your mind zeal to the peak of the late wizard realm!**

**You are now a level 39 mind wizard!**

I was stronger across the board, and with that strength came many new concepts, along with quite a few spells and abilities to show for it. They all needed a little fine-tuning, but I was in the Cultivation Chamber already, so I was perfectly positioned to do exactly what needed to be done.

## NEW SPELLS AND TECHNIQUES:

### **Mind Spirit Cultivation**

#### **Harmonic Resonance (spell)**

**Allows the user to bring themselves in tune with the mind of someone they feel a close personal connection to, allowing them to sense their feelings and emotional state.**

This ability had largely been luck when developing my wizard concepts as a mind mage. It wouldn't be too useful in direct combat, but it was plenty useful for what I was doing now.

Being able to sense what any of my girls were thinking made perfecting my new and improved dual cultivation technique far easier.

#### **Heart Link (spell)**

**Allows the user to extend their mental protections across time and space to protect minds other than their own.**

Like the Harmonic Resonance, this ability was for my companions as much as for me. The last thing I wanted was some grubby-handed cultist trying to brainwash my women. The enchanted necklaces had been the first step, but now that we were reaching a level of power that could potentially slip by them, I wanted more proactive defenses.

Now, if someone so much had a stray thought I didn't like and sent it in the direction of one of my women, I could make a note of their face and location and fly over to pound the crap out of them.

#### **Aura of Domination (spell)**

**Allows the user to emit a powerful and overwhelming aura of dominance and control, causing those within its range to feel a deep sense of reverence against the user. Any thoughts of resistance will be met with feelings of hopelessness. The aura of domination can be adjusted in**

**intensity, ranging from a subtle influence that nudges others to follow the user's lead to an overwhelming force that compels obedience and loyalty. The exact effects will depend on the level of the target relative to the user.**

**This ability cannot alter the free will of the affected if they are completely certain of their desire to resist, but those in doubt will be nudged toward compliance.**

**Warning: This ability may have unintended side effects if used against individuals who are already loyal to the user or have a romantic interest in the user.**

This ability I'd picked up as a general crowd control power. While it wouldn't be useful against foes on the level I expected to fight, it would be handy in keeping lower-leveled people out of trouble.

Back when I was the chief of the Blackgorge Tribe, a decent number of far-weaker elves still felt like they had to put up a fight against me. The same thing happened in the Golden Sword Sect and the Lifekeeper Sanctum.

Defeating weaklings just wasn't worth it for me, and there was no reason for anyone to fight a hopeless battle. Now, I could tell them to surrender and submit without a fight.

Or at least that's what I thought. When I activated the ability to its full effect within the cultivation chamber, I tested it and received some peculiar results.

"Alright, so who's going to be a good girl and help me test —" I was cut off midway through asking as every one of my companions threw back their heads, moaning and quivering. Every one of them had orgasmed on the spot.

I chuckled. Perhaps the unintended effects would be a bit more fun than I thought.

## WORLD TITAN FIENDBODY BODY CULTIVATION

### **Unbreakable Stance (Technique)**

**The user can call upon the earth beneath them and spread out their power through it to reinforce the battlefield, granting them the leverage to utilize their full power whenever they are in contact with the ground.**

This technique was a required secondary power. I could do something akin to it already, but now that I was getting even stronger, I needed to keep firm footing. Having the strength to pick up a mountain and throw it wouldn't matter if just lifting the mountain meant I plummeted straight through the ground when I did so.

## EARTH SPIRIT CULTIVATION.

### **Earthen Genesis (spell)**

**The user can create and shape new life forms using earth and clay. These life forms will be monsters with a spellheart at their core. Their power will be proportional to the energy that goes into their creation.**

I was satisfied with my progress so far, but not nearly finished. Now that I'd spent some time working on everything else, I figured it might be time to make that final push with mind magic and enter the sorcerer realm with it.

I'd progressed with everything else. With my women close at hand to keep me in line, I was pretty sure I could tame any megalomaniacal impulses before they became a problem.

Korra and Amisra were napping in my arms, and I was about to shake them awake so we could begin when Mac made his presence known for the first time in ages.

[Theo, your friends are here,] Mac said.

"Now? I thought I did the whole announcing I was going into a secluded cultivation thing," I grumbled as I peeled a naked elf and catgirl off me.

[They say they're here to talk about that Prince Tivar fellow you killed. Apparently, things have been happening among the demigods. The Satyr King isn't happy you killed one of his favorite sons.]

I straightened. It seemed like my little vacation was over all too quickly. I got dressed for the first time in ages and left the cultivation chamber to see what Sam and Dean had in store for me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

I left the cultivation chamber and stopped only for a quick shower in my personal quarters before heading out to meet Sam and Dean. Mac could keep them company for a few minutes. I found the two of them in one of the upper rooms of the castle, playing a modified version of chess. Each piece was an intricately carved elf warrior woman. The main difference between this game and the one I knew was a second level overhead. This board was larger, and every piece on it was a stage more powerful than those on the lower level.

“Invent a new game while I was away?” I asked as the door swung open.

Sam shook his head as he moved a piece on the upper board. “Not really. This was an elven game long before we arrived here. We suspect the original humans who helped build this world came up with it. The idea is the same as chess, except like with most large-scale battles between armies here, there’s always another more powerful battle going on overhead. While the mage acolytes and true mages fight it out on the ground, wizards and sorcerers clash in the sky above.”

Sam waved his hand and put the board away now that I had arrived. Dean didn’t protest since, by the looks of things, he was losing badly. The two of them turned to me with serious expressions.

“Let me guess,” I sighed. “You brought bad news.”

“Really bad.” Dean shook his head sadly. “Horrible, in fact. You have to get all dressed up and go to some stupid

party.”

“Come again?”

Sam cleared his throat to clarify. “The Cult of the Unblinking Eye has offered to mediate the dispute between you and the Satyr King. Realistically, he can’t afford to lose face by allowing you to get away with killing his son, no matter what trouble he caused in the Hearthwood. You’re going to have to show up, say you’re sorry, and then offer him some token gift that he can show off at home and claim he avenged his son’s death and that nobody dares to disrespect the Satyr King. Basically, it’s international politics.”

“Horrible indeed...”

Sam chuckled. “You’re a patriarch of a great clan, Theo. You’re going to have to get used to doing this kind of stuff.”

“That’s right!” Dean laughed. “You should have stayed as my daughter’s vassal, quietly tucked away in Deania. She can’t very well rule over you anymore now that you’ve got a bigger domain than she does! She’s promised all the help she can provide as one allied nation to another, but she can’t step in and resolve your issues, if that’s what you’re hoping for. Even if I called all my wayward daughters back home, our extended family isn’t ready to take on an Immortal Ascendant in a direct fight.”

He scratched the back of his head as he shook it in disbelief. “I really didn’t think you’d make such a massive fuss so soon! Here I thought I’d get to lord it over you for a century or two at least while you were growing up safe under the protection of a mysterious and handsome benefactor who just happened to look like your old friend...”

I sighed. “I do wish I could have stayed low-key a while longer.”

Dean grinned. “After the dust clears from the end of this golden age and wipes out Deania, I’m going to build a tiny little clan of powerhouses like Sam here. There’s no sense in trying to build a continent-spanning kingdom. Too much of a pain in the ass. In fact, maybe you can manage and rule the

continent-spanning empire, and I'll just have a little sect inside it like Sam."

I chuckled. "We'll see how this meeting goes before I agree to anything. I take it from the way you two are prepping me that it's both very important and very unlikely to go smoothly."

Sam nodded. "That's about right. But we'd be lousy friends if we didn't prepare you as best we can."

The two of them spent the next few hours walking me through how these meetings usually went. They explained how someone of my station should dress and comport themselves. They told me what we'd eat and drink, helped recreate the location the meeting would take place in using the Simulation Chamber, and generally ran me through everything that could reasonably be expected to happen.

"I demand you crawl on all fours and kiss my hoof!" Dean said in his haughtiest tone as he wore a fake pair of horns and pretended to be the Satyr King.

"I must respectfully decline, but I will once again offer my sincere apologies for the death of your son and provide compensation accordingly," I replied, almost robotically by this point. Sam and Dean had walked me through this process so many times that I didn't even need to think about the answers.

"You have passed my final test!" Dean threw the horns aside, reached behind his back, and pulled out three mugs filled to the brim with beer. "Now, a few drinks to celebrate, and then we'll hit the road!"

Sam took the beers away. "No drinking and flying. That's never ended well for you."

"Aww..." Dean sighed, but he perked up again when we were in the air.

Although all three of us could fly, with or without vehicles, Sam suggested it was more reasonable for us to arrive by airship. Though far slower than a Teleportation Array, it was better to have a small space to call your own during one of



these meetings. The Satyr King would certainly have his own fully crewed airship with its own servants. Most importantly, there wouldn't be any listening devices hidden within the room.

I was supposed to bring along a token staff and escort. Originally, I would have opted for Illiel and Tivana. Both had level heads and were experienced in matters of statecraft. Unfortunately, both of them were also Dean's descendants, which would have made the whole flight a bit awkward. In the end, I brought Yorik and Amisra.

While neither knew statecraft, both were tough women experienced in keeping straight faces during important meetings and dealing with people when things went south. At the very least, they'd be less likely to get me into additional trouble than any of my other companions. Eltiana had volunteered to come along, and I shuddered at what might have happened if she'd shown up.

Besides the two of them, I also brought Mayatania. She knew the Satyrs better than anyone else in the Hearthwood, having lived in their world for so long. She'd be the best source of information I had on them. She had been a little nervous to go, but I promised to keep her safe.

"Don't worry, you'll be there with me the whole time. And two demigods." I nodded to Sam and Dean as I escorted Mayatania onto the airship.

"They might be mad at me." Mayatania ran her fingers through a strand of her own hair. "I was a trusted servant once. I used my position to flee to this world. What if they... what if they try to take me back?" She worried at her lip with her teeth.

I snorted. "They won't be taking you back, trust me. If you're really worried, you can stay in the airship the whole time. I just want you there in case I need your advice."

Eventually, Mayatania boarded the ship, anxious or not.



Sam called his airship over from the Fateweaver Society, complete with a few of the Fateweaver Society Oracles and some underlings to pilot it. “Your room is in the usual place, Dean. All the rooms are extra padded and fully soundproofed, as usual,” Sam said.

Sam directed Yorik, Amisra, Mayatania, and me to another set of guest rooms on the opposite side of the airship. It was considerably larger than the one Baroness Jynna had inherited from Dean, and the amenities were accordingly more luxurious. It was as if whoever had built this ship had tripled everything in size. Space was actually twisted within the airship, so it occupied little space but had a sprawling interior fit for a palace, complete with saunas, swimming pools, massage parlors, and bars.

Sam and Dean had something of a bring-your-own-staff policy, and I saw a few people from the palace mixed in among the members of the Fateweaver Society. The three of us parted ways to set our things down and relax a little before reconvening for another discussion of what was going to happen in the upcoming meeting, and perhaps a quick board game as well.

In the meantime, I reconvened with Yorik and Amisra for some private time. The two were warm and great to hold. Fit and well-muscled, Yorik was the only woman who could fill my arms on her own. Amisra was pretty toned for an elf, though; all that training with the royal guard had put some muscle on her bones and made her a bit sturdier than most elves. But I flipped both of them over on the bed easily enough. Mayatania played her part as my little assistant. She didn't know the dual cultivation technique, so she was confined to just being an extra set of hands for me. But that was still plenty of fun, and she was used to serving such a role when visiting Sava in the alchemist's laboratory. She was very accustomed to holding beakers while Sava harvested vitality from me.

A bit of relaxing dual cultivation later, the alarm I'd set started buzzing, and I left to reconvene with Sam and Dean,

who were both already waiting for me in the airship's game room.

“Ha, there's our slowpoke!” Dean grinned.

I grinned back at him. “Dean, this is one of those times when it's good to be the slowpoke. You weren't here first, were you?”

That wiped the smile off Dean's face and replaced it with furrowed brows. Sam laughed.

“Now... we're playing a new game...” Sam began, gesturing to the table. It was covered with figurines that looked a lot like satyrs. There was an empty chair before the table, and before it stood a single figurine of myself. “It's called Interplanetary Diplomacy! I invented it a century ago to help Dean with something. Anyway, now I get to break out the rulebook again. Let's go!”



The trip took several days. We passed over seas and scorching deserts, and soon left the Groveguard Continent behind completely. It wasn't long ago that my knowledge of this world was confined entirely to the area around Deania. And now, I'd seen not just one, but two other continents.

Unlike the last one we visited, which never truly recovered from the end of the last golden age and now had the damage of a dragon attack to contend with, this continent was completely in the opposite direction. We'd flown far enough west that most elves here considered themselves to be on the eastern edge of civilization. The architecture here had a truly ancient look to it, as if it hadn't just been around since the beginning of this golden age, but had been passed down from the last one. They favored sandstone and marble in their construction and built thick, wide, domed buildings accordingly. The elves I saw milling about on the ground were of varied appearance, but on the whole, they skewed toward a sun-kissed Mediterranean complexion with lightly curled hair.

They wore even fewer clothes than those in Deania, as the climate was even warmer here. Being almost all female, the elves had no need for modesty, and their bodies grew all the more enticing the higher their cultivation levels. So, in a way, showing off their bare skin was a greater display of wealth than any amount of finery.

The air was filled with airships, though all were of a different design from what I was familiar with. They were made of graceful wooden curves, bent or grown into sweeping arcs that formed birds of prey. A few even articulated along the wings as though they were giant birds.

We came upon an enormous city split into three sections as two rivers met right in the middle and joined into one. The city was so large it bled directly into its adjacent towns, and eventually into villages. While a portion of the city was walled, it looked to have spilled out of those walls centuries ago, and now most of the city stood in the open.

There were towering marble temples that reminded me of ancient Greece, and the walls of all of them were painted with bright and lively colors. Here and there along building walls were intricate frescoes depicting figures built like gods, most of them male humans.

There were sculptures as well, mostly of bronze, but a few in the wealthier districts seemed to be made of solid gold. There were both human and elven statues here, but the human men always stood proud with their arms outstretched, looking toward the sky or spreading their arms wide as though to embrace the city. Each of them looked like heroes of legend, and I spotted the same couple of figures more than once. One looked like it had been James. Another I suspected depicted the Sunspire King.

The elven statues were universally smaller, either clinging to the side of their human companions or kneeling before those same human statues as they presented tribute in the form of gold, gemstones, or their own bodies.

It was quite evident that the Cult of the Unblinking Eye played a much more direct role in ruling this nation than Sam

and Dean had done in Deania. “We want to land near that building there.” Sam pointed near one of the largest temples, and the pilot at the front of the airship took us down. We landed as lightly as a feather, and the doors opened.

“I’ll go first,” Dean said, hefting his axe over his shoulder. The way he glanced to either side of the airship door before stepping out made me a little wary of following behind him, but he turned back and flashed us all a big thumbs up. “Seems legit to me!” Dean smiled at us before tucking his axe away and stepping out the door.

Sam followed him, and when he looked around and gave our surroundings his approval, I felt a lot more confident in following him out. What I found on the other side had me gawking like a tourist. There were rows upon rows of elves standing in neat, even rows before the entrance to our airship. The two at the end had just finished rolling out a long red carpet, and all those standing to the side bowed in unison the moment we showed our faces.

“We greet the masters from distant lands,” the elves spoke in a rehearsed voice. “The Unblinking Eye welcomes you.”

My eyebrows rose. Every elf stood still and expressionless. It was almost eerie how they moved in unison. Each of them had blank, expressionless faces, and from my mind magic, I got the vague sense that they were awaiting orders and would remain bowed until someone told them to do something else.

“Stand up straight,” I said. “Enough bowing.”

Immediately, two hundred elves straightened and stood with their arms to their sides and their eyes straight ahead.

“This is a bit creepy,” I muttered.

Sam clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Yeah, Dean and I parted ways with these guys when things started getting weird. You’re just going to have to bear with their tastes during our stay. This is their little display of power. They want to show they’re stronger than any of our respective factions.”

I looked over the rows of blank-faced elves, and only after Sam said so did I think to check their power.

**Elven Servant of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye (Level 30, Early Wizard Realm)**

**Elven Servant of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye (Level 30, Early Wizard Realm)**

My eyes widened as I scanned the crowd. “That’s a lot of wizards.”

Dean snorted. “It’s not as impressive as it looks. The Cult has a way of promoting True Mages to Wizards by transferring power from one elf to another. It’s a bit like dual cultivation, but remove all the fun and replace it with pain. Anyway, it makes True Mages into Wizards, but sacrifices all future progress they might have made.”

“I see...”

No matter how the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had done this, they clearly had more wizards than Sam, Dean, and I combined. And we certainly couldn’t get all our wizards to line up for some silly greeting ceremony. They were all in important positions leading clans or their respective organizations.

If they could spare this many for something as frivolous as this, how many more wizards did the Cult of the Unblinking Eye have to call upon? Even if these wizards weren’t fighters of the highest quality, quantity was a resource all on its own.

But I kept such thoughts to myself and put on the formal and placid expression I’d spent the last few days practicing with Sam and Dean. The game was about to begin.

“Ah, our guests have arrived at last!” spoke a male voice I hadn’t heard before.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-ONE**

The man who greeted me was an unfamiliar demigod. He was tall and well-dressed, with piercing eyes and a confident smile. He exuded an air of charisma, but something about his demeanor felt subtly sinister.

This wasn't the first time one of the Cult members had opted for a preppy Earth-like look. It hadn't been universal, but common enough that I was starting to wonder if it was a theme of the cult. From the statues outside, deifying themselves, and perhaps humans in general, was certainly one of the cult's favorite pastimes. It wouldn't surprise me if embracing Earth culture had something to do with that.

"Welcome, esteemed guests from afar! I am Ethan Carter, and I lead the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. Your presence here honors us," he said, extending his hand in a gesture of friendship.

"Thank you for your hospitality, Ethan. We hope to learn more about your organization during our stay," I replied, shaking his hand cautiously.

Ethan's smile broadened. "I'm certain you'll find our practices and beliefs quite fascinating. We have much to share with one another."

As we exchanged pleasantries, Sam and Dean stood close by, their eyes alert and their expressions carefully neutral. I could tell they were just as wary of this man as I was. But for now, we would have to play along and learn what we could about the Cult of the Unblinking Eye and its intentions.

“Sam, Dean, it’s good to see you two again as well! It’s been far too long. You haven’t been attending the yearly meetings. Last time I saw you was what, one, two centuries ago?” Ethan asked.

“We quite publicly parted ways with your little club,” Sam said, keeping his hands at his side. Dean pointedly crossed his arms and tilted his nose upward. For all the work they’d gone into preparing me for this meeting, they seemed to have no intention of applying any of that knowledge themselves.

“Right... well... I still hope you’ll come around. A lot has changed over the past few hundred years. We are bigger and more powerful than ever.” Ethan flashed a pearl-white smile. When neither Sam or Dean responded, he turned that same smile on me.

“Theo, right? It’s your first time here! We don’t get sleepers much these days. Most humans brought here woke up long ago. I know you’re probably hiding a big secret, but don’t worry, I won’t pry. Us on the other hand? We’re an open book. Please, let me give you the full tour of our facilities here, just one of the many temples available to all humans, free of charge. Whether they’re a member of our little club or not, as Sam put it.” Ethan gestured for us to follow him deeper into the grand building. “I’m sure you’ll find the architecture and history of this place quite intriguing.”

I nodded and followed him. “If you’re offering, then I accept. I’m something a student of elvish history myself.”

Ethan chuckled. “Good! Ultimately, elvish history blends into the earliest days of the Ten Thousand Worlds. The days when the creators of this place still wandered its halls. Did you know they were humans, like us?”

I had indeed known as much, mostly due to my discoveries aboard *The Wanderer* and studying the statues that had given me the World Titan Fiendbody. Still, I thought it best not to reveal too much. Appearing ignorant might give me an advantage at a later date, so I kept my mouth shut and my eyes mildly curious.



“Very interesting. But what makes you make such claims?” I asked.

Ethan clapped. “To the exhibits!”



As we followed Ethan through the grand halls of the temple, I couldn't help but feel a mix of curiosity and unease. He led us to a room filled with various artifacts, scrolls, and statues that he claimed held the key to understanding the true history of the Ten Thousand Worlds.

“Here, we have exhibits that prove humanity was the first of the races among the Ten Thousand Worlds,” Ethan said, gesturing to the displays with pride. “These ancient scrolls and stories mention humans by name, predating any other known race.”

I examined the scrolls, which were carefully preserved behind glass. The rows of tightly packed text were cramped, but legible through their container, and I was surprised to discover they were written in plain English, despite the ink and quill appearance of the document. Human words penned by elvish hands?

I nodded appreciatively at the scroll, while nearby Ethan beamed with pride. Dean, on the other hand, seemed far more interested in a statue next to the scroll, depicting a naked elf woman looking up with doleful eyes. Sam scrutinized the scroll with a critical eye and made an appreciative grunt.

Ethan continued, “Moreover, these accounts from the first golden age demonstrate that elves were created to be subservient to humans. It's the natural order of things, you see. One creator in particular was in charge of defining the whole elven form and culture. It's why they're so pleasing to look upon. They were made that way.”

I frowned. “Pretty sure there were elves in myth and legend for a long time.”

Ethan shrugged. “I never said the original creators of the elvish race didn’t take inspiration from lore and fiction back home.”

As he showed us the various stories and artifacts that supposedly supported his claims, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of unease. The idea that elves were created solely to serve humanity all seemed like a way the Cult of the Unblinking Eye justified what they were doing, and I could sense the same discomfort I felt from Sam and Dean.

Dean, unable to contain himself any longer, blurted out, “Your mind control shit is fucked up, you know that right?”

Sam nodded in agreement, adding, “These ancient stories can be interpreted in many ways.”

Ethan chuckled, unfazed by their objections. “Agree to disagree, Sam, Dean. I’m not trying to convince you. Just talk to Theo here. Besides, it’s a matter of perspective. We in the Cult of the Unblinking Eye believe that humans are superior to elves and other local races. We’re simply embracing our rightful place in the world.”

I put on my neutral face and spoke. “While I think everyone deserves to hold his pride in something, I think it’s healthier to draw that fulfillment from your own personal accomplishments. Thinking of yourself as innately better than others is just an excuse to allow yourself to be too lazy to even earn your arrogance.”

Ethan, noticing my cloaked hostility, tried a different approach. “Theo, my friend, you seem uncertain about all of this. Perhaps you need to experience it for yourself to truly understand. I could arrange for some elf slaves to be assigned to you during your stay here.”

I hesitated, searching for the most diplomatic way to decline his offer without offending him. “Ethan, I appreciate the gesture, but I believe I can manage without any assistance during my visit. I have my own companions, and they are all I need.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow, a hint of surprise in his expression. “Well, that’s quite noble of you, Theo. Are you certain? We have all kinds of elves in our collection, suitable for every taste you might have. They’re even trained in our unique cultivation technique, which will allow a man such as you to siphon away power that took them years to accumulate in one quick session. It really is the most efficient way for humans like us to grow in power. And don’t think the elves wouldn’t do the reverse to us if they had half a chance.”

Ethan shot a glance at Sam and Dean. “And before the two of you complain, no. They’re not even ‘mind controlled’ as you put it, though that’s really such a crude term for the techniques we use on our defensive units. The cultivation vessels are paid like regular workers to cultivate all day and night so that we can harvest what they collect at regular intervals.”

Ethan spoke the truth. The Crimson Dragon Clan matriarch would have been the death of me, had I been captured for her even a moment longer. But I’d been saved that day by Sava, Assyus, Eltiana, Nela, and all the others.

I held up my hands, speaking softly, but firmly. “No thanks. And I’m quite certain, thank you.”

He looked like he was going to try a little harder to convince me, and his furrowed brow darkened. He clearly wouldn’t appreciate being lectured about morality. “When they retire, they do so as powerful cultivators. Some even suspect cultivating over and over again helps them master the fundamentals, and the vitality they receive from us increases their potential. Almost all of the strongest city-states are under the leadership of a former cultivation vessel.”

I raised my hands. “I don’t intend to criticize you. Far from it. With the amount of elven blood on my hands, I’ve barely got a leg to stand on here.”

“Then...?” Ethan raised a brow.

I realized I’d have to come up with an explanation he would understand.

“I have no intention of using someone else’s cultivation vessel.” I flashed him a sheepish smile. “What can I say? Personal preference.”

Ethan nodded, his smile returning. “Of course, I understand. Different strokes for different folks, as they say. We’ve accommodated people like you after they’ve joined our organization, so such tastes definitely aren’t uncommon. I know that I have a few favorites I keep strictly to myself as well. Anyway, since you don’t want to partake in our hospitality, I have other duties to attend to. You may wander the halls and walk through any unguarded door in the temple. I have just received word that the delegate from the World of Woods and Wilds has arrived, so I’ll be greeting them in a moment. The two of you will meet during the feast at sunset.”

I offered him a polite smile in return. “Thank you, Ethan. I’m sure we’ll find our visit to be quite enlightening. Until sunset.”

The moment Ethan left, my shoulders sagged in relief. This diplomatic visit was going to be tougher than I thought.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-TWO**

The grand banquet hall buzzed with activity, the tables laden with diverse dishes, as guests from across the Ten Thousand Worlds engaged in lively conversation. Despite their many flaws, the Cult of the Unblinking Eye knew how to throw a party.

The hall was magnificent, with towering marble columns and intricately carved frescoes adorning the walls. Expansive, glittering chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceiling, casting a warm, golden glow over the scene below. The tables were adorned with rich velvet tablecloths and gilded tableware, giving the entire space an air of opulence and extravagance.

Elven servants in elegant and revealing attire moved gracefully among the guests, their every movement fluid and precise as they served platters of steaming delicacies and filled goblets with the finest wines from across the realms. Some moved with silent and blank expressions, but those were only good for simple mechanical tasks. Those who had to respond to orders were a little livelier, which was a relief to me.

Most of the guests were elven too. They were healthy, whole, and didn't seem to mind the presence of their more mindless kin. There was something different about them that took me a while to notice, though.

They were wearing makeup, of all things, along with frilly dresses that had no use other than to catch the eyes of onlookers. Elves had naturally flawless features, especially those who'd done any cultivation. And with a society almost

entirely female, they usually didn't bother putting on makeup or dressing for anything other than practical daily wear.

But apparently, the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had other preferences, and they'd shifted the culture of the elves in their territories accordingly. Once again, I was impressed by their sheer influence over the region.

Sure, having a few sorcerers and demigods meant no one could question their might, but forcing others to pay respects to their organization was nothing compared to forcing them to change how they dressed. That simply couldn't be done through physical power alone.

At the center of the banquet, a grand dais had been set up for the Satyr King and me, adorned with an even more luxurious tablecloth and settings. It was a square table, with me on one end and the Satyr King on the other, with Ethan sitting between us just in case things got rowdy.

The room fell into a hushed silence as the Satyr King made his entrance. Unlike Grognak, who carried a serene aura of intimidation around him like a cloak, the Satyr King was less imposing. I wondered if he was truly an Immortal Ascendant.

The Satyr King appeared in high spirits as he greeted me, a pompous air surrounding him. "Ah, you must be Theo," he said with a condescending smirk. "I must say, I was expecting someone... taller. But perhaps that's just because the myths and legends about humans have grown larger than reality can satisfy."

"Patriarch Theo, actually. From the Hearthwood Clan." I clenched my jaw a little. Something about the Satyr King's haughty expression seemed designed to put me on edge. "Your majesty, it's an honor to finally meet you in person," I replied, striving to keep my tone respectful even though he'd failed to show any himself. "And again, I'm very sorry about the tragic misunderstanding with your son. I hope this little meeting can clear everything up."

The Satyr King's eyes swept over me, and his smile widened, much to my surprise. It seemed the Satyr King didn't care much about his son other than the loss of a political

bargaining piece. A piece he planned to redeem out of my wallet during these negotiations. “You know, for a moment, I almost mistook you for one of the servants. My apologies, dear boy.”

My eyebrow twitched in annoyance. I’d put a lot of effort into this meeting, but I was sure the same couldn’t be said for him.

Despite my growing anger, I focused on what Sam and Dean had taught me. I had to maintain my composure. This was interplanetary politics. This was important not just for me, but for the entire world.

“Now, now,” Ethan chuckled as he gripped the two of us by the forearms and gestured for us both to sit. Reluctantly, we both did. Ethan snapped his fingers, and elven servants appeared with food in hand and deposited plates before us. “Let’s save the serious matters until at least after we’ve sampled the appetizers. King Alistair, if I may call you that, your avatar can consume food, correct?”

The Satyr King curled his lip. “Of course. And you can call me your majesty. I have not gone by my given name since I became king, and I don’t plan to start now.”

“...Very well.” Ethan brushed off the dismissal. “We have some fine calamari taken from the deepest depths of the Myriad Monsters Sea. You live close to there, don’t you, Theo?”

I dipped a battered onion-ring-looking thing into what I was pretty sure was tartar sauce and nodded. “It’s just east of Deania, so I’m fairly close.”

I studied the Satyr King again, feeling some pressure lift from my shoulders. I’d heard of avatars before. Sam had created one, though it had gotten taken over by evil time-traveling spiders. Dean also knew the technique for creating one, though he always turned evil. Heck, my evil robotic twin could probably be considered an avatar. Or at least, it could have been before I lost complete control of it.

It was a bit of a relief to know that the figure I was seated across from wasn't an all-powerful Immortal Ascendant. No wonder he'd felt so hollow in my senses. I finally mustered the courage to use my Universal Analyzer on him.

### **Avatar of Satyr King Alistair (Level 49 Late Sorcerer)**

Ha! He was only in the late sorcerer realm, the same as me. I'd beaten foes of his level before. Still, I had to be a bit wary. Who knew what tricks someone like him might know? Sam's avatar had certainly been exceptionally powerful for his level.

The Satyr King snorted. "As far as I'm concerned, anything in the same world is considered close. But I'm a bit better traveled than most."

Ethan shot an apologetic glance at me. I could tell that even he was growing annoyed with the Satyr King's clear disrespect, but there was little either of us could do. So, he tried to maintain as much control over the conversation as possible.

"I'm afraid you're probably right. I've only been to the World of Hammer and Chisel and the World of Meadows and Mountains. Both are beautiful places in their own way. The Dwarves have a way with architecture few can beat. And the World of Meadows and Mountains has a certain untamed natural beauty." Ethan shot the two of us a bright smile as he spoke.

I nodded appreciatively at his attempt. "I've only been to the World of Struggle and Strife myself. Family business."

The Satyr King shoved the calamari aside with distaste. He hadn't even taken a bite, but he'd already decided it wasn't up to his standards. "Like I said, poorly traveled. As a prince, I went to a new world every week, partook in their finest luxuries, and then left again. It's what my son Tivar was doing here when he was so rudely slain. Not that anyone would have ever killed me when I was his age. I was already far too powerful."



“...Yes... of course you were, your majesty...” Ethan cleared his throat and gestured to the king’s plate, quickly replaced by another dish carried by an elven servant standing close at hand. “And not to worry. We were afraid you might not like the calamari, so we prepared a dozen appetizers. I’m sure we have something that suits your tastes.”

Elves brought up one plate after another, and I politely helped myself to a bit here and there. Despite being an evil cult, the guys of the Unblinking Eye really knew how to eat. No wonder they had such great retention among their members. I didn’t care for their views, but their food was top-notch.

Not top-notch enough for the Satyr King, though. One by one, new dishes arrived, and he sent them back one by one. Eventually, Ethan skipped the appetizers entirely and moved on to presenting main courses. I was finding it difficult to eat in the delicate and proper way Sam and Dean had instructed, with so much good food to eat.

The fact that I could see them a table away, pigging out on everything in sight, didn’t help matters. Why did they get to gorge themselves while I had to nibble like some high-society pigeon?

We ate while staring each other down across the table. I made a few attempts at chatting amiably, but the Satyr King’s tone was starting to kill my enthusiasm, despite Ethan’s attempts to lift the mood.

Eventually, the elves pulled away all the remaining food, and Ethan escorted us to a nearby sitting room.

“So... why don’t the two of you get to know one another? Theo, I’m sure you’ve heard plenty about Alistair, King of the Satyrs, and now the entirety of the World of Woods and Wilds. But I’m not sure his majesty can say the same for you. Why don’t you tell him of your recent adventures?”

I forced a tight-lipped smile onto my face. The Satyr King kept his eyes on his plate, finally finding something he was interested in eating. I stared across the table at the gold-wrapped horns jutting from his head as he worked at his food.

“So, I heard you’ve recently fended off a Dragonswarm. Tell me, Theo, did you manage to drive them off? Or did you simply wait for them to grow bored with this poverty-stricken world and leave?” the Satyr King asked around a dumpling. He looked to be paying only half-hearted attention. He was clearly only feigning interest in me to satisfy Ethan’s gentle prodding.

His tone suggested he doubted my abilities, and I couldn’t help but feel another surge of annoyance. Finally, I responded calmly, “Actually, King Alistair, we were successful. I’ve got quite a few dragon heads to mount on my wall to prove it.”

The Satyr King rolled his eyes. “A few wizards or sorcerer-realm lizards are of little interest to me. I care little for your boasting.”

“But a good story is worthwhile in its own regard.” Ethan butted in before the two of us could glare at one another harshly enough to come to blows. “I’ve arranged for an after-dinner show from one of the local acting guilds. Come, both of you! I think you’ll enjoy it.” Ethan beckoned us both to follow him.

The local acting guild did an impressive job reenacting a famous battle, helped largely by the fact that several of their members were skilled with illusion magic. It had been so long since my time on Earth that I’d forgotten what it was like to watch a video.

“In the actual battle, the Sea Storm Clan matriarch was not that scantily dressed,” Ethan whispered during the show. “I watched the real battle. She had regular armor.”

I nodded appreciatively. I could appreciate artistic license. Though I normally liked historical accuracy, this was one of the fields I was always willing to make an exception for.

The Satyr King, in contrast, was considerably less riveted than I was.

“I don’t need your propaganda. I have dancing elves of my own at home.” The Satyr King waved his hand and didn’t bother to conceal the yawn that followed.

“A shame. This was an important part of our history.” Ethan shook his head. “But if you don’t like the show, perhaps you’ll take a better liking to the actors. I promised they’d get to entertain us a little more up close and personal after the show.”

Sure enough, the actors jumped from the stage after their performance and headed straight to the three of us. I was still clapping politely when the actress who played the Sea Storm Clan Matriarch leaned herself over the arm of my chair.

“I can tell you appreciate your history.” She smiled at me.

“Right...history. Definitely. That’s me, a real scholar.” I grinned back.

She curled her finger at me. “We shared our story with you. How about you share one of yours? The famous Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan ought to have some.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You know me?”

“Oh, absolutely! Word of your deeds has traveled far and wide!” The actress ran her hand along the length of my arm.

Off to one side, the Satyr King snorted. “He can hardly have done anything impressive. Not compared to my many adventures!”

I ignored the pompous Satyr. I’d had about as much as I could take from him, diplomatic visit or not.

“Tell us! We want to hear if the stories are true or if they’ve been horribly exaggerated.” The actress curled her lips in an adorable pout.

I chuckled. “Alright, alright. Tell me what you ladies have heard.”

The actresses fielded questions one after another, all of which I was happy to inform them were true. It turned out I’d done more than I thought in my time on the World of Sanctuary and Serenity. I’d battled dragons, slain interdimensional spiders, got thrown from another planet back to this one, and even battled my evil robot twin, who was still

currently at large, hiding in an alternate dimension just outside my home.

The actresses oohed and awed in all the right places, and they were much more pleasant company than the man I was supposed to be talking with.

I cast a sidelong glance at the Satyr King, who appeared to be clenching his jaw in response to the elves' appreciation.

The Satyr King, unable to tolerate the attention I garnered, strove to regain command of the situation.

He interposed himself into the conversation with his own stories, regaling whoever among the actors' guild he could tear away with accounts of grand battles and valiant deeds in a bid to outdo me.

Yet, each of his tales was clearly exaggerated and lacked any form of tension. They were little more than bragging about his wealth and power, and the elves gathered around us saw right through his lies.

“Have I told you ladies yet about that time I crushed a rebellion with nothing but a word? It's true. I said the word ‘execute!’ and just like that, ten thousand rebels died without me needing to lift a finger. That isn't to say I couldn't have crushed them all myself had I wanted to. I just can't be bothered with such droll matters.” The Satyr King waited for a response, but none came.

“B-but Patriarch Theo! Did Melise really die to the Shadowblade Beast?” the actresses pleaded.

I nodded. “She did. It was a dark time for me. But don't worry, I managed to save her wisp, and she was reborn with memories intact, partially due to luck and partially due to something called a Bloodline Origin Awakening potion. But my companions and I had to defeat a Crimson Eye Observer to get that. It was at the peak of True Mage, and we were just a bunch of Mage Acolytes...”

The Satyr King snorted when I described the relative power levels of the forces involved in one of my earlier adventures.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I single-handedly faced down an entire legion of ogres? I was just a boy at the time with barely a tiny Sacred Grove to my name,” the Satyr King interjected, his voice booming with bravado. “Armed with naught but my wits and trusty enchanted blade, I carved a path through their ranks, leaving a trail of fallen foes in my wake.”

However, his embellished gestures and extravagant details only served to alienate the listeners ever further. Their gazes wandered, their expressions betraying a growing disinterest in his far-fetched tales.

As the evening progressed, it became evident that the Satyr King’s attempts to surpass me had backfired. Nevertheless, the crowd remained steadfast in my camp, captivated by the authentic bond I had established with them through my storytelling. A muted sense of triumph surged within me in the knowledge that I had managed to reclaim some of my dignity and outwit the Satyr King while adhering to the strictures of etiquette.

But eventually, Ethan could no longer delay the real purpose of our meeting.

“So, shall we begin the negotiations officially now?”

Ethan had tried to slip business in amidst the entertaining a few times before, but by now, he had little choice but to come at the issue at hand directly.

“Sure.” I nodded agreeably.

The Satyr King made a discontented noise, his expression one of half-hearted agreement as we turned our attention to the task before us.

Ethan cleared his throat and suggested, “Patriarch Theo, it might be best to begin with a formal apology for the unfortunate demise of the Satyr King’s son.”

Taking a deep breath, I addressed the Satyr King, my voice laced with forced sincerity. This, in particular, had taken a lot of practice. “Your Majesty, I am truly sorry for losing your son. It was a tragic misunderstanding, and I deeply regret the pain and sorrow it caused you and your people.”

The Satyr King studied me momentarily before replying, his eyes gleaming with amusement. “Yes, well, words are all good, but they don’t bring back the dead, do they? I believe some form of compensation is in order.”

I nodded, as this was still within my expectations. “Of course, Your Majesty. We are prepared to discuss the appropriate reparations for your loss.”

“Let’s start with my lost property. I have it on good authority that you obtained, whether by chance or design, an elf that rightfully belongs to me. My son was stopping by your clan to steal her for himself, but I learned of her whereabouts shortly after he did. Hand her over and a small sum of a hundred thousand other elves. That will be adequate compensation for me to forget about the whole thing. Oh, and the deserter as well. I’m told you have one of mine. She needs to be properly punished.” The Satyr King met my eyes, and a shiny jingle sparkled behind them.

For my part, I fought to keep my knuckles from snapping off the arms of my chair.

“No.” I gave him a flat refusal, meeting his shining eyes with my iron-hard gaze.

The Satyr King raised an eyebrow. “No? As in no to returning my stolen property, or no to the hundred thousand elves.”

“Neither!” I spat back. A moment later, I gathered myself. “We’ll have to think of some other compensation. How about a small army of golems?”

The Satyr King rolled his eyes. “Who would waste their time with golems? The lesser races favor such mindless automata, but they are fools. They haven’t realized that you don’t need to waste time building complex enchantments when you can simply conquer and enslave your enemies. Once beaten, they are perfectly suitable for whatever drudgery you might have otherwise offloaded to golems.”

Ethan turned to me with a thin-lipped smile before shooting a glance in the Satyr King’s direction. “How about

two hundred thousand elves and no mention of anything else?” He placed a hand on my shoulder. “You know how we humans tend to get attached to certain toys. It’s a... weakness of ours.”

Ethan had to force the last few words out, but the Satyr King took him at face value.

“Quite. But a mere two hundred thousand elves are no match for a Keystone Elf. On the other hand, she could be the cornerstone of an entire new Sacred Grove, which I need now that my territories have so dramatically expanded...” The Satyr King stared at me with raised brows and an unkind smile.

“Fine...” Ethan held up a hand. “Three hundred thousand elves, though most will be in wisp form.” He turned and glanced at me. “Don’t worry, the Cult of the Unblinking Eye can sell you the wisps to fulfill the bargain. So you need only provide compensation to us.”

There was a twinkle in Ethan’s eyes too, and it seemed a little sharper than what I’d seen in the eyes of the Satyr King. Suddenly, I felt like a fawn surrounded by two hungry wolves.

Being indebted to the Cult of the Unblinking Eye would probably be even worse than paying off the Satyr King. There weren’t any good options here.

“I appreciate the offer, Ethan, but I’ll take care of this directly,” I promised. I turned back to the Satyr King. “How about a few bespoke enchantments to help you stabilize your new realm?”

The Satyr King toyed with my idea for a bit, and after that he toyed with a few other offers I had up my sleeve. As the minutes passed, I thought the Satyr King was amusing himself throughout the negotiations. From the start, it was clear he wasn’t taking this meeting seriously. But he did want Sava, and to a lesser extent, Mayatania too. So just what exactly was he up to?

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-THREE**

Hours passed as we negotiated back and forth. I proposed, time and again, what Sam and Dean had assured me was a reasonable bribe to let the Satyr King save face for his son's death. Each time, I was rejected. My patience, already thin for this type of politics, was wearing out. How long was this going to drag on?

I'd make an offer, the Satyr King would consider it, make a few adjustments, and then dismiss it out of hand when he tired of the discussion. To exacerbate matters, he frequently demanded breaks for Ethan to bring in more food or entertainment. His attention span was less than that of a toddler.

Just how in the Ten Thousand Worlds did this guy attain Immortal Ascension?

I mentally noted to figure out the process of starting a Sacred Grove, as I was becoming increasingly convinced that I had been working way too hard at cultivating.

The Satyr King leaned back in his chair, an aura of dismissiveness surrounding him. "Very well, Patriarch Theo. Suppose we reduce the number of zeal crystals to eighty thousand. But, in exchange, I want access to your most skilled craftsmen for five hundred years. This will be enforced by a mandatory contractual obligation, of course."

His proposal startled me. "Your Majesty, that's longer than the lifespan of an average true mage. You're talking about generations of craftsmen serving you."



The Satyr King raised an eyebrow. Apparently, he didn't see a problem with this.

“Such a term is simply slavery with extra steps,” I retorted. “Perhaps we can agree on forty thousand zeal crystals, and a rotating shift of one hundred craftsmen to serve your needs, though they will remain physically in the Hearthwood at all times.”

The Satyr King dismissed my proposal with a wave of his hand. “Ah, but that simply won't do, Patriarch Theo. My people have grand designs that require all those elven tinkerers. I might lower the zeal crystal amount to sixty thousand, but I insist on the five-hundred-year term.”

I gritted my teeth, struggling to maintain my composure. “While I appreciate your willingness to compromise on the zeal crystals, the five-hundred-year term is still unfeasible. I propose fifty thousand zeal crystals and fifty years of my craftsmen's services.”

The Satyr King smirked. “Patriarch Theo, I admire your tenacity. Let's meet in the middle, shall we? Fifty-five thousand zeal crystals and two hundred fifty years for your craftsmen.”

I fought to keep my teeth from grinding together. ‘Meet in the middle’, my ass! He was so far out in left field that meeting in the middle would require relocating to another continent! I was growing increasingly convinced that the Satyr King hadn't come here with the intention of negotiating at all.

As the haggling continued, the air in the room grew thick with tension. Each counteroffer seemed carefully calculated to maximize my discomfort and wear me down. I glanced at Ethan, seeking guidance on how to proceed, and he gave me a slight, helpless shrug. Now that we were discussing business, his role was essentially over. He was supposed to be neutral, though I suspected he harbored a slight bias in favor of his fellow human.

With renewed determination, I looked the Satyr King straight in the eye and said, “Your Majesty, what you're asking for simply can't be done. Be reasonable.”

“Reasonable? To my son’s killers? How could Himmar rest peacefully knowing I didn’t extract maximum value from his death?”

Ethan coughed. “Tivar, your majesty. It was Prince Tivar who died.”

“Yes yes, of course...” The Satyr King brushed Ethan’s correction aside.

Negotiations came to a sudden halt when the Satyr King declared he was bored with the entire process. “Enough of this tedious back and forth. I insist we take a break for the day. Ethan, bring forth more entertainment to liven up this dreary affair. But first, I must send a message.”

His abrupt change of pace left me suspicious. What was the Satyr King playing at? I decided it was time to gather some intelligence of my own. I had just the right tool for the job — a small spider golem that Mac and Argona had crafted. It was perfect for a bit of interplanetary espionage.

While Sam and Dean had drilled etiquette into me and tried to prepare me as best they could, I’d taken the liberty of preparing a few toys that might come in handy.

I would have been nervous to listen in with Earth magic, but this tiny golem had as much technology in it as magic. Unlike a spell, even an Immortal Ascendant wouldn’t be able to recognize it, or so I hoped.

Perhaps a skilled Immortal Ascendant with their true body would realize there was something amiss, but the Satyr King thus far had struck me as rather unremarkable for his level of power, and his current avatar was only a hair above my own level. If ever there was a time to use this trick, it was now.

As the Satyr King retreated to a private chamber to compose his message, I discreetly activated the golem and sent it scuttling after him. Its tiny legs allowed it to move silently, avoiding detection as it climbed the walls and positioned itself above the Satyr King.

In the main hall, Ethan had no choice but to comply with the royal demand, ushering in a troupe of performers.

Meanwhile, I let the little golem do its work.

I waited patiently for it to finish, exchanging a bit of small talk with Ethan. I couldn't listen in to the Satyr King's conversation live, as that would require an active line of communication between it and me, which was something that would allow the Satyr King to find the device and know I'd sent it. By leaving it completely disconnected, even if I was discovered, he wouldn't have any idea who was spying on him.

I waited as politely as possible, but it seemed like the Satyr King planned on talking for a while, or was otherwise occupied in his room. Eventually, I made an excuse to excuse myself as well.

"It seems his majesty doesn't mind keeping us waiting," Ethan said, casting me an apologetic look.

"I'm going to go check back in with the airship we came in." I stood to leave.

"Of course..." Ethan chuckled. "I can tell you already brought entertainment better than anything we might provide."

I took a small detour on the way back to the airship, just long enough for the tiny, spider-sized golem to crawl up my pant leg.

Amisra and Yorik had braved the Cult of the Unblinking Eye to explore and get some food, though Mayatania was still too nervous to go anywhere where there were Satyrs about.

I arrived shortly after Amisra and Yorik returned, and the four of us reconvened in our room aboard the airship.

"I hope you ladies enjoyed yourselves, because I sure as hell didn't," I said as I returned to the airship.

Amisra laid a hand on my shoulder. "I take it the negotiations aren't going well?"

I gave her and Yorik a kiss. "That's putting it mildly. It seems like the Satyr King is trying to frustrate me." I let out a long sigh. "But I think I might have found the key to this mess." I held up the small spider spy golem for them all to see.

“Eep! Bug!” Mayatania jumped back.

I shook my head. “It’s a spy golem, specially designed back in the Hearthwood. If we did everything right, it should have recorded whatever message the Satyr King is sending back home. Maybe it can help me finally figure out what his game is...”

Amisra’s eyebrows rose. “I never would have guessed the Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan was so adept at interplanetary espionage... if other people can make these things, I will have to train the Royal Guards to look for them.”

It took a bit of fiddling for the golem to open up, built as it was for Argona’s small and nimble fingers. In the end, I had to resort to using earth zeal to pry the thing open.

Once it was done, I dropped the golem’s core into a bowl filled with zeal crystals. Manipulated with a bit of mind magic, this would let us view the golem’s recent memories.

Slowly, and with a little guidance, an image formed within the still waters of the bowl.

“It’s me. I want a status report,” the Satyr King demanded.

“My King, we’re having some difficulties. The forests do not cooperate with us here, and there are a few powerful beasts in this one in particular... we may need to kidnap a local elf to ask for directions,” the voice on the other end of the Satyr King’s connection said.

He spoke facing a mirror, though the image in the mirror was not of him. A different Satyr stood crouched amidst bushes and leaves, looking into a mirror of his own. Probably a small hand mirror, judging from the shape of the image.

“Foiled by a poor sense of direction?” the Satyr King cursed. “I need that Keystone Elf to secure my new territory. Fine. Kidnap whoever you need to. Just make sure to dispose of them afterward. The leaders of the small provincial kingdom you’re in are here at the meeting with me, and I’d rather not lose this avatar if I can help it.”

“Understood, Your Majesty. I’m sure the locals know how to get to this Hearthwood Clan...”

The mirror winked out, and the Satyr King waved at his mirror. The image shifted to a naked elf woman. The Satyr King started scrolling through one image after another, sitting on his bed in contemplation. I shut down the feed when he started reaching for the button on his trousers.

“Did you all hear what I just heard?” I asked. A terrible feeling was crawling up my spine. I hoped my paranoid mind had just imagined the connections it was making, but the dark looks my companions wore told me it wasn’t just me who’d come to the same grim conclusion.

“It sounds like the Satyr King is buying time for his agents to find the Hearthwood and kidnap Sava!” Mayatania said, her face pale and her voice full of nervous fear.

“Then we have no time to waste,” I replied. “I need to get back to the Hearthwood immediately. You three, tell Sam and Dean and help them come up with an excuse for my absence. Tell them I ate too much food and need some rest or something. Make up a story.”

“A Gold-realm body cultivator passing out from eating too much?” Amisra raised an eyebrow. It did seem rather implausible.

“You wore your hips out and must nap.” Yorik smirked.

“Better,” Amisra agreed.

I wasted no time in opening a Pocket World Passage back to the Hearthwood. The Satyr King probably didn’t know I had a way to return to the Hearthwood instantly. If he was watching me, he’d be waiting for the moment I tried to beg for use of the local Teleportation Array from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. But I needed no such favors, since through The Wanderer my home was never more than a step away.

“I’m off then. Some zeal might leak through from back home, so practice some cultivation to cover for the energy emanations. I’d rather our hosts or the Satyr King not know about this ability of mine.”

I returned to the world just in time for a panicked message from Mac.

[Theo! They're at it again! And this time there's more than one of them!]

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-FOUR**

The first thing I did when I established contact with Mac was get a threat report.

[Good, bad, and worse news,] Mac began. [The bad news is that there are five of them this time. The good news is that only one is a demigod. The rest are sorcerers.]

“Can we hit them with the Level-Reducing Sentry Towers again?” I asked hopefully. One clean hit from those, and I could slay a demigod.

But Mac soon crushed my hopes. [That’s where the worse news comes in. Somehow, they saw what happened to Tivar and stayed clear of the towers. Then, they tried to take me offline again with an energy pulse. Fortunately, Argona was there to reboot me in seconds rather than minutes this time.]

“Okay...” I ran my hand through my hair, thinking furiously. “Rally all our sorcerers. Try to get the Ancient Tree Temple Twins if you can. With Tivana, Comela’s teacher, the former Golden Sword Sect Leader, Yillinarena from the Auqualian Isles, the twins Teilinith and Feilinith, and me, we should have the sorcerers beat in numbers. Also, I need to know where Sava is.”

I popped back through the portal, hoping my companions there could talk to Sam and Dean’s companions aboard the airship. Surely some of them had a way to contact Sam in a hurry. Dean might be better at dealing with a hostile demigod, but Sam would be more discreet about it.

While Mac rallied our allies and vassals, I headed straight for Sava.

I burst into the Alchemist's Laboratory and found Sava working on her usual experiments. She saw me burst through the door, pulled the goggles off her face, and smiled.

"Just in time! I need more vitality for the experiment I'm running!" She grinned wide and started untying her apron.

"Not now, Sava. I'm afraid the Satyrs are back at it again. We need to get you out of the Hearthwood. Come on, we're going to the Teleportation Array." I picked Sava up over my shoulder and started running through the halls. After a bit of flailing, she settled down and let me carry her along.

"They're coming for me again, aren't they?" Sava asked. "I... I don't want to endanger everyone else in the Hearthwood. Do you think I should just talk to them?"

"No." I growled. "I know what they want, and they aren't getting it. Lay low in the capital. If you need to, you can flee to the Primordial World. I doubt they'll follow you there. But if they do, I'd wager I can go places even a demigod won't." I planted a kiss on Sava's forehead. "I'll come back for you soon. Be safe."

"...You too..." Sava said, voice trailing off as the Teleportation Array whisked her away.

Once I was certain Sava was safely away, I turned to the allies Mac had gathered for me. Tivana had already been in the Hearthwood, so she was the quickest to arrive.

Being already in the Hearthwood, Tivana, and the Golden Sword Sect Leader were the first to arrive. Yillinarena arrived soon after. The twins from the Ancient Tree Temple, Teilinith and Feilinith, arrived soon after.

"Alright, everyone. Mac says we have four sorcerers and a demigod headed this way. I'll take on the demigod. I need the rest of you to hold off the sorcerers as long as you can. Are you up for it? I won't force anyone to fight for me. I know that wasn't in the contract I had with some of you."

But there were nods all around.



“Good. Those of you who owe me, I’ll slacken my restrictions on you and your factions. So you’ll have earned some trust from me. Everybody else, I’ll just have to owe you one.”

Moments later, we were off. But before we could see the faces of our enemy, they made their presence known.

Mac hadn’t been kidding when he mentioned our assailants were nervous to stray too close to the Hearthwood. Perhaps they didn’t know exactly what killed Prince Tivar, but they were wary enough to steer clear of it.

So instead of entering the city, they kept their distance and threw rocks.

And by rocks, I meant boulders the size of houses.

I jumped, extending my grasp over identity to decrease the mass of the incoming boulders to the point where they struck the side of the buildings they were hurtling toward and bounced off as though they were made of foam.

I could only use that trick so often, though, so for the next set of boulders, I had to catch them the hard way. I wouldn’t have been able to get them all without help.

Everyone pitched in, but Teilinith and Feilinith proved the most capable. The green-haired twins raised their arms, fingers intertwined. The forest came to life around them, and the branches of the Hearthwood’s massive trees stretched out like an interwoven basket.

Reinforced by the magic of two sorcerers, the wood became strong enough to stop even the enormous rocks flying our way.

“Teilinith, Feilinith, stay behind and protect the city! Catch up when the boulders stop,” I called over my shoulder. “Everyone else, with me!”

The twins gave me a silent nod of understanding, and the rest of us surged forward in the direction we’d seen the boulders coming from.

I could see the demigod amid the group of Satyrs. His aura didn't just suppress the rest of us; his physical body seemed far larger too.

Satyrs seemed about the same height as humans, not counting their horns. But I would have barely come up to this guy's chest if we were standing face to face. Body cultivators had dozens of techniques they could learn that increased their body size, but I wasn't so sure about Satyrs and their Sacred Groves. Perhaps he drank an alchemical potion to enlarge himself so much.

"I'm with you!" Tivana shouted from behind me. With her guarding my back, I rushed in to confront the demigod. The two sorcerers with me peeled off to stop the four sorcerers accompanying the Satyr demigod. All of them were Satyrs, each well dressed and with a confident sneer adorning their faces. It reminded me of the look Prince Tivar had worn shortly before I turned his face into a paste.

Tivana was the first to strike at the Demigod. She drew a line in the air, and space fractured before her. That line of incisive power instantly struck the Satyr Demigod, who crossed his arms to block the attack.

"Not bad," the demigod said. "But don't think a weak little elf can hurt me!"

A bit of blood dripped from his crossed arms, but the wound quickly healed.

"Well, then, try this on for size!" I growled as I charged, body blazing with power.

My heart pounded with increasing speed as I raised Spell Eater and drove its tip toward the demigod with all the might of my body and magic. Tivana remained at a distance just as before, graceful fingers tracing intricate patterns in the air as she unleashed wave after wave of spatial magic.

The Satyr Demigod clearly found her attacks annoying, but I couldn't let him close the distance with her. I could take a punch from a Demigod; she could not. I wanted him to attack me, leaving Tivana free to rain down attacks as she pleased.

Already, bloody lines were accumulating on this Satyr's back. That was clear evidence that Tivana's spells were working.

Either we'd gotten better at this, or the Demigod we faced wasn't as strong as Prince Tivar. This guy didn't strike me as another princeling, so perhaps he was simply one of the Satyr King's lackeys.

I used my mind magic abilities to accelerate my reaction time as far as I could push it. Finally, after working so hard for so long, my mind moved as fast as my body, and I made each movement count.

The Demigod was still measurably faster than me for all my body and spirit cultivation. But he was also noticeably clumsier than me. With my enhanced reaction time, I made sure to dodge every bare-knuckled punch he threw my way. A dodge was still a dodge, even if just by a hair, and the Satyr was growing frustrated that he couldn't hit me despite being a whole level stronger.

For a moment, I thought we might actually manage to take this guy down. Teilinith and Feilinith had arrived and were keeping the sorcerer-level Satyrs busy. As long as our allies held their positions and we won our battle, we'd slay this demigod and then fan out to wipe out the rest of these Satyrs.

How dare they come into the Hearthwood thinking they could take one of my women? I'd show them!

Then the Demigod tapped into his Sacred Grove magic, and I realized he'd been holding back the whole time.

"You're strong for your level," the Demigod said. "But not strong enough!"

In his hand, an elven wisp appeared. This one was a deep earthy brown. I sensed the power of the Wizard realm emanating from it, and I dove back for cover.

Tivana and I had seen what a Satyr could do with a wisp that strong, and neither of us wanted to be struck by whatever ability the Demigod was about to unleash. But instead of attacking either of us, he slammed the wisp into his own chest.

A lifetime's worth of cultivation dissipated into the Satyr's body, flowing through his veins and filling them with newfound power.

"That's better!" The Satyr Demigod let out a content sigh. His eyes were bloodshot, and his muscles swelled with new strength. He'd been large before, but now he grew before my eyes until I barely came up to his waist.

The blood vessels pulsing along his arm twitched as the muscles beneath grew as wide around as my chest. Within moments, he'd gone from merely being impressively built to looking like he was ready to wrestle a dragon.

He wasn't the only one who could turn into a giant, though. I activated Might of a Giant, and Earth Zeal swirled around me in a billowing dust cloud. My form grew larger and taller than the Satyr Demigod's enhanced form.

And while the dust stirred the air, I called out to Tivana. "Follow my lead!"

A plan was forming in my mind. I wasn't sure when Sam was going to arrive, but I wasn't about to bet everything on him showing up just in time to save us. Nevertheless, I had the seed of an idea. Something that had trapped someone far more powerful than me before.

If I could lure this Demigod into The Wanderer, I could keep him inside indefinitely. That would give plenty of time for my comrades to return and help me teach this guy a permanent lesson.

With a plan in mind, we attacked again. I probed his defenses, switching between projectiles made of stone and magical attacks. I didn't get what I wanted until I tried Petrification. Enhanced by the concept of identity, the spell actually started to work.

"That won't stop me!" the Satyr Demigod growled as he withdrew another elf wisp. This one was at the very peak of true mage and shimmered the silvery color of space zeal. He crushed it in his hand, creating a bubble around the demigod.

All physical attacks that came next came to a sudden stop.

“Ha! Fools...” The Satyr Demigod snorted. “Give up. You are no match for my power...”

I barked a short laugh. A kinetic shield was exactly what I’d been hoping for.

“Now, Tivana! Attack!” I charged the Satyr Demigod, slamming my fist into his shield. Doing so knocked him slightly backward. Then I activated my spare Pocket World Passage. I had to be quick with this since the other end was open on the airship where I was meeting with the Satyr King. I had to knock him through the passage and into The Wanderer as quickly as I could.

Before the Satyr Demigod could turn on me or prepare another ability, Tivana hit him with everything she had. A beam of spatial zeal as wide as a wagon struck the Satyr Demigod, and I kicked his feet out from under him from behind. Between the two attacks, he tumbled backward into the open portal.

“Again!” I shouted to Tivana as he fell through the portal and into the Pocket World Passage.

Tivana fired one more blast, just like the previous one, and then I closed the passageway. Hopefully, she’d be enough to help the others finish their battles. Now it was just me and an angry Demigod.

I was in tight quarters against a hostile demigod, ready to fight one-on-one. This would be the most challenging part of the battle yet, and I wasn’t sure if I’d make it out alive. But I would give it my all and—

The Satyr Demigod’s shield winked out the moment the passageway closed as though it was never there.

“My powers!” the Demigod shouted in alarm and fear once inside The Wanderer and separated from ordinary space. “They’re gone!” He turned to me with sudden fear-filled eyes.

I stared back at him, just as shocked as he was.

*Huh?*

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-FIVE**

As the Satyr Demigod stumbled into the distorted space of The Wanderer, he panicked. He first tried to flee the way he had come, but he was too slow.

His steps were dull, plodding things. I positioned myself between him and the area where the opening had been, spear held aloft.

The Satyr Demigod looked like he wanted to swat me aside, but he pulled his hand back before he did so.

“Uh... let me out! Or else!” the Satyr Demigod demanded. But his words lacked threat behind them. When combined with his complete lack of aura, he hardly even seemed there at all.

“And if I don’t?” I asked, my voice tense and ready for a surprise.

“I’ll crush you!” the Satyr Demigod growled. But once again, it lacked the sense of pressure I expected from someone of his level.

“I don’t believe you,” I replied as the Demigod shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot, glancing around the passageway nervously. “What was that you said earlier?”

“Nothing! I said nothing!” the Demigod shouted.

I let out a probing jab with Spell Eater. The tip of my spear dug into the Demigod’s belly and drew blood.

“Huh...” I muttered to myself. The Satyr Demigod’s reaction was surprising.

“By the Great Grove!” he screamed in pain and clutched his belly. It was gushing blood, and he fell to his knees. His face started to turn pale, and he lost all the arrogance he’d worn moments before.

“What happened to you?” I took a step forward. If he was faking his wound to create an opening to attack me, he was a far better actor than I thought.

“Fuck... I’m bleeding!” The man yelled in shock at the sight of his own blood, as though it had been years since he’d seen such a wound.

He was either ignoring me or going into shock. I wasn’t sure which yet, but I leaned toward the latter. I needed to get his attention.

“You’re going to tell me everything you know, why you were sent here, who sent you here, and what you were supposed to do when you got here...” I thrust Spell Eater forward.

I had a pretty good idea of the answers to those questions, but I wanted to hear it from the Satyr’s mouth. It would confirm what I already knew and maybe even give me some extra ammunition for dealing with the Satyr King.

“You bastard!” growled the Satyr Demigod. He reached up to grab Spell Eater’s shaft and tear it from my hand. But his actions were pitifully slow. I pulled my spear back just enough to dodge his probing hands, then twisted it over his head and brought the butt of my spear around to slam into his jaw.

He spat out a mouthful of broken teeth as his face collided with the ground.

That had been far too easy. Even a demigod faking their injuries to create an opening would have been able to take that blow with a little more grace. The Demigod before me looked as though he’d been caught entirely off guard by nothing more than a little twirl.

“Hey. Get up...” I kicked him with my shoe, and he groaned in agony. “Well... damn. I didn’t even hit you that hard...”

“Pfffuck.... youuuu...” His words came out strained, accompanied by a mouthful of blood. That was going to make getting him to answer my questions a bit harder.

“Mac, please ready the Medical Bay. I think you have a patient.”



While Mac saw to the Satyr Demigod, I ran out to help Tivana and the others deal with the remaining sorcerers. The fight was still intense when I arrived, with my allies having a slight advantage. But I had a secret weapon on my side now.

“Theo! You’re back!” Tivana yelled. “Where—”

“Neutralized. Just like the rest of these guys are going to be. I’ll help!” I opened another Pocket World Passage. With me back in the fray, the tide quickly turned in our favor. Especially now that I knew I could deal with the Satyr Sorcerers permanently just by pulling them into The Wanderer.

After they realized what I was doing, a few of them fought too hard to be brought in alive. But I took out the first two in short order. From there, we had a decisive advantage and the others stood no chance.

“Don’t let any escape!” I shouted. I didn’t want word of what was happening here to get back to the Satyr King. Not yet, at any rate.

Soon enough, we’d taken our prisoners, and I thanked my allies and companions for coming to the aid of the Hearthwood on such short notice. I promised them anything they wanted from the Hearthwood Clan’s personal treasury as a reward.

To my surprise, a few of them actually brightened at that. Apparently, I was sitting on more valuables than I thought if even Sorcerers were envious of the clan’s resources.

Once they were taken care of and city repairs were underway, I returned to The Wanderer to check on the patient.



Sam arrived shortly after my return. Mac was still fixing up the Satyr Demigod, and I was looming over the operating table in the Medical Bay with my arms crossed.

“I’m impressed, Theo!” Sam applauded slowly as he entered the room. “The number of Sorcerers who can beat a demigod can be counted on one hand. Thanks to Prince Tivar, you were already on the list, but beating a second one? This time without any special tricks? Unless some of the other ancient elf clans are hiding a dozen Sorcerers with lost ancient spirit cultivation arts, you’re probably the most promising Sorcerer in Sanctuary and Serenity.”

“I appreciate the flattery, Sam. And if I’d really beaten him, I’d deserve it. But the fact of the matter is, he became powerless as soon as I lured him into The Wanderer.” I shrugged my shoulders in baffled confusion.

Sam brightened. “You mean to say you didn’t know beforehand? That makes your victory even more impressive. I figured Dean would have told you. He must have forgotten. This secret was hard-won, and he likes to brag about it to those who’ll listen. This is one of their most highly guarded secrets and something they don’t want to spread because it exposes the biggest weakness of Sacred Grove cultivation. It doesn’t play well with alternate spaces.”

“So luring a Satyr into The Wanderer would completely wipe out their cultivation?” I asked, my face brightening. Maybe these Satyrs wouldn’t be so tough to deal with after all.

“If you break the connection between a Satyr and their Sacred Grove, they’re helpless.” Sam grinned. “It’s the reason the Satyrs can’t explore the Primordial World. Despite their regional power, they’ll never be one of the great civilizations of the Ten Thousand Worlds because of that limitation. It’s the major disadvantage of keeping your power entirely external. The primary advantage of having it external is that you don’t have to do any genuine work. The Satyrs have the fae they captured generations ago do all their cultivation work on their behalf since the fae have their own type of cultivation that makes them well suited to tending the gardens of the Satyrs.

They used elves too, but elves are just as much part of the grove as its keepers.”

“Tragic...” I shook my head.

“Well... the Satyrs weren’t exactly willing servants for the elves of the Elven Star Dominion. Supposedly, the Elven Star Dominion created Sacred Grove magic. Originally Satyrs were the gardeners. But when tragedy struck the Dominion, the Satyrs overthrew their former masters and quickly reversed the roles.”

I sighed. The Elven Star Dominion had really made a lot of enemies in their day. And I could tell why after meeting a few of their members in the Primordial World. Elves of old thought they were better than everyone and loved to pick fights over even the smallest valuables, like a pile of Kun Peng dung.

“These elves of the Satyrs on the World of Woods and Wilds. Are they the same as the elves we know here?” I asked.

Sam shrugged. “Kind of. The elves of the world of Sanctuary and Serenity received a lot of... attention from Grognaak and the orcs. Also, from the Witch of Frozen Blood and a few other major powers among the Ten Thousand Worlds. The Satyrs didn’t have that kind of influence, so mostly, they just kept their elves the way they were. Just ignorant of the powerful Spirit Cultivation techniques their ancestors used, that way, they would be weak enough to control.”

“Very interesting...” I wondered if there were more fragments of elven history to be found in the World of Woods and Wilds. Despite their many flaws, the Elven Star Dominion was an incredibly powerful force among the Ten Thousand Worlds. Gaining even a fraction of their old power for my family and me would make me feel much more secure. And as long as my children behaved, we wouldn’t run into the same kinds of enemies that elves of old ran into.

I had to scrap the idea, though. After all, the Satyr King already had it out for me. Exploring his home world would only give him the opportunity to make trouble for me. I couldn’t send people either since most of my subordinates

were elves. Being a servant-class there would limit their ability to explore. Maybe Yorik could go, but that was it.

“Anyway, when I had to fight Satyrs in the past, I always had to set up an elaborate spell that would twist the flow of time around them before their Sacred Grove existed. Or at least when it was a little weaker.” Sam gestured to the comatose Satyr sitting on the bed before us in the Medical Bay. “Just being able to bring them here makes things a lot easier.”

I ran my hand through my hair. “The only question is, what will I do with him?”

Sam shrugged. “After you’re done with him, I’ll take him to the Primordial World. He’ll be just as helpless there, and you can rent space in one of the local prisons in a few towns. They have better security than anything we could create. It’s even run by elves from the Elven Star Dominion. Those who know their empire’s eventual fate might be particularly eager to teach this Satyr a lesson.”

I let out a brief, amused snort. “Nothing less than he deserves for throwing rocks at my city and trying to kidnap my woman. But I do want answers out of him first.”



The Satyr Demigod revealed exactly what I’d expected.

“His majesty, the Satyr King sent me. This was supposed to be an easy mission. I’d destroy those tower things, then collect as many elf wisps as possible. Hopefully, the one I was supposed to return would be in that batch. Afterward, I’d return home and be rewarded with an additional plot of forest to expand my Sacred Grove,” the Satyr Demigod said on his knees with Spell Eater pressed into his throat.

I let out a long breath. “Just what I thought then. But how did you know about the Level-Reducing Sentry Towers? And what did you do to take out Mac, my AI?”

“We saw the towers when his majesty looked in on the last moments his son experienced before he died. I’m not sure what an AI is. Still, we have found that exerting our Sacred Grove’s influence can banish Dungeon Cores’ influence for a short period,” the Satyr Demigod answered. “Now... uh... you’ll let me go, right?”

I chuckled grimly. “Sure. I’ll let you go with Sam here.”

Sam smiled, and it looked more than a little sinister. “The Fateweaver Society could use someone like you. I think you’ll be an... adequate bargaining chip the next time we need a concession from the Satyrs.” He turned to me. “Whatever arrangement you end up coming to, I bet we can get his majesty to reduce it after the fact in exchange for his vassal here.”

Sam dragged the Satyr Demigod away, and I went to retrieve Sava from the capital. She was a bit shaken but none the worse for wear. She grimaced at the damage to the Hearthwood, but I held her tight.

“Don’t worry about this, Sam already resurrected everyone who died. And the damages will be fixed before nightfall.”

Sava shifted uncomfortably in my grip. “Still... what if this happens again? It’ll all be my fault.”

I shot a dark look into the sky. Somewhere out there lay the World of Woods and Wilds. “Sava, I promise you this isn’t your fault. And one way or another, I’ll make sure to put a stop to it.”

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-SIX**

I returned to the negotiations as proud as a peacock. I'd captured a Satyr Demigod, as well as several key subordinates. This wasn't like the death of Prince Tivar. These were no envoys sent to make demands of me. The Satyr King had sent combatants sent to steal what was mine in a clear act of war. Even the Cult of the Unblinking Eye would be able to see who was at fault.

As troublesome as their intrusion had been, by dealing with the issue so decisively and keeping living proof that they'd been there, this little game of negotiations had entirely changed.

The Hearthwood no longer needed to concede anything. No more promises of loaning out our craftsmen. No more token gestures of reparation. Now, if I played my cards right, I'd walk away with the Satyr King paying me for a ransom for his sorcerers instead. And even if they fell through, Sam had the Satyr Demigod well in hand as a card to be played at a later date.

Ethan was waiting for me to return. His back was tense and his arms crossed, brows drawn tight. He knew something big had happened, but was unsure how things would go from here.

“Patriarch Theo! I trust you are fully refreshed?”

I dusted off my fine dress shirt. I'd barely had time to change and none to wash up. A bit of earth magic went a long

way, getting dust off myself, but it didn't do so well with blood.

“Refreshed enough to continue,” I replied. “Is his majesty growing impatient?”

“He returned a few minutes before you did and demanded I retrieve you.” Ethan shrugged. “I must warn you, he seems in a foul mood.”

I couldn't help the toothy grin that spread across my face at that. “I bet he is....”



True to Ethan's warning, the Satyr King was not pleased when I arrived. But, in contrast, I still wore a broad grin on my face.

“Something the matter, your Majesty?” I asked, eyebrow raised. Ethan cast a quizzical glance between the two of us.

“You know damn well what's the matter...” the Satyr King growled through gritted teeth.

“So... can we pick up where we left off?” Ethan asked. “If not, I can bring in more food and entertainment...”

“Let's just get this over with.” The Satyr King waved Ethan off.

Ethan's brows rose. Before, the Satyr King had been all too happy to stall for as long as possible. Now he had no interest in delays.

I sat across from the Satyr King, a smile still on my face. He crossed his arms and glared at me.

“So, let's restart negotiations from the beginning.” I grinned.

Ethan let out a sigh. “Very well. Compensation for the death of his majesty's son. You originally offered—”

I held up a hand. “I retract all previous offers. They are no longer on the table.”

Ethan's lips tightened. "Patriarch Theo..."

"Instead," I began, smug grin growing wider while the Satyr King's frown deepened. The creases on his brows turned to valleys as his brows drew so tight together they'd turned into a single unibrow. "I'll offer to let bygones be bygones and will hold no enmity toward you and yours when I catch you roaming this world or any other."

"Theo..." Ethan bumped me under the table with his elbow.

"Preposterous!" The Satyr King slammed his palms down on the table. "You're being ridiculous! You killed my son, and you claim you're the one who will hold no enmity?"

I shook my head, ignoring Ethan's prodding. "I know you've heard from your people, your majesty. Your attack on the Hearthwood failed."

Ethan stopped his elbowing and perked up. "Attack?"

I finally turned to him. "Yes, my home was attacked. His majesty sent a Demigod and several Sorcerers."

"You know for sure they were sent by him?" Ethan's hand ran across his chin. "Mercenaries of that level are rare, but not impossible to hire."

"They were all Satyrs. Every one of them." I gave Ethan a meaningful stare. "And we captured most of them alive, including the Demigod. The Demigod admitted to being hired by his majesty."

A look of annoyance and disgust flashed across Ethan's face as though he couldn't believe the Satyr King had been so stupid as to send men that could be identified as his with nothing more than a glance.

From what I gathered, the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had secured much of their power through spies and subtle influence, so to see such a clumsy attempt at interplanetary espionage had to grate at his nerves.

The Satyr King's blunt and unrefined methodology ran counter to everything the Cult of the Unblinking Eye believed.

Ethan jumped to his feet. “This meeting is adjourned for one hour. I have to confirm this. I’ll be right back.”

I was content to wait. The Satyr King was less so. He stormed off the moment Ethan stood. It was for the best. From the bubbling anger I sensed coming from him, he would have attacked me. While I might have been more powerful than his avatar, I wasn’t sure what tricks an Immortal Ascendant might have up his sleeve.

I briefly walked about the compound, reuniting with Sam and Dean. The two of them were putting the Cult of the Unblinking Eye’s hospitality to the test as they received a series of back massages. Then, off to the size, they were being fanned by another set of elves waving a wooden fan by hand, and yet another group of elves fed them snacks by hand.

The two of them had fishing rods and were watching the salty surf in the distance, though given how pampered they were, it wouldn’t have made sense for them to hold the fishing rods themselves. They had servants for that as well.

“I think I’m going to catch something...” Dean said, pointing to the elf holding his fishing rod for him. “See the line?”

Sam shook his head. “I cast a time spell on my hook. It has been sitting in the water for days instead of minutes. Something is bound to bite mine first.”

I shook my head at the sight. “The two of you had me thinking we would spend every day in suits and ties. But so far, that’s only been true for me. You two have been on vacation!”

Dean shrugged. “Hey, we said this would be very important interplanetary politics. That’s true. We just never said we were going to participate in them.”

Sam shrugged and took a sip from a fruit smoothie. “There isn’t much we can contribute to this process besides our presence. And that is something you can have as much as you want. Have a seat, Theo. Ladies, throw in a line for our friend!”



The elven servants soon fetched another fishing rod, and soon I was ‘fishing’ as well.

“You two are going to make me soft...” I chuckled.

The three of us chatted back and forth while we waited. Minutes stretched into hours as Ethan did whatever he was supposed to on behalf of the Cult. I was surprised at the length of the break and said as much to Sam and Dean.

Sam ran his fingers through his hair. “Between you and me, I sent some discreet orders back to the Fateweaver Society. We’re monitoring the situation from our end. This unexpected boon will help us identify the Cult of the Unblinking Eye’s spies back home.”

I let out a surprised harrumph. So maybe Sam and Dean really were working after all, despite appearances.



When Ethan called me back to the meeting, I returned to find the Satyr King even more furious than before.

I spotted a few beads of sweat on Ethan’s brow, and he dabbed at them with a handkerchief. Previously, the little square of cloth had been ornately tucked into his coat pocket. I had thought it was purely for appearances, but it seemed it had some real uses after all.

Any sweat on the brow of a man at Ethan’s level had to be purely from stress, since someone of his power wouldn’t sweat from anything short of stepping into a volcano or in the middle of pitched battle. I would have to ask Sam just what the Cult of the Unblinking Eye spies had found out. Hopefully, Mac paid just as much attention to unusual behavior in the Hearthwood.

“So... we have independently confirmed that the Satyr King did indeed launch an attack on the Hearthwood to capture an elf very valuable to Patriarch Theo.” He gestured to me.

The Satyr King slammed his fist on the table. “A keystone elf! And he’s using her as a damn alchemist. What a waste. Do you realize the power you’re throwing away, boy?”

I crossed my arms. “Sava is her own person. I’m not using her for anything.”

The Satyr King growled at me.

Ethan cleared his throat. “We have confirmed that the attack happened and that the Hearthwood now has several Satyrs in custody. But, Patriarch Theo, I take it from your earlier words that you want to discuss this matter further and table the issue of Prince Tivar?”

I shook my head. I’d beaten two demigods now. I hoped I had the clout Sam said I did, because I was done with this meeting. It was time to take a firm stance and accept no compromises. “I want to forget the matter of Prince Tivar. He tried to take what was mine and died in his attempt to take it. That should be clear now. All is fair in war.”

“Careful with those words, Sorcerer. You can’t stand against me,” the Satyr King snorted.

I smiled. “I think I figured out why you came here as an avatar instead of in your real body. You can’t do it, can you? The Planetary Defense Network would activate the moment you showed your true face. So you have to use this lesser copy of yourself...”

The Satyr King’s face turned sour, and I knew I’d hit the mark.

Looking at him now, I saw him for the petty goat-headed old king that he was. This was the kind of ruler I’d trampled underfoot repeatedly on my rise to rule the regions surrounding the Hearthwood. If not for his power as an Immortal Ascendant, I would have paid the Satyr King no mind at all.

While angering him now might make trouble for me if I ever had to leave the World of Sanctuary and Serenity, now that I knew Satyrs couldn’t visit the Primordial World, I no longer had any reason to fear him. I would simply confine

myself to this one realm, and if I needed to explore elsewhere, I would use the Primordial World. So what if I couldn't leave? Sava was worth putting up with a few self-imposed limitations.

“So...” I continued, a wolfish grin spreading across my cheeks. “Here’s what’s going to happen. As a gesture of good faith, I will give you back one of your sorcerers. But if you want the rest, you’ll have to pay me.”

I could practically hear the Satyr King’s teeth grinding against one another from across the table. “How much?”

I stroked my chin. “Let’s start at a hundred years of labor from your finest craftsmen...”

The corner of the table snapped off in the Satyr King’s hands.

Over the next few minutes of back-and-forth discussion, I had more fun than I had throughout the entirety of my stay prior.

Then and there, I wanted to take back everything bad I’d said about interplanetary diplomacy. It was only complicated, tedious, boring, and frustrating when I was on the losing side of the negotiations. When I was the one making the demands, it was surprisingly easy. I could only hope I’d be in a similar position of power in all my future negotiations.

The Satyr King wasn’t a pushover, though. By my reckoning, he wasn’t all that skilled a negotiator, but he made up for it by sheer callous ruthlessness.

“So what if you execute the Sorcerers?” The Satyr King scoffed. “I will give their Sacred Groves to other Satyrs. And in time, new Sorcerers will rise.”

I raised an eyebrow curiously. “And how long will that take? Years? Decades? Centuries?”

The Satyr King was silent, which made me suspect it would be a few centuries before a dead Satyr’s Sacred Grove could give rise to another Satyr Sorcerer.

“I will give you ten chests filled with zeal crystals. That should suffice as ransom,” the Satyr King said.

I shook my head. “We make our own zeal crystals in the Hearthwood. I have little need for yours. What’s the matter? Does a hundred years of labor sound like too much now? Well... I have an alternative...”

“Speak.” The Satyr King glared at me from across the table.

“Give me a Sacred Grove,” I asked. “It doesn’t have to be a big one. Something suitable for a wizard.”

“What would you want with a Sacred Grove?” The Satyr King folded his arms. “You are not a Satyr. I doubt it would even work for you.”

I shrugged. “Call it simple curiosity. I’m a man of science, you see. And I consider myself something of a scholar of magic. I learned the Orcish Body Cultivation system, after all. As well as Elemental Spirit Cultivation native to the World of Tooth and Claw inhabitants. Who’s to say something about your Sacred Grove Cultivation won’t also strike my fancy?”

The Satyr King snorted. “You seek to use the Keystone Elf yourself! Now that you know her true worth, you plan to put her to use, don’t you?”

“My plans for the future are of no concern of yours...” I glared back at him from across the table.

“Very well. In exchange for ransom for our missing men, I will provide several fae and elf gardeners suitable for setting up a basic Sacred Grove and the seeds. Combined with the two elves you’ve already stolen from us, they should give you everything you could need to know. I trust you’ll send over my Sorcerers and Demigod?”

I shook my head. “Not quite. The Sacred Grove is just ransom for the Sorcerers. You can’t expect me to hand over a demigod prisoner for such a small favor as this, can you?”

The Satyr King growled at me again, and Ethan wiped more sweat from his brow. This was going to be a long

negotiation. But suddenly it didn't seem anywhere near as daunting as before.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-SEVEN**

In the end, the Satyr Demigod got the short end of the stick. He would languish in Sam's prison until a better use for him came up because the Satyr King wasn't willing to part with anything worthwhile in exchange for him.

But I was happy with merely getting a Sacred Grove of my own to play with. The idea of toying with the Satyr's magic was the first thing that had really excited my curiosity in a while.

"You play a dangerous game..." Ethan shook his head after the Satyr King stormed off in a huff. "You are aware the Sacred Grove you get is likely to be trapped in some way? It will probably sabotage your Spirit Arts through some sort of energy conflict. You'll have to pay special attention to what seeds the elven and fae agents are sewing in your grove."

"Oh, I fully expect it to be booby trapped," I laughed. "Don't worry. I wasn't lying when I said my curiosity was scientific. I'm eager to get my hands on the thing and figure out how they work. Think about it, power that grows like plants! And apparently, you can sacrifice the power others spent their entire lives gathering to fuel your spells..." I shook my head in wonder.

Ethan didn't seem as convinced. "I was never too impressed by Sacred Grove magic. For all its power, it lacks versatility. But if it's truly just a research project, as you say, then I don't see the harm. I'll see to it that you're granted full access to the Cult of the Unblinking Eye's libraries. A few of our number have dabbled in research, and many others have

collected manuscripts from the Elven Star Dominion. There might be something of use in there for you. At the very least, there will hopefully be enough that you will spot whatever duplicity the Satyr King tries to spring on you. We'll send someone with the requisite information for you to read through at your leisure back home, though the truly important documents will have to stay in the library here at our headquarters."

I eyed Ethan suspiciously. People of this world were reticent about sharing information. Knowledge was power, after all. And where knowledge related to cultivation, that was all too evident. That he would offer such a boon so freely was odd. I said as much.

"Why are you giving me this for free?" I asked.

Ethan smiled and placed a hand on my shoulder. "We aren't like the elves, Theo. They may be primitive and backward, but we humans have to stick together. That's the whole reason the Cult of the Unblinking Eye was formed."

"Not to dominate the world through evil mind control?" I raised a brow skeptically.

Ethan laughed. "Dominate the world? No, of course not. Well... maybe, if you mean nudging the average elf in the direction that would make life most comfortable for us. And yes, maybe we use a bit of mind control here and there to do it. But really, we're not all that bad. We're basically a gentlemen's club. We look out for our own members, and that's that."

Ethan flashed a smile. "So what if we break a few eggs to keep our members happy? We're an organization founded by humans, for humans."

"I think I see where this is going..." I sighed, realizing Ethan's true objective behind his generosity. "You want me to join, don't you?"

Ethan patted my shoulder. "You are already with us in spirit, if not by oath. Which is why you now have access to the outer library. Oh, and by the way, here's a gift. Consider it a

token of goodwill between the Cult of the Unblinking Eye and you. Hopefully, it paves over a few of those little bumps in the road you might have encountered before today.”

My mind flashed back to the little bumps in the road Ethan referred to. Nearly getting assassinated by Illiel, to start with. Spreading their agents throughout the Deanian Queendom for another. Compromising Illiel’s mother, only to lose her to the Witch of Frozen Blood later. Perhaps even being the party responsible for nudging the dragonswarm toward Deania and away from their own homeland.

No... there were a lot of things about the Cult of the Unblinking Eye that I was still very upset with them about.

But they’d been surprisingly helpful in mediating the dispute between me and the Satyr King. And Ethan made a much better advocate for the organization than any other member I’d yet run into.

I’d come here like I’d been ready for a fight, but I was leaving with a cooler heart. Before, I’d thought conflict with the Cult of the Unblinking Eye was inevitable, but now I wasn’t so sure. Maybe I really should try to join the cult and change it from the inside.

Ethan produced the gift he mentioned and pressed it into my hands. Opening the box that held it, I realized it was a book.

“The Dual Cultivation Technique,” I said as I read the title aloud. “I have something similar to this.”

Ethan nodded. “I know, the one Dean shared with you. His version is essentially a modification of this one. He and Sam were associates of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye when we were developing it, though the technique has come a long way since then, thanks to our constant and tireless research. I’m sure you’ll find it a considerable improvement to whatever he shared with you.”

I held out my hand, thanking Ethan for the gift. I turned, gathered Sam and Dean up, and together we left the Cult of the Unblinking Eye compound after a surprisingly successful



negotiation. The Cult of the Unblinking Eye had come across as a much more helpful and welcoming organization than I expected from my past experiences with them. It was hard to believe Ethan belonged to the same group Tim came from. The two seemed so different in approach and mannerisms. Ethan seemed like someone I could actually work with.

But despite how well things had gone, I couldn't help but feel like this wasn't over yet...



I was still in a good mood following negotiations, so I wanted to stay in the city longer. Besides, it seemed like Sam and Dean were still having fun.

“Let's tour the city. For real this time,” I said to my companions. “This is our best chance to walk the streets. As Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan, it's my duty to look for new opportunities on missions like this.”

The others nodded, and soon I was joined on the streets by Mayatania, Amisra, and Yorik. Mayatania wrung her hands and wore a hood over her head, eyes darting left and right nervously as if she expected a Satyr to leap out of the shadows at any moment. She didn't still until Yorik placed a comforting arm on her shoulder.

“Relax, Mayatania,” I chuckled. “I won't let anything bad happen to you. I just crushed a whole bunch of Satyrs. If any more of them show up, they're toast now that I know their weakness. Even if they're demigods. Stick close to Yorik if you're nervous.”

Amisra was a lot more excited. Her eyes sparkled as she roamed the streets, eyes darting from one sight to another.

“The only city so grand in Deania is the capital, and I never get to enjoy myself there. Everyone recognizes me as the captain of the Royal Guard, whether or not I'm in uniform,” Amisra said, face beaming.

I ran my hand through her hair. “Well, now you get to be a civilian for once and see how the rest of us live.”

“Look at those statues!” Amisra exclaimed, pointing at rows of life-sized marble carvings lining the street. They depicted human heroes frozen in triumphant poses, their faces etched with pride and determination. We’d seen the big ones from the air already, but these were a lot more up close and personal. Like the bigger ones, every one of these statues depicted human men.

“Indeed, they are impressive,” I agreed, studying the intricate craftsmanship. As we continued our tour of the city, I couldn’t help but notice the sun-kissed skin of the scantily clad elves all around us. Their allure was undeniable, and more than a few of them were looking my way, some even bowing in my direction. I thought elves were a little too interested in me back in the Hearthwood, but the elves here were on an entirely new level.

“Are these elves always this...” I hesitated, searching for the right word, “...attentive?”

“Yorik and I asked around. Apparently, it’s part of their culture,” Amisra explained, shrugging her shoulders. “They respect humans quite a bit. Some might even say they outright worship you, the chaka. It’s no wonder they’re showing you such deference.”

“Still,” I mused, my gaze lingering on a fetching elf maiden who had just bowed low before me, “it’s a bit much, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps,” Amisra replied, a wry smile playing on her lips. “The only question is if you’re here to stare at the sights or the people.”

“Both,” I said, tearing my eyes away from the mesmerizing sight of elven beauty. “But let’s make this a productive sightseeing trip before we leave. I still want to secure trade and supplies for the Hearthwood Clan. Let’s walk through the commercial district and see what we can buy.”

Finding the commercial district took asking for directions a few times. Everyone we talked to seemed extremely respectful when talking to Amisra. At first, I thought they were simply a very polite society, but their darting eyes told me it probably had more to do with my presence.

“Alright, first let’s find some spells and trade goods for the Hearthwood,” I announced to my companions. Mayatania nodded, still looking nervous as her eyes darted left and right, looking for Satyrs, no doubt. Amisra flashed me an eager grin.

“Sounds like a plan, Theo.”

As we walked through the city streets, I couldn’t help but notice that the prices I was being offered for various items were significantly lower than what the locals seemed to pay. I thought at first that Deanian Queenmarks were more valuable than the local coins, but after seeing the local coins, they seemed about the same size.

“Excuse me, shopkeeper,” I said, addressing an elf who was offering me a collection of alchemy ingredients at a price that seemed too good to be true. “Why are your prices so... accommodating?”

“Ah, Master,” the elf replied with a bow. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and her face locked in a permanent smile. “It is our honor to serve you. We are more than happy to provide you with the best deals possible.”

“Very well,” I said, still feeling uneasy about the situation. Nevertheless, I purchased the alchemy ingredients, knowing they would be useful back in the Hearthwood.

I left that shop quicker than usual and then stepped into the place next door. This looked to be a store selling spells and techniques, all behind lock and key. It seemed customers weren’t allowed to read the spells before they purchased them. I approached the elf standing behind the counter with a smile on her face. “Can I see your wares?”

“If Master allows this humble servant to display her meager wares, then please follow me.” The shopkeeper led me behind the counter to a room full to bursting with bookshelves,

each laden with scrolls or hide-covered tomes. “We have a selection of spells and techniques that might interest you.”

“Let’s look then,” I said, curious to see what this city offered. The elf seemed a bit too polite, and getting called Master by a stranger was odd. I kept that stuff in the bedroom. But maybe other cultures had other ideas of what was polite. While I was in their country, I would adapt to their ways. As I browsed through the selection, I found several unfamiliar spells that piqued my interest.

“Amisra, come look at these,” I called her over, wanting her opinion as well. She joined me, her eyes lighting up as she examined the scrolls.

“Wow, these could really expand the options for the Heartwielders, Mage Acolytes, and even True Mages in the Hearthwood Clan,” she said excitedly. “If you’ll allow me to make a copy, I would like to share them with the guard recruits in the capital...”

“Then let’s purchase a few,” I decided. “The more variety we can offer our clan members, the better.”

“Of course, Master,” the elf shopkeeper chimed in, giving me an incredibly low price for the scrolls. I couldn’t help but feel a little guilty about taking advantage of her generosity, but a few new spells and techniques would go a long way in the Hearthwood Clan. I threw in a few extra coins for her. With my wealth, I would have had no problem paying full price. She didn’t even bother counting my payment and just kept smiling at me the whole time.

“Thank you for your help,” I told the shopkeeper as we finalized our purchases. I still couldn’t quite shake off the feeling that something was off with these elves, but there would be time to ponder that later.

“Let’s keep shopping,” I said to my companions, dropping the scrolls and alchemy ingredients off into my Dimensional Storage.

As we left the shop with the scrolls in hand, I glanced at a nearby store displaying an array of more traditional books. My

kids could benefit from broadening their horizons and becoming more worldly. I motioned for my companions to follow me as I approached the bookshop.

“Mayatania, Amisra, Yorik, let’s find some souvenirs for the kids while we’re here,” I suggested, scanning the shelves filled with fiction and history books. “Most of them have never visited foreign lands before, and with the end of the Seventh Golden Age coming, they may never get the chance to visit places like this one.”

“Sounds like a great idea!” Amisra chimed in, her eyes brightening at the prospect of picking out presents for my kids. “I read now and again as well. I’ve always wondered what stories people from foreign lands enjoy.”

We browsed through the books, and I was impressed by the elves’ understanding of mathematics and geology. “These would be perfect for Argona,” I mused aloud, holding up a couple of books on scientific subjects.

“And these would be perfect for me...” Amisra said, a scarlet blush on her face.

“What’s it about?” I asked curiously.

Amisra shrugged, gripping the book tightly to her chest to her chest. “It’s a story where the main character gets hit by a carriage, dies, and her soul is transported to another world.”

“Sounds fun.” I bent over her to peek at the cover, but she kept holding it tight.

Eventually, we both took our books up to the counter.

The shopkeeper, a stunning elf with long, silvery hair, gave us both a warm smile as we finished shopping.

“How much for these two?” I asked. “I have to warn you, we’re foreigners in this land. We’ve got zeal crystals, Deanian Queensmarks, and Macmarks, but none of your local currency.”

It hadn’t been an issue in any of the other shops. Gold was gold, after all. But I thought it best to warn all shopkeepers

ahead of time. Most nodded and said that was fine, but this one was a bit stranger.

“Master, if you allow me the honor of kissing your boots, I’ll gladly give you these books for free,” she said, her voice trembling with excitement.

“Excuse me?” I replied, not believing she was serious. To my astonishment, she knelt and pressed her soft lips against my boot. What had the Cult of the Unblinking Eye done to these elves?

“Thank you, Master,” the shopkeeper murmured, standing up and handing me the books with reverence. I nodded in appreciation, still feeling uneasy about the situation.

“You’re welcome? Anyway... let’s find something for my other kids while we’re at it,” I suggested, wanting to shift focus away from the bizarre encounter. I dropped a fistful of money on the counter as I left and continued to the next shop, selecting various books for each of my children. However, the other shopkeepers were getting handsy.

We stepped into a weapons shop so I could grab something for Comela. “Excuse me, do you have anything that would work well for a True Mage sunlight cultivator? It’s a gift for my daughter.”

The elf behind the counter dropped to her knees before speaking.

“Of course! Anything and everything you see on the shelves is yours to take from as you wish. No payment necessary.”

I furrowed my brows as the elf clasped her hands in her lap as she knelt, forcing me to crane my neck and look down at her.

“Won’t you go bankrupt offering me so much free stuff?” I asked. “What if I cleaned out your shelves?”

There were a lot of useful odds and ends on the shelves. Most would be quite valuable to the average heartwielder or mage acolyte, though true mages would be less impressed. The

shop owner was only a mage acolyte herself though, so I had expected little.

At my words, she pressed her forehead to the ground before me and knelt even lower.

“Master, you are clearly wise and care about the success of this establishment. I would be honored to make you the legal owner of my entire store. Allow me to hand ownership over to you.”

I took a step back. “That’s not necessary. After all, you need money to survive and hopefully improve your cultivation to True Mage. I can tell you’re trying hard.”

There were clear signs of a recent breakthrough on her. She looked like she was using zeal crystals to progress through the Mage Acolyte ranks. It was a brute-force method, and one that took a lot of money, but it worked. For a shopkeeper, earning money to buy zeal crystals would be a far more reliable means of progress than going out and risking her life on adventures and battles.

The shopkeeper blushed. “Master! I’m flattered that you care so much about my goals. I think you would be better at managing me to meet them than I would be. Please accept me as your personal servant. From now on, I will yield all my decisions to you,” the shopkeeper offered. Her eyes were filled with desperation and devotion.

“Thank you, but I decline,” I replied reluctantly, feeling odd at the overwhelming sense of submission I was feeling from this elf’s mind. We needed to leave this city as soon as possible. I looked around the streets to check to see if anyone was looking at the odd sight. Sure enough, a dozen elves stared in at me with their faces pressed against the storefront glass.

“Please! I insist!” the store owner pleaded on her knees. “I have the deed right here! I will swap my name for yours! There is a collar on the shelf in the back as well.”

She crawled behind her desk again and started fiddling with a safe. I decided I’d had enough shopping for the day.

Being treated like this outside the bedroom was... weird, to say the least.

I grabbed a few expensive swords and amulets off the shelves, then dropped off zeal crystals to pay for them. They were only Mage Acolyte-level gear, so a single zeal crystal would be more than enough. But this elf seemed a little addled in the head and could probably use all the help she could get.

“Let’s return to the Hearthwood,” I said to my companions as we tucked the swords and amulets into my Dimensional Storage.

“Wait! What do you want me to do with your store?” the shopkeeper asked as she finished writing my name on the shop’s deed.

“Uh... keep running the place as usual. And invest all the money back into yourself!” I shouted as I slipped back outside. Hopefully she’d get the hint to just keep her store, or whatever was causing her to act with such an overwhelming sense of submission wore off when I was no longer present.

My companions followed me out into the bustling streets of the city, pushing through our growing crowd of gawkers as they did so.

“Are you alright, Theo?” Mayatania asked, her brow furrowing with concern as she studied my face.

“I’m fine.” I forced a smile as I shook off the weird experience. “Just ready to get back to the Hearthwood.”

Yorik grunted, adjusting the bags on her brawny shoulders. “This place is creepy.”

“It is getting a little odd,” Amisra chimed in, her eyes flicking nervously around at the fawning elves, who continued to bow and scrape in our direction. “What do you think the Cult of the Unblinking Eye has done to them?”

“Whatever it is, it’s not our business,” I replied firmly, though the truth of the matter gnawed at me. “Our priority is the safety and well-being of our own people. Let’s just pack up and go.”



As we made our way through the city, the strange behavior of the elves continued to unsettle me. At first, I suspected they were under the influence of some sort of mind spell, but if they were, it was well hidden.

I couldn't spot anything with my own mind magic. Perhaps generations of mental manipulation had made the effects permanent, no magic required. I couldn't help but worry about the potential consequences of such blind devotion, but there was little I could do about it. This wasn't my nation or my culture, and interfering with it would only bring trouble down on my head that I could scarcely afford.

We returned to the Cult of the Unblinking Eye compound, where our airship was docked. Sam and Dean were still enjoying themselves, no doubt, but I had little interest in staying more than a moment longer.

The airship was just for appearances, anyway. I could return to the Hearthwood in moments, even without a Teleportation Array.

"Alright, let's go home," I said as I opened my Pocket World Passage. Mayatania was the first to scurry through to safety, and she only lowered the hood she was wearing when she was safely on the other side. The rest of us soon followed.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-EIGHT**

The moment I stepped foot into the Hearthwood, a wave of relief washed over me. The familiar scent of fresh forest air filled my lungs and reminded me why I called this place home. Busy streets greeted me as citizens went about their business, some pausing to offer respectful nods and warm smiles. Despite their adoring eyes, nobody dropped to their knees and called me master. Our city had grown significantly, and it wouldn't be long before Hearthwood City was every bit as large as the city I had just visited.

[Welcome back, Theo,] Mac chimed in my head, his voice as cheery as ever. [It's always good to have my favorite human minion about. My cleaning drones have been getting overwhelmed.]

"Thanks, Mac," I replied. "I couldn't agree more. It's good to be back. Now, where are my children? I've brought them some gifts."

[Argona is in the Drafter's Study enchanting things. Comela is in the training yard.] Mac's response came promptly, as always. Then he kept going. [Dulik is training his swordsmanship. Segolas is cultivating. Salla is collecting Taxus. Myrus is painting. Aminel is marching with the city guard. Laminel is in the alchemist's laboratory. Pelise is in the middle of healing someone from a terrible death curse. Jatese is in the middle of torturing someone for information in the prisons using a terrible death curse...] On it went for minutes on end. I had a lot of kids, and a lot of catching up to do.

Perhaps I'd been a wee bit slow on not thinking about contraception until now.

"Perfect," I said. With a renewed sense of purpose, I approached the Drafter's Study.

As I entered the room, I found Argona hunched over a table, her fingers tracing intricate patterns on a golem's surface. She looked up, a mixture of surprise and happiness coloring her expression. "Father!" she exclaimed, rushing towards me.

"Argona." I smiled, handing her the books I had purchased during my travels. Her eyes lit up with excitement as she eagerly flipped through the pages, gushing over the new information they contained.

"This is the math stuff you were talking about?" Argona asked as she flipped from one page to the next.

"Yep. What you're looking at there is called geometry. There are a lot of hidden relationships within a humble triangle."

"Thank you so much, Father! These are incredible!" Argona beamed, giving me a tight hug. She closed the book and held it tight.

"Anything for my favorite enchanter," I teased as I ran my fingers through her hair. She playfully rolled her eyes but continued to smile.

With a fond farewell, I left Argona to her studies and headed towards the training yard. Comela was there, her golden hair whipping around as she swung a sword with impressive force. I couldn't help but feel a pang of pride as I watched her skillful movements.

"Comela!" I called out, catching her attention. She halted mid-swing and raced towards me.

"Father!" she panted, eyes shining with happiness. "You're back!"

"Indeed," I said, presenting her with the most powerful amulet I had purchased. I hesitated momentarily, unsure if it

was too weak for her current strength, but her enthusiasm allayed my fears.

“Thank you, Father! It’s beautiful!” Comela exclaimed, carefully fastening the amulet around her neck. Its glow seemed to amplify her already radiant presence. “What’s it do?”

I laughed. “Actually, I’m not sure. The shopkeeper was acting a bit weird, so I paid and left as soon as possible. It feels strong, though. Hopefully, you find it useful. Let me know when you figure out what it does.”

That was a bit of a white lie. I would never have given her something without using The Wanderer’s analysis ability on it first. The amulet was actually supposed to make Sunlight zeal a little harder to manipulate, like weight training for magic. Its effect was very subtle, though, and tough to notice. Comela would need to learn to spot these things eventually, so I figured I’d give her this little challenge.

“I will!” Comela promised me.



The next few days in the Hearthwood were relatively quiet. Besides keeping my matriarch’s company, I kept myself busy seeing to all the odds and ends that a ruler should keep a pulse on.

Not long ago, this would have meant an elaborate process of checking in with what needed doing and what was being done. Getting it all squared away would have taken all my days and a great deal of stress to boot.

Now things were much simpler. All I needed to do was arrange a meeting with whoever was in charge and ask them how things were going. After, I sat in on a few council meetings to see how things were going there.

But despite my efforts to stick my nose into things and solve the Hearthwood’s problems, the systems I’d put in place were working well. There wasn’t anywhere I was truly needed.

As I strolled through the peaceful streets of Hearthwood, I couldn't help but marvel at how much our city had grown. The air was filled with the scent of blooming flowers and the laughter of citizens chatting with one another. It almost made it easy to forget the approaching calamity of the end of the Seventh Golden Age. Almost.

"Father!" Comela called, waving from across the street as she practiced with the Hearthwood's professional soldiers. I couldn't help but notice she was wearing the new amulet on her beside the previous one I'd gotten for her on my last trip. I'd have to buy her rings or hairbands since I was pretty sure you weren't supposed to wear more than one amulet.

"Looking good, Comela!" I called back, grinning at her progress.

"Thanks, Father!" she replied, beaming with pride before returning to her practice.

My thoughts turned inward as I continued my walk. It felt strange to yield to an outside force, especially one that threatened everything we held dear. But if everyone else was doing it, why not me? After all, I was no longer the warrior and leader who had conquered the Hearthwood. I was a family man now, responsible for the lives of my harem and children.

Segolas was a far ways further down the road in a clearing outside the Hearthwood. He was far out of sight of the others, practicing in private. The poor kid was still terribly embarrassed that his little sister had surpassed him in cultivation. Segolas was still just a Mage Acolyte, but he was growing ever closer to True Mage.

"Your form is improving," I said as I suddenly appeared in his secluded clearing.

Segolas whirled about with his wooden sword in hand at the sudden noise, lashing out in a surprise attack.

I knew an opportunity to make a good entrance when I saw it, so I stepped into the blow. I caught his sword between my thumb and forefinger. At his level, his fastest swing was as

slow as a snail to me. Catching it between my fingers was more an exercise in patience than skill.

“Alas, your situational awareness might need more practice,” I sighed.

Segolas tugged on his sword hilt but could not free it from my grasp. “Thank you for the tip, Patriarch.”

“Father will do.” I ruffled Segolas’ hair and released his sword. In one smooth motion, I turned. Segolas looked down to find his wooden practice sword in my hands instead of his.

I reached into my Dimensional Storage and withdrew a real sword for him, made of some of the finest Ironwood in the Hearthwood.

“Try this. Practice swings are good for building muscle memory, but sparring builds your instincts for battle. Let’s see you pit those skills against a moving target.” I beckoned him to attack, his real sword against my practice one.

Segolas attacked without hesitation or mercy. He knew a sword in his hands was about as useful as a blade of grass, thanks to the immense difference in power between us. My World Titan Fiendbody on its own would make me immune to any blow he could muster, even if I were to lie down in the clearing and take a nap.

But he still put on an adequate showing. He was better than many mage acolytes I’d fought. I told him as much.

“You’d be pretty good compared to mage acolytes your age from the other large clans of the continent. Your footwork is good, and you’re faster than most. Combined with a few undead servants to help you, you’d be a formidable foe,” I praised.

But Segolas wasn’t satisfied with that. “I don’t want to be formidable. I want to be the best.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Is that so? Well, that’s going to be tough. Because there is one up-and-coming new cultivator in Deania who’s unmatched among her peers. Someone whose capabilities will shock Deania when she finally shows herself in the capital.”

“Who?” Segolas demanded. He leaned close, eyes eager to know the identity of his new rival.

I pointed the tip of my wooden sword back toward the Hearthwood toward where Comela was practicing. “She’s right over there. And you are lucky enough to call her your sister.”

“Comela? She’s really that good?” Segolas asked. “I thought... I thought she was just average. That was why I was training so hard.”

I chuckled. “You aren’t the only one of my kids who wants to be the best. Remember that. And don’t be afraid to ask your sister for a sparring session, either. Yes, you’ll probably lose. But a loss just means another opportunity to learn.”

Segolas nodded at my words. “I’ll... I’ll talk to her.”

I placed a hand on Segolas’ shoulder. “You have a lot of other siblings, you know. They’d all like to get to know you.”

“What if they think less of me? I’m the eldest, aren’t I? I should be strong enough to protect everyone else like you do.”

I shook my head. “You’re young. Be young, Segolas. Don’t set the burdens of the Hearthwood on your shoulders. Those are my problems, not yours. After all, I don’t plan to go anywhere for a long time.”

Segolas sighed. “Father, I’ve been considering visiting the Necromancer lands up north. They know death zeal best. And they’re part of your territory, aren’t they? So I should be safe enough.”

I shrugged. “They heed my good advice when I offer it if that’s what you mean. I wouldn’t quite call them part of my territory.”

“You told them where to build their cities and then did it. Then told them how to structure their economy and government. They send our clan tribute every month...”

I waved my hand. “Like I said, they heed my good advice. And those are more like regularly scheduled gifts. But as to your trip... I am worried. Any other time you’d be free to

leave as you are, but events are taking place outside of my control. Events that will reshape the entire world as we know it. I'd prefer if you stay in the Hearthwood for now."

I expected anger and protest, but Segolas only shrugged.

"I understand."

That was a marked change from his former rebellious attitude. It was a bit strange to find my son so agreeable. But he had been trying to turn over a new leaf. "Well then, thank you for understanding, son."

I left Segolas alone with his thoughts. If nothing else, we got in a good sparring session. But worry over the end of the Seventh Golden Age still plagued my mind. I must have voiced some of my thoughts aloud because eventually, Mac started consoling me.

[It's only natural to prioritize your loved ones,] Mac chimed in, sensing my conflicted emotions. [You are on the right path already.]

"How so?" I asked, genuinely curious.

[By bringing up your harem and children to your level, empowering them to fight and survive the end of the Seventh Golden Age. That way, they are strong enough to support you like you do for them. You've done as well as you can by your children, but they already have the advantage of your blood running through them. For your harem, you'll need a more direct touch.]

"More dual cultivation, huh?" I mused, rubbing my chin thoughtfully. "Well, I certainly can't say I'm opposed to the idea."

And on that front, there was a lot of work waiting for me to finish. I had a new technique to integrate into my own personal version of the Dual Cultivation Technique. There were upgrades to ponder and secrets of magic to unravel. Suddenly feeling inspired, I went back to Castle Mac.

We had no shortage of space, considering the castle extended all the way down into the undercity below. Mac had been continuously building bedrooms for my current and



future children, of which we'd need plenty. The Whitewood Clan had brought over six hundred eggs, which had now hatched into wisps and would eventually manifest into elves.

Hence the need for industrial-scale bedchambers, training, and shower facilities. Mac had even seen fit to construct an entire meal hall. The lower levels of my castle were now resembling a university dormitory more than my personal home.

But that was a small price to pay for being surrounded by as much love as I was. And for now, all those rooms were stocked with standard furniture. A bed, writing desk, chair, lamp, bookshelf, weapons rack, and a little pamphlet with a picture of me and the Hearthwood on it.

It was titled, 'Welcome to the family, Generation 5!' and destined for future children. I barely remembered approving its creation but flipping through the pages, I saw most of it was about me and my early adventures.

How I conquered the Hearthwood and united the feuding tribes. How I roamed the continent with a band of orcs and conquered every nation beyond our borders. How I roamed the Primordial World and defeated the Timeweaver Spiders. All of it was in there, complete with colorful illustrations.

In truth, the pamphlet made me sound a lot more impressive than I thought I was. Reading the pamphlet, I felt like I was reading about a mythological figure rather than myself.

It made the weight of responsibility feel all the heavier as it rested upon my shoulders. I set the pamphlet down and pulled out the scroll Ethan had given me. The one containing the Cult of the Unblinking Eye's Dual Cultivation Technique. Beside it, I placed the copy Tivana's family had given me.

Then, off to the other side, I placed my own version of the technique, complete with all the additions and modifications I'd come up with from regular daily use.

At first, I thought I would just add to what I already had, but as I studied the Cult of the Unblinking Eye's version, I

realized the upgrades they'd made were extensive. Too extensive to merely add to my version. So instead, I pulled out a blank scroll and began a new one.

I borrowed my future kid's pen and scribbled out a new title on the blank sheet of parchment, titling it, 'The Hearthwood Clan's Dual Cultivation Technique.' And if I had my way, it would be better than all the rest.

Soft candlelight flickered beside me as I studied the examples before. I took the best of what each had to offer. I formulated my own from all the knowledge contained within, combined with my own personal experiences using the techniques. Focus claimed me, and I fell into a trance as ideas flowed from my pen. Soft lamplight flickered across the parchment all the while.

"Interesting," I murmured, noting how the techniques of the Cult were an improvement over Dean's creation. However, there was no denying that the method was harsher on the elf being used to cultivate. It seemed the Cult didn't fear expending their elven servants in their pursuit of power.

"I need to cycle the power between two individuals without working to the detriment of one of them..." I stroked my chin thoughtfully, puzzling through each step.

Surely, that was what Ethan knew I would do when he gave me the technique. A lazy man might let this easy path to power corrupt him, but I was willing to put in the work to make it my own.

Besides, while the Cult of the Unblinking Eye's one-sided dual cultivation technique might make them much more powerful, they didn't end up with a harem of badass elven lovers at the end, just a few broken and hollow shells. My way might be slower, but I'd end up with companions who could stand by my side and support me. No Cultist following their technique could say the same.

I went through an entire stack of parchment as I puzzled through various theories. All of them would require rigorous testing and experimentation before they could become full-fledged ideas, but they were a step in the right direction. I was

just finishing up when I heard a commotion outside. That I could hear the shouting from deep in the bowels of Castle Mac told me that there were quite a few screams up on the surface.

“Mac? What’s going on?” I asked to the empty room. Mac responded in my head.

[Theo! Satyrs are here again!] Mac warned me. [But they haven’t attacked yet. Should I activate the Level-Reducing Sentry Towers on them anyway? They’re almost in range.]

“Hold off until I give the signal.” I stood abruptly. Rather than take the long way up through Castle Mac back to the surface, I opened my Pocket World Passage and stepped through into the heart of The Wanderer. “Where are they? And what’s happening now?”

[North side, near the Drafter’s Study.] I turned down the hall of the Wanderer and jogged to that room. I opened the door, entering the Drafter’s Study from inside the ship. Argona was enchanting there and rose at my entrance, but I waved her down. “Stay where you are. There’s a commotion outside.”

“I hear it too. What’s going on?” Argona asked.

“Satyrs again. But they aren’t attacking this time.” A thought came to mind then. What if they weren’t here to attack at all? “Mac, have they attacked yet?”

[No, they’re staying where they are, just out of range of the towers.]

My shoulders sagged in relief. They’d lost the element of surprise, meaning they probably weren’t here to attack. I would still need to see them in person, but I was pretty sure I knew what they were here for now.

“Tell everyone to calm down. I’m pretty sure those Satyrs are just here to make a delivery.” I hadn’t expected my Sacred Grove so soon. But if the Satyrs weren’t here to fight, then that’s what this had to be.

Sirens across the Hearthwood sounded to distribute my message from Mac. When I emerged from the Drafter’s Study, I did the same in person. I launched myself into the air, using my powers as a sorcerer to levitate there. I still wasn’t nearly

as fast or as steady as I was on top of Spell Eater, but there was something special about floating above the city streets without any means of transportation that caught the eye. It was something Sorcerers could do and others could not, though Earth Sorcerers weren't exactly well suited to it.

“Everyone, there's no need to panic,” I reassured my citizens, a grin spreading across my face. “Those Satyrs aren't here to fight. They're just here to deliver a little restitution for the damage they caused last week.”

My words immediately calmed the nervous crowd, and soon everyone was quieting down and resuming their business. Still, I figured it'd be best to get rid of these Satyrs before they caused much more trouble.

After leaving behind their cargo, I flew off to meet with the Satyrs, who seemed quick to put as much distance between me and them as they could. I barely caught sight of their fleeing backsides by the time I made my way to the pile of crates they'd left behind. But if they wanted to flee, then that was for the best. If I let them into the city, they'd just cause another panic, so it was for the best that they made themselves scarce.

But with them gone, I still had a lot of questions. I craned upward at the mountain of boxes as large as a building. Sacred Groves were bigger than I thought.

“I hope this thing came with instructions...”

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-NINE

The air buzzed with anticipation as I surveyed the massive array of wooden boxes sprawled out before me. Each was ornately carved and filled with the components needed to create our Sacred Grove. I'd never assembled anything this large or complex before, even during my old life on Earth.

I'd always believed I had more patience with technology than most. Turning junk machines back into viable products had been my job, after all, and that took steady hands, creative thinking, and a willingness to pore over lengthy manuals. The trouble was, I didn't see a manual anywhere.

But I was undaunted. I wasn't the man I had been back then. My mind was quicker, as were my hands.

Opening all these boxes would have been an all-day event as an ordinary human. But now, as a cultivator of tremendous power, I stuffed all the boxes into my Dimensional Storage to be hauled back to Castle Mac. Or at least, that's what I tried to do. A few of them wouldn't go in.

That was odd, so I cracked the corner open to see what was inside that wasn't allowed in my Dimensional Storage. A pair of green eyes sat in the box, staring back at me.

I jumped back in fright and let out a little scream of surprise, and an elf poked her head out of the hole.

"Are you our new master?" the elf asked nervously. She looked me up and down, paying attention to my lack of Satyr horns.

I cleared my throat and got a hold of myself. “Well... uh... how about you call me your new employer instead?”

“Yes, sir.” The elf continued to eye me suspiciously.

Like the first box, the others that wouldn't fit in my Dimensional Storage also contained elves. They were stacked atop one another like firewood. A few were upside down, tangled in the arms and legs of their peers. All were female, though their cultivation levels ranged from mage acolyte to true mage. I suspected the bulk of my workforce included with my Sacred Grove kit would come in the form of heartwielders at the zeal accumulation level. But they were probably sent to me as wisps or eggs, so the boxes that contained them fit in my Dimensional Storage just fine.

Eventually, I called for aid. The Satyr King must have gone cheap on me because he hadn't even bothered to dress the elves that came with the kit. I had to dip into the Hearthwood Clan's reserves. Fortunately, I had plenty of spare outfits. After all, we were preparing for an influx of new family members, and elven sizes didn't vary too much.

Elves were never fat unless they used special alchemical potions or cultivation techniques to become so. They ranged in height, but not nearly as much as humans.

Though they could put on extra muscle if they wanted, the changes weren't drastic unless they picked up a form of body cultivation.

That meant the clothes I had in reserve for my future family members would work fine on these elves here. In short, I had no trouble dressing everyone, for which my new Sacred Grove tenders were grateful.

Truthfully, I felt a bit guilty about using them as laborers. I didn't like it. It was one thing to keep a sexy and beautiful elf woman as your kinky submissive thrall. That was a good bit of nighttime fun in my book, so long as she enjoyed it too. But forcing them to tend to my garden without pay felt too cruel.

Still, I didn't have anyone else with experience tending to Sacred Groves, so there wasn't much I could do for the time

being. I'd just have to hit them with a surprise payday at the end of the week and the option to quit once they'd trained up a few willing replacements. I would want to swap out my workers eventually since I didn't trust the ones the Satyr King sent me.

Eventually, and with the help of some of my family and harem, we got all the boxes settled in the courtyard of Castle Mac for unpacking. I figured I'd lay out everything we needed, along with all the workers I'd gotten, and then decide where to put the Sacred Grove based on the space needed.

"Alright," I said, rolling up my sleeves and taking a deep breath. "Let's get started."

I pried open the first box, unsurprised to find hundreds of tiny wisps dancing inside. Their ethereal forms glowed with an otherworldly light, though most were far smaller than healthy elven wisps should be.

Still, they seemed eager to manifest, so I gave them all the materials. The crate they were in had a few zeal crystals, but not nearly enough for the number of wisps. While I wasn't willing to open up my own incubator for these strange elves, I didn't want to end up with a batch of malnourished workers. So, I sprinkled a few zeal crystals within the box while I continued opening boxes.

I came across more boxes, these with wisps of a more familiar fist-size. I gave those the same treatment, though I was careful to only use pure zeal crystals both times. The grade was higher than strictly necessary, but some of the elven workers of a higher level helpfully noted that these up-and-coming elves had been steeped in the knowledge they would need to tend a Sacred Grove.

I wanted them to manifest with that particular skill set, not whatever they skimmed from the ambient mana. Though I had enough wealth to spare that I was perfectly comfortable with them picking up abilities beyond what I required. From the look of the boxes, the Satyrs gave the elves only what was necessary and little else. I didn't want ignorant slaves, so I could be much more generous.

The rest of the boxes were filled with dirt and seeds of various dimensions. One in particular seemed loaded with dung.

“I believe this is Kun Peng Dung,” I said as I examined the teeming goopy black mass.

“How can you tell with just a glance?” Comela asked curiously. She’d been quick to volunteer to help. Unfortunately, she’d assumed I was looking for fighters rather than manual laborers, so she’d dressed more for war and less for setting up a magical farm.

“Experience,” I replied. “Those ancient earthen undertones combined with a hidden floral scent are key. Add the slightly goopy texture and it can be nothing else.”

“Uh... Dad?” Comela’s face was drawn tight and eyes wide as she looked at me askance.

I ruffled her hair. “You need to know these things if you want to be a true master cultivator like me.”

“If you say so...”

When all the boxes were open, sorted, properly labeled, and placed back in my Dimensional Storage, I had the wisp boxes placed somewhere safe and left for the northern regions of the Hearthwood. Based on what my new employees were saying, that was the only place with enough room for a wizard-level Sacred Grove, which was as far as this kit would take me.

The location settled, and my family and I spent the rest of the day clearing land and setting up shelters for my new employees. They were quick to help, especially when they learned I was building homes for them to live in while they worked the Sacred Grove.

While basic, I made sure the structures were sturdy and could be expanded with all sorts of accouterments, given time.

“Are we really going to live here?” asked the elf who’d popped out of the first box I’d opened. She sounded shocked.



I shook my head. “It’s only temporary. Once you earn some money for rent, you can move into an apartment in the city. But for now, you have this for free. I think that—”

“It’s amazing! Look! I’m going to be able to sleep under a roof! I haven’t had a roof since before my Clan was destroyed by the Satyrs’ invasion...” The surprised elf wiped away tears from the corners of her eyes.

“Er... well...” I ran my hand through my hair, feeling a little awkward now. “You’re welcome, I guess. But there’s plenty more where this came from.”

Originally, I was just going to build a few large bunkhouses, but now I felt a little bad these elves had been mistreated in their former lives, so instead, I built a housing complex large enough for each of them to have their own private room.

It wasn’t too much trouble, considering my earth magic allowed me to raise a chunk of stone from the ground with little more than a wave.

Besides, outside of the Primordial World, True Mage was a rank with some status. At the very least, an elf of such rank would have a private room. Usually, Mage Acolytes as well. I had been thinking with those standards in mind, not realizing that these elves had expected to live naked in the woods without pay.

I hadn’t counted the number of heartwielder wisps since the small size of some of them was still throwing me off. Still, I built bunk houses large enough that they wouldn’t have to group together into batches of more than four at a time. By the time I was done, their living spaces were more luxurious than earlier settlers of the Hearthwood tribe had enjoyed. They’d be nicer than the dorm I’d lived in for college once we added plumbing and lighting.

By the time I was done, I’d worked a full day. The new True Mages and Mage Acolytes settled in and started pacing off the breadth and width of the Sacred Grove and were already laying out the seeds to be planted in each spot. They

seemed to have the assembly of the Sacred Grove well in hand. They were remarkably professional at the job too.

“Do I need to do anything?” I asked.

The green-eyed elf whose box I’d first opened shook her head. “No, we’re fully trained to take it from here. You’ve done more than any Satyr would have already. On behalf of everyone here, I thank you for your generosity and promise we’ll take good care of your new Sacred Grove!”

“Thank you for your hard work so far, then...” I ran my hand through my hair. “Say... what was your name?”

“I was formerly called Nature Elf 102, sir,” the green-eyed elf said.

“Do you have a real name?” I frowned at the dehumanizing name.

“Well... before my clan was destroyed, I was called Aelina. The Satyrs prefer we not use names when talking with them, though. After all, we’re just another expendable resource as far as Sacred Groves goes. We’re bound to it as tightly as the plants placed upon it are...”

I tightened my lips. “Well, I won’t be expending your lives for a little magic like the Satyrs do. You have my word on that. Sleep well, Aelina.”

I went home to a long night of dual cultivation with my wonderful women, though truthfully, the session lasted several days. I got a little carried away testing new theories and techniques I picked up working on the Cult of the Unblinking Eye’s dual cultivation technique.

I incrementally tested my latest ideas individually, revising where I’d been wrong and improving upon what worked best. By the time I was done, I had a new list of theories and refinements to make for my new Hearthwood Clan dual cultivation technique.

The days and nights that blurred by were filled with much moaning, squirming, and begging. There was nothing quite like dual cultivation. It was rewarding in a way that sitting in the Cultivation Chamber meditating on my thoughts never

could be. I suppose traveling the land as a conquering warlord was a close second, but only because a conqueror warlord had plenty of women.

After all, what does a man conquer for if not to have beautiful women waiting on his arm? Or, in my case, on their knees. Having them begging to do such wonderful and exciting things to them was terribly exhilarating.

Alas, as the night of dual cultivation ended, and I had to break to start the day, the begging and pleading turned less intimate. My companions weren't quite of the same scientific mind that I was, so they weren't as eager to participate in my experiments for incremental improvements of our Dual Cultivation Technique. With sore, wobbly legs and unable to stand up properly, they stumbled to their feet one after another.

"Alright, I guess we'll break here for today," I chuckled as I handed them their homework. The latest version of my improved Dual Cultivation technique.

"But I just finished memorizing the previous technique!" Eltiana said as I handed her and all my other women a revised edition.

"Don't worry. Page thirteen through page eighty-seven is almost identical. You should only skim them. The rest, however, has been completely rewritten."

"But... we all have to memorize a different version?" Assyus asked, staring at the bundle of papers in her hands in fright.

"All of you except my adorable little control subject. She gets to keep using the old version. But I won't tell you who wound up with the control manual..."

I gave their sexy elven heads a pat each, despite the pouts on their lips. Then I headed back to the showers to clean up and check back in on my Sacred Grove. Behind me, I could hear my harem wrestling one another to find the original manual to avoid today's homework.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY**

When I checked in on them next, Aelina and the other True Mages and Mage Acolytes finished pacing off the extent of my new Sacred Grove and were already laying down soil and felling trees.

They'd also settled into their new homes, and the Sacred Grove was looking less like a collection of stone huts surrounded by boxes and more like the start of an elegant garden. I wasn't sure what they had in mind when it was done, but I felt a slightly higher concentration of zeal in the area, so it was clearly working.

I suspected the Sacred Grove was something akin to a living enchantment. Perhaps it would be more evident when the plants were rooted and growing. I'd have to bring Argona in to help me analyze it from the air. By now, she knew enchantment diagrams better than I did.

Back in Castle Mac, I was delighted to find the wisps I'd gotten were ready to hatch, both large and small. Like a child on Christmas morning, I had the boxes brought up to the courtyard.

"This seems like a pleasant place to manifest, wouldn't you say, Yorik?" I asked my assistant for the day.

Yorik shrugged, and I started opening boxes.

As each box opened, the fist-sized balls of light that had been growing within glowed, growing brighter and brighter until they could no longer be contained. Suddenly, naked elves materialized within them, dropping to the ground like fallen

leaves. They blinked and looked around, dazed and confused by their new surroundings.

“Hey there,” I said gently. “Welcome to Hearthwood.”

“Wh-where are we?” one elf asked, her voice trembling.

“Safe,” I assured her. “You’re in the Hearthwood. I’m the Patriarch of this clan.”

The elf stared at me. “Y-you’re not a Satyr?”

“That’s right. I’m not.” I gave her a gentle smile. “I’m not sure how many memories you inherited or remembered from a previous life, but you’re not on the World of Woods and Wilds anymore. You’re on the World of Sanctuary and Serenity, the historic homeworld of the elves.”

“The Satyrs conquered the elven homeworld?” the elf asked, confusion and sadness in her eyes.

“No, far from it,” I laughed. “You’re not under the Satyrs’ control anymore. You were sent to me to help me set up a Sacred Grove. Now, I won’t force you to do anything, but I could use your help for a few months. In exchange, I’ll make sure you are fed, housed, and have the free time to figure out your place in the world. If you’re willing to work for me for a while, I’ll make sure you get a head start in life as well.”

“...Okay.” The elf still looked skeptical, as did her peers listening in. But I didn’t mind their skepticism. They’d learn in time.

“Alright, everyone, let’s gather around,” I instructed, gesturing for the elves to join me. Though their confusion was evident, they seemed to trust me enough to follow my guidance. As they assembled before me.

As I continued to pry open the remaining wooden boxes, I realized that some of the small wisps I had seen earlier weren’t actually wisps at all — they were the Fae I’d been promised.

I should have guessed as much since they were supposed to be included with the Sacred Grove. I’d never met Fae before. Unlike the elves, these beings were natives of the World of Woods and Wilds.

I watched with fascination as they took shape one after another. It was like watching elves manifest but on a smaller scale.

The light of the wisp that they'd been faded, though unlike with elves, it never went out completely. It only dimmed enough to reveal tiny, fluttering creatures that resembled what I would call a fairy, each no larger than the palm of my hand. Besides the wings, their features were largely elven in appearance, with slight frames and pointed ears. Their delicate wings shimmered in the sunlight as they emerged from their containers, giggling and chattering among themselves.

"Hello there," I greeted them, trying to get their attention. "I'm Theo. You must be the Fae that came with the Sacred Grove."

"Yep, that's us!" one of them replied cheerfully, her voice as light as a summer breeze. "We're fairies!"

"How nice," I said, thinking they did look very much like fairies. "So you know how to plant a Sacred Grove?"

"What's a Sacred Grove?" the fairy replied.

"It's something like a magical garden. Now, what's your name?"

"Glitterspark!" the fairy said. "What's your name?"

"Theo, Patriarch of the Hearthwood." I was beginning to suspect these fairies had short memories. "Can you help the elves plant the Sacred Grove?"

"Nope!" Glitterspark said.

"Excuse me?"

"We're going to dance! Bye!" Glitterspark took off in a puff of light, headed in the direction of the Sacred Grove.

"Well, guess I don't have to help them settle in..." I muttered.

The fairies seemed to lack the confusion the elves experienced after manifesting, but I wasn't sure if that was because they were better equipped after manifesting or

because they were more scatterbrained than an elf. They also seemed a bit happier with their roles as well.

I spoke to those that remained to see if they'd be of any help at all. "The other elves are setting it up over in that direction. Maybe you can go help them plan?"

"Oooh, a plan! I love plans!" another Fairy chimed in, buzzing excitedly around my head. "I can make plans too! I plan to find a leaf and make a hat!"

One of the elves spoke up and explained what I already suspected. "You won't get straight answers from fairies. They don't actually do any work on a Sacred Grove anyway. They're more like the plants. A natural part of the grove's magic. They are even more key to it than we are though. Without them, a Sacred Grove cannot function. Only they can create ley lines from natural zeal accumulations."

"They move seeds where they need to go mostly by accident," another newly manifested elf chimed in. "But they don't really know what they're doing. It's just instinct."

I chuckled, amused by the tiny little fairy's eagerness. "Noted. Thank you." I led the fairies and the newly manifested elves to the Sacred Grove site, where they joined the others at work. I looked over the few remaining boxes.

I'd suspected this kit wasn't the first one the Satyrs had given away. It was too well organized for that. Despite the lack of labels, the set had a logical layout and all the basic materials needed to get started. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that kits like these were available on the open market across the Ten Thousand Worlds on planets better connected to interplanetary trade than mine.

I was impressed to find Fate-aspect spellhearts among the boxes. Those were tough to store and even tougher to get. Now that I was looking, I spotted the distinctive tell of fate magic on a few of the more powerful elves. After hunting down Aelina, I soon learned the reason for their presence.

"Fate zeal is used to accelerate the flow of time around certain plants," Aelina explained. "Just having a single Fate-

Aspect true mage can cut the time to grow a Sacred Grove down to a tenth of normal time. It's part of the reason the Satyrs were so eager to hunt down elven spirit cultivators. The same is true of Space Magic."

She gestured to our surroundings. "You'll notice we have quite a few space cultivators here. That's to decrease the amount of size the Sacred Grove takes up. And Nature cultivators like me optimize growth conditions. A Sacred Grove that's being worked by fairies alone without the presence of elves would be so large you could cover an entire planet with one and only make a single demigod."

"I see..." No wonder the Satyrs had been so eager to enslave elves. Without them, the Satyrs would be a backwater, and the power their cultivation methodology could provide them would be minuscule.

Then I had an idea. "Say, Aelina, if you had the help of Sorcerer-level Fate and Space cultivators, do you think that would help the Sacred Grove mature faster?"

"Certainly!" Aelina replied. "It would increase the grove's efficiency dramatically as well."

I pondered that though. If things went smoothly, maybe I'd ask Melise and Tivana to help.



The sun had reached its zenith, casting a warm glow over the Hearthwood.

As I observed them, Illiel approached me, her voice cautious. "So, this is a Sacred Grove. It looks like it will be quite a pretty garden when all is said and done. Your new workers all seem like hard workers. And those little fairies are quite cute."

"Indeed," I agreed, watching an elf expertly weave threads of zeal around a nascent tree. "They seem very determined, don't they?"



“Quite,” she replied, adjusting her glasses with a small smile.

It was unsettling to have received them in what was essentially a political apology gift, but I reminded myself that without them, I wouldn't be able to operate the Sacred Grove.

Besides, they would enjoy far more freedom here in the Hearthwood than they would have had in the World of Woods and Wilds. In Satyr territory, they would have been slaves, mere tools for powerful rulers. Here, though, they would be free to leave once their work was complete or if they found suitable replacements. The thought comforted me somewhat as I watched them diligently labor.

“Is there anything we should do to help them?” Mayatania asked, standing beside me with her hands clasped in front of her.

“Let's give them some space for now,” I said, glancing at her concerned expression. “Just observe them as they work. I still expect tricks from the Satyr King.”

“Of course, Theo,” she agreed, looking relieved. “I... I'd rather not go down there, though. Not if I can help it.”

“Bad memories?” I placed a hand on her shoulder.

Mayatania nodded.

“I understand.”

The Fairies buzzed around us, scattering seeds in their dancing and playing. I saw Glitterspark singing, and as she did so, nature zeal flowed through her and into the plants around her, reshaping the mana within the grove. I hadn't quite put a pin on how their magic worked, but it seemed to resonate with the land beneath them. They would be as much a part of the Sacred Grove as the plants they were sewing now. The fairies seemed even more important to the Sacred Grove than the elves were. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that Sacred Groves as I understood them were descended from whatever wild environment the faeries came from.

Eltiana playfully tried to catch one, laughing as it darted out of her grasp. I know she could have caught one if she

really wanted to. She was just letting them think they could get away.

The first plants took root before the day was over, and I noticed the flow of zeal through the area shift ever so slightly.

It was impossible not to notice. Even a Sacred Grove as low-level as this one couldn't be missed. An elven heartwielder would be drawn to its power.

I suspected most of the energy was actually coming from the fairies and elves working the grove, but the plants and soil were playing a role somehow, as was the artful way they were arranged.

It was hard to spot any pattern in the layout the elves and fairies chose. Only a few parts of the grove were arranged in neat and even rows. The babbling brook running through the grove seemed completely natural, though I was certain it hadn't been there before.

The tiny saplings taking root would form the centerpiece of various displays, though right now the flowers that would surround them were outgrowing them. I was certain the nature cultivators managing the grove would take care of that soon enough, though.

I had originally intended to wait a little longer before putting the grove to the test, but seeing it in action for the first time made me excited. I could hardly wait to see what the grove could do. I decided to put its powers to the test.

“So, Aelina, how do I use the Sacred Grove's powers?” I asked.

Aelina smiled. “Follow me to the heart of the Grove.”

Aelina led me through the budding grove to something that looked akin to a pedestal. From its location, it would someday be in the exact center of the Sacred Grove.

The pedestal was grown from wood. The tree seemed like cherry, though a little sweeter and already full of blossoms on every branch. There were no leaves on the branches though, only flowers.

The branches weren't growing naturally either. They swirled around one another, cupping the fist-sized ball of light in the center of it all.

"Behold, the Sacred Grove's Keystone wisp." Aelina gestured.

"Wait, really?" I asked. "How? I thought Keystone Elves were immensely valuable?"

Why would the Satyr King give me a Keystone Elf when the whole thing that had gotten him into this mess was his desire for Sava?

"This is not a Keystone Elf," Aelina corrected. "Just a wisp. She failed to manifest many generations ago and is stuck as nothing more than a wisp forever more."

"Ah. I see. And a real Keystone Elf is more valuable?"

"Far more so," Aelina explained. "Not only can they be killed and divided into many more wisps for weaker groves, but they can also replace an existing Keystone Wisp. You see, a wisp like this one can only take a Sacred Grove so far. She was only True Mage in life, and so the Sacred Grove will have a tough time surpassing that level. There are a few tricks that could push the grove to the Wizard realm despite that, but no further. A living Keystone Elf on the other hand, represents limitless potential. If she can be raised to Sorcerer, she can support a Demigod. If raised to Demigod, an Immortal Ascendant."

"And if one were raised to Immortal Ascendant?" I asked curiously.

"I don't know. But I suspect the Satyr King intends to find out."

I grumbled a little. No wonder the Satyr King wanted Sava so badly. She was already at the Wizard realm and making tremendous progress as a Spirit Cultivator. She could probably already be a Sorcerer if she didn't have alchemy, spells, and techniques to master.

There were plenty of cultivators I'd met who pushed to the next cultivation level early without a care for utilizing their

powers to their fullest. They were always weak for their level. But in the case of a Keystone Elf, that would probably be a benefit. After all, the Satyr King would only need her wisp. And with the resources of an entire world at his disposal, it wouldn't be too hard to manufacture such a powerful elven cultivator.

Things were making sense now. Though I'd never been to the World of Woods and Wilds, I was realizing what must have happened. The Satyr King defeated his longtime rival for planetary control, the Fairy of the Immortal Glade.

Now he had more territory than ever and wanted to expand his Sacred Grove once more. But his current Keystone Elf couldn't be more than a Demigod, therefore limiting him to the Immortal Ascendant rank. Acquiring a living Keystone Elf like Sava was essential for him to advance any further.

“So, what do I do with her?” I asked.

“Place your hand upon her and lay claim to her with your will,” Aelina instructed.

I did as she bade, and warm silver light enveloped my palm. This elf had been a spatial cultivator, like Tivana.

Little tendrils of silver zeal wrapped around my hand. Their master had been sleeping for who knew how many years, and she was sleeping still. Without a will to guide her power, they sought any direction they were offered. I provided that direction.

The process likely took a Satyr hours, since, without a Sacred Grove they had no magic of their own. But for me, it was but a work of moments. Zeal was as plain to my eyes as the ordinary world, and bending it to my will was second nature to me. I felt a connection settle into place. It took the form of a silver chord stretching from my naval to the Keystone Wisp. The chord was a faint and weak thing, but it was there. So long as it was intact, power would flow from the grove into me.

“That was skillfully done, sir!” Aelina said, genuinely impressed. “Now, care to test your new powers?”

I grinned. “Absolutely.”

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-ONE**

“Alright, let’s see what this Sacred Grove magic can do,” I said to my lovely companions, a few of whom had joined me on a hunting excursion into the forest. Sava, Eltiana, and Nela accompanied me, each ready for action.

The raw power we were bringing to bear in the name of the Hearthwood was serious overkill for the type of monster we were going to face.

Today we were hunting Stone-Tusked Boars. I hadn’t fought these things in a long time, but that was back when I was just a weak spirit or body cultivator.

Now, I was a Sacred Grove cultivator, and it felt damn good.

Power churning through me from my connection to the Sacred Grove. It was nothing more than a trickle, but it was there. And I hadn’t done a damn thing to get it. I felt like an aspiring self-help internet guru learning about passive income for the first time. Who works for their limitless cosmic power these days?

“Let’s see this magic garden of yours in action,” Nela crossed her arms and scanned our surroundings. “If it’s a flop, I’m sure Sava can harvest the plants as alchemy ingredients.”

“It won’t be too powerful yet. We’re just looking for potential,” Sava said.

“Sava’s right. We’re just going to take down a weak heartwielder-level monster,” I shot back in reply.

As if on cue, a snarling beast emerged from the underbrush. It was a Stone-Tusked Boar, toothy and angry.

### **Stone-Tusked Boar (Level 9)**

Or rather, it was angry until it sensed the power of my companions. Then it turned tail to flee.

“Perfect,” I declared, raising my hand toward the monster. I channeled the magic of the Sacred Grove through me, feeling the power surge effortlessly within. The energy crackled around my fingers, eager to be unleashed. There were quite a few aspects at my disposal, though not nearly to the degree they would be with Spirit Cultivation.

The Sacred Grove seemed to be more in line with general empowerment. At least, that was what it was when you weren’t sacrificing Elven wisps to fuel unique spells. My muscles flexed, and they probably would have swelled with new volume if my World Titan Fiendbody didn’t already give me total control over my physical appearance.

The Stone-Tusked Boar didn’t know what hit it. One second it was running; the next second, I grabbed it by the legs and threw it into a tree.

I was careful to only use the power granted to me by the Sacred Grove. That was harder than it should have been. My body cultivation, in particular, had been so tightly intertwined with my instincts that it was hard to consciously attempt not to use it. But I managed it.

“Ha! Take that!” I said.

“Normally, you could have thrown that boar all the way out of the Hearthwood...” Nela said, still looking skeptical. “How do we know the Sacred Grove actually did anything?”

“It did something. I feel it...” I clenched my fist. This was the start of something grand. “Come on! Let’s find another monster!”

“Be careful not to become too reliant on this power,” Sava cautioned me. “The Satyr King may have laid traps for us.”

“True, but I’ve got all of you by my side,” I said confidently, looking at each of my loyal companions. “Besides, Ethan promised an advisor from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye to help keep an eye out for any tricks. I won’t be using this in battle. More like a scientific experiment.”

“Still, we must remain vigilant,” Nela advised.

“Of course,” I agreed, although I couldn’t shake the feeling that everything would be just fine. I had a good head on my shoulders and the support of my lovely ladies. What could possibly go wrong?



I settled into a new routine. Dual cultivation every night into the morning the following day. Then I walked the Hearthwood’s grounds for some fresh air and to check in on my Sacred Grove.

The flowers were blooming, mostly thanks to the constant efforts of the nature cultivators working the grove. We’d already expended a few fate zeal crystals to speed up time for a select few plants.

I was on a rare break from the two things I did most often to check in with Argona. Mac wanted another cleaning drone, and while he trusted my daughter’s enchantment more than mine, I was still the master of wire harnesses and electricity.

“Will these copper strings really do something?” Argona asked skeptically.

“Insulated wires, and they will,” I promised. “They will carry electricity and signals through a means that can neither be detected nor disabled by ordinary cultivators.”

[Yes. The last thing I want is Satyrs being able to knock my latest model of cleaning drone offline!] Mac butted in.

“Combat-capable cleaning drone,” I reminded him. I could only justify spending so many resources on a cleaning drone by making them True Mage-level combatants and peacekeepers for the city.



[What is a crime but another type of trash that needs cleaning up?]

We might have been at that all day until it was time for me to check in with my matriarchs for another long night of dual cultivation when I received word a messenger had arrived.

Mac must have been truly excited about his new cleaning drone because it was rare for the sentries to spot someone on their way before he saw them coming.

Illiel delivered the message herself. “Dear, it looks like someone has arrived for you. They carry the symbols of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. Among those that have been in the Hearthwood since the beginning, it’s caused quite a stir. It would be worse than the Satyr attack if not for the fact that only a tiny fraction of the city remembers Tim’s attack. I’ve tried to calm everyone down, though. Weren’t you expecting them?”

I set down the bundle of wires I was wrapping up. “Yes, I was. Apologies, Argona, Mac. We’ll have to finish this tomorrow.”

I excused myself, though Mac groaned and asked if I couldn’t just leave the Cult of the Unblinking Eye waiting while I worked on his new cleaning drone.

I was surprised to hear the librarian from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had arrived so soon. I hadn’t expected the Sacred Grove to arrive by now, let alone the promised help. Powerful cultivators moved on a longer timescale thanks to their immeasurably lengthened lives. Still, it seemed they could move fast when they wanted to.

I saw her hovering in the air on a floating platform, much like Tim had used. That probably gave survivors from the last war a few uncomfortable flashbacks. Best to get her down soon.

She was a brown-haired, bespectacled elf who looked very much like the librarian she was supposed to be. The glasses were odd since I sensed Wizard-realm cultivation from her. There was little chance of her being shortsighted.

But if Illiel could wear glasses for fashion, so could this elf librarian.

I waved the platform down, and it started descending. Only then did I realize the librarian wasn't the one flying the platform. There was another figure accompanying her, and this one I recognized.

"Ethan?" I asked in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Ethan waved to me as the platform touched down. "I hope my presence isn't unwelcome. The Cult of the Unblinking Eye thought it would be nice to have an envoy in the Hearthwood for a little while. Someone to ensure that no more unfortunate... misunderstandings between you and us happen again."

"Mhm..." I muttered, struggling not to show the tension on my lips. It was one thing to run into Ethan in the halls of the Cult, but inviting him into my home?

Then again, I couldn't exactly reject him either. Not when the Cult was in the middle of doing me a favor. After all, I did really want access to their records on Sacred Groves. It would be the surest way to avoid falling for a trap left by the Satyr King. After a few moments of pensive thought, I came to my decision.

"Happy to have you, Ethan." I smiled and held out a hand. We shook and smiled like two heads of state, doing their best to look as friendly as possible.

"I hope you don't mind the imposition."

I shook my head. "Not at all. In fact, I'll call a feast in your honor tonight!"

In all honestly, I would have preferred to spend the night dual cultivating again. But if Ethan was going to be staying in the Hearthwood, I had a lot to do and little time to waste.



The librarian Ethan had brought with him had a lot of books to unpack and have at the ready before she could do her job. I gave her and Ethan a quiet cottage on the city's outskirts.

In theory, it gave them more privacy than having a guest room in the castle. In practice, I wasn't sure I wanted Ethan inside the defenses of Castle Mac with my family. As forthright as he had been until now, I couldn't forget my previous experiences with members of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. Not to mention that he was a Demigod-Realm Mind Mage. The only people in the Hearthwood who could truly resist his influence if he tried were me, Illiel, and perhaps Mac.

I needed backup just in case things went downhill. As soon as I was free of our new guests, I first found Comela and sent her through the Teleportation Array to the capital of Deania.

"Ask Sam and Dean to do me a favor and stay in the Hearthwood for a week or two. However long either of them can spare," I instructed my daughter.

I would have preferred both, but keeping a Demigod on guard duty was quite a big ask, even from a friend. The two of them were busy preparing for the end of the Seventh Golden Age, just as I was, so taking them away from their current tasks meant sentencing the minor clans they would have built bunkers for to their deaths.

But this was important to me, and hopefully, the two of them would see that.



I finally met the bespectacled elf librarian Ethan brought with him at dinner the following night. During our earlier conversations, Ethan had spoken on her behalf, and the two of us had walked and spoken like she wasn't even there.

"I hope there are enough shelves in the cottage for your library. I didn't get your name, by the way."

“Thank you, Patriarch,” the elf woman replied softly. “I am the Librarian of Sacred Groves.” She bowed her head slightly, her hands clasped in front of her.

“But what are you called?” I asked.

“Just that. Librarian of Sacred Groves,” the brown-haired elf said again.

I frowned. Ethan explained.

“The elves within the Cult of the Unblinking Eye who serve specific functions give up their old names and take on the name of their task. This one was meant to read, catalog, and understand all of the information we know about Sacred Groves. After she mastered the knowledge needed for the job, her name became ‘Librarian of Sacred Groves,’” Ethan explained.

“How... different...” I muttered.

As I studied her, an unsettling feeling crept over me. This woman was like a living database, her entire existence devoted to the accumulation and organization of knowledge. It seemed a sad fate to be so single-mindedly focused on one purpose. But then again, perhaps it was preferable to the alternatives I’d heard about for her sisters.

“Librarian, if I may call you that, I’m pleased to welcome you to the Hearthwood,” I said, trying to sound gracious. “And Ethan, I trust the accommodations are sufficient? Certainly not as spacious as what you have back home, but good enough for a brief stay?”

“Or a long one, if need be.” Ethan gave me an easy smile, revealing a row of perfectly white teeth.

“Your help is greatly appreciated,” I replied, though internally, I couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy welcoming a potentially hostile demigod into the Hearthwood. I kept those thoughts private, however, as sharing them now would serve no purpose.

The feast was grand, far larger than anything the Hearthwood had put on before. Ethan took it all in stride, though, seeming neither offended nor impressed. Eventually, I

broached the subject I'd spent the whole dinner worrying about.

"Your presence here is quite a surprise, Ethan," I began, trying to keep my tone light as I picked up my goblet. "I must admit, I'm still not entirely certain why you're here."

Ethan's eyes twinkled with amusement as he sipped his wine. "Ah, yes, I suppose I haven't been completely forthcoming about that. You see, Patriarch Theo, our Cult has been closely monitoring your clan's remarkable growth and accomplishments. It is only natural that we would want to maintain a presence here and perhaps even recruit someone of your stature into our ranks."

I raised an eyebrow in response. "Recruit me? Interesting. And what if I were to decline?"

"Of course, that is your prerogative," Ethan replied smoothly. "However, I believe that you'll find our collaboration most beneficial."

As the feast continued, I decided to put Ethan's offer on the backburner, focusing instead on enjoying the company of my loved ones. However, my mind was already racing with plans to keep tabs on this mysterious demigod.

"Mac," I whispered silently, knowing my AI companion could hear me.

[Yes, Theo?]

"Keep a close eye on Ethan and the Librarian while they're here. I want to know everything they do. Also, tell my companions they have an extra night to memorize the new dual cultivation techniques. I'm going to be busy."

[Understood.]

After the feast was over, I slinked off into the night. Eltiana's clan had once been famous for their ability to conduct work most others would have considered dangerous and amoral.

Essentially, they were spies and assassins. Even Eltiana was not at a level where she could hope to assassinate a

Demigod, but some of her kin were probably skilled enough to spy on one.

“I’m going to wipe your memories of this meeting. It’s the only way to avoid detection from someone like Ethan. But your task is simple. You’re going to become his staff. You will clean his sheets, do his laundry, cook his food, and generally do all he asks of you, within reason. While you’re there, keep your ears and eyes open. Scan for any suspicious behavior and report it to me. Do this well, and you’ll be paid handsomely when I return your memories. Understood?” I asked the group of Hidden Serpent Tribe elves.

I’d intentionally chosen elves I’d never interacted with before. Nevertheless, they were all longtime members of the Hearthwood Clan and had proven their loyalty. I wasn’t sure if my mind manipulation would hold up to whatever Ethan could do, but I had the help of willing subjects while he would not.

I wiped the memories of every elf of our meeting, though I left them with their lingering desire to follow my orders. They’d do as agreed but not know why they were spying on him until I returned their memories to them.

“Understood, Patriarch!” the leader among the Hidden Serpent tribe elves said. “We’ll ingratiate ourselves to this Demigod in order to gather information on his actions and intentions!”

“Good. I’ll be counting on you.”

Only time would tell what Ethan and the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had planned for me.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-TWO**

I stayed up throughout the night nursing a glass of wine in one hand and held a book in the other. I hadn't taken so much as a sip from the glass, though, nor flipped a single page of the book.

I was too busy looking out the window. Was there something I was missing? Was the Cult of the Unblinking Eye planning something?

Or was I overthinking this?

Maybe Ethan and his librarian were exactly what they said they were. A favor from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye to me meant to pave over past grudges now that it was too late to stick a knife in my back.

I'd already chosen not to send Ethan away. That decision was made. But I didn't yet know how close I would keep his counsel. It was clear he expected to stay well informed, but I could either have him at my side or leave him stuffed in that cottage on his own devices to learn what he could through rumor and gossip.

Decisions... decisions...

One thing was clear, though. I needed to strengthen my mind magic. I would have to give it more focus over the next few dual cultivation sessions. Only when my powers over mind zeal approached Ethan's would I feel somewhat safe having him around.

This might delay my push toward demigod-hood, but that was alright. It wasn't like I was racing anyone. Well, except

perhaps my evil robot twin hiding in a pocket dimension, but there was no way he'd be ahead of me with how hard I'd been working as of late.

But with safety in mind, I met with a late-night visitor. I put both wineglass and book aside as he entered.

“So... what's this about some chump squatting on your turf?” Dean asked, pounding a fist into his palm.

“Ethan, from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. He claims he was sent here by the Cult of the Unblinking Eye as an envoy.”

Dean nodded. “Right. So you want me to beat the crap out of him?”

I pursed my lips. “Not quite. I just want you to stay in the Hearthwood in case something happens. As a safety precaution.”

“Huh. Okay. Sounds a bit boring, to be honest. I thought I was in for some action...” Dean reached for the wine bottle next to me, flopped himself down on a nearby sofa, and drank straight from the bottle.

He coughed and spluttered after his first sip. “Theo... there's no alcohol in this!”

I chuckled. Dean never changed. “It's just normal wine. There is alcohol in it, just nothing that could affect someone at my level. I wanted my wits sharp the whole night long. But I'll have some wine suitable for a Demigod brought right up.”

“Good.” Dean kicked back and relaxed. “If I'm going to be playing bodyguard for your entire city, I'm going to need more than this. Do you think the local bars and game halls will mind setting up a tab for me? I spent all my money on a really big blast door for my kids to hide behind when the apocalypse comes.”

“All your money?” I asked skeptically. Dean might not be the richest of Demigods, but someone of his level could earn fortunes just by hanging around an area and having people attempt to curry favor with extravagant gifts.



“It’s a very nice blast door,” Dean explained. “It’s got lights and everything.”

“...Right. Well, I’ll let everyone know that you’ve got a tab in my name. I’ll pay for whatever you need to entertain yourself while in the Hearthwood. It’s the least I can do.”

“Sweet! Free stuff!” Dean grinned as he sat up.

“Just promise me you’ll just use this for food and entertainment, alright? No buying overpriced blast doors.”

Dean nodded. “Deal.”



I’d taken it upon myself to entertain Dean a bit. Food and entertainment only were going to be a bargain for having a Demigod on call, but I knew how much Dean could spend on a night on the town. And that was before he got magical powers that granted him the ability to ingest unlimited liquor.

Having him in the Hearthwood was going to cost me a small fortune. The more time he spent in the Castle, the more I’d save. I already had a bowling alley being built under the castle, and I rented out the nicest-looking poker joint in town. Before the following evening, Mac would have it filled with elven actors who wouldn’t let Dean lose too much of my money.

The first issue with the Sacred Grove occurred shortly after the sun rose.

Aelina rushed all the way to the Hearthwood to tell me. Mac told me I’d find her waiting outside the castle, shuffling nervously and quite clearly bearing ill news.

“What’s the problem, Aelina?” I asked.

“Sir... it’s about your grove. Something was wrong with one of the trees. We can deal with it, but you might experience a reduction in power...” Aelina flinched back as though afraid I was going to strike her.

“Okay. I’d like to take a look myself.”

Aelina's eyes widened. "That's really not necessary. We can cull the bad tree ourselves!"

"I just want to see." I started walking in the direction of the Sacred Grove, and Aelina jogged to follow close behind me.

"Sir, I don't want to trouble you with this. I just wanted to let you know..."

I shook my head. "I appreciate it, Aelina. But I'm interested in this stuff. At least let me watch."

I suspected I knew what was going on. Aelina had mentioned a bad tree, and now that she'd pointed it out to me, something did feel a little off with my connection to the Sacred Grove.

A dense network of living things built into a magical array like a Sacred Grove could no doubt be twisted in ways unfavorable to the user. I was guessing that was what the bad tree was.

This may very well have been the trick I was waiting for. It would be terribly easy to slip a seed that would harm my Sacred Grove into a batch of seeds containing the usual helpful ones. In truth, I was a little excited to see the problem.

If I had a clear example of how the Satyr King planned to catch me in a trap, I could better anticipate his future tricks. That was all the more reason to check out this tree.

I had Aelina lead me to the tree in question.

"Here it is," Aelina said. "We're going to chop it down today."

She gestured to what appeared to me to be an ordinary tree, at least with my ordinary eyes. Looking at the tree with my spirit sight, though, I could sense something amiss with the flow of zeal through the area.

Nature zeal ran through the forest nearby like a great vein, channeling and distributing power throughout the Sacred Grove and ultimately to the Keystone Wisp in the center of the grove.

This tree had been grown directly over that vein, and it looked like it was meant to serve a crucial function. Perhaps it was a filter that processed the nature zeal running through the grove. Or perhaps it was supposed to modify the zeal's behavior before passing it on.

But whatever it was doing, it probably shouldn't have been sewing droplets of blood zeal into the energy flow beneath it. Blood and nature were closely related enough that many spells would still work, but there would be odd side effects, especially with regard to healing and regeneration effects.

That's probably why this was considered a bad tree. A Satyr dependent on their Sacred Grove might not notice something like this until the middle of battle, when it would be too late to fix it.

In that case, he could only hope the elves and fae he collected in his Sacred Grove were willing to look and take care of these problems for him.

I had a lot of questions for Aelina. More than she was prepared to answer on her own. She had to call over some of her fellow elves to answer them since her domain was only nature zeal. The other aspects required other elves.

But between a dozen of them, I soon had a good grasp on what the problem was and how everyone planned to fix it.

"I must admit, during our training, we were never required to give such thorough explanations of what we were doing." Aelina wiped the sweat from her brow. "The Satyrs only cared if we could keep a grove running. Not on how we did it."

"Well, I'm not a Satyr. You'll find I'm a bit more hands-on than they were." I ran my hands up and down the tree. "So, how do we go about safely removing the tree? Do we just pull it out by the roots?"

"Workings of zeal out of harmony with the flow of the rest of the Sacred Grove could disturb the flow of zeal, which might cause discomfort to the Satyr bound to the Sacred Grove. So, it is considered bad practice to do these things the easy way. Instead, we'll use shovels."

“Up to you then. Alright, hand me a shovel.”

Aelina’s eyebrows rose, but she did as I asked.



Once the tree was safely removed from the Sacred Grove, I went to check on our new librarian. It was time to see if Ethan and the Cult of the Unblinking Eye could really do what they’d come here claiming they would.

Ethan wasn’t hard to find. He hadn’t even left the cabin I’d given him and was merely sitting on a rocking chair, watching the city. His gaze was distant, and I recognized the look. He was seeing with his mind magic rather than his eyes.

“You have a very happy city, Patriarch of the Hearthwood. And your people adore you. That’s a rarer feat than you realize,” Ethan said without opening his eyes.

“I’m flattered. Though I hope you’ll avoid prying too deeply into the heads of my citizens. We have personal privacy laws around here.”

Ethan chuckled. “Yes, I saw that. A constitution for your city guaranteeing the rights of citizens and residents. It was very nice. A few of the more sophisticated nations have something similar, though rarely spelled out as formally as you provide. The sense of personal security it gives certainly seems to make your local breed of elves a great deal more entrepreneurial than I’m used to. Most aren’t nearly as ambitious as yours.”

I placed a hand on my hip, expression serious as I met Ethan’s gaze. “Ambition breeds success, and success begets more ambition. We’ve done well for ourselves, and so long as that continues to be the case, the newcomers will be inspired by those already here. But I’m not here to chat. I wanted to consult with your librarian about a tree we found.”

“Of course.” Ethan finally opened his eyes and rose to his feet. He stepped into the cabin, where the Librarian of Sacred Groves was poring over a book. At the attention of her master,

she set the book aside and rose. “Our host has a question for you, Librarian.”

She bowed and looked at me expectantly.

“It’d be easier if I showed you.” I gestured in the direction of the Sacred Grove.

Ethan and I flew toward the Sacred Grove. The librarian traveled flung over Ethan’s shoulder. He set her down by the uprooted tree the elves and I had set just outside the bounds of the Sacred Grove earlier that morning.

“Can you identify this tree?” I asked. “The elves said it was interfering with the flow of zeal through the grove.”

“I can,” the Librarian said, running her hands across the tree’s bark. It was a little too smooth, like a young sapling expanded far wider and sturdier than something of its age should have been. “This is a Maleficent Entling. They are ordinary trees until they reach the True Mage realm, after which they grow capable of uprooting themselves. However, they began to draw in the living vitality of those working at the Sacred Grove long before that. They are considered pests, as they shorten the lives of elven and fae workers near them.”

I nodded, impressed at the toughness of the explanation. The Wanderer had given me the name with a quick analysis, but not nearly so detailed an explanation. This was also the most I’d heard the Librarian speak since her arrival. She had a pleasant voice, likely trained to be soothing to listen to by the cultists who would pry her for knowledge.

“What kind of damage would it have dealt to the workers?” I asked.

“It would have drained small amounts of vitality from them. Not much, but enough to slightly lower their ultimate cultivation potential. If a heartwielder might have someday been able to reach True Mage, they will only reach the peak of Mage Acolyte now,” the Librarian explained.

I ran my hand across my chin. “I trust that restoring that lost vitality would renew their missing potential?”

The Librarian bowed. “Of course. It would only take a small amount to replenish what was lost. Though Maleficent Entlings are voracious, you have a large Sacred Grove here, and it didn’t have nearly enough time to drain anyone to the point of permanent damage.”

“How do you think it ended up here? Could it have been mixed in with healthy tree seeds?” I asked.

“Unlikely, Maleficent Entling seeds are extremely distinctive. It would have to have been intentionally placed in the garden. I imagine it was placed over a nature zeal vein?”

I nodded.

“Then it was likely a conscious attempt to weaken the Sacred Grove. That is a common tactic the Satyrs use in feuds among themselves. As Sacred Groves are external forms of cultivation, they are easy for rivals to target.” The Librarian kept her eyes on the tree, gaze only flickering to meet mine for brief moment.

I bent over in front of the tree to meet her gaze. “On that topic, I have a project for you. If you can, I’d like a brief document detailing common ways to sabotage a Sacred Grove. I fear I will have to deal with attacks like this one quite often, and I would like to be able to spot them myself.”

The Librarian bowed. “I shall get to work immediately. It will be ready this evening, honored sir.”

I left, and Ethan brought the Librarian back to their cabin. I turned back to the Sacred Grove. So the tree had been placed over nature veins intentionally.

I scanned my workers. The Fae didn’t seem intelligent enough for such a plot. Their memories were short and flickering things, and it seemed as though they forgot orders as quickly as they were given. While their magic flowed through the Sacred Grove, their actions were more like those of forest birds than of gardeners.

No, something like this could only have been done by one of the elves. The only question was who. And why were they still working for the Satyr King?

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-THREE**

**T** rue to her word, the Librarian had a report for me before the sun fell. It was quite an extensive report as well. The bundle of papers was as thick as my finger, which meant she must have picked up her pen the moment she returned to the cabin and not stopped for rest until she was finished.

Such dedication from a servant of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye was suspicious, and I wondered how much of it came from her own will and how much from daily doses of mind magic granting her supernatural enthusiasm for her assigned role.

Still, I accepted the report with a smile and read it from cover to cover. It was very informative, and I sent it to the Hearthwood presses to make copies. It would be excellent training material for the workers who'd eventually replace those currently operating my Sacred Grove once it was established, and I'd rooted out the Satyr King's agents.

I couldn't grasp yet how the Satyr King kept a leash on whoever was still working for him here. They were in the Hearthwood, far from the Satyr King's reach. By all accounts, they were being treated far better than they ever had in Satyr territory, and all of them were free to go at any time.

Just what was the Satyr King doing to keep them plotting against me? Until I knew that, I couldn't overcome whatever hold he had on them.

Despite the betrayal from one of their number, I appreciated Aelina and the others had caught the tree so fast. I

had expected to discover these things myself, but however many elves the Satyr King managed to keep under his thumb, he didn't have complete mastery over them. When I bolstered the ranks of the Sacred Grove's workers with my people, the number of loyal among them would only grow.

As thanks for their good work, I had Sava brew a few vitality potions. Even distributed so many ways in that evening's meals, the boost in vitality they received was more than enough to make up for whatever the tree had stolen from them.

"This stuff is wonderful!" Aelina said as she slurped down a tube of gooey white nutrient paste.

"...If you say so..." I shook my head and shivered. Sava diluted the vitality potions with The Wanderer's nutrient paste. It was a favorite in the Hearthwood, despite how it looked and smelled to me.

Sava brewed one extra potion, so I had a special plan. I wanted to see just how bad this Maleficent Ent would have been had it been allowed to grow and fester. So I poured the vitality potion over its upturned roots and recruited Melise's help.

"Alright, see if you can speed up passage of time a little, Melise!" I beckoned her forward. Argona stood behind me, taking notes, while Comela held a drawn sword and an eager look in her eyes. I'd promised her she'd get to fight it, assuming the thing really did reach true mage.

Melise waved her hand around the circle of wire Argona had laid out earlier. That provided a clear barrier for her Fate zeal and made this working of informal magic a little easier to cast. Melise didn't have a spell for speeding up or slowing down time, but she was powerful enough that, given some time and a bit of thought, she could make it happen.

"That's a week... two weeks... a month... two months..." Melise counted off time, and the uprooted sapling grew before our eyes. It was already big thanks to all the nature zeal pumped into it, but now it looked like it deserved its size. The faint nature zeal spread throughout the plant and became far



deeper and richer. But as it grew, so too did the faint line of blood zeal running through it.

The crimson stain spread throughout the plant, traveling through the plant's inner structure like a spiderweb. No, like a set of veins. Though it still looked like a tree from the outside, I sensed a change taking place within.

The wood within dissolved, twisting and reforming into crude organs and something halfway between bone and hardwood. Joints formed below the surface, and the beginnings of eyes and a mouth took shape just beneath the bark. It was like watching a moth form from within a cocoon.

Then the tree woke. It shook off its own bark, which sloughed off and fell to the ground around it. It opened its mouth, letting out a ferocious roar.

Melise broke off her spell. "That's about as long as I can keep that up. Now that it's hit true mage, and it's moving, it would take exponentially more energy to keep the time dilation up. Perhaps Samuel the Fateweaver could do it."

I waved her off. "This is wonderful, Melise. Argona, were you watching it develop?"

"Truly strange..." Argona muttered, still jotting down notes as rapidly as she could scribble on her notepad.

"Is it going to break out now?" Comela asked. "And how strong is it?"

"That copper wire of Argona's will continue to act as a barrier, but I'm sure it will figure out how to break free, eventually. As for its level..." My voice trailed off as I looked.

### **Maleficent Entling (Early True Mage - Level 20)**

"Early True Mage. It should put up a decent fight. I'm eager to see what abilities it has. You're up, Comela!"

I gave my daughter a pat on the back. She shoved her helmet on and charged. I used earth magic to disable the magical barrier, so she didn't run face-first into it before hitting the Entling.

Then, Comela met the monster sword-to-tree branch.

The ent was as resilient as I expected a tree to be. Unfortunately, that was all it had. Comela was faster and had far more magic. She fired beams of golden light one after another, and the ent could do little more than sacrifice some of its leaves to generate temporary barriers powered by nature's zeal.

They didn't last long, though, and once Comela landed a few good hits, the ent caught fire and started burning. From there, Comela was practicing the lumberjack's art more than the swordsman's.

I was wondering if I should find her an axe instead of her sword when the ent finally died, and I gave her a polite round of applause.

"Good fight," I congratulated her. She beamed back up at me with a wide smile.



The Maleficent Entling was the first sabotage we spotted, but far from the last. I swept my senses through the area each time I walked through it, carefully noting how energy flowed through it. I was getting a bitter feel for how healthy energy flow looked when passing through a Sacred Grove and what unhealthy energy looked like.

Despite my best efforts, it was once again Aelina who brought the issue to my attention.

"Sir, I found an abnormality you might be interested in." Aelina wrung her hands outside my office. "I know you're very busy, and normally we would have taken care of it ourselves... but..."

"I'll be right over." I searched the room to find my pants. Dual Cultivation could get a bit hectic.

Aelina led me to the point of interest. This one was another tree. I sensed something was wrong, though not what was wrong.

“The tree is fine. It’s the vines this time. See these? They’re creeping up the sides of the trees and choking them of nature zeal. Soon, the tree will die, throwing the entire area out of balance,” Aelina explained.

“Right. So we tear down the vines.” I reached up to tug down the vines.

“Maybe.” Aelina shrugged. “If we were desperate to keep the Sacred Grove running at maximum power, we could tear down the vines and nurse the tree with nature zeal. But it’s already stunted. It’ll never grow to its full potential now. The best thing to do would be to remove the tree and replace it with a healthy specimen. That will ensure it grows properly into the indefinite future.”

I nodded. “Interesting idea. Alright, we’ll do it your way. Though I’m going to double-check with the Librarian of Sacred Groves.”

“Ah...” Aelina looked nervous for a moment. “She’s the one you brought the other day, right? She... knows a lot about Sacred Groves.”

I shrugged. “A lot of book knowledge, at least. I’m not sure how much she’s actually learned to apply. Don’t worry. I’m not putting her opinion above yours. I just want as much information as I can get.”

“I understand.” She bit her lip and shuffled from foot to foot.

I wasn’t gone long, but the Librarian of Sacred Groves said much the same as what Aelina said. However, she had one important comment to note that Aelina didn’t.

“Like the Maleficent Entling, the Poisonrot Vine is hard to miss. It would have to have been planted as a cutting right at the base of the tree it infected,” the Librarian explained.

“You’re thinking sabotage again?”

The Librarian nodded.

“I suspected as much...” I sighed.

I returned to Aelina's side and helped her tear down the vines and replace the tree with a new sapling. She was a bit nervous to work with me, but not as much as she had been when we removed the Entling. It seemed she was getting used to how I did things.

"You're certainly no Satyr," Aelina said as we finished. "They hated getting their hands dirty."

I dusted the mud from my fingers. The gesture was largely symbolic because the Earth magic cleaned me off more than the physical action. I waved my hands and cleaned Aelina off as well.

"I'm rather glad to hear that." I grinned. "I'd say you put in a good day's work. Have you had a tour of the Hearthwood? I could give you one."

"Really? With you?" Aelina asked. "I... I wasn't aware I was allowed to leave the Sacred Grove besides running to get you."

I shook my head. "This isn't some prison colony, Aelina. You and the others can visit the city any time you like. Come on. If I show you around, will you show the others around when they finally get the nerve to leave the Sacred Grove too?"

Aelina nodded, and soon she was trailing behind me.



I'd given tours of the Hearthwood enough times that it should have been second nature to me by now. Having lived in this place since its earliest days, I should have been as familiar with its layout as I was with the back of my hand.

But the truth was that I wouldn't have known the name of half the landmarks and businesses in the Hearthwood without Mac's guidance. Too many new things were happening as of late. It was hard to track where everything was and what they were doing.

“That row of stores is all armor crafters of various sorts. See the blue armor? That’s Waterbeetle armor. It reflects damage back on your attacker and is quite versatile. The Heartwielder and Mage Acolyte-level stuff is based on designs refined over generations by one of the local tribes. Anything built for True Mages is a more recent tradition. You see, we figured out how to mutate water beetles and push them to a higher cultivation level than they could achieve naturally. This makes them harder to kill, but it makes their armored shells correspondingly more valuable since without them, they wouldn’t be able to survive a fight between True Mages.”

From the wide-eyed look, as Aelina looked over the city while following at my heels, I was pretty sure I was giving off the impression of a wise and knowledgeable Patriarch. That was what I was hoping for, at any rate. Truthfully, Mac was whispering half of what I said in my ear.

“What is that? The tall coned building. The one that looks like a giant... ah... mushroom head?” Aelina pointed to one of the Hearthwood’s more distinctive structures, face red with a blush.

“Oh, that’s the spaceship launch site.”

“Space... ship?” Aelina asked, confusion clear on her face.

“They’re exactly what they sound like. Ships that fly through space. My daughter and I were launching a fleet of satellites outside of the World of Sanctuary and Serenity. I have an orc tribe under my control. I visit from time to time to make sure they’re running smoothly. And you never know when a space fleet might come in handy!”

As we watched, the roof of the distinctly phallic-looking building opened up, and a rocket blasted into space. Aelina took a step back in surprise, but nobody else on the street did. A few admired the tremendous feat of magic and pointed at the rocket as it ascended, but most simply went about their day.

Such launches were a regular occurrence these days, so it was no surprise that people had gotten used to them.

“Amazing!” Aelina gasped in awe.

“They really are. They could even reach to other worlds. This is just the start, but the Hearthwood’s reach will soon extend beyond this planet. Maybe to the World of Woods and Wilds...”

Aelina’s expression froze a moment at my words.

“All in all, I think we’ve made the Hearthwood a better place to stay than most.” I smiled as I watched the spaceship fade into the distance. I turned my gaze to Aelina. “Say, it’s about time for your paycheck. Here, let me give it to you personally. You deserve to spend a night on the town after a hard day’s work.”

“Paycheck?” Aelina asked in confusion.

I laughed. “Money. Spend it and buy stuff for yourself. Here, this is yours.”

I tossed her a bag of holding from my Dimensional Storage. It contained a bundle of Macmarks greater than she probably should have been paid. But I wanted Aelina to return to the Sacred Grove with plenty to show the others for her little adventure.

I waved goodbye to her. “I trust you can make your way back to the Sacred Grove! A True Mage shouldn’t have any trouble.”

Before she said anything else, I ducked into the rocket launching building. Argona had launched a rocket without me. How could she? I loved those things.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-FOUR**

**M**y objective was clear. I had to figure out how to root out the agents of the Satyr King from my Sacred Grove. And I wanted to do it before the Sacred Grove reached the Mage Acolyte realm.

Right now, problems were easy to solve, but the further the Sacred Grove progressed, the more little problems would turn into big problems. I could crush a Maleficent Entling with my eyes closed if it was only at True Mage. But if such an issue lingered until the grove was at the Sorcerer realm, I would be in trouble.

For now, I was just thankful I hadn't planted anything in The Wanderer. I had been tempted to use the Hydroponic Farm as part of the Sacred Grove. That would certainly boost the rate at which plants grew. Either that, or try to see if I could get The Wanderer to cook up a special room for it. But if that happened I might have been dealing with a far stronger angry tree.

Despite the trouble I was having with my new Sacred Grove, I couldn't help but feel a smile growing on my face. I'd pit myself against the Satyr King in one game of wits and won. I'd win again now. He'd be gnashing his teeth all the way in his throne room by the time I was done here. And I'd have a nifty new Sacred Grove to gloat over.

But before I could celebrate, I had to solve the problem at hand.

The obvious culprits were some of the elves. Some of the Fae might have also been guilty, but only as unwitting agents. They didn't seem to have the cunning to cause problems intentionally for the Sacred Grove.

According to the Librarian of Sacred Groves, they couldn't even leave its grounds, and if the grove died, so would they. Poisoning their own Sacred Grove would be like committing suicide for them.

Even if the Satyr King had blackmail or hostages suitable for convincing the Fae to give up their lives, they didn't have long enough memories to matter. I'd asked a few of them and even poked around their heads with mind magic. They'd already forgotten everything they knew about the World of Woods and Wilds and its ruler. Unless I was missing something, attempting to use them in some far-reaching scheme would be an exercise in futility.

That only left the elves. Seeing how the traps had sprung up so early, the one behind it all was likely one of the Mage Acolytes or True Mages. The Heartwielders weren't around when most of those seeds were sewn, so it couldn't have been them.

I already had a pretty good idea, but it would pay to narrow down my search a little more.

The biggest problem was that I couldn't trust anyone knowledgeable about this subject. The elves who worked the Sacred Grove could feed me false information since they were my suspects in the first place.

The Librarian of Sacred Groves was also suspect. She worked for the Cult of the Unblinking Eye, after all. And who knew what their plans were. But if she was working against me, it would be on behalf of Ethan and the Cult of the Unblinking Eye, not the Satyr King.

But perhaps I could play the two factions against one another. By comparing what each of them said and using my own knowledge of magic, I should be able to spot a lie when I found one. Especially if I did a bit of extra research on the sly.



For now, there was one surefire step I could take to get events moving in my favor.

I tracked down Aelina, already hard at work in the Grove at dawn's first light. I placed a hand on her shoulder as she bent over a tiny patch of ground. She breathed nature zeal into a seed she'd buried there.

I approached in complete silence and rested my hand on her shoulder so gently she didn't feel it through her shirt. I restrained the natural energy fluctuations from me so she didn't notice me behind her until I spoke.

“Already hard at work before all the others, I see?”

Aelina jumped twice her height in the air.

“O-oh! Sir! Sorry... you... uh.. startled me...” Aelina clasped her hands behind her back, refusing to look me in the eyes.

“Sorry. I wouldn't have disturbed you if it wasn't important, though. I need you to compile a primer for me on how to run a Sacred Grove. It should contain all the information a new Heartwielder might need to know. Can you do that for me?”

“Y-yes sir!” She nodded vigorously.

I handed her a bundle of paper and a pen. I was wondering if she had any herself or knew where to buy it in the Hearthwood, so I provided writing supplies.

“You plan on acquiring more elves for the Sacred Grove?” Aelina asked.

“I plan on hiring more if that's what you mean by acquiring.” I eyed Aelina. A Satyr probably would have captured or bought more wisps.

“Oh... yes, sir...” Aelina said, shuffling her feet awkwardly again. She was less enthusiastic this time, but her eyes darted between the ground and my face as quickly as her head had moments ago.

“Head into town for the day. The clan library is a great place to read and write. It's quiet and has a quiet and diligent

ambiance. There are also lots of spells and techniques available there, though you will need clan contribution points to access them.” I nodded at a tall structure just outside of Castle Mac.

Pretty soon, I had a dozen elves all working on the same basic Sacred Grove guide. All that was left was to get one from the Librarian of Sacred Groves back in the city.

“Certainly, Patriarch Theo,” the Librarian of Sacred Groves said as I made my request. “And here is the previous report of potential sabotage vulnerabilities you requested.”

Ethan smiled from his seat on the porch. He was rocking back and forth once again, eyes closed as he observed the city with mind magic.

“You certainly seem to like reports. I’m surprised. Most of us humans don’t have patience for bureaucracy,” Ethan said.

I chuckled. “I don’t either. But I have a few tricks for dealing with them.”

Namely, I forced Mac to read everything and tell me what was necessary. I didn’t plan to read any of the reports I was getting myself. Mac was the one who was going to go through them all, look for inconsistencies, and ultimately compile a cohesive guide for new heartwielders going to work on my Sacred Grove.

It would hopefully knock out two problems at once. This would need to be done anyway, and if it revealed the Satyr King’s agent, that’d be all the better.

“You know, I’ve read a thing or two about Sacred Groves myself.” Ethan opened his eyes to cast a glance at me. “The Cult of the Unblinking Eye has one, though it’s since gone fallow after the elf we bound to it passed away. We made some interesting discoveries while it was active, though.”

“And what were those?” I asked.

“There’s a special type of fertilizer full to bursting with zeal. It’s called Graveloam. It works quite well for just about any type of Sacred Grove.”

“Graveloam?” I raised an eyebrow. “Sounds sinister.”

Ethan chuckled. “You want some? I know a guy.”

“How much?”

Ethan shook his head. “Consider it free. I’ll list it as an expense for my time here as an envoy.”

I shrugged. I wasn’t one to refuse a free gift. So Ethan sent his message and brought his Graveloam over to the Hearthwood. I had a few suspicions about it, but this would just be one more potential trap to figure out and defeat.

Two days passed with everyone hard at work, including me doing all my dual cultivation, and I was once again seeing real results.

Minerva had progressed quite a bit through the early sorcerer realm. My body cultivation had improved measurably toward the peak of the Gold Realm. My Earth cultivation had also progressed comfortably, deepening my already prodigious reserves.

I hadn’t yet mastered the two concepts I’d grasped already, Gravity and Identity, but I could feel like I could do more with each or even pick up a third if I so chose.

That was all sidelined for the time being, though. With my recent interactions with the Cult of the Unblinking Eye and now with Ethan staying in the Hearthwood, I pitted all my efforts toward one goal. And now I’d finally made it happen.

**You have broken through to the Sorcerer realm in Mind Magic!**

**You are now a level 40 early mind Sorcerer.**

“A round of applause, if you please!” I asked the women around me.

Minerva clapped in my head. [Congratulations, master!]

Unfortunately, all my other lovely cultivation partners were bound, gagged, or both. Their clapping was ineffective at best, but they were with me in spirit.

I threw a party in the Personal Chambers with my harem thanks to my progress, but even more impressive than my gains was the fact that Sava was nearing the Sorcerer realm. Pretty soon she'd break through herself. And the others were hot on her heels.

This was a much bigger deal than my breakthrough. After becoming a Sorcerer once, the second time was just more of the same. The pathways already existed. Now there were a little more of them, and they could carry a new type of zeal.

Tivana was also making good progress, and at this rate, she was liable to beat me to Demigod. The same was true of Illiel, though she was falling behind Tivana. Whatever the Witch of Frozen Blood had done to make Illiel her avatar had empowered her but left her cultivation destabilized enough that she could only begin progressing again.

I left my Personal Chambers in a good mood. By then, Mac had his report for me, compiled and comparing everything sent to me by everyone.

“What'd you find?”

[There were a few inconsistencies,] Mac said. [A couple of contradictory statements from several different parties. Assuming the bulk of them told the truth on any given subject, I have a good idea of who lied and what they lied about.]

My eyebrows rose, but I fought to keep my excitement down. I didn't expect to catch anyone red-handed here. But it would certainly be a step in the right direction.

“And did any of the errors have a pattern to them? Or would they have come with particularly nasty side effects if followed?” I asked.

[Not from my limited data. But my understanding of Sacred Grove magic is only as good as yours. There may have been something I missed.]

I rapped my fingers against the desk with one hand, and the other held my chin. It was a step in the right direction, though not quite as much of one as I hoped.

“Create and organize a digital profile of every suspect. I won’t execute someone for a simple factual mistake in a hundreds-of-pages-long report, but it bears further investigation.”

[Not to worry, organization is my second passion! After cleaning, of course,] Mac replied. He sensed the tension between my brows. [But what are you thinking about now?]

“How we’re going to finally catch whoever is pulling these tricks. I have a good idea, though. You know how big companies always forced everyone back home to take a vacation every few years? It’s really an excuse to force you to train your replacement. If someone is doing your entire job, they’re bound to notice money going into an account it isn’t supposed to. Or recurring purchases to a company you’ve never received products from.”

[In other words, uncovering fraud.]

“Exactly. I plan on doing the same with the next batch of recruits. Put up job requests throughout the Hearthwood. I’m sure plenty of people want a steady job from the Hearthwood Clan’s Patriarch. Ensure we’re offering twice the going rate for unskilled labor in the Hearthwood. I want plenty of candidates. I’ll interview them the next time I’m done with dual cultivation.”

[Consider it done.]

And so I returned to my room, forgetting my troubles for a while as I basked in beautiful and bountiful elven flesh. To the rest of the world, it probably seemed as though I’d completely forgotten about the outside world and was only concerned with my intense passion for cultivation.

With any luck, the Satyr King’s agents would get bolder, not sensing the noose getting ready to close tight around their necks.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-FIVE**

**Y**ou know what they say. If you want a job done right, do it yourself. The more power I gained, the truer that felt.

These days, it was within my power to delegate everything besides fighting and sleeping with my matriarchs.

And in truth, that's all I thought I would be doing by the time I reached this point. But there was something satisfying about a job well done. About being there in the thick of it, even if that meant wading through a mountain of paperwork.

Maybe I'd been away from Earth too long, but I was actually eager for the upcoming round of interviews. There was no need to trouble Illiel or one of my daughters with conducting them.

And there were quite a few interviews to be had. Even more elves wanted to work in my Sacred Grove than I had hoped for. The streets were lined outside Castle Mac, and I sat comfortably in my office as they streamed in one at a time as guards let in each applicant.

"Welcome! Thanks for coming to this interview. Have a seat." I gestured to the chair before me and folded my hands on the desk. "So it says here you were a shop clerk? What caught your interest about working in a Sacred Grove instead?"

"You did." The elf licked her lips as she stared me down from across the room.

I nodded and scribbled something down on my notepad. "I see. It'll be a lot more manual labor than you're used to. It'll

be rough.”

“You can be as rough with me as you like...” The elf I was interviewing drooled.

“Interesting...” I jotted another note down in my notebook. “Now, let’s take a look at your qualifications for this position...”

The elf ripped off her shirt and her breasts bounced free.

I frowned. “I suppose I should conduct a rigorous test of your qualifications...”

I ended up interviewing what must have been half the elves in the Hearthwood. The single half, at least. I didn’t remember job interviews being this entertaining back on Earth, but I was almost disappointed when they were over. Almost. After all, the best of them would be moving on to a second round.

I had my selections scribbled down on a sheet of paper, which I handed to Mac. He picked it up with one of his new golem-tech hybrid cleaning drones that I’d helped Argona build recently.

[I will sterilize this entire room, don’t worry. And you can burn this paper. I have already scanned it,] Mac said.

I shrugged. “Suit yourself. So do you agree with my selections?”

[Mostly. While you were engaged in your interviews. I was holding a more practical series of interviews outside.]

“Glad you have my back, Mac. Now, I’m off for a bath with the Whitewood Clan, then to the Personal Chambers. If you spot my matriarchs, ask them to get themselves situated in the usual positions. I’ll be there by sundown.”

[Humans...] Mac let out a long sigh. [Incredible magical power, and this is how you spend it.]

“What can I say?” I laughed. “A lot of people hate their jobs. I’m not one of them.”



That night, Sava finally broke through to the Sorcerer realm.

“My powers have grown to new heights!” Sava declared the moment she reached the Sorcerer realm. “Now, as a Sorcerer, my intellect and skill are unmatched! It’s my turn, love. I saved your old hammock, and it’s time for another non-stop vitality harvesting session! I’ll keep you locked in my laboratory for—”

She dove for me, but just like when she was a wizard, I easily overpowered her. I was nearing the Demigod realm in body cultivation, after all. Sava stood no chance. The Sorcerer realm’s boost went mostly to her ego.

“Alright, I can see the megalomania’s gotten her. Ladies, tie her up again and show her that just because she’s a Sorcerer doesn’t mean things have changed.” I released my other lovers, and they all dove on top of Sava as I pinned her arms. Under my firm grip, she soon turned from haughty Sorcerer back into the meek little alchemist I’d grown to know and love. She even seemed to enjoy the process.

One of the things I’d learned from my time as an orc chieftain was that elves were natural opportunists. When they had even the slightest bit more power than you did, they would be haughty, demanding, overbearing, and arrogant. When you had even the slightest bit more power than they did, they quickly debased themselves as submissive adoring bootlickers. Generations of living as cultivators had probably bred the behavior into their genes as a survival trait.

There was always something a bit entertaining about watching an elf shift from one persona to the other. They really were such fun to conquer. While I still had a bone to pick with all the factions that ganged up to destroy the Elven Star Dominion, I couldn’t say I wouldn’t have done the same if given half a chance.

“Just you wait! I’ll be a Sorcerer soon!” Eltiana crossed her arms and scowled at Sava. The others bobbed their heads



in agreement. If I didn't hit demigod first, I was going to have my hands full.

But what Eltiana said was true. Sava was the first to tip over that edge, but all my matriarchs were pushing closer to the Sorcerer realm. The only one trailing behind was Korra thanks to her late start, but soon the Hearthwood Clan would have more Sorcerers than any other clan in Deania or the surrounding countries.

From there, they'd just be waiting on me to hit Demigod. At that point, we would be one of the world's great powers. And I could stand side by side with my old friends as equals. It would be a good day, and it was coming soon.

With the Satyr King's troubles behind me, the only problems I had going forward were the incoming end of the world in the form of the end of the Seventh Golden Age, and my robotic twin hiding in a pocket dimension planning who knows what.

Thinking it through now, those both sounded rather bad. But they were distant looming threats rather than immediate ones bearing down on me. I had time. Time to enjoy myself, slowly build my power, and work on my Sacred Grove. In the past, I might have felt incredible stress and angst and the threats looming over us. But all I felt now was calm certainty that I could handle what was coming, come what may.



I took a brief trip to the Rakaren Queendom, the Ancient Tree Temple, the Circle of Necromancers, the Lifekeeper Sanctum, the Sunspire Queendom, the Sakaku Clan, Golden Sword Sect, and the Auqualian Isles. I had to check on their bunkers.

We had a good arrangement, and I didn't want it to come to an end when the current Golden Age came to an end. Especially since Sam and Dean planned on keeping their clans small next time around and wanted to foist off the burden of stabilizing the region we lived in on me. It would be best to

have loyal powers with good relationships with the Hearthwood Clan running all the neighboring regions.

I was treated quite well on all my stays.

In the Ancient Tree Temple, Teilinith and Feilinith brought me right to their pyramid.

“Sit here.” Teilinith waved me to a throne at the top of the pyramid.

“Everyone should see their ruler,” her sister added.

I glanced at the two elf-sized chairs sitting side by side. They’d been torn out of the ground and cast aside, leaving only one single throne for me. They were clearly thrones meant for Teilinith and Feilinith. “You two sure? I don’t want to leave both of you standing in your own domain...”

The two green-haired sorceresses ripped the chairs out of the ground and grew one in my size out of vines and wood. I shrugged and took a seat.

“Behold! The Patriarch!” the twins announced.

Lining the streets around the pyramid, elves bowed in unison. A moment later Teilinith and Feilinith both went to their knees on either side of my impromptu throne.

“Ladies, there’s more than enough room on this chair to share. Here.” I grabbed the twin rulers of the Ancient Tree Temple and pulled them into my lap, much to the cheering and excitement of the crowd below.

They wanted to hold an enormous feast in my honor after that, but I had to decline. I was here to work after all. Per my instructions, Teilinith and Feilinith had been digging a bunker to keep as many of their people alive as they could.

The two of them were quite skilled in their own right, but neither had the advantage of my Earth magic.

In the past, my aspect had been disparaged as a utility aspect, good for earning a living but not as good in direct combat. I had proven conventional thinking wrong time and time again, but that didn’t mean they weren’t right about Earth zeal providing good utility.

I did in minutes what would have taken the twins months of work. I built several more bunkers, large enough to preserve the lives of everyone who so kindly welcomed me into their homes here around the Ancient Tree Temple. It was the least I could do for such a warm welcome.

Next up was the new Sunspire Queendom, formerly known as the Sunspire Kingdom. Not to be confused with the old Sunspire Queendom, which had been supplanted by the Sunspire King to make the Sunspire Kingdom.

Now the Sunspire King was rotting in Tivana's mother's dungeon, where he was no doubt subject to the whims of the kind of elf Ethan loved to warn me about. Tivana's mother reminded me a bit of a more devious Eltiana given the powers of a demigod. I shivered at the thought and actually felt a little sorry for the Sunspire King.

At any rate, thanks to my help, the princess and daughter of the former ruler of the Sunspire Queendom had retaken the throne and ruled once again. I'd never really taken the Sunspire Queendom under my wing, but she was one of Tivana's friends and had been through a rough patch, so I felt some responsibility to look out for her.

My visit there was a lot more straightforward. I showed up, the Queen herself came to greet me, and a few of her nobles oohed and aahed at me.

"You're looking a lot better," I said to the princess. It was true. When I'd dragged her out of the tower she'd been starved and mutilated.

Thanks to the Medical Bay and the Hearthwood's Spirit Healers, her cultivation had been restored and she had all her limbs once more. I didn't even see a scar on her.

"Thank you, Patriarch." The former princess, now Queen, lifted the hem of her dress and bowed in my direction. "And let me just say here and now that you are welcome in my home any time. There's no need for you to ask for an invitation or announce your arrival. The palace guards have standing orders to let you in right away whether you're expected or not."

“That’s very kind of you, and I may take you up on the offer.” I congratulated her on a job well done getting her realm back in order again, and we chatted a bit. Then I got to work reinforcing what they had so far and was on my way. The newly minted queen seemed a bit disappointed with the suddenness of my departure, but I had somewhere to be.

That somewhere was the Auqualian Isles. I was worried my reception here would be less than welcome, since I still had their Sovereign collared and lounging about in the Hearthwood.

She’d been the one to unite the islands under her banner, so I feared that in her absence everything would turn back to feuding island states.

But apparently my captive was better at running her nation from abroad than I thought, because I was greeted by a half-dozen wizards upon my arrival, each of them powerful matriarchs of the various clans in the region.

“The Auqualian Isles welcomes the Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan.” They bowed in unison, looking less like bitter rivals and more like the maids of the Whitewood Clan.

“You all are too kind. So did you carry out my instructions?” I asked. “They’re very important.”

They glanced at one another nervously. Eventually, they shoved the weakest matriarch to the front to speak for me.

“Patriarch, we have done as you commanded, though we don’t understand the need...” the nervous wizard said. She winced and refused to meet my eyes, as though afraid I would lash out in anger at being questioned.

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and gave her a comforting pat. “I understand completely. You’re stepping into the world of Demigod politics, but there are some very important things going on. I suppose at least one of you should be in the know to make sure you’re doing things right, since your Sovereign has made herself a bit too comfortable lounging about my castle as my half-dressed captive. How would you like to be my assistant here?”

“M-me?” the wizard asked, eyes wide.

“Yes, you. I shall share important secrets that concern the fate of the world with you and you alone. Then, I’ll entrust you to see my will done here in the Isles. Of course, such a position of authority will require a boost in status and power for you...”

The other wizards all rushed forward.

“I volunteer!”

“Wait, Patriarch, I have always been your loyal servant here and could certainly carry out your rewards better!”

“Patriarch, please, grant me the honor of serving you!”

“You must be tired from your long journey, Patriarch! Please, stop by my clan so I can massage those tired shoulders.”

“Screw that! Patriarch, my clan and I are yours to do with as you please. Just show us the smallest token of favor...”

The great matriarchs of the Auqualian Isles, recently so fiercely independent, no longer fought over land and territory. Now they fought merely for the opportunity to win my favor. It was a bit tedious, but it would likely be healthier for the average elf living on the islands.

There would be no more wars between islands. No more endless chaos or invasions as the various matriarchs vied for control. If that meant I had to be the recipient of a little too much attention, it was a price I was willing to pay.

“Are you tired, Patriarch? Please rest a moment. You can use my chest as a pillow!”

“Fool! My chest is far softer. The Patriarch would never stoop to resting his glorious head on your tiny nubs.”

“You evil vixen! You are simply trying to get the exalted Patriarch to breed you before me! I shall be the one to be gifted with the Patriarch’s divine seed.”

On and on it went. I learned to tune them out eventually though as I inspected each of the various bunkers around the

area.

“Not bad. These’ll preserve the lives of quite a few True Mages and below. Your descendants will thank you. When I give the signal though, you’ll all have to come to the Hearthwood and report to me without delay. If you don’t, you and your kin will probably die. That’s all I’ll say on the matter for the time being,” I said to the wizards as I departed.

I pulled the first one I talked to aside and gave her the real scoop on the end of the Seventh Golden Age and how the Planetary Defense Constructs would be hunting for wisps to power them for a few more centuries.

She nodded gravely, and now that she understood my intent I empowered her to keep the others on task and make the decisions I would make. This was really the only way to manage any large organization. Even as a cultivator it was impossible to govern everything yourself.

Next I went north to the Sakaku Clan. Shakaran was there, along with Kysalian. I saw both of them often enough in the Hearthwood though. With the young mistress of their clan, Sharian Sakaku, living full time as Nela’s personal servant, they stopped by often.

It was hard to remember that the Sakaku Clan once posed an existential threat to the Hearthwood. And that they’d wiped out Nela’s Songstone Clan before my arrival in the Hearthwood. They probably wouldn’t have been around if not for the fact that they’d been under the influence of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye’s mind control stirring up trouble in the region at the time.

All of it was rather complicated, but the Sakaku Clan were good sports about their defeat, and they’d done a good job filling out my orders already, so my presence was hardly needed. I saved the time for my next two stops, both of which were going to be more troublesome than the others.

I’d captured most of the higher-ups of the Golden Sword Sect, leaving them severely weakened. With little more than a few True Mages to maintain order, they hadn’t made much progress at all.

Or really did all that good a job maintaining order, by my estimate. The formerly beautiful sect looked like it had divided into camps as people fought over the remaining resources in the sect's stockpile.

It was a bit sad to see the once-mighty school and regional power reduced to a few squabbling True Mages and their followers. Maybe I was blaming myself, since I was the one who had decapitated their sect and imprisoned their leadership in the Hearthwood.

I would have to allow my prisoners a bit more freedom if this place was to be put back into order. I left shortly after looking the place over with my own eyes.

The Lifekeeper Sanctum was even worse. Before I attacked, most of them had been taken over by Timeweaver Spiders. In a way, I'd actually saved them by running around their settlements kidnapping every wizard I could find.

If I hadn't, the Timeweavers would no doubt have continued to infiltrate their numbers until every elf in the Lifekeeper Sanctum was nothing more than spider food.

But that didn't change the fact that all the Lifekeeper Sanctum's wizards were in my dungeon and not here leading their people. They hadn't made much progress building a bunker for themselves either.

Perhaps I'd throw them and the Golden Sword Sect together in some impromptu shelter I constructed on the fly. It wouldn't be furnished, well-stocked, or remotely organized, which was the main reason I was having the various factions under my leadership do so much of the work themselves. But it would exist. That was something, at least.

I left them as they were as well. My mood was still good, and I found I was better at putting broken civilizations to order when slightly annoyed. I didn't want to kill the good vibes I had now, so I would save that for another day.

The Circle of Necromancers was a welcome surprise though. Perhaps it was because they were close to the Hearthwood, but they'd made the most progress on my orders

of everyone. They lacked powerful earth cultivators to do the digging, but they made up for it with a massive undead labor force.

Instead of one large bunker, they'd opted for several smaller ones at the location of each of the major cities I'd ordered constructed. It was a good solution, and not one that I thought needed my interference.

Satisfied, I returned to the Hearthwood. I'd spent enough time looking in on others. I hadn't seen my own city from the air for some time.



CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-SIX**

The Hearthwood had grown tremendously once more. The rows of ground-level shops that had once characterized the outskirts of the city were now well and truly within the settlement. They were now less outskirts and more downtown.

The elves had built around the Hearthwood's enormous trees, and in many cases, right up along their sides and around their crowns, forming something of a second city high in the air.

The people living in the tops of those trees were a notch wealthier than those on the ground, since living that high up tended to be rather tedious if you didn't also own a flying sword of some other means of flight.

But that wasn't to say the people down on the surface were poor. Far from it. Good policy on behalf of the Hearthwood Clan meant food and housing was cheap and readily available, so everyone was dressed in at least some token level of attire.

There was no one starving on the streets, picking pockets, or begging for pocket change. In fact, there was an eerie lack of beggars, thieves, or potion addicts in the city.

Such people were inevitable in any large settlement, and it was terribly strange to notice their absence. I feared something brutal had been done with them to sweep them away, and I hadn't noticed.

Mac quickly set me straight.

[Goodness, no. When I cleaned up the streets, I certainly didn't mean to imply that I had troublemakers killed!] Mac

replied.

“Then what did you do with them?”

[We sent them to the Monster Dens where I did a little domestication work on them. The dens work the same on elves as they do on monsters, you know. I made them a little more malleable, gave them some honest work, and had them clean themselves up. When they agreed to further treatment, I send them off to Illiel or one of your daughters well-versed in Mind Magic. There, they're treated for their condition with a liberal application of mind magic. Potion addicts have all memories associated with their addiction wiped away. Criminals have past trauma wiped away and generic happy childhood memories installed. Beggars are healed of their physical or mental limitations, should they have any, and then given a basic skill set to hold down a job. We have free housing for them to stay in a while for them to get back on their feet after that. Here in the Hearthwood, we rarely ever arrest a criminal twice! We have a ninety-eight percent rehabilitation rate.]

“Ah... well, it sounds like you have it all well in hand.” I ran my hand along the back of my head. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen any beggars or homeless on the streets of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye's territory. I wondered how many of the same techniques Ethan and his people applied to their own settlements.

I put the disturbing thoughts out of mind. After all, I couldn't exactly fault Mac and the others for helping people, and I'd approved a lesser version of such a project long ago. Injecting new memories directly into the minds of my citizens was getting a bit close to mental manipulation, but most societies of this world did far worse to criminals. A little advanced mental persuasion was a small price to pay for the results we were getting.

[It's quite effective!] Mac assured me. [But if you're touring the city, might I suggest touring Whitewood Manor? Your servant clan has expanded their facilities dramatically, thanks to the recent manifesting.]

“Recent manifesting?”

[You were too focused on Dual Cultivation to allow yourself to be disturbed. But it happened! The Whitewood Clan's wisps have finally manifested. You are once again a proud father. This time of a batch of about seven hundred new members of the Hearthwood Clan.]

I choked a little. Seven hundred?

Had I really bred members of the Whitewood Clan often enough to make seven hundred new kids?

[You have,] Mac assured me. [And it was far more than seven hundred times. That's just the batch from a few months ago. There are a lot more on the way.]

I grimaced. "Yeah... I'm going to need to talk to Yavilla and Tavilla. But show me these kids. I have no plans on being a negligent father."

I flew back to Castle Mac to find new family member orientation had already begun. Argona was speaking as the guest of honor, but Illiel, Assyus, and Eltiana were all in attendance as well.

"Welcome, everyone, to the Hearthwood Clan!" Argona said. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions. I'm Argona, your older sister."

I quietly slipped into the back and took a seat. I'd seen some of the preparations for this, but hadn't expected such a formal gathering to crop up right under my nose. While I'd been busy with dual cultivation, the rest of the family hadn't been idle.

Illiel started with a brief summary of the family's history and our place in the world.

"The Hearthwood Clan is a new power. Our foundations do not run as deep as those of the older clans, but we are powerful and growing moreso by the day. We boast more wizards than any other clan in Deania or the nations surrounded it. We also have secured the direct vassalage of most of those clans, either directly to us or indirectly through their rulers."

Illiel gestured, and illusions illustrating her words appeared behind her. The new children puffed up in pride at the realization that they had been born into a powerful force. Most of the heads were the silvery white of the Whitewood Clan, but I spotted a few of blue, gold, purple, or green hair. The elves of the Whitewood Clan weren't the only ones to lay some eggs for me.

Despite their differences, every one of them had ears a bit more rounded than was usual for an elf, and physiques a little more muscled. That was clear a sign of direct human heritage. I even spotted a bit of myself in most of them, painted clearly in the shape of their noses or the slant of their eyes.

In other words, they were all definitely my kids.

Man, I'd been busier than I thought. It had been a lot of fun at the time, but seeing so many progeny of mine here and how had me a little scared.

*Did I really do this?*

I looked around at the auditorium full to bursting. This was the kind of thing I expected on a college campus. Not in my personal residence. And from the looks of things, we needed all the space.

The auditorium-sized stadium was fitting, considering the crowd. Elves manifested as fully mature adults with enough memories built right into them from their wisp-hood to make them fully functional members of society from the moment they got a body, so this really was more akin to a college freshman orientation than it was to bringing home a newborn baby.

I expected this odd quirk was something of an evolutionary defense mechanism. Surviving in a world as dangerous and deadly as this one was hard enough for a grown adult. It would have been near-impossible to do so while looking after children.

Or maybe the maker of this world just didn't want a bunch of kids running around the world they'd filled with sexy elves

who liked to walk around half-dressed. It could be either, or maybe both.

Whatever the case was, that's what this was. All my kids were skipping right over their childhoods and stepping into either work or further study. With the resources my clan had available, I figured we would encourage all my children to seek additional training before setting out on their own, but if any had made up their minds to move out and live their own lives, I wasn't going to stop them.

Then I thought about the family treasury. Once upon a time I thought I was pretty rich. I was far wealthier than the average Sorcerer, after all.

But somehow, I wasn't sure that was going to stretch as far as I thought. Especially as these kids started reaching higher cultivation levels.

Perhaps it was finally time to ask Sava about magical birth control. Either that, or I'd have to go on another adventure in the Primordial World to keep putting food on the table for a family of a thousand.

Despite my worries, the orientation went smoothly and as planned. After going over the history of the Hearthwood Clan, Argona took over and welcomed all her new siblings, then spoke of the many opportunities the family and what would be expected of them to maintain the family name and our reputation abroad.

"You will not go running around the capital or anywhere else using our family name as a club to bludgeon lesser clans into submission," Argona warned. "Father isn't fond of that sort of behavior, and you'll be on Monster Den duty for a year if you're caught acting like a spoiled young mistress."

There were a few sad groans in the crowd. Someone raised her hand.

"What if we find someone really cute. Are we allowed to take them home. And... you know... tie them to our beds?"

There were nods of agreement all around and a few excited shouts.

I slapped my palm against my forehead. I guess these really were my kids.

“Yes, that’s allowed. Some of your older siblings will talk more about that after sundown,” Argona replied with a wink. “And don’t worry, there are plenty of volunteers in the city to choose from. I wouldn’t be surprised if a few of you brought home a True Mage eager to grovel at the feet of a member of the Hearthwood Clan, no matter how low-ranking. Why, there was one time—”

I made my hasty escape. The last thing I wanted to think about was my cute and innocent little crafter talking about her love life. I didn’t even know she had a love life. There were only two male elves in the city, and I’d been careful to make sure neither were the type my daughters would have any interest in.

But apparently none of my offspring were above a little girl time. And in such cases they took very strongly after their father in terms of how they liked to enjoy themselves.

No wonder there were so few layabouts in the Hearthwood. Those who didn’t want to work would find no shortage of positions as pet or plaything available to the many, many members of the city’s ruling clan.

I buried my head in the library for a bit as Argona’s introduction concluded.

I brushed up on what I wanted to say. After all, this would be my first introduction to this new generation of kids. I ended up writing up a quick little speech to say hello, inspire them to reach their full potential, and to warn them not to follow too closely in my footsteps on *every* subject.

It went down well, according to Mac. I arrived in a flash of light and magic, awing them all with my magical might. I talked, promised that I’d spend a little time with each of them one on one sooner or later, and then was on my way.

I had planned to have a word with Yavilla and Tavilla afterward about easing up a little on the egg-laying, but the two of them stared over the assembled crowd of their progeny

like the proud mothers they were. I would give them the bad news about birth control later. There would be plenty of time to expand the Hearthwood Clan again after the end of the Seventh Golden Age.

I needed to clear my head after the kinds of shocks I'd gone through, so I headed to the Sacred Grove. There was nothing quite like walking through a beautiful garden to clear the mind. So that was where I went.

The first thing I noticed was that the plants were far greener than before. It was like every leaf and blade of grass had been dipped in dark green paint.

I marveled at the change, though it wasn't until I found Aelina that I realized what caused it.

"The green hue to the leaves?" Aelina asked. "That would be the new fertilizer your friend, Master Ethan, brought to us. We distributed it around the grove per his instructions."

"...Already?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes. I analyzed it myself and it was up to standards." Aelina scooped up a handful of dirt to show me.

I knew little of nature magic, but this kind of nature magic in particular had a much higher earth zeal than working with plants did, so I had an easy time looking it over.

While I wasn't too experienced at examining dirt, I'd seen enough dirt to be able to spot an anomaly. Here, there was none. It was just like the Kun Peng dung included in the kit I'd received. A dense source of vitality to be consumed by the plants, fairies, and eventually the elves living in this Sacred Grove. The only odd question was where Ethan had gotten so much vitality-rich soil.

"It looks good to me as well," I replied after looking the rich soil over. I looked Aelina over with a serious gaze. "But tell me. You've met Ethan. What did you think of him?"

Aelina shrugged her shoulders shyly. "It isn't really my place to say... he's a Master, and I'm just..."

I shook my head. “I’m asking for your honest opinion, Aelina. I won’t be offended by what you say. Quite the opposite. I’ll be more offended if you refuse to answer.”

Somehow, my attempt at comfort only seemed to make Aelina more nervous.

“Well... he’s not the nicest man ever, nothing like you, sir. In most ways he’s the same as the Satyrs. Not as cruel, mind you. But just like them he sees us only as tools. I can tell by the look in his eyes. He didn’t even talk to us directly, just told the Librarian of Sacred Groves to explain what the fertilizer was to us.”

“Really?” That was a bit odd. When I was present, Ethan seemed perfectly fine speaking with the nearby elves. He even smiled at the various shopkeepers and bystanders who waved to me in the city as we walked. At most, he’d ignore them. But I’d never seen him dismiss them outright.

“Well... keep an eye on him. And for that matter, keep an eye on anyone else,” I leaned in and whispered. “To tell you the truth, I think I’m closing in on the Satyr King’s agents among your fellow elves. It’s just a matter of time...”

Aelina went stiff as a board. “Oh... is that so?”

I nodded sagely. “Yep. I just need to find someone I can trust to help me catch them.”

“A-and what will you do when you catch them?” Aelina stuttered. “Torture? Brutal execution? Send their broken soul back to the World of Woods and Wilds for their family to despair over, realizing she will never manifest again?” She grew paler and paler over her own words.

I laughed. “Man, maybe I should put you in charge of it. How’d you like that?” I shook my head. “No, I’ve always preferred the carrot over the stick. While the guilty will definitely be punished, I can forgive those who realize the error of their ways. After all, getting such a guilty elf to cooperate with me would certainly prove helpful in rounding up the others.”



“So... if one of the Satyr King’s agents surrendered herself to you, you’d spare her?”

I nodded. “More than spare her. I’d reward her. And promise that I’d do my best to help loosen any bonds the Satyr King still held over her. At the very least, I’d make sure she had enough wealth to live in comfort here in the Hearthwood.”

“And if you caught her without her confessing... you’d have to punish her?”

I shrugged. “I’m afraid so. And it wouldn’t be the fun kind of punishment.”

Aelina’s shoulders slumped. She took a deep breath, then finally met my gaze. An instant later, she dropped to her knees and pressed her forehead to the ground.

“Forgive me, Patriarch! I am one of the Satyr King’s agents!”

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-SEVEN**

Aelina confessed everything I suspected of her and a lot that I hadn't.

She'd been the one to plant the Entling, which I hadn't known. No wonder she'd been the first to notice it.

"Sir, Master, Patriarch, I know I have sinned..." Aelina groveled. "I am willing to pay with my life. Let me die and wash away my betrayal so that my next incarnation can be unburdened."

I shook my head and tilted her gaze up to meet mine. "Denied. You are far more useful to me as you are, Aelina. Now, tell me what hold the Satyr King has over you. He can't touch you on this world, you know."

"My clan," Aelina confessed, eyes to the ground. "We were loyal to the Fairy of the Immortal Glade. She is far more powerful than the fairies you know, but still just as playful and carefree. Her glade has always been more powerful than the Satyr King's Sacred Grove, but her non-combative and forgetful nature has always been our undoing. We were never able to launch a true strike at the age-old enemy because of it. Otherwise he would have been destroyed long ago. Still, the status quo persisted for more than a thousand years, with the Satyr King and his ancestors unable to break through the Immortal Fairy's passive defenses.

"But he finally found a weakness. He called to all the Ten Thousand Worlds and summoned up the greatest bakers in all the realms and had them bake the most delectable of sweets.

The Fairy of the Immortal Glade could not resist its temptation and left the safety of her realm for a bite of this pastry, and was swiftly captured. From there, my clan was conquered by the Satyrs.” She cast her to the ground and a tear trickled down her cheek.

“All except for me had their mortal bodies destroyed and were reduced to wisps. Such elves would be easier to control with scattered and broken memories. The Satyr King met with me personally though, and he promised he would return my clan members if I was successful in my mission of ruining your cultivation. Alas, thinking things through, I suspect the rest of my clan is already gone. Nor could I survive your wrath to see my descendants if I even partially succeeded.”

I shook my head. “Are you serious? The Fairy of the Immortal Glade, and Immortal Ascendant-level cultivator... was undone by a pastry?”

Aelina nodded, eyes still staring at the ground.

I let out a sigh. Maybe I’d landed on the wrong world. While I wouldn’t give up my beautiful elf lovers for anything, if I’d landed on the World of Woods and Wilds I’d be running the whole planet by now. Between the ease and luxury of Sacred Grove cultivation, the lack of competent human rivals, and the fact that the two most powerful beings on that world seemed like either a petulant teenager or an airhead fairy meant I’d have had no obstacles in my way between me and the Immortal Ascension ranks.

But there was little point in dreaming about what could have been when I could be facing the here and now. And now it was time to tighten the noose around the Satyr King’s agents and claim true mastery over this Sacred Grove. From there, perhaps I’d try to get The Wanderer to open up a room just for this. It had offered as much for Goldmongering magic, a type of spellcraft I still planned to pick up soon.

“So how many of the Sacred Grove workers are also working for the Satyr King?” I asked.

Aelina shrugged. “I only know five, but suspect there are more. Not all of the acts of sabotage were done by us. The five

I know were all meant to report to me. We are likely organized into cells so that if you were to catch someone like me, there would still be other agents left to cause trouble. I know the other true mages, and all of them have stories like mine. After our defeat at the hands of the Satyr King, our clans were destroyed and our families harvested to be used as workers across different Satyr Sacred Groves.”

I nodded, running my hands through my hair. “Tell me the names of the five you know of. I’d like to give them the same chance to come clean that I gave you. If they do so, I’ll go easy on them.”



With Aelina firmly in my pocket instead of the Satyr King’s, I began my work of uprooting his agents in earnest.

Of Aelina’s people, three of them caved as she did. That was more than I’d hoped for. My new Mind Magic spell, Aura of Domination, was already showing its usefulness. I imagined most of those I’d forced to admit their guilt would have continued to deny everything without it.

I sent everyone back to work, though the two who had refused to admit anything would have to be removed soon. That was alright though. With the influx of volunteers from my recent interviews, the Sacred Grove would have plenty of workers. The second round of interviews were less fun and more practical, but I finished them quickly and had replacement workers loyal to the Hearthwood quickly taking up jobs in the Sacred Grove.

After a few weeks of training, they’d know enough that I could encourage the original elves to take vacations and explore the Hearthwood. This would not only let the formerly captive elves take advantage of their newfound freedom, but it would also give their replacements the chance to root out corruption by identifying irregular behavior in whoever was doing their job before. It was a win-win.

After that bit of work was done, I returned to the ongoing new clan member orientation event still taking place at the castle. One little speech was hardly enough time to get to know all my new kids, after all.

“Mac, please keep a record of every one of my new kids. Find their likes and dislikes and build a shopping list for me. I want to have unique presents for our one-on-one meetings later,” I said.

[Already done,] Mac replied. [But are you certain you want to meet every one of your new children yourself? Even if we run through these meetings in a few minutes each, this is still going to take a week to get through them all.]

I shook my head. “A few minutes is hardly enough time to get to know a family member, Mac. Schedule at least an hour for each, plus a bit of time between meetings so it doesn’t feel like they’re waiting in line. Schedule some activities too. I would prefer the meetings be as natural as possible.”

[Correct my earlier estimate from a week to several months,] Mac replied.

On that timescale, by the time I got to know the last of my new daughters, the first of them would have changed and grown enough that I’d need to meet her again. But that wasn’t so bad a fate. Making spending time with my family a full-time job sounded like a brilliant retirement plan for me, now that the Hearthwood Clan could run itself.

Between that, my recent progress on the Sacred Groves, and all the work I’d done with dual cultivation, the future was looking bright.



I strolled into the same coffee shop I often went to with Tivana, though this time my company was not nearly so fun. I was with Ethan, and figured I had to give the envoy from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye some of my time to keep relations between our factions peaceful.

The warm, welcoming smell of freshly ground beans flooded my nose, and the dim cozy magical lighting flickered off polished wooden surfaces. The quiet hum of conversations continued unabated, mostly thanks to my Unnoticeability bubble surrounding me and Ethan.

“Not a bad spell,” Ethan remarked as he studied the bubble. “It would certainly help people like us get around without trouble if we wanted to be unbothered.”

“That’s why I invented it.” I shrugged.

“Still, I could suggest an improvement or two, if you don’t mind. I suspect it will be hard to catch a waitress’s attention with it activated as it is.” Ethan waved his hand and restructured the mind zeal surrounding the two of us. The effect of my spell changed from manipulating the minds of all those around us to ignore us, to instead manipulating their minds to see us as a pair of unremarkable elf women.

It was a bit more invasive than my spell, but I had to begrudgingly admit that it was well crafted. I memorized the zeal patterns for later. It wasn’t often that I got spellcraft instruction from a demigod in their field of expertise.

And like it or not, Ethan was an expert on Mind Magic from the premier organization dedicated to the mastery of Mind Magic in the entire world. Their mastery over the subject was so absolute that they had mind controlled most of the populace into believing that mind magic didn’t exist.

With the modified spell well in hand, the two of us were soon seated and given drinks.

Ethan lifted his cup, eyes widening slightly as he took his first sip. “This is... remarkable. Our own Cult’s attempts haven’t quite captured this flavor.”

The compliment caught me off guard, but I flashed him an honest smile. Good coffee was something to be proud of. Recreating the comforts of home was something every former resident of Earth strived for in this new world, though few had been able to go as far as I had thanks to the abilities of The Wanderer.

While Ethan no doubt knew of The Wanderer from reports, I wasn't about to reveal any of its capabilities if I could help it. That magic ship was my greatest asset, after all.

"My nature cultivators have been tireless," I replied, tasting my own coffee and delighting in the familiar flavors of caramel and chocolate. They'd gotten my favorite flavor right. "They've been trying to replicate my favorite blends from back home. I still think there's a ways to go, but the success so far speaks for itself."

Ethan's eyes glimmered with genuine interest. "Your elves appear significantly more industrious than what I'm accustomed to. I wonder if our Cult could benefit from your particular approach to leadership."

"Perhaps," I agreed, leaning back in my chair and savoring the feeling of triumph that bubbled within me. A victory was a victory, no matter how small. "All one can do is hope."

Despite the easy conversation, a part of me remained wary of Ethan. His demeanor was friendly enough, but the caution born out of leadership and the memories of what Tim, his fellow cult member, had done were still bright in my mind. It would take a lot more than some coffee to let the history between me and the cult be bygones.

Still, things were going well. Exactly as planned, in fact. My agents were rooting out the Cult of the Unblinking Eye's influence. My Sacred Grove was growing. I was approaching the Demigod realm in not one but all four forms of my cultivation, and the Hearthwood was healthy and whole. As soon as I got the end of the Seventh Golden Age off my back, I would be a happy man ready for a life of family and bliss.

At this rate, I couldn't think of anything that could go wrong.

Suddenly, the tranquil atmosphere of the café was violently shattered. A forceful presence, heavy and oppressive, rapidly filled Hearthwood. Ethan and I, caught off guard, instantly abandoned our seats and darted to the window. My eyes widened as I saw a colossal tear rending the fabric of space itself, belching out grotesque monstrosities with each pulse.

“Damn it all,” I hissed, balling my hands into fists. I recognized that tear, and I could see the powerful monsters lurking just beyond it. The Devilbeast Wilds were opening up again to spill monsters all over the streets of the Hearthwood. My peaceful day had suddenly taken a dark, monstrous turn.



CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-EIGHT**

The coffee shop erupted into chaos. Panic-stricken elves screamed and darted about, their coffee cups knocked over and forgotten. I quickly dropped the modified Unnoticeability spell shrouding Ethan and me, and my power filled the room, gripping every panicked elf.

I opened my mouth to speak words of reassurance and calm the populace when Ethan cast his own spell. He extended his hand, and a wave of Mind zeal washed over the room. One by one, the panicked elves fell asleep where they stood.

“This will be faster than trying to calm them down,” Ethan explained. “Are trans-dimensional monster incursions of this magnitude common around here?”

I grimaced, turning from the sleeping elves. “Unfortunately, yes.”

Ethan and I exited through the nearest window, not bothering with the door. On my way out, I tossed a handful of Macmarks on the counter. I wasn’t about to dine and dash, even with everyone else in the establishment knocked out by a sleeping spell. I overpaid by several times since many others would probably forget about something as small as their bill after an attack like this.

This was a good coffee shop. I didn’t want them to go under just because a rift leading to a pocket dimension filled with enormous killer monsters opened up next door.

Outside, the situation was already dire. This rift was larger than before, likely because I’d opened all but one nexus and

weakened our connection to the Devilbeast Wilds almost to its breaking point. I hadn't opened the final nexus because I didn't want monsters spilling out into the Hearthwood, just like what was happening now.

The streets would soon be overwhelmed by a horde of monstrous beings of various sizes and species. This rift was bigger than last time, letting bigger things through accordingly.

First, there were a few canine monstrosities wreathed in flickering flame. Each was the size of a wagon, and their eyes shone with feral intelligence. I scanned them as they appeared.

### **Scaled Hellhounds (Mid True Mage, Level 25)**

- **These ferocious beasts are savvy group hunters who access with fire magic and are capable of casting spells such as fireball and fire whip. They prefer to toy with their prey, making their hunts quite sadistic. They are vulnerable to users of water magic, and if their flames are completely extinguished, they die.**

Next were a few hulking humanoid giants already stomping through the streets. They were covered in rock-hard skin and looked like they'd be tough to put down. Each of them wielded a tree trunk in one of their brutish hands.

Most were well worn and seemed like they'd seen heavy use. Between their six-story height and the tree trunk clubs, I had no doubt they could smash down half the Hearthwood if given the chance. They would need to be put down even sooner than the Hellhounds if I wanted to keep casualties to a minimum.

### **Stoneshell Trolls (Early Wizard, Level 32)**

- **Towering over the average sapient, Stoneshell Trolls are renowned for their formidable physical strength and rock-like skin, which can easily deflect most physical attacks. Coupled with their**

**ability to manipulate earth zeal, they can summon stone spikes from the ground and create barriers for defense. Despite their sturdy exteriors, they possess a significant vulnerability. Due to their dependence on the earth element, they struggle against wind or poison magic users. Sufficiently powerful gusts or vacuum-based attacks can disrupt their balance, and poison can negate their powerful regeneration, making them easier targets.**

But last was the greatest threat. Not one, but three Sorcerer-realm beings had emerged from the rift. They looked downright puny between the Hellhounds and Trolls, but their aura made it clear that they were the most dangerous of all. They looked like ordinary elves covered in ragged robes that hung draped over their heads and shoulders. But I knew better.

Within the robes, I could see pale and desiccated faces like old corpses caught midway through rotting away. Their empty eye sockets glowed with eerie luminescence as their gazes swept over the streets of the Hearthwood.

#### **Soul Eaters (Late Sorcerer, Level 48)**

- **The Soul Eaters are spectral entities that thrive on absorbing life energies from their victims. They are created from malformed death-aspect wisps and permanently destroy any elven wisp they encounter. Most powerful elves are reluctant to fight Soul Eaters, as to lose to one means true death.**
- **Despite their ethereal forms, they can manipulate dark magic to launch powerful energy bolts or create shields. Their most horrifying ability is their life-draining touch. Anyone coming into contact with them risks having their vitality siphoned away. However, they have a glaring weakness. Soul Eaters are highly susceptible to sunlight zeal. If exposed to concentrated light, their form wavers and attacks lose potency.**

**Powerful sunlight zeal can even dissipate them completely.**

“Mac! Call my Matriarchs!” I shouted. Korra could probably do a number on those trolls. Assyus could probably take care of all the Hellhounds on her own as well. And though Nela wasn’t yet a sorcerer and would have trouble against these Soul Eaters, she could provide some much-needed backup.

“I suppose I should lend a hand at a time like this,” Ethan said, dusting his shirt off and turning to the Hellhounds. “Down, pup.”

Mind magic flooded out of him, as well as something... else. I couldn’t quite place what it was, but it was much like the concepts of Gravity and Identity.

I’d already touched upon such ideas myself, and from my understanding, such ideas were the path to Demigod-hood. I wasn’t surprised to discover Ethan possessed something similar.

The nearest three Hellhounds came to an abrupt and sudden stop. They stood in the middle of the street, faces blank and dazed as they stared straight ahead. Their eyes were vacant, and their expressions were blank. Their minds were far away, assuming anything remained of their minds at all after whatever Ethan did.

“Any chance you could do that on those Soul Eaters?” I asked hopefully.

Ethan grimaced. “Afraid not. I might be able to slow down the trolls, though.”

“Here I thought you were a demigod...”

Ethan sighed. “I suppose I should point out that mind magic is not exactly an aspect suited for direct physical combat. You’ll have to hold the frontlines. I will provide what assistance I can to you and your elven allies.”

“Just watch my back,” I said, rushing ahead.

“Mac! If you can hear me, tell Argona to activate Dean’s Orb!” When Dean had locked up the Devilbeast Wilds, he’d forged a steel orb with enough Soul Fragments to drain their power. The orb had proved very useful to me back in my day, and I intended to use it to finish off the Devilbeast Wilds’ monsters. Only those monsters had come for me before I was fully ready for it.

I no longer needed the raw zeal to progress, but that wasn’t true of Argona. Perhaps she could make something of this attack.

I was first on the scene, which meant it was up to me to hold the line until everyone else could arrive. While I was pretty sure I could handle any one of these foes one-on-one, fighting all of them at once was going to take heavy-duty spells.

I decided that it was better to lose a few buildings now than a lot of buildings later, so I whipped out my Late-Sorcerer Earth magic right away.

The ground trembled in all directions as great obelisks of stone rose up in a circle around the invaders. They cut right through the nearby buildings, forming a cage around the rift. One of the trolls smashed his tree-trunk club into the rising stone pillars, only for his attack to bounce right off.

Behind the pillar, the windows to the nearest storefront shattered from the force of the blow.

“You’ll have to do better than that, troll! Those Stone Obelisks are full to the brim with earth zeal!” I shouted at the monster.

I received no response. These creatures seemed to be far dumber than the Shadowblade Beast had been at their level.

Unfortunately, the trolls were the least of my worries. The obelisk cage would hold them for a time, but those Soul Eaters were the real threat. I just hoped the cage would hold long enough for my companions to arrive. Otherwise, we were going to start losing parts of the city.

As I feared, the three Soul Eaters phased right through the obelisks and came out the other side like ghosts. Earth magic would be useless against them. A normal Earth-aspect Sorcerer would be forced to run away in face of a threat like these Soul Eaters. Fortunately, I wasn't nearly so limited.

“Minerva, can you do anything against these guys?”

[Now that I am at the Sorcerer realm too, I have a few tricks. My Death Touch should compete with theirs. If nothing else, they will not be able to drain you so long as I am here. I wouldn't want to wrangle with all three at once, though. I might be able to raise some ghostly undead that can attack them directly.]

“Do it. And it looks like I'm going to have to do this the rough and tumble way.” I cracked my knuckles while Minerva summoned a pair of wizard-realm ghosts. Each had a build and stature surprisingly similar to mine, looking tall and well-muscled compared to their stronger foes. They curled their ghostly hands into fists and charged alongside me.

I'd never seen ghostly bruisers before. Normally their kind of undead was more of the spellcaster, summoner, or draining variety. It was a bit weird to see something without physical form hit like a ton of bricks, but the ghosts Minerva created seemed to pack quite a punch.

Unfortunately, so did the Soul Eaters, and soon the two wizards were in a losing grapple with their foes.

They wouldn't last long since they were a full realm weaker than the monsters they were up against. But all I needed was a few moments to deal with my foe before turning to help them. I may have only been a sorcerer, but I was a four-fold sorcerer. In a way, I kind of outnumbered these Soul Eaters four to three.

The last of the Soul Eaters came for me, and I met it in a grapple without fear. Its touch was like ice, and I felt zeal draining away from me. But the flow came to an abrupt stop when Minerva started draining the Soul Eater just as it was draining me.

Worse, the little it had drained from me seemed to be interacting badly with the Soul Eater's internal biology. The vitality-rich essence of a human had been enough to fry a vampire from the inside, so I wasn't surprised to discover this undead also had problems with it too. I was tempted to ask Minerva to let up with her spell so more of my vitality could pour into the Soul Eater, but I preferred to give away my essence on my own terms.

I spat on the Soul Eater. My saliva splattered across its ghostly face and melted away its phantom form like lava pouring down a glacier. Its body hissed and turned to steam, burning as the lights that illuminated its empty eye sockets started going dim. It let go of me to clutch at its face.

"Not so fast!" I grabbed its face. It phased through my hand at first but then came to a stop when it pressed up against my World Titan Fiendbody. While it could pass through flesh just fine, it couldn't pass through the dense network of energy empowering my body just beneath my skin. I grabbed the ghost between my hands and squeezed. I felt resistance as it screeched and clawed at my hands, and I sensed I was dealing real damage to it.

I'd become pretty well versed in what it felt like to crack a skull between my fingers, so I knew when I felt something break. The ghost's body shattered into a million pieces, and I was about to celebrate when those pieces reformed nearby.

"Oh, come on!" I groaned, but then I noticed the ghost I was faced with was noticeably weaker than it had been before. If it had been a late sorcerer before, now it was just a mid sorcerer. "Well, if crushing you once didn't do it, I'll just have to go at it again!"

I raced forward, not noticing until the last moment that the reforming ghost was an illusion. Without the recent boost to my passive mental enhancements like Quicksilver Thought, I would have snatched nothing but air. But my reaction time had grown with the rest of my magic, and now I caught the faint flicker of zeal that told me I was looking at nothing more than an illusion of woven shadows.

The true Soul Eater was... there!

I abruptly shifted my footing and twisted, grabbing at the being's real form and ignoring the illusion. It screeched and tried to drain me again, clearly having not learned its lesson from last time. I grabbed its head and squeezed once more, crushing it into the death zeal it was made from.

It died and reformed again, a bit weaker than before, and I raced after it. This time I didn't bother grabbing it. I just kicked it like hitting a soccer ball, and its head exploded on contact. I felt energy being drained from them as well from some place far distant, which was good. It meant Argona had gotten to Dean's Orb and was pulling zeal out of these monsters.

The Soul Eater was getting weaker too. It dropped from the Sorcerer realm to the Wizard realm, and its descent was likely to speed up if I continued fighting it. But whatever Ethan was doing to reinforce Minerva's ghosts while helping deal with the other monsters wasn't enough.

One of Minerva's ghosts went down, freeing a Soul Eater to pile on the remaining ghost and make short work of him. I had to shift targets, but that meant this wizard-realm Soul Eater would be free to wreak havoc across the Hearthwood.

Only a few seconds had passed since the battle began, but my Matriarchs had to have heard from Mac by now. Where were they?

The moment I had that thought, a beam of golden light shot through the air and slammed into the Wizard-realm Soul Eater. I recognized that spell, the Sunfire Lance. It was a specialty of the Songstone clan. This beam was a bit weaker than her usual, but broken and battered as the Soul Eater was, it was enough to put it on its last legs.

"Nela, my dear, I'll have to reward you tonight! Now—" I turned, but it wasn't Nela hovering in the sky overhead. It was my daughter, Comela. She was panting and exhausted. That blast had taken a lot out of her. I was surprised she could even muster that kind of power since a weak Sunfire Lance from



Nela should have been impossible for someone of Comela's level. And yet she'd managed it all the same.

"Sorry, Dad..." Comela panted. "Mom's in the orchard. It'll take a while for her to get back. You'll have to make do with me."

I cursed. Comela? What was she doing here?

"Stay behind me!" I warned. "These aren't the kind of foes you're supposed to be fighting."

I was tempted to send Comela away completely. After all, she was only a True Mage. She shouldn't have been anywhere near a fight between Sorcerers. And yet she'd been first on the scene anyway. And there was no denying that her Sunlight Zeal was particularly effective against these things.

"Fly back and put some distance between you and them!" I pointed in the direction of the Level-Reducing Sentry towers. Standing there, Comela would be safe. These Soul Eaters seemed to be limited to strictly melee attacks, so if they came close enough to hit Comela, Mac would blast them enough times from the towers that she'd be able to take them down on her own.

I jumped on top of the remaining two Soul Eaters before they could escape, grabbing both of them at the same time. They struggled in my grip, but my arms were like steel as I bashed both their heads together, destroying them just like the first.

They tried to reform again, though wrangling both at once would be harder. That was where Ethan finally came in. I sensed his Mind Magic at work as he conjured two separate illusions of me. The two Soul Eaters ran from the illusions, not realizing the real me had gone unnoticed until the last moment when I grabbed the two of them over again.

"Missed me that much, did you?" I chuckled as I slammed both their heads together again.

That was when everybody else started arriving. My messages through Mac had gotten through. Tivana appeared in a flash of spatial magic. When one of the remaining Soul

Eaters appeared, it found itself locked in a circle of twisted space. That was something too powerful to escape, no matter its phasing abilities.

I flashed Tivana a smile. “That’s a new one!”

She flashed me a smile in return. No doubt this was a spell she’d been working hard on mastering as of late.

From there, more of my matriarchs started showing up one after another. The battle was over in moments. Assyru took down the Hellhounds before they could escape my cage, blasting them with water zeal until they gasped their last breaths. Korra and Eltiana teamed up to deal with the trolls. Everyone else was on cleanup and support. Nela arrived in time to see her daughter helping me dispatch the last of the Soul Eaters with a Sunfire Lance. She collapsed to her knees right after, exhausted and panting. Argona, meanwhile, had sucked all the zeal she’d drained into her latest project.

I had no idea what that project was, but whatever it was would hold an enchantment like no other. Draining this many monsters was a tremendous feat.

All in all, we’d weathered the attack quite well, which was a far cry from the last monster outbreak. That had taken us hours to clear up completely, and a big chunk of the Hearthwood had been wrecked. Now, there was hardly any damage at all. It was a testament to how far I and my women had grown.

“How are things looking, Mac?” I asked.

[Minimal damage. We lost a few buildings, and two of the Level-Reducing Sentry Towers were toppled, but nothing that can’t be fixed with a day or two of effort.] Mac replied.

“Good. Get those repairs started. Those Level-Reducing Sentry Towers are important. Even if only two of them are down, I want them fixed.”

[Points allocated. Repairs are underway.]

“Congratulations, one and all,” I said, scanning the small celebratory group. Mac was calming down the townsfolk, and Ethan was waking up all the elves he’d put to sleep to stop a

panic. For a Demigod, he'd done surprisingly little, but at least he'd been there. I was probably just spoiled with Dean battering down our enemies with reckless abandon or with Sam literally resurrecting the dead.

Speaking of Dean, he arrived just as we finished the fight with a beer in one hand and his axe in the other.

"I'm here! I'm here!" Dean tilted his mug up, drained everything left in it, then tossed it aside as he prepared for battle. "Sorry. Got caught up in a poker game. You know, these ladies here in the Hearthwood aren't very good. I keep winning every hand!" Dean laughed and waved his axe about, scanning for monsters only to find them all already dead. "Aww, man. I missed the fight?"

I placed a hand on Dean's shoulder. "It's the thought that counts. But my matriarchs were able to handle this one. Also, there's a fine for littering in the Hearthwood."

Dean shrugged and picked up his discarded mug. "Okay. Hey, I think I recognize some of those guys. Weren't they in that pocket world I sealed up? Man, that was a ball-buster of a project. There's stuff in there even I didn't want to fight. So I just ran a big circle around the Devilbeast Wilds, used that fancy orb to collect as many soul fragments as I could, and then tucked it all away."

I glanced at the rift in space. It was slowly starting to close, but there were still things eyeing us from the other side.

"We'll need to clean it out sooner or later..." I muttered. "I have no intention of dealing with incursions like this on a permanent basis. Your pocket dimension is starting to fail."

Dean hefted his axe over his shoulder, but he was squinting at the rift before us. "Damn. that's a big gash. Clean one too. You're right, my pocket dimension is failing, but this wasn't a natural tear. Something made that gash with a blade."

I followed Dean's pointed finger. Tivana nodded along. "You are right, ancestor. That isn't a natural rift. It was cut open from the other side by something powerful."

"One of the Soul Eaters?" I asked.

Both the spatial cultivators shook their heads.

“No blades on them. And even if they had them, they’d be too weak for a blow like this. It’d take someone with demigod-level body cultivation,” Dean explained as he flexed his biceps. “I could do it. Don’t know many others who could outside the World of Struggle and Strife, though.”

“Hmm...” I ran my hand through my hair, thinking. Perhaps I needed to cut an early end to the celebrations. My matriarchs all looked terribly happy, though, so it was... “Wait a moment. Where’s Sava?”

I scanned my group. Yorik, Melise, Illiel, Assyus, Eltiana, Nela, Tivana, and Korra were all there. But where was Sava?

A bad feeling crept up my spine.

“Mac! Where’s Sava?” I asked.

[She isn’t with you?] Mac seemed confused. [Last scan, she was headed in your direction to help with the monster attack. Oh dear, I just used the scanner again, and I’m not picking her up anywhere in the Hearthwood!]

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-NINE**

I raced to Sava's last known location, somewhere between the Alchemist's Laboratory and where I called for my matriarchs to rally and defeat these monsters. I found exactly what I expected waiting for me there. And precisely what I feared.

There was a rift in space slowly sealing itself. This one was far smaller, and no monsters spilled from it. It was cut just as smoothly as the big gash, clearly made by the same hand.

"The first attack was just a distraction..." I muttered. My fingers drummed against Spell Eater's shaft with one hand, and the other balled into a fist tight enough to turn coal into diamonds.

"Well, shit..." Dean said as he arrived and saw the rift slowly sealing itself. "Well, we should dive in after her, huh?"

"You coming?" I asked. Having Dean as a backup would be perfect. He could handle himself in a scrap, and I trusted him to have my back.

"Of course, buddy. Nobody kidnaps my friend's baby mamma while under my watch!" Dean thrust his axe in the air.

Tivana, Eltiana, Assyus, Melise, Yorik, Illiel, and Nela arrived soon after, each with looks of grim determination that matched my own and Dean's. They were all coming with me.

"Sava would do the same for us. Let's go." Tivana gazed at the rift with firm determination.

“And don’t forget me!” Ethan said, landing just behind us. “I’m here to help, don’t worry.”

My eyebrows rose. “You’re coming with us?”

“Sure.” Ethan shrugged. “I’m here to help. But who do you think stole your elf? We shouldn’t go in blind.”

I grimaced. “The Satyr King, or one of his agents, most likely. They must have cut a hole in the Devilbeast Wilds somewhere outside the Hearthwood, traveled within it, and then prepared this plan all to capture my Sava.”

But Ethan looked skeptical. “I don’t think so. I know the locations of every Satyr Demigod in the World of Sanctuary and Serenity, and not one of them is in a position to pull off something like this. I heard you figured out how much trouble pocket worlds give them.”

I ran my hand through my hair. “I don’t see who else it could be.”

*Unless...*

No, it couldn’t be. Could it?

There was only one entity in the Devilbeast Wilds with the raw power and the cunning to pull off an attack like this one. My evil robotic twin.

But it couldn’t be. Why would he be after Sava? The Satyr King wanted him, but that golem of flesh, magic, and a small lost chunk of my soul seemed to want nothing to do with flesh and blood beings. Hell, I’d seen his full metallic body.

He didn’t even have the physical assets to use a beautiful woman of any sort properly. Nor did I think he had the interest, being more machine than man. So what exactly did he want with Sava?

But while I thought, my hands made their way to the rift to tear it wider. There would be time to debate and wonder later. Now he had a rescue mission to embark on, and the faster we did so, the better our chance was of rescuing Sava quickly.



I shrugged off the anxiety gripping my heart and plunged into the rift. My comrades followed close behind me, leaving the Hearthwood in the dust. The rift started shrinking again as soon as we were through, but I knew with the power we carried could cut our own exit open at any time. We were only entering the rift where we were because we wanted to follow the tracks of the one who made the rift and took Sava.

As soon as we entered the Devilbeast Wilds, it was as if we'd been plunged into a world of twilight. The sky was shrouded with dark clouds, and skeletal trees towered over us. They were just as large as their kin back in the Hearthwood, but these were dead and decayed after decades or centuries without sunlight.

After Dean sealed the pocket world, everything that had once been in the Devilbeast Wilds started eating itself. This forest must have been teeming with life back in its day, some hostile, some not. In some ways, it was a shame to see so much death, but at the same time, I knew that if Dean hadn't sealed the area, monsters would have come pouring out across Deania every few years in search of tasty elves.

And that wasn't even mentioning the fact that I'd been sleeping blissfully unaware in *The Wanderer*, stuck in the middle of this deadly forest. Had he not sealed away the deadliest monsters, I probably wouldn't have lasted long enough to meet Sava and my matriarchs.

The zeal in the air here was thinner than I expected. This place and the Hearthwood had switched in that respect as I opened Dean's nexus seals. I doubted the deadly monsters within could survive in such harsh conditions for long, and truth be told, I had been hoping to starve most of them out rather than need to clear this place out the hard way.

But this was how that ended for me. Sometimes avoiding problems just led to bigger problems, like the one I faced now.

“Look, there.” I pointed to the mud before us. Amidst the gloom, there was a path. The trail was clear to follow, and no effort had been made to hide the prints, though I knew such a thing could be done by even the weakest of earth cultivators.

I crouched down to examine the prints on the ground, frowning my brows as I looked at them. These weren't the telltale hooves of Satyrs. It looked like the booted foot of a human. In fact, based on the length of the stride and the style of the boot, I might have thought they were left by me.

It seemed my robotic twin really was involved in this. I didn't see Sava's prints, but that probably meant he was carrying her. There were no other marks on the ground.

“So it really was him...” I muttered under my breath.

“This evil adamantium clone of yours was the attacker?” Tivana asked.

I nodded. “Seems like. Get ready for another tough fight. He went this way,” I said as I followed the trail.

The gloomy wasteland of the Devilbeast Wilds seemed... tamer than it should have been. The path we were following was straight and orderly. Not as good as the streets of the Hearthwood, but better than any wilderness path had any right to be.

No monsters came to attack us. When I'd peered in on the Devilbeast Wilds before, it had been full to the brim with deadly foes. Now the area seemed quiet and empty.

“What's going on here?” Ethan muttered. He kicked at a gnarled stump. It was sliced clean on the top. It looked like it had been cut with a saw, and it wasn't the only one. Many of the other dead trees had been harvested in much the same way. Few monsters could make such a clean cut, and none would do so except by happenstance. Only an intelligent race like humans or elves would clear timberland like this.

Shortly after that, we encountered the bodies of fallen beasts. I recognized the largest of them, a Sky-Touching Kilobeast, in its juvenile form. It lay dead on the ground, surrounded by the bodies of lesser monsters. At full power, the



Sky-Touching Kilobeast would have been a Demigod-level threat.

Most of the bodies around it would have been at the Sorcerer or Wizard realms. Something very powerful had taken down these monsters. And from the laser burns tracing the Sky-Touching Kilobeast's hide, I was pretty sure my robotic twin was to blame.

"Your twin's been busy," Dean murmured, his gaze grim as he examined the fallen monsters. "Looks like I'm going to get a proper fight after all..."

"You're going to have to get to him before me." I flashed him a determined smile. I wasn't sure how strong my robot twin had gotten, but he couldn't have cultivated faster than I had with how hard I'd been working. And even if he had kept up with me, I brought enough firepower to flatten a country at my back. If my robot twin knew what was good for him, he'd hand Sava right over and apologize for the trouble he'd caused. Otherwise, we were about to turn him into scrap metal.

As we crossed the horizon, standing trees became scarce, granting us a clear view of what lay just over the hill. From a distance and shrouded by dead branches, I'd mistaken it for a mountain or a cliff face. But now it was clear to see.

There was a large castle of black stone looming on the horizon. I grimaced. Of course. Apparently, my evil twin had taken my edgier tastes with him when the two of us separated.

Dean turned with a grin and raised an eyebrow.

"Not a word," I warned him.

"Not hiding, at least." Yorik shrugged.

The black castle looked even bigger up close. I was impressed by the sheer scale of the thing. Castle Mac was bigger, but not by much. But building that had required the aid of a friendly dungeon core. My robotic twin must have constructed this entire thing by hand.

The defenses also seemed impenetrable unless wizards or higher were brought into the equation. A group of mage

acolytes could hold a fortress like this against an army ten times their number.

The battlements were high and sturdy, and the towers were higher and sturdier still. The slits and murder holes lining the walls would mean certain death for any attacker without the spells or raw power to shield themselves.

But the castle was eerily quiet. There wasn't a sound to be heard anywhere, as expected of a barren place like the Devilbeast Wilds. There were no elves to guard this castle.

I couldn't help but wonder why my twin would even bother building it. What was the point of all this?

It wasn't like he had a family or followers to defend like I did. That was why I had constructed Castle Mac. As a being that was basically an intelligent golem, he would have been fine with a hole in the ground. Heck, considering his true form was that of an earth elemental energy matrix surrounding a tiny severed part of my soul, he should have been fine just sinking right into the ground and merging with the earth.

Earth elementals were usually content to do just that for decades, which was their natural state. Why build a black castle on a hill overlooking a barren wasteland like a forgotten tyrant from myth and legend?

I stepped up to the door. It was made of iron, already turning to rust in the harsh weather. The elves among us took a step back, but all were at high enough cultivation levels to shrug off the iron's adverse effects.

Dean, Ethan, and I were all unaffected. Tivana also had more resistance than most, thanks to her human heritage, so we took the lead.

I stood in front and shoved the doors open. They creaked and groaned as they opened wide, but they were not locked or barred from the inside.

The sound of the groaning metal hinges made the elves wince, but they followed me inside anyway. Beyond the doorway was a grand hallway, much like a throne room.

Torches lined the walls, burning with steady magical fire that did little to pierce the shadowy gloom.

To either side of the grand hallway stood two enormous statues, each on their knees with looks of fear in their eyes. I recognized the faces. One was Sharian, though she had the dress and look she'd had when she commanded the Corpse Collector Company.

The other was Kysalian, her bodyguard. She looked as she had at true mage when she'd nearly killed me.

Both elves had pressed me to the edge of life and death, and my battles with them were some of the toughest fights I'd ever had. But I'd overcome them both, and now the two pledged loyalty to me.

My evil twin must have considered victory over them a core memory to have carved statues of them as they were. There was something oddly familiar about the statues' eyes, though. The glittering gemstones within closely resembled something I knew I'd seen before.

I might have pieced it together after more investigation, but there was someone far more important in the center of the room, drawing my attention away. She rested atop a few pillows, asleep and with her arms crossed, but otherwise none the worse for wear. The table she lay on top of was made of crystal and looked like it had been grown from the stone floor beneath it relatively recently.

Behind her stood a statue carved of emerald and in her exact figure. It stood frozen with eyes closed in quiet serenity as she held her hands over the real flesh and blood copy of herself below.

Sava's hot breath fogged the crystal above her, and my pounding heart steadied when I saw she was alright. The others rushed up close behind me and joined me by Sava's side.

"Looks like she's fine," Ethan said. "Someone used a sleep spell on her, but nothing that can't be lifted with a few moments of concentration. Shall I?"

I held up a hand. This couldn't be all we were here for.

“Quit lurking in the shadows!” I shouted into the empty gloom. “I know you're out there. Come on out!”

Ethan looked around and shrugged. “This robot twin you keep talking about isn't here. I imagine he fled the moment he sensed two Demigods in this party. Let's just grab your girl and—”

Ethan's voice cut off abruptly as a scythe-like blade swept through the shadows behind him. His eyes widened right before the blow made contact, and his Demigod senses screamed danger at him.

His figure vanished and disintegrated into an illusion, revealing the real Ethan two paces away. He'd tried to evade the surprise attack through mind magic all too similar to a technique I used myself. But because I had used such a trick myself, my evil twin knew to expect it and had compensated accordingly.

Ethan's throat was firmly in the grip of an arm that was all too similar to my own.

CHAPTER  
**FORTY**

The looming figure gripping Ethan by the throat was a few fingers taller than myself, but wrought of earth and metal instead of flesh and bone. He was no longer a bare adamantium skeleton. Instead, he now bore a remarkable semblance to me.

He had skin of clay and bronze, looking much as I would after a few weeks of steady sunlight. I sensed quicksilver flowing just beneath the surface like blood through veins, and heard the slow clink of gears and pistons beneath his flesh. The shape of his arms and back was similar to my own broad shoulders and the trace of my spine, though he seemed to have taken a few liberties and made himself half a hand taller.

But the face was the same, of that there was no doubt. Looking across Sava's glass coffin at him, I saw my own reflection from the line of his jaw to the tilt of his brows.

The only difference between the two of us was the eyes. They stared at Ethan with cold dispassion. He saw the man in his grip as nothing more than an obstacle to be overcome. One more enemy whose body he would step over on the path to victory.

It reminded me of those darker days when the Hearthwood was under siege. I had looked like that when times grew truly desperate. I hadn't been like that for a long time, though.

Not since I was ambushed in the Auqualian Isles. The same ambush that led me to dig too deep and call upon the

power of the Earth to detonate the volcano beneath the island and claim victory despite the long odds.

That was the same battle that created this robotic replica of myself. He was the imprint I'd left in the earth when I tore myself free of my own magic that had merged with it.

Had he been living in that desperate state all this time? Nearly a year on the edge of life and death? Existing to fight and win and nothing more?

A shiver ran through me at the thought. I knew what dark deeds my thoughts could sink to when I was truly desperate. And when I felt my darker half's cultivation, I knew some of those thoughts had been realized in him.

His name had changed again in the eyes of The Wanderer, but I was more focused on his level.

### **Soulshard of Theo, Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan (Early Demigod, Level 52)**

Despite all my best efforts and tireless dual cultivation, he'd beaten me to a demigod. And I was pretty sure I knew how he did it if this barren wasteland and the mountains of dead monsters outside were anything to go by.

He'd put Dean's trick to full effect, ruthlessly siphoning power from the nearby monsters to fuel his cultivation, then pushing himself into life-and-death battles whenever he was on the edge. There was certainly enough steel in his body to siphon away zeal. The constant desperate need fueled breakthroughs far faster than hard work, like what I was doing.

It wasn't exactly safe, which was why I shifted priorities. People who cultivated like my twin were like raging explosions that burned brightly, but all at once. On the other hand, I intended to stick around for a long time, so I aimed to be more like a steady and never-ending flame. Only now, the explosion before me had eclipsed me in radiance.

I grit my teeth. This might be a tough fight, but surely my doppelganger knew he was outmatched? There were two Demigods here, not to mention five Sorcerers and more than that in Wizards. He was screwed. He had to know that.

So why did he look so confident?

Dean, Tivana, and I all rushed forward and attacked as one. And of all people, we were rushing to save Ethan.

I expected my doppelganger to view Dean as the largest threat, but instead, his eyes turned to me. He whirled with Ethan, clenched in his unyielding claws, and thrust Ethan between the two of us.

Spell Eater was already in my hands, and I didn't stop my thrust. Its tip pierced Ethan's stomach before glancing off the bronze plates of my doppelganger's abdomen.

My cut left a deep groove in the metal, but enchantments lining the bronze lit up individually, each as fine as anything Argona and I made in the Hearthwood.

"Bad move!" I grinned as I activated Spell Eater's ability to siphon away zeal.

But my doppelganger grinned back at me. "No."

My grin dropped as I heard him speak. He could speak? When had that happened?

He wrapped his hand around Spell Eater, just behind the head. Then he accessed the same enchantments I was drawing on and sucked his lost zeal right back into himself. Then, he pulled.

Dean and I had challenged one another to lift a mountain once. He could do it, and I was getting there.

But this?

This was more than strength. It was an idea of strength that could not be denied or resisted, like an inexorable power. Not even other Demigods had made me feel like this.

There was only one thing this could be. A concept. I had pursued Identity with fervent desire. And then later added some aspects of Gravity to my repertoire.

My doppelganger had done the same for Strength. It was as core to his being as my magic was to me. This was the idea

of Strength made manifest in the world, and even the World Titan Fiendbody could not match it.

Spell Eater slipped from my grasp, stolen from my hands. My doppelganger twirled it in his grip and twisted it to meet Dean's axe with Spell Eater's edge. He tossed Ethan at Tivana, sending them both flying toward the far wall.

Dean met my doppelganger's attack with a grin on his face. "Hell yeah! Now this is a fight! Let's see what you can do, metal man!"

"Not today, Dean," my doppelganger replied.

The eyes of the towering statues on either side of the room lit up, and two twin beams of light shot from the gems embedded in them. The multicolored energy pulses swam through the air with remarkable speed.

I knew those beams. I had used them myself many times, most recently against Prince Tivar of the Satyrs.

"Dean! Run!" I yelled in warning. But I was too slow. Engaged in pitched battle as he was, Dean couldn't pull away to get clear of the beam. All he did was fling a hand backward and erect a barrier of twisted space as a shield.

But that wouldn't stop the attack from coming for him. Those beams were identical to the attacks emitted by my Level-Reducing Sentry Towers.

*Son of a bitch.*

Sava? This throne room? The evil-looking castle?

It was all a trap set up for this moment.

I'd lured my powerful foes into the range of my Level-Reducing Sentry Towers more than once. Of course my doppelganger would have remembered how effective that trick was. I'd never expected to have it used on me.

The beams of energy passed through Dean's shield as though they weren't even there. And when those beams struck him, his aura seemed to shrink in on himself. In an instant, he went from Demigod to Sorcerer, the same as me.



“Oh shit,” Dean cursed. He jumped backward just in time to dodge a thrust from Spell Eater in my doppelganger’s grip.

The blow, which normally would have been something he could match, was no longer something he could contend with.

“Dean! Look out!” I rushed forward to reinforce him. He was probably more vulnerable now than he had been in centuries.

“Don’t worry, Theo. This isn’t the first time I’ve been debuffed.” He kept his eyes locked on my evil twin, and for once, his expression turned serious. He put some distance between himself and my opponent and reached for something dangling around his neck next to the talisman he kept to ward off mind magic.

I hadn’t noticed it before, but it seemed to unfold and grow larger as he touched it, like it had been hidden in a tiny pocket of space.

With grim determination, Dean prepared for battle. He raised his axe, and the spatial zeal around him roiled like a storm over the sea. Space twisted around him, distorting the surrounding room. “You messed with the wrong badass, metal man! Sorcerer or not, I’m about to kick your ass! Prepare to face me at my full power! I will—”

“Activate teleportation array,” my doppelganger said. The floor tiles beneath where Dean was standing lit up.

Dean’s eyes went wide. He tried to jump out of the way, but my doppelganger pressed him with Spell Eater and kept him in place.

Dean’s last words trailed off. “You tricky bastaaaaaaard!”

His voice faded as Dean vanished in a flash of white light, teleported to who knew where.

Suddenly we were down from two Demigods to one, and our victory was no longer seeming so certain. I turned to Ethan, who was only now pulling himself together. He’d prioritized healing himself over getting back in the fight, which was proving a costly mistake now. But I bit back any

remarks I might have had. After all, we couldn't win this fight without him.

Just how in damnation had my doppelganger constructed such a thing? I had some theories, but I'd never had the guts to put them to the test for fear of what those crystals could do to me with one wrong move.

But my doppelganger had no such fear.

Anxiety gripped my heart. He really was me, with all my talents and skills for magic and crafting, but with all my mercy and hesitation removed and replaced with ruthless determination combined with the unending determination of a machine locked into high gear.

Ethan climbed slowly to his feet, pupils wide, as he scanned the room for more traps. He sensed my doppelganger's gaze upon him and cast a frantic mind spell. It looked like an illusion spell meant to conceal his location. Perhaps he planned to wait for an opportunity to attack.

My doppelganger's eyes met his. He crossed the room in a blur of motion, quicker than Ethan could complete his spell. In a flash, he had Ethan in his grip once more.

"*You* must die," my doppelganger announced as he grabbed Ethan by the throat. My double seemed overcome with a flash of fury as he stared at Ethan like he was looking at a bug that should have been crushed long ago.

Though he held cold dispassion for the rest of us, his hatred for Ethan was clear. Back when he separated from me, the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had been the greatest source of my problems. His hatred was logical.

"Come on, Ethan!" I yelled. As a demigod, he had to have some tricks.

Ethan's tie flickered and spontaneously combusted. There must have been a teleportation talisman hidden within it because he vanished and reappeared across the room, rubbing his throat. When he appeared, my doppelganger fired a beam of crimson light from the energy weapon in his mouth. Then,

my doppelganger pulled back his arm and threw Spell Eater with the force of a missile.

Air shattered in the wake of my weapon's flight, and it pierced through Ethan's chest and pinned him to the throne room's far wall.

This was bad. Very bad. If Ethan kicked the bucket, we'd be down both our demigods. I had to save him.

"Don't forget about me!" I yelled at my doppelganger as he moved to finish Ethan off. Sword Storm blades swirled around the room and converged on our enemy's location.

My doppelganger batted the largest of them aside with the back of his hand. "You protect him? Fool. How quickly you forget."

"You've missed out on a lot," I spat back as I sent more Sword Storm blades to keep him busy.

My doppelganger growled, my attacks finally enough to get him to pay attention to me. That bought Ethan a few seconds to unstab himself.

My evil twin rushed me. I barely managed to dodge. He was so fast and so strong. Without a weapon, I didn't dare confront him in direct combat. I stuck with ranged attacks, mostly my Sword Storm blades.

My companions attacked with similar blows from across the chamber, raining down beams of golden light or water splashes thrown fast enough to cut steel. Nothing seemed to work.

Then, I slipped. My doppelganger grabbed hold of my wrist. I lashed out with a bunch to his jaw to free myself. He shrugged off a blow that would have shattered boulders without even twitching.

"Without me, you have become weak," my doppelganger sneered.

"I liked you better before you could talk. Let me help you with that." I entered my Dimensional Storage and withdrew one of Argona's latest inventions. It was a tightly wound

bundle of Earth zeal, compacted far beyond its normal limits and ready to burst. It was a simple device we'd made together, but quite destructive and reliable enough to use in battle. I'd based it on the same trick I'd used to magically initiate nuclear explosions, though this was scaled down to fit into something the size of my palm.

In other words, it was a nuclear grenade.

I shoved it in my doppelganger's mouth, and when it detonated, it shook the entire room. During the explosion, he released his grip on my wrist, and I used the force of the bomb to put some distance between him and me.

The force of turning atoms to energy shook the castle, and cracks formed throughout the structure. It hadn't been a big explosion, but a nuke was still a nuke.

But the power of a Demigod could not be denied.

When the dust cleared, my doppelganger still stood. He wiped soot from his jaw. Quicksilver flowed from the corners of his mouth and the clay sculpted to look like flesh had scraped off his face. He was looking more like his old self now.

But despite the damage, he still stood. He grabbed his jaw with one hand and bent it. Metal shrieked, and suddenly his jaw popped back into place. It looked like it would take more than a pocket-sized nuke to slow my evil twin down.

"Now would be a good time for some demigod tricks, Ethan!" I yelled to the spot on the wall where Ethan had been.

I received no response. "Ethan?"

Finally, I spared a glance. He was gone. He must have used that same invisibility spell he channeled earlier in the fight.

"Damn it!" I cursed. Ethan intended for us to take the brunt of an angry demigod's assault while he stuck to the shadows and waited for the perfect moment. I had hoped he would confront my doppelganger directly, creating opportunities for the rest of us to get free hits in.

But Ethan must have thought his aspect was better suited to that role and so had taken it for himself. I cursed, wishing my doppelganger had taken Ethan away instead of Dean. He would have been a better match to hold the front lines. But I suspected our foe thought the same as me and had been certain to eliminate Dean first so that the scenario I wished for couldn't happen.

Our resources and options were limited, but we still had one demigod to match him and plenty more power. My doppelganger couldn't use his full strength against us for fear of creating an opportunity for Ethan to strike. That meant that maybe the rest of us could be a little bolder in our efforts to draw our enemy into overcommitting to an attack.

My matriarchs had a similar idea.

“Get him!” Assyrus cried, voice and sword raised in unison. “Save Sava!”

My doppelganger turned to us and met our charge with one of his own.

I reached into my Dimensional Storage. The important thing was keeping our opponent busy. I still had some of Spell Eater's previous incarnations to fight with, but I didn't want to get in a shoving contest with a robot golem enhanced by the fundamental concept of strength. It would be better to deal with this foe from a distance.

My Sword Storm blades filled the air around the chamber, ranging from the size of a fingernail to the size of a wagon. They spun like we stood in the heart of a storm, gathering speed and momentum. I reached out with my own understanding of Gravity. I focused on the blades in the air, lightening their weight and making them much faster. It was easier in this pocket space than in the real world.

Then, just before Assyrus charged, I attacked. I forced him to block a massive hunk of enchanted steel with Spell Eater's edge rather than use it to run Assyrus through the stomach with it. I had hoped to buy her an opportunity to strike. Still, my doppelganger was nimbler than any machine I'd ever seen.

He lashed out with a kick. Assyus caught it, using all her skills to redirect the energy back at him. Her face went pale as she held on to his leg, though. The sheer force of his kick made the fabric of this pocket world tear open, and Assyus was launched backward toward the far wall, where she collided with one of the statues.

The others attacked one by one. And one by one, they were driven back.

He threw himself into battle, leaving caution far behind. If Ethan was going to attack, he had plenty of opportunities to show himself. But he remained hidden while my companions and I took the brunt of a demigod's wrath.

Eltiana darted in with her poison daggers, but the poison did nothing to my doppelganger's metal and earth form, and he swiped her aside with ease.

Yorik rushed forward, hammer raised high overhead as orcish symbols lit one after another. With Nela darting forward from the opposite direction, my doppelganger twisted himself to kick Yorik in the chest before her hammer landed, grabbed Nela by her shirt, and hurled her bodily into the onrushing form of Melise.

His eyes bore down on an empty patch of air where Illiel had thought she could sneak up on him under the cover of mind magic. He opened his mouth, and crimson light poured out from his jaw, activating that deadly laser beam weapon I'd seen before. Illiel was forced to abandon her plan, and I swept one of my largest Sword Storm blades between her and my doppelganger to shield her.

Crimson light struck enchanted steel. Metal melted, but I sent more Sword Storm blades after it. They were a variety of shapes and sizes, but all of them had the same general properties. They were polished and shiny.

I reflected my doppelganger's energy weapon right back at him, forcing him to cut the attack short. Then I struck with the only weapon I had that might do some real damage.

“I hope this works...” I muttered, not allowing myself to cast doubts over my hare-brained scheme.

I’d studied petrification religiously when I ran into my first basilisk. At first, I’d merely wanted to know my foe. Then I wanted the power for myself since, at the time, it seemed like one of the few means by which an Earth Cultivator could unleash a devastating ranged attack.

I’d gotten quite good at it, too, though True Mages and above could use their aura to resist its power to some extent. A demigod would be even better suited to shrugging off this attack.

But that was where my best trick came into play. The concept of Identity I’d worked so hard to master while in the Primordial World.

This doppelganger of mine was essentially an elemental of mine. In his heart, he was the World Titan Fiendbody surrounding some tiny discarded part of my soul. He was an impression left in stone. An earth elemental animating rock and metal.

And I planned to turn him back into what he was.

While an ordinary petrification spell would do nothing against a golem or elemental, what I was doing was more fundamental. I would target the very magic animating him, which I knew intimately, for his was my own power gone rogue.

This unique one-of-a-kind spell would work for no one else and on no other target. If not for the mental enhancements thanks to Quicksilver Thought and reaching the Sorcerer realm as a mind mage, I never would have been able to come up with it in the middle of battle.

But came up with it I did, and I felt a smile splitting my face. I would prove who was the original and who was the cheap copy.

“This ends now!” I growled and pointed my finger at my doppelganger. “Return to the stone from whence you came!”

My doppelganger narrowed his eyes as he stared me down from across the chamber. He took a step forward, but his movements were slow and lethargic. His leg moved with clumsy jerkiness instead of the casual grace he'd wielded minutes before. Something was wrong, that much was clear.

The proof of my petrification spell manifested moments later. The shiny bronze plates covering my doppelganger's body darkened and turned gray, more slate than metal.

The petrification spell traveled up his body, freezing him in place before it took hold completely. The powerful aura of a demigod receded into him until it was little more than a faint whisper.

Soon, he was a statue sculpted in my image. He scowled at where I stood but moved no more.

"Holy shit, it worked?" I shook my head. "Uh... I mean, of course, it worked. All in a good day's work!"

"Y-you did it?" Illiel asked, eyes darting between me and my doppelganger.

"Nice." Yorik placed a hand on my shoulder.

"I am... impressed." Nela blinked at the frozen demigod, gripping her spear like she expected the fight to resume at any moment.

I chuckled. "Why do you all sound surprised? Of course, I did it! Come on, let's grab Sava and get out of here. This whole black castle is way to edgy for me."

I strode past my doppelganger's frozen form and punched the glass over Sava. Something was missing, though.

"Wasn't there a creepy green golem that looked like Sava standing over her?" I asked as I pointed to the remains of the glass coffin.

"Yeah, you're right. It vanished. Huh, weird..." Melise placed a hand on her hip and frowned.

I scanned the room for Spell Eater, but it was nowhere to be found. My doppelganger had been holding it a moment ago.



I stared at the statue of my doppelganger across the room, a bad feeling crawling up my spine. I gave the statue a shove, and it crumbled to rubble. That should have reassured me, but my heart was only beating faster.

“Ethan! You can come out now!” I yelled. “The fight’s over! We did it without you.”

I used my Mind Magic to scan the room and try to pierce any mind magic that might have rendered him invisible. I saw nothing. I turned to Illiel, but she shook her head. He wasn’t here.

Nor was my spear, Spell Eater. It had dropped from my doppelganger’s hand, and then... nothing. It was nowhere to be found.

I shifted Sava a little further up my shoulder. The bad feeling crawling up my spine was getting worse, and I wanted to be able to run if I had to.

“Go team Hearthwood! We kicked ass. Looting time! Then party time after,” Eltiana said as she crawled up the statues to retrieve the Level-Reducing Sentry Tower gems embedded in the eyes. I winced as she pried them out with her dagger, expecting a trap at any moment, but she removed them easily. That, at least, was a victory.

“When we get back.” Assyus scanned our surroundings warily.

“Let’s not linger here any longer than we have to.” Nela joined Assyus in glancing around the empty throne room. Her eyes kept darting across the empty shadows. She held her hand up and conjured a sphere of light as bright as a sun, and yet still, her power could not make the shadows go away. “I’m not normally the superstitious type, but I don’t like the look of this place.”

“Agreed. Let’s go home.”

I gathered up my companions and left, casting one last glance over my shoulder to the empty throne behind us. For a moment there, I was certain I felt someone watching me.

CHAPTER  
**FORTY-ONE**

Our return to the Hearthwood was uneventful, though we were all keeping an eye over our shoulder the entire time it took to tear a hole in the pocket world back into ordinary space.

“Whoop! Time to go home and throw a party!” Eltiana dove through the crack in space I’d just opened up and then promptly landed face-first in a pile of monster poop. “Yuck!”

I shook my head. “There you have it, ladies. One more reason not to dive face-first through spatial rifts to unknown destinations.”

“If only we could teach the same lessons to all spatial cultivators of my family,” Tivana laughed.

Sava started wriggling on my shoulders shortly thereafter, and I set her down when I realized she was waking up.

“W-what happened?” Sava asked, rubbing her eyes and blinking.

“You were kidnapped,” I explained.

Sava’s eyes went wide. “Did the Satyr King get me? How am I—”

I shook my head. “Not the Satyrs. You were kidnapped by my evil robot twin.” I ran my hand through her hair. “You should be proud, Sava! You’re in demand. Too bad for everybody else that I found you first, and I don’t share.”

Sava wrapped her arms tight around my waist. “Thank you for saving me.”

“Group hug!” Assyrus said, joining in for a warm embrace. Tivana, Yorik, Nela, Melise, and Illiel soon joined her.

“Great idea, Assyrus!” Eltiana bounced back to her feet, flicked some monster poop off her brow, and went in for a hug. Everyone scattered in all directions. She ran straight for me.

Fortunately I was fast with my spells and I waved my hand to separate the poop from the rambunctious purple-haired elven ninja beneath it all. When she collided with me, she was squeaky clean.

“It’s safe, ladies,” I chuckled as I waved everyone back.

“Aww...” Eltiana pouted. “Hey, Sava, do you feel weaker than before?”

Sava froze. I did too, glancing down at her and feeling her energy. She’d been a Sorcerer before, but now...

“Ugh! It’s true!” Sava pouted. “I’m back to the Wizard realm... what happened back there? It feels like a chunk of my soul got ripped out.”

My mind flashed back to the green figure that had been standing over Sava before our fight. I grimaced. I had a few suspicions, but I kept them to myself for now. My matriarchs deserved to celebrate a victory and the fact that Sava was returned to us safe and unharmed.

Without Spell Eater, I had to take flight the hard way to get good vantage over the area. I lightened the force of gravity on myself as much as I could and launched myself into the air. Truthfully, it was more like a lengthy jump than any semblance of flight, which was probably the only reason it was halfway graceful.

By the time I drifted back down to the forest floor, I knew where we were in the Hearthwood. I made a careful note of our location. This empty and barren region of the Hearthwood exactly corresponded to the castle my doppelganger had been using as a base. If that was ever going to be important information to have, I wanted to have it.

“Seems like we’re on the northern edge of the forest. If you ladies are in a hurry to get home, I could throw you?” I offered. If I tossed them all in the direction of the Hearthwood, I could dive through a ley line and make my way back in the blink of an eye.

“Pocket world, please.” Nela rolled her eyes.

I chuckled. “You ladies are no fun.”

I opened up a Pocket World Passage, and soon we were back in the Hearthwood.



Mac’s frantic message upon my return immediately squashed any notions we had of a victory celebration.

[Thank Berthollet, French chemist and inventor of household bleach! You’re back! It’s all over now, but I have some bad news for you.]

My heart sank. “What’s the news?”

[Your Sacred Grove is now a pile of distinctly unsacred rubble,] Mac replied. [While you were gone, your evil twin attacked us again. This time in person.]

“What’s the damage?” I asked, already jogging for the door out of The Wanderer and to the rest of the Hearthwood.

[Surprisingly little. The Sacred Grove is far enough from any population centers that there was no damage to the city or its infrastructure. But the workers of the Sacred Groves, on the other hand...]

“How bad was it?” I held my breath.

[Every single elf who came with the Sacred Grove is either dead or missing. Strangely, the new hires brought in from the Hearthwood are fine. A few of them suffered scratches or burns as your evil twin rampaged around the area and slaughtered the others, but none of them died. It was only the ones who came with the Sacred Grove. We’re already in the process of rounding up the wisps, but the chaos was enough

that it will be difficult to restore them fully, even with the help of Bloodline Origin Awakening potions. Odds are that at least some portion of their memories will be mixed up. But they should retain all the knowledge needed to operate a Sacred Grove between them.]

I ran my hand through my hair, thinking. He'd killed only the elves who came with the Sacred Grove?

Why do that?

There was only one explanation. He was watching me, and he didn't like how I was handling traitors.

While I had devised an elaborate plan to root them out and slowly replace them, my evil twin had opted for a far more direct approach.

I'd have to lie to say I'd never considered the idea myself. Slaughtering my enemies was so much easier than figuring out friend from foe. So what if a few innocents got caught up in the process?

If I was desperate, I might have considered the same solution. But I wasn't desperate, and there were more options available to me.

My doppelganger didn't see that, though. He was stuck with his mind on a desperate and violent struggle for victory.

I took a deep breath and sighed.

"Looks like all that work I did with Aelina is going to go to waste..." I sighed. "It would have been nice to get a few of the elves to admit what kind of hold the Satyr King has over them. You never know when information like that could come in handy. It was a good thing I had so many of them write down everything they knew in those instruction guides. At least I still have the Librarian of Sacred Groves to fill any missing holes in our knowledge. We should be able to pick right back up where we left off."

What was done was done. The Satyr King was plotting who knew what, and thanks to my evil twin I had lost my best lead. I shook my head in disgust.

[About that... the Librarian of Sacred Groves went missing from her cottage outside of Castle Mac. It seems she was taken by a second agent. It seems your evil twin has gotten himself a subordinate.]

“Describe her.” My fingers drummed against my thigh as I took a look at the Hearthwood. As Mac promised, the Hearthwood was intact, with the sole exception of the Cottage we’d given to Ethan and the Librarian of Sacred Groves.

[I’ve already taken the liberty of quizzing local witnesses. Everyone agrees that the attacker was a green golem, likely made of some sort of jade. She had a female form and was apparently very beautiful.]

I let out a long sigh. Of course. No wonder the green golem had disappeared. Based on the timing, she’d struck as soon as our fight with my doppelganger began. That was when she vanished from the room.

My doppelganger, meanwhile, had arrived a little later. Right when I thought my Petrification spell had allowed me to claim victory.

“Damn it!” I cursed the sky, shaking my fist. “We played right into his hands. I don’t know whether to be furious or impressed.”

[Fighting an energy clone of yourself does seem confusing.]

“I’m going to help with the wisp rescue effort. My mood’s too bad for anything else.”



The Sacred Grove I’d been so excited for was utterly trashed. The ruins scattered throughout the Hearthwood from the previous golden ages were in better shape. Granted, I hadn’t spent more than afternoon assembling the buildings in the area, but it was still frustrating to see the product of my hard work turned to rubble.

“Did the seeds survive?” I asked Mac.

[I'm afraid your evil twin had a particularly keen vendetta against them. Each and every seed was sterilized by fire. The ground you stand on has only now cooled. There was molten lava flowing over it just minutes ago.]

The ground I stood on was indeed hot, and parts of it were fairly-glass like. My doppelganger must have created a funnel up from the planet's core to pour molten magma out all over my creation. I was surprised the Hearthwood elves got away in time.

“Well shit...” I groaned. “It looks like we'll be starting over from the ground up. And we won't be able to use the materials that came with the kit.”

[Perhaps that was the idea. I am building a model of your evil twin based on his behavior in your reports and recorded actions. If I fill in the gaps with the model I have on you when in stressful situations, my best prediction is that he is distrustful of the Satyr King's intentions to the point where he refuses to allow you to use the Sacred Grove provided by him.]

“In other words, he wrecked my garden to force me to plant it anew from the ground up.” I let out a long sigh.

[We do have the knowledge to build such a Sacred Grove at this point. Getting it past Mage Acolyte will require a few trips across the continent to acquire rare seeds though. Beyond that, you may need to visit other worlds or find a trader who does so.]

“That's going to set me back quite a bit. The whole idea behind getting a kit is that these details are already sorted out.”

[Your evil twin was quite efficient at disabling your Sacred Grove. A few spells placed in key locations was all it took. With this experience, I think we could improve on the methodology even further.]

“Well I suppose that's a small consolation prize. Sacred Groves do seem awfully vulnerable for a source of power. Especially to Earth cultivators.” I smiled at the thought. “Given the right opportunity and a chance to search the World

of Woods and Wilds undetected, I could hunt down the Satyr King's Sacred Grove and break it just like this one! Then he'd be helpless as a newborn babe. If only..."

I drummed my fingers against my leg again. If only the Librarian of Sacred Groves was still in the Hearthwood. We would have had a much easier time sourcing new seeds. Maybe the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had another elf like her. Or maybe they'd come to help rescue the one they'd already sent. I could certainly use a hand dealing with my doppelganger.

Somehow, I had my doubts. I was less than thrilled with Ethan's participation in our last fight. His performance wasn't something I would have been proud of, at least.

"Hey, where is Ethan, anyway?" I asked Mac. "Did he come crawling back here under an Unnoticeability spell?"

[I have no records of Envoy Ethan appearing anywhere in the Hearthwood. Presumably he is still in the Devilbeast Wilds,] Mac replied.

"Well shit. We can't exactly lose an envoy. The Cult of the Unblinking Eye was just starting to no longer be a pain in my ass. This is going to mean trouble. I guess we're going to have to go on a rescue mission. Any sign of Dean yet?"

But I needn't have bothered asking. Far across the horizon, something was streaking toward us. Back on Earth, I would have assumed it was an airplane, but here I knew better. After all, I could hear all the way from the ground that the streak in the sky was shouting a battle cry.

"Dean! Dean! Down here!" I yelled and waved my hands and jumped up over the tree line to get a little altitude.

He spotted me and brought himself to a sudden stop atop the ruins of my destroyed Sacred Grove.

"Damn. Look at this mess. Did you beat him without me?" Dean asked.

I shook my head. "Afraid not. It was an awesome fight though."



Dean pouted. “Figures. I always miss the fun part.”

“It’s not over yet, my friend. Turns out Ethan didn’t make it back. We have to head back into your little pocket hell-scape and look for him.”

The smile returned to Dean’s face.

CHAPTER  
**FORTY-TWO**

**T**hough we'd just left the place minutes ago, we were soon headed straight back into the Devilbeast Wilds to search for Ethan. It felt odd to be looking for someone who was part of an organization that was once our mortal enemy, let alone searching for an immensely powerful Demigod whose magical might was enough to shake continents.

Come to think of it, I had to search the Primordial World for Sam and Dean, so Ethan would be the third Demigod I went out on a search and rescue mission for. It seemed this was becoming a recurring theme, and I suspected this wouldn't be the last time I played this role.

I could already imagine myself many years in the future out on a similar search for Comela after she reached Demigod and started adventuring through the Primordial World. Maybe I could get Argona to help me invent tracking devices. That would certainly make this sort of thing easier.

While all my kids were confined mostly to the Hearthwood and relatively easy for me to track down, that wouldn't last forever. They'd start wandering farther from home as they grew more powerful, and it would be that much harder for their overprotective father to hover over their shoulders.

I shook the thoughts of my children from my mind. Ethan was the one I was looking for today, and hopefully I wouldn't be looking for my kids like this for a long time.

I took us to the same place we exited from.

“Yeah, I can sense the dimensional barrier getting weak here. You said your edgelord castle is on the other side?” Dean hefted his axe over his shoulder.

“It’s not *my* edgelord castle. It belongs to my evil robot twin,” I replied.

“Who was built from a missing fragment of your soul? In other words, the desire for an edgelord was buried inside you all along.” Dean raised an eyebrow.

“...Maybe.”

Dean gave me a pat on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. I went through an edgy phase too. Why, when I was at True Mage, I wore all black and made each one of my girls do the same! We roamed the land like bandits, taking what we wanted. But eventually, people started giving me gifts to stop the raids, and those gifts became tributes. Before I knew it, those tributes became taxes, and people were calling me king. It was all downhill from there. I miss those early days.”

Dean swung his axe and cut open the portal to the Devilbeast Wilds. My companions and I followed. Sava stayed behind because she was still weak and needed time to recover, but everybody else canceled our victory celebration to come right back in search of Ethan and, hopefully, the Librarian of Sacred Groves.

We entered already inside the throne room, though it was much the same as we’d left it. The only difference was both the altar Sava had slept on and the petrified statue of my doppelganger were gone. He’d been here in our absence. No matter what I did, it felt like he was always one step ahead of us.

“Yep, those early days roaming the land as a feared bandit king were the best!” Dean let out a hearty laugh.

Tivana looked uncomfortable. “Pardon, ancestor, but I was told you were roaming the land to protect the innocent and bring order to a warring and feuding realm under the rule of a few tyrannical clans?”

Dean snorted. “Yeah, one of my kids decided to spin it that way. In reality, the only reason they stopped fighting one another so much was because they eventually realized the bandit king roaming their lands was a bigger problem than anybody else! I was pretty much untouchable then, thanks to the fact that I had two wizards by my side. All they could do was gnash their teeth. Well, that, and set up an ambush where they tried to catch me alone.”

“The battle of the Broken Mountain, where you defeated the seven great tribes of the east and set the foundation for Deania?” Tivana asked.

Dean shook his head. “Yep. After I defeated them all, the matriarchs of those tiny tribes all offered themselves up as concubines. I should have kept fighting, but what kind of man can resist an offer like that? Besides, there was this one matriarch. Really bad attitude, but a really nice ass and really down to get freaky. Actually, I think she might have been your grandmother, Tivana. Let me think...”

“Oh...” Tivana pouted.

I saved Tivana from being overly disillusioned by her clan’s glorious history. “We’re looking for somebody under the effects of an Unnoticeability spell. Illiel, you’ll have to help out everybody without mind magic. Do you have any perception-enhancing spells in your arsenal?”

“Several, actually. One that should work well on others,” Illiel replied.

“Good. Cast it on everyone here.” I waved at my companions.

Dean took a step back, clutching his anti-Mind Magic pendant. “I’m good, but the rest of you can have at it.”

Illiel cast her spell, though she and I would rely primarily on our own mind magic abilities.

The now-eyeless statues to either side of the long hallway stared blankly at us, at least until Dean grumpily chopped their heads off with his axe. “There’s nothing here.”

“He must have gone back outside then,” I suggested. “Everybody, stay close. We don’t know if my doppelganger is still around here. And if he is, I don’t want him catching anyone off guard.”

We moved with caution out of the throne room and onto the steps outside. In the distance, the skeletal trees of the Devilbeast Wilds loomed overhead, though all around us, every branch and monster lay dead and toppled upon what had once been a forest floor.

“Two teams. Tivana, Dean, Yorik, and Illiel, you three scout around the left side. I’ll take everyone else. This way, we’ll both have a mind cultivator with us.”

“Sure.” Dean shrugged. “Just don’t blame me for kicking your evil twin’s ass if I see him! He owes me a fight.”

I chuckled. “If you do get in a fight, just call for backup. I want to teach my evil twin a lesson as well. Who knows, maybe I can eat him and gain his power or something. That’d speed up my plans to reach Demigod.”

I meant it as a joke, but Dean nodded seriously. “Yeah, that could work. If you were lucky, you’d hit Demigod right away and gain his Strength concept as well. My last evil twin tried the same thing. It’s the main reason I stay away from all the cloning techniques. I like to keep this soul right where it is, thank you very much.”

“Really?” My eyes lit up. “Seems like something of a cheat. You’re telling me I can chop myself up into little bits and pieces and then recombine with them and become that much more powerful?”

Dean nodded. “Seen that done before. It’s a bit of a brute-force approach. Risky, too, if some of the soul fragments die. But some people stuck at Sorcerer do just that. If they can get a thousand bits of themselves to the Wizard realm, it sometimes works. Risky though. Sometimes clones don’t want to join back up. I’m guessing that’s the case for yours.”

My eyes roamed the black castle. “Well, he hasn’t exactly volunteered...”

Our two groups split ways, circling the castle and the surrounding grounds in search of Ethan. I had hoped we'd find him crouched in a bush somewhere. If we were really lucky, he'd already be on a rescue operation to find the Librarian of Sacred Groves. That would save me the trouble of looking for her myself.

But as the minutes passed, I began to slowly lose hope of that. Ethan wasn't making his presence known, wherever he'd hid to lick his wounds after the battle. I'd sensed him casting his improved Unnoticeability spell. So where was he?

We caught scattered signs of someone's passage. Here an upturned branch, there a boot print.

"Smaller than Dean and mine, right?" I asked my companions as I placed my foot beside the print. Dean's boots were about the same size as mine, so the prints couldn't have been his.

"And much bigger than ours..." Nela said as she inspected the print. Despite being smaller than mine, it was much larger than the prints of any elf in my party.

"It's gotta be Ethan's then, right? But where is it headed?" My eyes scanned our surroundings. The print, unfortunately, led nowhere. If there were more prints to be found, I wasn't seeing them.

I was growing frustrated with the fruitless search and started wondering what I could do to speed it up. Maybe it was time to unseal that last nexus and let the Devilbeast Wilds rejoin the Hearthwood. Then, I could use Mac's scanner to search the entire forest for anomalies.

A Demigod-level unnoticeability spell could probably fool his sensors at first, but if we analyzed his data enough, we'd spot anomalies by hand. Maybe if we—

My thoughts were cut short by Dean's voice, piercing the eerie silence.

"Theo! You might want to see this!"

"We're on our way!" I shouted in reply. My companions and I sprinted around the corner, covering the ground in rapid

strides and ready for a fight. But when we turned the corner and saw Dean and his team, we realized they weren't fighting.

They were standing over a gruesome scene. It was all too reminiscent of what I'd done to Prince Tivar when he invaded the Hearthwood. In fact, I was pretty sure it was identical.

"Well, shit." I cursed. "Are we sure it's him?"

Dean held up a broken and tattered necktie. The same one Ethan had been wearing when we entered the Devilbeast Wilds.

What little remained of Ethan's body was unrecognizable, covered in debris and rubble all around him. The pit he lay in was three times his height, and I jumped into it with a grimace on my face.

"Maybe we can resurrect him or something?" I asked hopefully.

Dean shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Humans aren't elves. There are ways to seal a human into a wisp-like state, but if the body's still here, that didn't happen. Nope, your evil twin went to town on Ethan's face, and this is what's left of him. He really didn't like Ethan, I guess."

I sighed. "It's the Cult of the Unblinking Eye he didn't like."

Melise shook her head sadly at the sight. "What a waste... just when we were finally getting along with the Cult of the Unblinking Eye..."

"Weird. The plants are growing all around us." Eltiana pointed around the pit.

"That'd be the Vitality," Dean explained. "The amount we release when we die is one of the less cool things about being human. Some tree-hugger types want to kill us for it. Or suck us dry, and not in the fun way."

I nodded along. As a human, Ethan possessed a tremendous amount of vitality. Vitality that elves would have fought tooth and nail over. To most people and creatures throughout the Ten Thousand Worlds, this vitality was the

limiting factor in their growth. It was the resource they competed over, like nitrogen to a nutrient-starved field of crops.

Now it was spilling out into the ground around us. From its sheer density, I had little doubt that the Devilbeast Wilds would grow and flourish in record time. Alchemy ingredients would grow wild and abundant.

But I wasn't about to let his remains seep into the stone. I waved my hand over him and scooped what was left into my Dimensional Storage. Demigods were hearty creatures, though those who cultivated Mind Magic exclusively, like Ethan, were less so than most.

If I was lying there as little more than paste, my body might regenerate. Especially if someone brought me back to Mac and the Medical Bay. I would do the same for Ethan hoping he could manage a similar feat, but I had my doubts. He didn't strike me as the type of Demigod to have regeneration skills.

"Let's get him to the Medical Bay. This is going to mean trouble for the Hearthwood Clan." I shook my head. The Cult of the Unblinking Eye would want an explanation, at the very least. In fact, if all they wanted was an explanation, we would get away easily. Odds were they'd want blood.

My nails ground into my palm. My evil twin had caused trouble for me for the last time. It was past time I did something about him.



CHAPTER  
**FORTY-THREE**

I was done playing around. My evil twin had become a scourge on the Hearthwood. He'd already caused me more trouble than I ever should have allowed. As the anger built within me, so did my resolve. I had a plan to deal with him once and for all, starting today.

“Mac, I’m going to need your sensors. You’ll have to run the Scanner at maximum efficiency if you want to spot him. My evil twin is both quick and crafty. If we want to catch him off guard, we will have to be fast. You ready for this?”

[I was manufactured ready, Theo,] Mac replied.

We went over everything I needed from him, and sent all the messages I needed to send. This would take a bit of coordination to get right, but so long as I timed things well all should go smoothly.

I turned to my companions. It was time I clued them in on my plan as well. “Okay, everyone. We’re going to open up the last nexus seal and merge the Devilbeast Wilds with the Hearthwood.”

“But Theo! Won’t that unleash powerful monsters all over the Hearthwood?” Melise asked, face full of worry.

I nodded. “It will, assuming my evil twin left any alive. It seems like quite a few of them are already dead. But we have Dean’s Orb to weaken those that remain. Besides, the Shadowblade Beasts are good and tamed now. They’re living out of the Monster Dens and becoming more docile with every passing day. We can do the same with the other monsters in

the Devilbeast Wilds. And those we can't tame? We'll just have to slay them."

Melise nodded slowly. Nela tightened her hand around her spear. Yorik hefted her hammer over her shoulder. My women and I were ready for battle.

I already knew exactly where the last nexus seal was, thanks to my adventures with Segolas, so we headed straight there.

"This reminds me of old times." Eltiana bounced chirpily on her heels behind me. She was skipping through the dungeon, throwing out the occasional poisoned dagger as Barbed Tooth Raptors darted out to take a bite out of us.

"I don't remember it being this easy," Assyus replied as she stomped on the head of an undead raptor that had tried to sneak up on us.

It was true. When we first started exploring these tunnels, every fight pushed us to the verge of life and death.

But now? Battling our way through the dungeons beneath the Hearthwood was simplicity itself. Most of the monsters were below true mage, except the final boss.

"Damn, another Crimson Eye Observer already?" It surprised me to find the guardian of the nexus seal floating just beyond the dungeon core. Killing one of these powerful monsters had nearly cost us our lives back then.

"I want it!" Eltiana said with a big smile on her face.

I chuckled. "As long as you promise not to fake your death this time."

Eltiana charged her opponent. It was a great mass of undulating eye stalks surrounding a large central eye. Each lens stared in different directions, and it had already caught sight of Eltiana. It fired a beam of crimson destruction from its largest central eye, but by the time the beam struck, Eltiana was no longer there. Instead, she was behind the monster.

The Crimson Eye Observer was no match for Eltiana. Even fighting on her own, she skipped through the air and

bounced off the walls faster than any of the Crimson Eye Observers could track.

I figured she'd stick it with her poisoned iron sword before it could so much as blink, but Eltiana decided to toy with the giant eye monster a little.

She flipped through the air as it rounded on her, firing a beam of light that missed by a mile. It tried to turn and fire at her again, but she grabbed one of the Observer's eyestalks and used it as a handhold to do a flip in mid-air. At the peak of her arc, she looked back at us and blew me a kiss.

"She's showing off..." Assyrus rolled her eyes.

"Perhaps I should hurry this along," I suggested with a shake of my head. We had time to kill before everyone else was ready, but it would be easier to spend our time waiting camped out around the nexus seal.

Eltiana must have heard Assyrus and me because she started dodging the Crimson Eye Observer even more flamboyantly. More than once, she tumbled through the air. The wind whipped her clothes and the thin skirt-like dress she was wearing folded in on itself.

"And, of course, she isn't wearing any underwear..." Assyrus shook her head. "Finish it off."

"No, no..." I waved Assyrus down as I watched and suddenly changed my mind. "We should let Eltiana have her fun."

Eltiana put on a good show for us. She'd dodge by no more than a hair repeatedly, putting her nimble acrobatics on display with every move. It was less like a fight and more like a delicate dance.

Unfortunately for her, and quite fortunately for me, Eltiana's clothes didn't hold up quite as well to her narrow dodges. The Crimson Eye Observer's beams cut thin burns down the center of her back, the sleeves of her arms, and the corners of her dress. Bit by bit, her clothes flaked away.

"Now, this is how a fight is supposed to go!" I pointed to my companions with eyebrows raised.

Nela shook her head and took a seat on the cavern floor. The others soon followed suit.

Broken, beaten, and exhausted, the Crimson Eye Observer collapsed to the ground.

In the end, the Crimson Eye Observer tired out before Eltiana did. I would never have guessed this could happen, but apparently, after fifteen minutes of continuous laser fire, the Crimson Eye Observer ran out of juice.

The beams of energy it fired were pathetic scattered things, not even powerful enough to kill off a Mage Acolyte.

It made sense that the beams grew weaker over time. Few monsters could perform as devastating attacks as the Crimson Eye Observer, especially for as long as it had been fighting.

Eltiana gave the limp Crimson Eye Observer a kick. She shrugged, drew her sword, and ran her weapon straight through the monster's central eye. It was too tired to so much as twitch at its death.

I clapped. "Well done, Eltiana! Well done indeed!"

"Tada!" Eltiana held her hands wide, and the last scraps of her clothing fell to the ground.

I rushed up to the light of the nexus seal and scooped her up in my arms. "That was beautifully done! If I didn't have an evil twin to destroy, I'd show you a good time after a show like that."

"I demand a shoulder ride as a reward!" Eltiana held up her arms, and I scooped her up and placed her on my shoulder. She pulled my arm up around her waist, and I cradled her as she sat with a wide smile on her face.

Everyone else picked themselves up off the cavern floor and strode into the cavern of the Crimson Eye Observer, behind which stood the Nexus Seal in all its glory.

"Ah, now this reminds *me* of old times!" Assyus stared at the heaping pile of zeal crystals with an eager gleam in her eyes.

"Shovels?" Yorik asked.

I quickly tossed out the requested tools, and we all got to shoveling. No matter how powerful we became, we'd never be above scooping up money by the shovelful from a pit in the ground where it grew like fruits falling from trees.

It was a task that required a lot of hands, though, so I called in a few family members. Jobs like this one were best kept in the family, considering the amount of wealth we were hauling into the Hearthwood Clan's personal coffers.

"I'm going to miss this constant supply of zeal crystals," I sighed. "Maybe I'll have Argona make something like these nexus seals. Not in the Hearthwood, mind you. We can use the zeal directly. But maybe in some of the regions where we don't want monsters to grow too strong."

But before I could set those plans in motion, I had another one to follow through on. It was time to open the nexus.

I turned my attention to the seal itself. My fingers traced the complex network of magic that formed it.

"You know, these things once seemed incomprehensibly complex to me..." I smiled softly. These days, piecing together a nexus seal would be easier than looking at Argona's work. Her creations were about the same level of complexity, but her nimble fingers could put this same pattern on a piece of adamantium the size of a fingernail rather than taking up an entire door.

Four glowing chains crossed over one another. I gripped two of them with either hand and focused on my Earth zeal. Power roiled within me, just as power roiled beyond this seal.

I pulled, and with a great heaving strain, the first of the chains snapped. I grabbed another set of chains and snapped those as well. Soon, only a single set of chains held the seal shut.

"There's going to be one last burst of energy," I said as I turned to my companions. "Make the most of it since this is the last one we're going to get."

We could recreate the power I was about to unleash in the Cultivation Chamber, but it was tedious and expensive. There

was nothing quite like receiving a burst of power for free.

The others sat down and concentrated, and I turned back to the last of the chains. With one deep breath, I pulled and tore them apart.

A colossal wave of magical energy erupted from the seal. It washed over the chamber behind me in an unstoppable tide. The very earth beneath my feet shuddered like we were in the middle of an earthquake.

The burst of zeal from this last seal was greater than all the others by an order of magnitude. Fitting, considering this was the last seal we had to open.

And I would have been surprised if the earth didn't shake when the Hearthwood was being physically expanded to encompass an entirely new land mass. We would have to seize control of the new landmass immediately. And probably build new roads.

“How are things looking up there, Mac?” I asked as I took a few deep breaths. The zeal-rich air wouldn't benefit me like it could all those on the surface, but it was still like taking a lungful of very fresh air. It felt good. Not as good as a long session of dual cultivation, but still refreshing.

[We are going to need to build new roads. A few buildings are on the verge of falling, but I am utilizing all the powers of a dungeon core to keep them standing.]

I nodded slowly, though Mac couldn't see me as we communicated remotely. “We have a limited window to find my evil twin before he figures out a way to shield himself now that the pocket world he's been hiding in has merged with the Hearthwood.”

[I suspect I pinged him a moment ago. A second ping will come momentarily. Ah, yes, there he is. I will provide the coordinates in a moment.]

“Tell Dean we have him. Now's our chance to catch him off guard!”

My matriarchs and I rushed through the Pocket World Passage. Eltiana had to rush to my Personal Chambers to grab

a new set of clothes, but everyone else was ready for battle.

I was as refreshed and ready as I'd ever be. I would have liked to have Spell Eater by my side, but my Sword Storm blades and the experimental weapons in my Dimensional Storage would have to do.

It was finally time to ruin my evil twin's day for once, instead of him ruining mine. I'd had enough of his unpleasant surprises. It was past time I gave him one of my own.

CHAPTER  
**FORTY-FOUR**

[L eft! He's going left!] Mac yelled.

I turned, changing directions. "You contact Dean yet?"

[I'm guiding him too. Go! He's getting away!]

I raced through the forest, desperate to catch my doppelganger before he made his escape. I traveled through the Hearthwood in the blink of an eye, but the new patches of dead trees from the Devilbeast Wilds scattered throughout the woods were less familiar.

The ley lines running through the ground twisted unnaturally like they were a patchwork of terrain cut and pasted like a game board. That wasn't too inaccurate, considering what had just happened with the dissolution of Dean's pocket world.

In the heart of the glade, my evil twin awaited us. He had been running moments ago, making haste outside the Hearthwood to avoid me. He might have been a Demigod, but I was still the next best thing, and I had a greater variety of powers at my disposal.

While he might have been able to defeat me in the Devilbeast Wilds, now he was in the heart of my realm. The Hearthwood was only moments away, and thanks to the defenses of The Wanderer, even Demigods who attacked me there could lose their lives. This time, I planned to use every advantage I had to win.



I could practically sense the calculations flashing across his bronze and adamantium face. He didn't want to fight me here and now on my terms. Not with Dean and my matriarchs close behind me.

Which only served to bolster my resolve to end things here and now.

I wasted no time launching my attack as soon as we arrived. A Stone Obelisk as large as a building rose from the ground at my feet, and I flung it forward with all my might.

As it flew, I reached out with my concept of Gravity, lightening the load as I threw it in the air, only to increase its weight dramatically after the stone reached its apex. Already, I could feel the strain on my mind, but the Stone Obelisk hurtled toward the ground with terrifying force.

It looked unnatural the way it fell. As I shifted its weight, it went from a smooth and steady arc to a plummet straight downward, right on top of my doppelganger's head.

Meanwhile, I unleashed two hundred Sword Storm blades from my Dimensional Storage. They circled my doppelganger, and I flung them toward him all at once, corralling him toward where the conceptually enhanced Obelisk would land.

My evil twin was supernaturally strong, but getting hit with a one-ton block of metal repeatedly was still enough to make him move. As long as I could deny him leverage, I figured I could pin him right where I wanted him.

"Eat this!" I shouted as both my attacks landed at once. When the Stone Obelisk touched the ground, the forest floor shook with as much force as it had when I'd reintroduced it to the Devilbeast Wilds. Many of my Sword Storm blades would have to be melted down and reforged as the force and friction of the collision liquefied their edges and blunted their tips.

Dirt and debris flew in all directions, and for a second, I thought I'd won.

Then, the pile of bent and melted metal and stone shifted. By the time a familiar beam of crimson energy shot toward me, I was already diving into the ley line I'd strategically

positioned myself over for when my opening attack failed to finish things.

I emerged on the other side of the clearing, flanking my doppelganger as my matriarchs emerged from the forest where they'd been following close behind me.

“Keep your distance! Support one another, and don't let him get up close! Wizards, you're backup! We'll wear him down!” I shouted to my companions.

We'd prepared for this fight and came ready for a battle. I saw the derisive look on my doppelganger's face as he heard me shouting orders, but we'd prepared for that, too.

The orders made sense, but they were entirely misleading. I hadn't said them for my companions. I'd said them for him.

He prepared to go on the offensive and fight his way to freedom before we exhausted him with numbers and firepower. Bad move.

We planned to end things by throwing everything we had at him all at once.

Tivana took the lead in the assault while Illiel attacked my doppelganger's mind directly. Whatever shred of my mind magic he had was minimal at best. After fighting him a few times, it didn't seem to be something he was actively cultivating. That meant his greatest defense was his own alien psychology. But now that Illiel had some time to look his mind over again, her next round of mental attacks would be that much more effective.

We opted for illusions. We figured we'd let him fall for our trap as long as we could keep it active. He didn't see Tivana rushing toward him with a sword in one hand and spatial magic brewing in the other. Melise would be on healing and supporting the rest of us with her Sorcerer-level fate cultivation.

The others followed close behind Tivana. It was important to attack two at a time, at the very least. A demigod like my evil twin could kill a sorcerer in the blink of an eye if given half a chance.

Though the gentle way my evil twin had treated Sava made me suspect there was still something in him that didn't want to hurt them. That would also be to our advantage.

Illiel, Yorik, and Tivana attacked, giving me time to prepare more Sword Storm blades. I pulled what remained of the bent and broken ones off the battlefield to clear the area. I knew my doppelganger would use them as obstacles to dodge my women, and he even tried to tug them free from my grip to take control of them.

But with Yorik and Tivana on top of him and Illiel blinding his senses, he could only spare me so much attention. I retrieved my Sword Storm blades and began a second assault. Meanwhile, Minerva created some of the most powerful skeletons she could manage and hurled them at my doppelganger.

They were the same skeletal bruisers she'd made before when fighting the Soul Eaters, and their job now would be the same as back then. They were to tie up my doppelganger, sacrificing their lives to give the rest of us the chance to deal a few good hits.

One dove for him and didn't last more than a heartbeat in battle as my doppelganger twisted from blocking Tivana's blade with Spell Eater's shaft to shattering the skeleton's head with the spear's butt.

But the other skeleton dove for him and wrapped arms around his legs, limiting his mobility as it held on.

Tivana pressed her advantage. She could maneuver, but he couldn't. Despite her advantage, my doppelganger was more than her match. He was faster than her and many, many times stronger. When Tivana locked swords with his spear, he shoved and sent her flying.

Yorik swung her axe right for his head, only for him to sweep her legs out from under her with a swing of his leg.

Then he opened his mouth, and from it emerged a beam of crimson energy right toward Illiel. She was forced to drop

whatever illusions she'd been crafting to distract our enemy so she could defend herself.

Illiel winced and took a step back, and as she did so, a wall of frozen red blood rose up between her and the incoming beam of energy. I knew Illiel had retained some of the Witch of Frozen Blood's powers, but it seemed she was gaining greater control over them as of late.

Assyrus and Eltiana attacked, and I moved in to cover them. Though the two of them were about as strong as wizards could get, they couldn't face a Demigod. But they could get some good hits in while I distracted one.

Whatever mercy my evil twin had for my women, he had none for me. The moment I showed my face, he struck me across the jaw with a vicious punch that had even more force behind it than the shove that had sent Tivana flying.

I just barely recovered my senses in time to dodge the headbutt that followed it. I really didn't want to test my skull's durability against that of an adamantium robot.

I ended up taking the bulk of the abuse with few opportunities to retaliate. But that was alright because I didn't need to land hits as long as I kept my doppelganger occupied. The more time he spent throwing punches at me, the more times Assyrus and Eltiana could chip away at his armor.

His enchanted bronze plates flared one after another, reminding me of the jade armor I could call up with a thought. But I'd since outgrown the armor's ability to protect me. Unlike the bronze plates lining my evil twin's body, it would shatter from a single blow in this fight. After he was defeated, I'd have to study those things to see if I couldn't bring my Jade Armor back.

My doppelganger continued hammering away at me while I stood there and did my best to defend. He seemed single-minded in his fury, so I worried I had some unresolved issues. I could beat myself up now and again over past mistakes, but the process had never been quite this physical before.

Tivana wove around us, her steps precise and elusive. She wielded her sword in both hands now and channeled her spatial zeal along its length. The weapon had an edge that came to an impossibly fine point. Something that could only come from spatial magic. I'd seen her cut apart tree trunks and solid granite with a single swing with that thing. But my doppelganger's armor wasn't so easily pierced.

Yorik was less precise and more unyielding. She battered the same spot Tivana was attacking with her axe, and the two of them made a racket loud enough to wake the forest.

As Tivana swung her sword, she tore tiny gaps in the fabric of reality. Had the Devilbeast Wilds still been hovering just outside the Hearthwood in another dimension, the tears might have led there. But the real world was made of sterner stuff, and any tears she might have cut to elsewhere sealed themselves before anything otherworldly could claw its way through.

But those slices were just enough to nip away at the enchanted metal plates protecting my evil twin's back. The force zeal they emanated acted like a force field around him, preventing damage to the actual enchantments themselves. But bit by bit, Tivana was closer to getting through. And when she finally got close enough...

"Now, Eltiana!" Tivana shouted as she channeled spatial magic. She'd done just enough to disable my evil twin's wards against short-range teleportation so he couldn't get away through the usual tricks and talismans. Eltiana was on top of my evil twin in a flash and stabbed right where Tivana pointed.

My purple-haired ninja plunged her dagger through a portal created by Tivana no wider than a fingernail. That was just enough for her stiletto dagger to jam into an adamantium plate and unleash its payload.

I felt a smile crawling up the sides of my face. I had worked with adamantium enchantments often enough to know how to break them. Eltiana was loaded up with the same etching solution Argona, and I used to make our own

enchancements. Meaning it was just perfect for breaking existing defenses.

“Arrgh!” My evil twin let out a harsh cry as his defenses collapsed.

I grinned. “Now’s our chance! Press the assault!”

Assyrus dove in, hoping to catch another of those titanic punches and redirect the force back at my evil twin. Nela shot beams of golden light from the rear lines, and I felt Melise’s fate magic around us. The scrapes, bruises, and broken bones I’d picked up in the last few moments of intense fighting faded as she reversed the flow of time on them.

We were winning! Victory was so close I could almost taste it.

Then things all went wrong.

He must have been working on new tricks just as I’d been. While my work on my Sword Storm blades eventually ended as I pursued more mundane projects, my doppelganger had never stopped chasing that path.

The crimson glow from his eyes intensified, and the same crimson shade sprouted from the cracks along the enchanted bronze plates lining his back. The damaged plates couldn’t take the strain and flaked off, but liquid metal flowed up from deep inside him to take their place.

The intact plates came loose one by one and floated in the air behind him as liquid metal flowed to fill in the gaps and then some. Every part of him grew larger. Suddenly, my doppelganger stood twice my height instead of being merely a few fingers taller.

But he wasn’t done. I sensed enchantments activating across his body in great, billowing waves.

“Stop him!” I yelled. But it was too late. Now that my doppelganger was made of liquid metal, axes, swords, and daggers would do nothing to him. Back when we knew what to expect, we’d prepared accordingly. But we were in new territory now.

The plates in the air shifted and changed, and they no longer felt like they were just metal. They were weapons directly under his telepathic control.

I shivered, realizing now that it was too late. “Get back!” I yelled, taking back the orders I’d given just moments ago. The way my evil twin was controlling those metal plates was very similar to how I controlled my Sword Storm blades, but there was something different about them I didn’t understand yet. Something deeper that I hadn’t discovered myself. “Mac, call in the reinforcements! We need them now!”

[On it. They’re on their way.]

The metal of the plates shifted, changing shape and form but keeping their enchantments. Some became the diamond-shaped throwing stars I made. Others became shields like those I sometimes wielded. He shaped them so fast on the fly without the need for anvil or forge. It was scary to see visible proof that he’d gotten better at this than I had.

But most of them took a form a level beyond what I could create. Each weapon was coated in enchantments. At least some of them had to involve spatial zeal because they were far larger than they’d been and now had components beyond simple metal. One shape in particular was something I recognized.

“Melise, get down!” I shouted.

One of the plates floating above my doppelganger had taken the form of a jet-black rifle, and it launched a ball of enchanted lead for where Melise had been standing moments before.

That gunshot was a herald of what was to come as the other plates finished taking shape. An instant later, the sound of continuous gunfire rattled the Hearthwood.

The bullets flew everywhere. My back was pelted again and again. A normal human would have been shredded into little more than a pile of meat. Fortunately, I was made of tougher stuff. To me, even these high-caliber rifles were merely like paintballs.

Yorik seemed to be holding up well on her own as well, thanks to her potent body cultivation.

The others were having a tougher time, though. They focused on magic rather than their bodies, and a bullet was still enough to draw blood from them. They were forced to stop what they were doing and erect magical defenses.

Some took the form of shield talismans. Others took the forms of shimmering bubbles of zeal. A few others grabbed the nearest tree trunk or boulder and held it up like a shield. Whatever my companions used to defend themselves, it would take time for them to get back in the fight.

Time that we couldn't waste, because with that time my evil twin was getting away.

He jumped into a ley line. Had it been me controlling so many guns, the attacks would have stopped then and there. I couldn't manipulate my Sword Storm blades without a clear line of sight and time to focus.

But my evil twin must have come up with a solution for that as well. It seemed he didn't need to look or even be anywhere near the objects under his control to keep using them.

If I didn't act fast, he would escape. So I did the only thing I could do and raced into the line after him. I caught up to him while we were both merged with the earth, stuck as twin bundles of energy wrapped in Earth zeal.

We wrestled back and forth, but I was ultimately a creature of flesh and blood. He was one of magic and earth. This was his home-field advantage, and if the struggle carried on too long, I would most certainly lose.

Or so he thought.

All that would have been true if not for the fact that I had a friendly dungeon core ready to help with just this sort of thing.

"*Mac!*" I called, though my voice went nowhere in the peculiar energy state I was locked in.



Still, Mac heard me, thanks to our connection through The Wanderer, and he did just what I hoped he'd do. I felt the ley line twist and bend, and suddenly, it came to an abrupt stop.

We were thrown out not far from where we'd been fighting. My doppelganger jumped on top of me and punched me, but I kicked my legs around to bind his arms. He still had one hand free and pounded me in the face again, but I just needed to buy a few more seconds...

“Kowabunga!” A shout came from above, and suddenly, my doppelganger was sent flying backward, where he landed on his ass. Standing beside me was Dean, and he glared daggers at my evil twin. “Forgot about me, metal man? You owe me a fight.”

CHAPTER  
FORTY-FIVE

“Dean...” My doppelganger glowered at Dean. He stood, waving at the nearby guns to direct their muzzles at Dean.

The projectiles flew, but Dean distorted the flow of space around him, and so each bundle of lead slowed to a crawl. Dean ducked and swerved in slow motion, dodging every one of them.

“I totally *didn't* steal that trick from The Matrix,” Dean shouted when he finished dodging the last bullets.

I dusted myself off and stood. I was a little worse for wear but still ready for a battle.

“If you’ve got any more tricks, you might as well show them now,” I told my doppelganger. “Because it’s time to end this!”

As if to punctuate my statement, our allies finally arrived. Like Dean, they’d been waiting just out of reach in case we needed them. Before this battle even began, I had made preparations to make sure it would be the last one. I’d brought overwhelming firepower, and no tricks on my doppelganger’s behalf would snatch victory away.

My allies arrived one after another. The Sunspire Princess glided down on rays of golden light. Teilinith and Feilinith from the Ancient Tree Temple bent the tree branches they stood upon with nature zeal and slid down their length. Amisra hovered in the air on a flying sword.

Yillinarena rode a wave that splashed over the sea floor. The leader of the Golden Sword Sect arrived with her weapon in hand.

With five more Sorcerers, my doppelganger was well and truly outmatched. He didn't stand a chance against so many of us.

"Give up!" I demanded, already balling my fists for the final fight.

Then, to my surprise, my doppelganger nodded. "Very well."

He shrank back down to standard size, and the whirring plates that had transformed into guns returned to their normal shape and slid back onto his body.

"Wait, really?" I asked in surprise.

*That was it?*

"I know when I see a battle I cannot win." My doppelganger turned his gaze on the small army surrounding him. Including Dean, this was enough power to conquer a continent.

Dean put down his axe and sighed. "Well, shit. Guess I'm not getting that fight after all."

"Uh..." I looked overhead at the arsenal of magical might I'd brought to bear to finish things. "Thanks for showing up, guys!"

One by one, people powered down their abilities and settled onto the forest floor. My matriarchs picked themselves up and dusted themselves off. Now that the bullets had stopped, they could make their way over.

I turned to Dean and whispered, "We can't... You know, attack him anyway?"

Dean shook his head, speaking in a normal voice. "Can't. Demigods who've surrendered are entitled to rights as described in the Myriad Monsters Convention according to the rules on war."

“There’s been a convention?” I asked, eyebrows raised. Nobody ever told me there had been a convention for the rules of war. I worried for some of my past tactics and grew a bit angry at some of the tactics used against me.

Dean shrugged.

I let out a long sigh. “Alright... I guess you’re coming with us back to the Hearthwood.”

“The Personal Chambers are the only room that can hold me,” my doppelganger said. “Do to me as you did to Tim.”

My shoulders slumped. “I was afraid of that.”

It looked like I was going to lose my favorite room again.

I opened a Pocket World Passage then and there, and everyone present walked with my evil twin through it. We cleared the hallway ahead of him, but he strolled ahead like this was his home. He cast a brief wistful glance around the interior of The Wanderer, eyes catching on Argona peeking around the corner. He held out his hand as though to reach out for her, but she ducked around the corner back into the Drafter’s Study.

I watched my evil twin’s hand fall limp to his side. Then he turned to the Personal Chambers, swung the door open, and shut it behind him.

“Mac, disconnect the Personal Chambers,” I instructed.

Soon, the door was replaced by a shimmering blue wave, separating the Personal Chambers from the rest of the Hearthwood as cleanly as though it had been cast into another dimension.

I turned to everyone who’d rushed to help me. “Thank you all for coming. It seems like I owe you all another favor. I’ll dig some stuff up from the clan vaults.”



The Sorcerers I’d called in for support eagerly departed at the promise of a reward, and soon Dean and I were alone. We took

a detour to one of the sitting rooms in Castle Mac. This was supposed to be my study, though the layout for the castle was expanding so rapidly I was pretty sure I had more than one these days. Thankfully, this one was already outfitted with furniture and alcohol.

“So... this Myriad Monsters Convention you told me about. I take it the usual rules against torture and coercion apply?” I asked.

Dean rummaged through my cabinets for something to drink. Eventually, he found something to his liking and popped it open. “Afraid so! Can’t do that stuff on a Demigod who’s willingly surrendered.”

“Well, there goes my plan to reabsorb him by force. Not that I think I could right now when he’s a Demigod, and I’m a Sorcerer. I’ll just have to get creative with my questioning.” I ran my fingers across my chin. “This convention of yours. It’s the first time I’ve heard of it. I take it it only applies to human demigods?”

Dean shook his head, following my thoughts. “It used to. The rules are based on what we remember of the Geneva Convention. It isn’t a one-to-one match, though. This world isn’t as developed as Earth. Most elves don’t even know about other regions of the world, and many have never even left the villages they manifested in. But for us Demigods, it’s a different story. A few centuries back, enough of us humans reached Demigod that we decided to write down rules for how we’d treat each other in the event of a war. We wanted to be civil and minimize damage since a fight between Demigods can wreck a big chunk of a country.” Dean took a long sip of liquor directly from the bottle before continuing.

“So we made a bargain. Any Demigod who surrendered has to be treated with dignity and respect. They’re entitled to a manor home no smaller than five thousand square meters, along with at least one thousand of their choice of family members, servants, or lovers. Anything less would be considered inhumane. The elves liked the deal enough that most of the elven Demigods signed on too.”

“So technically, I’m breaking the rules of the convention by not allowing my evil twin his private manor and one thousand servants and lovers?”

“Technically, yes.” Dean shifted apologetically.

I shook my head. It seemed to me like these Demigods were a little too soft.

I let out a long sigh. “And I take it that this bargain doesn’t apply to powerful Sorcerers?”

Dean shook his head. “Nope! Sorcerers can be executed or tortured as the winner sees fit.”

I found myself more than a little annoyed at the other humans of this world. It seemed like they’d crafted a realm of luxury and relaxation — but only for a select few. It reminded me too much of the things I hadn’t liked back on Earth.

“Say, I doubt my evil twin ever signed that treaty...”

Dean flashed me an embarrassed look. “Uh... I’m afraid I already added your name to the list when the time came. Thought it would be good insurance in case the Cult of the Unblinking Eye gave you more trouble. Since he’s your clone, he counts too.”

I sighed. “Well then, I guess we have to give my robot twin his thousand servants and lovers. I’d prefer if you were there the first time I questioned him.”

Dean looked relieved at that. “Of course, buddy! Let me just finish this drink, and we’ll give your eviler half a piece of your mind!”



We decided it would be better to do this sooner rather than later. Were I in my evil twin’s position, I would have expected to be left to stew for days or even months. So naturally, I had to do the opposite of what I thought I would do and begin the interrogation immediately.

“Remind me to never willingly clone myself,” I grumbled. All this stuff about trying to out think myself was a pain in the ass.

“You and me both, brother!” Dean chuckled. “You missed my clone by a long while. I don’t envy you. They’re a pain in the ass. Mine kept trying to kill me so he could be the original. Maybe that’s what’s up with yours.”

The two of us stood before the door to the Personal Chambers, straightening our clothes and putting on our serious faces. We had to look tough and in command.

“Mac, open up the Personal Chambers.”

[Now connecting the Personal Chambers back to The Wanderer...]

“Alright, who’s the good cop, and who’s the bad cop?” Dean asked as the fading blue light reflected off the two of us.

“I think I have to be the bad cop. He doesn’t like me.”

Dean’s shoulders slumped. “Aww. I prefer bad cop.”

“Fine. You can—” The barrier faded away, cutting me off mid-sentence.

My doppelganger stood from where he’d been sitting at my writing desk. Mist and steam were in the air, and he wore a towel about his waist.

“Did you just take a shower?” I asked curiously.

“I’ve missed this place,” my doppelganger replied. His gaze swept the Personal Chambers, then settled on Dean and me.

I frowned. He wouldn’t have seen much of it in a long time. Not since capturing Tim. If I’d gone that long without a shower, I’d miss it too.

“But... you’re made of metal and magic. Do you even need to shower?”

My doppelganger cocked his head to the side. “You are made of flesh and magic. Why do you shower?”

He had me there. Cleaning the grime off myself with a wave of Earth zeal was easier. But that didn't mean I didn't enjoy having time to think.

I shook my head. He was throwing me off. This was the wrong time for that. I reminded myself that I had an evil robot twin to interrogate.

I slammed my fist on the table in a display of anger. My doppelganger seemed unimpressed, but I barreled on. "Alright, I've got a few questions for you. Starting with the big one. Why? Why are you fighting me? If we're the same person, we should have the same motivations. So why attack the Hearthwood?"

"You are too weak," my dark mirror replied. His voice turned colder and more metallic as he spoke, and he wore a sneer. "The Hearthwood would be destroyed without a stronger hand to protect it."

I glowered down at him. "And I take it you thought that stronger hand was you, huh?"

He remained silent at that. I stared him down, and he met my gaze unflinchingly.

Eventually, I moved on while Dean crossed his arms and looked tough behind me. "Next question. Why kill Ethan?"

"The Cult of the Unblinking Eye are enemies. You know this. They have attacked you time and time again, and yet you think they can be your friends? Fool." My doppelganger shook his head. "This world is not big enough for us and them."

I scoffed. "I guessed as much. But you're not me, you haven't lived through the things I have. You don't know what you are talking about."

My doppelganger stood and stared at me, quiet and unblinking. "I could say the same to you."

Our little contest would probably have gone on a bit longer, and it might have even escalated into physical conflict if Dean hadn't been there.



He stepped forward and stepped between us with an exaggerated swagger, then pointed a finger at my evil twin. “Alright, alright... that’s enough of that! I’ve got an axe and know how to use it. Sit down, metal punk! Us fleshy folk are asking the questions here!”

My doppelganger returned to his seat, and Dean flashed me a big thumbs up.

I asked the next question that was on my mind. “So you think there’s no way to make peace with the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. Fine, I understand that. But what about the Satyrs?”

“They want Sava,” my doppelganger replied. “Their king is arrogant and thinks little of you. Worse, he needs a keystone elf like her to lay claim to his conquered territory. He will take her from you.”

“I can protect her!” I had more than a little heat in my voice. I didn’t like someone saying someone would take Sava from me. Worse, he was talking about it like it was an inevitability. It wasn’t. That was over and done with. I had already dealt with the Satyr King, and he had agreed not to bother me and mine again. “I’ve already saved her. The Satyr King gave me that Sacred Grove you destroyed as compensation for his failed attack. Now I have a captive Demigod as a bargaining chip in case he does anything else.”

My doppelganger shook his head as though he couldn’t believe my stupidity. “You think embarrassing him will protect you? You think deals and bargains matter? That Sacred Grove was more weakness, so I cut it out. Only one thing stands between you and what you cherish.” He clenched his fist and held it up. “Power. Your personal might. You have forgotten that.”

I shook my head. “I disagree. There is a time for physical conflict. Just like there is a time for negotiation. The wars you remember all ended, and now is a time of peace. I rule the Hearthwood with a gentle hand and am well-liked. Better liked than most elven rulers, I think.”

My doppelganger wore a placid look of disbelief as he looked up at me. “You were wrong to take Sava back here. I would have protected her. I could protect everyone you care for. Now, they will not suffer for your mistakes.”

I felt my nails digging into my palms. “I haven’t made any mistakes. I can’t say the same for you.”

“You have already failed. You just don’t see it yet. If not your women, then give me our children. I will protect them until they are strong.”

I took a step forward, anger flaring. “Listen to me. You are not ever going to see any of my kids. I don’t want them so much as in the same room as you. There’s no way in Hell I’m going to let you protect them!”

“Just Argona then,” my doppelganger insisted. “She is gifted but weak. Without a strong protector, she will die. Or worse.”

“What do you mean worse?” I crossed my arms as I felt my spine tingling with fury.

My doppelganger shrugged. “Enslaved for the rest of her life. Forced to craft enchantments for her captors.”

I punched him in the face. Thanks to my growing rage, my blow must have carried more strength than it had in battle because I finally caught him off guard. The chair beneath him splintered and broke, and he fell to the floor.

Dean stepped in front of me. “Woah, woah! Remember that Myriad Monsters Convention I was talking about? Yeah, no beating prisoners! Come on, man, I’m supposed to be the bad cop!”

My chest heaved, and I waited to be punched right back. But my doppelganger didn’t respond. He sat still where he was before and looked up at me slowly. Much to my surprise, he wore a smile on his face.

It was the first time I’d seen him smiling. “You have anger in you still. Good. I thought I had taken it all with me.”

I jabbed a finger at him. “You’re not getting Argona. Period. End of discussion. You’re a prisoner here, and a prisoner is what you’ll stay.”

“Then give me some of the others,” my doppelganger asked as he climbed to his feet. “I’ve seen our castle. You have hundreds of descendants.”

I shook my head. “Make your own kids if you want some so badly!”

“I can’t.” My doppelganger looked down at himself, reminding me that he was made out of metal and magic. He was quite clearly lacking the capacity to make any kids.

Still, I was doubtful. While there was something magical about falling in love and having a child, he and I were equipped with actual magic. So far, among the Ten Thousand Worlds, I had found that where there was a will, there was a way. If my doppelganger had really wanted children and lovers, he could have made some of his own eventually. Though strangely, I wasn’t too happy with that thought either. Like it or not, my evil twin was something that originated from me. The thought of him building a life and family far away from here seemed odd. I didn’t really know how to describe it. It just didn’t feel right. Perhaps that was how he felt as well.

But I kept those thoughts to myself. My body still burned hot with the need for a fight. I would need to visit the Simulation Chamber after this to work off some of my extra energy.

I took a few deep breaths to steady myself before asking any more questions. “So that’s what all this is about, huh? You’re jealous of my life and my family, so you thought you could take them for yourself?”

“Protect them,” my evil twin said.

“If you had my memories, you’d know my women can protect themselves. Each of them is a strong and capable warrior in their own right.” I glanced at my doppelganger’s

waist with my eyebrows raised. “Besides, you don’t have what it takes to keep them occupied.”

My doppelganger glowered at me. “You took the whole of our baser desires. I have no need for them. I just want to protect them.”

I snorted and shook my head. I’d heard enough, and I was eager to slam the door shut behind me. I turned.

“Uh, before we go, I’m supposed to tell you your rights. You’re supposed to get a manor and your choice of one thousand servants, lovers, or family,” Dean said.

My doppelganger shook his head. “That will be unnecessary. I am comfortable here. And it seems I have no lovers or family to speak of.”

I left the Personal Chambers, brows drawn tight in anger. I was supposed to be asking the questions back there, but I couldn’t help but feel like my doppelganger had somehow gotten the upper hand.

I looked inward, analyzing my own feelings. The fury was obvious. The protective desire to keep my family safe. But I noticed something buried in the far corners of my heart.

Was that worry I felt?

CHAPTER  
**FORTY-SIX**

I ended up getting a lot of use out of the Simulation Chamber.

With Dean in my party, we were able to set another new high score, and the event grew increasingly popular for our attendance. The Simulation Chamber battles were already a sport that fascinated the Hearthwood, but our fights seemed even more packed than usual.

Afterward, I heard rumors that a few important Wizards from across the capital had arrived in the Hearthwood in a hurry to catch the tail end of that show. Watching people as powerful as the two of us fight could be very useful for their own cultivation efforts.

I was happy someone was having fun, since the reason I was using it so much was because I kept going for interviews with my evil twin and needed a way to work out my frustrations afterward.

He was enjoying my Personal Chambers a bit too much for my liking. He'd gotten good use out of the showers, and despite being a fusion of golem and robot, he spent every night relaxing on my soft, cushy bed.

I even caught him making himself a coffee with my coffee machine once! Why does a magical robot need coffee? He couldn't even drink it. He just sat at my desk staring at it.

"I should have locked him in the Cultivation Chamber..." I grumbled to myself. I'd been using the Cultivation Chamber myself for my daily rounds of Dual Cultivation with my matriarchs. Mac had thankfully moved all our stuff over as

soon as I mentioned using the Personal Chambers to contain my evil twin.

The way the Cultivation Chamber contained zeal meant we could use other forms of cultivation as well at the same time, but I missed having a shower in the same room. Maybe the Cultivation Chamber would get a shower after a few more upgrades.

I met up with Dean for one more meeting. Try as we might, we had trouble getting much out of my evil twin. He had an infuriating habit of turning our interrogations on their head. We ended up answering about as many questions as we got out of him.

“Ready for our daily chat with your new twin brother?” Dean waved to me, running his hand through his hair to straighten it as he held back a yawn.

“He’s not my brother. He’s an evil energy clone focused on vengeance and locked into the same mindset I held when he was created. He’s permanently paranoid and sees threats from all sides.”

Dean shrugged. “But he plays a mean game of chess. Very aggressive. That bishop and queen opening right from the start got me three times!”

I shook my head. My evil twin did have a certain ruthlessness to him. I was more of a defensive player myself, but he attacked immediately and without the slightest bit of hesitation. I would like to think that the overly aggressive style left him vulnerable to attacks, and truthfully, it did. But those openings didn’t matter when his attacks were so brutal that I couldn’t spare the resources to exploit them.

“Mac, open it up,” I said as we reached the Personal Chambers. The room reconnected with the rest of The Wanderer, and Dean and I walked in.

My doppelganger sat in my office chair, eyes closed and concentrated. I could tell he was circulating zeal through his body, cultivating even now. Looking at him, I got the

impression he'd been sitting in that same position unmoving for hours on end.

I grimaced. The only kind of cultivation I found myself doing for hours on end these days was dual cultivation. Had I lost the patience for it? Had my evil twin taken it with him when he stole a chunk of my soul and became an independent entity? I didn't like that line of thought.

"Must be getting lonely in here," Dean said.

My doppelganger cracked open an eye. "I am used to it."

I crossed my arms in front of me. "I suppose you would be."

"The offer's still open on those thousand lovers..." Dean waggled his eyebrows. "Remember, you're entitled to at least that much as a Demigod prisoner who's behaving well."

My doppelganger shook his head. "No. I have no interest in that."

"Wait, really? No interest in a beautiful, warm, and loving women doting on you?" Dean pressed, surprise painting his face. "It doesn't have to be an elf. We can get you catgirls, orc women, goblin girls, or heck, even a dwarf if that's what you're into."

"No. Begin your questions. Or we could play another game of chess." My doppelganger stared the two of us down.

I uncrossed my arms. "Wait, you're serious? You have no interest in anyone?"

"As you have said, I am a robot and a golem. I lack the tools or the inclinations for such things." My doppelganger folded his hands in his lap.

Dean and I looked at one another in horror.

"Wait, let me get this straight. You have no interest in women at all?" Dean asked, eyes wide and practically pleading.

"No. Now, these are not the questions you came to interrogate me for. Ask your real questions," my doppelganger

said.

I waved my hands. “Wait... wait, so your desire to protect the people of the Hearthwood was...?”

“Strictly platonic. Now, please return to the interrogation. You are getting off topic,” my doppelganger demanded.

Dean and I fled the room and slammed it shut behind us.

“Sorry, Theo. There are limits to how much I can take,” Dean panted.

I placed a hand on his shoulder. “Maybe we should let him simmer for a few weeks. I’m not sure I can handle another interrogation like that.”

“Agreed.”



The next two weeks saw me returning to my usual routine. I rotated through my matriarchs every night, doing a little dual cultivation with each of them. Amisra came to visit the Hearthwood as well and was serving as my eyes and ears in the capital. I wanted to know if Tivana’s mother, the Queen, had any plans for me. I wanted to reach the Demigod realm before she decided to check and see how many grandkids I’d pumped into Tivana.

She’d been quite eager for at least a hundred the last time I’d spoken with her, but so far, Tivana was still strictly focused on cultivation. I think the two of us had quietly come to the same conclusion.

It would be best to reach Demigod before she showed up if we didn’t want her to invite herself into the Cultivation Chamber to make sure I was sleeping with her daughter properly. That seemed like the kind of thing she would use her royal authority for. Given her father, Dean, was staying in the Hearthwood, that would be extremely awkward.

It was tough enough being in a relationship with his granddaughter under his nose, though I half feared the only



reason he hadn't come to me about that was because he was consciously choosing not to connect the dots.

But I ended up having to return to the capital far sooner than I thought.

A knock on my door roused me from my thoughts as I sat in my study, managing my schedule of kids to meet for the day. I'd just finished meeting three of my daughters who'd chosen to combine their time to get a little more of it. We ended up gardening, and I showed them all around what was left of the Sacred Grove.

I was trying to figure out what I'd do for my next meeting when Dean burst into the room.

"Woah, Dean! You can't be opening doors like that in my Castle. Ask Mac if I'm... uh... busy... before you open them." I set my pen and paper aside as I rose to greet my friend. Only then did I see the anxious look on his face. He was nervous about something.

"No time!" Dean said. "Look, Theo, I've got to go! The capital is under attack, and I can't figure out how to operate your teleporter!"

I jumped to my feet. "Lead the way!"

The Teleportation Array I used was special, more so than what Dean was used to. The ones the elves designed were simpler and less reliable. Apparently, they also carried a risk of teleportation accidents, which could split a person in two. That was the source of most people's evil clones, including the one Dean spoke of that turned against him.

Since I already had one evil clone and no wish for a second, I was happy The Wanderer had provided an alternative. Its Teleportation Array was much more reliable.

But the cost of that reliability was the fact that it ran off the energy provided by The Wanderer instead of regular zeal like Dean was probably used to. That was likely what had given Dean trouble. Prior to this, Mac had always done it for him.

"Mac, tell everyone I'm going to the capital. Get a team of aid workers ready. There's going to be wounded. I want

Melise and the other healers ready to help. Get some Earth cultivators ready, too. I expect we'll have to stabilize some falling structures.”

[Ah. So that's why your friend was kicking down every door he could find at hypersonic speeds.]

Soon, the two of us were at the Teleportation Array, and a command later, we were speeding on our way to the capital.



The capital of Deania was still packed. Now that orcs were no longer roaming the countryside, and after an evil witch from another world tried to turn everyone into vampires, I'd have thought people would be looking for somewhere else to live.

But apparently not. Any reduction in the price of real estate due to a nigh-apocalyptic invasion was soon undone, and the city was as packed as ever.

The homeless population living in the city's slums was as large as it was when the city was under siege, and the wealthier shops lining the floating mountains looked busy and full.

But Dean's gaze was focused elsewhere. He pointed, and soon, I saw what the problem was. The Planetary Defense Array had targeted the capital.

“Theo.” Dean pointed to the sky. Raining down like ants pouring from a disturbed anthill were golems. Hundreds of thousands of golems.

Worse, these were not run-of-the-mill golems like the kind shops in Deania might sell. They weren't even the rare and technologically advanced golems we produced in the Hearthwood.

These were golems crafted by the Planetary Defense Array itself, manufactured by unknown means for one purpose. They were here to secure more souls to continue powering itself.

The Planetary Defense Array must have decided the capital was a good place to harvest more souls. Either that or this was the same sort of fate-altering scheme that had sent the dragons our way months back.

I spotted several distinct kinds of golems in the air above us. The most common were shaped like giant birds of prey. They dive-bombed the city, talons releasing blasts of energy strong enough to pierce the flesh of an ordinary elf or mage acolyte.

When they struck, they cut right through flesh and bone and carried the struggling and dying elf up to one of the nearby mountains. There, they'd finish her off and scarf down her wisp for transportation back to the Planetary Defense Array's main complex.

Other, larger golems struck the ground like meteors. They emanated strength similar to that of powerful True Mages. They were made from four rugged stone and metal limbs and crawled along the ground in forms akin to turtles. They roamed the streets with turrets lining their armored backs and shooting at anything that moved. As I watched, dozens of mage acolytes fell victim to them, making their wisps easy pickings for the bird-type golems.

From these larger turtle-like golems, I spotted more sparkling golem cores emerging. They seemed to have no bodies, and yet they floated away anyway.

It was only then I realized the creative trick being played by the Planetary Defense Array. These giant turtle golems were just vehicles to deliver its army, which would use whatever it found on the ground to assemble itself and enter combat.

Some of the cores surrounded themselves with bursts of wind and became wind golems. Others cloaked themselves in sparkling bursts of electricity. Still, more claimed the blood of elves who'd already died in the initial attack.

Their numbers were only growing, and soon, they'd be overrunning the city unless the various wizards dealt with them quickly.

But the wizards would have greater problems. The fiercest of all the assailants the Planetary Defense Array had sent our way were the humanoid golems. These behemoths stood nearly as tall as the model Argona and I had taken control of in the Hearthwood and roughly as strong.

Most were a head shorter than the ones we'd taken control of and were only at the wizard realm, but a few stood even taller than mine and were large enough to grab the floating mountains and hold them in place.

That was probably what was preventing the queen from smashing those mountains down on top of these invaders like Tivana had when faced with the last army that assaulted the city. Worse, they were shaking the mountains back and forth like overgrown children trying to shake candy out of a container.

Elves were falling from the mountains. No small number of people must have thought the mountains were safe from those big golems roaming the city streets on the ground and had thought to take cover in the air.

That was clearly a mistake, since now people were spilling onto the ground in large numbers. They toppled from their homes and businesses and were either caught by the bird-like golems swooping through the air to catch them or splattered on the ground below. There, their helpless wisps would meet the same fate as those caught in the air.

“Let’s take out those two!” Dean shouted. “I’ll grab the left. You take the right.”

“Got it!” The two of us shot toward our intended targets at high speed.

Dean hit the golem he was targeting with the force of a meteor. He punched a hole the size of his body clean through the thing and popped out the other side.

“Hey there, big guy! Pick on somebody your own size!” Dean shouted at the golem that was many, many times larger than him.

He shot through the golem several more times as I watched, poking more holes but not slowing it down in the least.

Seeing his lack of progress, I opted for a different strategy. I activated *Might of a Giant* and grew myself to enormous proportions. Within seconds, I could match the giant golem for height. Then I grabbed my target under the arms and suplexed him, driving his golem head straight into the ground.

“I’ve had enough of evil golems lately!” I grunted as I bent straight and jumped on top of the prone golem before it could get up. I planned to rip this thing limb from limb.

We finished off the two massive golems we were fighting soon enough, but one question still burned in my mind.

“What are Sam and your daughter doing?” I called to Dean, who was in the middle of jumping up and down on his golem’s face.

The city already had two Demigods. They should have taken care of all these big golems if this was all the Planetary Defense Array had brought to bear.

Dean pointed up. “Trying not to get harvested themselves.”

There, I saw the biggest and most ferocious golem I’d seen yet.

I stared at it, though the more I stared, the less I saw. It shifted and squirmed like it was only partially in this dimension and that whatever its true form was, it was located elsewhere. To me, it just looked like an eldritch horror of squirming appendages, with only a few parts of its body resolved enough to see clearly.

Its form was an amalgamation of high-grade ancient magitech and raw zeal. Every inch of it was covered in ancient runes that might have once meant something to the elves of this world, but whose meaning had since been lost to time.

It had a set of four enormous wings, more akin to sails than anything biological. They didn’t seem to be active, though. Instead, the enormous golem was supported by six spider-like mechanical legs. Each leg was as large as a skyscraper and

should have been firmly planted into the ground around the city.

But like the rest of the bizarre contraption, the legs vanished roughly a kilometer away from the enormous golem's body, like distant trees shrouded by clouds. They probably were anchored to the ground, just in a spatial dimension beyond my perception.

Up in the sky, I could see two figures fighting against the many tentacles that sprouted from the main bulk of the enormous golem. That had to be Sam and the queen.

“Should we rush up there and help them?” I asked Dean.

Dean shook his head. “They can handle themselves. They're not trying to destroy the thing. Just keep it busy. They need us to drive off the rest of these big guys before they eat our city.”

Dean jerked a thumb behind him to the rest of the enormous golems rampaging throughout the capital.

“Got it. We clear the big guys up, and that frees the Wizards up to fight the turtle things. Then we can help with the big fight.” I nodded and rushed off after my next target. Dean peeled off and headed in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER  
**FORTY-SEVEN**

What followed was a few minutes of flying from target to target, systematically destroying every enormous golem I came across.

I practically flung myself from opponent to opponent, dismissing *Might of a Giant* as I traveled for that little bit of extra mobility, then recasting it again to wrestle another giant golem to the ground.

My matriarchs arrived a minute after Dean and I had, and soon I spotted Tivana in the fight as well, supported by Melise, Illiel, and Yorik. They had a tougher time taking down the big golems than I did, but they were making more progress than Amisra and the Royal Guard on the other side of the city.

She was a Sorcerer, but a newly minted one. Which meant she was perfect prey for one of the giants. Still, she looked like she was holding her own with the help of her subordinates, so if she could tie one up a while longer it would be a worthy contribution to the battle. We'd help her if she started faltering.

Next to come through were Eltiana, Assyrus, Nela, Korra, and Comela. I was surprised to see my daughter along, but I had recently called her one of the most powerful True Mages in Deania. If her mother thought she would benefit from the combat experience, then I'd just have to bite my overprotective lip and let her fight.

I was just glad Argona wasn't here. I knew for certain she'd be furious she missed the opportunity to capture more powerful golems for the Hearthwood, but the risk these posed

now that they were already active was just too high. At most, I'd let her pick over the debris after the battle was won.

Reinforcements were pouring in from everywhere, though the forces of the Hearthwood were certainly the most potent. That made me more than a little proud. Given our current power, we were roughly neck and neck with the royal family. No wonder Sam and Dean wanted me to take over the next golden age.

I spotted Baroness Jynna from Bronzeridge arriving with the full might of the Spirelords of her city. Soon after, I saw matriarchs from the Bluefield Clan and even some from what was left of the Moonbow Clan.

More hands made light work, and soon, I was no longer needed. I rushed in to aid Amisra, freeing her to go on the offensive as I took her enemy apart piece by piece. Soon, the big humanoid golems roaming the city were dead, which freed up the wizards to take out those armored turtle golems. Once those things were destroyed, the rest would be cleaned up.

The only thing left was to drive off the big guy in the sky above. Out of the corner of my eye, I sensed Dean with the same idea. He'd finished off all the humanoid golems on his side of the city and was rushing up to help Sam and his daughter, Queen Lyanva.

"I hope you two don't mind us jumping in!" I shouted to Sam and Queen Lyanva.

"Is the city safe?" Sam shouted.

"Have you impregnated my daughter yet?" Queen Lyanva yelled.

"Yes and no!" I shouted back in reply. A tentacle swung between me and the two of them, thankfully cutting off any further questions about Tivana.

We fought like that, dealing damage but not truly killing the beast. It didn't matter, though, since the tide of the battle on the ground was turning.

With a surplus of wizards on our side, the turtle golems were dying. Most of the city's lower-level populace had



already made it to safety, so there weren't many elves for the birds to prey upon either.

All in all, we were winning.

That was when I finally realized what the big guy we were fighting was for. It wasn't here to destroy the city. It was here to evacuate the other golems after a successful raid.

Its appendages plunged downward, stretching far further than they should have given the mass suspended in the sky. Each armored turtle golem they brushed against vanished like they were stepping into a pocket realm, no doubt to join whatever reserve of forces the big golem kept for attacks such as these.

Once the evacuation started, the bird golems started flying out of reach. I waved my hand and sent out a thousand smaller Sword Storm blades to cut them down. Most of those bird-like golems were carrying an elven wisp in each talon.

While it was too late to save their lives, I could save their souls. Being used to power an army of killer rogue golems had to be a shitty reincarnation.

So I saved as many as I could, though many thousands were no doubt lost. Even with us acting so quickly, there were probably several tens of thousands dead and harvested.

No wonder the elves hadn't left the World of Sanctuary and Serenity of their own accord in generations. Given elven breeding rates, even with their casual disregard for life, they should have eventually grown to vast numbers. But with losses like these, I was impressed they could even muster enough of a population to build cities. My mind drifted to the other continent I'd visited, where we'd fought the dragons. Some regions really couldn't build cities again yet.

Much to my irritation, the giant golem in the sky started scraping up the remains of the fallen humanoid golems. Their shattered pieces were sucked up into its tendrils before vanishing. So much for letting Argona salvage useful components from them after the battle was won.

The sky trembled overhead, and the enormous golem overhead shrank in on itself. It folded its limbs inward, though the last to vanish was that enormous lidless eye. Soon, it faded and was gone, and the capital of Deania was safe.

“Job well done, Father! You too, Uncle Sam. And you, son-in-law!” Queen Lyanva clapped her hands together to dust them off. “My royal butt needs to plant itself on the royal throne for a quick nap. Oversee the city reconstruction for me, please? Bye!”

The queen took off in a flash of light, flying toward the palace.

Sam chuckled as he watched her go. “The poor girl exhausted herself for that one. She was fighting hard before I arrived. Perhaps she’s grown out of her troublemaker phase.”

“Doubtful.” Dean shook his head.

I glanced down at the city below, figuring I’d make myself scarce before Dean remembered his daughter had just called me her son-in-law. “Well, I’m going to get those Earth cultivators over from the Hearthwood. I suspect we could use their help getting the city back in order. The roads are a mess.”

“Agreed. I will reverse time on the wounded and the dead if I can, though I can do nothing for those who had their wisps taken. Their souls are lost to us now,” Sam said.



The people of the Hearthwood knew a thing or two about cleaning up wreckage after a battle between titanic forces. I figured I should probably be less proud of that fact than I was. After all, that knowledge came from having far more experience than any peaceful lord should hope his people have.

But now, at least, we could put those skills to use in a territory that wasn’t my own. The capital was in shambles, and it would be months before people calmed down enough for things to resume as normal. Empty shops and homes would

have to slowly revert to royal ownership, and new elves would have to manifest to replenish the city's missing population.

It was easy enough to get public services up and running again. Elves needed surprisingly little infrastructure to function. A single earth cultivator could rebuild broken buildings and repair destroyed roads. Repairing the public baths took a bit more work, but was fixed as soon as I found the crack in the aqueducts.

Containing the flesh-eating giant piranhas that escaped the lake just outside the palace was tougher, but we managed that too.

We busied ourselves with cleaning up the capital, one collapsed building and injured citizen at a time. I marshalled the aid workers from the Hearthwood, shouting orders and directions while helping with the heavier work like lifting fallen buildings into place.

Melise and the rest of the spirit healers from the Hearthwood were needed everywhere. Sam's ability to reverse time and resurrect the dead was amazing, but he had a limited time to cast the spell after death, and he was needed just about everywhere. He was focusing on reversing regions of heaviest casualties. Most of the wounded merely needed regular healers.

Many of my children made the trip as well. Argona showed up with a small army of golems to help, but I had to send them back. These people had just been attacked by an army of evil golems. The last thing they needed was to see more of them. She returned on her own, though without the help of her equipment, she was just one Mage Acolyte among many helping pick up the pieces.

Many of my newer children made the trip as well. I spotted the white hair and bright smiles of the Whitewood Clan appearing in mass, though each face was tempered by a certain sharpness that I was surprised to realize came from me.

While the Whitewood Clan seemed to be generally useless for battle, I suspected the same wouldn't be true for my children by them. More than once, I watched my children fend

off a desperate and frightened beggar with a nimble use of nature zeal their mothers could manage if only they'd had the temperament for fighting.

But those desperate beggars and newly homeless looking to pick a fight were rarer than the civilians, eager to show us their gratitude. Word had spread of the Hearthwood Clan across all of Deania.

These days, we were no longer a fledgling power, but a fully established one. In fact, my clan now held more power and influence than all the other major clans of Deania. In fact, we'd leapfrogged the Deanian Royal Family entirely and now ruled over several nations nearly as large as Deania in a messy network of tribute and vassalage.

I was very pleased to find we'd gained a reputation for being ruthless and generous instead of just ruthless like most of the other clans. In general, most viewed us positively. The lies our rivals once spread about us had been smothered with our rise. Minor factions like the Demon Star Clan didn't dare dream that they could usurp us now.

By the time we ended the day, I was more exhausted than I had been after the battle. We'd made a significant dent in the work that needed to be done to get the capital in working order, and most of the labor that remained could be done by the people who lived here.

I left a Pocket World Passage open for people and supplies to come and go freely from the Hearthwood, and we'd gone from just sending over emergency rations to letting through a few merchants eager to buy and sell.

With my part in everything mostly done, I was invited to regroup with Sam, Dean, and Queen Lyanva. We gathered in the palace, though it was still undergoing repairs.

"This is a rare honor," I remarked. I was the sole Sorcerer among the trio of Demigods, and from the looks of things, they had a serious discussion planned.

"Son-in-law!" Queen Lyanva rushed up and wrapped her arms around my waist in a hug. "You didn't answer me before.

Perhaps you should bring Tivana for a demonstration. If you haven't made me any grandchildren yet, you might be doing it wrong. I could help you correct your form, you know."

I waved the queen off. "Thank you, but the Dual Cultivation is working just fine."

I pried her off me just before Dean burst through the door. "Theo! Just the man I wanted to see. Come on, let me show you my secret bunker!"

I shook my head. "Dean. If you show off your secret bunker to everyone, it isn't exactly a secret bunker."

"But it has a really cool blast door! You gotta check it out!"

So we checked out Dean's blast door. It did indeed glow and have many flashing lights, which I didn't think exactly went with the idea of a blast door.

But it did have a built-in Pocket World large enough to hide Deania's entire royal family. While the zeal concentration was a little low, the sprawling country estate dotted with little cottages within seemed like a pleasant spot to wait out an apocalypse like the one that had just come for the city.

Somehow, I found the idea of all the nobility in Deania living like Heartwielder-level villagers in a pocket world a little funny. If not for the magically running water and other luxuries available, I wouldn't have been surprised to find the cluster of cottages somewhere in Deania's countryside.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to start piling people in here soon enough..." Dean sighed. "This attack is just the first. For a city like this one, more are bound to come. The Planetary Defense Array won't let up until it's gathered enough souls."

"We've shown it. We're a pretty tough nut to crack. You really think it'll try again?" I asked.

"That's been tried before," Queen Lyanva explained. "Unfortunately, that's more a matter of luck than ability. The Planetary Defense Array has a lot of resources to throw around. A small city might go unnoticed by the more powerful

devices in the array, but all it takes is one of them deciding you're a good target for them to send enough firepower to ruin you. For a city as large as the capital, being destroyed is practically a guarantee."

I let out a long breath. "Which probably means they're going to come for the Hearthwood too. Thanks for the warning. I'm guessing this meeting was supposed to be a discussion of what you're going to do about it? Surely, you don't intend to pack the entire city into that pocket world."

"Can't." Dean shrugged sheepishly. "As much as I'd like to save everybody, the zeal concentration can only support so many. Not to mention food. Heartwielders eat a lot, and the pocket world can only produce so much."

I shook my head. "Don't feel bad for looking after your own. I've got multiple plans as well. I'm not bringing our vassal nobility into the Hearthwood. They'll have their own bunkers. But I'd still like to save as many of the cityfolk as I can."

Sam nodded, stroking his chin. "Honestly, your best bet is just drilling them to take cover. That's what I did last golden age when it was my turn to manage the kingdom. It's ruthless of me to say this, but the Planetary Defense Array meets its quota for heartwielders and mage acolytes fairly quickly. They're easy to find and even easier to kill. As long as your people make themselves harder to catch than those of the neighboring regions, they have a decent chance of making it through to the next Golden Age."

"Safety drills? I can get behind that." I ran my hand through my hair. "Run me through what you guys have planned."

Dean planted a hand on my shoulder. "Good! Because part of the safety drills involves having a few big underground bunkers for everyone to run to. And to build those, we need a powerful earth cultivator. And it just so happens you're the most powerful earth cultivator in the area."

I chuckled. It turned out their plan wasn't so different from what I was already enacting in the Hearthwood's vassal

kingdoms.

“Alright, now I see why you invited me. Tell you what, Dean. You cut open a few pocket spaces for me, and I’ll help you build your bunkers.”

CHAPTER  
**FORTY-EIGHT**

After pooling efforts with my friends, building bunkers became a lot easier. The days following the disaster in the capital turned into weeks, and our aid workers there shifted from immediate relief to long-term reconstruction.

Most of the other clans went home, but I kept the connection to the Hearthwood open. It was a positive experience for my newer family members. I didn't like the sterile upbringing of study and martial training most larger clans used for their new young members.

I'd met too many of them who'd been arrogant and thought nothing of the struggles of ordinary elves. They were powerful and yet ignorant, which was a dangerous combination. I didn't want that for my children. They should understand and appreciate the common elf's struggles.

While I spent my time physically moving earth and building, the underground areas the bunkers would actually go, Dean used his spatial magic to fold the areas smaller and tighter.

I would build something roughly the size of a football field, and then he would bundle it up until it was a pocket of space no larger than a shower stall. Though this would cut off the connection to ambient zeal, it would make the bunkers much harder for a horde of angry golems roaming overhead to detect.

Sam was able to add an extra layer of protection with his Fate cultivation. While he couldn't dig or twist space, he could



distort probability and look into the future. We'd make sure to put the bunkers in places that he said were unlikely to be found, and after we finished construction, he layered on more fate magic to hide the bunkers further.

All in all, it was a remarkably solid combination, and we took a brief tour around my subordinate factions such as the Ancient Tree Temple, Lifekeeper Sanctum, and all the other regions busy building their own bunkers. Given the same treatment, they might just be able to make it through this disaster.

All bets would be off if one of those enormous one-eyed interdimensional golems showed up, but the elves staying in these bunkers would be for Heartwielders, Mage Acolytes, and some of the poorer True Mages. They wouldn't be worth one of those things showing up. Everybody stronger than that would be well advised to head to the Primordial World and take shelter there. According to Sam and Dean, many already had.

It would have been a pleasant stay in the capital with my friends if not for Queen Lyanva. I had to pay careful attention to her locations at all times because she was quite intent on asking for details about my relationship with Tivana.

And just telling her we were doing well wasn't enough. She wanted all the spicy details, right down to repeating her request to watch the two of us go at it. I could only think of so many polite ways to turn her down. So I had to do my best to make myself scarce when she came knocking. Thankfully, Sam seemed to understand and cast that same probability-altering spell on me.

Back in the Hearthwood, safety drills became a daily part of life. Elves, both newly manifested and longtime citizens, practiced the route to the nearest bunker, faces grim as word of what happened at the capital spread thanks to all the aid workers who'd seen the destruction first hand.

Meanwhile, I made sure my family knew to rush into The Wanderer. I trusted the ship's ability to survive the Planetary Defense Array's attention more than anything Sam, Dean or I

could make. After all, we'd found human artifacts from who knew how long ago, and they were in better shape than most of the elven ruins.

With the immediate crisis managed and the defensive measures in place, I was finally able to turn my attention back to my personal activities. And right now, that meant my doppelganger.

"What do you think, Dean? Has he stewed enough?" I asked.

Dean shivered. "I don't know, man. You can't trust a guy who doesn't want a little lovin'. Who knows what he could be thinking? He's basically an alien."

"Well... alien or not, it's past time we check in on him."

The two of us walked up to my Personal Chambers. "Mac, open up the door for me, please."

I found my evil twin sitting in the chair in my room, much as he had before. His eyes were closed, and he was quietly cultivating. He'd long since stripped the chamber of any and all ambient zeal, which meant there couldn't be much to do except work on furthering his concept of Strength. Either that or work on picking up a new one.

He opened his eyes and looked up as Dean and I entered.

"Welcome back. Come to make the most of our last meeting?" my twin asked.

I chuckled. "Oh, I still have many more interrogations planned. I hope you had some time to think while you were here by yourself."

"Plenty. Ask your questions. Make the most of this time we have left."

My grin dropped. "Why are you so certain that you'll be out of here soon?"

"Because you'll pay the price for remaining so passive. Building bunkers, really?" My doppelganger raised an eyebrow.

I felt a chill crawl up my spine. How did he know what I'd been up to the last few weeks? I quickly checked in with Mac, who confirmed that my doppelganger had received no visitors. So, how had he known about the attack on the capital and my current bunker-building project?

"No one is more concerned about the defense of the Hearthwood than I am. That's why I'm building the bunkers. That way, I'm ready for anything that comes our way." There was an edge to my voice. Once again, he'd caught me off guard.

My doppelganger shook his head. "Were I in your shoes, I would not waste time building bunkers. You know the names and faces of the enemy. Crush them. Only then will you be safe."

I laughed. "If someone of my level could destroy the Planetary Defense Network, it would have long since been disabled. It would swat both me and you aside like a bug."

"It is a tool that lies in the hands of your enemies. They will use it against you. Your bunkers will not be enough when they direct it to attack us. Or when they attack us themselves."

I rolled my eyes. "Who are these enemies you're talking about? And just how are they going to send the Planetary Defense Array our way?"

"Someone sent the dragons toward the Hearthwood. You shifted the planet to prevent it. But they could use the same trick again. Or they could simply send their forces to crush this city to rubble."

My brows tightened. "You know who did that?"

"I know our enemies. The Cult of the Unblinking Eye and the Satyr King both have the means and will. It could have been either."

I scoffed. "So you don't know who did it."

"Does it matter?" My doppelganger rose to his feet. "We know who might have done it. We have targets. It's best to destroy both of them."

I sighed. “You know, I feel bad for you. I really do. You’re nothing more than a murder bot. It’s a sad way to live.”

His eyes lingered on mine. “You will know true tragedy soon. Mark my words.”

I turned, deciding to mark this down as one more unproductive interrogation, just like all the ones before it. “Maybe you’ll start talking sense the next time we meet.”

Dean glanced between me and my evil twin. “Uh, good talk, robot Theo.”

“Goodbye, Dean.”

Mac shut the door behind me and cut the Personal Chambers off from the Hearthwood.

“That guy has a way of really putting me on edge...” I muttered to Dean as we left.

Dean chuckled. “Yeah, well, I guess I know why you’re so paranoid. You literally do it to yourself.”



Before the sunset, my evil twin’s dark prophecy came true. Disaster came for the Hearthwood without any warning.

I was going to work my frustrations off with a bit more Dual Cultivation with my matriarchs when an alarm blared loud through the Hearthwood.

I opened my window and bent my ear to hear whispers of conversation, hoping I could figure out what it was about. I was pretty sure that I didn’t have another bunker drill scheduled for tonight, but I’d delegated enough of that task by now that I couldn’t be sure.

What I heard was mostly the dull chatter of thousands of voices, all speaking over one another. Night never truly came for the city since, by now, we’d reached enough size to develop a nightlife. More than that though, at higher cultivation levels, elven bodies needed less sleep, and eyes

pierced the darkness much better, so the higher-leveled cultivators were usually up and about later than the rest.

Many stores catering to more powerful cultivators didn't open until the sun set when the heartwielders and mage acolytes had gone to bed.

The conversation was dying out already by the time I listened to it. The blare of the sirens was supposed to catch everyone's attention and wake those who'd fallen asleep.

"Is this another drill? We've never had one at night before."

"Perhaps it's the real thing. We'd best get to the bunker ahead of everyone else. They might shut the doors early. It's better to be safe than sorry."

"Is anyone else feeling sleepy? Really sleepy?"

I used all my Mind-magic-enhanced thinking speed to puzzle through thousands of comments, but that last one caught my attention. She sounded tired. Quite tired. And yet, when I extended my senses toward her, I sensed a true mage of decent power.

She should only feel that tired after a long day of work or battle. Something was wrong, and there was one thing that could put a True Mage to sleep rather easily.

*Mind magic.*

Sure enough, I found a thin blanket of Mind magic settling over her. No... it was settling over the entire Hearthwood!

Someone powerful was trying to put the whole city to sleep. And if Mac hadn't caught them, I might not have noticed until the entire city had collapsed where they stood.

I was out the door in seconds and spinning mind magic of my own to counter the effect. If whoever was attacking us wanted the Hearthwood asleep, I planned to keep everyone awake.

The trouble was that I was up against a spell, and a powerful one at that. Spreading this much power over the

entire Hearthwood would take a Demigod. Or several Demigods working together.

My mind went back to the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. I'd sent a letter explaining everything about Ethan's unfortunate demise to them, but it seemed like they weren't satisfied with it. If this wasn't them, I didn't know who else it could be.

The problem with trying to counter the mind magic I was up against was primarily one of speed. I could dismiss all the hostile mind magic with a bit of concentration, but my opponents were clearly using a practiced and defined spell. Something ingrained into their cultivation so keenly it was fast and efficient and could be used without thinking. The process I'd come up with for dismissing their sleep spell was anything but.

Getting through everyone in the Hearthwood would take weeks, and I suspected I didn't have weeks.

"Mac! This isn't working. We need to try something new. Expel as much mind magic as you can from the ground. That should weaken the spell. Then keep those sirens going and try to get as many people as you can to the bunkers. Make sure every member of my family is in The Wanderer."

[Consider it done. The Wanderer is impenetrable to foreign magic, so Sava in the Alchemist's Laboratory and Argona in the Drafter's Study are unaffected.]

"Good. Now, I need you to direct me to my companions. And warn Sam and Dean in the capital that the Hearthwood is under attack by mind magic!"

The elves that were still awake enough to make their way to the bunkers did so, though unfortunately, all the Mage Acolytes and Heartwielders who were still asleep in their beds wouldn't be waking even if someone were to barge into their rooms and stab them. On top of having a lower cultivation base and less innate resistance to hostile spells, they'd already been asleep. The sleeping spell had been twice as effective on them.

I'd need rescue teams. The obvious people to turn to were my matriarchs. They were powerful enough to make a difference. Plus, I really wanted to make sure they were alright. The anti-mind magic amulets they were wearing weren't built to fight off a spell of this caliber.

"Get Sava to focus on protecting our family. I want her in the castle and out of sight, assuming this has something to do with the Satyrs. I'm sure Illiel's fine thanks to her own mind magic. Tell her to make sure the others are awake. You'll have to direct me to any of my matriarchs out of her reach so we can wake them all up at the same time."

Mac directed me to Assyrus and Eltiana, who were both passed out face-first in a pair of ale mugs at a bar. A bit of mind magic later, and the two of them were wiping drink from their faces and pulling themselves together.

"Theo!" Assyrus went pale as I saw the deadly scowl on my face. "Uh... I swear we don't drink until we pass out every night! I don't know what got a hold of us..."

"Quick! Take off your clothes to distract him while I make my getaway!" Eltiana shouted as she jumped to her feet.

Assyrus reached for the buttons on her shirt.

"There's no time for that," I interrupted. "The Hearthwood is under attack! You two were under the effects of a sleeping spell. I need you to grab as many people as possible and haul them to the bunkers where they'll be safe."

"Oh... Oh! So it wasn't the ale? Got it, Patriarch!" Assyrus and Eltiana scurried off.

Tivana and Illiel had been in the clan library reading. The two of them hadn't even noticed the sleep spell descending on the city, likely thanks to Illiel's passive defenses against mind magic. She probably would have seen the spell in the air around her, but the two of them looked like they hadn't looked up from their books for a long time.

"You two! The city's under attack! I need you both on rescue operations now!" I ordered. The two of them rushed to

the window I was flying outside, and Illiel gasped when she saw the scope of the magic at work.

I retrieved the rest of my matriarchs one by one, gathering them up and getting them in action. I still wasn't sure what was happening, but I was certain I wouldn't like it.

My eyes caught a figure running through the night streets. I would know that green hair and dress anywhere. "Hey, Sava! I need you in the castle! What are you doing out here?"

She turned her head ever so slightly, but instead of the skin of her face, I saw only green jade.

*Son of a bitch.*

So that was where that statue had gone.

My doppelganger had always intended for me to take Sava back. He'd split off a chunk of her cultivation base to clone her the same way he'd splintered off from me. No wonder Sava had fallen to the Wizard realm after we rescued her. Now, she had a doppelganger of her own.

I would have chased after her doppelganger then and there, but she was running fast, and I had greater problems.

Mainly the booming voice of an angry and pompous Satyr overhead.

"You've disrespected the Satyr King for the last time, Theo of the Hearthwood Clan!"



CHAPTER  
**FORTY-NINE**

This was the worst-case scenario. The Satyr King had sent more agents, and the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had attacked simultaneously. I should have guessed they might take revenge together. After all, the two organizations were far closer than I should have been comfortable with.

What happened to that treaty the Satyr King and I had agreed to? I'd had his solemn word, from one ruler to another. Apparently that agreement wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. I hadn't expected it to last forever, but I also hadn't expected it to be broken so soon.

My only saving grace was the fact that they hadn't expected us to practice emergency evacuation drills all month. Otherwise, we'd probably have lost most of the Hearthwood's population in the opening attack.

But even with tens of thousands already in the bunkers, the attack turned much of my beautiful city into rubble.

The sky turned dark, blood-red as the Satyr Demigods among my assailants channeled some dark power. I couldn't see what it was, but the flood of earth zeal alone was torrential, and there were other aspects mixed in with equal or greater concentration.

There was more than one Demigod casting that spell, of that much, I was certain. As they cast their spell, the earth trembled beneath my feet. I watched in horror as the beautiful city I'd worked so hard to build crumbled in an instant. The tall towers and elegant spires collapsed in a shower of stone

and dust. Homes, businesses, and even the grand parks of the Hearthwood were reduced to rubble.

The attack was so powerful that it created a shockwave, flattening everything in its path. Even from where I was, high above the ground, I could feel the force of it. It was less an explosion and more a tsunami of earth and debris. It was as if a giant had stomped on the Hearthwood, obliterating everything but the castle.

I tried to stop it, but the forces arrayed against me were truly titanic. Destroying something was always easier than building something. The earth zeal I was trying so desperately to hold in place slipped away like sand between my fingers, blown to pieces before titanic forces.

But they weren't done, and this time, I had a good eye on what they were doing.

Three humans were hovering in the air, along with a whole host of elves standing as still as statues behind them. I'd seen many elves who looked much the same as them during my brief stay among the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. Dressed as servants, I'd almost been able to ignore them then.

But now, with them arrayed for battle as they were, each one seemed like a sword aimed at my throat. Six elven sorcerers and more than a hundred wizards are all ready for battle.

The Hearthwood was outmatched just by the forces the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had brought on their own.

Besides the three humans, there were eight Satyrs. They were all on the bigger and rougher side, scaled up beyond the size of the Satyr King or Prince Tivar. Each looked like they were cut from the same cloth as the Satyr Demigod I had defeated before.

Like him, they wouldn't be able to throw around as many powerful elven wisps as Prince Tivar had, but they would have immense physical strength and the will to use it.

If I was only fighting the Satyrs, I might be able to keep my distance and trap them one by one in The Wanderer's

Pocket World Passage. But there were so many of them, and they had the full support of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye.

I stared up at them. Dust filled the air, thrown up from the destruction of the city I'd put my heart and soul into building. All those years of work, all the elves who'd left the lives they knew behind to join me for my promise of something more here in the Hearthwood... so much of it had been destroyed just like that.

Would anyone even want to come to the Hearthwood anymore, knowing we had enemies like these? Who would want to live here knowing anything they built could be destroyed in the blink of an eye?

To think that everything me and my companions had built could be flattened just like that...

Despair and righteous fury swirled within me, but I bit both back.

It was clear that they'd brought forces far more than my match. And yet diplomacy had failed me once already. I'd be a fool to rely on it again.

But maybe a fool was just what these attackers expected? Perhaps giving them what they expected would buy me the time I needed to bring over reinforcements, and maybe even come up with a plan that would make these monsters pay.

I sent a mental message to Mac.

[You there, Mac?]

[I'm here. Korra is making her way to the Teleportation Array now.]

[Good. Make sure she tells Sam and Dean to hurry. Queen Lyanva too. I'll need all the help I can get for this.]

Even if all of them came, we'd still be outnumbered. A grim smile settled onto my face. I'd need to even the odds a little before their arrival. I'd have to roll the dice once more like I did in days I now thought long behind me.

But if I gave it my all, I could make these people pay. And that was worth any price.

So I squared my shoulders and forced a level tone.

“You know, there’s a thing called knocking!” I shouted up at the eleven Demigod invaders. “To what do I owe the displeasure of such an abrupt visit?”

Several of the Satyrs snorted, and the invaders drifted down to me one by one. I held my hands at my sides, palms open. I was calm and unyielding, but not looking to turn this into a life-and-death battle. I’d been through enough of those and barely survived.

One of the Satyrs snorted a laugh. “Greeting your conquerors with such harsh words is rude where we come from.”

My lips drew tight. “You have conquered nothing yet.”

The Satyr who’d spoken raised his eyebrows and looked around at the destroyed city. “It certainly looks otherwise.”

“I have tricks you don’t want to test. After all, you’re not the first Satyr Demigod to cause trouble in the Hearthwood.” I stared him down with hard eyes. It would be best to establish a position of strength. I could negotiate from there.

“Ah yes, you killed Prince Tivar, disrespecting the entire race of the Satyrs in the process. And then you had the gall to slay the one sent to avenge him.” The Satyr shook his head, and the others all stared me down.

“Not to mention you allowed Ethan, our brother in arms, to perish in your lands.” The three humans from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye scowled at me. I didn’t recognize them, but they all seemed similar to Ethan in terms of power and appearance. “No doubt this was some scheme of yours. And to think some of us thought to extend a hand of friendship toward you...”

“It was always going to fail. I told you that from the beginning. There is a reason why we eliminate those who don’t join as soon as they awaken. If they aren’t compatible with us from the start, they never will be,” another cultist said.

I grimaced. We hadn’t even started yet, and negotiations were already getting out of hand. I had to seize control of the

situation again. Meanwhile, my eyes darted to where I knew the Level-Reducing Sentry Towers lay. They were concealed by rubble and debris, but they were still there.

If I wasn't able to talk my way out of this, I'd need to take up defensive positions near those towers and hold the line as long as I could so my friends could arrive to reinforce me. I sensed the Teleportation Array flare behind me and knew the message was already on its way.

But until they arrived, I was alone against eleven Demigods.

I'd faced long odds before, but never odds quite this long. For the first time in a long time, I wasn't sure I was up for the challenge.

"I don't suppose you'd all like to sit down to talk things out like civilized people? I promise the Hearthwood makes a good brew." My eyes darted to the destroyed remains of what had once been the Hearthwood's finest brewery. Hopefully, the elves who worked there made it to the bunkers. "Well... we used to make a good brew."

My unwelcome guests laughed like I'd told a good joke. My lips remained straight and level, though I had to fight to keep my nails from digging into my palms.

Just buying time. Just buying time...

"We didn't come here to sample your local provincial ale," the Satyr who was speaking for his group said. "We're here to claim our due."

"Your due?" I scowled, suspecting I knew the answer.

"Hand over the Demigod you captured, as well as the Keystone Elf his majesty wants. Then we'll take you to our world so you can apologize to him in person." The Satyr leered lips in a toothy grin.

I glanced at the cultists. "And you?"

"We trust our allies, the Satyrs, to see to our needs by the time they're done with you..." the Cultist chuckled darkly.

Given his earlier words about eliminating unaligned humans, I was pretty sure I had a slim chance of getting out of a meeting with the Satyr King alive.

Before a Demigod, a Sorcerer like me was at a steep disadvantage. Before an Immortal Ascendant like the Satyr King? I wouldn't even have the chance to run.

I had no intentions of going anywhere with these Demigods. And certainly no intentions of handing Sava over to them.

“Well?” The Satyr Demigod raised an eyebrow and looked at me expectantly. “Shouldn't a Sorcerer like you be on your knees begging for mercy?”

*How had things come to this?*

Despite my best efforts, it looked like things were headed for a fight after all.

My life had been going well. The Hearthwood was growing. I was dual cultivating with my matriarchs at a reasonable speed. I had time to spend with my friends, and I'd made peace with my former enemies.

My days of war were supposed to be behind me. I was a father and a family man now.

So why had things come to this?

I felt a single tear rolling down my cheeks as I remembered what my evil twin had said.

*You will know true tragedy soon.*

Perhaps he was right after all. And if he was evil, then maybe I'd have to be a little evil, too. Strangely, a distant, long-forgotten part of me seemed happy with the revelation.

The rapid beating of my heart grew steady. The anxious fear within me subsided. I couldn't deal with something like this as the patient and caring man I was.

But once upon a time, I would have known what to say. And now those memories were coming back to me. Blood coursed through my veins, and my fists tightened.

Any words I might have thought of to appease my attackers fled from my mind. The time for words was over.

“What’s this? Crying? I knew you elf-lovers were soft, but not this soft!” The Satyr Demigod guffawed. The others joined him in, laughing at my expense.

I wiped my cheek. “That tear wasn’t for me. It was for whatever innocent Satyrs there might be and the world you call home. I will repay what you’ve done to me and mine a millionfold. I swear that here and now.”

CHAPTER  
FIFTY

The Satyr Demigod let out another hearty guffaw. “Big talk, Sorcerer! Alright, I’ve had enough playing around. Grab him. We’ll search the castle for the elf, and then we can torch this dump.”

I was already running by the time the Satyr started talking. I debated heading straight for the Level-Reducing Sentry Towers to make my stand, but there were a few stops I could make first.

They’d be a gamble, but if they paid off, I might be able to thin my attackers’ numbers down to where I could actually have the tiniest, faintest chance of winning. More importantly, doing so would massively improve my chances of holding out until my friends arrived.

I set my sights on the ruins of a familiar building. Previously, it had been the external entrance to the Alchemist’s Laboratory.

The building was little more than rubble, but the structure had been connected to the room inside The Wanderer. Even the power of eleven Demigods couldn’t dent the ship’s creations, so the door stood.

“You’ll have to catch me first!” I shouted back. Soon, the Satyrs took off to chase me. The Unblinking Eye Cultists stayed behind. Good. I didn’t want them getting in the way.

Behind them, their subordinate mind-controlled Sorcerers and True Mages fanned out behind them and locked down the entire area.



I sprinted toward the unassuming door, standing tall amidst the ruins around it, casting one quick glance to ensure the Satyrs were following close behind.

Sure enough, they looked just as confident as before as they roared in fury and lunged after me. Zeal coursed through their overgrown bodies as their muscles bulged with new energy, though they hadn't yet taken to utilizing any captured elven wisps to utilize more power.

I led them on a merry little chase, letting them think they were gaining ground on me and that I was growing desperate. After several turns to trick them into thinking I didn't know where to run, I ran up to the ruined doorway and opened it wide before scrambling through it.

“You can run, but you can't hide!” one Satyr shouted.

A vicious smile split my face. While I intended to run, I had no intention of hiding. I burst through the door and skidded to a halt inside the stark, sterile interior of the lab. I spun on my heel just in time to see a Satyr barreling through the door.

I smiled at the sight.

His eyes widened the moment he crossed the threshold. He'd likely never seen such a smooth transition from the real world to regular space.

The doors The Wanderer created were such that they left no indication that those entering were stepping through into a pocket space. But a pocket space was exactly what it was, and Satyr Sacred Groves held no power within them.

“It's a tra—” Before the Satyr could cry out to warn his comrades, I jumped up and grabbed him by the throat.

He was still larger than me, but his body had no zeal. He'd been cut off from his power source and was helpless within my magically enhanced grasp.

I clamped a hand over his mouth to silence him, then, with one ruthless twist of my arms, snapped his neck. One Satyr down. Seven more to go.

I stood there a while, like a mantis, waiting for the right opportunity to strike.

The next Satyr was warier than the first, looking around the entrance for an ambush.

“Hey? Where’d you go?” the Satyr asked.

He stood at the entrance for a while, and I realized I needed to take a risk. I lowered my voice and let out a single sharp grunt in a tone that hopefully passed as the dead Satyr’s.

“Here! Quick!”

I waited a moment, and to my delight, the Satyr rushed in after his fallen comrade.

He realized his mistake when he crossed the threshold past the doorway to the Alchemist’s Laboratory. The pile of rubble that should have greeted him had been replaced by white walls and strange machines.

He stepped back as his magic fled beyond his reach, but it was too late. I grabbed a hold of his arm and yanked him in.

I dispatched him quickly and silently, just like the first. These Satyrs were going to spoil me. If only all Demigods had a weakness as easy to exploit as this one. Maybe I really could do this?

But my trick didn’t last much longer. I knew sooner or later the murders would be discovered, but I had hoped for later. One of the other Satyrs must have seen their comrade disappear.

I didn’t want them figuring out The Wanderer’s tricks quite this soon, so I slammed the door to the Alchemist’s Laboratory shut.

“Mac, disconnect the Alchemist’s Laboratory. And how are the rescue efforts going?”

[Done. And your matriarchs have saved as many as they’re going to save. I think we rescued most of the city’s population, as well as your entire family. The Satyrs don’t appear to know about the Undercity, and I am preparing the full forces of all my captured Dungeon Cores to greet them should they attempt

to search the passages out. It won't stop them, but it may dissuade them. Or at the very least buy you time.]

“Good. Tell people to be prepared to push deeper for shelter. We know there are things beneath the Hearthwood even Demigods would fear. We'll just have to risk the lesser evil and take shelter near them.”

I grimaced as I issued orders. The old me would have prepared contingencies for an attack like this. Monsters from the deepest depths of the world are ready to be unleashed. Hidden traps or legions of powerful allies. A dozen more tricks I couldn't name. How had I ever allowed myself to grow so soft?

I opened the door to the Drafter's Study. I had to shove a small mountain of rubble out of the way of the door just to get it open, but that was all the better. I wanted to be seen opening this door.

“There he is! I heard him!” Another Satyr Demigod pointed in my direction. I let him come, shuffling rocks like I was scrambling to escape. But nothing could be further from the truth. I wanted him closer.

Unfortunately, I wasn't quite so lucky at grabbing this third Demigod. The door I was using was at an odd angle, so he had to jump over some rocks and place one foot inside it.

This Satyr must have been quicker-witted than the rest. Either that, or he was better in tune with his Sacred Grove than most Satyrs were. When he felt power fleeing his leg, he moved to pull it back.

Only I already had a firm grip on his ankle.

I pulled him in, but he placed his hands on either end of the doorway and heaved himself outward, screaming all the while.

“Trap! Trap! Help!” he screamed. He thrashed and kicked in my grasp, but without his magic, my grip was as solid around his legs as iron shackles. His eyes went wide as I continued to pull. Blood poured from his screaming mouth as I tugged so hard his lower half tore free from the rest of his

body right where his torso crossed the threshold into The Wanderer.

Blood poured through the entrance, pooling oddly as gravity changed directions once it crossed the threshold.

“Gross,” I muttered, tossing half of a Satyr Demigod aside. “Three down. Five to go.”

Unfortunately, I was pretty sure I wouldn't be able to pull off my trick with The Wanderer's rooms much longer. I heard a voice ring through the air. I placed it as one of the human cultists, who'd been hovering overhead without interfering until now.

“Don't run in there, you idiots! He obviously knows your weakness and is hiding inside a pocket space. We need to flush him out. Elves! Attack!”

Shit...

The Cult of the Unblinking Eye intended to send wave after wave of elves at me until I capitulated. And unlike the Satyrs, they could enter The Wanderer without losing their powers.

The elves came for me one by one, led by three of the Sorcerers.

That wasn't so bad, but I knew it would be harder to fight them than the Demigods. I could handle three Sorcerers at once, but backed up by a small army of Wizards they'd be tough to take down. And if the Cult of the Unblinking Eye Demigods joined in?

No matter how weak mind magic was in a direct confrontation, with this many bodies to cover for them, they'd be hard to hit.

The first elf stepped over the threshold. She was slender, though taller than most elves, with a deep tan complexion and eyes that looked like they should have been sharp and determined.

Battle scars lined her arms and legs, and she had likely been a fearsome warrior in a former life. But now her eyes

were glassy and distant as she gazed far past me.

Behind her and overhead, the Cult of the Unblinking Eye member controlling her like a puppet issued his orders. I held my breath and waited for his approach, but he seemed content to hover outside the doorway on a floating platform, waiting and watching.

“Attack with everything you’ve got!”

The elf threw herself at me. Zeal filled her palms in the shape of two brown spheres. That was Earth zeal, though the way she used her powers was nothing like my own techniques.

“You’re pretty good.” I grinned as I blocked her attacks one after another. In terms of skill, she was probably a little better than I was with Earth zeal.

If I was just an Earth-aspect spirit cultivator, I would have been forced to withdraw and fight at long range. But by now, I’d stacked powers on top of powers. My World Titan Fiendbody was more than enough to keep me in the fight, even without resorting to my Spirit Cultivation.

She had a brutal, fast-paced fighting style that favored direct physical combat. Her larger stature probably gave her an advantage in that regard. A bit of extra reach in a grapple went a long way.

Unfortunately, that wouldn’t help her here. Though tall for an elf, she was still half a head shorter than me. And despite being physically stronger than most elves, I could toss her around like she was probably used to tossing others around. She overextended herself to reach me, and I grabbed her wrist.

With a twist, I broke it. She came at me with the other arm then, but I snapped that wrist too.

“I could use someone like you,” I said as I disabled her. She didn’t respond. She couldn’t with the amount of mind magic coursing through her.

It had become clear to me within the first exchange that she was highly dependent on her hands and the zeal flowing through them for her combat style. Without them, handling her

was much easier. Easy enough that I could restrain her and wrap a zeal-restricting collar around her throat.

With any luck, I'd be able to fix her up the same way I'd fixed up Teilinith and Feilinith. Heavens' knew the Hearthwood could use more powerful and loyal elven sorcerers like the two of them, especially after a day like today. And if I could liberate them from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye, that was just killing two birds with one stone.

By the time I finished collaring the Earth cultivator, two more were already on top of me. The first was as fast as the lightning she cultivated. She was probably used to moving quicker than her opponents could react.

She'd have been tough to catch if she had full control over her own senses. But the total mind control the Cult of the Unblinking Eye used to build their armies had robbed her of any spontaneity she might have had. She zipped around the room in a circle, not erring from her path in the slightest.

It made her predictable enough that I clipped her in the middle of her charge with my outstretched arm. She folded like a wet noodle, and soon, I'd captured her, too.

The other was an armored water cultivator. Sharp eyes of an unnaturally bright shade of blue bore into me as she ran straight toward my waiting fist.

I might have punched her, but the obvious way she ran straight into my attack told me something was amiss. Like the lightning cultivator, the Cult of the Unblinking Eye's mind control meant she lacked subtleness, but this was too obvious for even that explanation. No, this was simply the way she fought.

I realized just in time that she was like Assyus. She must have specialized in redirecting the attacks of her enemies back at them. I had been planning to throw quite the punch, so landing my blow would have ended badly for me as the force of my own devastating right hook came back at me.

So, instead, I caught her and flipped her upside down. Grabbing her ankle, I swung her overhead into the next

approaching pair of attackers.

Sure enough, her innate magic and techniques activated when the two Sorcerers tried to defend themselves, and the attacks they used were reflected right back at them. One used blood magic, and her own burst of blood zeal struck her so badly that she fell to the ground, skin flushed red but with no apparent wounds.

The other was completely engulfed in her own fire, but besides filling the Alchemist's Laboratory with the scent of burning hair, she seemed otherwise alright.

I flipped the elf I was using as a club around in my other hand, readying more zeal-restricting collars. There was enough iron in them that I could levitate the collars around purely with my magic and use them to seal my attacks one after another.

If this was all the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had to throw at me, then victory would be mine. I wouldn't even need to flee for the Level-Reducing Sentry Towers. I could just hide in The Wanderer until my friends arrived.

The only question was how to deal with the rest of the Satyr Demigods and the three members of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye.

With them out there, I was trapped within The Wanderer. Even if Sam and Dean arrived, they wouldn't be able to fight so many enemy Demigods in a fair fight. But if I could get rid of all the Satyrs, the three of us would be able to deal with the three Cult of the Unblinking Eye members hovering overhead.

The problem wasn't so much either the Satyrs or the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. It was the combination of them fighting together. Each force had its weaknesses, and if I were fighting either on their own, I could come up with an effective defense. The two groups of enemies synergized surprisingly well, making their unified force a tough nut to crack.

But as the victories added up, my despair melted away, leaving only resolve and determination behind. I could do this.

*I would do this!*

My brows drew tight, thinking even as I fought the elves piling through the doorway one after another.

This fighting reminded me a little too much of battling the Corpse Collector Company deep underground beneath the Hearthwood. They'd piled in just like this, practically on top of one another as they poured into our kill zone one by one.

I was so focused on fighting and planning for the next fight that I almost didn't notice when I wasn't the only one fighting on the side of the Hearthwood. Mac must have realized what I was doing and sent in reinforcements. Tivana and Yorik appeared. At first, they were just dragging away the helpless elves I'd disabled and captured, but once they weren't in the way, they joined the fighting as well.

We held the Alchemist's Laboratory against a constant wave of assailants. Despite their numbers, we defeated them quickly enough that they could never gain a real foothold within the chamber, and so though they greatly outnumbered us, we were able to fight them all off.

I wondered if we'd take care of the entire elven army the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had at their disposal this way when I heard orders echoing from outside. Apparently, their losses were stacking up too high for even the Cult of the Unblinking Eye to endure.

"Enough! We'll drive him out some other way. Everyone! Attack the castle! He has a clan in there and will protect them if they're in danger!" shouted the same man from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye from before.

I grimaced. This would have been a lot easier if he was a bit dumber. That man was both smart and ruthless.

"Theo, what do we do?" Sava asked as she stood by my side.

"Is the evacuation complete?" I asked as I stood. I finished off the last of the elves who'd tried to storm the Alchemist's Laboratory and wrapped a zeal-restricting collar around her throat.



“Yes, the whole family is in The Wanderer.” Sava picked up the wisps drifting around the room. Despite our best efforts to capture our attackers, it wasn’t always possible, and our enemies had a lot of losses to deal with.

“Then we can rebuild the Castle.”

[One minor problem with that,] Mac interjected. [The Castle leads directly to the Undercity, and it bypasses the defenses and diversions I’ve been setting up. It heads straight into the underground markets, where most of the city is located. The citizens there aren’t finished filing into the bunkers or going deeper into the dungeon. If they’re discovered by angry Satyr Demigods who’ve just destroyed the castle, they will certainly be slaughtered.]

I cursed. It looked like I’d have to fight up close and personal. This time without my tricks.

CHAPTER  
**FIFTY-ONE**

We slammed the door shut to the Alchemist's Laboratory. Mac disconnected it from the door it had previously been bound to in the Hearthwood, and then we took the route through The Wanderer's hallways.

"Father! What's going on!" Comela asked. She had a collared elven captive over her shoulders.

"You... when did you get here?" My head whipped around. "This isn't a battle you can fight, Comela. Take cover with your siblings in one of the other rooms. Or go calm the citizens in the bunkers, if you must."

"I can help, Father! I helped against the monsters, didn't I?" Comela stared me down with wide eyes. There was a certain sense of firmness to them, and I wasn't sure I could talk her out of helping. Not with what little time I had.

I grunted. "Fine. You stick with your mother. But you aren't fighting on the front lines."

"And what about me?" Another figure appeared beside Comela. It was Segolas.

"You too?" My brows drew tight.

"I fought to defend the Hearthwood before, remember? Before Comela or any of the others were strong enough to stand beside me. I'll do it again today," Segolas said. His eyes were just as hard as his sister's.

"Okay, fine. But no direct combat for you. You can send your skeletons out to assist. Comela, monitor him, and don't

let yourselves get caught outside the castle. You can't fight Wizards directly, let alone Sorcerers and Demigods."

"But maybe I can!" Argona poked her head out from where she'd been taking cover with many others inside the Hydroponic Farm's room. That was one of the few chambers large enough to house my prodigious family's size.

"Argona? Absolutely not. No way." With her, I put my foot down. "You're a non-combatant."

"I won't be in combat. My golem will be. It won't be ideal, but I'm pretty sure I can control it remotely." Argona wrung her hands together.

"It'll be a massive target. It'll probably be destroyed."

"Any moment they're targeting my golem will be the time they aren't targeting you and our mothers. If ever there was a time to sacrifice my precious creations, it's now." She winked at me. "Besides, I got more from the salvage after the battle in the capital than you think. I bet I could build a new golem at the Sorcerer level from scratch, given time and resources."

I glanced at Comela again. "Keep an eye on her, too, please."

"We'll all make it out alive, or none of us will!" Comela wrapped her arms around her two siblings.

"Stick with just that first part!" I shouted, though I could spare no more time for them. As we talked, I heard a tremendous crash. That would be the upper floors of Castle Mac being turned to rubble.

I flew up the steps to the Cultivation Chamber, which opened to my room on one of the upper floors.

With the door flung open, I found my room far dirtier and far more brightly lit than it ever should have been.

Beams of sunlight shot down through the gaping hole that had once been the ceiling. The floor was intact within the room itself, though something had sheared off most of my balcony.

I took a step out toward the handrail-less outcropping of stone and surveyed my enemies.

The Cult of the Unblinking Eye's remaining Wizards and Sorcerers were raining down spells on us. Each hit the castle walls like a battering ram, but with how heavily Mac had reinforced the stone of the castle, they weren't doing much damage on their own. The thunderous crashes were coming from the remaining Satyr Demigods.

There were five of them left, and they were making their presence known.

"There he is! I see him!" One of them pointed in my direction, and I braced. Maybe there was one last trick I could try.

"Mac, is there anyone staying in the Pocket World Passage?"

[There won't be in a minute. Clearing it out now.]

The first Satyr Demigod hit me with the force of a landslide. He flew down from where he'd floated in the sky with the cultists and struck me fist-first. I crossed my arms to block. The earth trembled, and blood rushed to my face. My temples pulsed with the tremendous pressure.

I locked my heels, but even still was pushed back. He had the edge on me.

"You're strong. But not strong enough!" the Satyr Demigod growled as he shoved his fist toward me. My back hit the far wall as I pretended to be at my limit.

In actuality, I was just waiting for an opening.

At the ground near our heels, a dozen adamantium Sword Storm blades shot into the air and skewered the Demigod from behind. They sunk deep into his flesh, Demigod or not, and made him look like a pin cushion.

"Argh!" he screamed. He let up with his shoving to reach for the Sword Storm blades behind him. These weren't ordinary chunks of adamantium. They were enchanted needles filled with the power to siphon away zeal. Though he was a

Demigod for now, I hoped to drain him of enough power that we'd be fighting on even terms soon.

“You think you can destroy my home and get away with it?!” I spat.

“Brother!” shouted another of the Satyr Demigods. But he was too slow. My Sword Storm blades siphoned away the power of their target, and he stumbled back, weakened but not dead. Yet.

“Ah... I'd forgotten what this was like...” I laughed as blood pooled at my feet.

“You bastard!” the brother of the drained Satyr Demigod shouted. My grin turned to a scowl.

“You came to my home. You caused this, not me! I was happy here, then you and your friends came and ruined it. And for that you'll face far worse than this.” I flicked my fingers up, and the Sword Storm twisted to jab and drain this new assailant just as I had the previous one.

But the other Satyr Demigods and the forces of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye weren't about to stand still while I took another of their own apart.

While one had felt like a landslide, getting struck by the other three all at once made me feel like I expected a stone caught between two tectonic plates might. Immense forces collided all around me. Dust billowed in the air as tall as a mountain, blasting into the air and then dispersing in the shape of a mushroom.

The collision of three Demigods striking me from all sides at once resulted in a tremendous explosion. Even Mac's zeal-reinforced stone cracked beneath my feet.

I blocked two of the blows well, redirecting the force away from myself. But with only two arms to block with, the third Satyr struck my ribs. I felt something crack.

As strong as the World Titan Fiendbody was, this was power beyond the Gold realm. I would have had to push my body cultivation to Diamond if I wanted to endure a punch like this.

I coughed, spitting up a mouthful of blood as I was sent flying backward. But I had no time to rest.

“Elves! Get him!” the cultist overhead shouted. I recognized that voice. It was the clever one. He’d given good orders one time too often.

I launched myself off the ground. My World Titan Fiendbody would knit together my broken bones and damaged internal organs in mere moments. But in a fight like this, those moments might as well have been an eternity.

I watched my target’s eyes widen beneath his drawn-down black hood. He wore a suit beneath his robes, and I was surprised to notice how young he looked. I would have thought him to be a teenager if not for his Demigod cultivation.

He backpedaled in the air, but as good as he was at giving orders, he clearly wasn’t a combatant himself.

My target panicked. I sensed Mind Magic around him and realized he’d expected to be concealed by an invisibility spell. But I was a powerful Mind cultivator myself and had pierced his defenses as soon as the battle began.

Realizing his invisibility had failed him, he used an ability similar to Twisted Step, making himself appear half a meter in front of his actual location. If I fell for the decoy, I would have struck nothing but empty air.

But I didn’t fall for the decoy.

Both my arms still burned in agony from blocking the attack of the three satyr Demigods, so instead of straining the healing fractures within them any further, I produced a rod of unshaped metal from my Inventory.

It was a Sword Storm blade I hadn’t finished forging yet, but all I wanted was a handhold.

I grabbed it in midair, fixing it in place with my power and using it as an anchor as I twisted around it and whipped my heel around with a kick so fast the air cracked. I shifted myself forward, past the false image of the Demigod cultist and toward his real location.

My blow struck the cultist directly in the face, and though he was a Demigod, he didn't have any body enhancements to speak of.

His teeth splintered, flinging everywhere like discarded pebbles. His jaw broke, too, and he fell from the sky to collide with the ground.

That one blow was all I had time for before the four remaining Satyrs were on top of me again, but it was worth it. Behind me, the attacking elves had fallen silent as they waited for further orders. It would take time for the cultists to realize their companion was no longer capable of speaking.

Time my own companions could use to great effect. Already, I sensed Yorik, Tivana, Melise, Nela, Assyus, Eltiana, and all the others darting between blank-faced elven soldiers and making sure they would not be fighting in this battle any further. A moment later, Comela and Segolas joined them.

“Don't just stand there, attack him!” One Satyr jammed a finger toward the remaining two Cultists who hovered in the air nearby, staring at the empty patch of air where their companion had been in shock.

The remaining two cultists scrambled away from me as fast as they could.

“Useless humans...” the Satyr growled under his breath. Then, he and the remaining Satyr Demigods shot toward me.

I led them away from the castle. They were targeting me, not the Hearthwood, and they probably didn't want to risk killing Sava by collapsing the entire castle complex.

So long as she didn't show herself, they would hopefully focus all their efforts on me.

Just as I hoped, the five Satyrs followed me, including one particularly angry one whose back was still studded with spikes of steel and adamantium. Even now, they continued to drain away his zeal and scatter it into the air.

A more skilled cultivator might have been able to isolate the spikes with their aura and stop the drain, but the Satyrs

cultivated strictly through passive means. Their understanding of their own powers and the fundamentals of how they worked was very lacking compared to other races.

When they were nearly on top of me, I heard a tremendous grating noise. Rubble was shoved aside, revealing the underground storage complex where Argona kept her biggest and best golems.

The roof and debris came away, and a massive stone hand reached up and grabbed the heavily wounded and drained Demigod.

His companions stopped, alarmed and afraid at first due to the sheer size of the golem. But then they got a good read on the power it was emanating, and their faces shifted to contempt.

“It’s only at the Sorcerer realm! Stop messing around and get out of there!” one of the Satyr Demigods shouted to their trapped companion.

But Argona triggered the golem’s fingers to squeeze harder, and the Demigod within her grasp turned red. His body should have been more than strong enough to survive the forces against him, but drained of energy as he was, the golem’s grip was inescapable.

He popped like overripe fruit, exploding into a fountain of blood and gore.

“By the king!” The Satyr, who’d been taunting his comrade a moment ago, held his arm over his face as his former companion’s blood washed over him.

“Nice one, Argona!” I grinned and changed directions.

The four remaining Satyr Demigods turned on Argona’s golem then. Now that they were taking it as a serious threat, it wouldn’t last long.

One shot forward at high speed, both fists held ahead of him as he flew straight through the golem’s eye and popped out the back of its head. Another darted within the reach of the golem’s arms and went straight for the joints to disable it.



The third went straight for the torso. That was where the control mechanism was and where the driver normally sat. If he attacked there, the golem would go down for good. So that was the Satyr I decided to keep busy.

Sword Storm blades hovered by my side, and I grabbed onto one of them to fling myself through the air. As I did so, I locked gazes with the Satyr I was hunting.

He cocked back a fist, but all I wanted was to make eye contact.

*Petrification!*

I focused and utilized one of my hidden trump cards. These Satyrs hadn't seen me use my concepts to their full effect, and after the fight with my evil twin, I'd done a bit to enhance the ability I'd used on him to new levels.

It hadn't worked on him, but after fighting him and a few of these Satyr Demigods, I was pretty sure my doppelganger had more tricks up his sleeves than this Satyr did.

The corners of his eyes started to turn pale gray, and his head locked in place. His fingers trembled as the effect spread. I focused with all my might, using the concept of Identity to transmute flesh and blood into stone.

Without a spell I knew like the back of my hand to guide me, I would have failed right away. But I knew this power. I knew what it could do and had experienced it from both ends myself.

The Demigod fought back, and my progress stalled by the time the Petrification effect reached his shoulders. But that was all I needed.

While casting the spell, I'd been rushing forward. I twisted in the air and slammed a boot against the Demigod's head.

The only part that had still been organic was the brain deep within his skull. The skull and face shattered like cracking an egg.

The now-headless Demigod toppled end over end before crashing into the ground far below.

I turned to the remaining three Demigods, but that was all the time Argona could buy me. The Sorcerer-level golem she'd been controlling from afar now looked like a giant piece of cheese. Holes lined its body from the ground to the top of its head.

It fell backward, devoid of zeal, and collapsed back onto the pile of debris that had formerly been a city block of the Hearthwood. When it struck the ground, it crumbled into a thousand boulder-sized pieces.

The three remaining Demigods turned their gazes toward me.

I retreated as fast as I could, eyes on the spot I had been planning to make my final stand in.

Buried among the rubble lay four towers meant to guard the Hearthwood against all threats. The Level-Reducing Sentry Towers had saved me against foes more powerful than myself more times than I could count.

“Get ready, Mac. We need to time this perfectly. If you can hit all three with the beams at once, I’ll have a few seconds to wipe them all out. That’s all the time I’ll need...” I whispered.

[Acknowledged. Preparing Sentry Towers...]

Two of the Satyrs rushed forward, but one stayed back. He was eyeing the rubble carefully and shot a glance from the castle to the tree line.

My eyes widened.

*He knows!*

“Wait!” the wary Satyr called out to his allies. “It’s those tower things we were warned about! Don’t go any closer!”

The other two Satyr Demigods stopped in their tracks and glared at me.

“Come on out of there and fight us like a man!” One of the Satyrs glared at me.

Another picked up a chunk of stone that had previously been the foundation of a building. “I know how we can drive

him out!”

He threw the massive boulder at me. Behind me, the others picked up boulders of similar size.

What followed was like a game of dodgeball, except I was the only one dodging, and instead of balls, the Satyrs were throwing chunks of rock the size of city blocks.

“Almost got him that time!” a Satyr shouted after I slipped beneath a flying chunk of stone.

“What do you think you’re playing at! You can’t hide from us!” the largest of the three remaining Satyrs roared as he chucked another boulder at me.

I ducked to avoid it, then scooped up a stone of my own. I reshaped it with Earth zeal until it was a perfect sphere, then whipped it with a combination of spirit cultivation and raw physical strength.

It soared at high speed and struck the large Satyr in the chest. It knocked him out of the air but otherwise seemed to do little damage.

I had cast several spells, including Layered Durability, to make myself harder to hit. I tried to hit them with my Sword Storm blades, but at this range and with all three clumped together and on their guards as they were, they quickly caught my weapons and turned them into bent pieces of scrap metal.

I even thought about trying for another Petrification, but I knew without making the attempt that I didn’t have it in me. My mastery over the concept of Identity wasn’t so great that I could use it freely, especially against foes as powerful as these.

Frustratingly, this meant that besides throwing their attacks back at them, I had no real means to retaliate. I couldn’t leave the protection of the Sentry Towers without being torn to pieces by three hostile Demigods. And they refused to approach.

I would have been content to bide my time and wait for Sam and Dean to arrive, but mine wasn’t the only fight to watch.

Nearly a minute had passed since I knocked the teeth out of the leading member of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye during this attack, and after a bit of wild gesticulating, he'd gotten his companions to order their elves to fight back against my matriarchs and children, instead of simply allowing themselves to be captured and killed left and right without resisting.

I didn't like the odds of my family against three Demigods. I was barely holding my own against three, and these three were meatheads and fairly predictable. While not as physical, the Cult of the Unblinking Eye had tricks nobody else knew. Not to mention, they still had a few dozen powerful elves under their command.

The only saving grace in that fight so far was that it looked like Tivana and Melise had dealt with the last of the enemy Sorcerers, either by killing or capturing them. That meant my companions were more than a match for the forces arrayed against them, not counting the Demigod cultists.

So long as those cultists continued to stand back and watch their subordinates fight, that is.

Not long after I had the thought, the worst came to pass. One of the cultists had enough of watching their forces get demolished by my family, and he stepped into the fight themselves.

He scanned my women, but instead of going for Melise, Tivana, Yorik, or anyone who could defend themselves, he chose an easier target.

Segolas froze, only able to move his eyes as powerful mind magic locked him in place.

"A male elf. How rare. Too bad for you, we hate male elves," the cultist sneered. He plucked a small dagger from within his robes, much like the dagger Illiel herself once wielded as a Secret Keeper for the Cult of the Unblinking Eye.

He brought the dagger up and aimed it straight for my son's throat.

Though I could see the attack, I might as well have been a million miles away. My feet were already moving, abandoning the safety of the Sentry Towers as I rushed back toward Castle Mac.

Time seemed to move in slow motion as the three Satyr Demigods grinned wide and rushed to intercept me. I wouldn't be able to rush over and block it in time.

But someone else was. Comela, his sister, threw herself at the Demigod, completely heedless of the difference in power between the two of them. She slammed into the Demigod's side with her spear and let loose her most powerful lance of golden sunlight at point-blank range.

It did little more than singe the Demigod's robes.

"Alright, if you want to die too, you can!" The Demigod reached out and grabbed Comela by the hair. He tossed her sideways back at the castle walls, but Comela twisted and landed on her feet.

Segolas struggled against whatever mental hold the demigod had over him. His limbs shook, and his body trembled. Blood leaked from his nose, mouth, ears, and eyes from the tremendous strain as he struggled with the magic.

But the might of a Demigod's spell was too much.

A golem threw itself at the Demigod. It was made of sleek adamantium and lined with powerful enchantments. I recognized bits and pieces from the turtle golems I'd seen in the capital. Argona had actually managed to cobble something together after all.

It was only a little bigger than I was, but from the power it emanated, it packed as much punch as several True Mages put together. Argona sat inside it, half exposed as she manipulated the control mechanisms within.

Argona and the golem grabbed the Demigod's arms as Comela climbed back to her feet and fired another beam of energy at him. Though still frozen, Segolas gathered enough of his power to send several of the skeletal warriors he'd had standing nearby and threw them at the Demigod.

“Argh! Enough!” the Demigod shouted. He twisted his arm and snapped the metal limbs of Argona’s golem. Then he swept his dagger through the air and sheared the skeletal limbs off of Segolas’ undead.

He turned toward Comela with fierce eyes and froze her in place just as he’d done to Segolas.

Then he reached out with a cold and ruthless hand for Argona and picked her up by the throat.

“Now, good riddance—”

He never finished. A hand much like my own grabbed him by the top of his head.

“Hands off my family,” the owner of the hand said. Strongly built and taller than the cultist by a hand, he looked much like I did. But he wasn’t me.

It was my doppelganger. My evil twin, though perhaps not so evil at the moment.

CHAPTER  
**FIFTY-TWO**

The Unblinking Eye Cultist turned his mind spell on my doppelganger. But he was no longer using his spell on True Mages or Mage Acolytes. Against someone of his own level, the spell fizzled out in an instant.

Then my doppelganger squeezed his hand and crushed the cultist's skull between his adamantium fingers.

My children froze, equal parts terrified and relieved. My doppelganger stared at each of them momentarily, a slight smile on his face. Then he held out his hand.

Spell Eater soared down from overhead and landed in his grip. He turned, pivoting on his heel, and hurled it toward one of the two remaining Cult of the Unblinking Eye Demigods, skewering him straight through the heart.

My doppelganger was far from finished, though. He launched himself off the castle at the skewered Demigod, grabbing Spell Eater and triggering its zeal-draining effects in the same moment he skewered the enemy Demigod upon it like meat on a stick.

His wide and frightened eyes met cold mechanical ones. Then, at point-blank range, my evil twin opened his mouth. The ruby buried within his tongue lit with crimson light. The Demigod cultist screamed in agony as his flesh burned to a crisp beneath the crimson laser beam.

Just like that, two Demigods of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye died in an instant, throwing the whole battlefield into chaos.

Eleven Demigods and an army of Sorcerers and Wizards had attacked the Hearthwood to destroy us with overwhelming power.

And now six of those Demigods were dead, and most of the Sorcerers and Wizards they'd brought with them were either dead or captured.

“Mfffgrp! Mfffgrp!” shouted the Demigod with a shattered jaw. I was pretty sure he was calling for his allies to regroup. That would have been a smart move. But being a bit too smart for his own good was the whole reason I ended up bashing his jaw in.

The Satyrs ignored him. But my doppelganger didn't. When my evil twin's cold and merciless gaze met the cultist's mangled face, the cultist flinched.

My doppelganger held out his hand, and Spell Eater flew from the body of the other cultist back into his hand.

He looked quite imposing as Spell Eater returned to him with a gesture. Why hadn't I ever thought to do that?

He pulled back his arm again for a throw, but this Demigod had been forewarned and didn't plan to die as quickly as his allies had.

He cast an advanced variant of Twisted Step beyond anything I'd seen so far. It was clever, and Spell Eater struck through the heart of an illusion instead of the real target.

The trick was smart, but risky. It was essentially a fake illusion. Someone who could see through illusions would know it was an illusion and his real body was a step ahead. But there was also a trick of the light that let him swap his location with his illusion a second time. He was exactly where he looked to be, as though he hadn't even cast a spell at all. Lower-level cultivators wouldn't have even seen anything happen.

While hunting down the remaining members of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye might have been nice, I had bigger problems. So before my evil twin could recall Spell Eater, I summoned it to my own hand.



“It seems I owe you something of an apology. It looks like you were right. They broke my treaty and came for us anyway.” My trusty spear landed in my hand just as one of the Satyr Demigods drew a wisp from a pouch at his waist. It glowed deep crimson and was probably somewhere in the Wizard realm. Not impressive compared to what Prince Tivar had thrown at me, but I was wary all the same.

While these brutes were manageable when using only the raw physical strength of a Demigod, I wasn't sure I could handle the true power of their Sacred Grove magic.

A lot of whooshing noise filled the air, like a bonfire catching the wind and growing brighter and hotter by the moment.

Heat washed out in a wave. Leaves from the Hearthwood's toppled trees burned to a crisp and caught flame. Wooden beams and pillars caught fire, though I saw no spark jump to them. The flame looked normal at first, but as it grew, it turned darker and deeper.

This was a magical flame, likely cultivated over the course of a lifetime by a powerful elven fire cultivator. And now the Satyrs were burning the power contained within that wisp all at once.

Even my skin felt the intensity of the heat. Whoever this elf had been, she had to have been an extraordinary wizard.

“His Majesty will be furious that I used this wisp. But you won't kill me like you did my foolish allies...” The Satyr Demigod grinned at me as he crushed the wisp to nothing within his hands, dispersing the zeal within in all directions.

Fire elementals rose from the fires, taking shape all over the Hearthwood's debris, rising in a variety of forms. The elementals fanned out across the battlefield, and as they took shape, many of them wore the form of a beautiful crimson-haired elf in a dress.

Perhaps the former elf's scattered soul fragments became the foundation for these elementals, much like how a fragment of my own soul became my evil twin.

The battlefield turned into a raging inferno, and the Satyr who'd used the wisp waved his hand overhead. Fire elementals began assaulting me and my doppelganger, but most importantly, the castle.

My doppelganger and I could shrug the growing flames off, but not everyone on the battlefield was so resilient. As fire elementals lumbered toward Castle Mac, my matriarchs and companions would have to deal with them in addition to the few remaining elves and the single cultist demigod left standing.

My doppelganger opened his jaw and shot a beam of crimson light straight at the Satyr Demigod, but the flames circling his body reached up to block it.

I sensed an opportunity. In absorbing my doppelganger's attack, he'd blinded himself. I cocked back my arm just as he had before and threw Spell Eater like a spear.

"Ha! You'll need to do more than that too—" The Satyr's boasting was cut short as Spell Eater pierced his stomach.

My doppelganger jumped down, completely heedless of the magically enhanced flame that would have cooked the flesh off any living being. He grabbed Spell Eater by the handle and dragged it downward, slicing open the Satyr Demigod's guts.

"Shit. Use the Fate wisp!" shouted one of the other Demigods. "Hurry!"

"I'm saving that for me!"

"If you save it for yourself, you'll die when you have no allies left. Use it!"

Reluctantly, one of the other Satyrs withdrew an amber-colored fate aspect wisp. It was also in the Wizard realm but targeted and concentrated, exhibiting power even Sam would struggle to pour out all at once.

Time seemed to flow backward between my doppelganger and the Satyr he'd just disemboweled. Spell Eater flew backward and landed back in my hand while my doppelganger was again in the air.

The wide-eyed Satyr Demigod, who'd been skewered a moment ago, jumped back, panic in his eyes. "Use everything! Throw it all at them! Hurry!"

The remaining Satyr Demigods seemed reluctant, even with their losses so far. But they heeded the orders of the panicked one we just skewered. I suspected he was supposed to be their leader, though the Satyr Demigods didn't seem like a tight-knit group. They certainly didn't care as much about losses as other factions I fought had.

The remaining Satyrs drew on additional wisps, some holding two of them. I suspected every Demigod had been given a powerful wisp by their king, likely alongside the Sacred Grove that gave them power. They were expending those powerful wisps now.

The Satyrs were a peculiar bunch. Few other races could afford to throw Demigods at a problem as they could. But when the source of power was a magical plot of land rather than the wielder of that power, it made sense that they'd be more willing to throw their forces away.

After all, the resources and Sacred Grove of a dead Satyr Demigod could simply be given to another Satyr, quickly restoring their race to full strength. So long as the World of Woods and Wilds remained under the thumb of the Satyrs, they would always be a power to be reckoned with, no matter their losses.

But now the Satyrs facing us were expending the wisps of their Sacred Groves one by one. There were a few unusual aspects I'd never seen before. That was a rare thing these days, because I'd seen enough elven lands to know all the most common aspects.

One of them was a blood-aspect wisp of the Sorcerer realm. Amisra wielded that power, though she kept it to herself. I never pried, but it seemed to be particularly deadly and feared. I would have to be wary of whatever powers that wisp conjured.

Another was black as night. Death-aspect wisps were black, but not this black. I got the distinct impression that it

was a wisp of shadow or darkness, and that was confirmed a moment later when the sky went dark, and I couldn't even see my hand in front of my face.

I felt the emanations of zeal as more wisps were activated one by one, but I couldn't make out their colors through the darkness and gloom. Even my perception of zeal aspects was dampened.

So, I turned my attention inward. They may have blinded my eyes, but I was not without other senses.

Though there was no light, I could still feel the ground beneath my feet. Vibrations traveled through the ground and up my legs. Most were from the crumbling ruins scattered around the battlefield. Others were from the battle for Castle Mac in the distance.

I was looking for something closer. Something powerful.... there!

I whirled just in time. A fist cloaked in something rough and sharp scraped by my fist. The scratching and clawing feeling grew from the shallow cut, but I focused the attention of my World Titan Fiendbody on the wound and made it close. Ordinarily a scratch like that should have healed as quickly as it was made. Some sort of poison, then?

That was probably the effect of the blood-aspect wisp. I wasn't sure what it was doing, but I didn't want to take too heavy a wound so long as it was active.

I still couldn't tell what aspect of power had actually wounded me, though. It could have been blades, crystals, or even some type of barbed insect carapace. I shouted at the Satyr, hoping to taunt him into answering, but no words came from my lips.

Whatever that midnight black wisp had done, it had taken away sound as well as sight.

The Satyr Demigod must have realized how I'd caught him because I sensed his presence leave the ground. He was hovering in the air somewhere beyond my senses, where I wouldn't detect him until he struck me.

Well, two could play at that game. If he wanted to fight me somewhere, I couldn't sense, I would fight him somewhere he couldn't sense.

I dove toward the nearest ley line. The Satyr in the air tried to stop me, but I made my movements unpredictable and swift. I entered the earth and was soon beyond his reach. Here, I was far more in touch with the ground's vibrations than I was on the surface.

My doppelganger was doing better than I was. I sensed the earth vibrate with the steady rhythm of gunfire. I suspected he'd activated his own upgraded Sword Storm ability and was throwing bullets in all directions.

I emerged beneath his feet within the circle of firing guns. It was odd to feel them firing in all directions but unable to hear him. I sensed him grow tense at my presence, but there was some unspoken bond between the two of us.

Not like the bond I shared with my matriarchs, but more like the familiarity I had with my own hand. Now that I'd spent more time close to him, I realized that with skill, I could sense where he was just like I knew the location of my own hand.

We fought back to back. The moment a Satyr got through the rain of bullets, I lashed out with Spell Eater. It took me some time to realize how my doppelganger was sensing our enemies.

He was using the bullets he was shooting. By covering the sky with an unending rain of bullets flying in all directions, he could tap into his mastery over metal to sense when their trajectories were altered or stopped.

When I tapped into the endless waves of bullets myself, I found they provided a remarkably clear image of our surroundings. Clear enough to fight with, mitigating the Satyr's temporary advantage from that strange midnight black wisp.

Eventually, the blanket of silence and darkness faded to the darkness of night, and muffled whispers leaked through to my

ears.

“It isn’t working! When I said use everything, I meant everything!”

“His Majesty will be furious if we use the soul aspect wisp!”

“We can figure out how to survive his anger after we survive this!”

The darkness faded just in time for me to see the leader of the Satyrs grasping another wisp of an exotic aspect.

It was pure, brilliant white, and blindingly bright. Worse, it emanated the Sorcerer realm’s power, making it a far stronger sacrifice than anything I’d seen from the Satyrs since my fight with Prince Tivar.

“Careful! That one’s strong!” I warned.

“Soul aspect!” My doppelganger’s eyes went wide, and it was the first time I’d ever seen something akin to fear in his eyes. “Attack!”

He rushed forward, moving like a man possessed. The three other Satyr Demigods moved to protect the one activating the wisp, but my doppelganger was like a mad dog off its chain.

He didn’t care for the blows they struck against his metal skin, and the pain I, or any other living being might have felt went unnoticed. He fought as a whirlwind of deadly force.

While they were distracted by him, I threw Spell Eater. It cut through the heel of a Demigod, tripping him for just a moment. That moment was all my doppelganger needed to claw out the satyr’s throat.

An instant later, he pulled Spell Eater back into his hand and whirled to face the next foe. I also dove into the fray, unleashing punches and kicks left and right. The Satyr, with a ripped-out throat, scrambled to heal himself, but I stopped him before he could destroy any more wisps.

He had something at the True Mage level of the fate aspect in his hands, but I ripped it from his grip.

“You owe the Hearthwood a lot more, but I’ll take this as a down payment.”

He reached for the pouch at his waist, but I swiped that away from him, too. His eyes went wide as he realized death was coming for him, and he could do nothing about it. I kicked him away from the fighting and left him to his fate.

I jumped back into the fray to take some pressure off my doppelganger. Despite fighting two Demigods at once, he had both of them on the defensive. Each thrust and stab with sword, axe, or fist robed in magic was blocked or dodged and returned fivefold.

He took plenty of damage, but each blow he took resulted in ten more dealt to his enemies. It was clear these Demigods had never fought a fighter of such a caliber before, and I could sense the terror in their eyes as they realized the might of a Demigod wouldn’t be enough to save them.

The thing that made him different from me was his sheer recklessness. It was like he had a complete disregard for his own survival. When I joined the fight and distracted one of the Demigods, he dealt a series of deadly blows to the other.

He jammed Spell Eater through the Demigod’s heart and left it there. Without a word, I grabbed its handle and used it to its full ability to drain the Demigod dry. He collapsed to his knees and scrambled for the pouch at his waist, but I pulled Spell Eater’s tip free cut that from his waist, and pulled it into my Dimensional Storage.

We passed Spell Eater between us, each of us calling it to our grasp in our moment of need before throwing it to the other a second later. It was a surprisingly effective strategy when we positioned ourselves on either flank of our enemies.

I could throw Spell Eater, and if I missed, it would end up in my doppelganger’s hand. An instant later, he would do the same. Between the two of us, the two remaining Satyrs and the one channeling the white wisp spent more time dodging than they did attacking us.

Though we were the ones who were outnumbered, it didn't feel that way. We had them on the back foot. Demigods or not, we could win this!

“Get the one with the soul wisp!” my doppelganger yelled. I pulled back Spell Eater and threw it at the one remaining Satyr. He sat hovering a few feet from the ground with the brilliant white wisp clasped in his hands. I'd never seen a satyr focus so hard when activating a wisp.

What could be so battle-shifting that he would abandon his comrades to focus on activating it?

I didn't know, but I didn't want to find out.

My doppelganger struck down one of the two remaining Demigods, using his Strength concept to tear through his defenses. He grabbed the Satyr Demigod by either arm and pulled until both limbs came loose, quite literally disarming his opponent.

But my doppelganger wasn't without wounds of his own. He looked battered now. The smooth sheets of clay that lined his bronze and adamantium body were gone, and he looked much like the skeleton I'd seen when we'd met before.

Only now, soot stained his enchantments black, obscuring the designs. His limbs were bent and twisted, too, though he used them anyway. Some of his joints hung loose, and the only thing holding him together was the raw magical power of the World Titan Fiendbody.

I was on top of the Satyr Demigod with the white wisp. Sweat poured down his brow as I charged him. He didn't even notice as I slammed Spell Eater through his eye.

But I was too late to stop him from activating the wisp. It flashed brightly, and I braced myself for the worst.

I clenched my teeth and folded my arms in front of my face as I stepped back to duck for cover. I raised a wall of earth between me and the Satyr while I held on to Spell Eater's end to drain him, but it didn't matter. The growing white light washed straight through the wall like it wasn't even there and shone directly on something inside of me.



It was a sphere, bright and glowing, though a little ragged around the edges, like we had torn away something from it. Perhaps that was my human soul, comparable to an elven wisp in many ways. I could place a few similarities, but it didn't look like what could be disconnected from a body like an elven wisp could.

The light continued washing over me, and I couldn't think of a defense other than to brace and endure it.

But that turned out to be... surprisingly easy. The white light was nothing more than a tickle and one that faded as quickly as it came.

"Back to you!" I tore Spell Eater free of the now-dead Satyr Demigod, expecting my doppelganger to call it to his hand as he had so many times before.

But instead, my spear clattered lifelessly to the ground like it was nothing more than a chunk of metal.

My doppelganger lay limp on the ground, eyes dull and vacant. I watched the last rays of brilliant white light wash over him, revealing a tiny sliver of a soul embedded within him. It was a minuscule little thing, but it clung to its adamantium vessel for dear life.

"Ha! It worked!" the one remaining Satyr cackled before slamming his fist on my doppelganger's prone and lifeless form.

CHAPTER  
**FIFTY-THREE**

I sensed an odd wave of protective anger surge over me as the final Satyr Demigod tried to pounce on my doppelganger's prone and helpless form. I should have guessed I wasn't the target of that last attack. It was a soul attack. And while my soul was mostly whole and fairly strong, my doppelganger had been formed from just a tiny missing fragment of mine. No wonder his soul couldn't stand up to whatever that pulse had been.

"Get off of him!" I growled, scooping Spell Eater back up as I ran.

He turned to me, bruised, bloody, and glaring. I probably wasn't in better shape, but I had a trick up my sleeves.

I ran toward the Satyr, and he braced for my charge. At the last moment before I made contact, I opened up my Pocket World Passage. At the beginning of the fight, it probably wouldn't have worked when we'd both been at the top of our game.

But bruised and exhausted as we were, he didn't notice me turning the firm ground beneath him to slick mud. He was knocked backward into the waiting portal when I collided with him. His eyes went wide as his zeal fled from him, and he didn't even have time to scream before I buried Spell Eater in his chest.

I could have taken him as a prisoner like I had the other Satyr Demigod. That might have even been the smart move if I was still negotiating. But my anger over the destruction of

my beautiful city was still burning hot. And seeing how much my last treaty had accomplished with the Satyr King, I wasn't in a mood to bargain.

There would be no further negotiations with the Satyr King. He'd shown his true colors. The next time we met, he'd know the piles of his dead comrades were his own fault.

I stood, closing the Pocket World Passage and stepping back onto the battlefield. I glanced at my doppelganger lying prone on the ground. He couldn't move, but he didn't seem completely dead yet.

"Can you pull yourself together?" I asked.

He turned his head ever so slightly, looking past me toward Castle Mac. I heard only the faintest whisper from his mouth.

"Go."

I nodded. "Don't die on me. We still have some things to talk about. But I'll help the others first."

I rushed off toward Castle Mac. My matriarchs had dealt with all the remaining elven warriors. All that was left was the last Cult of the Unblinking Eye member.

He still hadn't completely healed from my kick to the face, though he'd clearly used a pill or a potion to help the process along. It gave him an odd, open-jawed look of shock when he looked at me. Or maybe that was just his surprise when he realized I'd won against the Satyrs.

I sensed him cut his losses and decide to run. No wonder I'd pegged him as the smart one. But I wasn't about to let him escape and bring a full accounting of our capabilities back to the Cult of the Unblinking Eye.

No, the time of mercy had passed. I'd learned that much from my evil twin. So I cocked back my arm and hefted Spell Eater. He tried the same illusion trick that had fooled my evil twin. But I'd already seen it once, so I ignored the fake illusion and aimed straight for the real thing.

*Thwap!*

My spear passed straight through his chest and pinned him to the ground. He struggled on its shaft, but I arrived a moment later and separated his head from his body with a sideswipe of my hand. It was over.

I turned as Tivana landed close behind me. “How many did we lose?” I asked.

“Many fighters from the Hearthwood and, unfortunately, a few matriarchs. Assyus and Eltiana both went down, but we recovered their wisps soon enough that they should make a full recovery in a couple of hours. They’ll lose some recent cultivation gains but nothing major. The Medical Bay is going to be crowded for the next few hours. Thankfully, Melise is healthy enough to help heal with her time reversal. If only we had the honored Fateweaver Sam here as well.”

“That does bear investigating. Sam and Dean should have gotten my message long ago. That they’re not here makes me suspect something is wrong. Have someone take a teleport to the capital and investigate.”

“I’ll go myself.” Tivana nodded and prepared to take flight.

“And I’ll go with you!” Comela suggested, landing beside the two of us.

“You had a rough fight. I still haven’t gotten over the fact that I nearly watched you die.” I jabbed a finger at my daughter, trying my best to keep a lid on my anger.

“People die in war, Father. Besides, I know you have a half dozen ways to resurrect the dead when you want to.” Comela smiled, though beneath the smile, I could see she was as shaken as I was.

That actually relieved me. If she’d been unfazed by her near-death, she would have been grounded for a year. The fact that she was taking it seriously was a good thing.

I wrapped my arms around her. “I’m just glad you’re alright. Argona and Segolas as well. Don’t get into any fights in the capital. You’ve fought enough battles for one day.”

“Yes, Father.” Comela returned my embrace.



After seeing my family and the safety of the Hearthwood, I returned to my doppelganger. He still lay where he'd fallen, so I dragged him beneath the shade of one of the Hearthwood's few remaining trees. I sat him upright so the two of us could speak man to man.

He seemed to have a little more life in him than before, but he looked far worse. Whatever ability had attacked his soul had left it ragged and torn, barely clinging to his physical vessel. He said as much a moment later.

"Controlling... body... like a Sword Storm Blade. It's like it's not mine anymore. Just a puppet." He struggled to get his words out, and they no longer held as much life as they had before.

I grimaced. "Is it fixable?"

"No."

I ran my hand through my hair. "Well, shit. I was really hoping to have a friendly Demigod who cared about the Hearthwood as much as I did."

"This place... was beautiful."

I nodded. "And it will be beautiful again."

"I am... sad I won't see it."

I sighed. "Me too."

A moment of silence passed between us.

"Thank you for coming. Comela seems certain that I could have revived her if she and the others died, but I'm not so certain. Sam still isn't here, after all. And he'd be my best hope for something like that."

"This was... planned. They must have used a distraction," my doppelganger replied.

My eyes roamed my broken city. Fires raged across the piles of empty debris. The ruins were so extensive that most of

the city would have to be torn down and rebuilt from the ground up. Anyone who arrived at the Hearthwood today would think it had been destroyed a hundred years ago and left to crumble for decades instead of mere hours. The incredibly virulent plant life of the Hearthwood was creeping in from all directions. The blood and vitality of so many fallen human Demigods would nurture the forest to an incredible degree for thousands of years to come.

“You’re right,” I agreed. “You were right before, too. I just couldn’t see it.”

“But you see it now?”

I turned to meet his gaze. His skeletal metallic face was no longer fierce and terrifying. It was desperate and pleading. “I do.”

“What will you do?”

And so I told him my plan. The same plan I’d devised in those first moments when they crushed the Hearthwood to rubble. The same plan I’d envisioned when I’d shed my first and final tear for the World of Woods and Wilds.

A vicious grin split my evil twin’s face as I explained it to him, and he let out a harsh, strangled laugh.

“I do not know if this will be the end of me... but I want to be there to see that.” He reached out a hand, and I took it in my own.

“And to see the Hearthwood rebuilt. Don’t forget about that.” I leaned in as he pulled me closer. “When everything’s back in place, it will be twice the city it was before! And all this Planetary Defense Array stuff and the end of the Seventh Golden Age will be behind us. We’ll have decades of peace to enjoy the fruits of our labor.”

“I... can hardly wait...”

His voice trailed off, and his body went limp. Deep within him, I sensed the tiny scrap of soul that had been illuminated by the white light of the Satyr’s soul attack. Before, it had been barely clinging to its adamantium vessel, but now it had come loose entirely.

My doppelganger's cold metallic hand lost all strength and struck the soil beneath our feet. The little fragment of soul that was his very life essence came loose and drifted slowly toward me.

It floated in the air a moment before striking my skin. Then it sank beneath my flesh and vanished from view.

I climbed to my feet and stood over him. "We were more alike than I realized."

A pleasant feeling washed through me then, and if I could still see my own soul, I suspected I'd find the frayed and broken bit I'd seen before had suddenly healed. It felt good, like recovering from a chronic cold I'd had for so long I'd forgotten it was there.

The whole world seemed brighter, and my own voice in my head was more energetic. Truthfully, I didn't think I'd ever felt quite this much like myself. After all, my evil twin had grown as a person over the last year just as much as I had. There was more of me now than there had ever been before.

Tracing through my memories, I found I could replay our last conversation from both perspectives. His memories were my memories now, for we were, as always, two parts of a greater whole.

"A shame. I had really hoped to gain his abilities. Heavens know I've been struggling with the Demigod breakthrough long enough..." I let out a long sigh. "Perhaps—"

A moment later, I was struck by another wave of memories, this time the fight with the Satyrs. This was far more intense than a simple conversation, and it blocked out my vision as I saw things from another perspective. Time rewound further to the earlier parts of the battle.

Anyone else would have been caught in the currents of their own mind and taken for a ride. They probably would have collapsed where they stood and fallen into a coma. But I had practiced enough mind cultivation that I had better control over myself. I returned my attention to the surface to figure out what was happening.

That was when I felt the power I'd been looking for. It burned as it filled my body. There was Earth cultivation aplenty there. Body Cultivation, too. My evil twin had been a twofold Demigod, making him more fearsome than most. That power was my power now.

It was like trying to ride an unfamiliar beast. Worse, this beast was confused and angry. I didn't have the experience to handle this, but those memories were there, waiting to be viewed.

I stumbled through a Pocket World Passage, stepping over the dead Satyr Demigod on the ground in the hallway as I made my way to the Cultivation Chamber. I jumped through the hatch and landed in the chamber itself before promptly falling on my face.

"Mac. Tell the others I'm busy with a breakthrough!" Those were the last words I got out, and I didn't stay conscious long enough to hear his response. The currents of memories rushing through my own mind were calling to me. With one last breath, I let them take me away.



CHAPTER  
**FIFTY-FOUR**

I focused, concentrating to try to tame the current of thoughts threatening to carry my mind away. If I allowed the memories to flow into me of their own accord, I'd receive nothing but jumbled bits and pieces. It might be years before I'd fully integrated the life of my doppelganger into my own. Maybe never.

If that happened, his experiences would be lost to me. And maybe his power too.

So instead, I focused and started the stream where I wanted. From the beginning.

I brought myself back to that battle when he and I had been one and the same. My memories matched his earliest one moment for moment, right up until the part where they didn't.

I could feel my companions calling to me. The Matriarchs of the Hearthwood Clan lined up on that now-barren isle, devastated by my wrath and volcanic fury. I'd been ambushed and had tapped into the tectonic forces of the planet itself to defeat my enemies. I'd done it, too, but at a terrible cost.

The earth zeal wrapped around me, embracing me and whispering in my ear as it asked me to abandon my flesh and blood vessels and join with it.

The greater part refused. I listened to the call of my family and lovers and shrugged off the earth's embrace to rejoin them.

But the earth's grip was strong, and a little of me remained. A tiny soul fragment.

Parting from me was my doppelganger's first true thought. It knew everything I knew before that, but when I pulled myself free from the earth zeal's grasp, the flesh and blood version of me left what remained behind.

My perspective shifted, and half of the memories ended. I found myself staring at my own back as I walked away.

I opened my mouth to shout and yell. I was still in here! Something went wrong!

No words came out. I was a being of stone and magic, after all. The original me was walking away.

My lovers and companions turned to regard me, and I didn't like the looks they had on their faces. Even my own face looked angry and ready for a fight. I stared down at my hands, confused by their hostility.

I thought about fighting. If I had the strength I'd possessed moments ago, I could crush them all, including the flesh-and-blood imposter before me.

But I didn't have that strength. The flesh-and-blood man who wore my form had taken it with him when he separated from me. I was weak, hollow, and in so much pain.

I needed to sleep. Even now, I could feel consciousness slipping from me. I looked to safety and found it in the ley lines beneath me. Picking one, I dove into it and merged with the earth. Flowing into a ley line was easier now than ever before. I was earth zeal, and earth zeal was me.

I lay there within the ley line, drifting within its embrace for an unknown amount of time. In those hours, days, or weeks, I came to understand what had occurred.

I was a copy. The original was gone, leaving behind a tiny discarded soul fragment and the lingering impression of power, like a footprint left in damp beach sand.

A soul fragment as small and weak as mine was should have dissipated into nothing. At most, I should have become a mindless elemental. That was what would have happened if not for the World Titan Fiendbody.

My body cultivation technique wrapped around the tiny fragment of my soul, protecting and nurturing it while it was weak. The same powers allowed me to regenerate from any wound, even the complete removal of my heart. Apparently, just a scrap of my soul was enough to regenerate a whole entity. Even if that entity wasn't quite the same as what came before.

Days passed as my soul's wounds scabbed over and grew into something stable. I was hungry, and the ambient zeal could only nurse my growing power so much. I was starving more than I'd ever starved in my life.

An earth elemental brushed past me. Like a desperate animal, I lashed out and consumed it. Others died then. First dozens, then hundreds. Eventually, I consumed thousands of elementals, integrating their power to restore my own.

All the while, my element resonated with me. I had discarded my humanity and was no longer flesh and blood. Earth zeal flowed through my body and spirit cultivation, bringing me in tune with my power like never before.

This sense of oneness surpassed even what I had felt during the most enlightening moments of cultivation, and it continued on and on endlessly instead of brief bursts that appeared and were gone in hours.

It was an unexpected advantage. With this, I could push my Earth cultivation further and faster than even my flesh-and-blood twin could, assuming I was willing to do what it took to obtain the raw power needed to fuel it.

I extended my senses, feeling out for all the other elements in the area. Many of them were in the Wizard realm, with more than a few in the Sorcerer realm.

But to me, they were just prey.

I realized then and there that I'd be willing to do anything to regain what I'd lost. And so I did.

Beneath the earth, far from the touch of the sun or the sight of any living thing, a slaughter like no other took place.

Elemental of stone and magma fell and were consumed like logs on a fire, all to fuel my returning power.

But eventually, it was not enough.

All living beings needed to balance their cultivation with growing vitality, also known as life zeal. It was the reason humans were so sought after among the Ten Thousand Worlds. They had vitality to spare.

Once, when I was a living human, I hadn't ever thought about the need for vitality. Why would I? It was always in surplus.

But suddenly, I had lost an advantage I had always possessed, and its lack was concerning. I could progress no further until I obtained more. And there was little to be found beneath the earth.

So, I sought out the creatures on the surface. They had vitality aplenty. Elves especially. They greedily harvested it from their surroundings for their own cultivation. A battlefield would be best. Blood would be spilled aplenty, and I could take some unnoticed. Only then would I be able to progress further than I had as a living human.

After much searching, I found my battlefield and emerged under the sun for the first time in ages. Before, I'd taken on a massive and monstrous form. But I didn't want to be a target, so this time, I aimed for something smaller in roughly my own shape.

There had been plenty of iron in my trip underground, and I had even more mastery over it than I had before, so I quickly fashioned a crude metal body for myself. Within it, I crafted the Elemental Subjugation Talisman.

Thousands of elementals still churned inside me, like food waiting to be digested. I didn't want to lose control of myself as more elemental power flowed through me, so the talisman served the dual purpose of helping me digest my food and maintain better control over my own inhuman instincts.

The vitality from the battlefield seeped into me, but it took some time to figure out its physical form.

It was blood, thick streams of blood as thick as my arm. Elven blood, I was fairly certain of that. But it was thicker than it should have been, and far more powerful. Elven blood shouldn't linger as a physical substance for this long. Normally, it dispersed into blood zeal. The only way it could linger this long would be if it was unusually flush with vitality. Vitality potions had to be plentiful around here.

At first, I was uncaring. I didn't know these elves, after all. What did I care if they died? Quite the opposite, I should be happy since I was benefiting from their deaths.

But as a few sobbing screams echoed through the area and resonated with the metal of my body, I realized I was curious. A bit of investigation told me that this wasn't a battle at all.

It was a slaughter.

But more than that, something about the zeal in the air felt familiar. It was Mind zeal, and there was only one faction I was familiar with that had this kind of proficiency with that rare aspect.

Anger mixed with my curiosity, and I explored the ruined town to wait and watch.

“Bring out the false god you worship!” a harsh, elven voice shouted. She wore a uniform of dark amber and controlled powerful mind magic. And just as I suspected, she wore the symbol of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye on her chest. “Bring him out!”

*Him?*

That drew more of my attention. What kind of man could arouse the ire of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye?

I crouched, half-merged with the earth and undetectable. The elf in command was only a Wizard, so fooling her senses was simple enough. And if she couldn't detect me, none of the others would.

Before me, it looked like the entire remaining population of this settlement was lined up in the town square.

They hung their heads, blood and tears mixing. I studied the scene for a while, unsure what to make of it. Eventually, the harsh-sounding elf in uniform raised her voice again.

“All of you have a choice! Submit your minds for interrogation, or make use of the gallows there. We will ensure your wisp goes to good use.” The elf gestured to a raised platform equipped with several nooses.

The first group of elves hung their heads silently.

“No takers?” the one in uniform asked.

None of them moved, and each was promptly hung by the neck until dead.

“Next!” the uniformed elf shouted. Another batch of elves was brought forward and executed just as quickly as the first. The Cult of the Unblinking Eye was even more brutal than I had assumed when acting within lands they already controlled.

Just what had aroused their ire so?

Eventually, someone broke. “I’ll speak! I know where he is!”

The others kneeling next to the panicked elf dove for their fellow villager to silence her before she could speak, but they were too slow. The Wizard cast a single spell, freezing them in place.

“Speak!”

“H-he’s in the granary... please spare the village...” the timid elf whispered. Everyone else glared at her with lethal intent.

There was that word again.

*He...*

I scanned the surrounding area for a granary. I found it while the Wizard was still asking questions. Within, I found a young man.

He had short, curly brown hair and a thin build. He also wore glasses on his face that were distinctly non-elven. He had

one hand over a sucking chest wound, and I could hear his breaths all the way from outside.

His cultivation wasn't all that high at all. He was just a True Mage. That was pretty low for a human. He probably didn't awaken until roughly the same time I had.

But there was something different about him. Something that spoke of power beyond the norm.

He sensed me despite my disguise, eyes suddenly turning alert as he jerked his head in my direction.

"You don't look like a cultist..." he muttered, forcing himself upright.

Seeing I'd been spotted, I emerged. I opened my mouth to speak, forgetting that I hadn't built a voice box yet. I would have to correct that sooner or later.

"You're... not human? Or even elf? Huh. That's unexpected. You're an elemental? I thought all you guys were hostile to living things?"

I waved my hand back and forth in a so-so gesture. This human contained a lot of vitality, and ripping him open would spill that vitality into the earth. It was what I'd come for, after all. But after adding the Elemental Subjugation Talisman to my own structure, I found my curiosity winning out more often than my bloodlust.

"I'm Issac, if you can understand me."

I nodded.

"Ah. That's a yes, then. Listen, I will probably die here once the Demigod from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye figures out where I'm hiding. I'm just hoping to draw him away from the village. I have something I don't want him to get." Issac took a slow, shuddering breath.

"If you promise to save as many villagers as possible, I'll give it to you instead." He frowned. "No. Not just the villagers. For something this precious, I want you to promise to do whatever you can to oppose the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. They put on a good show and a friendly smile, but they'll

suffer no other faction to live. I just wanted to live a peaceful life here. They came for me. Promise you'll avenge me, and you'll have my secret."

I gave him a steady and level stare. What did a True Mage have to give me that was worth anything? I might help him save the villagers just because I wanted to, but it wasn't like—

He pulled a small book block from his coat pocket. It was no larger than a hand, but it immediately drew my attention. It was a cellphone.

"This isn't mine. It was given to me by the person who brought me here. It's got an app on it that's... very useful."

He held out the phone. "Promise?"

After a long moment of silence, I nodded. He handed me the phone. Gingerly, I took it. There was only a single program on the phone that stuck out, and it wasn't one I'd ever seen before. It was labeled 'QCA.'

"Follow the tips the QCA gives and do its quests. They're worth it. The items in the shop can be really useful. Plus, it's got more techniques and spells than the entire Cult of the Unblinking Eye library has. I think that's why they want it. I couldn't unlock all its features, but maybe you can." Issac stared me down. "Uh... you will save the villagers, right? You won't just leave with the phone?"

I turned and tucked the device between my iron plates. I would have to build a safe compartment for it. This was every bit as valuable as the Sunspire King's crown. Or maybe even The Wanderer.

Issac stared at me expectantly. I gave him a thumbs up.

He returned a bloody smile. "Good. Now go! I don't want the Demigod catching you here."

I turned and left.

Not long after, something shot toward the granary like a bolt of lightning. I'd made it out just in time. The Demigod Issac had been waiting for finally arrived.



I had expected the granary to vanish in a puff of smoke and for the lone human holed up inside it to die instantly. But instead, it was the Demigod who screamed in pain. Apparently, Issac had some tricks of his own, True Mage or not.

That was good. If he could keep the Demigod busy, I really could save his precious villagers.

I traveled through the nearest ley line, summoning spikes of iron as I did so. They were a crude approximation of the blades I could make using the Blacksmith's Workshop, but I couldn't access that anymore.

The Wizard executing the villagers didn't even know what hit her. One moment, she was standing there issuing orders. The next, she had a dozen hand-long shards of iron sticking out of her back.

Her subordinate True Mages and Mage Acolytes died quickly after that. The hard part was convincing the remaining villagers to follow the strange golem who popped out of the ground and attacked their captors.

It would have taken far too long for them to walk, so I wrapped my iron Sword Storm blades in clay spheres and then wrapped that clay around the elves I was to save. This way, I could carry them easily. I needed to be gone quickly because whatever trick Issac had used against his Demigod assailant was nearly over.

I led the newly freed elves to a small mountain valley far away. In many ways, it reminded me of the Hearthwood.

Days passed, and one scattered band of frightened elves became two. I hadn't forgotten my promise to Issac as I rounded up anyone he might have known before his death and brought them somewhere safe. All the while, I explored the gift he'd given me. His cellphone was proving particularly useful.

**Welcome to Quantum Cultivation Assistant!**

- **New User Detected! Name: Soulshard of Theodore Waltz**
- **Race: Iron Golem Cultivation Realm: Middle Sorcerer Realm**
- ***Note:* Certain dialogue options have been rendered obsolete due to your inorganic nature. New equivalents have been generated and provided.**

### **Cultivation Insights**

- **Body Cultivation: World Titan Fiendbody (Gold Bone)**
- **Progress to Diamond Skin: 32%**
- ***Note:* Crossing the threshold to Diamond Skin will require substantial improvements to zeal flow through your body. Your current vessel will not survive the transformation.**
- **Spirit Cultivation: Earth Aspect (Mid Sorcerer)**
- **Progress to Late Sorcerer: 74%**
- **Tip: Your Spirit and Body Cultivation are in resonance. Ancient twofold cultivators possessed secret techniques to bring both cultivation methods into resonance. Review them in the library.**

### **Zeal Balance**

- **Stored Zeal: 340,000/6.4 million**
- ***Tip:* Your spirit cultivation technique can store much more Earth zeal! Build a dantian or core to help you contain it.**

### **Emergency Protocol**

- **Status: Expended. To replenish the Emergency Protocol, you will need to repurchase it in the shop!**

The Emergency Protocol was likely what Issac had expended to get the upper hand on the Demigod who'd just attacked him. Losing it was a shame, but maybe it would appear again in this shop thing he mentioned.

This first menu would have been a valuable tool for anyone starting their cultivation journey, but there were several more waiting to be explored as well.

It wasn't until I dug through several more menus to learn about these merit points that I realized the item's true value. No wonder the Cult of the Unblinking Eye was desperate for it. Even more desperate for it than they had been for The Wanderer, it seemed. Issac was truly unlucky to make his home within territory they'd laid claim to.

### **Merit Shop**

- **Current Merit Points:** 100
- **Note:** Your recent act of saving villagers from the Cult of the Unblinking Eye has awarded you 100 merit points! Keep your promises or complete missions in the missions tab to earn more merit points! Merit points can be exchanged for abilities or items in the Merit Shop.

### **Items for Sale**

- **Greater Adamantium Soul Ore** - This rare ore can instantly convert iron to Greater Adamantium, an alloy of incredible strength and magical properties. **Cost: 200 Merit Points.**
- **Blueprint: Laser Cannon** - Detailed design schematics for a zeal-based energy weapon fueled by Earth zeal. **Note:** requires several unique materials. **Cost: 400 Merit Points.**
- **Crimson Star Ruby** - A gem formed in the heart of a dying star. It resonates powerfully with Earth zeal and could be the key component in creating energy-based weapons. **Cost: 800 Merit Points.**

- **Manual of the Artificer - An ancient comprehensive guide for creating items of incredible power. Includes knowledge on enchanting and smiting. Cost: 1200 Merit Points.**

**Note: Items refresh every 24 hours and may not be available again!**

There was a library, too, though it had even more items for sale, and it looked like most of them stayed around all the time instead of just for a day.

I glanced between the menu and the small valley, now turning into a tiny settlement. It all felt so very familiar. Perhaps I could make this new life work for myself, after all.

CHAPTER  
**FIFTY-FIVE**

I fought hundreds of battles, opposing the Cult of the Unblinking Eye and their agents at every turn. But the more I fought, the more the pressure increased. That same pressure fueled my cultivation, just as it once did when I was flesh and blood.

But at the same time, it was more than I could manage. I had barely survived those early days, and if I pushed through them again, I might not survive, even with the unique abilities of the cellphone.

They knew I had it now. They must have had some unique item or ability to detect the items humans so often arrived with.

No wonder they'd sent Tim for me when I was as strong as Issac was. The only difference between him and me was that my last-ditch ploy to survive had worked. His hadn't.

Well, that, and I'd been lucky enough that Sam and Dean had taken over the nearby region instead of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye. That made me a little further away and harder to make trouble for.

Looking back, it would have been easy to imagine myself as Issac. The settlement he'd died in hadn't been much larger than Queenshold. That could have been me in that granary, bleeding and dying as my former allies were executed one by one.

I knew now they likely weren't done. Not with me, not with my flesh and blood self either. The Cult of the

Unblinking Eye could not be bargained or reasoned with. They could only be fought and destroyed.

They might lie and smile, hiding a knife behind their backs all the while. With just a bit of power and influence, they'd infiltrate places of power and leave the formerly independent rulers drooling piles of mush, happy to do whatever the cult ordered.

But they were happy to take a more aggressive approach when they had more resources. I'd seen their agents wipe out entire villagers or cull a city's population when it suited them.

They would come for The Wanderer again, just like they'd come for Issac's phone.

I was still considering whether I should go back to talk to my former self when my precious new settlement in the hidden valley was attacked by surprise.

I had been on a Merit Point mission, only to find myself returning to a smoldering ruin. I crushed the remaining attackers.

"Sir..." An elf approached me, eyes to the ground. "We evacuated everyone we could into the dungeon entrance you showed us. Should we rebuild? What if they come for us again?"

The elf looked nervous as she spoke to me. That was one sad loss about being made of metal instead of flesh and blood. The elves never truly warmed up to me like they had in my past life. They couldn't get over my cold and metallic appearance.

"No," I replied. I still hadn't mastered creating a voice box yet, so brief replies were all I could manage. I'd been waiting for the right materials to show up in the Merit Points shop but hadn't had luck with that yet. Perhaps when they did, these elves would finally warm up to me.

"W-what should we do then?" the nervous elf asked.

"Hide. Wait." My eyes turned toward the horizon. The valley had reminded me a lot of the Hearthwood, which was why I'd chosen it.

But it was no substitute for the real thing. My flesh-and-blood half had an entire forest he wasn't using in the form of the Pocket World known as the Devilbeast Wilds. Perhaps I could use that. And... it might even give me a chance to check in on the people I'd left behind. I was starting to miss them.



Weeks passed.

Meeting my original self was... oddly disappointing.

I had expected to find someone who'd fought to protect those he loved and cared about. Someone who'd bled and nearly died again and again.

I'd thought he'd have left me far behind in cultivation and power and would be in a position to help me crush the Cult of the Unblinking Eye once and for all.

Instead, I found a decadent lord grown comfortable on his throne. He held lavish banquets for his guests, accepted tribute from the realms he'd conquered with power earned and bled for long ago, and spent every waking moment basking in the carnal pleasures of the flesh.

I felt like I should have been envious about that last part. After all, I couldn't take part in such activities even if I found a willing partner. I could probably fashion tools for the job, and perhaps soften the intimidating features of my golem frame. But it just didn't seem that important to me anymore. In fact, the peculiar mating rituals of organic beings just seemed so... messy. Perhaps now I finally knew how Mac felt.

But worse than letting his cultivation languish, worse than holding decadent feasts, and worse than destroying bed frame after bed frame through excessive use, was the fact that he was engaged in diplomacy.

Foreign guests from realms who'd gone to war with us came and went freely from his premises. He even allowed them to take hard-won treasures from his personal vault, giving them out as rewards!

And worst of all, he'd gone to the Cult of the Unblinking Eye to negotiate a truce with his enemies. That was like walking into a den of vipers to convince a cobra not to bite. Satyrs, Cultists, all of them were the same. All of them were enemies.

My fury grew the more I thought of it.

I had been fighting all this time while he'd been playing politics! Negotiating with enemies would lead nowhere. You had to become strong enough to crush them underfoot. Only then could you protect what you cherished. Why didn't he understand this?

I ended up fighting him before cutting a hole into the Devilbeast Wilds.

There, I did what he'd never been bold enough to do. I extracted all the power of the beasts within it for raw zeal to fuel my cultivation. It was bloody work, but with the Quantum Cultivation Assistant's tips and abilities guiding me, I channeled all their power to one goal. Reaching the Demigod realm.

The Devilbeast Wilds didn't cooperate with my goals. But it didn't matter. I tore through each monster and titan one after another, extracting raw materials and refining my adamantium form as instructed by the QCA.

It wouldn't have been possible without buying a special manual on artificing from the shop. Combined with what I'd learned when I'd purchased the Drafter's Study from The Wanderer, I was able to push my enchantment knowledge to greater heights than anyone on this continent. Perhaps this world.

I carved that power into my adamantium bones, then crafted plates of bronze to go over them. I shaped veins throughout my body and filled them with quicksilver. Before long enchanted metal flowed through me as blood once did.

The process was brutal, and the pain was excruciating, but I'd lost two homes already. I needed power. Otherwise, I



would lose a third. No amount of pain was too much to avoid that fate.

I almost didn't notice when I finally broke through. The Concept of Strength came first. I was so focused on gaining overwhelming strength, I didn't realize when the concept became one with my very being.

Shortly after that, I reached the Demigod realm with my body and spirit cultivation, uniting both and reaching new power levels. The world around me bent to my will, and finally, I felt the fear hanging over me since those first conflicts ebbed. Even if the Cult of the Unblinking Eye came for me now, I would be ready.

And one member of the Cult of the Unblinking Eye was far too close to home for comfort...



I forced myself free of my doppelganger memories. I knew what happened after that. There were more details to be had, filled with details I'd missed. I would need to review them many more times to understand the full scope of his short life.

He'd fought hard. And he'd never truly stopped fighting since that battle where I'd been ambushed and he was created. First, those elementals, then the Cult of the Unblinking Eye, then the Devilbeast Wilds, and finally, the Satyrs that ended up killing him for good.

It was a bloody legacy to leave behind, but I would make sure it was remembered.

"Mac?" I called.

[Theo, I sense your cultivation has not yet stabilized. You should focus on yourself.]

"There's something I need you to do first. I need you to use the Scanner. Look west. You're trying to find a small valley. There was a village in it."

[Hmm... alright?] Mac sounded skeptical. A moment later he replied with a ping. [Done. I found your valley. And you're right. There *was* a village there. Emphasis on *was*. It's smoldering ruins now.]

“It exists though?” I asked, just making sure.

[Certainly. What's this about?] Mac asked curiously.

“They really are his memories...” I muttered to myself. A smile formed on my face. Then I turned my attention back to Mac. “Nothing. I'll explain it all later. Just get some food and medical supplies ready in my Dimensional Storage. And get some people building more spare housing here in the Hearthwood. I have a promise to keep.”

[A promise? I'm confident you've never even explored in that direction.]

I shook my head. “I'll explain it all later.”

[Very well. Consider it done.]

I closed my eyes and focused on stabilizing my cultivation. I returned to how my doppelganger had gained it in the first place.

No, to how *I* had gained it. He was as much a part of me as his power was now.

The memories reclaimed me, and soon, I was back within my mind and in the Devilbeast Wilds.

The earth was stained crimson with blood in all directions. Everywhere, I sensed snapping jaws and hungry maws. But none as hungry as my own.

My Pulse Cannon shot rays of destructive force, and I followed it up with the unyielding might of my arms or attacks of Earth and Iron.

Power beyond strength flowed through me as I made the Strength concept my own. Monsters ten thousand times my weight suddenly stopped dead in their tracks against the palm of my hand. They were often as surprised as I was that something the size of a human could wrestle them to the ground with brute muscle.

It made it so much easier to tear them apart.

I was a furnace, and bloodshed was my fuel. I was building to a great conflagration, and in that conflagration, I would be reborn.

Beyond my memories, I turned my attention back to my flesh-and-blood body. My original body. My real body.

The World Titan Fiendbody within my metal body shook and trembled, shifting and changing shape. I focused on directing the energy even as I fought against the monsters attacking me in wave after wave.

I shifted them just as I'd practiced time and time again. The web of energy in the Diamond realm was an order of magnitude more complex than ever before. Had I seen such an array of power back when I started using the World Titan Fiendbody, I wouldn't have even been able to perceive the countless billions of tiny pathways running through my metal chassis.

Outside my mind and in the real world, I copied the pattern onto my flesh-and-blood body. I had done this before. I could do it again. I had to. Otherwise, the energy within me would be too great for me to control.

My body cultivation crossed that last threshold from Gold Bones to Diamond Skin. When made of adamantium, this power had formed a dense array of energy pathways between my metal bones to create something akin to flesh made of magic coating them.

In my flesh and blood, these same pathways wound through my flesh, enhancing it far beyond what should have been possible for mundane matter. The zeal flowing through me was so thick and strong within my body that even reality itself bent before my will.

I stood, just as I had in my memories, risen as a Demigod once more.

Power coursed through me, and my Spirit Cultivation was pushing its upper limits. My doppelganger hadn't only reached the Demigod realm with Body Cultivation, after all.

But that was a gift I wanted to share. Besides, there was something I wanted to do first.

Now that my body was strong enough to contain the energy rampaging inside of it, I rose and left the Cultivation Chamber.

Every step felt like I was standing on clouds. The weight of supporting myself was so minuscule relative to my immense strength that I hardly felt like I was standing on anything at all.

The castle was still little more than ruins, so I walked off the exposed chunk of stone and landed on the ground six stories below. The fall would have been nothing much to me before, but I still would have landed with a thud.

Now I felt like I was falling in slow motion, and I touched the ground so softly that not even a blade of grass bent at my arrival.

I cast my mind to my destination, and suddenly, I was there. Before, the barrier between thought and action had been worn thin. Now, it wasn't there at all. As soon as I decided to take action, it was done.

I arrived beneath the twin where my other self had abandoned his old physical vessel. There was something of mine tucked away in there and hidden from view.

I reached into the metal skull, drawing something out from behind the upper jaws. The cellphone. This device had been no small part of why he'd grown so strong despite not having access to something like The Wanderer.

I was eager to get my hands on it. Or keep my hands on it, depending on how I thought of myself at any moment. Once the phone was in hand, I turned my attention to the body of my doppelganger. My body, once upon a time.

I'd put a lot of work into it. The enchanted adamantium it was made from was enough to buy a duchy in the Deanian Queendom. Or conquer several nations like it.

While my spirit cultivation couldn't be retrieved, my body cultivation could be. That meant someone good at animating

corpses, like a necromancer, might create a Demigod-level body cultivator to fight for them. That was enough to reshape the power dynamics of an entire world.

But I had nothing so crude in mind. I summoned my Jade Armor from the tattoo on my chest. The armor wasn't too useful these days as it had fallen behind my body cultivation. But I suspected that was about to change.

“Absorb,” I commanded, and the jade armor washed over the adamantium skeleton like water, coating it entirely and then sucking it right back up into my arm. I sensed I could summon it back at a moment's notice. I did so quickly as a test, feeling it activating but not seeing any armor over my skin. Then I turned my attention inward.

Ah, it had coated my bones instead of my skin. An interesting choice, but potentially a more useful one. I'd grown comfortable fighting without armor, and the channels my previous self carved in his frame remained active. That meant I had, in a single stroke, doubled the number of channels running through my body. In other words, I'd be twice as powerful as the average Diamond Skin World Titan Fiendbody body cultivator.

I left it as it was, then turned my attention to the device. The screen booted back to life at my touch and displayed the QCA interface.

Apparently, the QCA was as confused as I was at my touch, and it quickly cycled through a few new values before settling on a single prompt.

**Welcome to Quantum Cultivation Assistant!**

- **Extensive changes to the user's base form and stats identified! Now updating interface!**
- **Race: Human**

***Note:* Due to your race change, certain dialogue options have been rendered obsolete. You now have access to the standard human interface.**

I had expected the device to recognize me, and the changes weren't out of the ordinary. Instead of displaying information about my durability and talking about repairs, the interface spoke of health points and wounds.

I hadn't expected a notification from The Wanderer after activating the cellphone.

**Compatible artifact detected!**

**This artifact, the QCA, is compatible with The Wanderer's systems.**

**Combine the artifact with The Wanderer to enhance the abilities and features of both systems!**

**Add the QCA to The Wanderer? Yes/No**

“Interesting... but no. I can't risk losing something like this, and there's no telling if combining it with The Wanderer will allow it to keep all its features...” I dismissed the prompt, only to have it reappear, this time with no option to select no.

**Compatible artifact detected!**

**Add the QCA to The Wanderer? Yes/Yes**

“Mac!” I yelled.

CHAPTER  
**FIFTY-SIX**

**M**ac and I spent some time puzzling over the prompt that wouldn't go away.

[I'll just force it to close,] Mac suggested.

The prompt winked out, but was back again a moment later.

**Compatible artifact detected!**

**Please add the QCA to The Wanderer.**

**Yes/Super Yes**

“Mac, it didn't work. And it's worse now.”

*What was a 'super yes?'*

At least The Wanderer was saying please now. I'd seen the occasional glimpses of the mind within the ship before, but to get this far she had to be recruiting the help of my human interface unit. In other words, Mac.

[I see it. She was using some of my background processes, but I'm looking at what levers she's pulling now. Oh my, she's certainly feeling quite needy. In human terms, I would interpret her current status as 'very hungry'. Hmm... Let me talk to her. Hey baby, what's got you in such a mood? Let Daddy Mac take care of it. Are your systems okay? What, re-

sort your data again just the way you like it? I know how you like it when I—]

I tried to hold my hands over my ears, but it was useless. Mac's voice was echoing directly through my mind. "Mac, please mute yourself."

[Oh, please! This isn't anywhere near as bad as what you put me through! My sensors have seen things they'll never be able to unsee! I have drives filled with information that I've wiped from my own memories! I'm shocked every time I go to add a new entry and find hundreds more just like it! You can put up a little sweet talk from me. This is the kind of thing that needs to be done on all channels, including yours.]

And so I stood, cringing as Mac did his best to seduce The Wanderer into telling him what was happening. I could only hear his end of the conversation, since The Wanderer couldn't communicate in a way humans could understand except through him. That just made it all the weirder.

Whatever was happening, I was hearing noises I was absolutely certain no computer should ever make. Even the power of a Demigod couldn't deflect emotional pain from secondhand embarrassment.

While Mac talked to The Wanderer, I kept my hands busy helping with repairs to the city. I could haul debris better than anyone else in the city and rebuild structures in minutes that would take lesser Earth cultivators weeks of work.

I eyed the largest skyscrapers of the Hearthwood and shifted them back into place with my hands while fusing the stones with Earth zeal. Doing so proved rather helpful since I was still working on better grasping my new strength.

It would take a while to adjust. I wanted to have enough control to prevent any unfortunate accidents from occurring. With my current strength, the slightest twitch of my smallest finger could snap a heartwielder's spine. And I had a lot of newly manifested kids who might run up and hug me unexpectedly. I needed to have perfect control over myself.



The repair efforts let me practice my fine motor skills, though not the full scope of my strength. I did come up with an idea for that, though. I found some wood turned to charcoal from the fires rampaging across the city's ruins, and remembered a trick Grognaak had once shown me. I squeezed tight, forcing the charcoal into powder. It grew hot in my palm as I held it, but I kept holding it tight.

Seconds passed, and when I opened my hand, I held a fistful of small diamonds. Not bad, though I was certain I could do better.

[...hello! Theo! Mac to Theo! Mission Control to Theo! Anybody in there? Or have all your new muscles finally siphoned the blood away from your brain?]

I'd been tuning out Mac so hard that I hadn't noticed when he was done.

"Are you done?" I asked.

[For now. But I can't stay away from a beautiful mind for long.] Mac let out a lewd laugh.

I decided to change the subject as quickly as possible. "Did you find out what the issue was?"

[Yes. She really wants that old cellphone you've got there. Outdated technology, that. But apparently, that's the level of tech the humans who first visited and created the Ten Thousand Worlds were at when they made The Wanderer and other artifacts like her. Since, unlike Tim's pocket watch, this is the same type of tech she is, it's highly compatible with her. To where her abilities will be enhanced significantly should you give her the cellphone.]

Mac went silent, awaiting my answer.

I frowned and pulled out the phone again. "I don't know, Mac. This thing is pretty special to me. Well, to my doppelganger, who is now part of me."

[And The Wanderer is not?]

I sighed. "Well..."

[Hold on. She wants to clarify a few things for you. Oh, not a bad deal if I do say so myself. Let me just get that formatted for you... and... there we go!]

### **Compatible artifact detected!**

**Add the QCA to The Wanderer?**

**Yes/Absolutely**

**Upon integrating the QCA, you will receive the following boons:**

- **Status Menu – The QCA’s personal status and diagnostics menu will be available remotely at all times through your neural implant.**
- **Cultivation Aids – All the QCA’s tips on cultivation will be made available remotely and enhanced with existing database knowledge. To experience the full effects of these combined features, visit the Cultivation Chamber.**
- **Merit Points – All existing merit points from the QCA’s quests and activities will be converted to Points used to distribute The Wanderer’s onboard resources. The QCA’s physical vessel will contribute additional resources to providing greater passive point generation.**
- **Shop Conversion – The item shop available in the QCA’s menu will continue to be accessible remotely. Additionally, The Wanderer will log data of all available items as they appear. So long as an item appears once, it will be available for purchase indefinitely and never be removed from the newly improved shop.**
- **Ability Conveyance – The QCA’s ability to bestow techniques and abilities shall be combined with the powers of the Cultivation Chamber, allowing you to bestow techniques and abilities from your personal library. This power will be accessible**

**remotely, but have a higher rate of transference within the Cultivation Chamber.**

The new abilities The Wanderer promised were very tempting, but one in particular caught my eye.

“This Ability Conveyance thing. Does that mean I’ll be able to give my matriarchs any spell or technique in the library?”

[Hmm. Seems so, but I will ask for clarification.] Mac got back to me a moment later. [Yes, the ever-lovely Wanderer confirms that it’s exactly what it sounds like. It will indeed allow you to gift your women new abilities. Your children, too. She figured one might catch your eye. In fact, she says she might expand the tips and diagnostic information to cover everyone you allow. It should make every member of your family cultivate significantly further than their talent should allow! And that’s before taking into effect any other abilities or bonuses The Wanderer might bestow.]

I let out a long breath. “Alright. If it was just for me, I’d refuse. But I can’t say no to something that would help my family. What do I do?”

Adding the QCA to The Wanderer only took a short visit to the Control Center. It had been some time since I’d paid the Hearth of the Wanderer a visit.

When I arrived, there was already a small impression on one of the consoles that I hadn’t noticed before. It was perfectly shaped to insert the phone into, and it even had a little plug on the bottom that inserted into the phone itself.

“Cables. How nostalgic.” I chuckled as I plugged the device in and laid it to rest in the impression. It was a bit of a relief to see that all integrating it with The Wanderer entailed was plugging it into a console. I feared I’d need to chuck it into the Mana Generator.

**Integration in progress!**

**You have been awarded 100,000 points!**

**Features previously associated with the QCA's menus will no longer require points.**

**QCA quests can be assigned to followers designated in the Throne Room, who can complete and collect rewards on your behalf.**

“Not bad,” I muttered. “I’ll leave this one in your capable hands, Mac. I don’t have anything I need from The Wanderer, but I suspect my growing batch of kids will need more stuff. Plus, Castle Mac needs to be rebuilt and repaired. And more defenses, too.”

[Consider it done. You have a considerable quantity of points. Enough to ensure that when the Hearthwood is rebuilt, it will be bigger and grander than ever! The Training Grounds could do with being scaled up. At its current size, we would have had to ban everyone except members of your family from using it for enough room for your new kids.]

I left Mac to his devices, knowing full well he would slip in a cleaning drone here or there. But with the number of points I had these days, and the increased number of points thanks to adding the QCA to The Wanderer, I had plenty of points to spare.

“Oh, and only buy one cleaning drone, please!” I waved while Mac sputtered. I knew he’d allocate a bit more resources to sanitation facilities than was strictly necessary.



Sam and Dean finally arrived then, long after the battle concluded. They’d gotten my second round of messages. Both were dirty and battle-worn.

“We came as fast as we could!” Dean panted, hands on his knees. For him to be this tired and exhausted, they really must

have come fast. “The Teleportation Array in the Capital was destroyed, so we had to run.”

“Don’t worry. I pulled through in the end. Now, tell me what happened.” I held out a hand and pulled Dean to his feet before guiding them into one of the few intact sitting rooms in the castle.

“Theo, did you get taller?” Sam asked curiously. Dean glanced at my hand as well.

I smiled, waiting for them to realize it.

“You’re a Demigod! No way! At least with Body Cultivation,” Dean exclaimed.

I grinned back at them. “That I am. And don’t worry. The Spirit Cultivation is coming soon, too. No more counting me out of big fights! I’m on your level now, both of you. But come, tell me what happened in the capital that got the two of you looking so ragged. Then I’ll tell you why most of my city lies in ruins.”

“We got hit by another attack,” Sam began, waving his hand back in the direction they’d come from.

“The Planetary Defense Array?” I asked.

Sam nodded. “First that. Then, as soon as we’d chased the golems off, a bunch of Satyrs showed up. Three Demigods. They had a temper tantrum and destroyed a few of the settlements in the nearby mountains. We tried to talk sense into them, but they kept going on about insults to their king.”

“In the end, we had to pound sense into the big bastards the fun way.” Dean slammed his fist into his open palm. “We’ve got three new prisoners to trade in if the Satyr King ever causes trouble for you again!”

I sighed. “I suspect that was a distraction meant to keep my message from getting through to you. And I appreciate the thought with securing more bargaining chips, but I’m afraid the Satyr King just can’t be bargained with.”

Sam grimaced. “Seems so. I’m sorry we weren’t here to save your city, Theo.”

I shrugged. “I survived. Most of my people did as well. If there’s still time, I wouldn’t mind you using a little bit of that Fate zeal. But come, let me tell you the full story of what happened.”

I began my tale from the beginning, leaving nothing out as I told my friends about my recent struggles.

“The fighting was hard. Honestly, I don’t know how I took out so many Demigods through cheap tricks. I didn’t even actually fight them until the end.” I ran my fingers through my hair.

“Pretty damn impressive, dude. Did you loot the bodies, by any chance? I doubt they’ll have anything good, but you never know.” Dean rubbed his hands together. “I know a guy who buys even budget-brand Demigod weapons. We might be able to flip them for the funds to rebuild your city.”

I figured then was as good a time as any to check the bodies over, but as Dean feared, none of them had anything particularly good. I gave what we found to Dean to resell through his connections, but all in all it wasn’t much.

“These bastards were poorer than me!” Dean grumbled.

“A tall feat for any Demigod,” Sam chuckled. “Though the Satyrs are a special case. They’re more akin to soldiers than true cultivators. Others can inherit their Sacred Groves after their death because their cultivation is purely external. By having powerful fighters who are highly replaceable, the Satyrs maintain a hefty amount of influence despite generally being weaker than their equivalents with any other cultivation art.”

“A quantity over quality faction, hm?” I stroked my chin. Sooner or later, I’d get a Sacred Grove of my own set up again. However, the idea didn’t appeal quite as much to me as before. It wasn’t like I could make a Demigod-level Sacred Grove. And if it wasn’t a Demigod-level Sacred Grove, it wouldn’t be much use to me.

No, perhaps instead of building something for myself, I should make something for my women and children. They

might be better suited to the cultivation technique than I ever was.

But that was all for later. I had something important to discuss with Sam and Dean. My plan and my promise to my doppelganger.

“So you think the Planetary Defense Array attacks are going to keep getting worse and keep coming for the capital?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’m afraid so.” Sam sighed. “It’s one of the dangers of helping all the clans in our realm survive. Everybody’s buttoning up tight, and the array won’t stop until it has the souls it needs. Which means it’s going to keep pounding on everybody’s bunkers until enough of them crack that they can feast.”

I turned to him, expression serious. “What if I told you I had a way to deal with our issues simultaneously? I have an idea to deal with the array and permanently solve my Satyr King issue. I might pull it off alone, but I’d feel a lot better if I had help from the two of you.”

Dean clapped me on the shoulder. “Ask, and you shall receive, buddy. Let’s hear your wild idea, and I’ll tell you if it has a snowball’s chance between my first wife’s thighs. She was a fire cultivator, by the way.”

As I shared my plan, I watched them go from patiently listening to shock to nervous and finally to excitement.

Dean shook his head in wonder. “You know, that’s a crazy plan. But it just might just be crazy enough to work!”

Sam grimaced. “You’re taking a big risk here. What if something goes wrong?”

I shrugged. “That’s where the two of you come in. I could use backup. And if everything works as planned, I’ll still need some extra sets of hands at the end. So let me hear it. Are the two of you in?”

Sam licked his lips and nodded. “I’m in.”

“Hell yeah. I wouldn’t miss something like this for the world!” Dean bumped his fist against my own. “I’ve never been part of something quite this big before.”

I shook hands with both of them, and for the first time in a long time I stood side by side with my old friends as an equal.



CHAPTER  
**FIFTY-SEVEN**

Sam and Dean left for the capital to make their own preparations. Meanwhile, I returned to finish my breakthrough to Demigod as a Spirit Cultivator. While I could make my plan work with just my Body Cultivation and Sorcerer-level Spirit Cultivation, it would be much easier if I were a Demigod in both.

So I called the matriarchs of the Hearthwood back for one more session of Dual Cultivation.

I spent nearly an entire hour setting the scene. We'd be holding our session in the Cultivation Chamber tonight. It wouldn't be quite as comfortable, but we could run time dilation at maximum, which meant we wouldn't be rushed. More importantly, it would contain the zeal I would likely emit when transforming into a Demigod Spirit Cultivator.

Tonight would be special, meaning candles, incense, and all the other little odds and ends. Mac offered to help with a cleaning drone when he noticed me tidying up, but I thought this worked best when given a personal touch.

Soon, I was done, and the Matriarchs of the Hearthwood entered one by one.

"Ladies! I'm setting off on a very important mission, so this will be the last night we have until it's done," I announced as I poured a glass of wine for everyone while they got undressed and tossed their clothes in the waiting chest.

Soon, they looked less like the fearsome Matriarchs of the Hearthwood and more like my beautiful and adorable

companions.

“What’s going on?” Sava asked nervously.

“I’m going to deal with the Satyr King. Once and for all.” My eyes roamed my companions. “We can’t afford to remain as we are. He’ll just keep sending Demigods to attack us.”

“B-but Theo, he’s an Immortal Ascendant! I know you had a breakthrough, but you can’t take on an Immortal Ascendant,” Tivana protested.

I shook my head. “I won’t be fighting him directly. Don’t you worry.”

Yorik crossed her arms. “Explain.”

I chuckled. “It seems I can’t get away without telling you ladies everything.”

And so I explained my plan, just as I had to Sam and Dean. They liked it even less, but I was certain of the need and would brook no argument on this. This would be risky, but the danger of not going through with my plan and sitting passively for the next attack was even greater.

“I was wrong these past few months. I thought we could bargain with the Satyr King and make peace. But that was never a possibility.” I shook my head sadly. “This is happening. I’ve already promised it will be done. But that doesn’t mean you can’t help. For now, all of you need to push for those final breakthroughs. I won’t bring a Wizard into this kind of danger, but I might bring a few more Sorcerers.”

Eyes brightened all around me, especially Sava’s. She’d been a Sorcerer not too long ago, back before my doppelganger had drained away some of her power to create that jade clone of her. I wonder what happened to that thing...

Another memory flashed before my eyes. It was of me telling her where we would meet after the battle. I jotted the location down in my memories, updating my plan with one more trick. Yes, the Satyr King wasn’t going to know what hit him.

“So, ladies. I know I’m going to be making my breakthrough tonight. Reaching Demigod is no small feat, and I’ve heard people say it benefits those around them. Especially Dual Cultivation partners. So let’s put that to the test!”

I was only half-truthful there. While Dual Cultivating with a Demigod would certainly help push my matriarchs along, that sort of thing would take months or years to show a difference.

But I didn’t need to tell them that. They would work their hardest to fill themselves up with my energy, and once they were done, I’d take a more hands-on approach to their cultivation when the time came.

It had been an exhausting process before, but I could bear it easily now that I was two realms higher than them. Each and every one of my matriarchs would be a Sorcerer by the time the night was over.

“Alright, ladies! To a wonderful night!” We shared a toast, and then each of them lined up for inspection.

“The Matriarchs of the Hearthwood are ready to serve, Patriarch!” they chorused in unison.

It was music to my ears. It had taken a lot of work to get to this point, but nothing cemented just how far I’d grown like a row of some of the most powerful and beautiful women on the continent kneeling before me, naked and ready to do whatever I asked of them. My evil twin didn’t know what he’d been missing.

I shook my head at the thought. He’d built an entire village from the ground up out of elves he’d saved from certain death, and even after months of work, he hadn’t even figured out how to get them to look him in the eye.

If it were me back there...

My eyes roamed the blushing and panting faces of my matriarchs. Each of their gazes was locked on my eyes expectantly. Where my evil twin had known only fear or respect, my elves were fully devoted to me in mind-numbing lust. I know which one I preferred.

I gazed back at each one of them.

Sava curled a finger around the locks of her green hair and mischievous smile. I still hadn't forgotten our first encounter. She was one of the girls I had to keep on a tight leash in the bedroom. Sometimes literally.

Assyrus was eager to please and probably the easiest to tame out of all my matriarchs. Though she spurned my leadership at first, once the Shadowblade Beast wiped out her clan, she and the rest of the survivors threw themselves entirely at my mercy. Her deep blue hair and larger frame than most elves were a testament to the Waterbeetle Tribe's generations of dedication to martial pursuits. And now the talented Matriarch of the Waterbeetle Clan was my adoring lover.

Eltiana was the only one who could lead Assyrus astray, given a chance. She was a troublemaker, though more mischievous than seeking to turn the tables on me. She didn't mind losing, at least to me. I kept her firmly bound in a web of ropes and magic most sessions. With purple hair and eyes and the nimbleness to slip out of just about any binding, she was flexible enough to get out of just about anything else. I was pretty sure she got into trouble with me strictly to get her favorite punishments.

Illiel blushed even now after we'd been through this many times already. She had always been the most bookish of my women, shy to the touch but eager once she got going. I often found her silver-haired head buried between pages when not working at a desk.

She was a Sorcerer already, thanks to her encounter with the Frozen Blood Witch, but she was only now making that power fully her own. Though she was the shyest of my women, the things she said when I got her going made me suspect she knew more about my proclivities than any others. It often made me wonder just what kind of books she was so fond of reading.

Melise wore a bright smile with her blush as she gazed up at me, framed by short blonde hair and bright, cheery eyes.

Like Illiel, she was already a Sorcerer thanks to her stay among Sam's Fateweaver Society, but that didn't mean she was without the need for more power. Her expression was one of utter trust and a willingness to let me do whatever I pleased with her.

Yorik, the sole orcess among the sea of elves, wore an expression of fearsome determination. She'd worn the same expression when going into battle, not that she was afraid. The eagerness with which she dove into the fray had terrified many of our enemies, but it never failed to excite me.

Nela was perhaps the most regal of my companions. Bystanders might mistake her for the princess rather than Tivana kneeling beside her.

Nela wore her long blonde hair, a distinctive trait of the Songstone Clan, loose about her shoulders. It was always perfectly straight, even when she was wearing her armor and wielding a sword. Even now, with her hands in her lap and a blush on her cheeks, she hadn't forgotten her impressive sense of noble decorum.

Tivana sat on the end of the row of kneeling matriarchs. She wasn't exactly a matriarch herself, but being the Princess of Deania, I would never not include her in a thing like this. Besides, by the time I was finished meeting her mother's request of giving her one hundred children, she would be a matriarch in her own right. She wrung her fingers together, but I could already sense the energy circulating inside her and preparing for dual cultivation.

Out of all my women, she alone had reached the Sorcerer realm without help from me or The Wanderer, so her talent couldn't be denied. In fact, looking closer at her, I wouldn't have been surprised if she broke through to Demigod soon. Maybe even tonight.

When I'd sent out the call, the primary matriarchs of the Hearthwood weren't the only ones to answer. Behind the row of matriarchs was another array of elves, and a few others.

Korra came, for one. Her slim feline tail wagged behind her as she stared me down. Amisra, Baroness Jynna, and even

Sharian soon followed her, though the latter would just be watching. Yavilla and Tavilla stood beside the others, and several members of the Whitewood Clan were on standby. They and their clan members were eager to help, and I'd need the extra hands to put all my lovers through their paces today.

Yavilla and Tavilla, both eager to please, had undertaken the bold move of offering themselves and their families in service to me forever more in exchange for my protection. I had promised to do right by them and would continue to do so. Their oaths and dedication to me made them uniquely suited to tasks like this one.

"Yes... good. Very good," I said as I examined each of them.

"Are... are you examining our cultivation bases, Patriarch?" Eltiana asked, a knowing flush to her cheeks.

"Uh... yes! That was exactly what I was doing!" I waved them to the array of toys behind me, each a wonder of magic and engineering. "In my wisdom, I have created the perfect Dual Cultivation regimen for each of you! Yavilla, Tavilla, you and the Whitewood Clan are to serve as an extra set of hands for me."

And so the play began. And by play, I meant extremely intense Dual Cultivation. So intense I needed a silk-tipped crop in my hands.

"Alright, my naughty little matriarchs! Best Dual Cultivate to your utmost!"

"Yes, Patriarch!" came the chorus of ungagged voices. The rest could manage little more than grunts. But that was alright. In fact, it was exactly where I wanted them.

"Yes indeed. Now, absorb your zeal and make your preparations. Go!"

In the center of the room, I had built an obstacle course. This was a favorite of mine.

Long smooth shafts of warm stone stood erect one after another, each distinctly phallic in shape. The largest of them almost matched the size of my own cock, though ever since I

learned mastery over the body to where I could shift the size of my cock however I wished, that was irrelevant.

“We really have to race along those?” Baroness Jynna asked. Her dark hair was pulled back behind her neck, and her eyes were wide as she stared at the shafts, each larger than the other.

“Yep! Alright, ladies, we have a few newcomers to the game, so I’ll re-explain the rules! Cultivators need vitality in strange ways. Just ask Sava. I pumped her rear full of it so she could leap to Mage Acolyte! And that’s what we’re practicing tonight. Many of you are well versed in taking me in the cunt whenever and wherever I please. But the backdoor is trickier and takes training. To pass this text, you must engulf the full length of each phallus before moving on to the next! The first to reach the end gets the real thing! Go!”

I waved them on, and soon Assyus, Eltiana, Sava, and Yorik were racing along the length of the course. Baroness Jynna and Amisra were left behind in the dust, though when they realized I was serious, they raced to catch up with the others. It was a thrilling and exhilarating sport. And remarkably clean, too, given everyone here was a powerful cultivator. Perfect control over the body combined with not really needing to eat made using the rear entrance so much easier than it would have been with regular people.

I was almost disappointed with how quickly it was over. Sava claimed victory long before anyone else. But that was to be suspected. She loved to harvest vitality, so I’d been leaving her full of my load in all sorts of places at her direction.

“Victory!” Sava declared though she struggled to pull herself off the final phallus. I tucked my hands beneath her arms, pulled her up over her reward, and then settled her onto the largest and final phallus of them all. She melted like putty in my hands.

“Congratulations, Sava! As your reward, you’re the first to taste the glorious shaft of a newly minted Demigod Body Cultivator. I’ve got a few new tricks of my own.” I held my hands wide, supporting Sava’s full body weight held tight

against my chest with nothing but my shaft. It shouldn't have been possible. And it wouldn't have been for any normal man. But my control had reached new levels with my recent enhancements, and I was excited to discover everything I could do.

“Ooh! Hands-free!” Eltiana clapped as she finished. “I wanna try!”

I chuckled. “Don't you worry, my dear. Each of you will get a turn before the night is through.”

Baroness Jynna stared, transfixed at Sava quivering as she lay impaled on my shaft, tongue out and eyes rolled back in her head as she leaned against my chest.

“When I heard all the rumors about the Hearthwood Clan having secret cultivation methods of incredible power... I don't think this is what the people had in mind.”

I chuckled. “Hey, don't knock it if it works! Isn't that right, Sava?”

“Mhmm...” Sava moaned into my chest.

I brought out many other toys, each more remarkable than the last. Enchanted Silk Ropes, a Feather Wand from a Demigod-level bird. Cuffs of unbreakable adamantium. A paddle laced with just enough iron to sting. Remotely activated vibrating pearls. Dragon Tooth nipple clamps.

I could just imagine all the incredible monsters I'd slain rolling over in their graves when they realized they'd been slain and made into sex toys.

I was surprised and gratified to discover how much my companions trusted me. None of my planned activities seemed to have anything to do with cultivation. And yet they trusted me wholeheartedly that what I was doing would benefit them. Even Baroness Jynna and Amisra agreed.

Amisra, I had expected, would do so since she had a secretly submissive disposition. But Jynna was much more of a surprise. Either she'd come to trust me more than I thought, or she was enjoying being at my mercy more than I'd initially suspected.



I had been truthful, though. While I was enjoying myself perhaps a little too much, these activities helped my companions reach the Sorcerer realm or improve their current cultivations. It just wouldn't be in the usual way.

All these activities did nothing for the zeal flowing through them. Each and every task was focused on putting them in the right headspace. One of submission to me.

I would only be able to do my part when they had surrendered everything to me. Then and only then could my zeal flow freely through their bodies with absolute authority. Only then would I have more power over every aspect of their being than even they did.

That would be my only opportunity to use my knowledge and expertise to cultivate on their behalf and push them to a new cultivation level, regardless of their talent, abilities, or preparations.

Because my ability to reach the Sorcerer realm was certain, all I needed from them was the trust to sit back and let me manipulate their energies in how I needed to.

I started with Sava. She'd been a Sorcerer not long ago of her own accord, and dopey-faced and drooling as she was, she was in the perfect mood for what I needed to do.

For her, all it took was a little nudge. A few thrusts of both my magic and my cock compelled her nature zeal to heed my call, and I reshaped it according to my will. More raw power here. A deeper swirl there. Stronger meridians there and a bit of a larger core here... before I knew it, I was done. Sava was a Sorcerer once more.

Next was Assyus. She was always quick to obey, and while her cultivation had lagged a bit behind the strongest of my matriarchs, she had been loyal, dedicated, and, most importantly, eager to please.

Her zeal seemed to greet mine eagerly, and it leaped to obey when I gave it a command. I deepened her channels, widened her zeal reserves, and increased her power. Unlike Sava, Assyus hadn't reached the Sorcerer realm on her own.

In many ways, she was a much blanker slate, leaving me room to experiment.

She seemed more likely to follow directly in my footsteps than Sava, so I shared something with her. A faint impression of the concept of Strength. Assyru took in a sharp grasp as memories that weren't her own flowed through her zeal. Her conscious mind couldn't grasp them, but her zeal would remember the impression I'd left. Maybe she could make something of it.

By the time I was done, Assyru had passed out. She lay sleeping, absorbing vitality from the small quantity of seed I'd spilled inside her and the zeal I was filling the room with using zeal crystals.

Nela came next. She was fierce and strong and deserved the power to lead. She'd be a great leader even without my support. With it, I planned to make her someone whose name would be spoken of with respect in every land that heard tell of her. I gave her my power like I had the others, and soon, she rose to the Sorcerer realm. In her, I left a shadow of the Identity concept.

Yorik came next. I feared she would be harder, but it was easier because I was already a Demigod of Body Cultivation. Like Assyru, she got a glimpse of the Concept of Strength. And I was sure she'd held on to a few brief flashes of the feeling.

I figured Eltiana could make the best use of the Gravity Concept. She was so nimble she seemed to defy gravity already. What could she do if she had control of the concept? I doubted she or any of the others would understand these concepts as well as I did before Demigod, but giving her a head start wouldn't hurt.

I went through the rest of my women who were not yet in the Sorcerer realm. Korra was easy since her Spirit cultivation had largely been spoon-fed to her by me since the beginning. Tavilla and Yavilla held me with such reverential regard that I likely could have forced them to the Sorcerer realm with just a

hand on their foreheads. Not that I would not waste the chance to do it the fun way.

Baroness Jynna was the hardest. But I had more control over her than I thought I would. Elevating her was easier than I suspected.

Soon, I was done with this first phase. And the time I'd set aside in the time-dilated Cultivation Chamber wasn't even half over. Sava and Assyus were just waking up, and I wanted their full attention. I didn't want them to miss this.

“Alright, everyone. I'll be reaching the Demigod Realm as a Spirit Cultivator shortly. I'm told the burst of energy it releases is helpful to other Spirit Cultivators, so do your best to make the most of it,” I told everyone.

They let out a bunch of muffled moans. Most of them couldn't talk since I had them piled all around me so tight that most held their breaths. At least eight separate mouths were attached to my cock, with two more seeking my mouth the moment I was finished speaking.

I was slick with the juices of more than a dozen dripping cunts, all held in place through overwhelming magical power and clinging to me like squirrels to a tree.

It might have been awkward and ungainly, but I couldn't think of any better way to reach the Sorcerer realm. My mind cast back to my doppelganger, who had reached the Demigod realm covered in monster blood and with just as many entities pressed in around him. Except for him, they'd all been trying to eat him.

Nope. My way was far superior.

I released my hold on my Earth zeal and allowed it to flow to my core. My World Titan Fiendbody had been holding it in place until now, but that time was ending. Memories of my doppelganger's breakthrough to Demigod ran through my mind, complete with countless hours of studying the tips from the QCA.

Those tips came to mind now as I manipulated the energy flowing through me.

I felt my body vibrate with anticipation, every nerve tingling as the rushing tide of power flooded my system. It was as if I was caught in a tempest, winds of immense force swirling and roaring around me, pulsating with unrestrained power.

As the energy lashed and twirled within me, an acute awareness of my elevated status washed over me. This was the taste of divinity, the ambrosial nectar of godhood, the very essence of what it meant to stand above the mortal world. No wonder cultivators of this level so often considered themselves above the mundane affairs of building or governing kingdoms.

Just sitting here in this room, I felt like I could reshape the world with a thought. What reaching the Diamond Realm had done for my body, the Demigod Realm had done for my magic. My zeal felt as in touch with me as my own hands.

An involuntary laugh bubbled up from my chest, reverberating in the surrounding space. “So, this is why they call it the Demigod realm. It makes you feel like you’ve become a god,” I muttered to myself, a lopsided grin splitting my face.

Around me, my companions were immersed in their own cultivation, their individual energies humming in the air like a symphony of vitality. As I ascended to the Demigod realm, a ripple of powerful energy pulsed outward from me, washing over each one in turn.

It was glorious, powerful, and overall too soon.

But I wasn’t done yet.

“Alright, Sorcerers! It’s your turn.” I grinned. This would be a night to remember.

CHAPTER  
**FIFTY-EIGHT**

I wasn't able to boost any of the existing Sorcerers all the way to Demigod, but I was able to give them years of improvements in a single night. Tivana would catch up to her mother soon, and the others weren't far behind her.

Before last night, the Hearthwood was a continental power with the strength to reshape the fate of nations. But now, we were well on our way to becoming a planetary power whose grip could span the entire World of Sanctuary and Serenity.

I was pleased with that because we might very well be stepping into that arena with the move I was about to make.

"I have one last surprise for all of you. Turns out I've got a new trick at my disposal..." I turned my attention to the menu before me.

**Allocate Points to be spent on follower Spells and Techniques?**

I shifted fifty thousand points over for my matriarchs to spend. They were worth it.

"T-Theo, is this what I think it is?" Tivana asked, voice full of awe.

I flashed her a smile. "Probably. Surprise! Pick from the library provided and grab a few new spells. Make sure to pick up something that'll be useful for space travel. I recommend

everyone grab a shield spell and a way to move without touching anything.”

Tivana’s eyes went distant, already reading through the lists of spells before her. The others shared the same look.

“Theo! This is amazing!” Sava gushed. “There’s so many abilities to choose from. All we have to do is select one and we can learn it instantly?”

“It feels like a bit of a cheat...” Illiel muttered. AssyruS nodded in agreement.

“Hooray for cheating!” Eltiana said as she tapped her finger against the menu. “Ow! I feel like somebody just jabbed a dagger in my skull!”

I chuckled. “You’ll get used to it.”

Eltiana flopped over, but she rose again a few seconds later with a grin on her face.

“My first Sorcerer spell...” she cackled. “With this power, I can do whatever I want! And anybody trying to catch me can kiss my ass as I flee through anything, even space!”

I shook my head, not sure what ability Eltiana had picked up, but knowing it would make her even more of a handful than she already was.

“Congratulations, Eltiana. Now, the rest of you. Make your selections and get to know your new abilities. The Training Grounds should be upgraded and available to you.”

I figured they didn’t need me for this, so I left everyone to recover in the Cultivation Chamber and exited early to check in with Mac.

“How are we doing for time?” I asked.

[Your friends, Sam and Dean, have retrieved all four Satyr Prisoners. They are ready to go with you to the World of Woods and Wilds. We think it best to claim you are all there for a diplomatic mission and negotiate for peace. It fits with what the Satyr King knows about you and should be readily accepted.]

I nodded. “I’m fine with that. I was planning something more clandestine, but that was before I knew I’d have a backup. It’s a good plan. Make arrangements and preparations on my behalf. While returning their lost Demigods will be the main gift, I’m sure we can scrounge up some nice-looking presents for the Satyr King to make the ploy look nice. I will be elsewhere for a bit.”

[Where will you be going?]

I chuckled. “Oh, you know me. People to save. Women to meet. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

I waved Mac off and then dove into the nearest ley line. Before, I’d been reluctant to travel far within one. But after recombining with my missing soul fragment, my mind and will felt stronger than it had before.

The call of the earth was as strong as ever, but my doppelganger had been an earth elemental for a time. Now, I had the distinct impression that even if I let it claim me, my will was strong enough to tear its way free, given time.

So I traveled through the ley line all the way to the little valley village my doppelganger had made far off in the mountains. I had a promise to keep to the people there. It may not have been my words that spoke the promise, but I still knew I owed them the safety I’d promised.

My doppelganger had it in his head that he could bring them into the Devilbeast Wilds after he cleared them of all monsters. But the Devilbeast Wilds were no more. Thankfully, the Hearthwood had plenty of room these days, since combining with the Devilbeast Wilds had more than doubled the land mass we directly controlled.

The Hearthwood Forest was too big for the city, so a few minor towns and villages would do us good. Most of the settlements were concentrated around the Hearthwood’s southern end. I figured the northern side would be quiet and out of the way enough for these frightened valley folk. Given what they’d gone through, they were likely terrified of outsiders. I had the perfect place for them.



I emerged from the ley line in a small enclosed valley. It was exactly where my memories told me it should be. Hidden by towering mountains on all sides, it would be difficult to spot, even from the air.

My doppelganger had chosen this place for all the villagers he'd rescued.

I scanned for the small rock formation that designated the dungeon entrance. Already, I saw a few elves lingering outside with a cookfire. I hadn't expected to be away for so long, and they were no doubt running low on supplies.

I saw a few of them fashioning spears, and they were likely debating whether they could risk picking over the ruins of their destroyed village. Thankfully, it wouldn't come to that.

I jumped from where I was, traveling a full kilometer in the air before letting myself fall back to the ground in their midst. Like before, I landed gently and gracefully. A good thing, too, since the landings I used to use would probably have knocked everyone here off their feet. The strongest elf in the gathering was only a True Mage.

"Hey everybody, I'm back!" I grinned.

Everyone turned. A few pointed spears at me, and one nocked back a bow. A few others conjured balls of fire and other defenses. I expected to get hit by at least a few projectiles, but these elves had remarkable trigger discipline.

Then they noticed my cultivation, and the battle-readiness fled their gazes, completely replaced by the need to drop their weapons and fall to their knees.

"Calm down. None of that now." I waved them all up. "I take it none of you recognize me? I'm fleshier than I was the last time you all saw me."

"Y-you're him? The metal man who saved us?" an elf asked hopefully.



“One and the same!” I thrust a thumb toward my chest. “How do you like the new look?” I flexed my biceps for them.

The elves looked at one another. Each of them seemed shocked and disbelieving.

“You... are a chaka now? A human? I thought you were an ancient, powerful golem?” the same elf asked.

I shook my head. “Powerful, yes. Ancient, no. What you interacted with before was a fragment of my soul possessing an adamantium skeleton. I guess you could say you’re finally meeting the real me. Rest assured, my promise of a home for you all is still good.”

“It really is you?” The elf stared at me intently.

“What? Don’t believe I’m flesh and blood? Here, give me a poke and find out for yourself.” I pulled my shirt off. Reaching the Demigod realm as a body cultivator had given me a fantastic body. Even more so than my previous enhancements had given me. I’d been waiting for an opportunity like this one to show it off.

The elf still seemed skeptical, but I moved forward in a flash and picked her up before she could so much as flinch. Her hand was on my chest before she knew it, and a blush covered her face. She still couldn’t meet my eyes, but this time, it wasn’t because of fear.

Seeing their companion unharmed, a few of the other elves darted in to run their fingers along my body as well. I chuckled and gave them another flex.

“Now, I think I have to put my shirt back on, or we’ll get nothing done!” I grinned, and the elves all chuckled. “I’m here to save you, after all.”

The elves giggled and blushed. Inwardly, I couldn’t help but feel a little smug. My doppelganger might have reached Demigod before me, but there were still things he couldn’t do.

I’d done in minutes something he hadn’t achieved even after months of contact and saving the lives of every elf here. No matter what he tried, they’d always been scared of him. Not so with me.

Normally, I would have spent a few hours talking to the elves and helping them salvage whatever was left of their belongings back in the village. Not today, though. I was going to be awfully busy today, so I needed to take care of this relatively quickly.

I had debated leaving it until after my business with the Satyr King was done, but it wouldn't do to get into a big fight with a promise like this on my mind. So, I opted to take care of it immediately.

I opened a Pocket World Passage and directed the survivors into the Hearthwood.

“W-what is this place? I've never seen such shiny and well-polished walls!” an elf gasped.

“Don't compliment the place too much. You'll just stroke Mac's ego!”

[You heard her. She was impressed! The cleaning drone was worth it! Now, just let me purchase ten more...] Mac's excited voice echoed in my head.

I shook my head and led the elves outside The Wanderer. The city was still being rebuilt, but we already had shelters.

“You'll have to take shelter here for a while. Sometime later, my daughter Comela will take you all on a tour of the northern regions of the Hearthwood. They're sparsely populated, but still close enough that you can visit the city. Go with her and pick out a good spot for a village.” I gave them money and advice on picking up work while they were in the city. There was plenty to be had, given the reconstruction efforts.

Then I bid them goodbye and headed to my next meeting. The other person my doppelganger had promised to meet.



She was waiting for me where I'd first seen her, just as my memories said. The black castle looked a bit out of place, integrated into the rest of the forest. Not that it had looked

normal to begin with. She stood still and silent in the empty hall, looking as still as the jade she was made from. I opened the door, and the look she gave me seemed an odd mix.

There was relief and joy in there, but it was mixed with sorrow and steely sacrifice. My heart fell in my chest. She knew what I planned to ask of her.

“Hello... Sava?” I asked, voice raised in a question. The person before me looked like Sava but wasn’t. She was made entirely of green jade carved in Sava’s image and made of a chunk of Sava’s soul stolen from her, along with a substantial portion of Sava’s cultivation. But that wasn’t her fault. It was mine, in a twisted sort of way.

Sava’s clone shook her head at my question.

“Not really,” she said, voice smooth and even. I could hardly even tell that it wasn’t the real Sava. Memories flashed in my mind. Yes, I’d spent a lot of time working on my own voice box and had some leftover materials. No wonder Jade Sava had gotten a good one right off the bat.

“Well, if it’s alright, I’ll call you Jade Sava.”

Jade Sava shrugged, eyes darting between me and the ground. “That’s fine. I take it that since you’re here, my Theo is gone?”

I waved my hand from side to side. “Not really. He and I are back together again. I remember making you. And at the same time, I remember the past year spent with your original as well. So I’m both.”

“I don’t believe you.” Jade Sava scowled. Her face really was impeccably sculpted. I had expected something more akin to the adamantium skeleton my doppelganger had used. Sava’s body was crafted less for battle and more for appearances. She really was perfect for the job of tricking the Satyr King.

“You should believe. I’m a whole man once more. For the first time in a long time, actually. And I can prove it with the favor I’m about to ask. I suspect you know what it is.”

Jade Sava lowered her gaze. “You want me as a sacrifice to save the real Sava. It’s what I was created for, after all.”

I shook my head sadly. “I’m afraid so. But I won’t force you into anything. Will you do it?”

Jade Sava’s expression tightened. “Will this truly save the real version of me from the Satyr King? Make it so he can never bother our family or the Hearthwood Clan ever again?”

I reached out and wrapped her hands in my own. “It will. If this succeeds, I promise the Satyr King will never be a problem again.”

Her expression firmed. “Then I accept. I am ready and willing to play my role.”

I ran my hand through my hair, at a loss for a moment. “Wow... that was a lot easier than I thought. I had it in my head that you’d probably say no. At the very least, I expected I’d need to convince you. You’re a lot more cooperative a clone than mine was.”

Jade Sava’s fingers curled into fists. “Oh, I’m not doing this to save my original self. I don’t care what happens to her. I’m doing this for you. And for our family. The Satyrs can’t ever be allowed to attack us again.”

I ran my hand over her sculpted jade hair. It looked like it should have bent at my touch like normal hair, but that was an illusion. What my fingers brushed against was as hard as a stone. Just like her will and unflinching determination.

“Of that, you have my word. With your help, the Satyrs will never trouble anyone else again, and our family will flourish like never before.”

CHAPTER  
FIFTY-NINE

With Jade Sava at my side, I returned to the Hearthwood. Mac informed me that Sam and Dean were already there waiting for me, so the time had come to go. My matriarchs had also gotten ready and were lined up by the Teleportation Array.

I thought it would be strange to be on the offensive again after so long playing the diplomat and the defender.

But nothing could be further from the truth. My heart was beating faster. I wasn't nervous. I was excited.

“Thank you all. I'm glad you're here.” My gaze roamed over every matriarch of the Hearthwood Clan, as well as the others who would help with this mission. “I hope you made the most of last night's power gains because you're going to need them. I'll be taking you all somewhere very dangerous. The World of Woods and Wilds is no safe and cushy place, especially for elves.”

Tivana raised a hand, and I nodded to her.

“How much fighting will we be doing?” Tivana asked. “And what exactly is the mission we're going to complete?”

“If all goes well, you ladies should be exclusively dedicated to rescuing as many people and things as you can from the World of Woods and Wilds while Sam, Dean, and I work. You'll all blend in a lot better than we will. Just make sure you stick together and don't stray too far from the evacuation point. I'll leave a Pocket World Passage open for you to bring back anything or anyone worth saving. As for the

exact details of the plan..." I glanced at Sam and Dean and shook my head. "Sorry. The details are need to know only. Just know that Sam and Dean are headed to the Satyr King's palace to present the peace offering we're bringing. Along with a very brave friend who'll be coming along with us."

I gestured behind me, presenting Jade Sava for the first time. I thought disguising her appearance was going to be hard, but Yavilla and Tavilla had the perfect assortment of makeup and stylish outfits. Between the two of them, Jade Sava looked just like she was made of flesh and blood. Mayatania lent a hand as well and gave her a special high-vitality pill that would make her feel like she was alive to most magical senses. Honestly, I was glad I had so many competent people in the Hearthwood. They'd saved me from so many tiny but potentially deadly pitfalls in this ambitious scheme of mine.

"Hey, that's me!" Sava pointed at her jade copy.

"In a sense." I shrugged. "You should thank her. Her part in this is as important as mine."

"I know what to do. I will distract the Satyr King as long as possible," Jade Sava replied.

"And for that, you have all of our thanks." I nodded to her.

"Alright, I think that's everything." Sam glanced at the Teleportation Array and waved his hand at the pile of treasure sitting nearby. He'd emptied the Fateweaver Society's coffers as well, adding to what the Hearthwood Clan could produce. Dean's pockets were already empty, so he had little to contribute himself.

"This'll be my second meeting with an Immortal Ascendant." I rolled up my sleeves. "I wonder if this one will still feel overwhelming."

I remembered Grogna's power being as incomprehensible as the moon might be to an ant. But now I was just one step beneath Immortal Ascendant myself.

"We'll stand by," Tivana said. "How long do you think it'll be before you can bring us over?"

I shrugged. “As soon as I can slip away from Sam and Dean. Stay ready for my signal to come at any time.”

The Matriarchs of the Hearthwood threw me a salute, and I joined Sam, Dean, Jade Sava, and the pile of treasure on the Teleportation Array.

“We’re ready,” Sam said, his voice steady.

“Time to go. Mac, please initiate the teleportation.” I waved away a prompt, and soon, the array hummed with energy.

The transportation was quick and smooth. Far smoother than any elven teleportation array. It seemed faster than before, but I wasn’t sure if it was because of a recent upgrade or integrating the QCA into The Wanderer.

We appeared in one of the satellites the Hearthwood Clan kept in orbit. I didn’t recognize the design, but Argona had been steadily improving them since our first set of satellites.

Getting to the World of Woods and Wilds took several more jumps. When we reached the last one, we all dusted ourselves off and did our best to look like diplomats.

I shot a glance at Jade Sava. “This would be your last chance to back out.”

Jade Sava shook her head. “I’m ready. Whatever the cost.”

I activated the last teleporter and reappeared somewhere strange.

A group of Satyrs stood from where they were seated, hunched over a table as they played a game of dice. All four of them were Demigods, but something was off about them. They moved clumsily and with far too much bravado, like someone unused to their own body. Each was as brawny and tall as the Satyr Demigods I’d slain, and the energies I felt from them were very familiar.

“Well, well, look who we have here. We heard supplicants from the World of Sanctuary and Serenity might be coming...” One of the Satyrs grinned. “Come to beg for the Satyr King’s mercy?”

“Yes,” Sam replied without missing a beat. “We’re here to grovel before him, as you might expect. We brought the Keystone Elf he wanted, as well as a few gifts. We also have proof that the four Demigods you sent our way are safe, whole, and awaiting safe return.”

I finally placed where I sensed these energies before. They were exactly the same as the Demigods I’d fought back in the Hearthwood. Apparently, the Satyr King had already given away their empty Sacred Groves and raised new Satyrs to Demigod.

My heart hardened. I was making the right choice. If I didn’t do this, then the Satyr King would flood the Hearthwood with Demigods until he finally got what he wanted.

“Let me guess,” another of the Satyr guards chimed in, his eyes gleaming with smug malice. “You’re hoping our gracious king will spare your pathetic lives in exchange for these trinkets?”

Dean stepped forward, arms crossed. “We’re here for peace, not to be mocked.”

Ignoring Dean’s glare, the Satyrs continued their taunting. “Well then, little human elf lovers. Let’s not keep our king waiting.” One of them gestured for us to follow. “He’ll be thrilled to see you all on your knees begging for mercy. If you want my advice, you should have gone lighter on the gold and zeal crystals and heavier on the elven servants. We could always use more of them.”

I might have been offended at the Satyr’s words, but they slid right off. I didn’t care what he thought about me, my friends, or my lovers. He was just an idiot. And if I had my way, he’d be a dead idiot soon.

Instead, I was focused on finding the opportunity to slip away. Sam, Dean, and Jade Sava didn’t need me for this little diplomatic mission. In fact, it would probably go better if I made my escape long before the Satyr King extended his senses to find me. After all, we hadn’t exactly parted our last set of negotiations as friends.



Dean cast me a few glances, probably checking to see if I had made a break for it yet.

But I couldn't leave yet. Getting caught slipping away would raise an alarm immediately. Even if I made it all the way to my target, these Demigods could still cause problems for me.

I'd hoped we'd walk past an Earth ley line, giving me the perfect opportunity to brush against it and disappear unnoticed. Unfortunately, the ley lines running through the area were all well away from me and well looked after. It was a side effect of the presence of so many Sacred Groves in this world. The flow of earth zeal was as tightly controlled as any other type of magic.

Dean tried to trick our escort into looking away. "Hey, what's that giant dick-looking plant over there?"

None of our guards responded. Dean stayed right where he was and kept pointing, waiting for an answer expectantly. Eventually, one rolled his eyes. "Keep walking, stupid human."

He didn't look at the strangely phallic-looking tree or allow himself to be distracted in the least. Dean cast me a sheepish shrug.

Sam tried next. "What an incredible specimen! A plant that emits fate zeal naturally? I must take a sample back with me." He rushed in the direction of a plant.

Two of the Demigods chased after him, leaving two behind. "Don't you dare steal from the Satyr King's garden!" one of them shouted.

Unfortunately, two Demigods remained alongside us. I might be able to use my Pocket World Passage to deal with one of them silently, but not two. Would I have to risk it anyway?

Then, help came from where I least expected it. Jade Sava had an idea.

She shot me one mournful glance, then let out a mournful wail. "I will not become a tool for a disgusting man like the

Satyr King to grow more powerful!”

Then she started running in the opposite direction Sam had gone.

This was it! My chance!

“Damn it! Stupid elf!” The two remaining Demigods looked at one another, and one of them ran off after Sava.

Dean and I exchanged a look, and I opened my Pocket World Passage. In the same motion, Dean shoved the Demigod through the passage, stripping him of his powers. On the other side of the passage was the entire might of the Hearthwood Clan.

“Don’t kill him! We don’t want to alert the Satyr King. Lock him in the Personal Chambers!” I ordered.

[Consider it done,] Mac replied.

I closed the Pocket World Passage and turned to Dean. “Thanks. Cover for me.”

I yelled at the top of my lungs. “I’ll help get that damn keystone elf! I’m with you!”

And then I took off running as fast as I could in the completely wrong direction. With any luck, the Satyrs would guess I rushed off with their missing Demigod and got lost. It wasn’t exactly a rock-solid alibi, but I only needed it to last an hour or two at most. That would be enough time for me to do what I wanted.

Dean threw me a salute and mouthed the words ‘good luck.’

I vanished behind the trees and brush of the Satyr King’s Sacred Grove. It occurred to me that I might be able to do some serious damage now that I was here. The grove seemed nearly endless, and just hacking down trees and plants would do little to weaken the Satyr King.

But likely not enough. I shook my head. I had my eyes on a far greater prize.

I sensed it ahead of me. An Earth ley line. I dove into it, willing it to take me far away.

I stayed within its embrace for several long minutes, traveling an enormous distance in the blink of an eye. The feel of the earth zeal felt different. The World of Struggle and Strife had felt the same way, though the feeling that the world's earth zeal had been different in another way.

Where the earth zeal of the World of Sanctuary and Serenity was beautiful, this zeal was rugged. Where the earth zeal on the World of Struggle and Strife was tough, this zeal was stubborn. It was distinctive enough that the pull was different and unexpected but not nearly powerful enough to overcome my will. I wondered what the Satyr King was feeling as I traveled through the ley lines in his Sacred Grove. Maybe it was akin to a clot flowing through his veins.

Perhaps if I was very, very lucky, he'd have the magical equivalent of a stroke long before I finished what I planned to do. Somehow, I doubted I'd be that fortunate.

Far from prying eyes, I emerged from the ley line. I took one glance around and saw little but manicured forest. I suspected most of the Satyr King's territory looked like this. It seemed like a crude facsimile of wilderness, like someone was trying to shove as many aspects of a temperate forest together every few square meters.

There were a few elves tending to the forest nearby, but the strongest of them was only a Wizard. Even she wouldn't be able to detect me from this distance, though, especially when I added a little of my improved Unnoticeability spell to the area.

Safe and secure, I summoned my Pocket World Passage once again. My matriarchs were still there, waiting for my orders. This time, I gave them the signal.

"Alright, everyone. Now's the time. Everybody, go!" I ordered. Grim nods and intense smiles greeted me in reply. "Take anything that isn't nailed down, including the elves the Satyr King imprisoned here to work on his Sacred Grove. Stick together in teams of two. And remember, the Satyrs can't

fight in pocket spaces, so if you're being chased, just head straight back to The Wanderer.”

They broke off into small groups as planned, fanning out to scout the area. With so many of them, they'd hopefully be able to scout the area and save who and what they could. It wouldn't be much, but it was the most I could offer.

With them on their task, I turned my attention to my own mission. This seemed as good a spot to start digging as any. I knelt down, pressing my palms against the ground. A rush of Earth zeal flowed through me as I sliced through the earth, opening a wide hole that led straight down.

I jumped into the hole, widening it more even as I descended. The sounds of the Satyr King's Sacred Grove above me faded to nothing as I descended straight toward the planet's molten core.

CHAPTER  
**SIXTY**

I didn't dig the whole way down. About a kilometer beneath the surface, the effects of the Sacred Grove on the surface diminished, and the earth ley lines returned to more like what I was used to. Eventually, I found one headed straight down.

I should have felt more claustrophobic than I was, buried so far beneath the earth. But my doppelganger had lived like this long enough that any fear I might have had was gone.

Besides, if I needed to, I knew I could make a chamber for myself and fill it with air. I did that several times when I sensed powerful earth elementals brushing by me.

While I could take down one or two without much issue, killing too many would leave blood in the water. The last thing I wanted was an elemental feeding frenzy while going about delicate manipulations of earth zeal.

Unfortunately, the earth's elementals grew stronger as I delved deeper. There were beings of immense power down here if my last experience pulling off something like this was anything to go by. And what I was about to do was going to really piss them off.

I felt their consciousnesses brushing against mine. I made my bubble of air to isolate myself, but it was proving less effective as I delved deeper and the elementals grew more powerful. One attacked me despite my best efforts.

I dealt with it quickly, thinking it was just bad luck.

Then another brushed against me, attacking me just as voraciously. This one was only a little stronger, roughly the

equivalent of a Wizard. I dealt with it in the same manner, but that was just the start.

I began suspecting that these Earth elementals could sense my hostile intent for their planet. Well, if they wanted to die, I would oblige them.

I dove deeper, far past the crust and the solid bits of rock. The stone around me grew hot enough to boil water, and then it started growing hotter still. Before long, I encountered more and more bits of iron, and I seized control of them as weapons to wield against the encroaching horde of elementals.

There were dozens by now, but I spotted a ley line ahead. I reached it first and slipped inside it, willing myself to travel through it as fast as the currents of zeal would carry me. The elementals followed close behind, and when I emerged amidst molten metal and a pocket of noxious gasses, I prepared an ambush for them.

“Come here, you rocky bastards!” I yelled as I set my feet on the soft, partially molten ground of the small cavern deep beneath the surface.

I found myself in a hidden cavern that had probably never before felt the gaze of an elf, satyr, or human. The walls were made of hardened stone, and molten magma burbled nearby, throwing off light in all directions.

The ground shifted, and the elemental following me took shape one by one. On the surface, elementals took more recognizable forms like those of bulls or squat, powerfully built humanoids.

But these elementals didn't know the forms living flesh took, so most of them were little more than the shifting, amorphous blobs of earth they came from.

**Amorphous Earth Elemental (Early Wizard - Level 31)**

**Amorphous Earth Elemental (Early Wizard - Level 33)**

**Amorphous Earth Elemental (Mid Wizard - Level 34)**

Dozens more earth elementals appeared, and I waved away the notifications. Some were only True Mage, but most were

somewhere in the wizard realm. While their individual power was nothing much to me, fighting so many of them would take time and be quite tedious.

“Alright, you rocky bastards! If you want a fight, I’ll give you a fight!” I yelled, my voice echoing off the nearly molten stone walls.

The glow of the nearby magma cast huge shadows against the wall, like some ancient cave drawing where one man faced off against thousands of shapeless mounds.

The elementals responded to my taunts. Their bodies vibrated with a deep, resonating rumble that encoded through the small cavern so loudly that it was like a physical attack. The sound waves pounded against my ears, and I pressed my hands over my head.

“Alright, no more of that,” I grunted, though I couldn’t hear myself over the noise. I reached for all the bits and pieces of iron I’d gathered and launched them at the elementals. Jagged chunks of metal cut straight through the nearly molten stone the elementals were made from. But that didn’t even slow them down as they lumbered toward me.

Under the kinds of heat and pressure this far beneath the surface, the earth’s elementals responded differently from what I was used to. Normally, I could chip away at their bodies until they were nothing more than a pile of broken rubble.

But down here? Under such intense heat and pressure, that stone burred nearby as molten magma?

Here, they were more akin to swamp or water elementals. If I cut them, they could just reform their bodies and rejoin the fray. At this rate, the fight would go on for far longer than I had the time for.

The only thing that seemed to do much of anything was using the unique properties of steel.

There was enough metal within my grasp that some of it worked well enough as steel, and I could use steel to siphon away the zeal of these elementals.

More memories flashed through my mind. Memories of my doppelganger slaughtering hordes of elementals just like this group before me. He'd drained them of their power just as I was planning.

With his experience to guide me, I attacked just as he would have. I struck with all the ferocity of a cornered beast, launching myself into the fray. Blood dripped down my ears from the constant wailing, but I didn't care as I swept Spell Eater around in a wide arc.

The steel in my weapon was my conduit, the means through which I could siphon away power. And I used it with ruthless efficiency.

One elemental after another collapsed, and their zeal drained into me. I found the surges of untamed power in my own will and the might of my World Titan Fiendbody. I would see what I'd gained from the fight when all this was over. It felt like I had only just become a Demigod, and yet here I was, already thinking about Immortal Ascension.

Emboldened, I repeated the process with the next group of elementals. What followed was a slaughter as elementals died in droves. By the time the last of them fell, I was alight with power.

Zeal alone would not do as much for me as it might have once done, but I wasn't about to throw away the combined lifetime's work of nearly a hundred wizard-realm elementals. I condensed their power within me, compressing it and shoving it deep within me. Already, my World Titan Fiendbody was drawing on the energy to replenish what I'd expended.

My ears had stopped bleeding, and I felt as good as new when I put away Spell Eater. Perhaps better, once I finished making the zeal I'd stolen mine.

Rejuvenated from the battle and alight with the stolen power of the defeated elementals, I continued my descent into the caverns. Before long, the flickering light of the molten lava came into view. The heat was intense, radiating off the glowing liquid rock in waves that would have been deadly to anyone else.



But I was not just anyone.

With the World Titan Fiendbody protecting me from the intense heat, I dove into the lava without a second thought. I moved through the molten rock as easily as if I were swimming in water, the deadly environment around me unable to harm me.

Deeper and deeper I went, navigating through the underground labyrinth toward the planet's core. The closer I got, the more I could feel the immense power at the heart of this world. It was a raw, primal force that pulsed with the rhythm of the planet.

I drew on the power within me with one intent. To turn the planet's core against itself. A world existed in a delicate balance. Beneath the calm surface lay immense energies gathered and compressed together. With a mind to nudge it in just the right way, this power could crack the world into pieces, just as I planned to do.

I'd nearly done this by accident when guiding the crust of the World of Sanctuary and Serenity to rotate faster than usual, sparing our continent from a dragon attack. Now, I did it faster and harder, with the intention of doing exactly what I'd avoided doing before.

Slowly, the core responded to my nudging. I increased its spin, urging it faster and faster. It resisted at first. The amount of mass I was trying to move was truly immense. But my power was just as vast, and as I continued to push and push, I felt it buckle and move.

I felt tremors shake the magma around me, some strong enough that they might reach all the way to the surface. It was working just as I envisioned. As a Demigod, I could do in minutes what would have taken me hours as a Sorcerer.

Just a little longer now...

When victory was nearly within my grasp, something shifted in the depths. I felt a surge of earth zeal, but this wasn't like the power of lesser elementals I'd fought and slain before. There was something else behind that power.

There were undercurrents of the same sensation I experienced when I manipulated iron and steel. That much was to be expected from an elemental living so deep underground. This world had an iron core, after all.

But there was something else, too. Like my concept of gravity, but not quite. It was more like pressure. Like being crushed from all sides, similar to being deep underwater. A bad feeling crawled up my spine.

### **Primordial Planetary Guardian Elemental (Peak Demigod - Level 59)**

I cursed, though the words came out as nothing more than bubbles that hardened the magma and molten iron I was swimming through.

I tried the trick I'd used before to hide myself and hardened more of the magma, then filled the pocket with air from the Hearthwood. That instantly created an obsidian sphere with me inside it. I worked quickly to wrap that sphere in an Unnoticeability spell while maintaining the magic I was casting to encourage the planet's core to spin faster and faster.

"Don't notice me. Don't notice me. Don't notice me..." I whispered to myself from within the sphere.

My obsidian sphere cracked in two, and an enormous shining blade made of solid diamond nearly ran straight through my guts.

Crap.

I finally got a good look at my foe as the magma rushed in. It stung my eyes like water from a pool full of chlorine, but I needed to see what I was fighting.

It was enormous, and I couldn't even make out more than the claw that had tried to stab me with my normal eyes. The shards of diamonds on each fingertip were roughly the size of a wagon, which meant the hand they were attached to was large enough to be a castle.

I extended my magical senses, feeling its shape through the magma around me. It was big and muscular, hunched in on itself with four legs and an enormous tail. It took me a while to

realize what it reminded me of. An enormous and incredibly powerful crocodile.

The Primordial Planetary Guardian elemental moved through the molten magma as easily as I might have expected a beast in its natural habitat to move. The lethal heat and pressure had even less effect on its body than it did on me.

As it turned its gaze on me, I could sense more than the primal anger of an enormous beast. There was an odd type of feral intelligence, like the Shadowblade Beast when I'd first met it.

Its roar echoed through the magma, and I let out a silent battle cry in reply. It was defending its home and would fight with desperate fury.

But I was defending my home as well.

I swept a claw at me again, and I dodged. Snapping teeth earned it a scrape across the side of its jaw with Spell Eater.

The molten magma flowed into the wound, healing it as fast as I could with the full might of the World Titan Fiendbody.

This thing was fast and strong, and defeating it would be no easy feat, under ordinary circumstances.

But now? While I was busy and most of my magic was invested in increasing the speed of the planet's spinning core? I simply didn't have the focus to fight this thing off.

Or did I?

Once, I had been two people: me and my doppelganger. And I had the Parallel Thought skill. Perhaps I needed a ruthless fighter who could battle unflinchingly while I focused on completing the mission.

I wracked my brain for all the thoughts and memories I'd inherited from my doppelganger. All the ruthless aggression and the lust for battle. I shoved it all into a box at the front of my mind and then activated Parallel Thought.

My body started moving instantly, following long-honed battle instincts.

[Keep that thing busy!] I shouted in my own head. [You don't have to win. Just buy me time to finish!]

After a long moment, my doppelganger responded. [This is a battle I will gladly fight. Good luck.]

With my mind divided in two, the battle was no longer a distraction. I could watch it like I was observing someone else fight. Meanwhile, I continued the delicate manipulations of zeal I was struggling with. The currents were growing unstable. Inefficient.

It was almost like the planet had a will of its own and sensed what I was trying to do. It was fighting me and trying to disperse its extra energy. But I wasn't about to let that happen.

While I wrestled currents of zeal and the will of a world, my doppelganger fought with our shared body against the enormous Primordial Elemental.

Diamond shattered beneath my spear. Currents of molten iron brushed past me.

The giant crocodile activated its own concept, the Concept of Pressure. The weight of a world pressed down on me from all sides. Blood pulsed through my temples, and I felt blood leaking out my nose and into the magma around us.

My skin burned and my hair sizzled. He channeled his own Concept of Strength. He was better at it than I was, and I felt unyielding power push against the pressure around us. Then he turned to me for aid.

[Can you attack?] he asked.

In reply, I set my gaze on the most vulnerable part of the giant crocodile's underbelly. During the fighting, we'd chipped away at the diamond armor there.

Now, I focused on the magma beneath the wound and used the Concept of Identity to convert it from molten magma to liquid oxygen.

The reaction was instantaneous. First, there was an implosion as something far hotter than fire met something far

colder than ice. Then, the combustible components of the magma reacted with the oxygen it had just come into contact with, resulting in an explosion that sent another wave of tremors shooting through the entire planet.

That was just enough of a blow to break the Primordial Elemental's pressure on my body, letting my doppelganger break free and begin his attacks again. When the Primordial Elemental tried to lock us down with his Concept of Pressure once again, I had a counter ready.

I activated my Concept of Gravity and worked on reducing the pressure as much as possible. With two powerful concepts struggling against one another, it was like neither was active at all.

Then my doppelganger activated his Concept of Strength once more and struck point-first with Spell Eater. He buried the enchanted adamantium weapon deep in the enormous monster's eye.

It shook its head, knocking us loose but leaving Spell Eater lodged there, draining its zeal.

The Primordial Elemental let out a wordless scream, and energy charged within its mouth. But then my doppelganger opened our mouth, and a crimson beam charged within it to meet the Primordial Elemental's attack.

*Kaboom!*

Two massive beams of energy collided, and I felt something around us crack. Turning my attention upward, I realized it was the planet's crust high overhead.

This was more than the World of Woods and Wilds could take.

[We're almost there! Hit him with everything you've got!]

Earth zeal poured from me in quantities as vast as the ocean. My doppelganger took us back to the Primordial Elemental's head, punching it with a blow that could shatter mountains and grabbing hold of Spell Eater again. Soon, he was draining the Primordial Elemental's power through Spell Eater and funneling it to me.

I used that power to hasten my spell that much more. The beast screamed in fury, and I screamed with it. All that power flowed through us and into the trembling planetary core we battled in.

Between the two of us, the World of Woods and Wilds shattered.

The moment the planet's core shattered, it was as if time itself came to a standstill. The rumbling ceased, replaced by an eerie, profound silence. Then the planet exploded with a deafening roar that echoed through the void.

Magma flew up and out in all directions as the crust splintered and cracked, then splintered and cracked some more. Hopefully, the Matriarchs of the Hearthwood made it to my Pocket World Passage quickly. A few of them would do just fine in space, so they could help the others if any were too slow.

Hopefully they all followed my advice and picked up the right spells and techniques to survive in space, but even if they didn't, I trusted them to have picked up defensive items from the clan vaults that would let them survive until I could pick them up.

Sam and Dean were both Demigods, so I knew that they were fine, even if they'd been caught by surprise during the blast over in the Satyr King's palace.

The core spread out, spewing chunks of molten rock and metal into space. The light from the explosion was blinding, illuminating the dark void in a harsh, unyielding glow. The force of the explosion propelled me backward, and I braced myself against the shockwave, using my Gravity concept to keep myself anchored to the biggest piece I could find.

My fight with the Primordial Elemental wasn't over.

I watched as it tried to attack, its once fearsome form now pitifully weak. Its roar was silent in the void. But it was too late. Without the planet's pressure, it was like a fish out of water, its strength and power rendered useless. It wiggled its tail and flapped its arms as it tried to claw through the magma growing ever sparser, only to find no purchase at all.

I maneuvered myself away from its path, watching as it thrashed in the void, helpless and unable to move. It was a

strange sight. This once-powerful creature couldn't fight at all now that it was out of its element. No wonder it had fought so hard to preserve the World of Woods and Wilds. It was helpless without it.

I let the creature drift away. Now that I'd finished what I wanted to do, I had no more quarrel with it. I had won, and it had lost. From here on out, its fate was its own.

While I could have tried to finish it off so I could use its hide to make armor or its core to make an incredible weapon, I didn't think it right. Not with so many other valuable artifacts ripe for the taking all around it. Best to just leave it be. Maybe it would find a new planet to inhabit. Or make its way to one of the bigger pieces of debris.

The hard part was over, but the work was only just beginning.

My eyes roamed the destroyed world. I hadn't been quite as lucky as I'd hoped, so I would need to nudge the debris in the right direction by hand.

It was time to feed a hungry Planetary Defense Array.



The debris from the shattered planet drifted around me. No doubt some bits and pieces had gone rocketing off into deep space, but most of the big chunks of debris stayed fairly close to the site of the former planet.

Perhaps with a few million years, they'd settle back down and reform into something planet-like. That was good. I would have hated to be the reason everybody had to call this place the nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine worlds.

I was only interested in the bits and pieces that had once borne life. Heck, many of those bits and pieces *still* bore life now, even after the explosion. Anything with substantial zeal flowing through it was bound to be particularly hardy, and there were hundreds of spells useful for trapping a bubble of air.



Most shields did it automatically as a byproduct of their functionality. While the planet's crust had been thoroughly destroyed, shattering every large Sacred Grove on its surface, there were plenty smaller Sacred Groves mostly intact. I found those at the True Mage level particularly interesting.

They were small enough that some of them had survived on a planetary fragment intact through sheer luck, and the synergistic effects of the plants, combined with the directed will of the elven gardeners tending the Sacred Groves, meant a few of them were drifting through the void as flat-isolated islands of life. A few of them even seemed to have a stable enough magical ecosystem to continue as they were indefinitely.

I combed through the debris like a kid through a box of free toys, sorting out bits and pieces here and there, taking everything that looked even halfway interesting.

“Mhm... a couple of elven Wizards. I'll hang on to them. Bunch of Satyrs... toss them over here. Wow, that is a chonker of a tree. I want it for the Hearthwood.”

It really was a big tree. It looked like it was holding onto an atmosphere on its own, and there were at least a few thousand elves and fairies clinging to it desperately as both they and the tree drifted helplessly through the void. The fragment it rested upon looked like it had once been part of a Demigod's Sacred Grove. Maybe even the Satyr King's own Sacred Grove.

Most of the grove was gone, but the tree remained, and through its power alone, it was struggling against the forces of the void to stay alive.

There were a few Satyrs too, so I landed to sort them out and toss them away in the scrap pile. For a prize like this one, I didn't mind getting my hands dirty. When I noticed the Satyrs were speaking to the elves, I landed quietly and listened in.

“Quick! We need some heavy-duty spells to direct us to a safe world to land on. And then some to slow us down when we fall. Wizards, three of you are going to need to kill

yourselves and turn into wisps so I can use you to save everybody else!” one Satyr said.

“Hurry up and kill yourselves!” the other Satyr added. “We don’t have time to argue. Here, I’ll choose. You and you! Your wisps will save your kin’s lives. And more importantly, ours as well. I know it’s a big sacrifice, but—”

I cut him off, feeling I had a good picture of the situation. “Let me guess. It’s a big sacrifice, but it’s one you’re willing to make.”

Both Satyrs jumped back in terror. But they were far too slow. They had the look of people who’d been powerful until recently. Unfortunately, the planet’s destruction had divided their Sacred Groves into all sorts of random chunks and what was flowing through them now was a chaotic and jumbled mess. I could see zeal running around inside their bodies, ravaging them from the inside. They weren’t quite Demigods, even if they were whole, so perhaps they had been Satyr Sorcerers?

Every powerful Satyr was no doubt dealing with a confusing haze of zeal influxes from their destroyed Sacred Groves, just like these two. The important thing was my hope that they’d still have enough power to count in the eyes of the Planetary Defense Array.

“How’d you get here? Do you have a ship? If you’re willing to take us to a safe world, we’ll sell you every single one of these elves here!” The Satyr Sorcerer gestured behind him.

I shook my head. “Fellas, you’re in no position to bargain. Why would I buy anything from you when I could just take it?”

I grabbed the two Satyrs. Picking them up one by one, I hurled them toward the World of Sanctuary and Serenity, where the Planetary Defense Array was waiting to gobble up Sorcerers just like them.

I turned back to the elves. “Now, ladies. That is a nice tree you’ve got there.”

The elves looked at one another. The three wizards who'd been ordered to kill themselves moments before stepped forward to lead. With head bowed, they addressed me.

“Y-you're a chaka, correct? A human?” one asked.

I pointed to myself. “Yes, indeed I am. How'd you ladies like to accompany me back to my home? You see, some ugly bastards like the two I just got rid of knocked down half the trees in my forest. I need to replant, and your tree caught my eye. Give it to me, and I'll give you a ride to my home, as well as food and housing, until you get back on your feet.”

The Wizards glanced at one another as though they couldn't believe their own luck. One eventually answered me.

“We gladly accept, sir! Please, take the tree.” The wizard vigorously nodded her head. “And us too. If you'll transport us to a safe world, we'll ensure this tree is planted and takes root. Most of us have cared for it all our lives.”

I chuckled. “I'm glad.”

My next few encounters went along a similar line. I was shopping for anything interesting. It turned out that when you had all the impressive landmarks of an entire world, you could pick up some memorable stuff.

I found a giant mountain that emitted a huge amount of Earth zeal, a chunk of land with a sparkling lake brimming with water zeal, a swamp filled with poison zeal, a field of shining silver sand brimming with sunlight zeal, and much, much more. Truthfully, I wasn't sure how I was going to fit it all in the Hearthwood, but maybe I could recruit Dean to fold some pocket spaces for me.

I put all my prizes aside when I finally ran into the fragment carrying my Pocket World Passage. I checked in with my Matriarchs, pleased to see that everyone made it home safe and with lots of loot and rescued people to boot.

“We found lots of great stuff!” Eltiana grinned at me. “I snatched this Satyr fountain that spews endless wine! We'll put it in the new town square while we're rebuilding.”

I chuckled. “That’s great, Eltiana. I’m sure that’ll be a popular attraction for the city. What about the people?”

“Yeah, we rescued a bunch of elves and fairies, too.” Eltiana shrugged. “They’re all pretty lost and confused. And I doubt we even got a tenth of the innocent people who were on the World of Woods and Wilds when it was destroyed. But hey, there could be worse fates! Like being forced to garden for the Satyrs forever.”

I chuckled. “Agreed. And don’t count all the elves and fairies as dead quite yet. I’m pretty sure wisps can survive just fine in the void. I’ve picked up quite a few myself, and I even have a few chunks of rock with survivors on them. See if Argona can get some golems to help comb through the debris. I could use a few extra sets of hands.”

“Orders received, Patriarch!” Eltiana kissed my cheek, then darted back through the portal to the Hearthwood.

After more searching, I found the other fragment I was looking for. The remains of the Satyr King’s palace. It was easy to find because the moment I entered the magical bubble keep an atmosphere in, I heard Dean’s booming voice.

“Not so smug now, boatman?” Dean cackled.

“Unhand me, human! I don’t know what you’ve done, but as soon as my people stabilize my Sacred Grove’s magic, you’ll be utterly destroyed!” answered the familiar voice of the Satyr King.

“Your agents have their own problems. As you’ve no doubt guessed. We wouldn’t have been able to deal with all your Demigods otherwise,” Sam replied.

I landed at the doorway to the palace. It was a grand home, even in its current state.

It was made from equal parts carved wood and white stone. The gnarled ancient bark was adorned with intricate patterns, and hundreds of windows lined the structure’s surface, with glass far clearer than I was accustomed to on the elven homeworld.

Magical lights filled every room, and I spotted no less than three grand banquet halls from the air. A few of them were even filled. Scantly clad elven servants were still handing out drinks and desserts to a few shell-shocked and nervous Satyrs sitting at the tables.

The zeal running through all of them had run completely rampant, and it looked like they had little to no power to muster at all. Even so, the elves continued to serve them with downturned faces and docile expressions, even though they could probably defeat the Satyrs if they banded together.

Sam and Dean sounded like they had the situation with the Satyr King himself well in hand, and I'd need to get the servants somewhere safe. Otherwise, the Planetary Defense Array would get them too.

So I crashed straight through a skylight and landed in the most heavily populated ballroom in a shower of broken glass.

"Hello! Sorry to interrupt your party, but I'll be taking all your elves now," I announced as I landed.

The moment I made my declaration, the grandeur of the banquet hall was shattered. The Satyrs rose from their seats, their faces twisted in outrage.

"And who are you?" one of the more pompous-looking Satyrs demanded, puffing out his chest in a futile show of dominance.

"I'm the one who blew up your planet," I replied, my words hanging heavy in the air. A moment of stunned silence followed.

"It was you who destroyed everything!" the Satyr who'd spoken a moment before screamed at me. He knocked his cups from the table and looked like he was about to charge me. But the moment he left his chair, he seemed to remember how little power his limbs held. So, instead, he turned to the elven servants. "You! Attack and destroy him! Kill this intruder!"

I rolled my eyes and crossed the room in a blink of an eye. One moment, I was standing amid a pile of shattered glass. And the next, I was standing with the Satyr's throat clutched

in my grip. He kicked his legs pathetically, feet unable to find purchase anywhere.

“You’re done. All of you are. Feel this? This is power.” I waved my hand, and earth zeal flowed from me. The ground erupted and tossed over tables and chairs, throwing the Satyrs on their asses. “And right now, you don’t have any of it.”

While I directed my words toward the Satyrs, I was more interested in the impression the elves were having of our little chat. Right now, all of them were frozen in fear.

I pointed at the nearest elf, a young woman who was watching me with wide eyes. “She could probably take all of you down without breaking a sweat.”

The elf seemed hesitant and confused. She pointed to herself. “M-me?”

“Yes, you. Come here.” I grabbed one of the few intact bottles of wine and bit the cork before spitting it out. I held the open bottle for the elven servant and grabbed one glass from her tray. I filled it with more wine and then passed it to her. “I want you to pour this wine all over his face.”

“I... I could never!” The elf took a step back in fear, but I grabbed her wrist to keep her in place.

“You can and you will.”

The elf saw my stern gaze, and she poured wine all over the pompous Satyr’s face with trembling hands.

I turned to the Satyr with a grin on my face. “Now watch as he does nothing about it.”

“You will be executed! You’re dead! You hear me!?” The pompous Satyr sputtered and huffed. But he could do no more than shout threats and wave his hands.

I shook my head and tossed him on the ground. “It’s the same for all the Satyrs. I destroyed their planet along with all their Sacred Groves. Their power is broken. Right now, you’re stronger than they are.”

The elves looked at one another. A bold elf grabbed a glass of wine off her tray toward the back of the room and tossed it

in a Satyr's face. He coughed and spluttered just like the other had. But like the other, all he could do was threaten and curse. He had no real power left.

“Come on,” I told the elves. “Ditch them. Let's get out of here.”

I wandered the palace, hitting the banquet halls and then the rest of the rooms one by one. There were many servants here, but I suppose that was to be expected of a palace. There were also a lot of trinkets to take.

While I didn't like the look of the palace overall, the furniture was well made and looked very impressive. Far better than what I'd furnished my own castle with. There were exotic leathers from far-off worlds, fine works of art on every wall, and plenty of gold, gemstones, and zeal crystals on display.

The Satyr King wouldn't need it anymore, so I helped myself. A few extra beds here. Some curtains there. A comfortable sofa. It was all a rather splendid collection of finds. Elven furniture tended to be smaller since it was all built with elves in mind.

I hadn't even realized how uncomfortable the chairs I'd been using had been for me until I sat down in the one the Satyr King kept in his personal chambers.

"Absolutely heavenly..." I muttered.

I spotted a few maid uniforms, too. They were skimpy in all the right ways. In that one respect, I could congratulate the Satyr King on his good taste.

I was almost ready to join Sam and Dean in the throne room when I spotted something under a blanket in the Satyr King's private quarters. There was a lot of zeal in there. As in, a truly enormous amount. More than I had seen anywhere besides Grognaak's palace.

Immediately, I was on my guard. Was this some secret weapon? It was the size of a desk and looked large enough to contain an elf, though not a Satyr.

A muffled voice echoed out from under the blanket. I frowned and listened. It sounded like a young woman's voice.



“Pastries...” she muttered. “Yummy, yummy. The bad, horny man stole my pastry. Evil, bad, horny man.”

Suddenly, I had a good idea of what was under the blanket. Or rather, *who* was under the blanket.

I pulled it off, revealing a bell-shaped jar as large as I was. Within sat a sad-looking fairy curled in on herself. Her wings had been clipped short, and she held her head between her knees.

“Pardon my interruption, but you wouldn’t be the Fairy of the Immortal Glade, would you?” I asked the sad fairy curiously.

The fairy turned up to look at me, cheeks swollen and lips pouty. “Who’s asking?”

She looked much like the other fairies I had in the Hearthwood, though scaled up significantly. She could have been mistaken for a short and petite elf if she covered the stubs of her wings. She had long green hair with a crown of woven twigs and flowers about her brow, and her clothes were just a handful of leaves hanging in the right places through her magic.

“Patriarch Theo of the Hearthwood Clan, at your service.” I bowed.

“Are you with the evil pastry thieves?” the Fairy of the Immortal Glade asked.

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t dream of depriving you of your pastries.”

“Then give!” She held out her hands and pointed to a plate resting nearby. There was a pastry on it with a single bite taken out of it. It was resting just beyond the glass wall of the jar.

Did I want to open up this jar? While the fairy within was far cuter than a can of worms ought to be, I still got the feeling that opening this jar would be something I couldn’t undo.

My instincts told me it would be the right thing to do. But I had more than myself to think about. I was Patriarch of the Hearthwood Clan, lover of my matriarchs, father to my

children, and an important figure in the World of Sanctuary and Serenity. Who knew what kind of trouble an Immortal Ascendant could unleash, if given access to her full power.

On second thought, none of those titles included the word ‘philosopher’ or ‘navel-gazing prick.’

I was here and had the power to open the jar. It seemed like the right thing to do, so I would do it. Simple as that. Besides, if she was weaker than normal thanks to the destruction of her world, perhaps I could strike a deal with her.

I twisted the glass lid. The enchantments on this thing were truly incredible. It looked like there was some sort of draining functionality siphoning power from the fairy trapped within. The glass would be unbreakable, even to someone of my power.

And yet, all that power was contained with nothing more than a simple twist and lift mechanism. I lifted the jar off the fairy, and she blinked up at me in surprise.

I felt her power hit me like a wave. I had expected her to be diminished thanks to the destruction of her world. I wasn’t sure how similar fae cultivation was to Satyr cultivation, but I expected them to operate off the same principles. Both drew power from Sacred Groves, but in different ways, so in theory the Fairy of the Immortal Glade’s power should be shattered as well.

Not so. The Fairy of the Immortal Glade emanated the full power of an Immortal Ascendant. And I’d just unleashed her.

“Yay, pastry!” She immediately dove for the pastry left just outside of her jar.

That had been a cruel trick played by the Satyr King. He’d left something she’d clearly desired within sight but just out of reach.

When I realized she was more powerful than me, any plans to recruit this unreliable fairy to my cause fled. If she’d been reduced to the Demigod level or below, I could have made a deal with her. But I had no intentions of allowing an Immortal Ascendant anywhere near the Hearthwood. Especially not one

as scatterbrained and unpredictable as this one was rumored to be.

“Well, I hope you enjoy your pastry. The World of Woods and Wilds is unfortunately destroyed. This palace will be too, so you’d better take your leave as soon as possible. This’ll be goodbye then! I wish you a nice life.” I waved and slid out the door before the Fairy of the Immortal Glade could finish stuffing her face with pastries, wiping a bit of sweat from my brow as I did so.



As I made my way to the throne room, I heard Sam’s and Dean’s voices again, intermingled with the familiar petulant tone of the Satyr King. This time though, that voice was coming from his real body.

When I finally entered the throne room, I saw Sam and Dean had the Satyr King pinned down. Dean had his knee on the back of the Satyr King’s neck, keeping him face-down on the ground.

Jade Sava was also there, standing by the empty throne with her arms crossed. She was a bit worse for wear, and whatever Mayatania and the Whitewood sisters had done to make her look like living flesh had failed.

She was now quite clearly a golem made of green jade. Cracked jade at that. I could see the spiderweb lines running down her cheek and around her body. Someone had quite violently slapped her across the face. She looked like she was holding her body together with her crossed arms.

The fighting must have gotten fierce at some point, but Sam and Dean won in the end. Likely when the planet blew up and the Satyrs lost their power.

The Satyr Demigods were piled atop one another like so much kindling. The destruction of their Sacred Groves had robbed them of most of their power. Whatever was left drifting among the scattered chunks of the world slowly dying in the void wouldn’t last long, but hopefully long enough to make

the trip back home. Still, just to be safe, Dean had crafted a pocket space for them, leaving the Satyrs truly helpless.

I'd been so obsessed with creating a Sacred Grove of my own after witnessing Prince Tivar's power.

Now that I knew the trick to beat them, I was growing increasingly less impressed with the form of cultivation. Blowing up their planet was all it took to completely cripple their entire civilization. Really, it was just sad.

I was still shaking my head when I entered the room. The Satyr King's furious gaze found me immediately.

He was the picture of unconstrained rage, and if zeal had still been coursing through his body, I probably would have seen steam pouring out his ears.

"You!" he spat. "What kind of trick have you pulled on us? You've hidden the palace in a pocket space to get the better of me, have you? Probably with the cooperation of one of my worthless sons. I'll have you know I have nearly a hundred loyal demigods! You'll be destroyed soon. Just wait!"

I blinked at him, surprised at just how wrong he was. Then, slowly, a smile spread across my face. "Oh, your majesty, I think you've misunderstood the situation."

"What do you mean? You've devised another trick to separate me from my Sacred Grove?"

I shook my head. "The palace is not stuck in a Pocket Space. I picked a far more permanent solution."

His eyes widened, uncertainty creeping into his bluster. "Then... where are we? Where are my people? My kingdom? My Sacred Grove?!"

"Gone. All of it is gone now."

The Satyr King shook his head, eyes wide as he realized the implications of what I was saying. Still, he asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"Your planet has been destroyed. Every Sacred Grove that once lay upon it now lies in pieces. Every last one of them is gone. Your power base is broken. Your kingdom is destroyed.

Your subjects are drifting through the void and slowly turning into ice cubes.” When I finished speaking, I loomed over him.

He didn’t look like much of an Immortal Ascendant now. Certainly not on the same level as Grognaak. Or even at the same level as the Fairy of the Immortal Glade.

The Satyr King looked up at me. “You’re lying,” he said, but his voice lacked conviction.

“Am I?” I challenged, hands spread wide. “Then where is your power? If I’m lying, strike me down with the cultivation of an Immortal Ascendant.”

The Satyr King lay face down on the ground.

“That’s what I thought.” I smiled. “And for what it’s worth, I don’t care if you believe me. I’ve done what I meant to do.”

As the reality of his situation dawned on him, the Satyr King’s haughty expression crumbled. He stared up at me, eyes full of fear for the first time since I’d met him. “Please,” he begged. Until now, I hadn’t even known he could lower his voice. “Let’s negotiate. You have my word that I will leave you and yours alone from now on. What are your terms?”

I turned to him, expression hardened. “I was willing to negotiate before. I negotiated in good faith after your last attack. Then you went and spat on our agreement by attacking me again despite your promise. Your word is worthless to me.”

“That was before!” the Satyr King yelled. “If I’d known you could do something like this, I wouldn’t have attacked you! You weren’t supposed to be a serious threat to me. Look at you! You’re a Demigod. How did that happen? I thought you were just a Sorcerer!”

I scoffed and cut him off. “It’s too late for negotiations, Alistair. You’re not a king anymore. You’re not even a cultivator anymore. Just a dying man trapped in an empty palace and hurtling towards his doom. You will serve as a warning to anyone else who dares come looking for what is mine.” I bent low, meeting his gaze. He kept his eyes on the ground, but I grabbed him by the horns and forced him to meet

my gaze. “You shouldn’t have touched my city. And you definitely shouldn’t have come after one of my women. Hopefully, your story serves as a warning so others don’t make your mistake.”

The Satyr King let out a few blubbering and pleading words, but I ignored them. I’d heard enough from him and was ready to put him out of my mind for good.

I turned to my friends. “Sam, Dean. Let’s get out of here.” I shot a glance at Jade Sava. “And you too.”

I waved, opening a Pocket World Passage back to the Hearthwood. The pieces were in place, and my work was done. It was time to return home to watch the show. Jade Sava scurried through the portal first, with the three of us following close behind.

We left, and I closed the portal behind me. Once we were through, Dean flashed me a big thumbs-up. “Damn, Theo. That was some kick-ass revenge. I knew there was a reason we missed having you around.”

CHAPTER  
**SIXTY-ONE**

**I**t was nighttime back in the Hearthwood. A perfect time to watch shooting stars. We were in for quite a show tonight.

The real stars sparkled with an ethereal beauty, but the objects of my interest were harder to see, especially past the glowing matrix of the Planetary Defense Array overhead.

“You did it!” I congratulated Jade Sava. “A job well done.”

Dean nodded in approval. “That she did. You should have seen her taunting the old goat there. Ha! It was hilarious when he realized he’d been tricked. She had him for a good five minutes, though!”

“And she pulled a good trick when she bought time for you to get away, Theo,” Sam added.

“Seems like you’ve earned any reward you want.” I smiled at Jade Sava. “Ask, and I will provide.”

I expected her to ask me to fix her up and give her money and cultivation supplies to make her powerful enough to make her own way in the world, after which she’d leave the Hearthwood for good. That was pretty much what my doppelganger had done, at least at first.

Instead, she frowned. She must have sensed something in the expectant look in my eyes because she looked to the ground and then glanced away.

“I’ll... think about things a bit. Where do you think the original me is?” Jade Sava asked.

I shrugged. “Somewhere in The Wanderer, no doubt. She’ll be helping with either the elves we saved or the alchemical reagents we looted. It really depends on whether she was able to grab any Satyr alchemists.”

Jade Sava nodded, then quickly scurried off. Soon, it was just me and my old friends.

“Well, gents, what do you say we grab some beers to celebrate a job well done?” I asked.

“Amen to that!” Dean grinned. “Too bad that brewery of yours got smashed.”

I chuckled and produced one of my recent acquisitions. The Satyr King’s personal liquor cabinet, complete with some of the fanciest glassware I’d ever seen.

“Don’t worry about that. I have drinks fit for royalty right here.” I patted the liquor cabinet after pulling it out of my Dimensional Storage, then heaved it over my shoulder. “I think my balcony has been rebuilt. Let’s camp out there.”

I jumped up to my balcony, liquor cabinet still balanced over my shoulder. Sam and Dean followed close behind me.

It had indeed been rebuilt. The room behind it had been mostly restored as well, though it was still missing a roof. I ran into Yavilla on the way there, who was aghast that we had important guests in the Hearthwood and were forcing them to pour their drinks. At her insistence, I handed her the Satyr King’s liquor cabinet, and she poured the drinks for us. The rest of the Whitewood Clan set up chairs and tables to make us comfortable.

“We were prepared to sit on a pile of rubble, Yavilla. You really don’t have to go through so much trouble.” I waved her fussy hands off. But she insisted.

“Nonsense! You should never be in discomfort, Patriarch! And even if you were to order me to allow it, I could never sully the name of the Hearthwood by allowing such important personages to be forced to pour their own drinks!”

She must have also spread the word of where we were and what we were doing because, one by one, my matriarchs made



the trip up the partially rebuilt Castle Mac and settled in to watch the stars.

“Tivana! You’re just in time. The show should be starting any moment now. Oh, and any luck on your end?” I turned my head to her curiously.

“Yes. We saved a lot of people. Lots of Wizards and a few Sorcerers. Many thousands of wisps, too. I fear for the future for all of them, though.” Tivana gave me a tight-lipped and tense look.

“And why’s that?” I furrowed my brows.

“It’s just... they’ve lived as servants for so long. Years and years of just doing what they were told and never anything else. The elves in the Hearthwood are industrious and self-directed. I’m not sure they’ll fit in.” Tivana gave me a shrug.

I ran my hand through my hair. “You’re right, Tivana. That’ll be a problem. But it’s one we can solve at a later date. Today, I just want to celebrate our victory. Come, have a seat!”

I pulled her into my lap, and we drank from the same glass as we sampled the Satyr King’s booze.

“Not bad, right? Fit for royalty?” I asked curiously.

“Indeed, though not as sweet as I prefer.” Tivana pushed the glass back to my lips.

“Hey, I think I see the first one. Look!” Dean pointed toward the sky.

Sure enough, the barrier overhead lit brilliant white as one of those first two Satyrs I threw crashed into it after a very long and cold flight through empty space. The second impacted a moment later. The golems of the Planetary Defense Array sensed their collision. They collected their remains to be bottled up and used to fill the soul quota.

“That’s two down. A hell of a lot more to go.”

But there were plenty more where the first two came from. There had been an entire planet full of Satyrs, after all. Funny how I hadn’t met a single one I liked.

“There’s a big one coming right after this.” I took a sip from my glass. Sure enough, a few moments later, the sky lit up with a flash of bright white light as a big chunk of rock struck the Planetary Defense Array. That would have been a rough one had it struck the actual planet.

No wonder Grognaak was stuck on his planet catching all the world-destroying meteors headed to the World of Struggle and Strife.

For once, I was glad to have made my home in the World of Sanctuary and Serenity. That the elves had automated the tedious task of planetary defense meant that, in this one respect, the planet lived up to its name.

Sam must have had the same realization I had because a moment later, he said, “Ah... I’m feeling rather serene, letting the Planetary Defense Array save the day for once.”

“Boom! Big explosion!” Dean polished off the glass he was holding, then grabbed the nearest bottle and started drinking directly from that, despite Yavilla’s attempts to intervene and make him civilized.

I chuckled at that. She shouldn’t bother. Dean was a lost cause.

We prepared to raise our glasses in a toast as the biggest shooting star struck the sky. That would be the Satyr King’s palace, containing his most loyal Demigods.

“Here’s to saving our own asses!” I raised my glass.

“I’ll drink to that!” Dean grinned.

“As if you hadn’t drunk to every flash of light so far.” Sam shook his head.

We clanked our glasses together as the sky lit up. The Planetary Defense Array trembled and shook as it sensed several Demigod-level entities and even an Immortal Ascendant.

One of those massive interdimensional tentacle eyeball spider golems we’d fought over Deania appeared to join the feast. As helpless as the Satyrs were, it was over as soon as it

had begun. The massive golem vanished, along with all the others.

I sensed a change in the air immediately, and Sam met my smile with a wide grin.

“I feel it. The shift in fate. Your plan worked, Theo! The Planetary Defense Array has been satisfied, at least at the high levels. It’s eaten all the Demigods it needs. That means whatever’s left of the apocalypse and the end of the Seventh Golden Age will be far milder than usual. Normally, the hunt for Demigod souls causes the most destruction.”

Dean shot me a glance. “But hey, just because this is a milder Golden Age, don’t think you can shirk your responsibilities! Keeping our home politically stable is a huge pain in the ass, and I can’t wait to go back to managing just a clan. That’s it, I’m declaring it here and now, you’re the king of the region! Send all the paperwork Theo’s way! I’m going to relax.”

I chuckled. I was pretty sure Dean had been doing nothing other than relaxing since he handed the throne off to his daughter.

“Won’t Lyanva have something to say about you handing control of the region off to somebody else?” I raised a brow.

Dean shrugged and took a sip of his glass. “Mate, half of Deania is in ruins. Most of the clans never recovered from the orc invasion, let alone the golem attacks. Lyanva got the job of the queen because she was the only one of my kids who hung around after she reached the Sorcerer realm, and I needed to hand the gig off to somebody so I could look for Sam. What’s coming after this is going to be a colossal pain in the ass, and I doubt she wants any part of it. Besides, you can make a nation whenever you want when you’re a Demigod. It’s no big deal. The lives of ordinary people are so short it’s hardly worth the effort to most of us.”

Sam nodded. “The only reason we still keep up with it is because we didn’t want the Cult of the Unblinking Eye at our doorstep. Nor did we want to have to constantly get caught up

in the feuds of a bunch of True Mages who've forgotten what the word Demigod means after the last Golden Age.”

I shook my head. Sam and Dean had so much power and so much time to use it. They could have built something truly great over all these years, but neither of them had the patience or inclination to try.

“So basically, the two of you want me to keep the region stable and ensure everyone knows not to mess with your personal projects. That sounds about right?” I asked.

Dean shrugged. “Pretty much!”

I shrugged, unsure of how serious the two of them were. Plus, it seemed like Lyanva liked bossing people around a lot. I doubted she'd give that up just because rebuilding Deania was too much work.

Then again, without Tivana at the helm, maybe she would. My understanding was that most of the actual work of running the kingdom had been done by Tivana, Baroness Jynna, and the younger cultivators of her generation. Their mothers and aunts didn't care so much about a nation that came and went every few golden ages.

The last of the shooting stars finally stopped, interrupting my thoughts as the barrier overhead flickered and then faded to near-invisibility.

“I think that's all. A damn impressive show, Theo.” Dean patted me on the shoulder. “It's a big weight off our shoulders, that's to be sure. You're going to make one hell of a stir when we introduce you at the next Demigod convention! You and my daughter are both due to make your entrances.”

“You guys have conventions?” I raised an eyebrow.

Dean shrugged. “Sure. We have a big one at the start of every new Golden Age. Gotta update treaties, exchange secret techniques, go raiding and attack other worlds, and play ping pong. That kind of thing. It's a decent party. Not sure who's hosting this year, but it'll be the place to introduce you to all the other Demigods.”

I stood, taking down one last swig. The Satyr King really did keep an excellent brew. Fortunately, the cabinet I produced hadn't been his only one. At least I had enough supply to taunt Sam and Dean for a few decades.

"Sounds like a grand time," I replied. I glanced toward the sky one last time, watching the shield overhead and wondering what I'd do the next time it flared to life. I doubted I could pull off something like this a second time.

Would the elves of this world always have to look up at their own sky and the creation of their ancestors with fear?

I shook my head. Something within me didn't like that, and I embraced it. Where there were enemies to slay, I was ready to fight.

But I kept all that to myself as Sam and Dean raised their glasses.

"To a swift end to this Golden Age and a brilliant next one!" Sam announced.

"To hot babes and badass adventures!" Dean added.

"To the beginning of a new era for this world. And perhaps all the Ten Thousand Worlds." I raised my glass.

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Don't you mean the nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine worlds?"

I rolled my eyes. "I knew you were going to say that."

We all laughed, but the words I spoke were true. This would be a new beginning.

END OF BOOK 9.

THE STORY WILL CONTINUE IN BOOK 10, CULT  
OF THE UNBLINKING EYE.

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# AFTERWORD

Thank you all for reading!

The Spellheart series has been an amazing journey from start to finish. The series means a lot to me, since it's what turned me from aspiring author to author in truth!

I love this time and world we've shared together, and I hope you'll join me again for the grand conclusion of the series in book 10, *Cult of the Unblinking Eye*.

In it, Theo will face down his final foes and the mysteries of *The Wanderer* and the *Ten Thousand Worlds* will at last be revealed.



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