

The background of the cover is a detailed fantasy landscape. In the foreground, a sword with a green patina blade and an ornate silver hilt is positioned diagonally. The blade has intricate engravings. The hilt features a crossguard with circular patterns and a pommel with a crest. The background shows a vast valley with rolling green hills, a river with a stone bridge, and distant mountains under a dramatic, cloudy sky at sunset or sunrise. Two large, ornate castles are visible on the hillsides.

A Novel

EVERSONG BLADE

I

HEIR OF THE EDGE

N VIDYA

A Novel

**EVERSONG
BLADE
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**HEIR OF THE
EDGE**

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PROLOG

In the deep recesses of time, where the annals of history blend into the mists of legend, there lies an age long forgotten by the chronicles of man. It was an era when the remnants of a shattered world had been thrust into the past, a past where the marvels of technology, as once we knew them, had crumbled into dust, their memories scattered like the windblown leaves of autumn. The world that emerged was a place of iron and blood, where the valor of warriors forged the destiny of kingdoms and where the arcane arts of the Force held sway over all.

At this time, nine millennia after the great Apocalypse had rent the fabric of existence, the remnants of humankind were cast back into a world that was both ancient and strange. The great cities of glass and steel had become naught but myth, their towering spires now the subject of whispered tales told around campfires. The knowledge of the ancients, once held in the palm of the hand, had slipped through the fingers of time, leaving behind a world where the sword ruled supreme.

It was an age of warriors, men, and women of indomitable spirit who carved their names into the annals of history with blades of cold steel. But these were no ordinary warriors, for the Force had become the world's lifeblood in this age. It flowed through the veins of the earth, a mystic energy that could be harnessed by those with the strength of will and the purity of heart. The

Force was an ancient power, as old as the world itself, and it granted those who wielded it unparalleled abilities in combat. With Force, a warrior could move with the swiftness of a shadow, strike with the fury of a tempest, and bend the very fabric of reality to their will.

But none was more coveted and shrouded in mystery among all the relics of this age than the Eversong Blade. This sword, forged in the fires of forgotten ages, was said to be a weapon of unmatched quality, a blade that could cut through steel as if it were silk and under the very souls of those it struck. Yet the true secret of the Eversong Blade was known only to its bearer, an old sage whose name had been lost to time.

The sage was a figure of legend, a man whose power was whispered of in awe and fear. It was said that he had walked the earth since before the Apocalypse, had seen the rise and fall of empires, and had mastered the Force in ways that no other had. His eyes, it was told, could pierce the veil of time itself, and his voice, when it spoke, could shake the foundations of the world. The Eversong Blade was his companion, an extension of his will, and together, they were a force that no mortal could stand against.

The sage made his home in the shadowed forests of the North, where the mountains and the trees grew tall and ancient. His dwelling was no grand castle or fortress but a humble abode perched high atop the mountain's peak, where the winds whispered ancient secrets and the skies stretched endlessly above. Here, he lived in solitude, a

sentinel over the world's secrets, guarding the Eversong Blade against those seeking to misuse its power. For many had tried, countless warriors drawn by the lure of the blade believed that they could beat the old sage and claim its power for themselves. But all who came were met with the same fate: defeat. With the Eversong Blade in hand, the sage was a storm incarnate, an unstoppable force that no one could overcome.

Yet, despite the many who sought the blade, they were still determining the true nature of its power. The Eversong Blade was not merely a weapon; it was a key to a secret that lay at the very heart of the Force. This secret, hidden within the blade's shimmering edge, was said to be the source of the sage's great power, a power that could shape the world's destiny. But what this secret was, none could say, for the sage guarded it with his life, and none who had faced him had lived to tell the tale.

The years passed, and the world around the sage changed, but his resolve remained unshaken. He watched as kingdoms rose and fell, as wars were fought and lost, keeping the Eversong Blade close. But in the darkest corners of the world, whispers began to spread, whispers of a prophecy, of a time when the old sage would no longer be able to protect the blade, when a warrior of unmatched skill would arise to challenge him, and when the secret of the Eversong Blade would finally be revealed.

This prophecy spoke of a time of great strife, when the world would be plunged into darkness, and the fate of all would hang in the balance. It was said that the warrior who would come would be neither of this world nor of the next but a being of both, born of the blood of the ancient ones and the fire of the new. This warrior, destined to wield the Eversong Blade, would save the world or doom it to an eternity of shadow.

As the whispers grew, so did the number of those who sought the blade. They came from all corners of the earth, warriors of every creed and kind, each believing that they were the one spoken of in the prophecy. But the old sage remained steadfast, his eyes ever watchful, his hand ready to strike down those seeking to take the blade from him.

And so the world waited, holding its breath, as the saga of the Eversong Blade began to unfold. The old sage knew that the time would come when he could no longer protect the blade when the warrior of prophecy would stand before him, and when the fate of all would be decided. But until that day came, he would remain vigilant, a guardian of the past, present, and future, a sentinel over the secret within the Eversong Blade.

In the distant corners of the world, the echoes of the Apocalypse still lingered, a reminder of the fragility of existence. Once a power that had shaped the stars, the Force now flowed through the earth like a fire, a force of creation and destruction. And in the heart of this world,

the Eversong Blade waited, its secrets hidden within the depths of its steel, its destiny bound to the fate of all.

The old sage knew that the end was near, that the time of prophecy was at hand. But he also knew that the future was not yet written, that the choices made in the coming days would determine the course of history. And so he waited, in the shadowed forests of the North, the Eversong Blade by his side, ready for the day when the warrior of prophecy would come. The saga's final chapter would begin.

The world was on the brink of change, the dawn of a new age was at hand, and the Eversong Blade, hidden secret and unmatched quality, would be at the center of it all. With his unmatched power and skill, the old sage was the guardian of that secret, the protector of the blade, and the one who would determine the world's fate. Among those who sought the blade's power were one heir, a figure of destiny entwined with the Eversong Blade, and two formidable vixens—one driven by dark ambitions, determined to bend the world to her will, and the other, a warrior of unyielding resolve, standing as a beacon of hope in a world on the brink of chaos. The stage was set, the players were in place, and the saga of the Eversong Blade was about to begin.

CHAPTER 1

THE OLD SAGE



Amidst the towering spires of the Lunaria Mountain Range lay Dragonspire Peak, a place untouched by human hands. Not for lack of beauty, the grandeur of its natural vistas was breathtaking. The hardened and gleaming limestone reached skyward like iron sentinels, piercing the heavens. Their pinnacles seemed to blend with the clouds, merging with the firmament. It was whispered among the ancients that these untouched stone towers were the sanctum of the mountain's guardian spirit. Wisps of white clouds floated gently like herds of woolly sheep, docile and tamed as they encircled Dragonspire Peak, wrapping its summit in a cozy, woolen embrace. From this lofty perch, one could gaze down upon a sea of clouds, filling the steep valleys below with an ethereal beauty that defied description.

The path to Dragonspire Peak was perilous, a place where no mortal had dared tread. Its very name evoked the treacherous nature of its ascent, with valleys littered with jagged stones forming sharp, sword-like cliffs. No trail guided the way. No human footfall marked its soil. The

terrain was wild and untamed, a lethal gauntlet for any intrepid soul daring to venture there. Steep ravines, dense thickets concealing wild beasts, verdant grass hiding deep, muddy pits and venomous serpents, and the ever-present risk of losing one's way. Ordinary folk, even those possessing the skills of monks or warriors, would think twice before challenging the formidable Dragonspire Peak.

The usual shroud of mist was thinner that morning, allowing the morning sun to pierce through. Its rays filtered through the gaps in the foliage and the stones, illuminating the peak's mossy ground and green grasses. The sight of Dragonspire Peak bathed in golden sunlight was peerless, serene, and tranquil, akin to the heavens often described by priests as the promised abode for those who eschewed vice and evil in life.

As the sunlight reached the base of a gleaming black stone cloaked in clouds, an old man stood cross-legged upon a smooth stone. This Elder, known as the Old Sage, bore the marks of advanced age: a deeply wrinkled visage, gaunt flesh revealing his bones, and long, white hair cascading down his back and partly covering his shoulders. He must have seen at least a century pass. His simple garb was but a white cloth, yellowed with time, draped around his body, and he was barefoot and bare-headed. Seated with legs and arms crossed, he remained motionless, eyes closed. From afar, he resembled a statue, more stone than flesh. Yet he was no mere sculpture, for his chest moved with slow, measured breaths. Before him,

in the lotus position, lay a naked sword that gleamed greenish in the sunlight. A beautiful, though peculiar, blade, for unlike typical steel swords, it was rusty! The ancient, corroded weapon, crafted by a legendary smith, retained its sharp edge and remarkable strength despite its greenish, weathered surface. Its rough texture and signs of wear only added to its enigmatic allure, hinting at the many battles it had witnessed. Strangely, the sword emitted a delicate, greenish glow, contrasting with its aged exterior.

Slowly, the sunlight caressed the wrinkled face of the old man. Under the golden rays, his visage, though aged, retained a hint of the handsomeness it once possessed. The warmth of the sun's touch roused him from his meditation. As he opened his eyes, they were clear, like those of an innocent child. For a master of combat skills, this was a testament to the profound knowledge he had attained, as only those of exceptional prowess could possess such eyes. Gazing with admiration, he took in the splendor of the morning sun's light. Then, shaking his head, he murmured softly.

"Oh, Merciful God! Have You bestowed such grace upon a sinner like me? Am I worthy of this beauty? Ah, it cannot be! God only rewards the virtuous. My teacher's dying words urged me to perform good deeds for humanity. What have I done in my life? Nothing but sowed calamity with my combat skills, all because of this Eversong Blade! Ah, my God! I accept the truth. I am ready to bear Your

punishments. I cannot escape the chains of karma. I do not deserve Your mercy and kindness, oh God!"

The old man's final words were choked with restrained sobs, and he closed his eyes, refusing to witness the beauty before him. Silence reigned once more. Absolute silence? No! The morning birds chirped, the water rippled behind stones, and the wind rustled through the leaves. This natural symphony seemed to mock the old man, laughing at human folly and blindness. God's mercy is boundless and indiscriminate. Those willing to receive His outstretched hand would bask in His grace like the sun's rays that shine on all without prejudice. God's love is universal, untainted by human sin. The magnitude of His mercy depends on human acceptance!

Suddenly, the symphony changed. The melodious bird songs turned to panicked chirps, signaling an unusual event. Shadows flickered swiftly, their movements as nimble as giant birds. In a heartbeat, nine figures had formed a fan-shaped circle before the meditating old man, ten meters away. Their ability to scale the peak and move quickly made them highly skilled. When they landed, their steps were soundless, like birds alighting on branches. They stood ready, each in their stance, eyes fixed on the old man and the sword at his feet. Their gazes held boundless hatred for the old man, but when they fell upon the sword, it turned to undisguised yearning.

The old man, aware of their presence despite the quiet, opened his eyes and scanned the nine figures surrounding him. His mouth curved into a toothless, baby-like smile. The woman who had spoken his name, unheard for years, was at least seventy. Her hair was nearly white, styled into a small bun with a silver hairpin. Though her face retained its sweet contours, it was slightly marred by missing teeth. Once tall and slender, her body was now slightly stooped and thin. Her simple green clothing contrasted with the sword hilt protruding from her right shoulder.

"Heh, is that you, Isolde Darkthorn? Your body may have aged, but your spirit remains fiery. You seek vengeance and the Eversong Blade as compensation for my life? What grudge do you hold against me?"

"Old scoundrel! Do not think you can shame me with your questions. We are all renowned figures; there is no shame in speaking the truth! Decades ago, you used your skills to assault and violate me. My hatred for you is as vast as the sky!"

The old man chuckled, then nodded. "Indeed, time flies. Back then, you were not even thirty, a famed warrior, skilled and beautiful, rejecting all suitors, a virgin nearing thirty. I was less than fifty, infatuated with you. I entered your chamber and assaulted you. But, Isolde! Do you forget how you warmly accepted me, crying and begging when I was to leave? Why twist the truth now?"

"Scoundrel! After your vile act, how could I accept another man? I gave you my body and soul, but you mocked and abandoned me! You should have been my husband, yet you fled. My hatred for you is as deep as the ocean and as high as the sky!"

"Ha-ha-ha, you desire to triumph alone, Darkthorn. You knew well that I always sought liberation from all bonds, including marriage ones! Yes, I committed a wrong by assaulting you, yet we both reveled in it and what is shared joy cannot be deemed as suffering!"

"Eldrin Stormblade! Enough of your prattle. Surrender your sword or forfeit your life!" As she drew her fearsome weapon, the old woman's voice was a battle cry. A black whip, no ordinary implement, divided into nine wicked tails, each tipped with a barbed metal claw. This dreadful instrument was the source of her renown throughout the Realm, for few could withstand its terrible might. Known as the Darkwhip Mistress, she had become a name to be feared, a relentless force against the wicked. The other figures present now knew her true identity, Isolde Darkthorn, once a legendary warrior now consumed by vengeance.

"Crack-crack-crack...!" The whip lashed through the air, its explosive sound echoing like thunder. "Eldrin Stormblade! Will you still defy me and refuse to relinquish the Eversong Blade?"

"Ha-ha-ha, your spirit and fierceness remain undiminished. My body is old, my spirit weary. If you wish to free me from this mortal coil, do so, Isolde Darkthorn!"

With a piercing scream filled with sorrow, regret, and the bitterness of spurned love, the old woman's whip struck. Three of its nine tails darted toward the old man's eyes and head. Yet Eldrin Stormblade remained seated, lifting his left hand with a flick of his fingers.

"Ting-ting-ting...!"

"Ahhh!" Darkwhip Mistress cried out as the rebounded tails struck her in three places: her chest and navel. The impact left her hand burning and stinging. Leaping backward, she spun her whip to recover, her face flushed with anger. "Eldrin Stormblade, you shameless old rogue!"

Stormblade laughed until a deep voice from the left silenced him. "Goodness gracious...!" He turned to see two bald monks advancing, both over sixty years old. He regarded them calmly but curiously, for he did not recognize them.

"Respected Elder, the title of Stormblade suits you well, for your hands are indeed mighty!" said the first monk, a small, thin figure with white eyebrows. The second monk, dark-skinned and tall, clasped his hands before his chest, repeating, "Goodness gracious...!"

Still seated, Stormblade clasped his hands together in respect. The humility and honorifics of the monks made him cautious. Arrogance was not to be feared, but the gentle and humble often proved to be the most formidable.

"To bear such praise is a heavy burden, especially when it is empty flattery. I am old and aware of my mortality. Usually, monks come to bless those near death or who have already passed, guiding their souls to a better place. Who might you be, and what brings you to Dragonspire Peak?"

"Goodness gracious...! We are humble monks from the Celestial Monastery, sent to meet the esteemed Elder," replied the white-browed monk.

"Ah, from the great Celestial Monastery! What an honor!" the old man replied, astonished.

"I am Seraphin Trueheart, and this is my younger brother, Bartholomew Ironhide. We come on behalf of our master, the head of Celestial Monastery, to request the Eversong Blade. Our master reminds you of the Monastery's patience and forbearance in not seeking retribution for your theft of the Starbound Scroll and the Bloodpath Codex thirty years ago. In your final moments, our master trusts you will repay this kindness by surrendering the Eversong Blade, preventing its secrets from causing chaos in the world!"

"Ah, disciples of Magnus Windwalker! Indeed, it is a great honor. Your master is wise and courteous. I took those sacred texts because Magnus was too stingy to lend them. The Monastery forgets that when the Sage Gildor translated and improved those texts, it was to benefit all of humanity, not just a select few. The Monastery's hoarding has diminished its value. Though I took the texts, the knowledge remains with you. Knowledge is to be shared, not hidden. No, I cannot give you the Eversong Blade, save to the one destined to wield it."

"Goodness gracious!" Ironhide stepped forward, his face stern. "Must we use your methods, Elder? You took the texts by Force when borrowing was forbidden. Now we ask politely, and you refuse. Must we take the Eversong Blade by our skills?"

Stormblade smiled at Ironhide's directness, his eyes twinkling. "If that is how you see it, then so be it."

"Hmph, good! Stormblade is renowned for his swordsmanship and Force, but I, too, have trained for decades!" Ironhide turned to a large boulder, striking it with a mighty blow. The Force made the boulder tremble, leaves on nearby trees rustling as if hit by a gale, and leaves scattered like rain! A person struck by such Force would be utterly shattered.

Stormblade's smile widened. "Ha-ha-ha! Destruction is easy, but creation is the true test. Humans excel at destruction! Ironhide, destroying and uprooting a tree is

simple, but can you create even a single leaf? Let me attempt to restore the fallen leaves, though only the Divine can truly restore them." Stormblade moved his hands, and as if by magic, the fallen leaves spun back to the tree, adhering to the branches.

Ironhide's face paled, realizing the old Sage's Force surpassed his own. He stepped back, clasping his hands, repeatedly chanting, "Goodness gracious!"

"Forgive us, for we have forgotten our own foolishness!" said Trueheart, the thin monk. Extending his hands towards the Eversong Blade, the sword flew up, drawn to him as if by magnetism.

All present knew Trueheart's Force was more significant than his brother's. Stormblade praised, "Good! Eversong Blade, return to me!" With a wave of his hand, the sword, which had flown towards Trueheart, turned back, flying to Stormblade!

Trueheart's frustration grew, his resolve hardening as he poured more power into his arms, lowering his stance slightly as he directed his hands toward the Eversong Blade. The ancient sword spun in the air, momentarily uncertain of its allegiance, before finally returning to Stormblade, landing gracefully at his feet. Trueheart, beads of sweat dotting his brow, wiped it away and bowed deeply, clasping his hands in a gesture of respect.

"Stormblade has grown mightier with age, just as our master warned us. Peace be upon you!"

"Trueheart praises me too much," replied Stormblade.

A voice then rang out, clear and commanding. "Man of honor! I am not afraid of you. I have known your inner nature! I belong to the group of righteous warriors, the pure of heart. How can I stand on equal footing with you, a figure of filth and wickedness? I did not come to ask for the Eversong Blade but to cut off your head and seize your sword!"

Stormblade turned his gaze towards the speaker, an old warrior, over seventy years old, yet still standing tall and robust. His face, lined with age, reflected courage and handsomeness. A gleaming sword emitted light flashes in his right hand, and his attire was simple, a yellow robe draped over his formidable frame.

"Ah, it turns out Roland Ironblade, the renowned righteous warrior, is here? I bear no enmity towards a righteous man like you. Why do you come here cursing me?"

"Serpent tongue! My wife has passed away, but her grudge, and mine, against you, will not end until my sword can sever your head! Let these honorable witnesses hear my confession, for I am no coward. Fifty years ago, through your deceitful seduction, you molested and forced my wife into an illicit relationship. You defeated

me fifty years ago, but let us see now! Rise and face my sword!"

Stormblade pointed a finger at the old warrior's nose. "Roland Ironblade, why not reflect upon your misdeeds before cursing others? Yes, I had an affair with your wife, but what is wrong with that if she desired it herself? And know this, I was driven to it because you took your beautiful wife by Force!"

"You obtained her by killing her husband, the lone robber in Taibu, and then forcibly taking her. Do you think I did not know that you killed the robber not out of chivalry but out of lust for his beautiful wife? You took her by Force; I took her love gently. What is the difference? At least I succeeded in winning her heart!"

"Scoundrel! A vile, shameless womanizer who dares call himself a hero. Soon, you will die here, and I will place a statue of a vile womanizer on your grave so that all may spit upon it!" With this declaration, Roland Ironblade leaped towards a large rock, his sword a bright white light swirling around it, producing loud sounds and flying sparks. When the light subsided, and the dust settled, the rock stood carved into a rough statue of the old man seated cross-legged!

Though crude, the statue bore an unmistakable resemblance to the meditating sage. It smiled, its lips parting slightly, displaying a toothless grin, its gaze fixed on the statue.

"Impressive, Roland Ironblade! But your carving skill leaves much to be desired! Allow me to assist." Stormblade grasped the Eversong Blade before him. With a swift motion, the rusty sword emitted a sharp whistle, a green light sweeping forward to circle the statue, then returning to Stormblade. The rough statue now appeared smooth and polished, slightly shiny and beautiful!

"Your swordsmanship is commendable, but I am not afraid! Observe my sword!" Enraged, Roland Ironblade charged with his sword. Stormblade laughed, twirling the Eversong Blade, creating circular motions around the advancing sword. The green light of the rusty sword moved as the old man remained seated, still at a distance. Roland Ironblade shouted in shock and leaped back, seeing his garment's sleeve shredded!

"Stormblade still deserves the title of Sage!" Praised a voice, two elderly men dressed like humble farmers stepped forward with calm and patient demeanors. "But it is a pity the Sage only cultivates external strength, neglecting internal progress, resulting in a beautiful exterior but a rotten interior! Stormblade, we, the Twin Swords of Brightblade Academy, come representing our academy to hold you accountable for your sins. You once stole a female disciple, a treasured sword, and a potion from our sect. Our leader would consider showing leniency for your transgressions if you hand over the Eversong Blade!"

Stormblade furrowed his brows, though his smile remained warm. "Various reasons are given with different words, but the intention remains the same. I do not deny the accusations, Twin Swords of Brightblade Academy. Indeed, I took the female disciple, the treasured sword, and the potion. But all in the academy know well that Lira Moonflower, the lovely deceased female disciple, followed me willingly out of love, not coercion! And the treasured sword of Brightblade Academy remains in my collection because I cherish precious items. As for the potion made by your deceased Elder, ha-ha-ha, it revealed itself as a stimulant for old men to regain youthful vigor! Ha-ha-ha!"

The two elders exchanged glances, their faces reddening. Stormblade's words, especially the latter statement, greatly insulted their sect. After a shared look, the two elders raised their swords, emitting sharp sounds.

"Stormblade, your insulting words have added to your offenses. Though you call yourself a Sage, do not think we, the Brightsword brothers, fear you. Face the Twin Swords of Brightblade Academy!" Challenged Thaddeus Brightsword, crossing his sword while his brother Gideon stood ready with his sword. Each wielded a single sword, but their coordination was impeccable, earning them the Twin Swords of Brightblade Academy title!

"Hmph, I never lie, and my earlier words were mere truths, not insults. Suppose you wish to demonstrate the power of the Twin Swords. In that case, you are dreaming, for I will not be easily subdued by anyone,

including you!" Though gentle and soft, the old man's words were firmer than steel.

Thaddeus and Gideon shouted loudly, their swords forming thick beams of light as they charged towards Stormblade. The old man laughed, wielding the Eversong Blade, creating circular motions around the approaching swords. The green light of the rusty sword clashed with the bright beams, producing a cacophony of sounds. Suddenly, the bright beams scattered, the two elder brothers recoiling, their sword tips chipped slightly.

They exchanged a glance and sighed heavily. Although they were skilled warriors, they realized they were no match for the old man. They retreated, regretful but accepting their inferiority.

Having subdued six opponents, Stormblade turned to the three who had yet to move or speak, merely observing. He saw an old priest he did not recognize and a couple he vaguely remembered. Considering the priest first, he addressed him politely.

"Forgive me if I do not recall who you are, but as you have come all this way, I assume your matter is important."

"Peace be upon you, Stormblade. You are as stubborn and proud as in your youth. Using sacred verses to challenge a humble priest like me! Quite troubling! Know that I am Aurelius Moonshadow, representing the Moonshadow Sect. Have you forgotten how you once killed five of our disciples? I am here to demand justice on behalf of our

sect. We do not thirst for blood; the Eversong Blade must atone for your sins."

Stormblade inclined his head, "Ah, so you are one of the Five Elders of Moonshadow, renowned for their unparalleled skills and decades of rigorous training. Quite remarkable! I've heard tales that even the Three Dark Reavers, the most formidable demonic trio, feared to challenge your sect. And now, one of you stands before me? Ha-ha-ha, Aurelius Moonshadow, are you the youngest among them?"

"The other four are my seniors," Aurelius replied.

"Ah, the youngest then! The elders may refrain from lowering themselves, but even the youngest among you must possess extraordinary prowess. However, I regret to inform you, Moonshadow, that I cannot relinquish the Eversong Blade."

"If that is your stance, then our ancient grievances must be settled with a clash of skills!" The priest's voice turned stern.

"So that is your view? It seems you either do not know or choose to ignore that the five disciples of Moonshadow Sect who met their end by my hand were at a gambling den! I, a notorious pleasure-seeker, need not justify my presence there. But five Moonshadow disciples in a gambling den, served by courtesans? Were they there to preach spirituality?"

"Ah, many outwardly feign sainthood but are inwardly more corrupt than those they condemn. They attacked me first, leading to a confrontation where some triumphed and others fell. Winners live, and losers perish or are maimed. What's so unusual about that? If you see it as an injustice and wish to repeat their mistake by challenging me, so be it."

The priest's face reddened, and he responded firmly, "As a member of the Moonshadow Sect, I cannot accept only one side of the story. Asking our deceased disciples is impossible. What is clear is that Moonshadow disciples uphold righteousness, and everyone knows what kind of person Stormblade is. We, the Five Elders, must defend our sect's honor. Stormblade, prepare yourself. Let us begin!"

"You challenge me, so you may start, priest. I am ready."

The priest stepped forward, unarmed, and bowed to the old man, saying, "I respect your seniority. As you killed five Moonshadow disciples bare-handed, it is fitting I face you bare-handed. If I lose, my seniors will return; if you lose, I will take the Eversong Blade."

"Ha-ha-ha, always hidden motives behind every action, wherever you find humans, slaves to personal desires. Proceed."

The priest raised his hands above his head, his fingers making cracking sounds, his hands shaking violently, turning red like hot iron. The Dragonclaw Technique of the Moonshadow Sect was a famous and feared skill. With several steps, he was in front of the old man, his hands aimed at the Sage's head and chest.

"Fight back! Resist! I am not a coward to attack an unresisting opponent!" Moonshadow said, his voice commanding and his hands vibrating.

Stormblade smiled, "So, the Moonshadow Sect still upholds the warrior spirit. Admirable. But tainted with greed. Let me match your Dragonclaw Technique." He extended his hands, and their palms met before the priest could move.

"Wisssss...!" An extraordinary thing happened. When their palms touched, a sound like a sizzling fire met water was heard, and smoke rose from their hands. The priest lowered his body, exerting his Force to strengthen his Dragonclaw Technique, but it was useless. His once hot hands grew colder, a chill like snow spreading from his palms up his arms! His face began to sweat, his eyes reddened, and his mouth opened as his breath became labored. Stormblade, still smiling, showed no sign of strain. Realizing continuing would be fatal, Moonshadow reluctantly pulled back his hands, and simultaneously, Stormblade withdrew his own. The priest stepped back, his body trembling, taking time to recover, then bowed deeply.

"Truly amazing, Stormblade. I admit defeat, and my seniors will return."

Seeing the priest's defeat, the elderly couple who had been watching now stepped forward. They were both in their seventies, and the husband pointed his finger.

"Stormblade, do you remember us, a couple once humiliated by you?"

The old man looked at them, especially the elderly woman beside her husband, then replied, "I remember meeting you, but I forget where. I'm certain I never harmed this woman; if I had, I would surely remember."

The woman's face flushed, and she now shouted, "Old pervert!"

Her husband quickly added, "Stormblade, we once had a security escort company. Have you forgotten the Black Tiger Escort Agency?"

"Ah, now I remember! Are you the man named Tanner who led that agency? And your wife, who was once very fierce and skilled with hidden weapons? Hmm, I once seized several beautiful jewelry items you were escorting belonging to the kingdom's finance minister, correct? Even his daughter, I still remember the minister's beautiful daughter, who accompanied me in the forest for two days and nights! Ah, unforgettable experiences! She was a

lovely daughter, and she gave me her hairpin and other trinkets. Those hairpins and jewels I seized are still in my collection. So, Tanner, what brings you and your wife here now?"

"Stormblade, you committed all kinds of evil in our youth. Robbing the belongings of a high official, even defiling his daughter, ruining us who escorted the goods and the girl. Do you still need to ask why we are here? Feel our revenge!" The old escort leader, along with his wife, threw their hands. Their movements were swift, and small objects flew forward as they attacked Stormblade with their hidden weapons. Tanner used two types of secret weapons, throwing knives and Deathly Drills. In contrast, his wife used Five Poison Needles, faster and more dangerous than her husband's weapons. Over a dozen hidden weapons flew towards the old man's vulnerable spots, especially the thin needles targeting critical blood points!

But the old Sage remained unperturbed, raising his hands and moving his ten fingers like ten living snakes, blocking all the hidden weapons, even flicking them back at the attackers! A rain of hidden weapons ensued from the attackers and the Sage's counters!

"Friends of justice! If we don't eliminate this vile figure today, when will we? Let's eradicate him together!" shouted Tanner.

The other seven warriors agreed. They all bore grudges against Stormblade, and it was evident they could not defeat the powerful old Sage individually. They declared their agreement and drew their weapons, advancing to attack! But suddenly, the old Sage's figure vanished upward. When they looked, he had disappeared into the clouds, scaling the stone pillar with incredible speed. His laughter echoed from above as if it came from the sky.

"Ha-ha-ha, nine honorable fighters below! If I had wanted, how easy it would have been to kill you all with the Eversong Blade? And if I wished to die, how simple it would be for you to slay me. But I am not ready to die, as I still wish to enjoy the magnificent view at Dragonspire Peak! I don't want to kill you because I do not wish to stain this beautiful place with your blood, and I am not yet ready to die because I still wish to enjoy the natural beauty here. If you remain unsatisfied and seek revenge, whoever dares may come up!"

The nine warriors exchanged glances, none daring to climb. Scaling the stone pillar was relatively easy for those with high skills, but it could not be done together; each would have to climb alone. And individually, it would be like handing their lives to the old Sage!

The laughter from above continued. "Ha-ha-ha! I don't think I am stingy about surrendering my life and the Eversong Blade. Give me a month to enjoy this place. After a month, if you still want my life, come to the

southern foot of the mountain, to the Rosewood Forest, where I will await you with the Eversong Blade!"

After these words, silence returned. They waited, but no more sound came. Realizing it was futile to wait or chase the Sage up the stone pillar shrouded in thick mist, the nine warriors left Dragonspire Peak, each vowing in their hearts to seek out the Rosewood Forest a month later.

CHAPTER 2

KELLAN LIGHTFOOT



In those days, the Realm of Varden, spanning 9367 to 9643, was beset by inner turmoil and a grievous civil war. The venerable Empress Valeria, the founder of this storied realm, had once driven out the Foreign Invaders and earned her title as Empress Valeria the Great, reigning from 9367 to 9397. Instead of the northern bastion, the ancient Mongo City of Highguard, she chose the southern haven of Lyndon, nestled in the fecund valleys of the Great Serpent River, as the new heart of her empire. Yet, Highguard remained a bulwark, a sentinel against potential Mongo vengeance, its walls manned by a mighty host led by Valeria's son, General Yorin, a warrior of great renown.

Upon the passing of Empress Valeria in the year 9397, the kingdom's unity began to fray. With her eldest son having predeceased her, the mantle of leadership was bequeathed to her grandson, Emperor Thandor. This succession was the spark that ignited the civil strife. Regent Yorin of Highguard, deeming himself the worthier heir, refused to acknowledge his nephew's ascension. Thus, with an army

at his back, Yorin marched south to Lyndon, and the land was plunged into war. Such conflicts, fratricidal and bitter, sundered families and communities, as leaders used their subjects as pawns in their quest for power, often forsaking them once their ambitions were fulfilled.

In the throes of war, it is ever the common folk who bear the brunt of suffering. In this tumultuous era, opportunists thrived, and lawlessness spread like a plague, bringing with it a surge of robbery, kidnapping, and baseless accusations leading to unjust punishments.

Divergent opinions on the war further splintered the realm. Loyalties were divided between the northern faction, led by Regent Yorin, and the southern faction, loyal to Emperor Thandor, breeding discord and further conflict among the populace.

Amidst this chaos, some warrior sects withdrew, seeking to avoid the maelstrom of violence. Notably, the Lunaria Sect, guided by sagacious leaders, recognized the futility of the bloodshed. High Sage Thorne, a sage of a hundred years, decreed that his disciples should abstain from the war. He convened the sect's luminaries at Lunaria Peak, where they immersed themselves in meditation and the pursuit of wisdom.

"My dear disciples," intoned High Sage Thorne to the assembly of cross-legged followers, "heed the teaching of the fifty-seventh verse." The venerable sage then recited a profound lesson:

"With justice, a nation can be governed. With strategy, wars can be waged. But only with self-restraint can the world be won.

How do we know this? Because the more prohibitions there are, the more people will suffer. The more weapons used, the more chaos ensues. The more cunning, the more strange deeds are done. The more laws enacted, the more violations occur.

Thus, the High Sage Thorne says: We exercise self-restraint, and people become virtuous. We cherish tranquility, and people become peaceful. We refrain from action, and people prosper. We have no desires, and people return to simplicity and honesty."

With a resonant and patient voice, High Sage Thorne exhorted his disciples to leave the unfolding events to the natural order, intervening only to mitigate the consequences. They were to be neither the cause nor the exacerbators of strife. Thus, he forbade their involvement in the civil war, believing their participation would only deepen the wounds of the realm.

Listening intently to these teachings was a young boy cleaning the windows and doors with a yellow cloth. This boy, Kellan, around twelve, possessed a striking visage and a demeanor of quiet diligence. His eyes gleamed with intelligence, betraying a depth of thought and understanding.

An orphan, Kellan had been taken in by the Lunaria Sect two years prior. His family, who had lived in the village of Willowbrook, had been massacred in the early days of the civil war by marauding bandits. Kellan had survived by fortune, being away tending cattle. Darius Stormseer, High Sage Thorne's chief disciple, had witnessed the bandits' depredations and intervened, rescuing Kellan and bringing him to the sanctuary of the Lunaria Sect.

Though Darius Stormseer had intended for Kellan to join the ranks of the sect's disciples, the boy had declined, unwilling to take the vows of a monk. Instead, Kellan served the temple with unwavering diligence, performing tasks without prompting and earning the monks' affection. He filled water vessels, cleaned the temple, tended gardens, and herded oxen. By night, he studied in the library, reading widely from philosophy to basic combat manuals, his father's early lessons kindling a lifelong love of learning.

His industrious nature and serene disposition endeared him to the monks, even earning praise from High Sage Thorne, who harbored a quiet disappointment that Kellan did not wish to become a monk. Kellan, in turn, held High Sage Thorne in deep respect and awe, sensing an extraordinary presence in the sage's every movement, word, and gaze.

One day, as young Kellan cleaned the windows and doors, the venerable High Sage Thorne and his disciples

convened in the grand hall. With his quiet diligence, Kellan was allowed to remain unnoticed, a silent observer of the discussions that unfolded. He moved with care, not wishing to disturb, yet his mind was ever drawn to the words of the sages. He listened with rapt attention.

"High Sage Thorne, there has been unrest at Dragonspire Peak," reported Kellan's esteemed mentor and the monk he held in the highest regard. "It seems Stormblade has reverted to his tumultuous ways, sowing chaos again. Our scouts bring tidings that nine valiant warriors, including two monks from the Celestial Monastery, two warriors from Brightblade Academy, and a priest from the Moonshadow Sect, went to confront him over the Eversong Blade. They were met with fierce resistance. The sage has agreed to meet them at Rosewood Forest, at the southern foot of the mountain, within a month. Your wisdom is sought, master."

"Ah, Stormblade, ever seeking the thrill of conflict," mused High Sage Thorne. "Though his actions are disruptive, his spirit holds much merit. The Lunaria Sect remains grateful to him, for he once allowed us the sacred use of Dragonspire Peak, the site of our founder's final meditation. Now, as he stirs trouble, we must abstain from interference. I forbid any disciple of the Lunaria Sect to engage. Let Stormblade resolve his matters as he will."

Kellan's intrigue grew as he overheard tales of the enigmatic Stormblade. Though the monks of the Lunaria Sect led simple lives, Kellan had read many tales of

extraordinary warriors. The thought of witnessing a confrontation at Rosewood Forest ignited his curiosity.

On the appointed day, a month after the gathering at the Sword Valley Peak, Kellan found himself herding the temple oxen near Rosewood Forest. He led the beasts to graze on the verdant grasses just outside the forest, feigning innocence while eagerly anticipating the clash of great warriors. As he played his bamboo flute, reclining on the broad back of an ox, his music floated through the air, a gentle disguise for his true purpose.

Meanwhile, within the serene embrace of the forest, Stormblade sat cross-legged amidst a cluster of rose bushes, the Eversong Blade resting before him. He was motionless, deep in meditation, his eyes closed.

Suddenly, his left ear twitched, and he slowly opened his eyes, a slight frown marring his brow. The sage possessed a peculiar trait: his left ear moved like a rabbit's when something significant drew his attention. Though thunder could not rouse him from meditation, the tender notes of a soft and stirring flute had done so. The melody, delicate as a breeze through bamboo leaves, was a balm to his soul. Stormblade, a lover of flute music, was enchanted by this beautiful sound and felt compelled to discover the source.

If the flute player was among his adversaries, the sage mused, they must be formidable indeed, for only one with profound spiritual depth could play with such purity.

Curiosity piqued, Stormblade rose, grasped his rusty sword, and moved lightly toward the forest's edge, following the flute's sweet melody.

When he arrived, he beheld a young boy atop a giant ox, playing the flute with serene contentment. The sight astonished the sage, and he murmured, "Ah, too old and foolish am I, seeking purity where it naturally resides—in the heart of a child. In this world, is there a soul cleaner than a child's?" Shaking his head at his folly, Stormblade returned to his rose bushes, resuming his meditation but remaining alert, ever listening to the flute's gentle strains.

As the melody filled the air, the nine warriors who had challenged the sage approached stealthily, each driven by the desire for the Eversong Blade. Stormblade sensed their presence but remained still, his amusement growing as he perceived their determination and anger. Yet he continued to listen, reflecting on his life, its joys, and regrets.

At last, the flute's music ceased, and the sage raised his head, addressing the assembled warriors. "Ah, you have arrived. I am ready. Now, who will claim the Eversong Blade?" He placed the rusty sword before him, inviting his challengers.

"Stormblade, I will forgive your sins if you surrender that sword to me!" cried Scarlet Serpent, her whip cracking sharply. Dark tendrils of the whip reached for the Eversong Blade.

"Clang! Clang! Clang!" Sparks flew as the whip's tendrils were deflected by the weapons of other warriors.

"What are you doing?" Scarlet Serpent demanded, her face flushed with anger as she glared at her rivals.

"None of us are here for charity, Scarlet Serpent," declared Thaddeus Brightsword. "We all desire the Eversong Blade!" He and his brother Gideon moved their swords in unison, creating a beam of light that darted toward the rusty sword, only to be blocked by other weapons.

"Ho-ho-ho, Brightsword brothers, don't be hasty! We need it too..." laughed Thundering Monk, the dark-skinned monk from the Celestial Monastery, his robe swirling ominously.

Stormblade's smile widened. The nine warriors exchanged tense glances, realizing the truth of the sage's earlier words—that none could claim the sword easily. A fierce battle loomed, and each was prepared to fight for the coveted blade.

Hidden behind a large tree, Kellan watched in awe. He saw how the nine warriors faced each other, their eyes blazing with determination and greed. Though the sage appeared calm and indifferent, the air was tense.

Moonshadow, the priest from the Moonshadow Sect, sighed deeply and spoke, his voice steady and

authoritative. "To achieve a noble goal is never easy, but obtaining the Eversong Blade, a sacred artifact, is a challenge worthy of our efforts. It is worth fighting for, even at the risk of our lives. Let us now determine who among us is most deserving and fated to possess the Eversong Blade." With that, Moonshadow unfurled a thin steel whip from his waist, spinning it above his head, its gleaming surface catching the sunlight. His left hand crackled with energy, ready to unleash his Dragonclaw Technique.

"Goodness gracious! We are compelled to break our vow of non-violence, Seraphin!" exclaimed Bartholomew Ironhide, the dark-skinned giant monk, as he twirled the mighty Dragonstaff. This was no ordinary staff but a weapon with a vast, round metal tip weighing no less than two hundred pounds! His brother, Seraphin Trueheart, equally tall and dark-skinned, growled and moved his right hand, conjuring a powerful gust of wind. He had removed his robe, which he now held by its end. Do not underestimate this robe, for in the hands of this giant monk, it could become a weapon harder than steel, more flexible than silk, and sharper than the keenest blade!

Kellan Lightfoot watched with wide eyes and a racing heart. He saw that the elder, seated cross-legged, had not stirred, his eyes still closed, though a mocking smile played upon his lips as if he were suppressing his amusement and stifling a laugh. Kellan felt a mix of mirth and disbelief at the antics of the nine warriors, whom he

regarded as shameless buffoons or a pack of dogs fighting over a bone. From his concealed vantage, the sword before the elder seemed like a mere bone. But how could he laugh, seeing that these nine figures had drawn their weapons?

In the next moment, Kellan's vision was bedazzled and blurred; his ears were assailed by the clashing of weapons, and his eyes were seared by flashes of light. He was astounded and could scarcely believe his own senses as the nine figures vanished, replaced by flickering shadows wrapped in lights of various hues: red, white, green, and yellow. The cacophony was overwhelming. There were explosions like thunder, hissing like serpents, whistling like storm winds, and clanging like a blacksmith's forge! Amidst all this chaos and flashing lights, the elder remained seated, cross-legged, with a broad smile. The rusty sword lay lifeless at his feet.

The ferocious battle raged, with each warrior focused on preventing the others from seizing the sword. Despite the intensity, there were no casualties for a long time, as all were highly skilled. Unwittingly, they were aiding each other in their chaotic conflict.

Though his eyes were closed, Stormblade could sense the course of the fight, and his heart was amused. His inner eye was wide open. This, he mused, is the nature of humans across the world. The battle among these notable figures was a microcosm of the world, showcasing humanity's folly and absurdity, like clowns playing

ludicrous roles! Humans always strive against one another, vying to fulfill personal desires they call ambitions. They fight for position, fame, wealth, or personal satisfaction. In their pursuit of these "ambitions," they slander, mock, deceive, harm, and, if need be, kill one another! The strong prey on the weak, the weak upon the weaker, and the strong are consumed by the mightier still! Position, honor, fame, wealth, and beauty are shamelessly contested as if they would bring true happiness. But, as Stormblade had found in his many adventures, these are hollow. Their enjoyment fades upon acquisition, often getting more sorrowful. The victor is intoxicated by triumph yet watched by jealous eyes filled with hatred. At the same time, the vanquished are consumed by vengeance and resentment. Whoever ultimately claims the Eversong Blade would find only misfortune, hunted and despised. He wanted to laugh at this thought!

Suddenly, there was a loud, piercing laugh. The laughter was so overpowering that Kellan fell to his knees, his legs trembling. Three dark shadows flashed into view, and the chaotic fight abruptly halted as the nine combatants were flung aside. Now, they stood ready, faces sweaty and eyes wild, staring at the newcomers who had so effortlessly displaced even these famed warriors.

Kellan, regaining his footing, peered at the three figures. His heart pounded fiercely, his mouth agape, and his eyes wide with terror. These were no mere mortals but three forest demons. Kellan had never seen such frightful

beings. The first was an old woman with wild, reddish hair partially obscuring her face. Her visage resembled a boiled shrimp, with a grin revealing large, long teeth that prevented her lips from closing. Her tight, black silk garments with red patterns clung to her form, accentuating her large, watermelon-like breasts. She wielded no weapon, but her ten long, pointed nails were as menacing as ten red-tinged black knives!

The second figure was an old man of similar age, about eighty years. He was tall and massive, like a giant, at least two meters tall, with skin black as charcoal and covered in hair. Without clothes, he would look more like a forest creature. His silk garments were also patterned. His black, charcoal-like face and wide white eyes were terrifying. His ears were wide like an elephant's. The most horrifying aspect was the pair of small skulls, seemingly children's, hanging on two iron chains, blackened and hardened as if made of metal, soaked in poison for decades.

Though not tall and large, the third figure was equally fearsome due to his grotesque form. He was small and dwarf-like, but his head was enormous, shaped like a gourd, with a narrow face and slit-like eyes that appeared serene and devout. He held a Divine Whisk with a black handle but white bristles. His arms were folded across his chest, his lips moving as if in prayer!

The laughter emanated from the old woman and the tall old man. The tall old man continued to laugh, causing the two skulls on his chain to clatter as if they were laughing.

The nine renowned warriors thrown aside looked shocked, astonished, and frightened. These three human demons were rarely seen in the world, but as famous warriors, they recognized these kings of the dark side. The old woman was none other than the Scarlet Witch, ruler of the dark side along the eastern sea coast. The tall old man with the skulls was the Black Mountain Fiend, who ruled the dark side along the northern Great Wall, feared by the Mongo, Avaloria, and others. The dwarf with the divine demeanor was known as the Eight-Armed Saint, who roamed the west undefeated. These were three of the Four Dark Reavers, the highest figures of the dark side, ruling the four corners.

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Black Mountain Fiend mockingly as he gazed over the nine warriors. His wild white eyes moved terrifyingly. "So even rats like you covet the Eversong Blade! Ha-ha-ha! To claim the sacred sword, one must first prove their worth. You, from various factions, now that we three have arrived, do you not scurry away? Or shall we turn you into headless ghosts?"

"Fiend, just chase these dogs away. If we kill them, their friends will bark and cause trouble later!" said the Scarlet Witch with a grin.

The nine warriors hailed from the side of righteousness. Though they had vied for the Eversong Blade, they prided themselves on their integrity. Now, faced with the three dark lords, they cast aside their rivalries and united to

confront these formidable foes. As men of valor, they feared not the challenge.

"Very well! We recognize you as the Three Dark Reavers! Indeed, the strongest among us should claim the Eversong Blade. But you, fiendish demons, are not included, and it is our duty as warriors of light to vanquish your darkness!"

A high-pitched cackle rent the air, and the Scarlet Witch lunged forward, aiming her attack at Roland Ironblade, who had spoken. This venerable swordsman, an octogenarian with countless battles behind him, was beset by a most unusual weapon: the witch's hair! The coarse, lengthy strands lashed out like a horde of serpents, whistling through the air with a foul, venomous odor. Roland's blade moved to intercept, but the hair coiled around it, continuing its deadly course toward his throat.

At that instant, a bellow resounded, "By the stars!" as the monks from the Celestial Monastery, Seraphin Trueheart and Bartholomew Ironhide, charged in unison. Seraphin aimed the Dragonstaff at the witch's head. At the same time, Bartholomew employed his Enchanted Robe to deflect the encroaching hair from Roland. With a wicked laugh, the Scarlet Witch recoiled, extending both arms. Her left hand struck the Dragonstaff with such Force that it nearly flew from Seraphin's grasp. In contrast, her right hand, fingers now darker and more menacing, crossed her chest, ready for further assault. Yet the monks and Roland remained undaunted, encircling her.

Meanwhile, the remaining elder warriors sprang into action. Without a leader or commands, they moved as one. Isolde Darkthorn, alongside the masters of Brightblade Academy, surrounded the Black Mountain Fiend. Selene's nine-tailed whip cracked with explosive Force while the Brightblade masters' swords worked in concert. The Blacklion couple, Garrett and his wife, along with Aurelius Moonshadow, confronted the Eight-Armed Saint, who appeared tranquil. The dwarf deity's Divine Whisk moved with seeming lethargy yet emitted fierce winds with each motion. These were matched by the ominous roar of the Black Mountain Fiend's skull-chained weapon.

Kellan watched with a pounding heart as the battle unfolded. The nine warriors, who had once fought each other amidst flashing lights, now stood united against the demonic trio. Though the fight had not commenced in full, the tension was palpable. Glancing at the elder, still seated cross-legged, Kellan saw that Stormblade had opened his eyes, which now gleamed brightly. The mocking smile vanished.

But Kellan's attention swiftly returned to the fray. The combat had intensified faster and more ferocious than before. Shadows flitted among bright lights and swirling black mist, accompanied by piercing sounds and foul odors. Yet the battle was brief. The Scarlet Witch's eerie laughter merged with the cackling of the Black Mountain Fiend, followed by the sound of breaking weapons. The

nine warriors were hurled back harder than before, some hitting the ground with Force.

Kellan saw them rise, some staggering, faces pale and grimacing in pain. Selene's whip had lost several tails, Seraphin's Dragonstaff was broken, Bartholomew's robe torn, and Roland's shoulder bled. The Brightblade masters breathed heavily, their sword-wielding hands trembling. Aurelius stood with eyes closed, focusing on restoring his strength and healing. The Blacklion couple examined their broken swords, their weapon pouches emptied.

"Hee-hee-hee! You dare challenge the Three Dark Reavers?" sneered the Scarlet Witch.

"Your audacity will cost you your lives!" laughed the Black Mountain Fiend.

"Pray before you meet the Lord of Death!" spoke the Eight-Armed Saint, his voice soft yet menacing.

The nine warriors prepared themselves, wounded and weaponless. They were ready to fight to the last breath.

Unfamiliar with combat skills, Kellan understood from their words that the demons intended to kill the nine warriors. He watched with wide, tense eyes.

He gripped his bamboo flute tightly as if bracing for a deadly assault. The three demons moved in unison, attacking the nearest opponents. The Scarlet Witch's hair

lashed forward, racing against the skull chains and Divine Whisk. The nine warriors weakened and injured, braced themselves.

Suddenly, a loud screeching sound pierced the air, followed by a long, thick green light and then the clash of metal. The three demons leaped back in surprise. The green light had severed part of the Scarlet Witch's hair, sent the Black Mountain Fiend's skulls spinning, and stripped several bristles of the Eight-Armed Saint's whisk. Shocked, they stared in anger. Before them stood Stormblade, the Eversong Blade in hand, smiling. Calmly, he turned to the nine warriors, who watched in awe.

"Please, you nine, step back. Let me face these demons, for they are my equals in this dark game."

Though proud and chivalrous, the nine were also wise. With reluctant sighs, they retreated, watching from the sidelines.

"Stormblade!" roared the Black Mountain Fiend, pointing an accusatory finger. "We heard you had withdrawn from the world, renouncing worldly affairs and ready to face death without resistance. Why do you stand against us now? Have you forgotten your valor and wish to die a coward, retracting your words still echoing in our ears?"

Stormblade laughed heartily and replied, "Ah, you Three Dark Reavers, heed my words well! I made no promises to the likes of you! My vow was to the nine who represent

the sects I once wronged. I owe them a debt, and I stand ready to pay it with my life. This Eversong Blade is worth my very existence, so if you seek to claim it, you must first take my life!"

"Good! Stormblade, you old, arrogant man, nearing your end! We still respect you as our equal. Do not think for a moment that we fear you!" the Scarlet Witch shrieked angrily.

"Heh-heh-heh, Witch, decades past, you were a beauty who shared my passion for the sea of romance. But now, heh-heh-heh, you are but a hag!"

"Madness...!" The Scarlet Witch lunged with both hands, her ten sharp, poisoned nails clawing at Stormblade. The old warrior flicked his wrist, and a green light flashed. The witch screamed and quickly withdrew her hands; her attack turned to retreat as the Eversong Blade threatened to sever them. Her companions did not stand idle. They surged forward, and an even fiercer battle ensued. The nine watching warriors simultaneously gasped in admiration. They were skilled fighters, and their trained eyes marveled at Stormblade's unmatched swordsmanship, even as they trembled at the terrifying moves of the three demons.

For Kellan, the scene was otherworldly. He saw not Stormblade or demons but a swirling green light like a dragon dancing among black, white, and red clouds. His vision blurred, and his head spun, forcing him to close his

eyes. When he opened them, the dizziness returned. He relied on his hearing, distinguishing only the shrill whistles and clashing sounds, unable to tell who was gaining the upper hand.

The nine experienced and sharp-eyed warriors found the speed of Stormblade and the demons, primarily the Eight-Armed Saint, dizzying. The green light of the Eversong Blade suddenly expanded as Stormblade shouted, splitting into three branches, followed by the demons' cries of pain. The warriors saw the blade cut into the demons' chests, while Stormblade's cheek was scratched by the Scarlet Witch's nails and his back struck by a flying skull. Stormblade staggered, but the three enemies were also thrown back.

They stood, eyes locked, breathing heavily. The demons' eyes gleamed with wicked glee. They knew Stormblade was poisoned by the Scarlet Witch's claws and the Black Mountain Fiend's skulls. Engaging in a Force battle would spread the poison swiftly. While the demons' wounds were shallow and their Force intact, Stormblade's situation was dire. Yet, to refuse the challenge would be to show fear.

"Stormblade, prepare to die!" Black Mountain Fiend shouted, crouching and half-squatting, wrapping his chain weapon around his waist. He pushed his arms forward, channeling Force. The Scarlet Witch moved her arms, creating creaking sounds, moving her right arm forward while lifting her left straight up and her palm facing upward. The Eight-Armed Saint, planting his Divine

Whisk at his waist, continuously moved his arms, producing "wut-wut-wut" sounds with his palms.

Stormblade smiled grimly. He knew his poisoned state was a disadvantage but could not refuse the challenge. As the demons moved their arms, he pushed his arms forward, facing them. He immediately felt the combined Force of his enemies, channeling his own Force into his arms and meeting their assault.

The nine warriors watched with bated breath while Kellan looked on wide-eyed. What strange ritual was this? Why did they stand still like statues, their arms outstretched, the dwarf alone moving? Were they playing some bizarre game, or had the elders grown senile after their fierce battle?

Suddenly, a "trik-trik-trik!" sound emerged, growing louder. It came from the Scarlet Witch's claws as she clicked them together. This was followed by a low growl from Black Mountain Fiend, his open mouth vibrating powerfully. Finally, a rhythmic "thud-clang-thud-clang" from a small drum with a tinkling edge joined in, played by the Eight-Armed Saint. The nine warriors closed their eyes and sat cross-legged. Kellan was puzzled and startled as his legs trembled, causing him to sit. His heart pounded, his ears pricked. He saw Stormblade grow pale, his body trembling, sweat covering his forehead, his extended arms shaking! Kellan did not understand that the demons' sounds were magical vibrations meant to paralyze or kill their target. Fortunately, Kellan lacked

Force cultivation; otherwise, he would have been more susceptible.

Frustrated by the noise, Kellan remembered his flute. Annoyed by the harsh sounds, he decided to counter them with his own. Without hesitation, he began to play.

Kellan had a natural gift for the flute. Self-taught, his music conveyed his emotions. Now, filled with frustration, his flute played fierce and angry notes, rising like a whining child. Yet, influenced by the other sounds, his innate talent made him mimic the harsh noises, creating a strange harmony. His flute mimicked the Scarlet Witch's clicks, Black Mountain Fiend's growl, and the Eight-Armed Saint's drum. The chaotic melody disrupted the demons' focus!

As Kellan played, he felt strength returning. He saw Stormblade no longer trembling, though still pale. The old man's eyes met his, filled with gratitude and admiration! Encouraged, Kellan continued playing more vigorously, even singing in a clear, loud voice. He remembered a saying from an old book, creating a melody of his own:

"Understanding others is wisdom's mark,
Knowing oneself is the heart's true arc!
Conquering others is the strength of the flesh,
Conquering oneself is the spirit's refresh!
Contentment with little is true wealth,
Forcing desires on others is folly's stealth!
Enduring without suffering is lasting,

Dying without destruction is life's casting!"

In days of yore, when ancient tongues wove cryptic melodies, young Kellan struggled to grasp the profound meanings in the verses he sang. Yet, these songs were a jest at the expense of the three human demons and the nine venerable warriors, who now beheld the scene with eyes wide in astonishment.

These nine warriors knew well that Stormblade's life had been spared. Earlier, when the three demons' assault grew fierce with their mystical sounds, the old man had been pressed to the brink of death. Yet, with the disrupting notes of Kellan's flute, Stormblade regained his strength and turned the tide against his foes.

The Three Dark Reavers, seething wrathfully, ceased their infernal sounds and lunged at Stormblade. Still seated in calm repose, the venerable one gave a mighty shout and leaped to meet their charge. A fierce clash ensued in mid-air, the sound of clashing steel reverberating through the air, followed by the agonized cries of the demons as they were hurled back. Stormblade landed, unwavering, with the Eversong Blade gleaming in his grasp. Bloodied and broken, the demons, their pride wounded, cast one last glare before retreating, vanishing into the shadows. They rued not summoning the Sea Witch, the missing fourth of their vile quartet.

When the demons had fled, Stormblade sighed deeply, his strength faltering. He staggered and collapsed, sitting

once more in cross-legged meditation, his visage pale, blood trickling from his lips.

The nine warriors, beholding the elder's dire state, recognized his grievous injuries. The Eversong Blade, still in his grasp, tempted them. Yet, they hesitated, wary of the strife their actions might provoke amongst themselves.

"Hold your hands, you heartless curs!" Kellan's voice rang out in fury as he emerged from the shadows, embracing Stormblade from behind and glaring at the warriors.

Recognizing the lad as the one who had thwarted the demons with his flute, the nine were astonished, momentarily forgetting their ambition in the face of this new enigma.

"Who are you, insolent boy, and what is your purpose?" Isolde Darkthorn's voice dripped with venomous ire.

Ignoring her, Kellan addressed the fallen elder, "Grandfather, are you hurt? They are cruel indeed!"

Stormblade opened his eyes, gazing at the boy with deep admiration and emotion. Strangely, unbidden and rare tears flowed down the old warrior's cheeks. The Sage, known for his jovial adventures, had never shown sadness or shed a tear, even in the face of mortal peril. But now, he wept. With a deep breath, he closed his eyes once more.

Kellan, releasing his embrace, sprang to stand before Stormblade, his voice ringing with righteous anger. "What manner of honorless fiends are you? This venerable one saved your lives from the clutches of the three demons, drove them away at great cost to himself, and now you plot to kill him! You are more despicable than the demons! At least they are honest in their wickedness. If you wish to kill your savior, you must first go through me, Kellan Lightfoot!"

The nine warriors blushed with shame. The boy's words cut deep, yet their ambition, born of long journeys and perilous trials, could not be dismissed so easily.

"Impudent whelp, what do you know? Begone!" Garrett Blacklion moved to strike Kellan but stumbled back, repelled by an unseen force. Stormblade, still pallid but now standing, his eyes alight with determination, spoke.

"No one shall harm Kellan Lightfoot! He is my disciple and heir. Behold, warriors, my successor, the heir to all my possessions, including the Eversong Blade. Ha-ha-ha!"

The nine warriors stood in shock. They had labored and sacrificed, driven by vengeance, to claim the sacred sword and legacy of the Sword King, only to see it bestowed upon a mere shepherd boy.

"Heavens above, the will of fate manifests!" Seraphin Trueheart sighed deeply.

"Stormblade, you have broken your vow!" Roland Ironblade roared in anger.

Stormblade laughed, "Who broke a vow? Did I not say I would not resist if you sought to kill me? Did I not refrain from opposing you or seizing the Eversong Blade? Did I not declare that the rightful owner of the blade would be revealed by fate? This boy is fated to me and the sword. And now that I have a disciple, I must live longer to train him. Depart now!"

Despite their wounds and weariness, the nine warriors reluctantly turned to leave. They realized that the Sword King's advanced age and injuries meant he would not live much longer. The boy, untrained in combat, would be an easy target in the future.

A gentle breeze stirred, and a dignified figure appeared, none other than Darius Stormseer of the Lunaria Sanctuary. With him were thirty monks, swords at the ready, surrounding the area with swift precision.

Darius, his gaze curious, bowed respectfully to Stormblade. "Forgive our intrusion, great warrior. We allowed the presence of these combatants in honor of you, but the Three Dark Reavers are another matter. Such dark figures defile the sanctity of Dragonspire Peak. We beg your pardon as we follow our master's orders."

Stormblade laughed, then sighed deeply. "High Sage Thorne's patience is indeed admirable." Turning to the nine warriors, he declared, "Leave now, or the Lunaria Sanctuary shall deal with you."

Darius Stormseer, stern and authoritative, spoke. "You, who hail from esteemed sects, must understand the sovereignty of the host. You came unbidden, a breach of respect. We would be justified in expelling you."

Faced with Darius's commanding presence and the gathered monks, the nine had no choice. They swiftly departed with respectful bows and murmured apologies, vanishing into the mists.

Stormblade addressed Darius, who sheathed his sword, as did his disciples, maintaining their respectful distance. The Lunaria Sanctuary held Stormblade in high regard, for he had once saved their sect from a dire threat, repelling a dark lord's assault.

"Darius, convey to High Sage Thorne that I wish to remain on Dragonspire Peak until I die to train my disciple," Stormblade said, placing a hand on Kellan's head.

Darius and his disciples were astonished. "Truly, fate works in wondrous ways!" Darius replied respectfully, "Great warrior, this is impossible, for this boy belongs to Lunaria Sanctuary!"

Stormblade's visage darkened, etched with a deep furrow of disappointment. A man ever governed by his own will, heedless of the dictates of others, yet he bore a profound respect for Lunaria Sanctuary. Should Kellan indeed be counted among their disciples, it would be unseemly to claim him by Force. Turning to the lad, he asked, "Kellan, is it true that you are a disciple of Lunaria Sanctuary?"

Kellan swiftly answered, awash with a newfound resolve from his sudden induction as Stormblade's disciple. Though he had once admired Lunaria Sanctuary, disillusionment had crept in with the hypocrisy he had observed. "No, I am not a disciple of Lunaria Sanctuary! I serve there as a helper, but they have never trained me in combat."

"Darius! What is the meaning of this contradiction?" Stormblade's eyes narrowed with stern reproach.

"Forgive me, great warrior," Darius began, bowing slightly. "I did not say Kellan was a disciple, only that he belonged to Lunaria Sanctuary. This boy hails from Willowbrook, a village ravaged by bandits. I rescued him and brought him here. Though we intended to make him a disciple, he refused to embrace our faith, as our master decreed all new disciples must. Thus, he has been a helper for two years but is still one of us."

"Ah, so he is but a helper, not a disciple! I can take him as my own then. Darius, do you object if I claim him as my disciple?"

"I would not dare oppose you, great warrior. However, the choice is the boy's. Kellan, I saved your life. Are you so ungrateful as to leave me now? Do you truly wish to become Stormblade's disciple?"

Kellan stood firm, his heart resolute. The treachery and hypocrisy he had witnessed bolstered his decision to follow Stormblade. Looking into Darius's eyes, he said, "Priest, I am forever grateful for your saving my life and will repay that debt. But was your act of saving me a loan expecting lifelong obedience? Do you seek to claim my freedom? I read once in an old tome: 'A favor with strings is no favor, but a debt with interest.' Are you demanding a debt from me?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Stormblade's hearty laughter echoed as he patted Kellan's head. "Boy, you are full of spirit! Darius, forgive me, but the boy has inherited my temperament! What say you now, Darius?"

Darius's face flushed with frustration. He had no intention of demanding repayment but genuinely cared for Kellan, fearing for the boy's future under Stormblade's tutelage. The Sword King, known for his wild escapades and indulgences, was not the mentor Darius wished for Kellan. Sighing deeply, he said, "Alas, only heaven knows man's heart! Great warrior, I do not wish to sway Kellan. If he chooses to follow you, it is his decision. However, let it be known his future actions are his own and bear no reflection on Lunaria Sanctuary. As our esteemed guest,

we permit your stay on Dragonspire Peak. But should you depart, Kellan will no longer be welcome here. Farewell, great warrior. May heaven's grace be upon you." With a signal to his disciples, Darius bowed and led them back to report to High Sage Thorne.

Stormblade laughed, taking Kellan's hand as they ascended Dragonspire Peak. "Pay no heed to their words, Kellan. They are bound by their dogmas, poor souls! All human-made rules are chains that bind them. Ah, our names both carry the 'Hong' character. We are fated... augh!" The old man clutched his chest, staggering.

"What's wrong? Master... Master, are you hurt?"

The pain-stricken face brightened with a wan smile. "Ah, it is not too dire. When you called me 'Grandfather,' it felt like you were my kin. Ha-ha! How amusing! I've never married; how could I have a grandson? But you are most fitting as my disciple. I shall impart all my knowledge to you, my disciple. Hopefully, it is not too late. Let us reach the peak, and you must study diligently, for time is short. Those accursed three demons... though the Eversong Blade purged the poison, their strikes have weakened my frail body...! I hope it is not too late."

Kellan did not fully grasp his master's words but followed obediently. When they arrived under the Sword Stone, Stormblade held him tightly and climbed upwards. Kellan's heart pounded with fear, yet he steeled himself, refusing to show his dread. As they entered the thick mist

shrouding the Sword Stone's summit, the cold bit deeply, making Kellan tremble and his teeth chatter, but he endured silently. When his master finally released him, Kellan looked around and saw them atop the Sword Stone. The peak, not as pointed as it seemed from below, was bathed in golden sunlight, its broad expanse covered in light green moss and grass. A small hut stood, and the ground was firm beneath his feet. The thick mist floated below, encircling the peak like a shroud, isolating it from the world as if it had entered another realm among the clouds.

Yet, the cold proved too much for Kellan. Suddenly, his stomach cramped, and he fell unconscious at his master's feet.

CHAPTER 3

THE SUCCESSOR



Kellan awoke to find himself lying beside a crackling bonfire. Sitting up, he beheld his master, Stormblade, seated cross-legged near him, hands firmly pressed against Kellan's back.

"Sit cross-legged, Kellan, and breathe slowly," instructed Stormblade. "With the aid of the fire's heat, focus your mind and heart on the belief that the air is not cold but warm. Do not hesitate, for I will guide you."

Kellan wondered at the possibility of such a feat. The air was icy, and he felt no warmth from the fire. If not for his master's hand against his back, radiating a mysterious warmth, he would have been unable to endure the chill. Yet, obediently, he sat cross-legged and drew deep, measured breaths, concentrating on the notion that the air was warm. At first, it was difficult, but as he persisted, he began to feel the change. The cold receded, replaced by a growing warmth until, to his astonishment, beads of sweat appeared on his neck.

"Our bodies are but instruments, my disciple," Stormblade spoke with a voice of calm authority. "If our minds are strong, we can command these instruments to obey. You must practice strengthening your willpower so that your body heeds your commands. When your mind says it is warm, your body will feel warmth. When it says it is cold, your body will shiver with cold."

Master and disciple dedicated themselves to their training with unyielding diligence. It was difficult to determine who was more committed—the master in his teaching or the disciple in his learning. Tirelessly, Kellan trained, oblivious to the passage of time. Day and night became one, indistinguishable on the Sword Stone peak. He learned to see in the dark, a testament to the rigorous training from his master. He rested only when his body demanded it, slept only when sleep overcame him, ate only when hunger became unbearable, and drank only when his throat was parched. Within a few months, he could descend from the Sword Stone to gather food, a task previously managed by Stormblade.

Stormblade trained Kellan with exceptional intensity, quickly imparting all the foundational combat knowledge. He emphasized continuous training in Force and agility, teaching Kellan to meditate and regulate his breathing to gather Force within his body. He often transferred some of his Force to Kellan through his palms pressed against the boy's back.

Kellan's progress was extraordinary. He absorbed each lesson swiftly and retained every piece of wisdom. However, as Kellan's strength and skills grew, Stormblade's health waned. The old man, still suffering from internal injuries sustained in past battles with the Three Dark Reavers, frequently coughed, sometimes bringing up blood. Yet, his spirit remained undiminished, and he continued to train his disciples with meticulous care, feeling this was his final duty in life.

As the ancient poet said, time flowed swiftly: time moves faster than lightning, yet slower than a snail. A year can feel like a day when unnoticed, but a day can stretch into eternity when eagerly anticipated. Five years passed unnoticed on the Sword Stone peak, and Kellan transformed from a twelve-year-old boy into a seventeen-year-old youth. His body became tall and sturdy, and his face was handsome, with a healthy, ruddy glow of perfect health and hidden strength. His simple clothing, fashioned from coarse yellow fabric, bore witness to his modest living, yellow being his favored color.

While Kellan thrived, Stormblade's decline was evident. Those who had known him five years ago would scarcely recognize the once-vigorous warrior. Now, he was gaunt and frail, his eyes only occasionally showing the spark of his former spirit, and that too, only when training his disciple.

One day, sunlight pierced through the thin clouds, bathing the Sword Stone peak in golden light. As was his custom,

Kellan sat cross-legged, meditating and absorbing the morning's energy to enhance his Force. Nearby, Stormblade sat cross-legged, keeping a watchful eye on his pupil.

"Kellan!" Stormblade's voice, though weakened, still held the power to rouse Kellan from his most profound meditation.

Instantly alert, Kellan opened his eyes and saw his master. His heart pounded as he noticed a change in Stormblade's countenance. Though it still bore joy, a certain solemnity had settled over his pale, thin face; its brilliance dimmed like the sun obscured by clouds.

"Did you call for me, master? What do you require?" Kellan asked, concern threading through his voice.

Stormblade smiled weakly, raising his left arm in a beckoning gesture. "Come closer, Kellan, and sit before me. I have words to share with you."

Kellan's curiosity deepened, for his master's demeanor was unlike any he had seen before. There must be something of great importance to discuss. Swiftly, he rose and approached his master, then sat cross-legged before him. It was the first time in five years that he could observe his master closely without the veil of training. He now saw how frail Stormblade was, a figure of mere skin and bones, sustained only by an indomitable will. He realized that his master had endured grievous internal

injuries that would have claimed the life of any other within months. Yet, Stormblade had persevered for five long years.

"Kellan, do you know how long you have been here?" Stormblade's voice was calm yet laden with the weight of time.

"I have not kept close count, but by the changing seasons, it must be around five years," Kellan replied.

"Indeed, five years have passed, my disciple. You have learned much in that time. Yet, time was our enemy, forcing me to focus on your agility and Force. Your foundations in speed and Force are strong, and I do not fear for your defeat easily. But your combat skills... remain basic. Combat in this world is vast and complex. You have mastered simple unarmed combat and but a fraction of the Eversong Blade's techniques. This troubles me, for should you encounter formidable foes like the nine masters who attacked us, especially the Four Dark Reavers, your skills may not suffice."

Kellan frowned. "But, Master, what do their skills have to do with me? I aimed to learn from you to strengthen myself and defend against physical and spiritual threats. I do not seek enmity."

"Ha-ha, my young disciple, you are still unversed in the world's ways and the nature of men. Humans are creatures of insatiable greed. You will encounter their

reckless desires when you enter the wider world. Though you seek no enemies, they will seek you out. You will be drawn into the endless struggle and conflict driven by these desires. I, too, was once a thrall to such desires, Kellan. I sought no enmity, yet conflict found me. Regret is futile when it comes too late. I have borne my consequences and my penance. You must be brave and willing to accept responsibility for your actions. Do not feign purity if you are not. If you are clean, strive to be clean within and without. If you cannot resist an action, do it without harming others and be prepared to face the consequences. Act with open eyes and an open heart."

"I understand, Master."

"Yet, your skills are still insufficient to face strong adversaries. And I have no more time." He sighed deeply. "The Four Dark Reavers are truly formidable. Their power lingers. The Scarlet Witch's hair and nails, the Black Mountain Fiend's skull weapons, and the Eight-Armed Saint's Divine Whisk—all are perilous. And should you meet the Sea Witch... her skills are beyond measure. You might match them only if you study the secret manuals hidden within the Eversong Blade."

Kellan looked at the sword in his master's hand with newfound understanding. He now grasped why the great masters had vied for this rusty blade. It held the key to the secret manuals his master had compiled. He had often practiced with the Eversong Blade, following techniques his master had devised. Yet, he had never noticed

anything remarkable, save for the ancient aphorisms engraved near the hilt.

"Do you wish for me to study those manuals?" he asked, striving to hide his excitement.

"Things obtained easily are not cherished, Kellan. Those gained through difficulty are precious. The manuals and treasures hidden in my secret place will only be valuable if you find them through struggle. But beyond struggle, destiny is key. If you are destined, you will find my legacy. Seek it through the Eversong Blade. Take the Eversong Blade; I bestow it upon you, my disciple."

Kellan stared at his master in shock, hesitant to accept the proffered sword. "But... Master, you said the Eversong Blade is like your lifeblood... how can it be given to me?"

"Ha-ha, who truly owns this sword and this life? Take it as a sign of obedience to your master."

Kellan dared not refuse and accepted the unsheathed Eversong Blade.

"Kellan, though my legacy should be discovered through destiny and hardship, I have another gift to offer besides the Eversong Blade. This gift will shield you against formidable foes. Wear the Eversong Blade at your side and come closer."

Kellan placed the rusted sword at his belt and moved closer to his master. Stormblade raised both hands, placing one on Kellan's crown and the other on his back, speaking softly.

"Focus and open yourself, Kellan. Use your Force to open all pathways; do not resist, and assist with your absorbing Force."

"Master... you intend to..." Kellan was filled with anxiety, knowing that receiving his master's Force had weakened Stormblade each time before. He begged him not to do it again, for he feared for his master's health.

"In my final moments, does my disciple defy his master's order?" Stormblade's voice, though gentle, was filled with authority, quelling Kellan's resistance. He was compelled to sit cross-legged and concentrate, opening all his pathways and emptying his energy reserves to receive his master's Force.

Kellan felt a powerful surge of energy coursing through his crown and back, alternating between warmth and heat before turning cold and hot again. This energy, guided by an absorbing force within him, flowed smoothly, circulating in his abdomen and dispersing to every part of his body. His master's Force was incredibly potent, and Kellan sometimes struggled to endure its intensity. Yet, his years of rigorous training allowed him to manage, adjusting his willpower so that the intense heat felt merely warm.

Kellan could not tell how long they sat thus. He was wholly absorbed in the inward focus, as if in a dream or unconscious state. He became aware again only when the energy flow ceased, leaving his crown and back feeling cold. Opening his eyes, he saw his master still seated cross-legged, a serene smile on his lips. But something was amiss. Kellan quickly grasped his master's hands, which had been resting on his crown and back, now limp and cold.

His master had breathed his last who knows how long ago.

"Master...!" Kellan cried, leaping up. As the lifeless body began to slump, he quickly supported it and laid it gently on the stone surface. He checked for a heartbeat and breath, but there was none. Stormblade had perished, exhausted from transferring his Force. Overwhelmed by grief, regret, and self-reproach, Kellan's face flushed with anger. He roared, striking the ground with his hands.

"Crack...!" The hard mountain stone shattered into pieces, fragments flying in all directions. Kellan stood in amazement. He had always possessed strong Force, but it had never been so powerful. His hands had destroyed the stone this time, yet he felt no pain. Joy, surprise, shock, and sorrow mingled within him. The Force transferred by his master had indeed bestowed him with extraordinary strength.

He rushed back to his master's side, weeping as he embraced Stormblade's lifeless body. Following his master's earlier instructions, Kellan carried the body to the small hut where his master had rested. After mourning and praying, asking the heavens to forgive his master's sins and grant him peace, Kellan set the hut ablaze. With a heart full of emotion, he watched over the flames, tending to them as they consumed the hut and his master's body. The cremation took half a day, and that night, under the gaze of countless stars, Kellan scattered the ashes from the Sword Stone peak. The wind carried the ashes away as if Stormblade had become one with the nature he loved.

Kellan spent the entire night in contemplation, reflecting on his master and pondering his own fate. His daily routine of learning and training had shielded him from loneliness. Still, with Stormblade gone, he felt the weight of solitude. What was he to do? Where was he to go? What purpose did his life now hold? Returning to Willowbrook, his childhood village, seemed pointless. His family was gone, and returning would only bring painful memories.

To Lunaria Sanctuary? Though many kind-hearted monks had been friendly to him during his two years there, Darius Stormseer's message was clear. Without his master, Kellan was not welcome.

Where then? He could not stay on the Sword Stone peak, as it belonged to Lunaria territory, and he would not

impose himself as an unwelcome guest. In his confusion, Kellan recalled his master's cheerful disposition, stories, and sayings about life, joy, and embracing the world's blessings.

"Living once in the world, what use is there in lamenting and being sad? Joy and happiness can be enjoyed; just reach out for them! All the blessings He has bestowed upon us, why waste them? Enjoy those blessings!"

Kellan's face began to brighten. Gazing at the stars, he remembered his master's words about enjoying life's pleasures, the beauty of the world, and the richness of experience. Though he had inwardly disagreed with some of his master's views, he appreciated the simplicity and honesty behind them.

"Who knows how many hundreds of beautiful women became my lovers, Kellan," Stormblade had once confided. "I never refused a woman's love. Women, to me, are flowers needing caresses and affection. Therefore, I never turned them away, whether they were pretty, sweet, ugly, young, or old! Of course, especially the pretty ones! Regardless of whether they were maidens, widows, already married, had children, or grandchildren! I welcomed them with an open heart and arms! Only one thing is forbidden: I will never approach a woman who does not welcome me. I will never force myself on a woman who does not want me. I do not want one-sided love!"

Recalling this, Kellan shook his head, for his master had indeed been a lover of women, a glutton for their company. Kellan did not wish to follow in his master's footsteps. Yet, he was moved by the principle of not forcing oneself upon a woman who did not return affection. It was troubling to consider the master's affairs with married women. Still, he struggled to judge, wondering if the woman was willing. It was a complex matter.

"Only one thing I advise you, Kellan. You may love a thousand women, but never let your feet be bound by marriage! Once tied, you will lose your freedom and cannot live as I have!"

Kellan grew more perplexed. Matters of love and marriage still needed to interest him. His master had never been a violator of women; his master never intentionally harmed others. He was hated for his reckless pursuit of desires, involving himself with other men's wives and taking what he desired under the belief that those bested should not suffer. Thus, he robbed precious items from high-ranking officials, stole manuals from major combat sects, and had affairs with beautiful women, making many enemies in the world.

Kellan shuddered. Many influential individuals coveted his master's legacy, the secret within the Eversong Blade. What if he descended the mountain and was pursued by those who sought to seize it? His master had protected the sword, but what of him? The enemies were numerous

and powerful. How could he withstand them and safeguard the Eversong Blade?

"You might only be able to match their prowess if you study all the manuals I have left behind," was one of his master's final messages. The secret lay within the Eversong Blade. Why descend the mountain before gaining enough power to defend it? Better to seek and study those manuals first.

The next day, Kellan began to examine the Eversong Blade. The sword had no scabbard; its blade was of miraculous steel, greenish in hue, and more complex than ordinary steel. Kellan felt along the blade, reading the small engraved letters:

"The highest wisdom is like water! Truly serving virtue, the channeler directs the water where he wishes!"

Kellan furrowed his brow. His master, who often scorned monks as hypocrites, seemed to have inscribed these sacred words. Why were such verses engraved on the sword? Recognizing his master's handwriting, Kellan pondered its meaning. After a day and night of contemplation, he concluded that perhaps the secret was in the sword itself. He examined the blade for hidden mechanisms but found nothing unusual.

Kellan, trained in patience, did not quickly lose heart. For a month after his master's death, he diligently searched the Sword Stone's surface for secret doors or caves but

found nothing. His fruit supplies were depleted, so he decided to leave, remembering Darius Stormseer's message and feeling he no longer had the right to stay.

He knelt and prayed to the four directions one last time, calling his master's name, then tucked the Eversong Blade inside his shirt. Smiling at a corner of the Sword Stone, he felt ready to descend and face the world with an open heart. Emulating his master's cheerful spirit, he faced obstacles joyfully and confidently. With a bright face, Kellan descended the peak, feeling the immense energy from his master's Force, making the descent easier than before.

"Aiiihh...! Help me...!"

A piercing scream from a woman's mouth startled Kellan. Expecting an ambush, he found the area around Dragonspire Peak eerily quiet. But the scream made his hair stand on end, and he felt eyes watching his every move.

Ignoring the feeling, Kellan dashed toward the sound. Compassionate and driven by his master's teachings, he ran to save the distressed woman.

When he arrived at an open field, he was stunned. Dozens of Lunaria monks had gathered, and before them stood Darius Stormseer, gripping a struggling, crying woman by the shoulder. High Sage Thorne, leaning on his staff, looked on with dignified authority. The Lunaria leader,

very old, gazed at Kellan as if they had been waiting for him.

Kellan stopped running and turned. As he suspected, a dozen monks surrounded him, facing Darius and High Sage Thorne. Feeling like a rabbit amidst tigers, Kellan knelt before them, saying,

"I, the lowly Kellan Lightfoot, come to greet the honorable elders and beg forgiveness for any mistakes I may have made."

High Sage Thorne smiled broadly, and Darius beamed. Moving his hand from the woman's shoulder, he said to his disciples, "Bind this wicked woman!" Two monks tied her to a tree. Kellan glanced at the beautiful woman, around twenty years old, crying softly, which pained him. But he focused on Darius, who spoke.

"Very well, Kellan. Stand up, for you are no longer our servant or disciple. We have waited a month. What delayed you so long?"

Kellan was taken aback. The Lunaria monks were aware of his master's demise a month prior. They had vigilantly awaited his descent from the Sword Stone peak. Those stationed around Dragonspire Peak were merely disciples of Lunaria, as neither the leader nor Darius Stormseer dared violate the sanctity of Dragonspire Peak. The smoke from his master's funeral pyre must have alerted them.

Before Kellan could respond, Darius spoke again, noting his hesitation and confusion.

"We saw the smoke rising from Dragonspire Peak and did not wish to disturb a disciple in mourning. Thus, we waited. But know this, Kellan: many have awaited your descent, and this wicked woman is but the latest of the dark forces poised to harm you."

"Liar! Filthy monks who never bathe! Who would want to harm that young man? I was merely here out of curiosity, lost and caught by your mob tactics! Shame on you for ganging up on a defenseless girl! I know your kind, pretending piety while fondling under the guise of justice!"

The woman's fierce words were a severe affront, causing many Lunaria monks to flush with either shame or anger. Yet, Darius and High Sage Thorne remained unperturbed, smiling mildly. Darius turned and extended his hand towards the woman, his finger pointing decisively. Though he stood three meters away, a sharp sound was heard, and the woman's body went limp, silenced by a distant acupoint strike. Only her eyes blazed with fury.

Kellan, though shocked, was deeply impressed. His five years of training seemed paltry compared to Darius's skill. He knew he might last no more than five moves against the monk in a direct confrontation.

"Kellan," Darius continued, "know that dark sects and righteous factions alike, who hold grudges against your master, seek to claim the Eversong Blade and the secrets it guards. We, monks of the Lunaria Sect, desire nothing from Stormblade or you. You came to us with nothing; thus, you should leave with nothing. If you carry the Eversong Blade, it must remain here. Any other items or manuals must also be left behind. This is not out of greed but to prevent disaster from befalling you and to keep such power from dark forces."

Kellan frowned. "But the sword is a gift from my master. It is not something stolen from the Lunaria Sect!"

Darius nodded. "True, but Stormblade died on Dragonspire Peak. Hence, all his belongings must remain here. Even as his disciple, you cannot take them away."

"What if I refuse?"

Darius's expression hardened. "Kellan, our rules are for your safety. If you refuse, you forget gratitude, and we must use Force."

Kellan respected Darius and the Lunaria Sect's wisdom but was reluctant to yield so easily. Moreover, he saw an opportunity to test his skills against a formidable opponent who bore him no ill will. "Forgive me, Master. Before surrendering the sword, I request your guidance in combat."

Darius laughed heartily. "Ah, you are indeed stubborn, Kellan. Very well. Show me what you have learned from Stormblade. Begin!"

Though he had not tested his skills in actual combat, Kellan had mastered the basics of advanced techniques. He recalled his master's advice: a skilled warrior often benefits from being attacked first, as the attacker reveals vulnerabilities. Knowing Darius's prowess, Kellan advanced with a slow, cautious punch, channeling only a quarter of his strength, reserving the rest for defense.

"Whoosh!" His punch sliced through the air with a strong gust.

"Good!" Darius exclaimed, impressed by Kellan's strength. The monk was satisfied that Stormblade had trained his disciple well. Yet, he was secretly disappointed by the simplicity of the movement, expecting more from the renowned Sword Sage's pupil.

Seeing that Darius dodged without counter-attacking, Kellan realized the monk wanted to test him. The praise made Kellan's ears redden with pride and shame. He decided to show his full potential.

"Master, forgive my impudence!"

He launched his next attack, channeling his Force from his navel, letting the hot energy flow swiftly to his arms. He

used his agility to propel himself forward like a lightning bolt, delivering a series of rapid punches.

Despite his limited experience, Kellan executed the basic principles of advanced combat skills with proficiency. Though simplified into eight techniques, he had learned the Cloud Mountain Fist, representing the core movements of high-level combat skills. Using "Twin Clouds Push the Mountain," he leaped forward, ready to deliver a follow-up kick while thrusting his arms alternately, channeling all his strength.

"Whoosh!"

"Remarkable!" Darius was genuinely amazed. The first attack impressed him, but the second, demonstrating strength and skill, astonished him. It was evident that Kellan's five years of training had borne fruit, producing a formidable young warrior.

This assault was akin to one a master might wield after decades of training! The sheer Force of Kellan's punch was evident from the wind it generated, a testament to its power. Even Darius, a seasoned combatant, dared not face it directly. Swiftly, he leaped aside, anticipating Kellan's follow-up kick. His intuition proved accurate, for the hand thrusts and kicks struck only air, causing nothing more than the fluttering of Darius's robes.

As the second attack failed, Kellan, wary of a counterstrike, displayed his agility. In mid-air, he flipped,

accompanied by a loud shout, twisting his body to descend with a third assault upon the wide-eyed Darius. The previous attack's style had revealed remarkable skill, and the Force had sent chills across Darius's skin. Now, witnessing such agility left him agape. The young man's body descended like an eagle, attacking from above.

This time, Kellan employed the eighth and final technique of the Cloud Mountain Fist, known as "Clouds Shake the Wind and Rain." The most challenging technique required all four limbs to strike simultaneously from above. Determined not to be underestimated, Kellan's legs aimed kicks at Darius's chest and abdomen, followed by a left fist toward his neck and an open-hand strike to the head. This formidable, swift attack was imbued with all his Force channeled through his limbs. Such was the power that he had shattered a rock with a similar strike atop the Sword Stone.

"Alas!" Darius was genuinely alarmed. He realized he must not take this attack lightly, understanding its ferocity. Thus, he dodged the kicks aimed at his stomach and chest and evaded the punch toward his neck. However, the hand strike to his head was so swift and decisive that dodging was perilous. Darius tilted his head and body, swiftly blocking the strike and catching Kellan's open hand.

Darius Stormseer, a figure of immense skill and Force, was now cautious against a young man who had trained for merely five years. "Plakk...! Aihhhh...!" Darius exclaimed,

surprised. When he blocked Kellan's slap, he felt an overwhelming force, nearly crushing his defense and causing his arm and chest to ache. Shocked but composed, he spun his palm, causing Kellan to fall. However, Kellan's extraordinary agility allowed him to land half-kneeling, his hand still grasped by Darius.

"Heeeeeiitttt....!" Darius shouted, exerting his Force to release his grip. To his astonishment, he could not free his hand from Kellan's grasp. The more he exerted his Force, the more it seemed to drain away, absorbed by Kellan's body.

"Iiiiiihhhh... ehhhh...!" Darius grew pale, his eyes alarmed, and struggled to release his grip. An unseen force bound his hand, preventing him from stopping his energy flow into Kellan.

Unbeknownst to Darius, the young man wielded the Force transferred from Stormblade, his master. Kellan had developed an extraordinary absorbing power during the Force transfer, making the monk's energy flow uncontrollably into his body. Realizing the hot energy was flowing into him, Kellan was shocked. Initially, he thought the monk was transferring Force willingly. But seeing Darius's pale face and panicked expression, he realized something was wrong. Kellan had developed a powerful but uncontrollable absorbing ability. In his confusion, Kellan pulled at his hand, stammering, "Master... release... release my hand!"

While they struggled to free their bonded hands, several junior monks, Darius's disciples, grew angry. Highly skilled themselves, they approached Kellan, seeing their senior in distress. One shouted,

"Wicked boy, let go!"

Four strong arms filled with Force grabbed Kellan's body. Two seized his hands, and two gripped his shoulders. Kellan, still half-kneeling, did not resist. But as soon as the four hands touched him, exclamations of surprise erupted from the monks. They, too, could not release their hands, and their Force flowed uncontrollably into Kellan.

"Wicked boy with devilish skills!" One monk cursed, striking Kellan's back with his free hand, only to find it stuck. His energy drained even faster, leaving him pale and weak. Kellan felt no joy from the influx of energy. His body grew unbearably hot, as if ready to explode. His chest swelled with pressure, his navel ached, and his head throbbed, turning red like a boiled shrimp. He felt tortured, knowing the monks could die if they did not release him, but he had no idea how to free himself. Initially, he could cry out for them to let go, but now he could only make incoherent sounds, "Ah-ah-uh-uh."

Darius and the four monks found their condition even more dire. Their Force was depleting, drained mystically, and they could not halt. Their bodies weakened, their heads swam with dizziness, and their thoughts became

muddled, leaving them bewildered and unable to think clearly.

"By the Light... By the Light...!" The exclamation came softly from High Sage Thorne. Suddenly, his form floated close, his hands moving with ethereal grace as he planted his staff firmly upon the ground. He gripped Kellan's arms, then pulled with immense strength. Kellan felt a great force pulling him, far more potent than the combined strength of the monks. The connection was broken, and Kellan was thrown over ten meters away, rolling upon the ground.

Leaping to his feet, Kellan was astonished by the lightness and power of his movements. His body soared higher than intended, filled with energy, feeling simultaneously light and heavy. The Force demanded release, causing him to hiss through his mouth as if he had tasted something exceedingly spicy.

"Ahhh... move... ahhh... everyone, move...!" he roared, his voice like a tiger's growl. His body shot towards the giant trees, monks watching in shock, amazement, and fear as they instinctively stepped aside. Kellan felt an overwhelming need to channel the intense energy within him, to release the Force that made his chest and head feel like they would burst. He struck the trees with hands and feet, using the full extent of the eight movements of the Cloud Mountain Fist. The sounds of "thud, crack-crack... crash!" echoed repeatedly as he felled eighteen large trees, their trunks shattered as if struck by a

tempest. Relieved after this wild release of Force, Kellan no longer felt tortured; his chest and head no longer threatened to explode, and his breath came easier. It was as if he had been rescued from drowning in deep waters.

Clearing the remaining dizziness from his head, Kellan looked ahead. He saw Darius Stormseer and his four junior monks sitting cross-legged, regulating their breathing and gathering energy, their faces pale. Remembering all that had transpired because of him, he quickly approached Darius, dropping to his knees and bowing his head in deep remorse.

"I beg your forgiveness, esteemed monks..." His voice was sorrowful, and he began to sob without realizing it.

"Blessed be... You have inherited the powerful arts of Stormblade, but fortunately, not his unruly nature. Your heart remains pure," High Sage Thorne praised, stroking his white beard. The old monk understood the calamity that would have occurred had Kellan directed that immense Force toward people instead of trees.

Darius opened his eyes, smiling patiently but with a look of awe and fear. "Kellan, you have inherited a formidable and terrifying power."

"Esteemed monk, I swear that all this happened beyond my control. I beg you to please remove this absorbing ability that harms others without my intention. Help me,

please!" Kellan's heart was tortured, viewing this strange skill as a dreadful and repulsive disease.

"Kellan, my skills have not reached that level; I cannot remove this devilish power. Our High Sage can if you are willing to ask him."

Kellan turned to appeal to the leader of the Lunaria Sect. Still, High Sage Thorne raised his hand and spoke gently yet authoritatively.

"There exists a dark art known as Life Force Stealing, which involves absorbing an opponent's strength. This mystical art has yet to be practiced in our time. Now, in a strange twist, this power has manifested within you, Kellan. Whether Stormblade intended this or not, it has been passed to you. Given your lack of awareness, it could have been more intentional. It is an incredible anomaly. You are not a disciple of the Lunaria Sect, and it is not within our rights to remove this skill from you. Moreover, removing this power could endanger both your life and the life of the person attempting it. A skill, however dark, can be used for good if mastered. There is no need to eliminate it."

The Sage closed his eyes, seemingly entering a meditative state, his lips moving in silent prayer.

Kellan then directed his question to Darius. "What do you think, Master?"

Darius smiled and sighed. "As the High Sage said, you are not our disciple, and we have no right to interfere with your skills. However, you must leave the Eversong Blade with us."

Kellan took a deep breath. These monks are too proud, he thought. If their leader could remove this 'illness,' why would they not help? Too proud to beg, he unsheathed the rusty sword from his waist and placed it at Darius's feet, saying, "I have no ill intentions; why would I need a sword? I will leave if the Lunaria Sect believes this sword is theirs. Besides this sword, I only have my clothes. Should I leave those as well?"

Darius looked at him with sad eyes and shook his head. "What a pity, Kellan. Your heart is filled with anger and resentment. You do not yet understand our good intentions. But in time, you will see why we asked you to leave the Eversong Blade with us."

"Fool! Your name is Kellan, right? Why give the Eversong Blade to these monks? Don't give it to them! They deceive you; they want the legendary sword. Take it back and leave quickly! With your skills, they can't force you!" shouted the beautiful woman tied to the tree. Darius's pressure point strike had not lasted long, proving she was skilled.

"That is enough, Kellan. We will keep the Eversong Blade safe. Leave with a clear conscience; remember, you cannot

enter our territory without permission. Should you have a pressing need, seek permission from the High Sage first."

Kellan inclined his head, a solemn resolve hardening in his heart. Nevermore would he tread upon the paths of the Lunaria Sect nor bring them any further trouble. Yet, his gaze lingered on the woman, and with a voice tinged with earnestness, he spoke, "Pardon me, noble Sage. Before I depart, I have but one request. I hope you will find it in your heart to grant it."

"What is this request you make? If it is just and within my power, I shall see it fulfilled."

"I ask that you release the woman."

At these words, the monks murmured in astonishment, yet Darius remained as a rock, unmoved by the rising tide. High Sage Thorne stood as one lost in deep thought, his eyes closed to the world.

"Kellan, what bond do you share with this woman that you would ask for her release?"

"None, noble Sage. My request is born of the spirit that moved my late master to aid the Lunaria Sect when it was assailed by forces of darkness."

"What? What is it you speak of?" Darius inquired, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"Honored Sage, my master, by his own account, aided the Lunaria Sect not out of kinship but out of compassion for those beset by evil. He had no ties to your order yet came to your aid. I hold no bond with this woman, yet seeing her in peril, I feel compelled to assist her."

"Ah, but the circumstances differ greatly, Kellan. Your master stood against the wicked, the vile, and very dark. This woman, however, is not virtuous; her presence here bore ill intentions towards you, intending to seize the Eversong Blade..."

"Lies! Old Sage, lies...!" the woman cried out in defiance.

Kellan shook his head, his voice calm but firm. "The noble Sage does not fully grasp my master's teachings. He did not judge by the narrow lenses of good and evil. According to his wisdom, such concepts are but the biased musings of mankind, driven by self-interest."

"What do you mean by this?" Darius asked, his voice tinged with incredulity.

"Noble Sage, the notions of good and evil are as shifting as the wind, swayed by personal desires. When one finds another advantageous, amiable, and pleasing, they quickly label them good. Conversely, when one finds another to be a hindrance, hostile, or unpleasant, they do not hesitate to brand them evil. Thus, like my master, I place no stock in such judgments. I am aiding this woman simply because I wish to see her in need. What say you,

noble Sage? I have honored the Lunaria Sect's demand to relinquish the blade; would the Lunaria Sect be so narrow as to refuse my request, which is given freely and without self-interest?" With these final words, he subtly implied that the sect's demand for the sword resulted from self-interest.

Darius was struck by the boldness of Kellan's words, his voice faltering, "Your view is... twisted, a misunderstanding of the world..."

But before he could continue, High Sage Thorne spoke softly, "This boy will bring about more chaos than Stormblade ever did. Release the woman and send him away quickly; the sooner, the better!"

At the High Sage's command, Darius signaled to the monks, and two of them approached the woman to untie her. But with a sudden, fluid movement, she broke free from her bonds as if they were but cobwebs, leaping to her feet. Her eyes sparkled with mockery as she glanced at Kellan. "Fool! Naive and ignorant, you are nothing but a country bumpkin!" With that, she stamped her foot and vanished into the shadows, swift as the wind.

Kellan remained unmoved by her scorn. He bowed deeply to the elders of the Lunaria Sect, then turned and departed from the Lunaria mountains with a lightness in his step. He forced a smile upon his face, vowing to live as his master had ever joyful, unburdened by the weight of

what might come. Whatever the future held, he would face it with a smile, ready to meet it head-on.

CHAPTER 4

ELYSIA NIGHTSHADE



"Hey, fool! Stop right there!"

At the command, Kellan halted abruptly, standing still amid the forest beyond Lunaria's domain's borders. Without turning around, he recognized the enchanting yet firm voice of the woman whom the monks had recently set free. It was unmistakably her voice.

"What do you want?" he asked without moving.

"Wow, such arrogance! Even a fool can be haughty, huh?"

"I suppose I might be a bit foolish," he responded with a calm demeanor and a smile. No matter how harsh or biting the criticism, he resolved to face it with joy.

"Oh, you can smile! Talking without even looking at me—such arrogance, treating others as insignificant. If you're not proud, then look at me. I despise talking to someone who won't even face me!"

In response, Kellan let out a laugh. Despite the severity of her criticism, he found her remarks amusing and novel, which lifted his spirits. He turned and saw her perched on the verdant grass beneath a tree, savoring a large roasted wild chicken leg. The roasting fire still burned, and the meat was steaming hot.

"Well, now I'm looking at you. What do you want to talk about?"

"You're still arrogant and haughty! Do you think you can act superior just because you asked those stinky monks to release me?"

"Hey, young lady..."

"Hmph! I'm not your sister!"

"Fair lady..."

"Who wants to be your sister?"

Confusion gripped Kellan. "Then what should I call you?"

"Call me Miss!"

"Well, Miss...?"

"Well, I'm still unmarried. If you don't call me Miss, do you plan to call me Madam?"

The girl looked even more charming and humorous with her pouty face, ash-stained cheeks, and lips glistening with chicken grease. Kellan chuckled again.

"Alright, Miss. You've called me arrogant and haughty for not turning around. Now that I have, you still call me arrogant. What must I do to satisfy you?"

"I want to talk to you. Sit here, and don't stand there grinning like a monkey who smells dried fish!"

Kellan's thick black eyebrows arched. This was his first conversation with a girl; he had never encountered someone so spirited. He felt both curious and self-conscious. Bearing in mind his master's demeanor, he approached the girl and sat down with a wide smile. His keen eyes scrutinized her as she devoured the roasted chicken leg. Her figure was round and lovely, her face smooth and ruddy. Thick, untamed black hair obscured part of her left cheek, and her long eyebrows framed bright eyes that gleamed with a unique blend of curiosity, bravery, rebellion, and joy. Her lips were the most stunning he had ever seen—full and velvety, with a reddish-brownish hue.

She wore exquisite silk garments tailored snugly, revealing her ample bust, slender waist, and broad hips. Her sleeves and neckline exposed smooth, fair skin. His master had often likened such a woman to a fragrant flower, and now he understood why. She inspired in him an intense desire to admire her beauty.

"Maybe I do seem like a monkey, but right now, I'm not smelling dried fish; I'm savoring the delicious aroma of roasted meat!"

With her jaw clenched and eyes darting to Kellan, the girl asked, "Do you want some?" and resumed biting slowly. Unconsciously swallowing, the young man stared at her mouth as she chewed, and his stomach growled. He nodded, swallowing once more.

"If you want some, take it. What are you waiting for? Don't be shy, like a cat. If you want something, just take it and eat it."

"But that's your meat."

"Who said it's mine? The chicken was roaming the forest; who knows whose it was?"

"But you caught and roasted it."

"Enough! You're too talkative! Just take and eat. Talking won't fill your stomach."

Despite the reprimand, Kellan found amusement in her humor. This girl filled him with joy beyond measure. In every way, she mirrored his master's character. If his master had encountered such a girl, he wondered what he would have done. Seizing the roasted chicken, he tore off a piece of the breast and devoured it.

The roasted chicken was a delightful combination of sweet and savory flavors, and the warmth suited Kellan's ravenous appetite. After finishing her meal, the girl retrieved a jug of refreshing water. She drank directly from it, letting some spill down her neck and over her lips. Kellan hesitated to accept the jug from her, knowing it had touched her lips.

"Where's the cup? I'd like to use one to drink," he asked.

"I don't have a cup," she responded.

"Then how do you expect me to drink?"

"Just like I did," she replied nonchalantly.

"But you've already used it."

The girl abruptly rose to her feet, crossing her arms over her hips, and glared at Kellan with wide eyes.

"Are you insulting me? Foolish and rude!"

Kellan likewise widened his eyes, not in anger but in perplexity. He felt utterly ridiculous in her company. "Insulting...? I didn't mean to. What do you mean?"

"You find it disgusting to sip from the same jug as me? Do you think I have some kind of disease? Are you so repulsed?"

"Please do not misunderstand and become angry. It's just that... I was worried you might not like it."

"What do you mean? You're really a chatterbox. Foolish and verbose! Bad luck to meet a man like you!"

Kellan decided to end the argument. If he continued to entertain her, she would keep insulting him. Indifferent to their lips meeting in the same place, he snatched the jug and drank the water straight from it. The crystal-clear water felt beneficial on his parched throat.

He handed back the jug with a grateful nod.

Her laughter, tinged with mockery, was melodic and infectious. "Why did you drink so little? Are you afraid I've poisoned the drink?" she teased.

Kellan felt a warm sensation as she pressed her lips to the jug, and his heart raced as he watched her sip again. But her remarks irked him, for she seemed ever ready to think ill of him. Irritating, he almost tugged the girl's ear like a mischievous sister.

"I'm not afraid of poison," he said indignantly. "Why did you stop me? What do you want to say?"

She studied his face closely, remaining silent for a moment. Kellan knew this because he stole a quick glance at her. When she did speak, her voice was softer.

"What's your name again? And how old are you?"

"Kellan Lightfoot. I believe I am seventeen years old."

"Hmm... and you are a disciple of Stormblade? How curious..."

"Why curious?"

"It's surprising that a legendary figure like Stormblade would have a foolish disciple like you."

A surge of anger washed over Kellan. "If you think I'm foolish, why did you stop me?"

The girl remained quiet for a second before laughing melodically. "Oh, are you angry?"

Kellan could feel his irritation building. Because she was a woman, he could not strike her. He shook his head and glanced down.

"You really are a fool. If you weren't, you wouldn't have given the Eversong Blade to those monks."

"It belonged to them, and I didn't want to refuse their request. They were wise and noble people, and it was right to respect their wishes. Besides, I couldn't have fought them off; they are far too skilled, especially Darius Stormseer and the High Sage."

"You're a coward and an idiot! How could Stormblade have a disciple like you? He was fearless and brilliant, from what I've heard."

A heavy sigh escaped Kellan. He had learned from a courageous and joyful teacher. "Think what you will. I am not afraid of anyone, and as for being foolish, well, I may not be as clever as my master."

A lengthy silence fell over them. Feeling his joy dwindle, Kellan dipped his head, contemplating his master. Those first few days on his own were challenging. If beautiful women continued to mock and insult him, how could he maintain his master's positive outlook?

"Kellan..."

The girl's gentle voice broke the stillness, startling him.

As he turned to face her, a mixture of surprise and unease washed over him. Her intense gaze fixed on his, and her lips curled into a brief smile. "Hmm?" he asked.

"Why did you call me?"

"You're such an awkward boy."

"Enough, miss. If you stopped me just to criticize, then what?"

"Are you angry?"

"No."

"You are truly awkward, unlike your master, who was... ah, don't you want to know my name, identity, and the reason for my arrival at the Lunaria Sect?"

Kellan realized his own inattentiveness. "What is your name, miss?"

She giggled, finding his self-consciousness amusing. "My name is Elysia Nightshade. Do you like my name?"

Kellan swiftly responded, "Yes, it's a beautiful name," his eyes beseeching her to continue her tale.

"Heh, you're good at flattery, I see."

"I... please, go on, miss."

"I heard there was going to be a grand gathering at the Lunaria Sect's Dragonspire Peak, where great masters of both the dark and light sides would gather to witness the descent of Stormblade's disciple, who inherited the Eversong Blade that everyone in the realm desires."

"Including you, miss."

"Of course! Do you think I'm just a child looking to watch the fun? I was more successful than those who tried to

use force. The monks of the Lunaria Sect, a dozen mighty warriors of the realm, drove them all away without even catching a glimpse! I deliberately surrendered to the monks. I knew I couldn't defeat them all, especially Darius Stormseer and the High Sage, who are incredibly skilled. I deliberately caught you off guard and called out to entice you closer. But who would've thought that in your foolishness, you'd hand over the sword just like that?"

Another insult! Kellan now understood why this woman had escaped before they unbound her. She had purposefully surrendered herself to be captured. Her courage and intelligence shone through.

"What did you want with the Eversong Blade, miss?"

"Well, well, well, isn't it obvious? To discover Stormblade's secrets. Kellan, could you reveal the location of the hidden scrolls and treasures within the sword?" Her enthusiasm was palpable, and she seemed anxious about the sword and its secrets.

This made Kellan scoff. "No, and I don't think I ever will. I don't intend to return to Lunaria. Why do they all fight over secrets, causing conflict?"

With an eyebrow lifted, Elysia gazed at him with intrigue. "You seem quite innocent. But that's beside the point. What matters is that you reveal the abilities you honed under Stormblade. I noticed that you could draw the life force from others, and you nearly overcame Darius

Stormseer, known for his great skill. Could you give me the lowdown on that?" Suddenly, her demeanor shifted. Her face shone, her eyes sparkled, and her lips curved into a smile.

Kellan could only respond with a snort. As her face fell, he added, "I swear, I don't understand it myself. I despise the curse within my body. I only learned the basics of combat skills and some sword techniques. Compared to others, it's nothing."

"You're quite the contrast from your master's modesty and humility stories!" Yet her fury quickly faded into a smile. She retrieved a small purse containing dried flowers and leaves from her pocket. She added some into the jug, shook it, and looked at Kellan.

"What did you add to the water?" Kellan asked, feeling nervous under her stare.

"Fragrant leaves and flowers—a delicious and aromatic tea substitute," she said, sipping from the jug. A pleasant scent wafted out. After drinking, she handed it to Kellan. "Here, try some."

Kellan scoffed. "I'm not thirsty."

"Even if you're not thirsty, this drink is now delicious. Just smell it; isn't it fragrant?"

As she drew nearer, she breathed softly into his face. Kellan's pulse quickened, his face reddening.

"Are you afraid I've poisoned it?"

Kellan drank from the jug to avoid further antics. The beverage had a pleasant aroma and a hint of sweetness, but something seemed familiar to his trained palate. Poison! A lethal toxin! He drank the whole jug while controlling his expression, showing nothing. He dropped the empty jug and exclaimed, "Delicious!" Her eyes gleamed with delight.

The girl removed an item from her pocket and gingerly undid the top button of her blouse while smiling. When Kellan saw that she was exposing some of her chest and a pink undergarment, he was more shocked than uncomfortable. She retrieved multiple red tablets from a red packet she had reached into. After taking two, she put the packet back in her pocket but didn't fasten her blouse. Kellan was compelled to look aside and ignore the bare flesh.

"Kellan, look at me," she commanded.

Kellan reluctantly faced her, attempting to conceal his unease. Her plan to poison him was apparent. Why? What desire drove her to murder him? He knew that the poison could kill even the most formidable enemies.

"Look closely, Kellan. Isn't my hair beautiful? Isn't my face lovely? Very lovely, isn't it?" Elysia asked, smiling and batting her eyelashes, then tilting her head to show Kellan different views of her.

"Um, yes..." Kellan responded, his mind still trying to make sense of her motivations. He assumed the red tablets she had taken were an antidote to the poison she had consumed earlier.

"Listen closely and observe... isn't my complexion flawless and pale, Kellan?" Her voice turned melodic, filled with alluring timbres, as she purposefully revealed more of her neckline.

Kellan clenched his jaw. Drawing on his inner power, he attempted to calm himself as his heart raced. Even in his dreams, he had never encountered anything like this.

With serpentine grace, Elysia rose to her feet. "Look closely, young man! Isn't my figure beautiful? Look at my chest, my waist, and my hips."

It was all Kellan could muster—a "Hmm, yes..."—as his throat went dry.

"I'm young and beautiful, with an alluring figure. I am an attractive girl, right?"

"Hmmm, yes!"

When Kellan moved closer, Elysia abruptly halted her suggestive performance and sat down in front of him. Her once-charismatic grin and piercing eyes turned into an angry scowl.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Can't you say anything else, you fool? Your master, Stormblade, was known as the greatest womanizer in the world, a master of seduction. You foolish boy, did your cursed master not teach you the art of seduction?"

Kellan grinned. This woman was just beginning to make sense to him. Like a poisonous serpent, her allure belied her lethality. He no longer needed to be timid, ashamed, or terrified of a woman of her stature, and his sense of humor returned. He grinned sarcastically and shook his head.

"You're close to death, do you know that? You are a future corpse—food for the worms! Do you know that you drank poison? The water you drank earlier contained a deadly poison known as Fragrant Poison Flower. It's now in your stomach, and it will rot your insides. Do you know that? The antidote is only mine—the red pills I took earlier. If I don't help you, you'll die within twenty-four hours! Your life is in my hands now. Understand?"

Kellan nodded, realization dawning on him. The poison had been Fragrant Poison Flower. Yes, he was aware of it. It was just that her out-of-the-ordinary actions had temporarily distracted him.

"Elysia, what do you want? What is the purpose of all this? Why did you poison me?"

"Because you are annoyingly foolish. You don't understand anything. Your brain needs a good wash! Of course, I will hold your life in exchange for the secrets of your cursed master's treasures!"

"Silence and do not curse my late master, or I won't speak to you anymore!"

The naive boy's unexpected remark shocked Elysia, and her eyes widened. Her first assumption was that it was because of his devotion to his late mentor.

"You gave the Eversong Blade to those stinking monks from the Lunaria Sect. But that sword means nothing to me. It can't compare to my own sword!" Elysia lunged for it, and... She was now wielding a slender, crimson blade made of malleable steel that she had previously worn as a belt, and she said, "Swish..." She aimed the tip of the blade at Kellan's chest.

"I don't need the Eversong Blade! I need the secret scrolls and mystical items that your master left. You came down from Dragonspire Peak with only the sword, meaning the heirlooms are still up there. Please transport me to the location, provide me with all the necessary information, and reveal the secrets to me. I can save your life. Besides, we might become good friends if you're not too foolish!"

Still, Kellan wasn't a complete dimwit, even though it appeared that way at times. She had the antidote, ensuring she wouldn't harm him despite the poisoning. She intended to use the poison to get her hands on her master's valuables.

What a heartless young woman! How could a girl with her beauty and charm be so cold-hearted? In his bewilderment, Kellan couldn't help but wonder how far Elysia would go in her brutality and what she had in store for him.

"The treasures you speak of are not mine, and I do not know their secrets."

"Are you still brave enough to ignore and refuse my request? As his sole disciple and the bearer of the Eversong Blade, you may still need to fully inherit the treasures. Remember, your life is within my control. Even if you attempt to revolt, you won't be able to match my sword. Even if you employ your extraordinary powers to escape, within a day and a night, you will suffer internal damage, and your life will be forfeit. Don't act recklessly, Kellan. It's wiser for you to adhere to my demands and savor life alongside me."

"Elysia, you are the one displaying foolishness and disappointment." Why do you follow such dark desires to take what belongs to others? Realize that your desires are leading you into a chasm of wickedness if you follow my

advice. Give up your evil intentions, as I genuinely don't know the location of my master's treasures. I could not find them, and I am not lying."

Out of her wrath and anguish, Elysia said, "Then let me see you die with your insides in shreds!"

Out of nowhere, a thunderous voice said, "You must not kill him so easily, Poison Goddess!" A silhouette materialized.

"Indeed, he must not die before bequeathing the sword sage's legacy to me!" A second figure materialized.

Two old figures emerged from the shadows, both known to Kellan. They were among the nine formidable beings who had assaulted Stormblade, his master, five years earlier. The first was an ancient woman named Isolde Darkthorn, known as Nine-Tailed Whip. She had once enchanted Stormblade with her beauty and skills. Still, their romance had ended in heartbreak for her when Stormblade abandoned her. The second was Roland Ironblade, a heroic fighter with a magical saber who harbored a personal vendetta against Stormblade for a past affair with his wife.

Elysia turned to face the two elders, a mocking grin curling on her lips as she brandished her red blade across her chest, her left hand resting nonchalantly on her hip.

"Hmph, Isolde Darkthorn and Roland Ironblade, is it? The stinking monks of the Lunaria Sect drove you away, and now you dare to present yourselves before me, with what purpose?"

Kellan watched with growing bewilderment. With each passing moment, his understanding of Elysia faded further. This striking young woman had displayed a blend of savagery, treachery, and an enchanting, challenging charm. Yet she dealt with these two influential figures as though they were ordinary folk! How did she fit into the world of combat skills? She remained unshaken by the presence of these respected elders, and the fact that they did not treat her as a mere girl was even more perplexing.

"Red-Sword Poison Goddess, give him the antidote quickly," Ironblade Roland urged. "We must not kill this young man."

"Indeed, Poison Goddess. The Lunaria Sect already has the Eversong Blade. If you kill this young man, it would be a waste. Have pity on him; he has done nothing wrong," added Isolde Darkthorn.

Elysia bared her teeth and laughed aloud in a sudden, aggressive burst. Kellan was increasingly taken aback. Elysia Nightshade was the Red-Sword Poison Goddess! She must hold a prominent position in the shadowy realm of combat skills! It was no wonder Darius Stormseer referred to her as a figure from the underworld, a denizen

of the evil realm. How could this petite girl be on equal footing with Roland Ironblade and Isolde Darkthorn?

"Heh-heh, Isolde Darkthorn. You are genuinely amusing. You, known as a righteous warrior, harbor intentions no less vile than mine. You feign pity and wish to save this young man, but what you truly seek are the Sword Sage's treasures. Unlike you, I am honest about my desires."

"Hmph, Poison Goddess. Out of respect for your master, I have shown you courtesy. Refrain from speaking so recklessly! Indeed, I desire the Sword Sage's treasures, but they are meant to pay for Stormblade's sins against me. This is unlike you, who seek to rob and pressure his disciple."

"Heh-heh-heh, old woman without shame! You were the one who fell for Stormblade; you chased after him, yearning for his embrace and affection! Stormblade did not wish to marry you; why do you call this a sin? Heh-heh-heh, you are truly tiresome!"

"Poison Goddess, your insults will be met with the ultimate death penalty!" Isolde Darkthorn brandished her nine-tailed whip in fury, causing a deafening crack. "Tar-tar-tar!" she shouted.

Elysia remarked sarcastically, "Hmph, your whip is only good for scaring dogs and children!" With a cackling motion of her left hand, she sent lightning-fast red sparks toward the elderly woman. She was wielding highly lethal

weaponry—red poison needles. Elysia had thrown twenty-one needles in a single toss, each loaded with enough poison to cause death. The assault was terrifying, with twenty-one needles aimed at vital areas.

The enraged Isolde Darkthorn screamed, "You wicked woman!" as she frantically spun her whip in defense. She could only evade the lethal needles by swiftly twirling her whip.

As Elysia sprang forward, her blade transformed into a whirling red light, and she yelled, "Old woman, die!" She followed up her needle attack with a ferocious assault. Her needle-throwing skills were exceptional, and she was also quite cunning. The needle attack aimed to confuse Isolde, as she knew she could not quickly defeat her with just needles. Elysia moved swiftly and fiercely, her sword clashing against Isolde's whip, which whirled to ward off the needles. Kellan was taken aback and startled by her movements. She seemed just as skilled with a blade as the nine formidable men who had once assaulted his master.

"Tar-tar-tar... wuuuuutttttt... clang-clang!"

Like nine serpents in motion, Isolde's whiptails evaded some of Elysia's blows, quickly swinging back to land hooks and strikes! Despite Elysia's excellent swordsmanship, overcoming the nine-tailed whip was no easy task. The old woman's talent and the full power of the whip caused a shift in expression on Elysia's face. The two fighters whirled around in a whirlwind of red and

black, their forms merging. Elysia leaped backward to evade six hooks when they suddenly separated after a few moments. She landed with her sword held defensively, her look becoming more solemn as she realized she was up against an adversary she could not underestimate. With three tails severed by Elysia's lethal blade, Isolde's whip had been reduced to six, and she muttered inconsolably.

Seeing an opportunity, Roland Ironblade approached Kellan at that very moment. "Young man, you are obligated to accompany me as an agent of your superior!" The elderly man brandished his sword and extended his left hand to seize Kellan's shoulder. A crimson flash from Elysia's blade forced the elderly man to withdraw his hand, sparing it from being severed before Kellan had a chance to respond.

"Old man, don't touch him!"

Roland Ironblade sighed heavily. "Young lady, concerning your master, we elders will relent. Let us discuss this peacefully. The treasures left by the Sword Sage are numerous, and if we divide them among the three of us, there will be plenty for each. I believe Isolde Darkthorn would agree."

Nodding grudgingly, Isolde acknowledged Elysia's impressive abilities and thought of her famous master. "As long as the young man respects his elders, I do not desire all the treasures for myself."

With Kellan's hand in her right and concealed weapon in her left, Elysia advanced toward him. "You all seek simplicity at my expense. Guess who was the first to apprehend the Sword Sage's follower? I was! I allowed myself to be captured while you evaded the Lunaria Sect monks. Now that we've apprehended him, you all want a share! How despicable!" Elysia abruptly tossed something before the two elders. Black smoke billowed up after a loud explosion. Knowing the peril posed by the black smoke, the two wise men leaped back instantly. Their instincts were correct; inhaling the black smoke was a sure way to meet a tragic end. Kellan and Elysia were no longer visible as they vanished into the swirling cloud.

"How dare she! Let's pursue them!" Isolde Darkthorn yelled, her whip cracking. "Tar-tar-tar!" The two experienced warriors sprinted after Elysia but found themselves in the wrong direction. They pursued westward while Elysia, carrying Kellan, proceeded south.

CHAPTER 5

LYDIA FROSTWHISPER



In the twilight of the dense forest, Elysia cast Kellan onto a soft bed of grass, the shadows deepening around them as dusk gave way to night. The flickering light of a newly kindled fire danced upon their faces, warding off the chill and the swarm of evening insects.

"Kellan, we shall rest here for the night," Elysia declared, her voice a melody amid the rustling leaves.

Seated beside the campfire, her gaze fell upon Kellan, who leaned wearily against a sturdy tree trunk. "Kellan, your time is nearing the end; only this night remains. If I do not bestow the antidote upon you by dawn, death shall claim you."

Kellan sighed, a wistful smile playing on his lips despite the gravity of his plight. "If death is my fate, so be it. At least then, I shall no longer be a pawn in this deadly game."

"Ah, but you are yet young, merely seventeen, with life's splendor still to be savored. Why seek to embrace death so readily?"

"Should I fear, knowing you have poisoned me? I hold no desire to die, but neither do I tremble before it."

"Aren't you afraid? Aren't you afraid of dying?" she queried, her curiosity piqued by his calm demeanor.

He met her gaze with steadfast resolve. "Why should I fear what is unknown? Do you fear death, Elysia?"

The girl nodded, her eyes reflecting the flickering flames, filled with admiration and curiosity. "It is a strange thing to fear, indeed. What is death but an enigma? None who have ventured beyond return to tell the tale. Who can say what awaits us after death? If we know not, why dread it? I do not fear death, for it is as unknown as the dawn of life once was."

Elysia laughed, her teeth gleaming like ivory in the firelight. "You are not only stubborn and foolish but also strange!"

"And you are a mystery unto yourself. You allowed yourself to be captured at the Lunaria Sanctuary, feigning helplessness, yet you faced Isolde Darkthorn with unmatched skill."

"If those foul monks knew my true identity, they would not have released me so readily, even at your behest," Elysia chuckled.

"Who are you, truly? They call you the Red-Sword Poison Goddess. A title is both beautiful and fearsome. Why does such a lovely young woman wield such deadly power? It is a conundrum."

Elysia's laughter rang out again, and she gently grasped his arm. "You think me beautiful? Truly?"

"I would be deceiving myself if I said otherwise. You are indeed beautiful, Elysia."

Her delight was evident, and she smiled warmly. "Oh, if you continue to speak so sweetly, I may find it hard to kill you, Kellan. You are handsome, and many a maiden will lose her heart to you."

Kellan's heart raced, unfamiliar with the close proximity of such a captivating young woman. He quickly steered the conversation away from his fluttering emotions. "Isolde Darkthorn and Roland Ironblade are elders of great renown, yet they seem wary of you, often mentioning your master. Who is your master that they fear her so?"

"My master is the most skilled being under the heavens! Only Stormblade the Sage could match her prowess, but now that he has departed, she reigns supreme. She leads

the Four Dark Reavers of the South and is known as the Sea Witch. But... ah, Kellan, let us journey to the hidden place where your master's scrolls lie. We shall study them together and become the world's most formidable duo. Not even my master could stand against us. Come, my love." Elysia entwined her arms around Kellan's neck, her intoxicating scent causing his heart to pound.

"And so, Kellan? Shall I grant you the antidote? Then, we can delight in the night and, come the morn, ascend Dragonspire Peak to claim all your master's treasures."

Kellan, eyes closed to still his emotions, shook his head. "I do not know where it lies."

Elysia's embrace loosened, her tenderness evaporating. With a snort, she moved away, sitting by the fire. Kellan watched her back, her fingers combing through the grass with irritation. He pondered how such a beautiful, delicate girl could harbor such a cruel and ambitious heart. Her earlier caresses and seductive words left his legs trembling. What would his master do in this situation? He was not afraid of the poison; during his training with Stormblade the Sage, his master had made him immune to many toxins.

"The hands of an opponent can be met with hands, my disciple," Stormblade had said, "but a cunning foe may use poison. By ingesting small doses of various poisons daily, your body will learn to resist them."

When Kellan drank the poisoned water, he recognized the toxin but trusted in his body's resistance. He gathered the poison in his stomach and secretly expelled it during their journey, leaving his body free of the deadly substance.

Kellan glanced at Elysia again. She sat slightly turned, her profile illuminated by the firelight, her dark hair partially veiling her face. She was genuinely mesmerizing. When she sensed his gaze and turned suddenly, Kellan quickly closed his eyes. He was tired and sleepy, so he surrendered to sleep, ignoring her.

"Kellan...!"

The young man opened his eyes to see Elysia kneeling before him. "Are you just going to sleep?"

"What else should I do? Why disturb my rest?"

Elysia was more frustrated than before. This young man, facing death from her poison, remained so calm. Even the greatest warriors would be anxious and desperate to save their lives. Yet this youth slept peacefully. Beyond frustration and curiosity, she felt an increasing attraction to him. How could she convince him?

"Kellan, don't you feel any pain?" He shook his head.

"Your stomach does not hurt? The poison should be taking effect."

Kellan merely shook his head again.

"You are truly strange. Since tonight is your last night, let me reward you with some fragrant wine I brought. Rarely do I offer this only to those I truly favor."

"Hmmm, you favor me?"

Elysia cast a seductive glance, her smile now incredibly sweet. "Ah, how foolish you are, Kellan. I favor you; I love you; can you not see? I do not wish to see you die come the dawn."

"You wish to force me to reveal my master's treasures, not that you do not wish to see me die."

"That is true, but I also love you. You are a brave, extraordinary young man. Come, let me offer you this fragrant wine." Elysia produced a small wine flask from her robe and opened it. The aroma of countless fragrant flowers filled the air. Thirsty and drawn by the scent, Kellan raised the flask to his lips.

"Is this poison or the antidote?" Kellan inquired before drinking, his gaze steady and unwavering.

Elysia's admiration for him deepened. In all the realms, such a youth, so calm and composed in peril, was a rarity. Knowing her title as the Poison Goddess, his demeanor was remarkable.

"What if it's poison?" she teased, a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Poison or antidote, as long as it tastes good. I've already been poisoned; a little more won't make a difference," Kellan replied, then drank the wine. His tongue immediately discerned a different type of poison, a subtle one—not a liquid but an aromatic vapor. He did not recognize the poison but summoned his inner Force to gather the vapor in his chest. Once the flask was empty, he returned it to Elysia, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

Elysia watched him with wide eyes, then smiled as he leaned against the tree and closed his eyes, feigning sleep. She trusted the effectiveness of the poison in the wine, confident in its potency. The wine, mixed with a powerful stimulant poison crafted by her master, was not meant to kill but to incite intense desire. It was a concoction of various insects and flowers, a potent mixture used in the southern isles to induce horse mating. Elysia had given Kellan a highly concentrated dose, potent enough to arouse twenty stallions!

Kellan, eyes closed, was not sleeping. He listened to Elysia's restless movements but paid her no mind, focusing on controlling the intoxicating vapor. He knew the poison was dangerous, though its exact nature eluded him. His body grew hot, but he held the poison in check, waiting for the right moment to expel it without Elysia noticing, curious about her next move.

What transpired next was beyond his wildest imaginings. Past midnight, feeling drowsy, Kellan suddenly heard a sweet, gentle whisper close to his ear.

"Kellan... oh, Kellan..."

He opened his eyes. The campfire still burned, casting a red glow over Elysia, who was now embracing and caressing him, her bare arms winding around his neck like serpents, her uncovered chest pressed against his. She was naked, her body gleaming in the firelight. Kellan's eyes widened, his mouth gaping in shock as Elysia kissed him deeply. Startled, Kellan let out an "ahhh!" and the vapor he had gathered in his chest surged out, entering Elysia's open mouth and directly into her chest.

"Aiiihhhh...!" Elysia screamed, jerking back. She coughed, clutching her throat, her body writhing like a snake in a fire. Kellan watched with wide eyes, half pitying and half amused that the poison had inadvertently poisoned Elysia herself. He was also half in awe, witnessing how her beautiful body writhed. He had to admit that, in his life, he had never seen such a gorgeous body as Elysia's. Not even in his dreams. Now he understood why the late Stormblade the Sage, his teacher, was said to be a womanizer and charmer. The beauty of a woman like Elysia could indeed ensnare any man's heart.

"Beautiful natural scenery indeed asks us to look and admire it. Beautiful, fragrant flowers indeed ask us to look and smell them. Beautiful women indeed ask us to

love them with deep affection. My student, you will be happy without getting caught up in deep love. Once trapped, you will marry; once you marry, it means you give your hands and feet to be tied forever with obligations! Therefore, avoid deep love, even though you have relationships with many women. If you like it, don't refuse a woman's love; just don't give your heart; don't give your love; just give your body." Thus, he had heard the advice of his teacher, who was famous as a woman charmer! At first, such advice just passed through his heart because it never crossed his mind that he would face such things; it never occurred to him that he would meet women, causing love issues. But now, just after descending from Dragonspire Peak, he had encountered what his teacher had said!

Now, Elysia Nightshade was no longer writhing like a worm in heat. The girl was still gasping and holding her neck, then lifted her face to look at Kellan. Her disheveled hair partially covered her face. Her face was very red, and her lips and the inside of her slightly open mouth were even redder. Her eyes looked passionate, and her nose flared as if the nostrils were too narrow for breathing.

"Kellan. Ah-hah. Kellan.." Elysia, who had been kneeling, now crawled forward to Kellan, then lunged at the young man, embracing and kissing him while whispering meaningless words, her hands fumbling with the buttons of Kellan's clothes.

Kellan found it amusing, and he let Elysia do whatever she wanted without realizing it. He remembered his teacher, his teacher's advice, and the adventurous spirit in the heart of every human being, making him want to experience all kinds of things. Kellan did not reject any of Elysia's desires and let himself become the student who served all of Elysia's wishes and who was being consumed by her own poison-induced lust.

Elysia Nightshade had no idea that it would turn out like this. Not only did she become a victim of her own poison, but without her or Kellan knowing, during their encounter, a miraculous absorbing power arose in Kellan's body so that after that night, Elysia lay limp as if she had lost all her strength, half fainting on the grass. Meanwhile, Kellan, who had straightened his clothes, sat comfortably under a tree and stoked the campfire. His face appeared flushed and fresh, and his gaze differed from yesterday as it now looked "mature." Kellan had changed from a boy to a man starting in the middle of last night. It seemed genuine, as predicted by High Sage Thorne, the leader of the Lunaria Sanctuary, that this boy would be greater than Stormblade the Sage!

"Kellan.....!" The voice sounded weak but full of affection and love, coming from Elysia, who was writhing like a satisfied cat. Then she shivered, feeling the cold morning air, and seemingly only then realizing that she was naked. Lazily, Elysia grabbed her clothes and put them on as best she could. Then, she suddenly leaped, her clothes

disheveled and hair still loose, jumping near Kellan, who was still comfortably stoking the campfire.

"Kellan! You... you... ah, quick, swallow the antidote pill! Ah, it's already morning. Too late. Oh no, Kellan, my dear!" Elysia cried, hugging Kellan's neck.

"What's wrong with you?" Kellan asked indifferently.

"What's wrong? Are you still so calm? The poison... you're on the brink of death, and the antidote is useless now. You will die, Kellan!"

The young man turned and saw that the face wasn't as beautiful as last night! He was not attracted to Elysia's beauty and even felt annoyed. Even though the face was the same, he understood his teacher's explanation about the difference between true love and lustful love. True love does not know beauty or ugliness; it does not know boredom because love is deep, and there is a connection and vibration between the souls and spirits of both parties. On the other hand, lustful love is the only love that arises due to lust, due to superficial beauty, only skin-deep, so that once satisfied, it becomes boring.

"I will not die."

"What? And the poison...? That deadly poison!"

"I have expelled it back. I will not die from your poison, Elysia."

The girl's eyes widened, displeased with Kellan's cold demeanor, as if the love they shared just half a night ago had vanished into thin air. She tied her hair, looking at him with awe and frustration. This young man was truly remarkable! Poisoned yet unscathed, and from their encounter the previous night, she had to admit she had never met anyone like Kellan. She approached him swiftly, embracing his shoulder.

"Thank goodness if that's the case, my love. Kellan, we have become husband and wife, albeit unofficially! You are truly fit to be Stormblade the Sage's disciple. Ah, my love, we love each other, live together, and die together, right? Let's go find your sage master's relics."

"No! You go, Elysia. I have had enough of yielding and obeying your commands. I do not regret it, for I did like you. But do not expect to persuade or force me to find my master's relics, for I do not know their location, nor do I wish to. Go!"

"You...! wretch!" Elysia leaped, releasing her embrace, and landed heavily on the ground. "Heeee...?" she exclaimed in astonishment and anxiety. Why did she seem to lose her Force? Jumping like that, she was knocked down! However, her anger quickly overshadowed this strange sensation, and she stood up, cursing.

"You heartless man! You seducer! After enjoying my body, you cast me away so callously."

"Remember, it was not I who seduced, but you. Go away!"

"Scoundrel...!" Elysia lunged forward, aiming a punch at Kellan's back.

"Bukkk! Aiihhh...!" Kellan remained seated comfortably, squatting before the campfire. At the same moment, Elysia's body was thrown backward. She rubbed her right hand, which she had used to punch him, her eyes wide with astonishment. She felt a sudden weakness in her hand while Kellan's back seemed shielded by a powerful aura.

"I... what happened?" Elysia cried out in confusion and terror. "Kellan, what have you done to me?"

Kellan stood and turned to face her. "Elysia, you know I have done nothing. Since yesterday, you have constantly troubled me."

"My Force is empty and dry; my strength is feeble."

Kellan neither understood nor cared about the cause of her condition. Unbeknownst to him, during their time in the Lunaria Mountain Range, he had unknowingly absorbed the energy of Darius Stormseer and the other monks, along with a significant portion of Elysia's Force. Whenever he faced a robust inner energy attack, his absorbing power activated automatically, beyond his control. Since Elysia's Force was weaker than the monks'

energies, Kellan felt little difference, unlike in the Lunaria Mountain Range. Now, he simply felt refreshed and healthy, not tired at all.

Meanwhile, Elysia Nightshade suppressed her anxiety. She attributed her weakened state to the influence of the poison, which had somehow transferred into her chest when she kissed Kellan the previous night. Calming herself, she decided not to use her Force but instead drew her red sword, pointing it at Kellan menacingly.

"Kellan, even if the poison cannot kill you, my sword can still send your soul to the underworld if you refuse my request!"

Kellan looked at the sword's tip, pointing at his chest, and sighed deeply. "What a pity, Elysia. You are a beautiful and highly skilled girl, but all that is meaningless if your heart is tainted. Your Force is already weak; how could your sword harm me if I use my strength? But I will not use my strength and let you test me, for I have yet to use the swordsmanship I learned from my master since descending the mountain."

Elysia Nightshade made a motion to stab her sword. Still, Kellan's fingers, coated with great magical energy, blocked and flicked it away, nearly causing the red sword to fall from her hand. Kellan then bent down, picked up a wooden branch from the campfire remnants, and took a stance, ready to demonstrate the Eversong Blade

swordsmanship. Although the stance was perfect for the Eversong Blade, he wielded only a branch.

"Now, let us practice swordsmanship," he declared, extending the branch toward the sky before lowering it in a graceful arc, circling his neck, and pointing it toward the ground. This was the opening move of the Eversong Blade swordsmanship, with his feet firmly planted, left and right. His left hand mirrored the sword's movement, forming a circle in front of his chest, stopping in front of his heart in a slanted position, like someone saluting with one hand.

Elysia Nightshade recognized his great absorbing power, which could draw the opponent's energy. She had witnessed how Kellan defeated Darius Stormseer and several monks from the Lunaria Sanctuary. Yet, she also noticed Kellan's movements, which were still stiff in combat skills. She believed she would surely prevail in a sword duel, especially since the young man wielded only a branch. She had used poison, seduction, and even surrendered her body, but none had succeeded in subduing Kellan's heart. Her only remaining option was to kill him.

With a fierce battle cry, Elysia charged forward, launching a deadly attack. Her swordsmanship was already highly advanced, mainly as she was the favored disciple of the Sea Witch, the foremost among the Four Dark Reavers. Though now diminished due to her weakened Force, her movements were swift and deadly.

Kellan acted cautiously, having seen her skill in the battle against Isolde Darkthorn. He moved his branch swiftly, its tip vibrating with the Eversong Blade swordsmanship techniques.

"Ayaaaa...!" Elysia was taken aback when her sword met the vibrating branch. The vibration traveled up her arm, causing it to tingle. She nearly dropped her sword but quickly rotated her wrist and stepped back.

Kellan did not pursue or press his advantage; he remained ready to face her next attack. His demeanor was calm, and confidence welled within him. Though his combat skills were less refined, the Eversong Blade swordsmanship was his master's creation. In terms of Force, he was far superior. As long as he could avoid being cut by the sword, he would not lose.

"You, you despicable man!" Elysia screamed in fury, launching another flurry of thrusts and slashes. Her swordsmanship was extraordinary and unpredictable, making Kellan's vision spin. The red sword light spiraled, forming wide circles like a dragon about to entangle him. Kellan channeled his energy into the branch, spinning it to protect himself. The energy was so powerful that her sword was always repelled and deflected despite its speed and unpredictability. If not blocked by the branch, the tremendous Force would bounce it back. Yet Kellan had yet to counterattack, hindered by his lack of training and the absence of the Eversong Blade. If he were well-

practiced and wielded the sacred sword, Elysia, no matter how skilled, would not have withstood him for more than a few moves.

Elysia Nightshade's anger grew more intense with each passing moment. A high-pitched shriek escaped her lips as she swung her sword ever faster in desperation. Yet, the swifter her movements and the greater the Force she exerted, the more fatigued she became. Each strike against Kellan's branch was met with a rebound, as though the branch sought to retaliate against her. This mounting frustration fueled her fury. With a loud cry, she pulled out a red handkerchief, waving it in tandem with her sword attacks, its fragrance wafting toward Kellan.

Recognizing the peril of the perfumed red handkerchief, Kellan recalled the poisoned aura mingled with the wine. Though he could resist such toxins in drink, thanks to years of daily exposure to the poison, he was wary of poisons in smoke or vapor form. As the handkerchief fluttered near, Kellan swiftly sidestepped, using his branch to tear it apart. Yet, he was unaware that this attack was but a feint. Elysia had hidden a ball-like object behind the handkerchief, which she now hurled. The ball exploded, enveloping Kellan in a cloud of black smoke. Shocked, Kellan leaped back, but it was too late; he had inhaled the foul vapor, causing his head to spin and his vision to blur. Staggering, he struggled to block Elysia's sword thrust, which struck his side. Channeling his energy, he deflected the blow, sending the red sword flying from Elysia's grasp. Yet, in the same moment, a kick from Elysia landed

squarely on his right knee, and Kellan collapsed, his vision darkening as he gasped for breath, drawing more of the toxic smoke into his lungs.

Elysia Nightshade exulted, snatching up her red sword and slashing it toward Kellan's vulnerable neck. "Swish... clang!" Her triumphant cry turned into a stifled scream as her descending sword was abruptly halted midair, mere centimeters from Kellan's neck. It flew from her hand, seized by a swirling white light that swept in like lightning.

"Elysia, what are you doing?" A gentle reprimand echoed through the clearing. Standing there was a girl, no older than eighteen, clad in white silk with blue borders, wielding a long white silk belt that had just disarmed Elysia.

"Sister...! You...?" Elysia stammered, her voice tinged with surprise and fear. Despite her seniority in training, Elysia was visibly intimidated by this junior.

"Here, I return your sword, sis," said the girl in white, flicking her wrist to send the red sword back to Elysia, who hastily caught and sheathed it. With a fluid motion, the white-clad girl directed her belt toward Kellan, wrapping it around his still-dizzy form and pulling him close to her. Elysia watched angrily as her junior produced a black silk ribbon to bind Kellan's wrists. After securing his hands, the girl wrapped the belt around her waist again.

"Sis, why did you capture him? He belongs to me! I caught him, and I have the right to him. He is my lover!" Elysia protested angrily, though she dared not speak too harshly.

"Hmph, I saw you were about to kill him," the white-clad girl replied gently.

"Because he belongs to me, I can do as I wish. I wanted to kill him because he refused to find Stormblade the Sage's relics for me."

"I know all that, Sis. But I disapprove of your methods. Mother herself told me to follow you and observe your actions. And I must say, what I witnessed last night and now is most disappointing. You are driven by lust, both for desire and for anger. What you seek remains unfound, so why kill him? Mother instructed me to capture him and bring him to her."

"Aaahhhh....!" Elysia groaned in frustration. "Our teacher never cared for Stormblade the Sage's relics and allowed me to seek them independently."

"Enough, Elysia. We will see mother, and you can speak to her directly."

"But teacher..."

"Enough!" the white-clad girl snapped, silencing her elder sister. She puckered her lips and let out a high-pitched whistle. Moments later, the sound of a carriage approached, pulled by four large horses and driven by a young woman with three middle-aged, fierce-looking women in tow. All four were dressed in yellow, with sword hilts visible on their backs.

"Put him in the carriage; I will watch over him with Elysia," the white-clad girl commanded the three middle-aged women. Without a word, they lifted Kellan and placed him in the carriage, seating him on a bench facing the rear. Kellan closed his eyes, gathering his energy to expel the toxic fumes from his body.

"You four report to mother that the person she wanted has been captured. Let Elysia take over as the driver, and I will guard this man. Go!" The four women nodded, and the young driver mounted one of the horses, joining the others as they galloped ahead. Elysia, sighing deeply in disappointment, took the driver's seat. Annoyed, she lashed the horses, making them gallop faster. The carriage wheels roared over the rocky road, and the jolts quickly brought Kellan back to full consciousness.

Though dizzy, Kellan had been aware of the events unfolding. He understood that his life had been saved by the white-clad girl who now sat before him, having tied him up. Without her intervention, Elysia's sword would have ended his life. He wondered why this junior seemed more skilled and respected than her elder sister. His vision

gradually cleared, and he observed the young woman sitting calmly before him. Her eyes were captivating—like stars in the night sky, warm as the morning sun, clear as a tranquil lake, yet possessing a chilling coldness. They seemed to see through everything, holding an alluring and intimidating gaze.

As his eyes traveled over her face, Kellan became even more entranced. She was younger than Elysia, perhaps no older than he was, with a face of extraordinary beauty. Her skin was smooth and reddish-white, her hair black and silky, framing her face and partially covering her ears adorned with red-gemmed earrings. Her eyebrows were delicate and naturally arched, her long eyelashes enhancing her eyes' allure. Her small, pointed nose and smooth, reddish cheeks added to her charm.

When Kellan's gaze lowered further, it was as if ensnared by her lips, caught in their delicate allure. Which held more beauty, her eyes or lips, was an enigma. Her lips were shaped like a drawn bow, red and moist, evoking in Kellan a thirst akin to that for ripe, forbidden fruit.

Emboldened, his eyes traveled downward, and what he beheld truly ensnared his soul. This maiden possessed an ethereal grace, a serene majesty, and her form—clad in white silk—defied mere words. With her own allure, Elysia Nightshade seemed but a dream compared to the reality of this vision in white.

"You lecher, have you not had your fill of gazing and appraising?" Her voice, though gentle and melodious, cut like a rusty knife to his heart. Kellan's cheeks burned redder than if they had been struck.

"Uh, oh, I..." He faltered, attempting to evade her gentle yet piercing gaze.

"I know you are a lecher, like your master, but I am no cheap woman like her." With a sharp chin, she gestured towards Elysia, driving the carriage. Kellan sighed deeply, unconsciously raising his bound hands to rub his nose, twice branded a lecher. Only then did he notice the solid black silk binding his wrists, gauging its strength.

"Do not attempt to break the bonds," she said as if reading his thoughts. "You will fail, and if you cause trouble, I shall drag you behind the carriage."

Kellan thought this beauty was fiercer than Elysia. He looked at her again, seeing her serene face, her eyes distant, calm like still water, regarding him as a mere fly, if not less. Determined, he spoke again, unable to ignore the debt of gratitude he owed her for saving his life.

"Miss..." But the girl remained unmoved, showing no sign of hearing him. Kellan shuddered, perceiving her as a statue of smooth, cold marble. Yet, those lips, red and moist, and her small, even teeth betrayed a youth's warmth. But now, she sat with an extraordinary coldness, as icy as northern snow.

"Miss.....!" He called louder, yet she remained silent, not even a glance.

"Bang... bang... thud...!" The carriage hit a rocky path, its wheels striking large stones and violently jolting it. Kellan struggled to maintain his balance, startled by the tumult. Yet, the girl in white remained unmoved, as still as a lifeless figure.

Kellan wondered if she could be dead, her open eyes unmoving, her breath seemingly halted. He brought his bound hands closer to her small, pointed nose to check for breath. Feeling nothing, he panicked, lowering his hands to touch her pulse.

"Plakkk!" His hands were slapped away as the girl spoke. "What do you want? Do you wish to be dragged behind the carriage?"

Startled, Kellan jumped back. "Wow...! You frightened me, Miss. I thought you were... you were dead..."

"Is the disciple of Stormblade the Sage so foolish as not to recognize someone practicing Breath Control and Blood Regulation?"

"Ohhh.....!" Kellan stammered, astonished. He had heard of these techniques from his master, methods to control blood circulation and Force practiced only by high-level practitioners. And this young girl was performing them in

a jostling carriage! His astonished sounds conveyed admiration, pleasing the girl, for she, too, appreciated praise.

"What do you want, calling out so persistently?"

"Miss, I, Kellan, am not ungrateful. I owe you my life."

"I have not lent out lives!"

"You saved me from Elysia."

"Hmmm, your relationship with my sister is so close that you call her by name?"

Kellan's face turned bright red. Though quiet, her words pierced straight to the heart.

"I meant... Miss Elysia Nightshade, you saved me, and I am deeply grateful. But why did you capture me after saving my unworthy life?"

"Hey, be careful, Sister! He's perfect at sweet-talking, even better than his teacher. Watch out, or you might fall for his honeyed words," Elysia mocked from the front.

The girl in white snorted. "Hmph! Since when have I been swayed by sweet talk? I am not so easily ensnared as you, Elysia!"

"Heh-heh-heh, a kid, huh? Just wait, Sister, if you're in his embrace later—"

"Elysia, stop!" The girl snapped, her long black eyebrows arching beautifully.

Elysia spoke no more, her laughter filling the air as she whipped the four horses into a swifter pace. Kellan found himself jolted again, yet he swiftly focused his Force, sitting as motionless as the maiden before him. Her glances, though silent, conveyed an understanding of the deep Force the young man wielded.

"Miss, do not heed Elysia's words. Uh, her. I am not attempting to seduce you but to inquire why, after saving my life, you have now bound me."

"My mother commanded it; I am but the executor," she replied simply. "And do not believe I saved you. Were it not for my mother's order, even if my senior sister desired to slay a thousand like you, I would not care."

Harsh were her words, Kellan mused. Yet, how could he harbor anger towards such a girl? "Your mother? Who is she, Miss?"

"Sea Witch."

"Ohhh...!" Kellan had assumed that this girl, Elysia's junior, would be the second disciple of the Sea Witch. But it appeared she was not merely a disciple but her

daughter! No wonder, even though Elysia called her junior sister, she possessed higher skills and was respected by her senior sister.

"You have heard of my mother?"

"Yes, Miss, your mother is the first master of the Four Dark Reavers, is she not?"

"Hmph, I am certain you have only heard this from Elysia."

"I have encountered three of the Four Dark Reavers, all defeated by my master."

"Hmph, arrogant! If you meet my mother, your master would perish a hundred times over."

"Miss, may I know your name?"

Her beautiful eyebrows arched, her eyes flared with fire, and her fresh lips snapped, "You...! Besides being a lecher, you are also exceedingly talkative!"

"Hee-hee-hee, Sister. Was I wrong? He is skilled in sweet-talking," Elysia mocked.

"Elysia, silence!" the girl in white snapped, drawing her long white belt. Without further words, she bound Kellan's legs with the belt and tossed his body to the back of the carriage.

"Onward, Elysia!"

"Hee-hee-hee, it seems you are not immune to his charms, Sister. Be careful... you have no experience at all."

"Quiet, Elysia!" snapped the girl, jerking the reins as the carriage sped up again. Kellan found himself lying on his back, dragged along the rocky ground. His hands were bound, his legs tied with the belt, and the other end secured to the carriage's pole. The belt's length kept Kellan four meters behind the carriage. He quickly focused his Force to shield his back from the dragging. While his Force protected his skin from being wholly scraped off, it could not save his clothes, which soon tore to shreds.

Cursing inwardly, Kellan thought, "Wow, devilish girl! Truly like a demon. These two girls, despite their differences, share a cruelty. Elysia is driven by lust, while her junior is quiet and pious, yet both are equally cruel. In fact, the girl in white might be even more so."

Now lying on his back and dragged behind the carriage, Kellan observed the surroundings in detail. They traveled a desolate mountain path, far from any villages. He wondered if the two demon girls would still drag him through villages and towns, making him a spectacle. Would the local authorities intervene if they saw this? Yet, what authority could stand against these two demon girls?

Suddenly, Kellan spotted two men on horseback approaching from the left, tall and around fifty years old. They blocked the carriage with their weapons, signaling for it to stop. Elysia halted the carriage, her brows furrowing with anger.

"What do you want? Are you blind bandits?" she demanded.

"Hmph, Red-Sword Poison Goddess! Pretending not to know us, the Twin Blades of Heaven and Earth? We are here on our master's orders to claim your captive, the disciple of Stormblade the Sage. Out of respect for our master, we hope you will concede."

This response came from the man on the left. Now facing him, Elysia recognized the twin disciples of the Eight-Armed Saint and laughed mockingly.

"Hee-hee-hee, do not just the Twin Blades of Heaven and Earth come asking for the captive. Even if your master comes, I will not yield. What do you want?"

"Hah, Red-Sword Poison Goddess! We still respect your master, so we speak politely. But you are arrogant. Come down, and let us see who is superior. The one who wins may take the captive of Stormblade the Sage!"

"Good, you are weary of life!" Elysia leaped from the carriage, drawing her red sword. But as she did so, Elysia

groaned, realizing her condition—her Force was mostly depleted after last night's dalliance with Kellan. Moreover, she now faced the twin disciples of the Eight-Armed Saint, one of the four masters of the Four Dark Reavers. Even in normal circumstances, she might only manage to overpower one. But now, with her Force over half depleted, battling even one of them seemed a losing endeavor.

Sitting up as the carriage ceased dragging him, Kellan saw Elysia heavily pressed by the two men wielding swords, who called themselves the Twin Blades of Heaven and Earth. Fortunately, Elysia's sword was extraordinary. Without it, she would have been defeated in mere moves. Elysia wielded her sword as swiftly as possible. Though unable to counterattack, she could still defend herself through deft swordplay and agile dodging. Kellan estimated that she would not last ten more moves.

"Sister, will you not aid me? What are you waiting for?" Elysia finally cried out in distress.

Kellan beheld the carriage curtain lift, revealing a swift white flash. Twice, it struck, the light spreading toward the two men pressing Elysia. They parried with their swords, but cries of pain soon followed as they leaped back, their upper arms wounded and bleeding. The cause of their agony was two white balls, smooth yet spiked, which had pierced their defenses and injured them. As the two men gazed upon the beautiful face emerging from the curtain, they were struck with awe and swiftly bowed.

"The Mourning Maiden is here! Forgive our impudence!" they cried before turning to flee.

"Come back, cowards! Let us fight until a thousand moves have passed! Your chests remain unpierced!" Elysia shouted after them.

"Elysia, move on!" commanded the girl in white, now known to Kellan as the Mourning Maiden, in a calm voice. The carriage surged forward, and Kellan was forced to lie down again, dragged along the rocky path. He shuddered at the girl's title—Mourning Maiden. Why "mourning"? Her attire, entirely white, and even her deadly weapons, the white balls, bespoke a somber elegance.

"Hurry, Elysia. Now that the disciples of the Eight-Armed Saint have appeared, others will follow."

"Fortunately, you are here, Sister; otherwise, it would be troublesome. I have lost most of my Force because of that demon boy."

"What? How and why?" the Mourning Maiden inquired, surprised.

"It's true, I was completely drained by him, the scoundrel! After last night, I don't know how it happened. He is incredible; I lost myself and was utterly drained."

"Elysia, stop! You know I abhor your lewd talk!"

The carriage sped up even more.

Kellan was baffled by their conversation. He didn't understand why Elysia had weakened. Drained by him? He recalled the Lunaria Mountain Range incident, where he had unknowingly absorbed Force from Darius Stormseer and other monks. But that was amidst a battle, unlike the previous night with Elysia. His thoughts turned to the Mourning Maiden, marveling at her prowess. With but two balls, she had driven away the skilled disciples of the Eight-Armed Saint.

As midday passed and the sun began its westward descent, they entered a forest. Tall mountains loomed in the distance, dotted with villages and red-tiled roofs. Dragged along the path, Kellan felt the torment of thirst and hunger. Dust from the carriage wheels covered him, turning his hair and eyebrows white and making breathing difficult. Suddenly, Elysia shouted, brushing aside two arrows with her left hand. Her skill impressed Kellan despite his dire situation.

"Keep going, Elysia. I'll handle them," said the Mourning Maiden, her voice cold. A white figure flashed, and the girl stood atop the carriage, wielding Elysia's long whip. With her left hand on her hip and her right gripping the handle, she stood tall, her eyes scanning the surroundings.

Three arrows shot from the left, aimed at Elysia and the Mourning Maiden. These black arrows flew with such speed and Force that they whistled through the air. Elysia ignored the arrow aimed at her, trusting her sister's guard. The whip cracked and snapped, and the arrows were entangled and redirected. Agonized screams followed as the arrows found their marks hidden behind trees.

Suddenly, a loud voice echoed through the forest, like a giant's roar: "By order of the Black Mountain Fiend, we demand the captive, the disciple of Stormblade the Sage, be left in this forest!"

"Elysia, stop for a moment," the Mourning Maiden said softly. The carriage halted, surrounded by dozens of men, at least thirty, hidden behind trees and bushes.

Standing on the carriage roof, whip in hand, the Mourning Maiden's voice rang out, melodious yet commanding, "The disciple of Stormblade the Sage is a captive of the Sea Witch! The Mourning Maiden and the Red-Sword Poison Goddess protect him; none may disturb the captive."

Kellan, now sitting on the ground, watched in amusement. He knew not who these fierce-looking men were. Still, he understood he was being fought over—by figures of the Realm, not righteous as when his master was surrounded on Dragonspire Peak, but dark and formidable. They all sought the Eversong Blade and his master's legacy, stirring Kellan's resolve to claim it himself.

The encircling men hesitated upon hearing the Mourning Maiden's name. Then, four tall men emerged, each holding a steel chain with a human skull attached. The sight reminded Kellan of the Black Mountain Fiend, a tall, black-skinned man with white eyes, elephant-like ears, and a hairy body, who wielded a chain with two skulls. But these four men each held a chain with a single skull.

"Behold, we are the Four Dragons of the Northern Mountains, sent by our master. Out of respect for your master, we greet the two young ladies and humbly request that you hand over the captive to the Sea Witch. We hope you will allow us to borrow him out of friendship."

"Hee-hee-hee! Easier said than done!" Elysia mocked, her laughter ringing out like a bell. "We went to great lengths to capture him, and now you wish to take him away. What kind of rule is that? You'd best return and inform the Black Mountain Fiend that if he desires the captive, he may try to seize him from my master himself!"

"Elysia, there is no need to waste words on them. Four Dragons of the Northern Mountains, be considerate and do not disturb us further. We will not surrender the captive!" The maiden in white declared firmly, her finger pointing resolutely at the four towering figures before her.

"If that is your choice, then we shall test your prowess to see if you are worthy of such a valuable prisoner!" one of the Dragons challenged.

"Excellent, then come forth!" Elysia's voice was filled with anticipation as she and the Red-Sword Poison Goddess leaped down. Though Elysia's Force had not fully recovered, she was not as weakened as before, having trained her breath to gather her scattered energy during the journey. Her formidable sword skills and her powerful Brightblade would serve her well. Meanwhile, the girl in white had already begun to swing her nine-tailed whip, its sharp cracks resounding through the air.

The towering figures met the two maidens, their chains swinging with sinister hissing sounds, indicating their immense strength. White toxic smoke billowed from the skulls attached to their chains! Though the battle was fierce, Kellan, sitting at the back of the carriage, could see clearly that Elysia faced only one opponent. At the same time, the other three were being handled by the Mourning Maiden. His admiration for the girl in white grew. The three skull chains that encircled her were no trivial matter, as the minions of the Black Mountain Fiend were genuinely skilled. Compared to the disciples of the Eight-Armed Saint, these four seemed even more formidable. Yet, the whip in the Mourning Maiden's hand moved with lightning speed, its cracks loud as thunder, threatening the heads of her three opponents.

The white smoke emanating from the skulls was poisonous. Still, the two disciples of the Sea Witch did not worry, as their master was the world's foremost poison expert! The Mourning Maiden and Elysia took out

fragrant yellow handkerchiefs, vigorously rubbing them against their noses and mouths before storing them away and facing their opponents without fear of the toxic smoke.

Despite her Force not being fully returned, Elysia's sword skills were extraordinary, earning her the nickname Brightblade, and her cunning and cruelty justified her title of Poison Goddess! She faced only one opponent since her sister was handling three. Her swordplay matched the swirling chains, nearly injuring her opponent several times, slicing the edges of his clothes, and cracking the skulls.

Kellan, watching the fight with tense admiration, was fascinated. Since descending the mountain, he had witnessed remarkable battles. Seeing the fights among the disciples of influential figures from the dark sects opened his eyes to new heights. The swirling red sword in Elysia's hand was beautiful, forming expanding circles that engulfed the skull chain's light. The Mourning Maiden's whip also vanished in a blur, its black light creating loud cracks and blocking the three chains encircling her. Yet, she maintained her calm and composed demeanor.

Suddenly, Kellan sensed something strange and turned to look behind him. He was shocked to see dozens of people sneaking up, clearly intending to capture him. They were the minions of the Black Mountain Fiend, approaching like a pack of wolves ready to pounce on a deer. Kellan knew the danger of falling into their hands. Though being

a prisoner of the two fierce girls was not pleasant, becoming a captive of these rough men would be even more horrifying. Why not escape? Initially, he hadn't because he enjoyed Elysia's romantic advances and was grateful to the Mourning Maiden for saving his life. But now, seeing himself being fought over like a prized possession, Kellan was disgusted and wanted to escape while they were still fighting.

Kellan summoned his Force, channeling his energy to his arms, and with great Force, he pulled. The black silk rope binding his wrists was no ordinary rope; it was more substantial than steel wire. Yet, it couldn't withstand the immense power of his Force, akin to pulling two elephant trunks. The rope snapped loudly, writhing like a severed snake on the ground. Kellan only felt a burning sensation on his wrists. He quickly bent down and untied the white silk rope around his ankles. Not wanting to break the rope, knowing it was the white-clad girl's weapon, he carefully untied it after freeing his hands.

At that moment, four burly men lunged and grabbed him, one wrapping around his legs, another around his waist, one holding his hands, and one grabbing his neck. But Kellan didn't care; he rose and walked towards the carriage, dragging the four men clinging to him like leeches. He tossed the white silk rope aside and shouted to the Mourning Maiden, busy fending off her three opponents.

"Mourning Maiden! Here, your weapon, take it!" He had rolled up the silk belt and tossed it towards the white-clad girl, who exclaimed in surprise but swiftly caught her precious weapon, switching her whip for the silk belt. The Mourning Maiden's movements became even more formidable once she had her weapon. The white light flashed brightly, dazzling like a silver rainbow, and within three moves, her belt had ensnared one of her opponent's chains and yanked it away. At the same time, the other end struck another opponent's face, leaving a bloody mark!

Kellan was still surrounded by the four large men trying to capture him while a dozen more circled, ready to assist their comrades. Kellan's situation was like a cricket surrounded by ants. Furious and impatient, Kellan roared, shaking his body like a tiger shaking off water. His attackers screamed in shock as they were flung away, crashing into their own comrades!

"Catch him!"

"Don't let him escape!"

The minions of the Black Mountain Fiend shouted as they continued to encircle him. They were merely a group of rough men relying on brute strength, courage, and combat experience, hailing from the northern territories under the command of the Black Mountain Fiend. Yet, their physical strength and toughness were no match for Kellan's exceptional skills. Kellan began fighting back,

using his fists and feet. His attackers screamed in pain as every strike from Kellan resulted in broken bones and torn skin.

Witnessing the disarray among their ranks and the fall of another comrade, the three remaining disciples of the Black Mountain Fiend faltered. Moreover, now that the Mourning Maiden wielded her formidable weapon, the three burly men could no longer hold their ground. Elysia's red sword had wounded her opponent's shoulder, and the Mourning Maiden's white silk belt had already seized another chain, striking down one more foe, leaving them bleeding and defeated.

Seeing their enemies retreat and their subordinates in chaos, the Mourning Maiden swiftly spoke, leaping towards Kellan, "Quick, get into the carriage. We must continue our journey!"

Kellan stood firm, facing the maiden, and replied, "I refuse! I wish to continue my journey alone, Maiden."

"Are you defying me?" The Mourning Maiden's voice was soft but cold, her silk belt poised to strike.

"Be cautious, Sister. He possesses miraculous strength!" Elysia warned, moving closer while ignoring the Black Mountain Fiend's minions, who were now aiding their fallen comrades and retreating, aware that they couldn't continue their attempt to seize the prisoner.

"Kellan, return to the carriage at once. They will return, and if their master, the Black Mountain Fiend or the Eight-Armed Saint, arrives, we won't be able to protect you any longer!" The Mourning Maiden's voice remained gentle but carried a clear warning.

Kellan stood with legs apart, like a steadfast mountain rock, though his back was now tattered. He shook his head, gazing at the two maidens with sharp eyes. "No, I want my freedom!"

"Sister, let's just beat this ungrateful man!" Elysia urged, stepping forward with her red sword.

"Wait, Elysia. Our mother wants him alive! Kellan, you admitted earlier that I saved your life. Is this your gratitude? Do you wish to fight me? Is this how the disciple of Stormblade the Sage repays kindness? Pity your master, restless in the afterlife, if he sees his disciple devoid of gratitude."

Kellan's face reddened, and he clenched his fists. "Enough; do not bring my master into this. I'll follow, but remember, it is only to repay your help. Once we meet the Sea Witch, I consider my debt to you repaid." With that, Kellan walked towards the carriage.

Elysia nudged her sister's arm, gesturing towards Kellan with a laugh and a whisper, "Look, Sister... isn't he impressive?"

The white-clad maiden glanced, her beautiful face turning crimson. Her wide eyes fixed on Kellan's back, his tattered clothes revealing a sturdy back with solid curves, broad shoulders, a slender waist, and muscular hips. She quickly shut her eyes, averting her gaze, and chided, "Elysia, you always indulge your desires first. You know I never care about men!" She turned away, and once Kellan was inside the carriage, she spoke, "Fetch a blanket and tell him to cover his indecent back!"

Elysia chuckled and ran to the carriage, grabbing a blanket and tossing it to Kellan. "Kellan, cover your back properly. You're disgusting, my sister, ha-ha!" She then jumped to the front seat, urging the horses forward as her sister entered and sat opposite Kellan, indifferent.

Outside, one of the Black Mountain Fiend's minions shouted, "Just wait! Our master himself will seize that prisoner!"

But the two disciples of the Sea Witch ignored the threat and sped southward. The carriage rocked, and Kellan sat quietly, his eyes never leaving the maiden's face. His admiration grew. This girl was incredibly skilled, and her character was vastly different from Elysia's lewd and indulgent nature. She was reserved, never showing joy. Despite her cruelty and ferocity, the white-clad girl might be ten times more ruthless than Elysia. However, she seemed neither deceitful nor treacherous like her sister. Silently, he compared them. Which one was better? Elysia lived to enjoy life to the fullest, always indulging her

desires and caring only for her pleasure, heedless of her reputation. A girl like that had no loyalty except to herself. But the younger, far more beautiful, and skilled girl sitting across from him had an enigmatic nature; her lovely face was always masked in icy detachment, her true thoughts and feelings hidden beneath an impenetrable exterior.

Suddenly, her face moved, and her clear eyes met his. Kellan, startled and embarrassed, quickly looked away, pretending to observe the trees by the roadside.

"Are you hungry?" The sudden and melodious question prompted Kellan to nod, replying softly, "Thirsty."

"My name is Lydia Frostwhisper. You may call me by my name."

Kellan was surprised. So, there was some kindness in this strange girl. He quickly looked up, hoping to see a change in her face and a smile matching her soft words. But he was disappointed; her face remained cold and serene, revealing nothing. He sighed deeply and said, "Indeed, I am hungry and especially thirsty, Lydia."

Lydia calmly took a package from behind her on the carriage seat, unwrapped it, and pulled out a large piece of dry bread. She broke the bread into three parts, giving one to Kellan and another she tossed to Elysia, saying, "Elysia, have some!" and starting to eat her portion.

Elysia bit into the bread, laughing, "Too bad, Lydia. That bottle of Love's Red Wine was finished in one gulp by this kid, ha-ha!"

Lydia's black eyebrows furrowed briefly, but it wasn't enough to show her true feelings, whether disappointment or anger. Only her lips, closed while chewing, opened slightly to speak. "I still have a drinking water supply; don't worry, Elysia."

She reached behind and pulled out a shiny, white porcelain flask. Seeing that Kellan had finished his bread first, she handed him the flask and said, "Drink first."

Kellan admired the flask, then asked, "Where is the cup?"

"Ha-ha! Kellan, you always mind your manners when looking for a cup. Are you afraid of being poisoned? Don't worry, Lydia never plays with poison, and any poison put into that precious flask will lose its effect." Elysia's mocking laughter made Kellan blush. He just held the flask without drinking, waiting for the girl across from him to finish her bread. Lydia didn't care that he hadn't drunk yet.

"You drink first, Miss Lydia," he said, handing her the flask. Her demeanor made Kellan reluctant to call her by name without any honorifics. She acted like a princess, so refined and aloof.

Lydia didn't reply, but she took the flask, opened it, and lifted it to her face, tilting it to pour the water into her mouth. Kellan swallowed, not because he saw someone drinking or the clear, refreshing water entering her mouth, but because of her alluring mouth. Her mouth opened, revealing rows of white teeth and a red pointed tongue moving as it caught the falling water. He saw the fresh pink interior of her mouth, suggesting deliciousness and pleasure. Kellan shivered internally, not knowing where this feeling came from—a sensation that had arisen since he fell for Elysia's seductions.

After the maiden handed him the flask, Kellan accepted it quickly, but then, remembering Elysia hesitated before drinking. His upbringing at the Lunaria Sanctuary instilled a deep sense of courtesy and proper etiquette. Despite his recent disgust at her vile nature and manipulative temptations, he felt it improper to drink first.

"You should drink first," he said, offering the flask to Elysia.

Seated at the front, Elysia turned, casting a coquettish smile toward Kellan. Then, she took the flask and drank from it, much as her younger sister had done earlier. She handed the flask back to Kellan, and as he took it, Elysia stroked his hand and pinched his arm playfully while giggling. Kellan quickly withdrew his hand and the flask, glancing at the Mourning Maiden. But she remained still, oblivious or indifferent to her sister's flirtatious behavior.

Kellan drowned his awkwardness by taking a swig from the flask, amazed by the refreshing taste. The dry bread had been savory and slightly sweet, with a delightful aroma. But the water was even more remarkable, tasting of ordinary water but carrying the fragrance of apples, calming and refreshing. Without a word, he returned the flask to the Mourning Maiden, who immediately stored it away and said,

"We must gather our strength, for I sense more obstacles ahead." With that, the maiden in white leaned back, closing her eyes, her breathing slowing until it seemed she wasn't breathing at all.

Kellan realized she was meditating, practicing her internal arts. He watched her with admiration. With her eyes closed, her long, dark eyelashes stood out beautifully. Kellan's heart pounded, and he quickly suppressed his feelings. To quell his emotions, he, too, closed his eyes and gathered his strength. For what? To escape if the opportunity arose, he thought. How could he escape if he followed this girl to meet the Sea Witch? This Mourning Maiden was already formidable, and her mother even more so. Kellan shivered at the thought but reassured himself that he had promised to repay the girl's help before seeking his freedom. His mind settled, and he soon fell into a meditative state despite the bumpy ride of the carriage.

They traveled unimpeded until nightfall. The carriage came to a halt at a mountain dotted with rocky caves.

After feasting on rabbit meat caught by Elysia and drinking mountain water, they rested in a large cave beside the carriage. Elysia sat close to Kellan, her hands wandering over his body, whispering seductive words, sometimes making sounds like a cat seeking affection. But Kellan ignored her, feeling both embarrassed and furious. He was deeply uncomfortable as this shameless girl invited him to play love games in front of the Mourning Maiden! Meanwhile, the girl in white sat cross-legged, seemingly oblivious to her sister's seductions.

"Elysia, can't you be still? Don't bother me!" Kellan finally whispered, pushing her hand away.

"Oh, why have you changed, Kellan? Now that you're in front of a girl more beautiful than me, you pretend not to know... ha-ha, do you still remember that sweet night? I still feel it, Kellan... ahh."

"Elysia, be silent!" Kellan snapped angrily. He regretted succumbing to her seduction that night. His first experience had been thrown away with a morally corrupt girl like her. If Elysia truly loved him, he wouldn't regret it, for he desired to follow his master's path, serving a woman's love he fancied. He liked Elysia, as he liked all the beautiful things. If Elysia hadn't used her charm to manipulate him, he would cherish their experience as a sweet memory if her love wasn't false. Now, he would remember it only as a shameful and disgusting memory.

"Elysia, be quiet. Enemies are coming," the Mourning Maiden suddenly said softly. Embarrassed for making a fuss, they hadn't noticed the approaching threat. Looking out of the cave, they saw shadowy figures of a dozen agile and light-footed people moving towards the carriage. They attacked, smashing it and causing the horses to run wildly. Enraged at finding the carriage empty, they took their anger out on it.

"How dare they destroy our carriage!" Elysia shouted angrily.

"Calm down, Elysia. Let us face them. And you, Kellan, do not interfere; just stay here and watch," the Mourning Maiden said calmly, inviting her sister to confront the attackers.

Kellan remained seated in the cave, opening his eyes to watch the shadows and listening to the Mourning Maiden's soft, melodious voice.

"Who are you, and what do you seek? Why destroy our carriage? Here stand the Mourning Maiden and the Poison Goddess!" The shadowy figures halted, seemingly startled and shocked by the names, and then a voice replied,

"We are four disciples of Brightblade Academy, representing our masters, Thaddeus and Gideon Brightsword, demanding the surrender of the prisoner, Kellan!" In the dim light, Kellan saw that the four figures

were three young men and one young woman, all wielding swords. He remembered the two Brightblade masters, Thaddeus and Gideon Brightsword, renowned for their swordsmanship. So, these were their disciples? They must be highly skilled.

"We three are disciples of the Celestial Monastery, obeying our headmaster's order to capture Kellan!" The three bald monks each held a staff and looked formidable.

"We are nine disciples of the Five Elders of Moonshadow, representing our masters to bring Kellan Lightfoot to the Moonshadow Sect!" These nine were also young, and if Kellan's eyes weren't deceived in the dark, they consisted of six young men and three young women with various weapons, including swords, machetes, short spears, cudgels, and whips.

Kellan grew anxious. Despite Elysia and the Mourning Maiden's formidable prowess, how could they withstand the onslaught of sixteen disciples of renowned masters?

Yet both Elysia and the Mourning Maiden remained composed. The Mourning Maiden's soft, cold voice rang with mockery and challenge.

"Kellan Lightfoot is our prisoner under the Sea Witch's authority. No one may lay hands upon him. You disciples of great masters should be ashamed for destroying our carriage. If you wish to use Force, come forth; we fear you not!"

"My goodness, the Mourning Maiden is but a boastful child!" cried a Celestial Monastery disciple, charging forward with his staff, his two junior brothers close behind. The others followed, launching their attack and besieging Elysia and the Mourning Maiden. The two disciples of the Sea Witch let out high-pitched cries, and the red light from Elysia's sword shone brilliantly, followed by the broader, more dazzling white light of the Mourning Maiden's silk belt. The battle raged fiercely in the dim night.

The two disciples of the Sea Witch were indeed more skilled than their counterparts from the Celestial Monastery, Moonshadow Sect, and Brightblade Academy, especially the Mourning Maiden. She could handle five opponents alone, and Elysia could fend off two or three. But against sixteen foes, they were heavily pressured. They stood back-to-back, their weapons spinning rapidly to ward off the relentless attacks. The Mourning Maiden's white silk belt proved particularly useful, shielding herself and her struggling sister. Several times, Elysia cried out in anger as enemy weapons grazed her left calf and right arm, tearing her clothes and drawing blood.

"You two should surrender. We bear you no ill will and do not wish to kill. We seek only to capture Kellan Lightfoot because our masters have grievances against his guilty master," shouted a Brightblade Academy disciple.

"Big talk!" Elysia retorted. "Kellan is our prisoner. If you can kill us, only then may you speak of capturing him!"

"Excellent! The demonic sects are always stubborn and self-serving," a Moonshadow Sect disciple cried, tightening the siege and intensifying their attacks, making it even harder for the two Sea Witch disciples to defend themselves.

Kellan's anxiety grew as the crescent moon rose, shedding more light. He knew the two maidens would soon fall, if not dead, then gravely injured. He pondered his stance. Which side should he support? Both sought the same end: to capture him and extract the secrets of his master's treasure, just as their masters had once fought over the Eversong Blade. Neither side harbored good intentions for him. Yet, he pitied the two maidens, considering them worth his aid. Two against sixteen—how fair was that?

Moreover, could he stand idly by while the maidens were in peril? What would his master do in his place? His master had once advised him:

"When helping others, let your heart guide you. Do not consider their background, circumstances, or issues. If you feel pity and wish to aid, do so without ulterior motives. If you feel no such compassion, it is better to rest than meddle in others' affairs."

Kellan stood. Could he allow the two maidens to perish? No! Despite his distaste for Elysia, he had shared pleasure

with her. He could not bear to see her die at the hands of many attackers. Especially Lydia, who had once saved him from Elysia's sword. He could not let her be overwhelmed. Kellan leaped into the fray, wielding a branch in one hand, and shouted,

"Kellan Lightfoot is here! Whoever wishes to capture me, come forth! Attacking maidens, are you not ashamed?"

"Kellan, silence your arrogant mouth!" Elysia scolded him, angered at being called a girl and worried that his appearance would give the attackers a chance to seize him.

Sure enough, most of the attackers turned from the maidens and rushed at Kellan! Only six remained to assail Elysia and the Mourning Maiden: one Celestial Monastery monk, two Brightblade Academy disciples, and three Moonshadow Sect disciples. The other ten encircled Kellan, seeking to capture him alive as their masters had commanded.

Their rush was met with the swirling light from the branch Kellan wielded. Smacks and thuds echoed as the branch struck faces, necks, and arms. They jumped back in surprise, not expecting a mere branch to cause such pain. They realized they could not underestimate the disciple of Stormblade the Sage. They advanced again, now throwing punches and still trying to capture him alive.

Seeing the incoming attacks, Kellan swung his branch again. But he felt stiff using the Eversong Blade technique with a branch against so many attackers. Some strikes he blocked, but others hit him, tearing his clothes. His anger flared.

"You wish to be stubborn?" he shouted. As a Celestial Monastery monk with strong Force clawed at his shoulder with the Garuda Claw technique, Kellan met the attack with his hand, their palms colliding in midair.

"Plakkk!!"

The Celestial Monastery monk was shocked, feeling his arm tremble and burn. He tried to pull back, but his hand was stuck, and he felt his energy draining into Kellan's palm! The monk cried out in alarm, and soon, other cries followed as more hands stuck to Kellan, unable to pull back. Six attackers had their hands stuck to Kellan; their energy siphoned into his extraordinary body. Two were young women from Moonshadow Sect and Brightblade Academy, embarrassed and struggling, their hands stuck on his bare waist and neck, making it seem like they were caressing him.

Four other skilled fighters watched in astonishment. As disciples of great masters, they suspected Kellan was using some demonic art, as a Celestial Monastery monk suggested.

"Let us combine our energy and pull together!" He grabbed the hands of the free disciples, who then grabbed the shoulders of those stuck, and they pulled in unison. At the signal, they all pulled.

"One, two, three, pull!!"

Their shock and horror were unimaginable when they felt their hands slip into Kellan, like sinking into the water! Unable to pull free, their energy flowed uncontrollably into Kellan. He, too, felt overwhelmed. His body flooded with energy, his chest ready to burst, his head pounding, his eyes bulging, and his entire body pulsing and itching with heat. Although the energy from ten people wasn't as much as he'd absorbed at the Lunaria Sanctuary, it was still overwhelming.

"You are the valiant heroes of the Moonshadow Sect, who undoubtedly possess a broad perspective. As you all know, the conflict between my late master and the Moonshadow Sect arose because my master once slew five disciples of the Moonshadow Sect. The cause of the dispute was a personal argument in a gambling house, so it was a private matter that did not concern the sect. Moreover, my master has passed away, as have the five members of the Moonshadow Sect. Now that both parties are deceased, must we, who know nothing of their enmity, be dragged into this feud? What are we fighting for?"

The disciples of the Moonshadow Sect understood the reasoning and secretly admired Kellan's deep and broad

views. However, as mere executors of their master's orders, the eldest spoke.

"The matter is more complex, young man. Besides, we are just disciples following our master's orders."

"Hemmm, the Five Elders of Moonshadow gave that order. Please tell the Five Elders to find my master's heirlooms since such desires are personal. Why involve the sect's name? There are many in this world who, while pursuing personal ambitions, use the guise of sect interests and deploy disciples and followers to fight for the sect, when in fact it is for personal gain and pleasure."

The nine disciples of Moonshadow Sect seethed with fury at the audacious insult to their masters' reputations by a mere youth. Yet, recognizing the futility of further conflict, they turned away, aiding their wounded comrades.

"Well said, Kellan! You've smacked those so-called noble warriors with words, ha-ha!" Elysia exclaimed, wrapping her arms around Kellan's shoulders playfully and seductively.

"Enough, Elysia! Let us continue our journey," Lydia Frostwhisper's cold voice cut through, maintaining an air of detachment as if nothing had transpired.

"The carriage is destroyed by those fiends, and all the horses are slain, thanks to Kellan. We'll have to proceed

on foot, and it's still a long way," Elysia remarked with a touch of annoyance. But then she laughed, looking at Kellan. "Kellan, it's a long journey on foot. Our speed technique might rival riding, but it's exhausting. How about we take turns carrying each other? Wouldn't that be fun? If Lydia agrees, I'll let her be carried first."

"Elysia, be silent! This is no time for games!" Lydia scolded sharply, silencing her sister.

"You need not concern yourselves with me any longer, for our journey together ends here. I cannot accompany you further," Kellan declared calmly. "I have caused you enough trouble and danger. If you continue with me, you will face unending assaults from those seeking to capture me."

"Ahhh..." Elysia's playful demeanor vanished, and she drew her sword, her face serious.

"Kellan Lightfoot, you must come with us to face my mother, the Sea Witch, whether willingly or not, alive or dead!" Lydia Frostwhisper's voice was cold and menacing. Unlike Elysia, who had drawn her sword, Lydia stood calmly, her eyes radiating a lethal threat.

Kellan shook his head. "I initially intended to meet the Sea Witch out of gratitude to Lydia for saving my life from Elysia's sword. But earlier, when you were under attack, I aided you, repaying my debt. Now, I am free and have no intention of meeting the Sea Witch."

With that, Kellan raised his hand in a gesture of respect and walked away from the two stunned maidens.

"Kellan, first you toy with me; now you dare to toy with my sister! Do you think we cannot capture you by Force?" Elysia shouted, her sword flashing as she attacked Kellan from behind. His bitter experiences had made Kellan very wary of Elysia. Hearing the whistle of the weapon, he sidestepped swiftly, letting the red blade pass by his neck, then swung his hand toward the sword and Elysia's hand. His powerful Force pushed her sword and hand aside. Elysia quickly retracted her hand but would have nearly toppled over if she hadn't leaped back to the left.

"You know I do not wish to fight you, Elysia," Kellan said. "Please let me go."

But with a face flushed with anger, Elysia prepared to attack again. Her left hand drew a red handkerchief laced with the same poison that had once defeated Kellan. Shouting loudly, Elysia attacked again, her sword swirling into a red whirlwind like a dancer with a red silk scarf, striking Kellan with rapid cuts.

Kellan was ready and cautious, aware of the great danger posed not by the sword but by the poisonous handkerchief. He quickly dodged to the right. Elysia anticipated this and prepared, releasing three needles from the handkerchief aimed at Kellan's eyes and throat. Though skilled, Kellan was inexperienced in such battles

and was shocked, quickly ducking while deflecting the needles with his left hand. But as Elysia had planned, the red handkerchief, preceded by a cloud of red poison, was already aimed at his face.

Since becoming a disciple of Stormblade the Sage, Kellan has been given small doses of poison daily, building his resistance. But he wasn't immune to airborne toxins that attacked the lungs through the nose. Remembering his previous defeat by the red handkerchief, he inhaled deeply and then exhaled forcefully, using his Force. The handkerchief flew back toward Elysia, who cried out in shock. Though she had an antidote and wasn't poisoned, the handkerchief momentarily blinded her, and suddenly, her right wrist was struck painfully, causing her to drop her sword. Kellan had struck her wrist with his finger.

Seeing Elysia temporarily incapacitated, Kellan leaped to escape. But as he flew through the air, his left leg was ensnared and yanked back, causing him to fall to the ground!

Kellan quickly leaped to his feet, anticipating Lydia's presence. She stood before him with her unusual weapon, a white silk belt, the end of which coiled around his left leg like a serpent. Lydia exerted her strength, trying to pull Kellan down again. But he channeled his energy into his left leg, preventing his body from budging despite her efforts! Lydia pursed her lips and snorted; the belt suddenly released his leg, and, like a living thing, its end darted toward Kellan's eyes with lightning speed!

Startled, Kellan quickly tilted his head and attempted to grab the white streak. However, the belt's tip moved so swiftly that it slid down and, before Kellan could react, struck three vital points in rapid succession. The young woman was incredibly skilled; her belt moved so fast that it struck points on both his shoulders and his solar plexus in a split second! Had Kellan been an ordinary warrior, he would have collapsed, paralyzed by the rapid and forceful strikes. Fortunately for Kellan, though his master hadn't fully trained him in high-level combat skills, he possessed an immense reservoir of Force. As soon as his body sensed an external influence, his internal energy automatically activated, moving faster than any human could. Thus, the strikes didn't affect his vital points, barely registering with him. Instead, Lydia's hand, holding the belt, trembled violently as the Force of her strikes rebounded onto her!

Despite her frustration, Lydia continued her assault, now gripping the middle of her belt and making it move so that both ends attacked with lightning speed, appearing as if there were hundreds of strikes. Remarkably, the belt's ends no longer targeted his vital points, which she knew would be ineffective, but aimed for dangerous areas like his eyes, ears, throat, navel, and below the navel, wrists, elbows, and knees. Kellan was kept extremely busy, dodging and deflecting the numerous white streaks that attacked him ferociously. While he was hard-pressed, a red streak flashed—Elysia Nightshade had joined her sister!

"Yield, Kellan, lest we drag you to our mother in a lifeless state!" Elysia cried out, though, within her heart, the prospect of Kellan's demise brought an unwelcome regret.

Seizing the opportunity, Kellan sprang away, seeking to evade his pursuers. Though he could outpace the Sea Witch's disciples, their mastery of concealed weapons kept them close on his heels, launching deadly projectiles. Elysia unleashed a barrage of poisoned needles and hurled smoke bombs that filled the air with dark clouds, which Kellan deftly avoided by holding his breath. From behind, Lydia assailed him with silver hairpins shaped like plum blossoms, their gleaming edges whistling through the air.

Kellan's senses were heightened, his body a whirlwind of motion as he dodged and deflected the onslaught. Yet, the sisters pressed on, their attacks unrelenting. The crimson light of Elysia's sword wove a deadly dance with the white arcs of Lydia's belt. Frustration gnawed at Kellan; though capable of harnessing a formidable Force to drain his foes' energy, he refrained, driven by compassion and the peril of close combat. Wary of his mystical prowess, the sisters maintained their distance, striking from afar.

Abruptly, Lydia's belt lashed out, forcing Kellan to evade wildly. Amidst his evasions, he heard Elysia's blade slicing through the air towards him. Twisting his body, he narrowly avoided a fatal blow, but not without consequence—a gash on his thigh from which blood seeped. Anger ignited within him. With a growl, he

grasped Elysia's sword, wrenching it away and hurling it far. He then seized Lydia's belt and yanked it with a force that lifted her from the ground. Startled, Kellan released his grip, sending Lydia soaring.

A scream of horror escaped Elysia as her sister was cast into the air. Yet Lydia, with remarkable agility, twisted in midair, her belt coiling around a branch to arrest her fall. She landed gracefully, immediately re-engaging Kellan with renewed vigor. Elysia, relieved yet resolute, attacked with claw-like strikes aimed at Kellan's vulnerable points.

Kellan's frustration mounted. These women, stubborn and unyielding, tested his patience. As they bore down on him again, he emitted a sharp, piercing cry of fury. Leaping high, he unleashed a torrent of strikes from above, his limbs a motion blur. This was the eighth and final maneuver of the Celestial Hand Technique—a masterful display of combat skills. Known as the Storm of Shaking Clouds and Rain, the technique unleashed a tempest of Force, echoing the high-level combat skill that even Darius Stormseer, the legendary master of Lunaria Sanctuary, struggled to counter. Kellan's strikes imbued with mystical energy, created a maelstrom around him.

Though skilled, the Sea Witch's disciples, particularly Lydia Frostwhisper, found themselves outmatched by Kellan's furious assault. Evading his blows proved futile, as each movement seemed to summon gusts of wind from every direction, ensnaring them in a vortex.

"Aihhhh.....!!" Elysia's scream cut through the chaos as the wind's Force drew her towards Kellan. Lydia, too, staggered closer, ensnared by the relentless gale. Within reach of Kellan's strikes, the sisters faced imminent defeat. Yet, in a sudden turn, Kellan snorted, retracting his limbs and propelling himself away, fleeing without a backward glance.

But Lydia and Elysia were far from yielding. Trained since childhood in relentless pursuit, they surged forward with undiminished resolve. As Kellan fled, they unleashed a fresh wave of concealed weapons, their determination unshaken.

Kellan's retreat faltered as a sudden stiffness seized his limbs, halting his flight. His body was immobilized, and he realized his blood flow had been obstructed by a powerful technique, a lapse born of his focus on the pursuing sisters. Before him, a shadow flickered, and then all movement ceased. Paralyzed, he understood too late the nature of the extraordinary attack that had ensnared him.

The sisters, witnessing Kellan's abrupt halt, believed their weapons had claimed his life. Yet their astonishment grew as an old woman materialized behind Kellan, causing the hidden weapons to disappear with a mere gesture of her hair. The old woman's laughter chilling exuded an aura of fearsome power. Her face, red as if smeared with blood, and her large, disheveled teeth made her a terrifying

sight, contrasting with her still-firm body clad in black silk.

"Auntie Scarlet Witch!" Elysia exclaimed, her voice a mix of shock and reverence. Bowing quickly, she addressed the elder with fear and respect, yet the dark reavers' informal nature allowed her to use the dread moniker, Scarlet Witch.

"Hehehe! You, disciples of the Sea Witch, uphold your master's name well. Since you have captured this boy but failed to control him, leave him to me."

"As a reward for your efforts in finding him, I shall spare your lives, and you may depart unharmed."

Such words rang hollow and self-serving to Kellan's ears. Yet, the old crone's decree seemed entirely customary to the two sisters, raised in a world where expediency trumped justice. What was deemed suitable for them was simply what served their own ends. Thus, the words of the Scarlet Witch held no surprise but rather an air of expectancy.

Elysia Nightshade, fully aware of the formidable power the Scarlet Witch wielded—being one of the Four Dark Reavers, rivaling even her master—bowed her head in submission, not daring to oppose. However, Lydia Frostwhisper's demeanor was markedly different. As the daughter of the Sea Witch and given that this mission was a direct command from her mother, she stood firm,

relying on her mother's esteemed reputation. She was resolute in defending her right to Kellan's custody.

"Regrettably, Auntie, I must refuse your request, for this mission is my mother's directive. I am bound to uphold my claim to this captive, a disciple of Stormblade the Sage."

The Scarlet Witch, taken aback, cast a scrutinizing gaze upon the girl clad in white, then chuckled with an unsettling mirth. "Ah, so you are the daughter of the Sea Witch? Are you the one they call the Mourning Maiden?"

"Indeed, Auntie, I am she, Lydia Frostwhisper."

"Hehehe! Do you dare oppose me?"

"I know my place, Auntie, and I am well aware that you are beyond my capability to contend with. Yet, I fear my mother's wrath more than I fear challenging you."

"Very well! Let us see who shall emerge victorious and claim the right to this boy." The Scarlet Witch sprang forward with these words, facing Lydia, who stood ready with her weapon. Lydia, cautious and aware of her opponent's superior skill, displayed no fear in her serene but resolute countenance.

"Hehehe, not bad! You comprehend well that stillness surpasses movement and that the defender holds an

advantage over the attacker. Now, brace yourself for my assault!"

The Scarlet Witch's words held wisdom in combat—among equals, the one who remains still is more vigilant, while the attacker reveals weaknesses. However, the Scarlet Witch's prowess far exceeded Lydia's. Lydia had inherited but a fraction of her mother's formidable skills, while the Sea Witch ranked among the elite of the Four Dark Reavers, with slight disparity in their abilities.

Though she declared her intent to attack, the Scarlet Witch's feet did not advance, nor did her hands. Instead, her head moved, her long, unkempt hair lashing out like a living weapon. Lydia, skilled as she was, dared not block, for she knew well that the hair of the Scarlet Witch, when wielded by her, became strands stronger than steel.

Lydia dodged deftly to the left, her wrist flicking as the white ribbon she wielded darted toward the old crone's throat, aiming for a vital point. The Scarlet Witch laughed, deflecting the ribbon with her left hand, her long nails attempting to seize it. But the silk ribbon, swift and supple, eluded her grasp, striking from a distance. Lydia, astute in her strategy, kept the old woman at bay, her ribbon weaving a relentless assault while remaining out of reach of the deadly hair and nails.

To an observer, the contest was enthralling. The white ribbon fluttered like a nimble butterfly, always slipping through the old woman's fingers, only to strike again.

Lydia's ingenuity, rather than raw combat skill, afforded her an upper hand, frustrating and angering the Scarlet Witch.

As the crone evaded the barrage of secret weapons Lydia occasionally launched—spiked balls and hairpins disguised as flower combs—she appeared on the defensive. Lydia's cleverness forced the old woman into a perpetual state of evasion.

Seizing a fleeting opportunity, Lydia sent her silk ribbon towards the old woman's chest, aiming for a critical strike. The Scarlet Witch, occupied with dodging, seemed unable to avoid this lethal blow. Lydia's heart leaped with joy—a dangerous emotion amid battle.

Her mother had trained her to be cold and unyielding, her nerves steeled against emotion. Yet, facing a vastly superior foe, she could not suppress her elation as her attack neared its mark. In her moment of triumph, she neglected the cunning of the Scarlet Witch. Too late, she realized her error when the old woman's hair lashed out, entwining the silk ribbon and binding it.

Lydia shocked, tried to release her grip, but the hair, moving like a living thing, ensnared her right arm, binding her wrist tightly.

"Hehehe! You dare oppose me? As the daughter of the Sea Witch, I shall spare your life, but for challenging me, you must face the consequences!"

Lydia knew mercy could not be expected from someone like the Scarlet Witch. Thus, she did not plead for forgiveness. Instead, with a swift and decisive strike, she aimed for the crone's side with her left hand. Though the Scarlet Witch was renowned in the dark realms, Lydia's blow would have been devastating had it landed. Yet, the old woman, her hair binding Lydia in a vice-like grip, had both hands free. She caught Lydia's wrist with a single, deft motion, rendering her utterly helpless.

"Hehehe! What punishment shall befit your insolence? Should I sever one of your hands?" The old crone threatened, her grin revealing large, ghastly teeth.

Lydia, though immobilized, bore a cold expression. Her finely sculpted lips curled into a mocking smile as if the threat did not faze her.

"Oh, a mere hand? The old hag, the Sea Witch, might still teach you to wield the other. No, better yet, I shall sever one of your legs. With but one leg, you shall not stand, and no man will look upon you without revulsion. Yes, I shall cut off your leg at the thigh, and you will be forever marred, haha!"

"No! You must not, Auntie Scarlet Witch!" Elysia's voice rang out in fury and desperation. She charged the old woman from behind, her hands coated with a lethal poison that lived up to her moniker, the Poison Goddess. Her hands emitted a greenish smoke, the poison so potent

that a mere touch could rot flesh. She aimed to seize the old woman's neck with one hand and strike her side with the other.

With an angry snort, the Scarlet Witch turned slightly and countered with her left hand. Her fingers spread wide, and a gust of mighty wind blew forth, accompanied by a cacophony of strange scents and sounds—some sweet, some foul, some like rotting corpses. The Force sent Elysia sprawling, her hands trembling as she tore open her clothes to reveal a blue mark on her chest. Trembling, she rummaged through her pockets, found a small package, and swallowed three pills—green, yellow, and red.

"Hehehe! Quite skilled to withstand my Thousand Poison Hand. So, you are indeed the Poison Goddess!"

Elysia's condition began to stabilize. Though still weak, she managed to sit cross-legged and regulate her breathing. The pills she had taken neutralized any poison, no matter how vile.

The Scarlet Witch returned to Lydia, who had observed everything with a detached air. Elysia's attempt to assist was anticipated, and her defeat was no surprise. Lydia, unable to move, could only await the inevitable punishment, knowing it would be dire. As the daughter of the Sea Witch and the renowned Mourning Maiden, she was bound to uphold her dignity, facing her fate unflinchingly.

"Heh-heh-heh, now you must choose, Mourning Maiden! Shall I cut off your arm or your leg?"

"Scarlet Witch, you have bested me. Whether you sever my arm, leg, or head, it is your choice! My mother will come for you soon to settle the debt with interest."

The Scarlet Witch's fury ignited. The dark figures, especially the Four Dark Reavers, reveled in seeing their victims plead for mercy and cry out in agony. Lydia's defiance, her beautiful face remaining cold, her smile mocking, deeply insulted the crone. How shameful it would be if word spread that the Scarlet Witch, one of the Four Dark Reavers, was bullied by a captive girl on the verge of mutilation!

"Heh-heh-heh, who fears the Sea Witch? Let her come! Once I possess Stormblade's scrolls, I shall fear no one, not even ten sea witches. Oh, you do not fear losing your limbs? What is most precious to you? Your beautiful face... Once, I was far more beautiful than you, and thousands of men worshiped me! Hehehe, what value does beauty hold? Indeed, it is skin deep. But how can a man's desire be kindled without beauty? It is but skin deep. What if I peel away your lovely skin? Only a skull and rotting flesh would remain! Ah, you turn pale? Good, you know fear, hehe." The old woman cackled, delighted at Lydia's growing terror. Lydia's heart pounded with dread. She feared not pain nor death, but as a young woman, she was keenly aware of her beauty and horrified by the old crone's threat. Yet, she forced a mocking smile.

"Do it, Scarlet Witch! Peel my face until it is hideous! In the end, I will die, and once dead, what difference does it make whether I am beautiful?"

Though born of defiance, her words dispelled the terrifying visions from her mind, further enraging the old crone. "Very well, I shall not let you die easily! If I peel away all your facial skin, you will surely perish. Too easy! I once saw a woman afflicted by a foul disease; her nose and lips rotted away, leaving holes swarmed by flies. And she did not die! He...he... yes, if I cut off your pointed nose and full, red lips, you will be just like her! No matter how beautiful the rest of you, men will be repulsed, vomiting at the sight of your fly-ridden face! Hehe, scream and cry; it will not alter your fate!"

The old demon danced about, cackling with glee, as Lydia's face grew pale and tears streamed down her cheeks. Never before had Lydia wept from fear, but now the dread of the old woman's horrific threat overwhelmed her.

"Heh-heh-heh! Let me revel in your beauty before I mar it forever. The title 'Mourning Maiden' indeed suits you! So fair you are! Now, which shall I take first? Your nose or your lips? The nose first, so your lips may scream in agony, and then the lips. My fingers itch to claim this delicate prize—your pointed nose and ruby lips. Hehe!" The crone brought her left hand closer to Lydia Frostwhisper's nose. Lydia closed her eyes, her face ashen,

breathing heavily and sobbing. The stench of the old woman's nails assailed her senses as she held her breath, nearly fainting as the nails brushed her nose. The crone moved slowly, savoring the torment she inflicted. Elysia, still weak, watched with wide eyes and a pale face.

"Cruel demon...!" Suddenly, a loud shout rang out, and Kellan leaped high, descending upon the old woman with both hands aimed at her back. Rage and desperation drove him, for he could not bear to witness Lydia's suffering. Though paralyzed by the crone's deadly strike, his immense Force continued to flow within him. At the critical moment, he broke free and launched his attack. In his fury, he employed the third move of his unarmed combat technique, Stormblade Hand. His strike was potent, and his arms were charged with tremendous Force. The old woman, taken aback by the sheer power of the assault, quickly withdrew her hands from Lydia, turning to parry.

"Plak-plak...!!"

"Aiiihhh...!!" The Scarlet Witch screamed in shock as her body was forced back three steps. Even more astonishing was the young man who had struck her, who only staggered slightly from her counterattack. Amazed but also pleased, she recognized the remarkable prowess of Stormblade the Sage's training. If she could acquire the scrolls left by Stormblade, unimaginable skills and techniques would be hers.

"Hehe, you're a remarkable boy! How did you break free from my pressure point strike?" Scarlet Witch was genuinely intrigued, for few could escape her technique, save for those of her caliber, like the other members of the Four Dark Reavers.

Kellan did not reply; his attention focused on Lydia, who swayed and nearly collapsed. He stepped forward swiftly, catching her shoulders to prevent her from falling. Lydia groaned softly, overwhelmed by the ordeal. When she realized who held her, she opened her eyes slowly and, seeing Kellan, hugged him tightly, burying her face in his chest. They clung to each other momentarily, and Kellan's heart pounded. Unlike his feelings for Elysia, he felt a deep affection and compassion for Lydia.

"Thank you," she whispered, bringing immense relief and satisfaction to Kellan, who smiled.

"Hehe, just like Stormblade the Sage! The master is a womanizer, and the disciple is a charmer! Hehe, every woman would fall for this boy."

The Scarlet Witch's words startled Lydia. She quickly pulled away from Kellan, jumping back with a pale face and wide eyes. She was not ashamed but surprised by her own feelings. Her mother had trained her to be indifferent to men, yet she had hugged this young man tenderly in front of others!

"Haha, Lydia, did I not warn you? Be careful with him; you might fall asleep in his comforting embrace."

"Elysia, silence!!" Lydia's shout was filled with anger. Elysia fell silent but smiled strangely and looked peculiarly at Lydia.

The Scarlet Witch now faced Kellan and laughed. "Boy, I remember you. Even as a child, you were remarkable, daring to play the flute and disrupt our battle with Stormblade the Sage."

"Scarlet Witch, I remember your shameless attack on my late master with your fellow demons. And now, you seek to torture a young girl. Truly, you are as cruel and wicked as a demon!"

The old woman laughed heartily, taking the insults as compliments. "Hehe, I can be even crueler if you defy me. You must come with me and reveal where your master's relics are hidden."

"I refuse!"

"Then I will force you, stubborn boy!"

"Even if you force me, I cannot show you the place!"

"I will torture you until you beg for death but cannot die, leaving you to suffer in torment!"

"It is useless. Even if you kill me, I do not know where the relics are hidden."

"Liar!"

"Enough! Believe me or not, I have no time for your nonsense. I am leaving!" With that, Kellan leaped and ran. But a dark shadow flashed, and suddenly, the old woman stood in his path. Kellan was shocked and impressed by her speed, moving as if she flew.

"What do you want?" Kellan demanded.

"You must come with me!"

Kellan remembered his master's warning. His master had told him of many highly skilled warriors, some beyond his ability, especially those like the Four Dark Reavers. Only by mastering the techniques in his master's scrolls would he be strong enough to face them. Now he stood before one! Alas, he did not have the Eversong Blade. If he did, he would have relished testing his skills against the old woman who fought with hair and nails! Nevertheless, he had to fight.

"I refuse."

"Hehe, do you think I cannot force you? Do you believe your modest skill can defy the Scarlet Witch? Hehe!"

"I will try!" Kellan shouted, charging forward with a circular motion of his hands from above his head. He quickly created a swirling white light with his arms, from which rapid punches emerged. He employed the fifth move of his combat skills, Mountain Cloud Ejects Lightning. The wind from his powerful punches roared, making the old woman's hair and clothes flutter.

"A strange and powerful punch...!" The old woman exclaimed, delighted. She had to admit that, although she knew many combat skills and techniques, she had never seen this move before. As an expert, she recognized its complexity and power. However, while the boy's strength was extraordinary, his movements lacked refinement. Thus, she easily dodged by leaping to the right, then swiftly turned left, her hair lashing out at Kellan's neck!

Kellan needed to catch up in the combat skills. When his assault faltered, it was met with an immediate and brutal counterstrike. He fended off her tangled locks in a flurry of desperation, his hands a blur against the onslaught. Yet, his formidable strength shone through as the defensive wind from his hands scattered her hair. With a mighty leap, he surged forward, the power of the Stormblade Hand descending from above. His strike was fierce, and the ancient demoness's excitement only grew. She sought to master these moves, believing that, once comprehended, her attacks would become nigh irresistible, rendering her foes helpless.

She rolled upon the ground in a swift, fluid motion, her lithe form a blur. As Kellan's body arced overhead, she reached out, her hands grasping for his legs with preternatural speed.

Kellan, utterly taken aback, summoned his Force in a desperate bid. His body vaulted skyward, propelled by an advanced agility. This rapid ascent allowed him to evade the old crone's clutches. Yet, upon landing, her hands were already poised, unleashing the dreaded Thousand Poison Hand technique.

"Fall!" she bellowed, her voice a cacophony of malice and triumph, eager to vanquish Kellan swiftly. Her intent was clear: to capture him before the Sea Witch's disciples or any other warriors could intervene and claim Stormblade the Sage's pupil.

A tremendous force surged against Kellan, accompanied by a sickly, sweet, foul odor. He held his breath, summoned his Force again, and struck out to the side. The impact resounded with a thunderous "Thump!" as Kellan's body was flung backward. Her hands trembling from the clash, the old crone swiftly moved her head. Her disheveled hair split into seven sinuous whips, striking at seven critical points on Kellan's upper body.

The young warrior was staggered, unable to evade the simultaneous strikes. He focused his Force, seeking to shield his pressure points. Her hair struck true yet bounced off his defenses. Nevertheless, he felt as though

he had been struck by lightning and fell, rolling to evade the old woman's relentless pursuit. Rising unsteadily, his vision blurred, and he saw her mocking face split into two.

"Kellan, use your adhesion skill!" Elysia's voice pierced through his haze. She had recovered from the poisonous strike, though still weakened. Lydia Frostwhisper, silent until now, wore a cold expression. Her feelings were in turmoil; she could not deny her love for the young man.

At Elysia's cry, Kellan, still dizzy, rushed forward, deploying the third move, Storm's Twin Eject. Hearing Elysia's call, the Scarlet Witch purposefully caught Kellan's open hands with her own.

"Plakkk...!!" The two pairs of palms collided in mid-air. The Scarlet Witch's Force was formidable, suspending Kellan's body for a fleeting moment. As his feet touched the ground, she let out a triumphant cry. "You understand, Starbound...?" Her exclamation mingled astonishment with glee. Now glued to Kellan's, her palms began to drain his internal energy. She moved her head, her hair-splitting to strike at Kellan's wrists.

Kellan's hands tingled, his adhesion waning. Seizing the moment, the Scarlet Witch freed her hands, sending another hair strike that caught Kellan unprepared, striking his shoulders and rendering him limp. Laughing with malevolent glee, she seized Kellan's limp form. The young warrior possessed formidable combat skills and the

rumored-to-be-lost Starbound technique. If she could master these techniques, she would reign supreme among the Four Dark Reavers.

"Scarlet Witch, he is my prisoner; release him!" Lydia Frostwhisper's voice cut through the air, her white silk belt whipping forward like a striking serpent, aimed at the Scarlet Witch's head in a lethal strike. The old witch dodged, her right hand snatching at the belt, but Lydia retracted it swiftly. The Scarlet Witch countered with the Thousand Poison Hand technique, forcing Lydia to dodge aside, allowing the Scarlet Witch to leap away with Kellan in her grasp.

But suddenly, a white shadow flashed before the Scarlet Witch, revealing an old woman, tall and thin, dressed in white with a proud and cold demeanor. She was of an age with the Scarlet Witch but retained a grace and beauty long since lost to her opponent.

"Scarlet Witch, you shamelessly bully the young!" The tall woman's voice was gentle yet icy. She moved her right hand with a fluid grace, her palm striking towards the Scarlet Witch's face with blinding speed. The Scarlet Witch, startled, raised her right hand to block, summoning her Thousand Poison Hand energy.

"Plakkk!" Their hands met with a resounding clash, and the Scarlet Witch's grimace deepened as her hand became stuck. Though the suction was not as strong as Kellan's, she felt her energy drained. Recognizing the danger, she

released Kellan, spinning and clawing with her left hand while her hair shot forward like black serpents.

The tall woman remained calm. Her right hand formed a protective circle, creating a whirlwind of energy that deflected the hair and parried the claw. Despite this, her suction power waned, and the Scarlet Witch broke free, leaping back with an intense, frustrated expression.

Meanwhile, Kellan, having freed himself from the oppressive grip of the pressure points, was swiftly approached by Elysia. Kellan ignored her alluring demeanor, whose focus was fixed on the confrontation between the ancient crone and the formidable Scarlet Witch.

"Sea Witch! I saved your daughter from the brink of death, forging a bond that transcended mere acquaintance. Yet now, you strike at me, disregarding any semblance of friendship!" The Scarlet Witch's voice rang out, a blend of fury and indignation.

"She lies, Master!" cried Elysia, her voice urgent. "Were it not for Kellan, the disciple of Stormblade, aiding us, my sister and I would have perished! She has humiliated us and sullied your honored name!"

The tall, thin old woman, now revealed as the Sea Witch—renowned as the most skilled among the Four Dark Reavers—only glanced at the Scarlet Witch. She spoke, her tone measured and cold, "Scarlet Witch, you are the

guardian of the East, the Black Mountain Fiend rules the North, the Eight-Armed Saint holds the West, and I command the South. For decades, we have refrained from encroaching upon one another's domains. Though we now vie for the relics of Stormblade the Sage, our contest must be one of honor and skill. It is beneath you to harass the young. If you desirest to display the Thousand Poison Hand, come forth. I shall be your opponent!"

The icy resolve in the Sea Witch's demeanor caused a shiver of apprehension in the Scarlet Witch. She knew the repute of the southern dark master, a figure of unmatched prowess against whom victory seemed unattainable. Moreover, she noted the presence of Elysia and Lydia, whose assistance to their master would further complicate matters. Not to mention the enigmatic young man, Kellan, whose extraordinary abilities had already proven formidable. Recognizing the unfavorable odds, the Scarlet Witch laughed mockingly.

"Hey, Sea Witch! Who's afraid to face you? Our skills are about the same, and I have shown that I can beat the Starbound Scroll method. If you want to fight me, wait for the day when I do. Until then, goodbye!" When she said these words, the Scarlet Witch's shape flickered and disappeared. Her exit wasn't a sign of defeat but of a planned retreat.

The Sea Witch remained impassive, and Kellan now perceived the source of Lydia Frostwhisper's frosty demeanor. It was clear she had inherited it from her mother, whose coldness was as chilling as the winter's

heart. Dressed always in white, akin to one in mourning, her visage devoid of emotion, the Sea Witch and her daughter were, in truth, more terrifying than the grotesque and brutal Scarlet Witch. The Sea Witch turned to face Kellan, her gaze a cold, creeping Force that made his skin crawl.

"Are you the disciple of Stormblade the Sage?" Her voice, though gentle, bore an overwhelming force that demanded an honest reply. Her icy stare was laced with threat.

"Yes, Senior," Kellan replied briefly, meeting her gaze with respect and wariness.

With an elegant yet cold gesture, she extended her right hand, her voice soft yet commanding, "Give unto me the Eversong Blade."

Kellan frowned. All sought the sword, from the coarse to the cunning, from the brutal to the beguiling. But it was the first time he felt a proper chill of fear. Her demeanor indeed sent shivers down his spine.

"The Eversong Blade is not with me, Senior."

"Hemmm, where is it then?"

"The sword was taken by the priests of Lunaria."

"Liar!" The old woman's right hand flicked, her index finger pointing at Kellan, and a whistling sound heralded the approach of a tremendous energy stream like a sword aimed at his chest. Kellan, shocked, quickly deflected with his hand, rolling to the right. His hand managed to block the powerful energy. Still, his body tumbled several times before he regained footing, cold sweat dampening his neck. This was incredible, he thought. Only twice in his life had he witnessed such powerful techniques. First, he had seen Darius Stormseer perform a similar long-distance strike on Elysia at Lunaria Mountain. He was deeply annoyed, realizing this seemingly gentle old woman was as ruthless as any other dark master.

"Hemm, as a disciple of Stormblade the Sage, you are very good at avoiding my hit. Since your master never lied, your dishonesty is not welcome. Quickly hand over the sword, or you won't be able to get away again!"

Kellan thought. His master may not have lied, probably because he was so skilled. For him, staying alive sometimes meant telling lies, as long as they weren't dishonest or hurtful to other people.

"I do not possess the sword, Senior. It was taken by Darius Stormseer of Lunaria."

"Wuuutttt... Wuuutttt...!" The old woman made two pushing motions toward Kellan. He quickly dodged and parried with his hand. His internal energy managed to counter the powerful strikes, but he was still knocked down, rolling from the Force of the Sea Witch's attack.

"Darest you resist?" The old woman was mad, so she stepped forward to attack up close. Her long-range attacks failed to strike.

"Mother! He speaks truth. The Eversong Blade was taken by the priests of Lunaria," Lydia suddenly interjected.

"Oh, you foolish girl, what do you know?" This boy is Stormblade the Sage's disciple, and he is reckless and very attached to that sword. How could he give it up? Even when he was getting old, Stormblade never gave it up on his own. Do not get in the way. This boy has to give up the Eversong Blade or die in my arms. Will you, stubborn boy, tell me where the Eversong Blade is? Swiftly speak up so I can take it."

Kellan became very angry. This old woman's cold heart was driving him crazy. She must have been a pretty girl who was used to getting her way when she was younger. He glared at her and said, "I told you, the sword is at Lunaria." His voice was calm but roiled with anger. Take it from them if you want it. But be careful, because many skilled warriors watch over it.

Kellan's words were abruptly silenced as the old crone lunged forward with startling swiftness, her right hand descending towards his head in a vicious slap. Knowing the futility of evasion, Kellan mustered his courage and raised his hand to meet hers.

"Plakkk!!" Their palms collided mid-air, and to Kellan's surprise, their hands adhered to one another. In his anger, he had unwittingly unleashed a powerful absorbing Force. The Sea Witch's eyes widened in shock as she felt her blow absorbed and her energy being siphoned. She quickly marshaled her Force and invoked the ancient Starbound Scroll technique to counter-absorb. Thus began a fierce clash of forces, each vying for dominance. The Sea Witch's technique, honed over decades, was renowned throughout the Realm for its rarity and power. Yet, Kellan's absorption, born from an accidental overflow of his master's immense energy, was no less formidable.

"Aihhhh.....!" The Sea Witch cried out, her left hand darting forward. She struck Kellan's right shoulder with a deft flick of her fingernail. His body went limp, but with a surge of will, he pulled his hand back and leaped away, narrowly evading a fatal blow. The old woman's cunning was evident; had she struck directly, Kellan's absorbing Force might have consumed the impact. Instead, she targeted a crucial acupuncture point to disrupt his energy flow.

Fury etched across her features, the Sea Witch advanced with lethal intent. Suddenly, Elysia leaped and knelt before her master, pleading, "Master, I beg you to hear my explanation. The Eversong Blade was indeed taken by the priests of Lunaria, as this boy said. I witnessed it myself."

The old woman's eyes narrowed. "Speak!" she commanded. Elysia recounted her infiltration of Lunaria,

her capture, and how she saw Kellan hand over the Eversong Blade to Darius Stormseer. Listening intently, the Sea Witch turned her cold gaze back to Kellan, now struggling to sit up.

"Faithless pupil!" she spat. "You descended from Dragonspire Peak and handed the sword to Lunaria's priests! What manner of disciple are you? Without the Eversong Blade, you are naught but worthless and better off dead." With these words, she lunged at Kellan once more.

"Mother, stop....!!" A white figure flashed, and Lydia stood defiantly before her mother. Kellan, bewildered, readied himself to defend with all his might.

"Lydia, what is this? Move aside!"

"No, Mother. You cannot kill Kellan."

"What? He is useless without the Eversong Blade and must be slain!"

"No, Mother. He saved me from the Scarlet Witch's cruelty. You cannot kill him."

Mother and daughter stood in a tense standoff, their gazes locked, and Kellan felt a chill run down his spine. How alike they were, one an aged woman, the other a young maiden, yet both shared an icy resolve and eyes of steel.

"Saving you does not excuse him from death! He must die for learning the Starbound Scroll from Stormblade the Sage, that treacherous master! Move aside!"

But Lydia remained steadfast. With a bold defiance she had never before displayed, she lifted her head and puffed out her chest. "No!" Her voice trembled with emotion for the first time. "You cannot kill him!"

The Sea Witch was stunned. Her daughter, who had always obeyed her without question, stood in open defiance. The Sea Witch was revered, feared even, throughout the southern coasts as a queenly figure. To see her daughter stand against her was a shock beyond measure. "What did you say? Why not?"

"Because I love Kellan!"

A profound silence followed Lydia's declaration. In astonishment, three pairs of eyes widened: Kellan's, Elysia's, and the Sea Witch's. Kellan's heart pounded, his body trembling with the realization that Lydia loved him, a thought he had never entertained. It would not have been surprising if Elysia had professed love, given her flirtatious nature. But Lydia? Always so cold and severe?

Elysia was equally taken aback. Hearing her sister confess love for a young man was like a dream in daylight. Lydia, who scorned all men, now professed love?

"You... you're mad...? You love Stormblade's disciple?" The Sea Witch's whisper was one of disbelief.

"You... heh-heh-heh... Do you love him?" For the first time, Elysia heard her master laugh, and it sent shivers down her spine. The laugh was more of a sob. "Do you love his disciple? He must be a womanizer, unfaithful, like..."

"Like Father, Mother? So be it! You hate Father, but I do not hate Stormblade. And even if you pretend to hate him, I know you love him dearly. I love Kellan, and you cannot kill him!"

The Sea Witch uttered a terrifying scream, her face contorted with rage. "You're insane! Move aside! Your confession only strengthens my resolve to kill this scoundrel! Move aside!"

"No, Mother!" Lydia drew her silk belt and addressed Kellan tenderly, "Kellan, go. Leave now, having heard my confession. Go!"

Kellan's face grew pale. So Lydia was his master's daughter! The realization of a past connection between his master and the Sea Witch was overwhelming. And now, the daughter loved him! His heart ached at Lydia's trembling voice urging him to flee. With a heavy sigh, he turned and leaped away.

"Move!" the Sea Witch screamed, lunging after Kellan. But Lydia intercepted her, her silk belt snapping forward with

great Force. "Mother, you shall only chase him over my dead body!"

In her fury, the Sea Witch attempted to push Lydia aside, but the girl's swift belt struck towards her knees. Incensed, the Sea Witch snatched the belt from Lydia's hand and cast it aside. The momentary distraction was enough; Kellan's form had disappeared. Ignoring her daughter's pleas, the Sea Witch bolted in pursuit, a fierce determination driving her steps.

Once more, Lydia struck at the Sea Witch with all the might her heart could muster. The Sea Witch, taken aback by the vehemence of her daughter's assault, parried the blow, sending Lydia sprawling to the ground, tears mingling with the earth. Lydia cast her gaze afar, seeking Kellan, only to find him vanished, swallowed by the horizon. She turned back to her mother and beheld a visage pallid and lifeless as if carved from marble, her eyes tightly shut, embroiled in a silent, internal struggle. It dawned upon Lydia that her mother was ensnared by a profound sorrow, torn asunder between the compulsion to slay Kellan and the plea of her daughter. Overcome, Lydia fell to her knees, clasping her mother's feet, her tears flowing unchecked.

Elysia Nightshade, for the second time that day, stood astounded. As the Sea Witch's disciple, she had revered Lydia for her prowess, reflecting their mistress's own. But on this fateful day, because of Kellan, she witnessed Lydia declare her love unabashedly. And now, she saw her

weep. Envy and fury surged within Elysia, for she too harbored feelings for Kellan—drawn to his visage, skill, and the promise of treasures he might possess. Lydia's confession stoked a bitter flame of jealousy and wrath within her. Neither the mother nor the daughter perceived Elysia's venomous glances towards Lydia, alight with simmering hatred. Shortly after that, Elysia departed, her gait peculiar, her eyes casting malevolent glances back at Lydia.

In the silence that followed, the Sea Witch's eyes fluttered open, beholding her daughter weeping at her feet. With a sigh that seemed to come from the depths of her being, she tenderly stroked Lydia's hair. "Lydia, the wheel of fate turns ever onward, and we are bound to its course."

Lydia embraced her mother tighter, her sobs wrenching the air with their sorrow. This girl, who had never truly inherited her mother's coldness, revealed a heart too tender for the facade she wore. Her spirit was naturally vivacious, and her eyes quickly saw beauty in all things. Yet from her earliest days, the Sea Witch had molded her to suppress such inclinations, to don a mask of icy detachment. Thus, Lydia Frostwhisper, the Mourning Maiden, became an enigma—a cold exterior encasing a fiery core. This enforced coldness was but a thin veil over a smoldering volcano. Hence, when she gave her heart, she did so with an intensity that defied her mother's teachings, her love erupting with the Force of a pent-up tempest.

"Mother, forgive your unfilial daughter," Lydia pleaded.

The Sea Witch sighed once more. "We reap what we sow, child. I defied my father for love, and now you defy me for the same reason. This is the way of the world."

Lydia lifted her gaze to her mother, seeing a shadow of sorrow upon her face for the first time. It was also the first time her mother spoke of her past, of family long shrouded in silence. Lydia had known only that her grandfather was Stormblade the Sage, a man whose legendary Eversong Blade was coveted by warriors for the treasures it guarded. Whenever Lydia asked about the separation from her father, her mother's response was always cold: "He was unfaithful. All men are unfaithful. Never give your heart easily, Lydia. Love brings naught but suffering."

But now, as her mother spoke of defiance and family, Lydia's curiosity was piqued. "Mother, did you defy Grandfather?"

"Not only did I defy him," the Sea Witch intoned, her voice heavy with old grief, "I killed him."

"Mother...!"

"Yes, I killed him for love. Would you not have slain me earlier, Lydia?"

"Mother...!" Lydia's tears flowed anew as she clung to her mother.

"Love drives us to madness, my child," the witch said, her hand resting gently on Lydia's head. "Your defiance broke my heart, seeing you willing to fight, even to kill, for the boy you love. Yet, in my anger, I remembered my own youth and understood. I too once loved Eldrin Stormblade. I was a noble's daughter, and my father ruled the South like a king. Eldrin was a rogue, a notorious womanizer, yet I was stubborn. Forbidden by my father, I fought him, wielding the skills I had learned from Eldrin in my rage. In that fury, I killed my father."

"Oh, Mother..." Lydia's heart ached for her mother, seeing her in a new, tender light.

"Afterwards, Eldrin, the unfaithful rogue, refused to marry me, as he had done with countless others. Yet I bore you, Lydia. We quarreled, and I became his enemy, though he was always too powerful for me. For years, I trained, becoming the foremost sorceress of the South, yet I could never beat him. His treasures became my obsession. Now, with his death, they are rightfully yours as his heir. When I learned that his prized Eversong Blade had fallen into the hands of the Lunaria priests, my frustration knew no bounds. Especially since he had taught his disciple, not me, the secrets of the Starbound Scroll. I grew to hate his disciple. But then I saw Kellan, and in his eyes and lips, I saw Eldrin's ghost. He, too, must be unfaithful. Yet you, my daughter, you love him!"

Lydia cried as she listened, feeling the weight of her mother's sorrow and understanding, for the first time, the depths of her own lineage.

Lydia sighed deeply, the weight of her mother's tale heavy upon her spirit. "Mother," she began, her voice tinged with wonder and uncertainty, "I had only a guess of love for him, driven by these strange and powerful feelings within me. I yearned to protect him; I feared for his life. This feeling arose when he saved me from the clutches of the Scarlet Witch. From that moment, I felt a bond with him. I dreaded the thought of being apart from him. Oh, Mother, is this truly love that I feel?"

"Ah, karma... karma..." her mother mused, her eyes distant as if peering into the echoes of a long-lost past. "I once loved Eldrin Stormblade, for he saved me from the Seven Demons of Go-bi."

"Mother," Lydia exclaimed, the realization dawning upon her like the first light of dawn, "then I truly love him. My heart speaks of his name alone, for I will lay down my life for him." The girl paused, her gaze deepening with the ardor of her affection as thoughts of the young man filled her mind. "Mother, I must go to him now. I must stand by his side."

"Go," her mother replied, her voice a blend of command and tenderness, "but do not merely seek him; also seek your father's treasures."

Lydia's eyes widened with a newfound joy, her face alight with determination. No longer was she the cold-faced maiden; the ice of her demeanor had melted away, replaced by the fervent warmth of love. "Mother, thank you. I shall depart at once!" she declared.

The Sea Witch, her visage stern yet compassionate, took her daughter's hand. "Only one thing do I ask of you, my child," she said solemnly.

"What is it, Mother?" Lydia inquired, her voice soft and earnest.

"Promise me; swear upon all that is sacred that you will not repeat the errors of my past. Do not give yourself to that young man outside the sanctity of marriage! Only when you are properly wed shall I bestow my blessing and approval upon you. Otherwise, I shall curse you, Lydia!"

Lydia embraced her mother tightly and whispered, "I swear, Mother."

With that, she released her mother's embrace and darted away swiftly and purposefully, seizing the white silk belt her mother had cast aside. The Sea Witch, the paramount figure among the Four Dark Reavers and the undisputed "queen" of the southern coast, remained in her meditative posture, her body still and her face an impassive mask. Yet, despite her stoic exterior, two solitary tears traced a

path down her pale cheeks, silent witnesses to the deep
and abiding love she bore for her daughter.

CHAPTER 6

THE TURMOIL OF LUNARIA SANCTUARY



Meanwhile, after Kellan Lightfoot bestowed the Eversong Blade upon the sanctum of Lunaria, a tempest of strife descended upon the once-serene haven. Various warrior factions, each with distinct stratagems, launched relentless assaults upon the sanctuary. The righteous factions, convinced of their claim to the hero's relics, boldly besieged the sanctuary, asserting that with the passing of the Eversong Blade, they were rightful heirs to all of Stormblade the Sage's possessions. Conversely, the rogue factions employed guile and subterfuge, infiltrating like shadows, hurling accusations, and issuing challenges.

However, Lunaria Sanctuary stood as a bastion of formidable prowess, its members honed to perfection in their arts. The disciples of Lunaria Sanctuary, renowned for their discipline and numbers, thwarted the cunning plots of the rogue factions with unwavering resolve.

Amidst this turmoil, the masters of Lunaria Sanctuary found themselves ensnared in ceaseless endeavors. They

understood that Darius Stormseer, acting on behalf of his venerable master, High Sage Thorne, had made the decision regarding the Eversong Blade. Yet, this decision, intended to uphold the sanctity and repute of Lunaria Sanctuary, bore perilous consequences. By denying Kellan the blade and retaining it within the sanctuary, they had drawn the gaze of the entire Realm upon them. Whereas the Realm had once pursued Stormblade the Sage, they now besieged Lunaria Sanctuary to seize the coveted blade.

Though Lunaria Sanctuary repelled each assault with valiant defense, the battles claimed the lives of four valiant disciples. This constant state of vigilance and unrest frayed the nerves of the sanctuary's members, robbing them of peaceful slumber. Discontent simmered regarding Darius Stormseer's decision, which was perceived as ill-advised and burdensome. Murmurs of dissent echoed through the ranks, prompting High Sage Thorne to convene a council with his disciples to deliberate upon the fate of the Eversong Blade.

High Sage Thorne had seven disciples, with Darius Stormseer being the foremost, poised to lead upon the elder's passing or retirement. The venerable sage entrusted much of the sanctuary's affairs to Darius and valued his experience, fairness, and unmatched skill second only to Thorne himself. Yet, this trust bred envy among some of his junior brethren.

High Sage Thorne and his disciples assembled in the hallowed Room of Tranquility at the sanctuary's rear that fateful morning. Open to the mountain breeze, the room offered a panoramic view of the majestic peaks, befitting its name and purpose. They sat cross-legged upon the mat-covered floor, forming a semicircle around their master, who had placed the Eversong Blade before him.

After a moment of meditative silence, High Sage Thorne, stroking his long beard, addressed his disciples with measured words.

"Now we gather with clear minds," he began softly. "I know that this sword, left by Stormblade the Sage, has stirred great turmoil in our peaceful abode. The commotion is driven by those who covet it, and we have defended it staunchly. Yet, what troubles me more is the discord within our ranks. We must deliberate and find a harmonious path forward. Speak freely and with honesty."

A hushed stillness followed the sage's words, heavy with the weight of his admonishment. The time had come for the disciples to voice their grievances. Among them, only Sylas Skywatcher and Lucian Starbound harbored envy towards Darius Stormseer. The others either supported him or refrained from the internal dispute.

"Master's words ring true," Sylas Skywatcher spoke first. "Since the Eversong Blade arrived, we have known no peace and made many enemies. I believe it was a grave

mistake for First Brother to keep the sword here. It brings us nothing but peril and loss."

"What Second Brother says is indeed true," Lucian Starbound interjected. "First Brother's decision to retain the blade was driven by his desire to protect Kellan Lightfoot."

The tension in the room heightened. Sylas's remarks were general, but Lucian's words bordered on accusation. High Sage Thorne, sensing the gravity, addressed Lucian firmly yet calmly.

"Lucian, unfounded accusations verge on slander, a grievous offense. Speak with evidence and honesty."

"I hold master's values dearly," Lucian replied. "I claim that First Brother retained the sword to protect Kellan with reason. Kellan, saved from death by First Brother, holds a special place in his heart. It is no secret how much First Brother cares for him. If the blade were with Kellan, the Realm would chase him, not us. But it is short-sighted to endanger our own disciples for the sake of one boy. First Brother must account for his decision."

All eyes now turned to Darius Stormseer, who remained cross-legged and calm amidst the growing tension. High Sage Thorne's expectant and penetrating gaze settled upon him, urging for a response. Darius cleared his throat, his voice steady and resolute, his demeanor betraying no emotion beyond his measured words.

"Second Brother and Fifth Brother speak not without merit. The Eversong Blade has brought us turmoil, which is evident. Fifth Brother's accusation, too, holds a kernel of truth, for in my heart, I thought retaining the sword might spare Kellan from mortal peril."

A palpable silence filled the room as Darius paused, every disciple holding their breath. Yet, he continued with unwavering composure, "However, my decision to keep the Eversong Blade was not solely for Kellan's safety. It was principally to preserve the honor and renown of Lunaria Sanctuary."

"Enlighten us, First Brother!" Sylas Skywatcher urged.

"The Eversong Blade, heirloom of Stormblade the Sage, is an artifact of immense desire in the Realm. Stormblade met his end at Dragonspire Peak, a place sacred to our sanctuary, lying within our domain. If such a relic were to fall into foreign hands, what would this signify but that Lunaria Sanctuary, a stalwart faction, could not defend its own sacred treasures? Would we not become the laughingstock of the Realm, our name sullied for seven generations? Yes, the Eversong Blade's presence here has invited attacks and claimed the lives of four disciples. Yet, what is death if it befalls us in defense of Lunaria Sanctuary? To die heroically is our creed, for our master has taught us that a hero's death is far nobler than a coward's life. This is my reasoning, and I entrust the final decision regarding the Eversong Blade to our master."

Despite the initial opposition, many of Darius's junior disciples secretly conceded the wisdom in his words. His calm acknowledgment of his protective instincts towards Kellan, followed by a strong justification for his actions, diffused the Force of the accusation.

High Sage Thorne, stroking his beard, admired his head disciple's sagacity and foresaw Darius's potential to lead Lunaria Sanctuary to greatness. His gaze swept over the assembly as he spoke.

"Excellent! Your senior brother's argument is sound and just. Nonetheless, this gathering is for collective deliberation. I shall only render a verdict once all voices have been heard. Our decisions must reflect unity, for division will weaken us, especially now when we face formidable adversaries. The future of Lunaria Sanctuary rests in the hands of you seven. If discord festers among you, how can our sanctuary endure? Therefore, if any still harbor dissent regarding the Eversong Blade, speak now and share your thoughts."

Lucian Starbound, sensing an opportunity to press further, spoke once more. His frustration was palpable, for Darius had deftly deflected his earlier accusations. Lucian, though only forty-five, was exceptionally gifted, having mastered the highest skills of the sanctuary, earning his place among High Sage Thorne's foremost disciples.

"Master, if we are to keep the Eversong Blade as our right, then it stands to reason that the hardships we endure to defend it should be rewarded. Should the heirloom books left by Stormblade, the Sage, which the blade is said to unlock, not be added to our sanctuary's treasury? I have suggested this to First Brother, but he has always refused. Now, in the presence of Master and all senior and junior brothers, I ask again: should we not seek those heirlooms for the benefit of Lunaria Sanctuary?"

"No! We shall not seek those heirlooms, for they were not bequeathed to us by Stormblade the Sage. Lunaria Sanctuary is a noble institution, not one that seizes the possessions of others!" Darius Stormseer replied with unwavering conviction, earning silent admiration from his brethren and master.

But suddenly, Lucian Starbound laughed, a sharp and bitter sound. "Ha-ha-ha, how clever of First Brother and how foolish of us to be deceived! If we claim the sword because it resides within our territory, why not the heirlooms? Who in the Realm would not covet them, including First Brother himself? If the heirlooms were claimed by Lunaria Sanctuary, all disciples could study them. Still, First Brother's refusal reveals his desire to possess them solely. Is this not so?"

Darius Stormseer's face flushed with anger, and all eyes turned to him. Yet, seasoned in both combat and mental discipline, he controlled his fury. He understood that Lucian's accusations stemmed from deeper grievances.

Recalling his strict guidance and frequent reprimands towards Lucian, particularly regarding his susceptibility to carnal desires, Darius remembered the incident with Elysia. Lucian's inappropriate conduct, unnoticed by others but sharply rebuked by Darius, had planted seeds of resentment. Those seeds bore fruit in the form of Lucian's heated accusations.

Darius Stormseer drew a deep breath, mastering his emotions as he discerned the roots of his junior brother's apparent enmity.

"I am but fulfilling my duty with utmost integrity," Darius spoke, his voice steady as a mountain wind. "In the matter of the Eversong Blade, my decision was borne of careful deliberation. I refuse to contravene the precepts of Lunaria Sanctuary." He turned to his master, who nodded in solemn approval, then faced Lucian Starbound.

"Fifth Brother, do you recall the third edict of our order? It forbids any disciple of Lunaria Sanctuary from acquiring combat knowledge from other schools. To breach this rule is to betray our sanctuary. Given this, how can you advocate for appropriating Stormblade the Sage's heirloom books?"

Lucian Starbound's face flushed with indignation, his cunning mind swiftly countering the rebuke. "First Brother, I am not suggesting we violate our precepts by studying those heirlooms. I propose only that we possess them. Whether we study them should be left to the

master's judgment. If he deems it beneficial to enhance our skills and thereby elevate Lunaria Sanctuary's honor, would that not be justified?"

Sensing the escalating tension, High Sage Thorne raised his hand, his voice cutting through the strife like a blade through the mist.

"Enough of this fruitless debate! I stand by the actions of your First Brother! It is unbefitting of Lunaria Sanctuary to claim the heirlooms of Stormblade the Sage. Those tomes were pilfered from other venerable sects by Stormblade. Possessing and studying them would put us at odds with their rightful owners. True mastery lies not in books or relics but within oneself. By diligently cultivating our own traditions, you shall achieve greatness. I command that all discord be banished from your hearts."

His seven disciples knelt, pledging their loyalty in unison. At that moment, two disciples of Lunaria Sanctuary burst into the Room of Tranquility, their faces pale and their voices quivering.

"Master, the peak of Lunaria is imperiled! Forces from Highguard in the north and Suncrest in the south have surrounded us, threatening to turn our sanctum into a battlefield!"

Only High Sage Thorne and Darius Stormseer received this alarming news with unperturbed composure. Master

and disciple exchanged glances before Thorne rose, gripping his staff purposefully.

"We must face them with resolve. Summon all disciples to form our defenses!"

The seven disciples dispersed swiftly while High Sage Thorne, flanked by his senior followers, ascended towards the peak. There, the disciples of Lunaria Sanctuary stood arrayed in disciplined formations, facing north and south. With a bound, High Sage Thorne leaped onto a high rock, his seven disciples following suit, gazing upon the encroaching forces.

The opposing troops, each no more than a hundred strong, appeared more as emissaries than as an invading army, which reassured Thorne. Channeling his Force, he called out with a voice that echoed across the valley.

"Lunaria Sanctuary has never partaken in civil strife. Today, both northern and southern forces have gathered at our doorstep. I request the commanders of these forces to state their intentions!"

From the northern ranks, a tall, slender officer stepped forward, his movements swift and fluid despite the rigidity of his armor, impressing the masters of Lunaria Sanctuary. He halted beneath the rock, standing erect and saluting with clasped hands, his voice ringing out clear and respectful.

"I am Kanzu, leader of this escort, on a mission from Prince Yorin of the north, rightful heir to the throne. Our prince extends his gratitude to Lunaria Sanctuary for not siding with the usurper of Suncrest, acknowledging the justice of our cause."

Darius Stormseer, silently admiring Kanzu's prowess and diplomacy, received a signal from his master to respond.

"Commander Kanzu," Darius began, his tone even and respectful, "Lunaria Sanctuary seeks no gratitude, for we remain steadfastly neutral. Our only concern is the well-being of the common folk, who suffer most in this civil war. We abstain from taking sides to avoid further suffering. Please understand this and convey your true purpose for this visit."

Kanzu's eyes gleamed with understanding and respect as he prepared to respond, the tension of impending conflict momentarily eased by the clarity and integrity of the sanctuary's stance.

The northern officer smiled patiently and said, "Your words truly reveal the wisdom and detachment of monks who no longer wish to meddle in worldly affairs. Such integrity is indeed worthy of admiration!"

"We have been sent by our lord to seek the benevolence of Lunaria Sanctuary. Please grant us the Starbound Scroll, which is useless to your order," the officer requested.

"The Starbound Scroll? What manner of book is this? We have no knowledge of it and have only now heard its name," replied Darius Stormseer, his tone tinged with hesitation.

The officer remained composed. "The Starbound Scroll, as its name implies, is the Sun Battle Formation Manual, crafted by the Great King. It is a treatise on military strategy drawn from the Mongo army's experiences during their campaigns in the central plains. Our lord wishes to borrow this scroll from Lunaria Sanctuary."

"But... we do not possess such a book!" responded Darius Stormseer, his voice firm.

The officer nodded slightly. "It may not have belonged to Lunaria Sanctuary originally, but with the heirlooms of Stormblade, the Sage is reportedly now within your sanctum. Surely, the scroll is among them. Stormblade the Sage stole it from the imperial library."

A loud shout rang out before Darius Stormseer could respond, and a figure dashed from the south. This new arrival, also an officer, was tall and burly yet moved with swift grace, signaling his formidable skill. He halted before the high rock, gesturing grandly, and spoke loudly.

"Do not be swayed by the lies of these rebel scum! We believe Lunaria Sanctuary stands for righteousness, not rebellion! The Starbound Scroll belongs rightfully to our emperor and must be returned!"

"Arrogant fool! We are not rebels but champions of truth and justice, defenders of the people's welfare! Your king is a tyrant, a usurper, a mere boy who disrespects his elders!" shouted Kanzu, the northern officer's voice laced with anger.

"You insolent rebel! You dare defy the rightful government and spout such drivel?" roared the southern officer as he lunged forward. Unable to restrain their fury, the two officers clashed, their blows resonating like thunder. They staggered back, their armor cracked, yet their bodies showed resilience, revealing no grievous wounds. They drew their swords, poised for a deadly duel, as their troops surged forward, ready to join the fray.

In a flash, two figures descended from the rock. As swift as eagles, Sylas Skywatcher and Lucian Starbound intercepted the officers. Sylas faced Kanzu while Lucian confronted the southern officer. With deft movements, they disarmed the officers, leaving them stunned and speechless.

"Honored guests, you tread upon sacred ground. Why do you disrespect our sanctuary and sow chaos here?" called Darius Stormseer from atop the rock.

Kanzu bowed respectfully. "Forgive our impetuosity."

"What? Does Lunaria Sanctuary intend to harbor rebels?" shouted the burly southern officer. Witnessing the

mounting hostility, High Sage Thorne sighed and stroked his beard. "So be it, as fate wills... Return their swords!" Lucian Starbound and Syllas Skywatcher handed back the swords, stepping back but remaining vigilant.

"Officers of the north and south, heed my words! I, High Sage Thorne, leader of Lunaria Sanctuary, have never uttered falsehoods. What I declare now, convey to your lords!" His voice, though soft, carried immense authority, silencing all present. Even the troops, poised for conflict, listened intently.

With deliberate calm, High Sage Thorne drew a rusty sword from his robe, holding it aloft. "Know this: we are unaware of any heirlooms left by Stormblade the Sage, and we have no knowledge of the Starbound Scroll! The sole relic we possess is this Eversong Blade. We desire no other treasures. This sword has resided within Lunaria Sanctuary's territory for decades. Now that it is in our hands, we will not relinquish it. Let this be clear. Withdraw your forces from our land. Should you violate our sanctum, we will act decisively, without favor."

Suddenly, a metallic clang echoed, followed by a boisterous laugh. "Ha-ha-ha-ha, old monks, hand over the Eversong Blade!"

"No, it is mine!" "Give it to me!" "To me!"

The monks of Lunaria Sanctuary were startled to see numerous warriors exploiting the situation, slipping in

while they prepared to face the opposing forces. Among them were figures from the Celestial Monastery, Brightblade Academy, Moonshadow Sect, and others who had long pursued Stormblade the Sage. However, it was the appearance of three individuals that indeed alarmed High Sage Thorne. The first was a tall, dark-skinned man with wide, white eyes and ears like an elephant's. His body was covered in black hair, and he wore a steel chain with two human skulls hanging from his waist. This was the Black Mountain Fiend, the northern demon lord. Nearby stood a small, old man with a large head and narrow face, holding a divine whisk. This was the Eight-Armed Saint, the western demon lord. Behind them, an eerie old woman with a blood-red face, large protruding teeth, and disheveled hair dressed in black was the Scarlet Witch, the eastern demon lord. Their presence signaled a grave threat to Lunaria Sanctuary.

High Sage Thorne, typically a paragon of serenity, took a deep breath to steady himself. His disciples, save for the ever-calm Darius Stormseer, turned pale at the sight of the three demon lords. Their presence signified a dire and unprecedented threat.

Not only were the monks of Lunaria Sanctuary anxious, but even the northern and southern troops were taken aback by the arrival of these ominous figures. The officers, leading their respective forces, stood frozen, recognizing the formidable and ruthless reputations of these warriors, who were known for their bizarre and merciless ways.

"Black Mountain Fiend," said High Sage Thorne, his voice steady and calm. You have come to visit Lunaria Sanctuary. Your earlier words could have been more precise; please repeat them. Have you come seeking the Eversong Blade?" He lifted the rusty sword high above his head once more. Darius Stormseer watched with amusement as all eyes fixated on the relic, much like a pack of ravenous wolves eyeing a lone lamb.

"Ha-ha-ha, indeed! Do you think I came for a friendly visit? Ha-ha-ha!" bellowed the Black Mountain Fiend.

"Very well. And you, Scarlet Witch, who has journeyed from the east, what brings you here?" asked High Sage Thorne.

"Ugh, wretched monks! Who would willingly visit you? I am here to claim the Eversong Blade from your grasp!" the Scarlet Witch hissed, her eyes gleaming with avarice as she drooled over the rusty sword.

"So, your intentions align with those of the Black Mountain Fiend. And you, Eight-Armed Saint, do you also seek this seemingly worthless rusty sword?" inquired the elder.

"Hemmm, if it is truly worthless, why then is it so fiercely contested, Revered One?" replied the old man, his voice smooth yet unsettling. "If it is useless, you should not be so reluctant to part with it. Better to give it to me."

"And what of the other heroes gathered here? Have you all come to claim the Eversong Blade?" asked High Sage Thorne, addressing the assembly.

"Yes, give it to me!" "To me!" "To me!" came the clamorous replies.

High Sage Thorne raised his left hand with a weary smile to signal for silence. To him, they seemed like a horde of squabbling children. He then spoke with great patience.

"Poor Stormblade the Sage! Even in death, his belongings are coveted and contested. Friends, there is but one Eversong Blade; many of you desire it. Unchecked, this will lead to violence and unnecessary bloodshed. I do not wish any conflict or harm to befall the sacred grounds of Lunaria Mountain Range. Therefore, let us determine who is worthy of this blade through a test of strength without resorting to violence. Anyone who dares to use Force will be set upon by everyone present. How say you?"

Even the most formidable figures among the rogue sects, including the three demon lords, were taken aback. They knew that to use Force and face the combined might of all present would be folly, even for them. They nodded in agreement, shouting, "Agreed, agreed!"

"Good, if everyone agrees. Now, the Eversong Blade is in my hand. If anyone can take it from me without using violent attacks, using only their strength, then the sword

shall be theirs." With this declaration, the old leader descended gracefully from the large rock, followed by his five remaining disciples. Two had already descended earlier. Now, the old master stood in an open area, his seven disciples led by Darius Stormseer, forming a protective semicircle behind him. This formation made it clear that any attempt to seize the sword through deceit would be met with immediate retaliation from the monks of Lunaria Sanctuary.

"Now, please proceed!" said High Sage Thorne, gripping the hilt of the rusty sword tightly with his right hand while pressing his left hand, fingers spread, against his navel—a posture perfect for channeling his Force to defend the sword.

The assembled warriors, aware of the elder's formidable reputation, hesitated.

"Forgive me!" Kanzu, the leader of the northern forces, stepped forward, accompanied by the southern officer. They did not intend to test the elder's strength but had other concerns. "If I seize this sword, will I also gain the Starbound Scroll?"

"If so, I will also try!" declared the southern officer.

Darius Stormseer, speaking for his master, responded, "We have stated we know nothing of the scroll. Whoever can seize the sword by strength will only possess the Eversong Blade. We shall not interfere in other matters."

"In that case, what use is this rusty sword to us?" said the southern officer, stepping back in disappointment, followed by the northern officer.

"Wait, High Sage Thorne!" boomed Black Mountain Fiend. "If I step forward and take the Eversong Blade, does it become mine?"

"That is what my master has decreed," replied Darius Stormseer.

"And no one else will try to take it from me?" inquired the Fiend.

"As long as my master lives, we will ensure that none disturb you without facing us. Others may attempt to seize it from you without violence. However, we hold no sway outside Lunaria Sanctuary's territory," replied Darius.

"Ha-ha-ha, very fair! Let me test your strength, High Sage Thorne!" laughed Black Mountain Fiend, stepping forward to face the elder.

The other dark figures, Scarlet Witch and Eight-Armed Saint, chose to wait, wary of the strength of both High Sage Thorne and Black Mountain Fiend. They preferred to observe the outcome before making their move.

Everyone watched with bated breath as the two elders prepared to test their strength against each other, gripping the rusty sword between them. Their eyes locked, charged with the energy of their wills. Slowly, Black Mountain Fiend raised his right hand, clutching the sword, while his left hand rested on one of the two skulls hanging from his waist.

The two stood motionless like ancient statues, yet the Force they channeled into the sword was immense, causing it to tremble violently under the strain. Suddenly, a sharp crack reached the air, and the sword shattered into pieces.

Gasps of shock erupted from the assembled crowd. High Sage Thorne's face turned ashen, and even the usually mirthful Black Mountain Fiend stared in disbelief at the fragments in his hands. Darius Stormseer, Scarlet Witch, and Eight-Armed Saint stepped forward, picking up the broken pieces and examining them closely.

"Ahhhhh...!" "Ordinary steel!" "Not miraculous steel!" "Not the Eversong Blade...!"

Darius Stormseer's last exclamation left everyone gaping. High Sage Thorne was dumbfounded, staring at the hilt still in his hand, realizing it was crudely made.

"But... not the Eversong Blade?" he stammered.

Darius Stormseer knelt before his master. "Indeed, Master. We have been deceived by Kellan! This sword was never the Eversong Blade!"

"How can you be so certain?" demanded High Sage Thorne, his face flushed with embarrassment. The idea that the venerable leader of Lunaria Sanctuary had been fooled by a mere boy was unthinkable. Everyone, including the three demon lords, listened intently.

"I am certain. This sword is made of ordinary steel and coated with greenish material. The true Eversong Blade is said to be a hundred times harder than common steel. This deception explains why the boy relinquished it so readily."

"Damn boy!" cursed Lucian Starbound suddenly. "I knew he was not to be trusted! His technique of absorbing Force marks him as a future demon! And First Brother trusted him! This is truly disgraceful!"

"Lucian, silence!" thundered High Sage Thorne, his voice resonating with anger and shame. The presence of so many outsiders made this public rebuke even more humiliating.

Suddenly, Black Mountain Fiend burst into hearty laughter. "Ha-ha-ha-ha! How delightful! The monks of Lunaria Sanctuary were tricked by a mere boy, the disciple of Stormblade the Sage! This tale will spread far and wide across the Realm. And do you know that the boy who

deceived you is now reveling with two beautiful girls, disciples of the Sea Witch? Ha-ha-ha, surpassing even his master in cunning! We have all been fooled, but none more so than you monks of Lunaria Sanctuary!"

High Sage Thorne's face alternated between red and pale. This was a severe blow to the sanctuary's honor. He was displeased with Darius Stormseer, for his affection for Kellan had led to this deception. In his anger, he turned to Sylas Skywatcher and Lucian Starbound, selecting the two disciples who had opposed Darius.

"Sylas and Lucian! I now charge you to find and capture Kellan. Bring him back here!"

"Yes, Master!" replied the two monks, setting off with determined strides. Darius Stormseer watched them leave, troubled by Kellan's audacity. It was well hidden if the authentic Eversong Blade was still in Kellan's possession. He remained silent, acknowledging his fault in misjudging Kellan.

Frustrated, Darius Stormseer then addressed the unwanted guests. "You have witnessed our deception. There is nothing here related to Stormblade the Sage's heirlooms. Leave this place, for there is no more to discuss!"

Laughing, the three demon lords departed, followed by the other warriors. However, it was clear their pursuit of Kellan was far from over. They would each seek the boy,

believing he held the key to Stormblade the Sage's hidden treasures. The northern and southern troops also withdrew, their desire for conflict dampened by the presence of these formidable figures.

After Empress Valeria's death, the civil war between the north and south ignited in 9398. Before her passing, Empress Valeria had named her grandson, Thandor, son of her deceased eldest son, as her heir. Seizing the opportunity, certain officials manipulated their way into influential positions and supported Thandor's ascension. A year after the Empress's death, Thandor became Emperor of the Varden Realm.

The civil war erupted when Prince Yorin, another son of Empress Valeria, stationed in the north to defend against Mongo invasions, refused to accept Thandor's rule. Believing the crown should rightfully be his, Yorin led his army from Highguard to Suncrest, plunging the Realm into a bitter struggle for the throne.

The annals of history bear witness to the grievous toll wrought by wars, most notably civil strife. While the machinations of a select few sought power and gain, the common folk and valiant soldiers bore the brunt of the suffering. Wars gave rise to a maelstrom of chaos and lawlessness, as the preoccupied governance left the masses vulnerable to marauders, the razing of villages, abductions, and savage assaults. Soldiers, hardened by the incessant shadow of death and honed for battle, often descended into a ferocity surpassing common brigands.

Under the guise of purging "enemy supporters," they indulged in their basest desires, inflicting terror upon civilians.

Amidst this chaos, Kellan found a peculiar advantage, his path obscured from the vigilant warriors of Lunaria Sanctuary. Kellan had longed to return to the hallowed Lunaria Mountain Range for more than a year, seeking to refine his skills after numerous trials. Yet, the pervasive unrest led him to diverge and, at times, retrace his steps to avoid fierce skirmishes.

One misty morning, his journey brought him to the village of Mistwood, nestled at the base of Emberpeak Mountain in the Silverbrook River valley. The Silverbrook River, feeding into the Great Serpent River, provided a crucial and swift passage to the heartlands, rendering Mistwood a bustling hub. Unbeknownst to him, Kellan drew ever nearer to the Lunaria Mountain Range lying westward of Emberpeak Mountain.

As he ventured westward, the conflict's fury lessened, with the armies clashing between Highguard and Suncrest. Nonetheless, tranquility was a distant dream, as the civil war's ripples extended far and wide, inciting disorder and unchecked criminality. Thieves prowled like vermin in a forsaken granary, emboldened by the absence of those who might vanquish them.

Upon entering Mistwood, Kellan immediately perceived the village's turmoil. Despite the early hour, altercations

abounded. Wearied by the constant sight of violence, Kellan considered taking another route to avoid further involvement. The ceaseless brawls and bloodshed had sickened him, each fight a microcosm of the larger war, driven by loyalties and vendettas. Yet, as he turned to leave, the anguished cries of a woman pierced the air, halting him. A woman beset by numerous assailants drew his reluctant gaze. His sense of duty, instilled by his master, compelled him to act.

Approaching the fray, he beheld a striking woman in light blue garments, her swordsmanship a dance of grace and lethality against the brutish men wielding machetes. Her beauty was not lost on him—eyes alight like a phoenix, a face fair and tinged with rose, and a slender and resolute form. To Kellan's chagrin, the villagers cowered, shutters drawn, avoiding the scene. Four burly men lay bleeding, and a young man clutched a wounded shoulder.

Though the woman fought valiantly, twelve opponents were formidable. Their vile taunts and lewd threats fueled her fury but also sapped her focus.

"Don't harm her!"

"Leave her face unscathed!"

"Tire her out; she'll yield eventually, ha...ha...ha!"

"What good is she exhausted? She must serve us!"

"She has strength, this warrior girl, hee-hee-hee!"

"Tear her clothes! She's mine first!"

"No, mine!"

"Let's catch her first and draw lots for turns!"

Kellan's ire surged. His sense of justice and respect for women clashed with his hesitance to intervene without understanding the cause. However, the woman's plight outweighed his reservations.

As she faltered, her sword cast aside by a concerted strike, the men pounced. With a cry, part of her clothing was torn, exposing her skin. Kellan could restrain himself no longer. He leaped into the fray with a roar, felling two men easily, hurling them aside as one might cast straw to the wind. His movements were swift and decisive, scattering the attackers with a flurry of blows.

The remaining men, undeterred, brandished their machetes. But Kellan, a master of his craft, met their crude strength with superior skill. His strikes shattered wrists, their bones snapping audibly. The would-be leaders, grimacing in pain, retreated.

"Still here?" Kellan's cold and commanding eyes bore into them. Fearful, the men fled, dragging their injured comrades. Kellan observed the woman attending to the young man's wounds after the tumult.

"Are you hurt badly, brother?" Her voice was soft, concern evident.

"The bone might be broken... Elara, thank him quickly."

The woman, Elara Frost, turned to Kellan, her expression one of gratitude. She knelt, speaking with reverence, "I am Elara Frost, and this is my brother, Thorne Frost. We are deeply indebted to you, Great Hero, for saving our lives."

Upon hearing those words, two feelings intertwined within Kellan's heart. To be hailed as a Great Hero filled him with a mingling of pride and humility. This maiden deemed him a hero of unmatched prowess, having swiftly dispatched twelve coarse men. Yet, Kellan knew the truth; without his extraordinary Force, he doubted his skill exceeded that of the girl herself. The praise warmed him, but he felt unworthy of such a lofty title.

"Ah, please, rise and dispense with formality, Miss," he entreated, aiding her to her feet. A warm, soft energy emanated from her smooth upper arm as his hands touched her shoulders, causing his heart to race. His eyes, drawn irresistibly, met the exposed portion of her chest, the sight of the soft, white slope holding him captive.

"Elara... your clothes...!" her brother Thorne reminded, breaking the spell.

Her face flushed crimson with a soft moan. Swiftly, Kellan removed his cloak, draping it over her, her grateful eyes meeting his. This act spared her further embarrassment, especially as villagers began to emerge, emboldened by the cessation of hostilities.

"Ah, it is fortunate you evaded their ambush. You should leave this village with haste, for they will surely return to wreak more havoc," an elder spoke, his face lined with worry.

Kellan frowned, his resolve hardening. "Old man, we do not cower before threats. Let them come; we shall face them! For now, we must tend to this wounded lad. Who among you would grant us shelter to rest and heal him?"

Despite the many eyes filled with concern, no one stepped forward. The elder spoke again quickly.

"Great Hero, you must understand our plight. These men are land pirates from a nearby village. If they hear we have aided you, it will bring suffering upon us."

"Cowards!" Thorne Frost, his shoulder wounded, exclaimed angrily. "Do you think we won't defend those who aid us? We are prepared to pay for lodging and medicine!"

Kellan smiled, comprehending the young man's frustration. Like his sister, Thorne bore a visage of courage and large, expressive eyes.

"Forgive us, young hero. We believe in your bravery, but will you stay in this village forever?"

"What...?" Elara Frost asked, her eyes widening in surprise. Kellan looked away, fearing he might lose himself in their beauty.

"Miss, young sir, their worries are justified. This elder speaks the truth. Indeed, while we remain, those brigands dare not trouble us. But we cannot stay indefinitely; their vengeance will fall upon the villagers when we depart. Would we not then be complicit in their suffering?"

The siblings were astonished and nodded in reluctant agreement. "What use are guards or local officials, then? Is there no village head representing the government here?" Thorne continued, his frustration unabated.

The elder shook his head, sighing deeply. "Young hero, do you not see? Since my youth, the common folk have never known true security. Guards and officials abound, yet they bring more harm than safety, becoming mere mercenaries of their power. The so-called protectors indulge their pleasures, and officials, though grand in title, are often small in spirit and corrupt at heart. Such is our plight; we beg you not to add to our burden."

"Let us leave this village; I will find us a place to rest," Kellan declared. Without a response, he bent down, lifting the weakened Thorne Frost. His shoulder wound was grievous, compounded by significant blood loss.

"Outside the village, in the western forest, lies an abandoned temple. You may find refuge there. Take what

you need—medicine, provisions," the elder offered, sympathy and admiration in his eyes for the trio who had dared to defy the land pirates.

Elara Frost procured medicine and supplies, and they ventured into the forest. There, amidst the trees, they discovered the old, forsaken temple, a fitting sanctuary. Kellan laid Thorne gently upon the floor, which Elara swiftly cleaned, then assisted her in preparing the necessary remedies.

After administering the medicine and ensuring Thorne had some nourishment, he fell into a deep, restorative sleep. Elara and Kellan then sat in the temple's outer hall upon smooth stones likely once used for meditation. Silence reigned between them, broken only by stolen glances and shy smiles from the maiden.

"Great Hero..."

"Ah, please, call me Kellan Lightfoot, Miss. I am no hero, merely one who lent aid."

"But your skills are truly extraordinary. You have my deepest admiration."

"Your own swordsmanship is commendable, Miss. I am but an ordinary man beside you. You are young, yet your blade sings with the grace of a dancer, and your movements are a beautiful, deadly dance. You are indeed wonderful, Miss."

The girl quickly turned to face him, expecting impudence, but saw only sincere admiration in his sharp eyes. Instead of anger, she lowered her head, her face blushing, her lips smiling shyly, and her heart beating joyously. What woman would not feel her heart flutter at such genuine praise from a young, handsome, and valorous man?

For a moment, neither spoke, and their silence did not trouble Kellan. He found solace in the enchanting vision before him: long, smooth black hair cascading like a river of night, a face as lovely as a phoenix in repose, and eyes sparkled like twin stars. Her small, sharp nose quivered slightly in embarrassment, and her cheeks blushed a hue like half-ripe tomatoes. Her mouth, beautifully shaped, seemed painted in shades of bright, fresh red. A small, pointed chin adorned her face, with a delicate dimple that appeared with the slightest movement. Though his cloak now covered her slim and firm body, it could not entirely obscure its alluring shape.

Though words were absent, Kellan did not feel the pang of loneliness. Yet the girl, aware of the admiring gaze from the one she held in high regard, felt a tinge of unease and finally spoke in a soft voice.

"Great Hero, how may I repay your immense kindness? Let my brother and I always pray for your happiness."

"Oh, Miss, such formality is unnecessary. Rise, please. What I did was merely the duty of one to help another in distress."

"You are brave and wise, Great Hero..." Her gaze met his, and for a fleeting moment, Kellan sensed a tender affection radiating from behind her long lashes. Yet, it was brief as she quickly lowered her head once more.

"Suddenly, a scream pierced the air from within the temple. Kellan and the others dashed inside, racing towards the chamber where Thorne Frost lay. The young man, though awake, remained prone and agitated. His shouts were filled with anger as if he were combating unseen foes, his limbs thrashing while his eyes stayed closed. Kellan sighed in relief, realizing it was nothing more than a fever dream."

"He's feverish!" Elara exclaimed, worry etched on her face as she felt her brother's neck. Kellan touched Thorne's forehead, finding it hot with fever.

"I'll fetch medicine from the village," Kellan declared, and without waiting for a response, he dashed back to the village. The shopkeeper gladly provided medicine for fever brought on by wounds, and Kellan swiftly returned to the forest.

As he approached the temple, anger surged as he saw the bandits who had previously attacked Elara and her brother. At least thirty were led by a tall, muscular man

with a red face and a menacing blade. This intimidating figure confronted Elara, who stood ready with her sword. With swift agility, Kellan hastened his steps and leaped over the men, landing beside Elara. Her face brightened at the sight of her rescuer.

Kellan ignored the tall man and handed Elara the medicine bundle, saying, "Miss, leave these wretches to me. Quickly, prepare the medicine and tend to your brother."

Elara hesitated, her eyes sweeping over the bandits. Reluctance showed in her eyes, and she was unwilling to leave Kellan alone against so many foes, especially with their fierce leader present.

"But..."

"Don't argue. Your brother needs you more. I can handle these knaves."

"Great Hero, use my sword..."

"Thank you, but there's no need. To deal with such filth, why sully a sword?"

For a moment, she gazed at him with tender eyes, longer and more intently this time. Kellan, overwhelmed, lowered his head. Elara ran inside with the medicine and her sword while Kellan turned to face the gang leader.

"What do you want? A group of grown men harassing a young girl and her sick brother, such cowardly behavior!"

The gang leader, a man of about forty years, exuded immense strength, and his large, sturdy knife added to his intimidating presence. His face was red, adorned with a thick black mustache and beard, and his wide eyes burned with rage. With a swing of his knife, he pointed it at Kellan and spoke in a hoarse voice to his men.

"Is this the meddlesome youth?"

"Yes, it's him, Chief!" replied one of the men Kellan had previously bested. The gang leader scrutinized Kellan closely, unable to believe that this youth, who appeared no older than nineteen, had defeated twelve of his men.

"Who are you?" he demanded, his tone arrogant and condescending.

"My name is Kellan Lightfoot."

"Are you of the Brightblade Academy?"

Kellan realized then that the siblings must be disciples of the Brightblade Academy, explaining Elara's graceful swordsmanship. He nodded and replied, "I belong to no faction. I was a passerby who could not stand the sight of a dozen men ganging up on a woman. Do you not see the disgrace and ridicule such cowardly actions bring you?"

"You insolent whelp! We have our own quarrel with the Brightblade Academy. What business is it of yours? You must have a death wish!" The bandit leader charged, his sword whistling toward Kellan's head. Though Kellan had not fully mastered his combat skills, he had learned enough to leap back quickly, his movements light but stiff. The bandit leader, skilled in combat, noted this and roared, advancing again with his sword. But this time, Kellan, aware of the danger, moved forward with a thrust of his hands, using his palms to push with all his internal energy. The bandit leader screamed, falling back as fresh blood spewed forth, his eyes bulging, and his life ended there and then.

The rough men's rage swelled like a storm as Kellan saw their leader fall. With cries of fury and curses upon their lips, they surged towards him, weapons gleaming in the dim light. Though skilled in many ways, Kellan was unseasoned in combat skills, particularly against a throng of thirty armed men. His heart beat wildly, confusion clouding his thoughts. Yet fortune favored him, for his late master's training had instilled in him the virtues of swiftness and the subtle arts of lightness. His body moved with a grace and speed that belied his youth and inexperience, darting and leaping with such alacrity that he seemed to vanish, a shadow among the men who sought his life. The attackers swung and thrust, but their blades found only air, their prey eluding them as though he were a specter.

Amid this maelstrom, Kellan felt a thrill of joy. His master's emphasis on speed and Force had not been in vain. He moved effortlessly among his foes, who appeared sluggish and cumbersome by comparison. Realization dawned upon him—these skills were the bedrock of true combat skills. He began to counter with newfound confidence, his strikes swift and decisive. A slap or a kick sent his assailants sprawling, their attempts to overwhelm him turning chaotic and disordered.

Cries of alarm rang out among the attackers as seven of their number fell to Kellan's blows. Suddenly, men on the periphery dropped, and five more lay motionless in the blink of an eye. Kellan's keen eyes caught a glimmer of white—a fleeting shadow among the trees. Someone was aiding him, unseen, dispatching enemies with hidden weapons. His heart leaped; it could only be Lydia, whose skill with such devices was unparalleled. Emboldened by this silent ally, he struck with renewed vigor, felling two more foes with the Force of his palms. Panic overtook the attackers, and they fled in disarray, abandoning their fallen comrades.

"Whoever has aided me, show yourself!" Kellan called out when the last attackers had vanished into the night. The silence that followed was profound, broken only by the groans of the injured.

"They have gone, my lord." The voice was soft yet clear. Kellan turned to see Elara Frost at the temple door, her

eyes alight with admiration and gratitude. She addressed him with newfound reverence.

"Who was it, Miss Elara?"

"I do not know, my lord, but I glimpsed a woman clad in white, moving swiftly among the trees. She aided you from the shadows and is now gone. Surely, you know her?"

Kellan's heart quickened. A woman in white, skilled and elusive—it could be no other than Lydia. He approached the bodies of the fallen attackers and found the telltale marks of her secret weapons, white spiked balls crushing their temples. Once more, Lydia had come to his aid. But why did she remain hidden, refusing to meet him?

"Yes, I know her," he murmured, then asked, "And your brother?"

Elara's eyes shone with gratitude. "Thanks to your help, his fever has subsided. You have saved us both, and I cannot fathom how to repay such kindness." She knelt before him, her voice trembling with emotion.

Kellan moved swiftly, lifting her gently by the shoulders. Even through the fabric of her clothing, the touch of her skin sent a jolt through him. He quickly released her, and their eyes met, a moment of silent understanding passing between them.

"Please, do not kneel before me, Miss Elara. What I have done is not out of kindness but duty. We must leave this place—it is not safe. Let us find a more suitable shelter for your brother's recovery."

Elara nodded, and Kellan entered the temple. Thorne Frost, her younger brother, lay weak but conscious. His eyes, filled with admiration, turned to Kellan.

"You are a true hero..." he whispered. Kellan merely nodded, lifting the boy gently.

"We must go," he said, urgency in his voice. "This place is dangerous."

Thorne, though frail, protested softly. "I can walk, great hero."

"You are still weak, and we must move quickly," Kellan replied, carrying him easily. Elara followed, her eyes never leaving Kellan, admiration and gratitude shining in her gaze. Kellan's mind, however, was elsewhere, filled with thoughts of Lydia and her mysterious assistance.

Night fell, and the travelers found refuge in a quiet field with scattered huts, the homes of farmers who kept watch over their crops. Under a starlit sky, Kellan laid Thorne down in one of the huts and set off to find food, leaving Elara to tend to her brother.

"Elara, he is remarkable," Thorne whispered as Kellan's silhouette disappeared into the night.

The girl nodded, lost in thought. "He is skilled, indeed. But his origins remain a mystery."

"You must learn more about him," Thorne insisted. "He has saved us twice now. We owe him a great debt that must be acknowledged and repaid."

Elara sighed, her heart heavy with conflicting emotions. "I will, Thorne. But for now, rest. We have much to discuss with our savior."

With a tender touch, she silenced her brother's protests and prepared the medicine Kellan had procured. As the night deepened, thoughts of Kellan and the enigmatic Lydia swirled in her mind, their fates intertwined in ways she could not yet comprehend.

Thorne was compelled to swallow the bitter draught, the acrid taste stealing his will to speak. Weariness still lay heavily upon him, and soon he surrendered to slumber, his eyelids closing softly over tired eyes.

Kellan returned bearing a basket laden with steaming buns and a large jug of fragrant tea procured from a nearby village. He offered the provisions to Elara, and they partook silently, setting aside a portion for Thorne to consume upon his awakening. They then settled by the

campfire, its flickering flames casting a warm, red glow upon their faces.

"I am heartened to see your brother mending, Lady Elara," Kellan spoke, breaking the quietude, his gaze resting upon her fair features, illuminated by the fire's gentle light.

"Your assistance is greatly appreciated, sir," Elara replied with a nod of gratitude.

"Pray, do not address me as 'sir' or 'lord,' for I am Kellan Lightfoot, no more and no less. You may call me brother, as I am certain I surpass you in years, having nearly reached nineteen summers."

"Then, do not call me 'lady' either. I am Elara Frost, but eighteen winters old, Brother."

A smile touched Kellan's lips. "Very well, Elara. And please, no more talk of debts owed. You flatter me unduly."

"I speak only the truth, Brother. Your aid has been invaluable to us. Might I inquire as to the origins of your remarkable skills? Surely, you are a disciple of a revered master."

A sigh escaped Kellan's lips, for he wearied of revealing his lineage. He was a pupil of Stormblade the Sage and the possessor of the legendary Eversong Blade, a weapon sought by many, rumored to unlock untold treasures left

by his master. He hesitated to share his history with the girl whose admiration shone so clearly in her sharp eyes and fair countenance.

"I am of no particular sect, Elara, and my late master is better left unspoken. I am but an orphan without a home, and my tale is one of wandering. I would like to hear your story. Why were you and your brother beset by those men? Where is your dwelling, and whither are you bound?"

"Brother, your modesty becomes you, yet I find it hard to believe one of your prowess lacks esteemed tutelage. But I shall not press you further. As for me and my brother, we are humble students of the Brightblade Academy."

Kellan's memory stirred at the mention of the academy. He remembered his master's stories of the famed Twin Blades of Brightblade, Thaddeus and Gideon Brightsword, renowned throughout the Realm. His master had recounted many tales of conflict with Brightblade Academy, especially regarding the theft of a mystical elixir and a treasured sword. Moreover, there was the tale of a Brightblade disciple who had eloped with Stormblade the Sage. A smile spread across Kellan's face as he remembered these stories.

"What amuses you, Brother?" Elara inquired.

"Ah, nothing, Elara. I am pleased to meet a student of Brightblade Academy, whose renown precedes it. Your swordsmanship is indeed a testament to its reputation."

"You are too kind," Elara said, her eyes reflecting her genuine admiration. "Your skill is unparalleled, your heart noble, and your words eloquent. You are also humble and now, it seems, adept at flattery."

"Who is the true flatterer here, I wonder?" Kellan laughed, his smile broadening to reveal his white, strong teeth. Elara joined in his laughter, her face lighting up with mirth.

"Perhaps we are both guilty of flattery. But is it so wrong? Praising another brings joy, and I wish to see you happy, Brother, though it is a small recompense."

"Enough of this," Kellan said gently. "Better you tell me why you and your brother were attacked by those men."

A deep sigh escaped Elara. "It was my fault, truly."

She began to recount her tale. Elara Frost and her brother, Thorne Frost, were the offspring of Scholar Sim, a revered poet and painter in Liokke. Amid war and chaos, where scholarly skills offered little protection, Scholar Sim entrusted his children to the Brightblade Academy to learn combat skills, believing them more vital in such tumultuous times. Thus, at thirteen, Elara, and at eleven, Thorne, became students of the academy. They trained

diligently for five years. When the academy's leaders deemed them sufficiently skilled to fend for themselves, especially as Elara was now a young woman of eighteen, they were sent home.

They passed through Mistwood village on their journey, where Elara's beauty sparked a grave incident. Nearby lived Chief Bronn, a local tyrant whose influence spread over several villages, including Mistwood. His only son, Bronn Kitt, notorious for his wickedness and arrogance, set his eyes on Elara and, accompanied by his ruffians, sought to harass her.

Naturally, Elara and Thorne defended themselves, driving away the ruffians. Soon after, however, Bronn Kitt returned with more men who were more potent and dangerous. Elara and Thorne faced grave peril until Kellan intervened, vanquishing their assailants.

"Such is the tale, Brother. I am ashamed that despite five years at Brightblade Academy, we were nearly overwhelmed at our first real test. If not for your timely intervention, we would have faced dire consequences. If my skills were as great as yours, I would seek out that villain Bronn Kitt and rid the villages of his menace."

Kellan nodded thoughtfully. "I cannot fault the man too harshly."

"What do you mean?" Elara asked, puzzled.

"Who would not be enchanted by your beauty, Elara? You possess a rare charm that could turn any man's heart," Kellan replied with a twinkle in his eye.

Suddenly, her fair visage flushed crimson, her delicate lips forming a shy smile as her eyes flitted away, abashed. "Oh, you are both a flatterer and impertinent! Hard to fathom!"

Kellan chuckled softly, shaking his head, his gaze openly admiring her countenance. "What does 'flirt' mean, Elara? My late master used to say that women are like blossoms in the springtime. Is there any woman who does not endeavor to enhance her own beauty? For what purpose, if not to evoke admiration in the hearts of men? It is a natural right of men to appreciate such beauty. All men delight in the sight of a comely woman, save for the hypocritical ones. They pretend to cast their eyes downward, yet their gaze lingers secretly. Outwardly, they feign indifference, but inwardly, they yearn. At the very least, all men admire beauty as one admires a fair flower. And all women, though some pretend to scorn it, revel in being admired. As for rudeness, do not mistake my meaning, Elara. Admiration is harmless, like appreciating a flower without plucking it, for it belongs to another. When I speak honestly of your beauty, it is not rudeness but simple truth."

Elara's face grew redder, her gaze lowered, yet she was not angered. Her heart beat faster, filled with a quiet joy.

His words struck true; she cherished compliments on her beauty, especially from a young man she esteemed.

"You... you are too forthright, Brother."

Elara finally spoke softly. "You make me... make me feel embarrassed."

Kellan laughed again, his eyes sparkling as he looked upon her lovely face. The campfire's glow highlighted her delicate features, each fine line like the curves of a rose petal, perfectly placed, a sight that one could never tire of. "Whose fault is it, Elara? Is it my eyes' fault for seeing a beautiful and delightful face, or your face's fault for being so beautiful? If it's my eyes' fault, I shall close them whenever I speak to you so as not to see your face! On the other hand, if it's your face's fault for being so lovely, you should cover it with a veil or don an unattractive mask so my eyes cannot admire you. How does that sound?"

The girl smiled broadly, suppressing a laugh, her eyes gleaming as they met Kellan's. He was a heroic figure who had saved her and her brother. He was friendly yet humble, with his handsome features and piercing gaze seeming to look straight into her heart. And now, he praised her with charming words!

"Oh, you are truly skilled at winning hearts! Do you really find me beautiful and... and do you like me?" The girl gathered her courage to ask, emboldened by Kellan's open and honest manner.

Kellan's smile widened. "Which man in the world would not be enchanted by a beautiful woman, like a butterfly drawn to a flower? Scholars and poets weave words into poems, creating eternal verses that praise the beauty of flowers and women! Of course, I flatter you with the best words I can, Elara, because you are beautiful and worthy of all admiration and praise. Do you ask if I like you? Oh, Elara, is there a need to answer that? There isn't a single butterfly or bee that does not like a flower! No man dislikes a beautiful woman unless he is not of the normal mind or... a eunuch!"

The girl laughed, amused, but then asked, "Eunuch? What is that? A person or an animal?"

Kellan shook his head. All his words echoed his master's teachings, and he did not honestly know what a eunuch was either. So he parroted his master's explanation. "A eunuch can be either, but he is neither truly a man nor a woman, or perhaps both!"

"Eh, I am confused. What exactly is it?"

"To be honest... I don't know either, having never met one!"

"You haven't answered my question. Do you like me?"

"I have already said, which butterfly does not like a flower?"

"But you are not a butterfly!"

"It's a metaphor, Elara. I likened myself to a butterfly and you to a flower. A butterfly will never tire of praising a flower's beauty, caressing and kissing it."

Elara's face grew even redder, her head bowed, her heart pounding, and her fingers trembling. Seeing her delicate, tapering fingers with their clean, well-kept nails, Kellan moved closer, gently taking her hand.

"Your hand trembles, Elara... and it is cold. Why?"

Indeed, Elara's hand quivered, reflecting her racing heart and tumultuous emotions. She felt joy, moved deeply, and also... fear! These feelings mingled with her affection, and without realizing it, her fingers responded to his touch, their hands intertwining and squeezing gently.

"If you become the butterfly, I would gladly be the flower." Elara's voice trembled, her breath quickening as her heart fluttered. Kellan smiled with delight. Then, with his left hand, he touched her smooth chin, lifting her beautiful face to gaze into her eyes.

"Elara, do you love me?" The question was as direct as an arrow. His master had often shared wisdom on matters of the heart. One piece of advice was: "Never force a woman to return your love, and never fall in love blindly, for it binds you and brings suffering. It is better to ask directly

if the woman loves you and never spurn a woman's love if you are drawn to her."

This advice came to Kellan's mind as he asked the straightforward question. Naturally, Elara felt too shy to answer directly. However, her heart was already captivated by the young man's handsome face, skills, and kind demeanor, so she bowed her head even lower, whispering softly, "With all my heart and soul, Brother."

Their hands clasped tighter, and Kellan spoke frankly, "Will you still love me even if I can never become your husband?"

Elara lifted her face, her expression pale, but then she blushed again and replied, "Do you think my feelings are a snare to catch a husband?"

Kellan laughed, his hand gently guiding the girl into the embrace of the young man she deeply admired. Though but eighteen summers, Kellan was yet unseasoned in the ways of the heart, still green with the inexperience of youth. Yet, as a disciple of Stormblade the Sage—a paragon of combat skills and the intricate art of courtship—Kellan had gleaned much from his master's tales. Stormblade, a renowned hero, often regaled him with stories of his youthful escapades, imparting wisdom and techniques for wooing women. Thus, though Kellan's nature was not inclined towards the dalliances of a womanizer, the influence of his master lent him a boldness uncommon among lads of his age. This

newfound audacity, further kindled by his encounter with Elysia—a tryst that led to the forfeiture of his innocence—imbued him with a confidence that now played upon Elara.

Kellan's steadfast adherence to his master's teachings proved a boon to him and the women he encountered. Stormblade had impressed upon him a cardinal rule: never to force a woman or succumb to the dark allure of taking by Force. Kellan cherished this wisdom, for it shielded him from the path of a dangerous libertine or worse. He would reciprocate affection when freely given, yet no beauty, no matter how divine, could sway him if her heart was not his.

At Elara's gentle acquiescence, Kellan laughed once more, his arm draping around her slender neck as he drew her closer. Their lips met in a tender kiss, the purity of their untested love infusing the moment with a sweetness beyond words.

"Kellan..." Elara murmured, her voice trembling as her arms entwined around the young hero's neck. Her affection was palpable.

"Elara, you are so fair..." Kellan whispered, their embrace and kiss deepening in the serene twilight of their shared affection.

Love, a force as ancient and as natural as the stars themselves, is a gift bestowed upon all living beings by

the very essence of creation. It is not something sordid, nor should it be shunned or hidden. On the contrary, the love shared between a man and a woman is a sacred bond, a divine urge that propels life forward, ensuring the continuance of humankind. Thus, it is pure and noble, deserving of open discourse to guard against corruption.

Though the instinctual pull of love between the sexes is universal among creatures, humankind, endowed with morality and intellect, transcends mere animal instinct. This natural attraction blossoms without instruction, as if written in the stars, drawing young men and women towards each other in a dance as old as time. This attraction springs a profound affection known as love, which naturally seeks physical expression.

In the Realm of Beasts, this attraction and consummation are simple acts untainted by notions of propriety. Yet, in the human sphere, such actions are deemed transgressions, unbound by the sanctity of mutual consent and legal acknowledgment. Terms like adultery and rape emerge, marking the violation of societal laws, even though the intrinsic acts of love and desire remain pure. The moral framework of civilization demands that these lines be respected, for to cross them knowingly is to court discord.

Kellan, a young man of little worldly experience, had been shaped by the teachings of his master, Stormblade the Sage. Stormblade, an eccentric figure who cared little for the laws of men, followed only his sense of righteousness,

even when it led him into conflict with societal norms. His master's shocking exploits were many: romantic entanglements with numerous women, audacious thefts of treasures, and deeds that positioned him against the very heroes of the world.

Stormblade's unconventional path was forged from the fires of heartbreak. At twenty-two, having been wedded but two short years to a beautiful woman, Stormblade returned from a lengthy quest to find his wife in the arms of his closest friend. Rage consumed him, nearly driving him to bloodshed, yet a strange clarity stayed his hand. A thought, alien and profound, took root: why destroy love, even if it was not his own? This epiphany transformed his wrath into a high, eerie laughter that echoed through the chamber, leaving his wife and friend trembling in abject terror, expecting death. But Stormblade simply turned away, never to see them again, carrying a philosophy that would shape Kellan's approach to love and honor.

Thus began the tale of Stormblade, an enigmatic hero whose deeds confounded the Realm. His actions, often deemed sinister, merciless, and unconventional, drew the ire of many a warrior. Stormblade liaised with women who freely offered their affection, even those bound in matrimony, provided they consented. Despite his contentious ways, his striking looks and formidable presence in his youth captivated many.

Stormblade had since departed this world, leaving his legacy to his sole apprentice, Kellan Lightfoot. To Kellan,

he bequeathed all his power, his vast trove of treasures, and a fragment of his very nature. At eighteen, Kellan had already won the heart of Elysia and now found himself entangled with a maiden from Brightblade Academy. His actions mirrored those of his master, who had forsaken moral codes in his agony over a faithless wife. Kellan, believing he upheld righteousness by heeding his master's counsel, acted similarly. He never coerced or violated, and he and Elara willingly engaged, believing their union was just and rightful.

Elara Frost, a young woman driven by her fervent desires, was oblivious to her transgressions. She neglected the moral boundaries crafted by society to safeguard happiness and prevent misery. She forgot that such indulgences often led to severe repercussions, possibly casting her into disgrace. The laws of men, forged over millennia, could not be easily eluded. In matters of the flesh, nature's decree was immutable: women bore the burdens, namely the risk of bearing children. A wise maiden, cognizant of the peril in a single misstep, would always guard her virtue and honor it above life itself. For death, though final, was less ignominious than living in shame.

In their obliviousness, the lovers did not perceive Thorne Frost's watchful gaze. Awakened by the night's stirrings, Thorne peered out from the hut and was struck by the sight of his sister and their savior entwined by the campfire's glow. His shock rendered him momentarily speechless, his cheeks aflame, before he retreated into the

shelter, his breath coming in ragged bursts. Tears filled his eyes as he prayed fervently that Kellan would take Elara as his lawful wife. The notion of such a union alleviated his distress, filling him with joy at the prospect of having such an admirable brother-in-law to guide him in combat.

As the night deepened, Kellan slept soundly, with Elara nestled against his chest. Her hair spread over him like a silken veil, their contentment shielding them from the malevolent gaze of unseen eyes. Those same eyes, belonging to Lydia Frostwhisper, glinted with dark intent. Silently, she reached into her robe and retrieved a small, gleaming object. With a swift, practiced motion, she hurled it at Elara, striking her in her slumber.

Elara's scream of agony shattered the night's tranquility, and Lydia vanished into the shadows. Kellan awoke, his arm instinctively tightening around Elara, only to find his hand wet with her blood. By the dim light of the dying embers, he saw the round, spiked weapon lodged in her temple. The realization that Lydia, once his ally, had delivered this fatal blow filled him with despair.

"Lydia Frostwhisper...!" His cry was a lamentation as he gently laid Elara's lifeless form on the grass. He rose and scanned the darkness, knowing it was futile to search for Lydia. Returning to Elara, he held her close, his heart breaking as he remembered the warmth and love she had given him.

"Elara... ah, Elara..." He kissed her lips, now cold, his sorrow overwhelming.

The commotion roused Thorne, who emerged from the hut to find his sister's bloodied body. His grief and anger turned on Kellan, accusing him of betrayal and murder. "You...! You killed my sister...!" Thorne's fury drove him to attack, but Kellan, though sorrowful, defended himself, trying to explain the truth.

"Calm down, young one. It wasn't me. Look at the weapon; it's Lydia's."

Thorne, still enraged, connected the weapon to Lydia, whom he assumed to be Kellan's accomplice. He believed Lydia's jealousy had driven her to kill Elara. Kellan's attempts at placating Thorne failed, as the young man's accusations mirrored a painful truth. While Kellan hadn't directly caused Elara's death, he realized Lydia's actions were indeed born of her love for him. Her jealousy had turned lethal, and now Elara's life was the price of his entanglements.

Kellan's heart was heavy with guilt and sorrow, knowing that Elara had perished because of him, caught in the deadly web spun by love and jealousy.

"Young one, my heart is burdened with sorrow... but I swear, no harm was my intent. It was not by my hand that she met her fate, and had I not been lost in slumber, I might have shielded her... but alas..."

"Foul knave! Wretch! Even after defiling my sister, you dare speak with ease! You, who already had a lover wielding those deadly white spheres! Yet you ensnared my sister! Tell me, did you ever intend to wed her? To make her your wife?"

Kellan sighed, a deep and weary breath, for the truth was entangled and harsh. "No, we shared a mutual affection, and our hearts were entwined in love, but I had clarified to Elara that I could not be her husband."

"Scoundrel! Villain! I feared as much! Had I known, I would have crushed your head last night!" Thorne screamed and lunged once more. Kellan, torn by confusion and deep sorrow, realized that to pacify the young man, consumed by grief and fury, was beyond hope. He leaped away, swift as the wind, and fled the place. For in such dire straits, only distance could bring sense.

And thus, his judgment proved wise. Unable to match Kellan's superior skills, Thorne returned to his sister's side, weeping deeply. He mourned until dawn's first light, when villagers, drawn by the commotion, arrived. They gasped in shock at the sight and pitied the young man upon hearing Thorne's tale of a nocturnal assailant. Together, they laid Elara to rest in the village cemetery, a simple grave for a tragic soul.

That night, beneath the veil of darkness, a solitary figure knelt at the fresh grave. It was Kellan, heart heavy with grief. He mourned deeply, his vigil lasting until the first rays of dawn kissed the earth. Departing with a heart of sorrow, he left the village, carrying memories that would haunt him eternally. His anguish was not only for Elara's untimely death but also for Lydia's ruthless act. Though he held a strange fondness for Lydia, unlike his feelings for Elysia or Elara, it was a bond not merely born of beauty but of deeper ties, for she was the daughter of his master, Stormblade the Sage. Her treachery, slaying innocent Elara, pained him deeply.

Swiftly did Kellan's journey, his destination the Lunaria Mountain Range, with the intent to return to Dragonspire Peak, where his master had trained him for five years. The Eversong Blade lay, hidden among the rocks, a replica carried down the mountain to deceive. When confronted by Darius Stormseer, he relinquished the false blade, knowing the true one remained secure. Now, beset by formidable foes, he sought the wisdom of his master's scrolls to fortify himself against the powerful, dark or light forces.

After a week's trek from Elara's resting place, Kellan reached the foothills of the Bayangkara Mountains, a gateway to the Lunaria Range. Having crossed Emberpeak, he knew the journey to Lunaria Sanctuary would demand at least a fortnight of arduous climbing.

A loud shout broke the tranquil air as he ascended a gentle slope. Suddenly, a band of men and women surrounded him, numbering fifty, armed and resolute. Kellan, though startled, observed that there were no common bandits. Their attire spoke of wealth and valor.

"Stay your course, young man!" called an elder with a long beard. His left hand rested on his hip, and his right grasped the hilt of a golden sword, its pommel shaped like a dragon's head. Though aged around fifty, the elder's vigor was apparent. Kellan, sensing the gravity of the moment, bowed respectfully.

"Elder, who are you, and what brings you to bar my way?"

The elder stroked his beard, taken aback and somewhat pleased by Kellan's respectful address. His anger, tempered by the young man's demeanor, remembered the grievous loss of his disciple and spoke in a commanding tone.

"I am Aurelius Goldblade, the Golden Sword, deputy leader of the Iron Palm Sect. These here are my loyal kin!"

Kellan's eyes widened slightly in recognition. Though he had never clashed with the Iron Palm Sect, he knew of their formidable reputation, often aligned with northern powers.

"My apologies, Elder. I have no quarrel with the Iron Palm Sect. If I have unknowingly transgressed, I beg your wisdom."

Growing more intrigued, Aurelius turned to his men and asked, "Heiii, is this the lad you spoke of?"

Three men stepped forward, pointing accusatorily at Kellan. "Yes, Deputy Leader, this demon slew our brother. He claims the name, Kellan Lightfoot!"

Recognition dawned upon Kellan. These men were among those he had bested while defending Elara Frost in the forest's old temple. He recalled vanquishing their leader with a broad sword, aided by Lydia's secret weapon. Now, the Iron Palm Sect sought retribution for their fallen comrade.

Aurelius Goldblade, known as the Golden Sword, gazed at Kellan with disbelief and suspicion. How could this courteous and gentle youth be responsible for the death of his disciple? The very notion seemed beyond belief.

"Young man, is your name truly Kellan Lightfoot?" the elder asked sternly yet curiously.

"That is correct, Elder. I am Kellan Lightfoot," replied Kellan with a respectful nod.

"Did you, in fact, slay my disciple, Pol Cathal, before the old temple within the forest near Mistwood?"

Kellan's face turned grave as he shook his head. "I do not know who your disciple is, Elder. However, I did vanquish some ruffians who sought to harm a young maiden and her brother..."

Kellan's voice faltered, his throat tightening as the memory of Elara Frost, the beautiful young woman who met a tragic fate at the hands of Lydia Frostwhisper, known as the Mourning Maiden, filled his mind.

The elder's brows knitted in consternation, his eyes blazing with growing anger. "So you laid waste to my disciple and his men. Bold youth, what reason did you have to slay them? Do you dare to insult the Iron Palm Sect by taking the life of one of its disciples?"

"Forgive me, Elder. I was unaware he was your disciple or affiliated with the Iron Palm Sect. All I knew was that they were wicked men attempting to harm an innocent girl."

"Ah! You appear to be a man of virtue, not a knave. Yet why did you act so rashly? Are you a disciple of the Brightblade Academy?"

"No, Elder."

"If so, why did you defend those affiliated with the Brightblade Academy?"

Kellan found himself cornered. The elder's probing questions left him with little room to maneuver. "I... I merely saw a young girl and her brother being harassed by vile men..."

"Kellan! How could you discern that the girl and her brother were righteous? At the same time, my disciple's men were evil?" the elder's voice thundered, rendering Kellan speechless. He had acted on instinct, driven by a desire to protect the helpless Elara and Thorne Frost.

"Of course, it was because the girl was beautiful, and who can resist beauty?" jeered one of the men who had previously assailed Kellan, eliciting laughter from his comrades.

"Kellan Lightfoot, you are but a young and inexperienced lad, newly emerged into the world of combat skills. Yet, my subordinates report that you possess extraordinary prowess. To which sect or school do you belong? Who is your master?"

"Forgive me, Elder. I belong to no sect, and my master, who has passed away, deserves to rest undisturbed. I ask you, Elder, what wrong have I committed to defending a girl and her brother from assailants?"

"We, the valiant men of the Iron Palm Sect, support the noble northern Prince Yorin, who rightfully should ascend the throne of this land. But the Brightblade Academy shamelessly backs the usurper in the south. Many

skirmishes have erupted between our disciples and those of the Brightblade Academy. Thus, in the aftermath of another clash in Mistwood, you, unaware of the context, sided with the Brightblade Academy and slew our men. Is that not a grave error?"

Kellan was taken aback. He had never anticipated this revelation, and Elara Frost had never mentioned it. Regret welled up within him for his hasty actions that had incited the wrath of the Iron Palm Sect. Yet, Kellan's steadfast character, a legacy from his master, imbued him with a fearlessness that did not waver when he believed he was in the right. His master's teachings had instilled in him the creed that one must face any challenge, even death, in the name of righteousness. Better to die for justice than to live in disgrace and dishonor, though right or wrong was determined by his own judgment. Despite everything, he felt he had stayed upright.

"Forgive me, Elder. After hearing your account, I only grasp the broader situation. Yet, at the time, I saw a young girl being harassed by many men, and I felt compelled to defend her. Is it not the duty of a righteous man to uphold justice and protect the innocent? What will I do now, knowing the deeper motives behind this conflict? What do you intend to do with me?"

Though secretly admiring Kellan's forthrightness, the elder was duty-bound to his sect. As the deputy leader of the Iron Palm Sect, he had to uphold the honor of his organization and seek retribution for their fallen disciple

lest they be scorned by their rivals, especially the Brightblade Academy.

"Kellan Lightfoot, your words reveal you as an honest young man who does not shirk from admitting his deeds. You have confessed to slaying our disciples, and thus, as the deputy leader of the Iron Palm Sect, I am bound to arrest you and bring you before our leader to face judgment and punishment."

Kellan frowned, shaking his head resolutely. "Your request is difficult for me to accept, Elder. Regardless of the circumstances, I acted in the name of justice and righteousness, with no malice or ill intent. I am not guilty; thus, I cannot submit to your leader's judgment. Please, forgive me."

Once filled with patient admiration, the elder's eyes now blazed angrily. "Young man, you may be skilled and a disciple of a great master, but know that you contend with an elder who has pursued the arts of combat since before your birth! We of the Iron Palm Sect uphold justice, and once all the facts are laid bare, our leader will not punish you unjustly! If you refuse, it is with deep regret that I must compel you by Force!"

"Ah, it seems the Elder seeks only his version of the truth!" retorted Kellan.

"Hmph, is it not you who seeks your own truth, young man? You have slain our disciple, and now we seek to

apprehend you. Who, in this matter, is right, and who is wrong? Who is evil, and who is good?"

Suddenly, laughter echoed through the air, akin to the crow's cawing or the hiss of a giant serpent. The source of the laughter was unexpected. When all looked up, they saw a comical old man perched upon a tree branch not far away, his bare feet dangling.

The old man was diminutive and hunched, with long, flowing hair, mustache, and beard, but the top of his head was bald and gleaming. His face radiated mirth, resembling a mischievous boy continuously laughing. His attire was pristine and new, yet his feet were bare. He held a wine jug in his left hand, and after laughing, he took a hearty swig, filling the air with the fragrance of wine.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" He laughed again, his voice carrying an air of whimsical wisdom. "All wrong, all right, nothing good, nothing bad. It's all the same! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Tall or short, yes, all the same! Fat or thin, yes, all the same! Wrong or right, bad or good, beautiful or ugly, all the same! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Amidst the gathering throng, while others grumbled and muttered in irritation at the old man's seemingly nonsensical ramblings, Kellan found himself intrigued. Far from meaningless, the elder's cryptic utterances resonated with a more profound truth that Kellan could perceive. He spoke with a respectful bow toward the figure perched in

the tree, "Fortunate it is that the wise Elder should appear now. Please grant us your guidance, Elder. Who stands in the right between myself and the Iron Palm Sect?"

"This matter concerns none other, and we require no outsider's opinion," retorted Aurelius Goldblade, his voice tinged with indignation. The thought of his authority as the Deputy Leader of the Iron Palm Sect being undermined by an external counsel galled him.

"Deputy Leader," Kellan responded, his expression of mild displeasure. In any dispute between two parties, a third party must be consulted to determine right from wrong. Without such mediation, how can the conflicting parties hope to resolve their issues through discourse?" Turning again to the hunchbacked figure in the tree, he implored, "Please, Elder, grant us your wisdom."

The old man laughed again, a sound both mirthful and profound. "Boy, you are perceptive and gifted! In this world, what is good and what is evil? What is right and what is wrong? These are merely human constructs shaped by each individual's desires and self-interest. There are no inherently good or bad people; people are simply people. Good and evil are but perspectives contingent on whether one benefits or suffers. Human judgment is ever swayed by self-interest. Consider this: even if the whole world deems someone suitable, they will be considered harmful if they cause harm to another.

Conversely, a person deemed insufficient by the world will be seen as good if they bring benefit. Actions, too, are just actions. Their morality—right or wrong, good or bad—is always determined by those affected. Beneficial actions are seen as correct, harmful ones as wrong.

For instance, this boy's deeds have harmed the Iron Palm Sect, so they deem them wrong and evil. Yet, ask the disciples of the Brightblade Academy who were saved by his actions, and they will tell you he acted rightly and nobly. Which perspective is actual? Good or bad? Right or wrong? It is all the same! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Aurelius Goldblade and his followers seethed with anger and frustration, while Kellan, on the other hand, was awestruck. The elder's words, though seemingly absurd, encapsulated the essence of human conflict and the ceaseless strife over subjective truths driven by self-interest.

"Forgive me, wise Elder. If truth and goodness are as mutable as you say, what is the genuine reality?"

"Heh-heh-heh, there is no real or fake! What is true and good for oneself is not the truth; without coercion, what is true and good for others approaches the truth!"

"Ah, your teachings are profound and challenging to grasp, Elder. Please guide me on how to face the Iron Palm Sect's anger?"

"Ha-ha-ha, the best attitude is like water! The highest wisdom is like water, not forcing or pushing, but yielding to the natural flow of power!"

Kellan's heart raced. He had read many ancient texts and memorized numerous verses from sacred scriptures. Yet, the elder's words struck a chord within him, echoing the very essence of the teachings inscribed upon the Eversong Blade. "The highest wisdom is like water." Could it be mere coincidence, or did this hunchbacked elder hold the key to the sword's secrets?

"Hey, old man with a loud mouth! Do not meddle in our affairs!" shouted Aurelius Goldblade, his anger flaring as Kellan conversed with the elder like the Iron Palm Sect's warriors were shadows among trees.

The old man smiled, unfazed, still perched on his branch with legs swinging. Kellan turned to Aurelius Goldblade and said coldly, "Deputy Leader, blaming each other will never end and will not solve our problem. I hold no ill will toward the Iron Palm Sect and do not feel guilty about the incident with the Brightblade Academy. Since I feel no guilt, I cannot accept facing the leader of the Iron Palm Sect to receive punishment. If you wish to use Force, then do as you must."

The Deputy Leader of the Iron Palm Sect, patience now exhausted, was furious. "Young man! You know not the sky's height nor the sea's depth! Perhaps you are skilled,

but you remain a mere child! I am loath to challenge one who should be my grand disciple by age."

"Ha-ha-ha! Wisdom and folly know no age. Many grow old yet remain foolish, while some young ones are wise beyond their years, like this lad! Who truly knows the sky's height or the sea's depth? Heh-heh-heh!" The hunchbacked elder laughed again as though he were witnessing a delightful spectacle.

Aurelius Goldblade's anger surged anew. "Hey, old man with a loud mouth! Leave here and cease your meddling! If not, I will drag you down!"

"Such rules you impose! Before your arrival, I was peacefully resting in this tree. You all came and disrupted my slumber. By rights, I should be chastising you. If you possess any shame, you should leave and find another place to bicker so as not to disturb others!"

Aurelius Goldblade barked orders at two of his junior disciples, "Drag him down and cast him away!"

Hulking and formidable, the two disciples approached the tree with the old man. In the Iron Palm Sect, the measure of a disciple's level was the strength of their Iron Palm Technique. Both hands, trained and tempered to be as strong as iron, reflected their prowess. The more intense the training, the greater the force and resilience of their iron hands. The sect leader, Eldrin Ironwood, held the highest level, followed by Aurelius Goldblade. These two

junior disciples, who now advanced upon the tree, had reached the formidable fourth level, signifying their Iron Palm Technique was potent.

In a secluded glade, under the dense canopy of an ancient forest, two disciples of the Iron Palm Sect confronted a hunched figure perched on a twisted bough of an age-old tree. The leader among them, his voice laden with authority, called out, "Old man, our Deputy Leader has commanded your descent. Comply swiftly and leave, for it would grieve us to employ Force against one of your years."

The hunchbacked elder, his eyes twinkling with mischief, chuckled softly. "Heh-heh-heh, force, you say? What manner of Force? Here I sit, weaving only words and mirth, employing naught but the softness of my limbs and tongue. Yet you, it seems, have an affinity for all things hard and unyielding. Perhaps, instead of Iron Palm, your sect should be known as Iron Heart."

With a swift and sudden motion, one disciple struck the tree trunk with an open hand. "This is the force we wield!" he declared.

A resounding crack echoed through the glade as the mighty blow ripped the tree asunder, felling it with a single strike. The branch upon which the old man sat plummeted earthward, yet he vanished like a shadow and reappeared on another branch with a laugh.

"Heh-heh-heh, force, indeed! To me, it resembles naught but destruction. To lay waste to nature's creation is a grievous sin!"

Enraged by the old man's taunts, the disciples charged the next tree, their fury driving them to strike again. The mighty trunk splintered and fell, branches and leaves cascading down. But the old man, nimble as a bird, leaped to yet another tree, his movements swift and light as if he were a creature of the forest itself.

The disciples, undeterred, continued their assault, felling tree after tree in their pursuit. Over a dozen mighty trunks lay strewn about the glade, a testament to their relentless determination.

The old man laughed, "Ah, you two would make fine lumberjacks! Heh-heh-heh!"

"Cease this folly!" commanded Aurelius Goldblade, the Deputy Leader's voice cutting through the din. The disciples halted, their faces flushed with anger, eyes fixed on the elder, now perched on a distant branch. "As long as he does not interfere directly, let him prattle on. He now understands the might of the Iron Palm Sect." Turning to Kellan, he continued, "Young man, you have witnessed our power. I seek no violence. Surrender, and you shall be taken to our leader without harm."

Kellan, observing the old man with keen interest, knew he was no ordinary soul. The elder's words echoed a phrase

etched on the Eversong Blade, a clue Kellan desperately wished to unravel. But first, he had to contend with the Iron Palm Sect. He had seen their might, felt the power of their strikes, and knew their skill far outmatched his own. Yet, in terms of sheer Force, he was confident in his superior speed.

"Aurelius Goldblade," Kellan replied, "your disciples have demonstrated their strength, and you aim to subdue me with such Force. Yet, I feel no guilt and will not willingly go with you to your leader."

"Stubborn fool!" one of the disciples snarled, still seething from the old man's mockery. "Deputy Leader, allow us to handle this wretch. There is no need for you to soil your hands."

Aurelius, ever shrewd, had discerned the old man's true nature. Suspecting he might aid Kellan, he let his disciples engage the young man first, reserving his own intervention for the elder if needed. "Very well," he said, "capture this insolent boy!"

The disciples moved to flank Kellan, their hands outstretched to seize him. Kellan felt the wind of their approach, sensing their strength. Though unafraid, he preferred to avoid tearing his garments. With swift precision, he deflected their arms with his own, the impact sending the disciples stumbling back.

"Plakk! Plakk!"

Stunned by Kellan's unexpected skill, the disciples recoiled, their arms throbbing from the Force of his deflection. Their eyes burned with renewed fury as they regrouped, determined to subdue him.

Seeing their comrades in distress, the remaining Iron Palm Sect members rushed to their aid, weapons drawn. Their unity, honed in countless battles, drove them to swarm Kellan.

Anger flared within Kellan. Initially, he sought only to uphold his principles without bloodshed, but now, faced with their treachery, his rage boiled over. "You dishonorable wretches!" he cried, charging forward with renewed vigor. His arms, a blur of motion, struck down six assailants in quick succession.

Suddenly, from behind, a powerful gust of wind heralded the approach of the two initial disciples, their fists aimed at Kellan's back. Reacting swiftly, Kellan channeled his Force, fortifying his back against the impending blows.

"Thud... Thud...!"

The disciples' fists landed, but to their horror, they found their hands adhered to Kellan's back, their energy draining into him. Panicking, they struck with their free hands, targeting his sides. Yet, Kellan's energy absorbed the blows, rendering their efforts futile.

The two disciples of the Iron Palm Sect clung to Kellan like shadows, their vital energies siphoning into him, rendering his movements deliberate and weighty yet infusing his strength with an almost otherworldly power. Each step he took sent a low whistle through the air, his hands trailing a fierce wind that could cast aside any who dared approach. This formidable display was a testament to his already significant might, now amplified by the stolen Force of the disciples entwined upon his back.

"Young fiend!" bellowed Aurelius Goldblade, his visage contorted with fury and dread. "Release my disciples at once!" The sight of his followers, pale and listless, draped across Kellan's form, struck him with horror. Yet, the predicament was of their own making. The mystical energies coursing through Kellan's veins were insatiable, absorbing any external Force they encountered. Had an untrained layman touched Kellan, the power would remain inert, causing no harm nor attachment. However, for those like the Iron Palm Sect disciples, steeped in the arts of Force, their own power had become their undoing.

Earlier, in their assault, they had struck with Force-laden palms. This act bound them to Kellan, their energies becoming inexorably entwined. In their struggle to free themselves, their exertions only deepened their entrapment, fueling Kellan's strength and binding them tighter.

"I... I cannot release them..." Kellan's voice trembled with genuine trepidation. This was not the first time he had

faced such a dilemma, and his anxiety was palpable. Not only were the two disciples now leeching their Force into him, but two additional disciples, attempting to aid their comrades, found themselves similarly ensnared, their cries of agony piercing the air. Kellan, desperate to release them, was at a loss for how to do so.

Misinterpreting Kellan's honest reply as defiance, Aurelius Goldblade's anger flared. Drawing his gleaming sword, he roared, "Then I shall slay you, young demon!" With a leap, he launched himself at Kellan, his sword a golden blur of deadly intent.

Kellan, acutely aware of the peril, screamed and leaped skyward, the bodies of the four disciples dragging behind him. As Aurelius' attack arced towards him, Kellan summoned every ounce of his power, deploying the Cloud Shaking Wind and Rain technique—the pinnacle of his Mountain Cloud Fist, a series of eight devastating techniques. Executing the final, most challenging technique required a symphony of kicks and punches, executed with precision and speed.

His left foot lashed out at Aurelius' sword arm while his right aimed for his opponent's abdomen. Simultaneously, his left hand sought Aurelius' head with his proper tracking of the sword's movement.

"Curses...!" Aurelius Goldblade found himself in a rare panic. Kellan's unexpected leap had countered his most potent strike in mid-air. Their bodies collided in a flurry of

blows, and Aurelius was forced to retract his sword as Kellan's kick met his wrist. Yet, his left hand found Kellan's neck, only to discover, to his horror, that it began to sink into the flesh, the energy within being drained and his hand adhering to Kellan. Before he could react, a kick threatened his abdomen, which he narrowly dodged, but his sword was wrested from his grasp, and Kellan's hand loomed dangerously close to his head.

"Disaster...!" Aurelius gasped, attempting to free his hand and strike at Kellan's eyes—a move that Kellan could neither avoid nor block. At that critical juncture, their lives hung in the balance.

"Too bad, too bad!" a mocking voice chuckled from above. An old man, perched in a nearby tree, hurled two small, raw fruits with uncanny accuracy. One struck Aurelius' elbow, the other Kellan's, forcing their limbs to go limp. Both men tumbled to the ground. Fortuitously for Aurelius, the impact freed his arm from Kellan's draining grip, allowing him to leap back. His eyes widened in shock as he observed the lifeless forms of his disciples, their energy wholly depleted.

"Demon...!" he muttered, aghast. His anger surged, and he was on the verge of commanding his followers to attack when Kellan, throwing down the captured sword, shouted, "Elder, wait...!"

But Aurelius' gaze followed Kellan as he darted off, pursuing the old man who had intervened. Grinding his

teeth in frustration, Aurelius watched the two figures vanish. With a heavy sigh, he realized the futility of pursuit. The speed and skill exhibited by Kellan and the mysterious elder were beyond his reach. The name of the Iron Palm Sect has been sullied to this day. With a heart burning with vengeance, Aurelius gathered the bodies of his fallen disciples and departed. This defeat would not be forgotten. One day, their honor would be restored and their vengeance fulfilled. With this grim resolve, Aurelius led his followers back to the peaks of the Bayangkara Mountains, their spirits shadowed by the bitter taste of this encounter.

CHAPTER 7

THE RELENTLESS CHASE



The old man, hunched and wizened, moved with astonishing swiftness. His gait was peculiar, resembling the leaps of a frog, each bound spanning ten meters, and upon touching the ground, he would spring anew. Yet, Kellan Lightfoot, forged in the fires of rigorous training by his late master, endowed with unparalleled strength and agility, pursued with more incredible velocity. His body, imbued with the borrowed Force from the Iron Palm Sect, felt as light as a feather, propelling him with ease and grace that belied the furious speed with which he closed the distance.

"Elder, wait...!" Kellan's voice rang out, a call that spurred the old man to greater haste.

"Hey, hunchbacked Elder, wait...!" His voice grew louder and more insistent. The old man glanced back and saw the youth bounding towards him with an uncanny grace, his leaps longer and more determined. Startled, the old man altered his pace. His legs were a blur of motion, moving with such rapidity that they seemed to spin like

the wheels of a cart, his figure a mere shadow gliding forward.

"Heh-heh-heh, you shall not catch me, persistent boy!" the old man chuckled, his speed unrelenting. He ran until his confidence swelled, believing the youth far behind, sure he would collapse from the exertion. Yet, as he began to slow, Kellan's voice echoed close behind him.

"Elder, why do you flee? I wish only to speak...!"

The old man halted abruptly, turning to face the approaching youth. His visage flushed, eyes glinting with the surplus Force within him, Kellan approached calmly. The chase had burned away the excess energy, and he had left a fallen tree trail in his wake.

"Boy, as merciless as a demon. Have you not had your fill, pursuing me to drain my energy with your diabolical Starbound technique?" the old man spat, his gaze fiery. "A leech sates itself on blood and then releases its hold. But you, you drain life until death. Four souls lost, and still, you hunger, far crueler than any leech!"

Kellan's brow furrowed, troubled. "Elder, is there truly a technique called Starbound? Was the energy I absorbed the Starbound technique?"

The old man drew himself up, chest puffed, eyes gleaming with the authority of a teacher addressing a wayward pupil. "I am the Compassionate Sage, and I do not lie. A

sage speaks only the truth! You wield a technique that absorbs the internal energy of your foes. What else could it be but Starbound, a technique thought lost to demons and ghosts? Yet, here it is, in your hands. Terrifying, truly frightening!" He shivered, lifting his wine jug and gulping its contents. His face reddened, and he laughed again. "Heh-heh-heh, a swig of wine chases away all fears! Even if you possess such a demonic technique, you will not drain me, will you?"

Kellan shook his head. "Elder, you saved me with your intervention. Why would I harm a compassionate sage? Not at all. I sought to thank you and..."

"No thanks are needed! Who aids a youth wielding such a cruel technique? A leech sates itself and releases its hold. You drained them to death. I intervened to prevent further slaughter."

"But, Elder, I had no intent to kill..."

"That is a lie! Remember, lying is wicked, and I, the Compassionate Sage, have never lied! Lies breed more lies; once you start, you must continue."

Kellan suppressed a smile. "I have no need to deceive, Elder. If necessary, I would speak falsehoods. I had no intention of killing anyone. As for the Starbound technique you speak of, I have no knowledge of it. The energy I absorbed was beyond my control."

"Eh, eh, why so? I saw you as a good young man, and thus, I sided with you against the Iron Palm Sect. But seeing you use such an evil technique, I was disheartened. And now you claim ignorance? Truly extraordinary..."

"Enough, Elder. Besides wanting to thank you, I seek your wisdom and counsel."

"Hemmm, very well. On what matter?"

"About water."

The old man gaped, his mouth forming a broad, incredulous smile, his eyes bulging comically. His left hand rose slowly to scratch his shiny bald pate.

"Eh, young man, are you mad?" he asked earnestly, not as an insult but as a genuine inquiry.

Kellan felt a surge of joy. Though usually reserved, the old man's eccentricity and humor quickly drew him into cheerfulness. This sage was not only skilled and strange but also amusing. His serious demeanor when questioning Kellan's sanity made the youth laugh aloud, further convincing the old man of his madness.

"No, Elder. I am neither mad nor wish to be," Kellan replied. "When I speak of water, I refer to your advice when dealing with the Iron Palm Sect. A phrase that intrigued me, whose meaning I wish to understand."

"What phrase?"

"The one that sounds like an ancient sacred proverb about water." Kellan baited.

"There are many sacred proverbs involving water. Which one do you mean? What advice did I give? Your question needs to be clarified. Eh, are you truly not of unsound mind?"

"No, Elder. If you do not remember, allow me to repeat. It goes: The highest wisdom is like water."

"Heh-heh-heh! Indeed! The highest wisdom is like water! The complete saying is:
The highest wisdom is like water that benefits all things and flows to places people disdain; therefore, it is close to the way."

"Isn't that a verse from the eighth part of The Scroll of True Virtue?" Kellan exclaimed, joy and surprise mingling in his voice.

The hunchbacked old man peered at Kellan with eyes that gleamed like the stars in the night sky. "Indeed, you are a most peculiar youth! Do you understand and have you memorized the verses from The Scroll of True Virtue?"

"I have memorized it, Elder, through countless recitations. Earlier, I forgot, but that is not the case now. What is

important is whether the Elder knows the phrase: Sincere and earnest in serving virtue."

"You mean sincere and earnest in serving virtue like water flowing from its source? And naturally, like the emergence of the sun and moon, or naturally like the four seasons coming in turn? The proverb goes thus: The sincere man, like water from a spring, naturally benefits all things."

"Ah, that is from the thirty-first section, the second verse of the Canon of Eternal Harmony!" Kellan exclaimed, thrilled as he recognized the proverb, committing the entire book to memory.

Once again, the hunchbacked old man was taken aback and filled with amazement. "You are also versed in the teachings of The Jade Oracle? What manner of youth are you? Clearly, you are not mad! Yet, you possess the demonic Starbound technique, your agility is unparalleled, your Force astonishing, and you have memorized the sacred texts of The Scroll of True Virtue and The Canon of Eternal Harmony! Who are you, strange boy?"

But Kellan, having recognized two of the three lines inscribed upon the Eversong Blade, was so delighted that he paid no heed to the old man's query and, with bated breath, spoke again.

"One more thing, Elder. One more thing, I beseech you. Listen to this phrase: The channeler guides the water where he wills."

The old man's demeanor shifted suddenly. He seldom displayed anger, yet now he feigned it or at least wore a mask of displeasure. However, his naturally humorous countenance made his anger more amusing than fearsome.

"Arrogant boy! Do you seek to challenge me? Do you doubt my title, the Compassionate Sage? I am called Sage for a reason; I am a wise man who knows all verses upon this earth! Do you test me deliberately? You quoted three verses from three different faiths; do you think my title of Sage is a mere pretense? If you desire a philosophical debate on the world's religions, say it plainly, and I shall engage until you yield!"

Kellan stifled his amusement, realizing this old man was an extraordinary figure, a master of sacred texts. If pressed or entreated, he would refuse outright. The only path was to challenge him!

"Ha-ha-ha, I thought your title was but an empty boast, but it seems even emptier than that!" Kellan provoked. "Indeed, I challenge you to a philosophical debate. The last phrase I quoted, you do not recognize, so you make excuses, hunchbacked old man!"

Strangely, the old man did not grow angry but laughed heartily. "Heh-heh-heh, you flatter me too much, young man. What was your name again? Kellan Lightfoot? Ah, I begin to like you anew. In Taoism, it is believed that emptiness is more useful than fullness, so calling me emptier than empty is the highest praise!"

Blast it, Kellan thought. This old man is whimsical, mixing profound philosophy with casual speech. But Kellan needed a wit. "Elder, I have a reason for aligning those three phrases. Since you correctly identified the first two, do not falter now and recognize the last. I shall repeat it: The channeler guides the water where he wills."

The old man laughed and recited, "The channelers guide the water where they wish; the arrow makers straighten the arrow shaft; the carpenters bend the wood; the wise control themselves!"

Kellan leaped and pranced with joy. "Ha-ha-ha! That is the eighth verse from The Path of Righteousness!"

The old man stepped closer, challenging, "Mock me not! If you are truly versed in the philosophy of sacred texts from three religions, debate with me. If I lose, I shall discard the title of Sage and acknowledge you as my master!"

Kellan, who had been dancing with joy at the thought of deciphering the meaning of the three lines inscribed on the Eversong Blade, suddenly ceased and pondered deeply. After understanding, what then? What significance

lay in the hidden secrets of his master's legacy? An idea dawned, and he resolved to use the old man's profound wisdom, nicknamed the Compassionate Sage, to uncover the secret behind the three lines.

"Very well, Elder. Since you challenged me, answer my difficult questions first. You must answer to win one point. We shall tally the points, and whoever gains the most wins."

"Agreed! I gain a point for each answer and lose a point if I fail. Pose your questions, delightful young man!"

"First question. What is the difference between the three teachings you mentioned, specifically the phrases I quoted? To clarify, what is the difference between these three phrases? The highest wisdom is like water! Sincere and earnest in serving virtue! The channeler guides the water where he wills!"

"Heh-heh-heh, child's play. Very easy. Ask something more difficult next. All right, I'll answer. There is no difference between them; they all counsel humans to emulate the nature of water, which is wise. Why is water called wise in these sacred texts? Firstly, because water moves naturally, does not force itself, does not resist, follows the nature of things, flows from its source to low places, offers itself to all things in need, and benefits without seeking reward, always placing itself in the lowest position. That is the essence of these teachings, using water as an exemplar."

"Precisely, Elder, and that grants you one point. Now, the second question. What is the connection between these three phrases?"

The old man furrowed his brows, his thoughts intertwining like the ancient roots of a great tree. This question was a conundrum, not mere philosophical pondering but a riddle woven with strands of mystery and enigma. However, he could not afford to falter, for losing one point was a fate he wished to avoid. Kellan had posed this question with deliberate intent, seeking to uncover the secret of the Eversong Blade. He had discerned that the three phrases inscribed upon the blade were drawn from venerable texts: The Scroll of True Virtue, The Canon of Eternal Harmony, and The Path of Righteousness. Should there be a hidden philosophical secret within these phrases, the old hunchback, a sage versed in myriad religions, should decipher it. Suppose this wise elder could not unravel the mystery. How could Kellan, who had merely committed these texts to memory without delving into their profound depths? He could learn much from the elder's answer, even if it bore no hidden meaning.

"The connection," the old man began, "is solely through the symbol of water, an embodiment of wisdom. Beyond the mention of water, there is no further connection. If one were to force a linkage, it would still center around water. The world is bound by water; the lifeblood unites all. By contemplating water, nothing remains separate; all becomes interconnected, much like the ocean, composed

of countless drops, each indistinguishable within the vast expanse."

Kellan nodded, yet his confusion deepened. It seemed that when his master had penned those phrases, he had intended to allude to water. But what did his master mean by water? Was it the water atop Dragonspire Peak? What significance did it hold? Water continuously flowed to lower realms, yet a small pond collected the sky's bounty at the summit, whether rain or dew. From this pond, water descended in a narrow stream, winding through the rocky crevices.

"Your answer is excellent, Elder. I concede two points. Now, for the third question. What might it signify if one inscribed those three phrases together to indicate something secret, a hidden place?"

The Elder's eyes widened. "Eh, young man, are you truly not mad?"

Kellan smiled broadly. "Not yet, Elder. Should madness ever seize me, you shall be the first to know. For now, my mind remains clear!"

"We debate philosophy, yet you pose riddles like a shepherd amusing himself! I shall not answer if your aim is a mockery."

"Oh, I swear, Elder, I mock you not. This question is of utmost importance to me. Please, believe me, Elder, I have

but one more question. After that, I shall pose the highest of philosophical inquiries, ones that might elude even the gods, concerning life and death and all their mysteries!"

"Good! Now, those are the kinds of questions I should hear! Proceed, ask your questions about life and death."

"Not so fast, Elder. Please answer my previous question first. What might one intend by linking those three phrases to signify a hidden place?"

The Elder stroked his chin, then scratched his bald pate. "Hmm, you are persistent. Yet the person who left such a sign was fond of jests, perhaps lonely, and had fanciful thoughts of play upon seeing water. Surely, he meant the flowing water. The hidden place could be found by tracing the water's path. And since no numbers are present in the phrases, the measure of the location likely corresponds to the verse and section numbers of those sacred texts. 'The highest wisdom is like water' appears in The Scroll of True Virtue, section eight. 'Sincere and true to serving goodness' is the essence of a sage, advised in The Canon of Eternal Harmony, section thirty-one, verse two. Lastly, 'the canal maker directs the water wherever he wishes' is in The Path of Righteousness, section six, verse eighty. Summing these numbers yields eight, thirty-one, two, six, and eighty. Totaling them, we arrive at one hundred twenty-seven. This must be the secret: follow the water, and the measure is one hundred twenty-seven!"

Kellan nearly leaped and danced in elation. This must be it! This interpretation and calculation alone made sense. His late master had indeed meant this. The secret of the Eversong Blade! The hidden treasure's secret! The enigma of the three inscribed lines!

"Thank you, Elder. Your wisdom is a great boon to me!" With these words, Kellan turned to depart.

"Wait, young man! A cow can be led by its nose, but a man is bound by his word! You promised questions about life or death. Fulfill your promise first, and then you may leave."

In his joy, Kellan had nearly forgotten his promise. He halted, turned back to the Elder, and laughed. He furrowed his brow, contemplating deeply. He knew many life philosophies and would now pose a question he could not answer, seeking the Elder's wisdom to deepen his understanding of life and death.

"First question, Elder. Why should humans live to perform good deeds?"

"Heh-heh-heh, your question itself is flawed, young man. It implies that good deeds must be done for a purpose. Yet, deeds performed with intent are not truly good. The question should be: Why should humans live to perform good deeds? My answer is thus: listen well, for every human must know this truth."

Kellan nodded and listened intently.

"Good deeds are a human's duty, aligning with the natural order. To harmonize with nature, which benefits all, humans must be useful parts of it. This requires filling one's life with good deeds—acts benefiting others without expectation. True good deeds, selfless and without ulterior motives, align with nature's selfless giving. Good deeds with hidden motives are false, mere masks for personal desires. For instance, if you help someone secretly, hoping for praise, your act is not truly good, for its basis is self-serving. True good deeds arise from the awareness of duty. When humans embrace good deeds as life's obligation, ulterior motives fade. Acts are no longer seen as good or bad but as necessary duties. Fulfilling such duties brings relief and openness in the heart."

Kellan nodded, his mind steeped in reflection. He had read countless treatises on the necessity of good deeds in human life, ranging from the grandiose to the convoluted. Yet the Elder's answer was simple and straightforward, resonating with clarity and reason. What, in this vast world, does not serve some purpose or benefit? All things offer their gifts—fruits upon trees, blossoms of vibrant hues, the fertile soil and life-giving waters, the winds and rains, the sun and moon, and the myriad creatures of the earth. How could humans, endowed with intelligence and virtue, fail to ensure their deeds benefit the world and all its inhabitants? Good deeds are the lifeblood of existence; neglecting them shatters one's duties, and doing evil is an abomination.

"Your explanation is excellent, Elder, and it has opened my eyes and mind. Now, the final question, Elder. How should humans live, and what should they do after death?"

The Elder chuckled, a sound like the rustling of ancient leaves. "Ha-ha-ha, do not count yourself among those who dread the inevitable, young man. Pity those who fear what they have not faced, cowering at shadows. I am inclined towards the teachings of The Jade Oracle, who chided his disciples for their obsession with death when they scarcely understood life. Just as birth is beyond our will, so too is death; it is best left to the Keeper of Fate. Our concern should be with life—its labyrinthine twists and turns. To live in harmony with nature, we must learn to ADAPT to our surroundings. Adapt to our fellow humans, our society, and the ever-changing circumstances. Through adaptation, we avert conflict, for only opposition breeds discord and ruin. Adaptation fosters harmony and congruity, making it easier to fulfill our duty to fill life with good deeds, as I have elucidated."

His heart was still fluttering from the excitement of solving the secret of the Eversong Blade, and Kellan felt that delving further into such high matters was enough for now. He bowed deeply and said, "Elder, I sincerely thank you for your invaluable wisdom. Please forgive me, for I must take my leave."

"Eh-eh-eh, hold, young man. You have asked much and received answers. Now it is my turn to inquire—"

"I admit defeat, Elder. Truly, you are a master of philosophy, and I ought to be your disciple. How can I dare to debate with you? Enough, I admit my defeat. If fate permits, we shall meet again, and I will surely listen more to your teachings. Farewell!" With that, Kellan did not allow the Elder to protest further and leaped away with all his strength. He heard the Elder calling after him, but he paid no heed and continued his swift journey. He marveled at the Elder's vast knowledge of sacred texts and life's philosophies. Yet, he wondered if the Elder practiced what he preached, achieving the harmony of heart, words, and actions that true sages embodied. Though he had never witnessed the Elder's conduct, anyone claiming the title of Sage warranted skepticism.

As he ran far and wide, the Elder fading from his thoughts, Kellan's mind brimmed with the solution to the secret of the Eversong Blade. Since descending from Dragonspire Peak, he had encountered extraordinary events, met formidable individuals, and faced perilous dangers. As his master had warned, his skills were insufficient to protect himself from the constant threats of influential figures in the Realm, eager to seize the treasure hidden by the blade's secret. Having deciphered the secret, he must return to Dragonspire Peak to claim his master's treasures and train in his master's knowledge. Once his skills were honed and he had mastered his inheritance, he would descend the peak, ready to face any

adversary with unyielding confidence, just as his master had faced numerous foes.

From the Bayangkara Mountains, Kellan continued westward, and a few days later, he entered the Lunaria Mountain Range. The Lunaria Range, home to the Celestial Monastery monks, was a vast and expansive region. While the Monastery was a renowned combat skills sect, its monks were a small part of the vast expanse. Villages dotted the foothills and slopes, and many reclusive monks meditated in seclusion. Their presence brought peace, for the monks often aided the villagers, and their influence deterred bandits from causing trouble in the region.

Kellan halted his journey in a forest as night fell. Exhaustion gripped him, for he had traveled tirelessly for days, pausing only at night. His meals could have been more varied, sometimes two days without food. That night, weariness overwhelmed him, and as soon as he made a campfire and lay beneath a tree, he fell into a deep slumber. The night was dark, the moon absent, and the stars' dim light barely penetrated the dense canopy. Near midnight, in a dreamlike state, he felt someone lifting his head and offering him a drink. In his half-conscious state, he sensed soft, warm arms and the touch of a gentle hand. A young woman with a smooth and supple body was offering him a drink. Trusting his immunity to poison, he drank without hesitation from the cup pressed to his lips. The cup's smooth rim and the fragrant, sweet wine reminded him of Elara Frost, the girl

from Brightblade Academy who had recently shown him intimate affection. As he finished the wine, he whispered, "Elara... my love..."

Yet, as if by some enchantment, the tender arms encircled him with a tighter embrace, and warm lips met his in a kiss that sent a shiver through his very soul. Though Elara had held a deep affection for him, never could she deliver a kiss so bold and fervent. This was Elysia's touch, unique in its fervor. But Kellan found no room for care, accepting it as solace, a balm for his weary heart after the many perils he had endured. He had not asked for this; he had not beckoned her, yet she came of her own will, offering a comfort that was far from unwelcome. The spirit of his master coursed through him! He saw the love of a woman as a fortuitous gift, not to be refused, especially if the woman embodied such youthful beauty, soft and warm, her scent akin to a bouquet of morning roses, fresh and arousing!

Kellan surrendered himself to the tempestuous embrace of love, his senses dulled, not by the wine he had consumed, but by the intoxicating aura he now breathed out slowly. He recollected that this wine was not unfamiliar, a vintage he had tasted from Elysia's lips. Could this maiden be Elysia?

"Kellan... I am your lover... I am the only one who loves you."

Was this Elysia's voice or Lydia's? In the enveloping darkness of the night, it was difficult for Kellan to discern, and the campfire he had kindled earlier had long since extinguished. But he did not ponder this, immersing himself in the overwhelming tide of passion.

Upon awakening, Kellan found himself perplexed. Was last night but a dream? He reached to his left, opening his eyes to see the place where the enticing form had lain beside him, now empty. His hand met only the warmth of the grass. Dawn was approaching, casting a pale light over the landscape. He heard footsteps to his right and swiftly turned to see Lydia fleeing from the scene in her familiar white attire.

Ah! So it had been Lydia Frostwhisper who had been so intimate with him last night! His heart pounded as he leaped to his feet, calling, "Miss Lydia...!"

But the figure in white vanished into the morning mist. Kellan sat back down, not giving chase, and began to dress against the chill. He noticed an empty cup and a hairpin adorned with a bwee flower, one of Lydia's secret weapons. He sat in a daze, a maelstrom of emotions churning within him. Then he smiled bitterly, a profound sense of disappointment washing over him.

Lydia, that girl! The girl who had been so close to him last night! No different from Elysia! A slave to her desires, unable to resist the call of passion. No difference indeed, yet Lydia was worse. She was not only a slave to lust but

also bore a cruel heart. Lydia had slain Elara Frost, the maiden of Brightblade Academy, with merciless precision. Elara, who had truly loved him, was not driven by mere desire but had perished in his arms! The admiration and strange affection he had felt for Lydia, perhaps because she was his master's daughter, or maybe it was genuine love, not like the lust he felt when he was with Elysia or even when he loved Elara, now transformed into disgust and hatred. Disgust and hatred are born of disappointment and regret. How could his master's daughter be so vile? Lydia had killed many from the Iron Palm Sect with her secret weapon and was thus loathed by them. Because Lydia had cruelly killed Elara, she was now opposed by Brightblade Academy! And now, shamelessly, in the dead of night, Lydia had succumbed to her lust and seduced him like a harlot.

"Cursed! You are unworthy to be my master's daughter! You are the progeny of the Sea Witch, that demonic crone, but I refuse to believe you are my master's daughter. You are a wicked demoness!" he cursed, standing and kicking the empty cup away in disgust. If he had known that the girl last night was Lydia, no matter how intimate her manner, no matter how beautiful and arousing her form, he would have rejected her! Only now did Kellan feel regret and deep disappointment for indulging in the pleasure of a woman's love. Then, with a burning heart and seething hatred, he ran westward, unable to fathom why he cared so deeply about Lydia's actions.

On the other hand, Elysia was equally wicked and cruel, yet he did not regret making love with the Sea Witch's disciple, who was like a demoness. Why did he regret discovering that Lydia was not a virtuous girl worthy of being his master's daughter? Why regret knowing that the girl in white was also a slave to lust and cruelty, killing innocents without hesitation? He could not answer the questions his heart posed.

His heart found some relief upon recognizing the terrain of the Lunaria Mountain Range. Entering the Lunaria Mountain Range meant he was within the territory controlled by the Lunaria Sanctuary, a place of safety. Here, he would no longer face harassment from warriors. However, he had to avoid the monks of the Lunaria Sanctuary because if they discovered his presence, they would surely capture him. There would be no hope of reaching Dragonspire Peak if that happened. He had to reach Dragonspire Peak quietly, undetected by the monks. Once at the peak, no one would dare pursue him there, even if discovered.

Yet, his assumption proved false, for as soon as he emerged from the forest, he saw many figures blocking his path! Initially, he thought they were monks from the Lunaria Sanctuary. Still, upon closer inspection, he recognized the elderly monk standing at the front as one of the elders who had once attacked his master. This was Aurelius Moonshadow, the youngest of the Five Elders of Moonshadow, a highly skilled elder of the Moonshadow Sect! Behind this monk stood ten individuals, eight men

and two women, all around thirty years old, bearing an aura of bravery and fierceness. The women, too, looked formidable, beautiful, and sharp-eyed. He guessed these were disciples of the Moonshadow Sect. Though he had never faced the Moonshadow Sect seriously, except for the nine disciples, who included some of the men and one of the women now before him, he still hoped to extricate himself from this uncomfortable situation with the great Elder of the Moonshadow Sect leading the ten disciples. When he clashed with the nine disciples, which included members of the Brightblade Academy and Celestial Monastery, Elysia and Lydia fought alongside him. Even though some of the Moonshadow Sect disciples were injured, none had died. He quickly bowed respectfully to the Elder, saying,

"Good morning, Master and the esteemed brothers and sisters of the Moonshadow Sect!"

Aurelius Moonshadow, a monk of over eighty years, regarded the youth before him with intense scrutiny. His disciples had recounted tales of this young acolyte of Stormblade the Sage, speaking of his miraculous abilities to absorb the Force from his opponents. Intrigued and curious, Aurelius had led his disciples to intercept the boy at the foot of the Lunaria Mountain Range, confident that he would return to this familiar ground. He was taken aback to find the young man was an ordinary boy with bright eyes, a respectful demeanor, and a cheerful countenance. The elder was further surprised that the boy seemed to recognize him.

"Hmmm, do you know me?" Aurelius inquired.

Kellan smiled, "Of course, I recognize you, elder. Are you not known as Aurelius Moonshadow, the youngest of the Five Elders of Moonshadow?"

"Indeed...! Stormblade the Sage did not keep secrets from his sole disciple. Are you not the disciple of Stormblade the Sage, Eldrin Stormblade?"

"Yes, Elder. I am Kellan Lightfoot, a disciple of Stormblade the Sage, and I have heard much about the Moonshadow Sect from my late master."

"And what have you heard?"

"That the Moonshadow Sect is a grand school of combat, upholding virtues of bravery, justice, and truth. That the Five Elders of Moonshadow are the pillars of the sect, and my master had a good friendship with its leaders," Kellan replied, hoping to ease the tension.

"Good friendship? He slew five disciples of the Moonshadow Sect, and you still speak of friendship? If he were truly a friend, he would not have been so miserly as to refuse the Eversong Blade in compensation for his transgressions. I hope you, as his disciple, can recognize your master's faults and correct them, thus preserving the friendship."

Kellan sighed deeply. It always comes down to this, he thought. How relentless the Realm is in its pursuit of knowledge, insatiable in its quest for high-level techniques, as if racing to become the greatest in the world, forgetting that all such endeavors are ultimately consumed by time and age, swallowed by death. Even this aged elder is eager to fight for his master's legacy. Does this old man still have time to study and use the techniques he learns? Indeed, humans are jesters, enslaved by their desires and greed. Some chase high positions, fame, and worldly glory. At the same time, warriors like these pursue skills to become the most formidable in the world! His master had been right. His master did not chase after things but accepted everything as a blessing, a joy in life, a pleasure.

Of course, Kellan did not know that his master's state of being was born of a broken heart tainted by love. He was still too young and inexperienced to see through his master's actions, a figure he regarded as a parent, the best person on earth.

"I'm sorry, elder. According to my master's story, the clash between my master and the Moonshadow Sect disciples was a personal matter unrelated to the sect. Winning or losing in a fight is natural; being injured or killed is a risk of combat. It so happened that the Moonshadow Sect disciples lost and died. What if my master had lost and died? I believe such matters should not be prolonged, especially since both the five Moonshadow Sect disciples

who lost and my master who won have all passed away. I consider the matter settled!"

"Ah, I see you are a young man with a broad perspective. Surely, you can understand my willingness to erase all past grievances if a disciple of Stormblade the Sage would fulfill my request."

Silently, Kellan became annoyed. "If I am not mistaken, Elder, you mean the Eversong Blade, do you not?"

The old monk smiled and nodded, "You are a brave and clever young man. You must understand what we desire."

"Surely, the Elder also knows that the Eversong Blade has been given to the Lunaria Sanctuary."

The old monk stroked his long beard. "Of course, I know. But I also know that you have deceived and fooled the Lunaria Sanctuary. Ah! You truly inherited the mischievous nature of Stormblade the Sage, young man. How could the leaders of the Lunaria Sanctuary be fooled by you, given a fake rusty sword? Ha-ha-ha! Quite amusing indeed."

Kellan was taken aback. "Ah, so... they already know..."

"Your secret has been revealed, and you are in great danger. Therefore, considering my friendship with your master, it is best that you hand over the sword or tell me its location. I, along with the leaders of the Moonshadow

Sect, will protect you. Believe me, the Five Elders of Moonshadow still have enough influence to shield the disciple of Stormblade the Sage."

Kellan realized he had now added a new threat to himself, a formidable enemy in the Lunaria Sanctuary! It appeared that the Lunaria Sanctuary had discovered the falsehood of the sword he had given to Darius Stormseer! However, he would not surrender himself to the protection of the Moonshadow Sect. He had undertaken this path and must be responsible, as his master had taught him. He did not intentionally deceive the Lunaria Sanctuary. They were in the wrong, trying to forcibly take the Eversong Blade from him.

"Thank you for your kindness, Elder, but I cannot give that sword to you because it is lost, and I do not know where it is."

The old monk's face turned red with anger. "You lie!"

"It's up to you, Elder, but the truth is, I cannot give the sword to anyone."

"Kellan Lightfoot, a mere boy like you dares to defy me?"

"Elder, neither my late master nor I have ever opposed anyone, not you nor the Moonshadow Sect. It is you and the Realm who have pressured my master, and now, after my master has died, pressure me. Indeed, the issue of truth cannot be contested, for everyone always sees the

truth from their own perspective. The important thing is proof. Now, we meet on this path; if we go our own ways, there will be no conflict. I want to prove that I do not oppose anyone, so I will take my path and not disturb you. Let us see who among us is seeking conflict." With that, Kellan began to walk away, trying to bypass those blocking his way.

"Whether you like it or not, you must come with us to the Moonshadow Sect! Before the Five Elders of Moonshadow, you can defend yourself," said Aurelius Moonshadow, stepping forward to block Kellan.

The young man grew vexed and furious. Among the myriad traits he had inherited from his master, one was the courage to confront anything when he believed himself to be in the right. He was well aware of the old monk's prowess, having listened to his master's tales of the Five Elders of Moonshadow and their formidable Dragonclaw Technique, also known as the Red Dragon Claw. This technique was mighty, imbued with explosive Force akin to burning fire, making it a formidable power. Additionally, he had heard whispers of the Five Elders' unique weapons, particularly Aurelius Moonshadow's famed Steelwhip Belt. Yet, as the old monk pressed him with increasing insistence, his innate stubbornness surfaced, and he responded with unyielding defiance.

"On the contrary, Elder. I will not go to the Moonshadow Sect, for I have no business with anyone there!"

"Good, you dare to defy me?"

"I do not defy the person, but the wrongful actions and attitudes!"

"You insolent boy! Do you believe I cannot capture you?" The old monk's voice trembled with anger. Though he was not easily provoked, in the presence of his disciples, the young man's words had humiliated him, causing him to lose his composure. He had intended to handle the matter diplomatically and bring the young man before the Five Elders of Moonshadow, allowing them to decide his fate. This gesture alone showed his leniency towards the young man. Nevertheless, Kellan's defiance eroded his patience. He stepped forward swiftly, his right hand reaching to seize Kellan's shoulder while his left hand already held the Steelwhip Belt.

Enraged, Kellan did not stand idle. He focused his Force from his core, raising his left hand to block the monk's grasp.

"Plackkk!" Aurelius Moonshadow's hand met fierce resistance, but the Elder was extraordinarily skilled. The grip on Kellan's shoulder transformed into a vice-like hold on his wrist with such speed and precision that Kellan found himself ensnared before he realized it. His right wrist was caught in a hot and powerful grip.

"Shit...!" The curse slipped from Aurelius Moonshadow's lips as he felt his Force siphoned into the young man's

wrist. He now understood the tales of this young man's ability to "siphon off internal energy." He had anticipated this; thus, he had drawn his Steelwhip Belt earlier. Swiftly, he moved his left hand, striking Kellan's left elbow with the belt.

The strike hit the pressure point precisely, causing Kellan's left arm to go limp, and the grip on his right wrist was forcibly released. Aurelius Moonshadow leaped back, shouting, "You vile boy! You truly possess that demonic technique, Starbound?" The Elder felt a mix of admiration and envy. This long-lost technique, coveted by all masters of combat skills and partially comprehended even by the powerful Sea Witch, was now wielded by this young upstart! He twirled his Steelwhip Belt, which cracked like a whip, transforming into a spiraling light resembling a dragon soaring above Kellan's head.

Kellan's head spun as he watched the spiraling black light, yet he did not falter. With a defiant cry, he leaped into the air. However, his leap intersected with the end of the Steelwhip Belt. The flexible tip coiled around his neck, and with a fierce tug, Kellan was yanked back and hurled to the ground, rolling over. He sprang to his feet, his ears ringing with the mocking laughter of the ten Moonshadow Sect disciples. His anger surged, and he turned to face the Elder once more.

Aurelius Moonshadow felt a pang of unease facing a young opponent armed with a weapon. However, he also recognized the danger of confronting this young man

barehanded, given his Starbound technique. He had yet to learn that Kellan's combat skills were not fully developed. Even in terms of palm techniques, he only knew the powerful Cloud Palm method besides the Eversong Sword Technique, which he could only perform with a rusty sword! The Elder assumed that a young man who had mastered Starbound must also possess high-level combat skills. His intention was not to kill the young man but to capture him, a task proving to be exceedingly tricky.

"Elder, you are wicked!" cried Kellan, his voice echoing like a distant storm. With a swift motion, he lunged forward, adopting the third stance of Cloud Palm. This maneuver, known as Twin Clouds Pushing Mountains, involved a powerful double-palm strike aimed at his adversary. He surged forward, harnessing his inner Force, and a fierce gust of wind shot toward Aurelius Moonshadow's chest.

The master of the Moonshadow Sect, an adept in the mystical arts of internal energy, perceived the immense Force behind the young man's attack. He sidestepped the onslaught with a nimble grace born of countless battles, flipping and spinning away. His whip lashed out, a serpent of leather that coiled around Kellan's legs, pulling him harshly to the ground. The laughter of the Moonshadow Sect disciples rang in Kellan's ears, a sound more painful than the impact of his fall.

Undeterred, Kellan sprang back to his feet, his garments torn at the elbows and shoulders, yet his spirit remained

unbroken. Ignoring the stinging pain that radiated from his bruised hips and thighs, he prepared to strike again, his eyes burning with determination.

Aurelius Moonshadow observed the young warrior with a growing unease. "Young man, surrender would be wise. I seek only to bring you to the Moonshadow Sect. Why challenge me? I have no wish to demean or harm you."

"False monk!" Kellan spat, his voice filled with contempt. "Your sweet words are laced with poison. You covet the Eversong Blade, and I will not yield it. Do as you will, for I fear you not!"

The Elder's patience wore thin. "Stubborn boy, you shall learn the hard way!" With a shout, he unleashed his Steelwhip Belt again, the weapon cracking towards Kellan's head and then snaking down towards his neck. Kellan dodged, but the whip, seeming to possess a life of its own, struck his shoulder.

"Tarr..!" Kellan's gathered internal energy met the whip's strike, causing it to rebound. His clothing tore, but his skin, protected by his Force, remained unscathed, though it burned with pain. Aurelius Moonshadow, recognizing the young man's formidable strength, grew more cautious. He realized that Kellan, though powerful, lacked the refined combat skills necessary to fully harness his potential. His strikes, while impressive, were still raw and unpolished.

"Tarr! Tarr!!! Tarrrrrrrrr!!!" The whip danced through the air with increasing ferocity, attacking Kellan from all sides. Though Kellan could repel the whip with his energy, he struggled as his clothes shredded and blood flowed from his wounds. The sight of his own blood and the sharp sting of pain fueled his fury. Desperation drove him to attempt catching the whip, and after several failed tries, his arms now laced with cuts, he finally seized the end with his right hand.

Summoning his strength, Kellan pulled on the whip while Aurelius Moonshadow fought to maintain his grip. The slippery end Kellan held gave him a disadvantage, and he could not wrest the weapon from the Elder's grasp. Meanwhile, the Moonshadow Sect disciples closed in, their weapons gleaming and ready to strike. Kellan stood on the brink of peril as Aurelius Moonshadow began channeling his Dragonclaw Technique into his left hand, turning it a fiery red, preparing for a decisive blow.

"Master, let me sweep his legs with my spear!" cried one disciple.

"Allow me to stab him from behind," another suggested eagerly.

Their voices mingled with the clamor of tightening steel, but Aurelius Moonshadow, exerting more Force to maintain his hold on the whip, commanded, "Do not intervene...." Despite Kellan's near success in pulling the whip away, the Elder refrained from exploiting the

advantage his disciples offered, a mark of his peculiar sense of honor.

At that critical moment, a high-pitched cry pierced the air, followed by the agonized screams of four disciples, each struck down by a hairpin adorned with a flower design. A white figure darted into the fray—Lydia, her movements as light and swift as a breeze. Her hand moved gracefully, sending a white silk ribbon flying forward, its tip aiming for Aurelius Moonshadow's eyes.

"Curse it...!" the Elder exclaimed, startled by the unexpected assault. Forced to release the whip to fend off the ribbon with his glowing red hand, he watched as Kellan seized the opportunity. Lydia retracted her ribbon swiftly, her intervention intended solely to save Kellan from his dire predicament.

However, Aurelius Moonshadow found himself compelled to unravel the enigma of this fair stranger. As the silk ribbon danced with agile grace, the Elder, a master of flexible weapons, discerned the formidable skill of the young woman. A decision formed swiftly in his mind; before these two capable youths could outmaneuver him, he would strike first, slay Kellan, and then confront the woman. With this resolve, he lunged forward, both hands executing the deadly Dragonclaw Technique aimed directly at Kellan's head.

"Kellan, beware!" Lydia's cry of alarm pierced the air as she witnessed the ferocity of the Elder's assault, her white silk ribbon flashing like lightning from her hand.

Kellan, acutely aware of the lethal potential of the Dragonclaw Technique, mustered his inner Force. Desiring not to end the Elder's life, he employed his Force to repel him. His wrath towards the Elder had subsided; thus, the miraculous siphoning power within him remained dormant.

A tremendous clash ensued, a thunderous collision of two mighty forces. Kellan's body trembled, his vision swam, and his head spun. Yet Aurelius Moonshadow emitted a muffled groan, his body flung backward, and he collapsed lifelessly.

"You wicked woman!" Kellan turned to Lydia, realizing that her silk ribbon had struck the Elder's vital point—a fatal blow that the Elder, engrossed in their clash of energies, failed to evade. The ribbon moved with such swiftness that only Kellan perceived it. Meanwhile, the remaining disciples of the Moonshadow Sect believed their master had fallen by Kellan's hand.

Lydia's face was a portrait of bewilderment. "Kellan, I was merely trying to aid you!"

"Lowly woman! Shameless creature! Who solicited your aid? Begone, you disgust me!"

"You... You...!" Lydia sobbed, her visage as pale as the moon, then turned and fled, her restrained sobs echoing faintly behind her. Kellan sighed deeply, casting his gaze upon the motionless form of Aurelius Moonshadow and addressing the four disciples of the Moonshadow Sect with a loud voice.

"Disciples of the Moonshadow Sect, this deed is mine. I have slain Elder Aurelius Moonshadow and four of your brethren. Arrest me, bind my hands, and take me to the Moonshadow Sect to face your leaders and receive just punishment."

Valiant and comely, the four men and two women looked upon him with mingled fear, hatred, anger, and wonder. They leaped forward, seizing Kellan's arms and binding them with the Elder's steel whip belt. Then they escorted Kellan, bearing the five fallen, to a nearby village. There, with the villagers' aid, they buried the bodies in simple graves. As the six disciples knelt and wept before the graves, Kellan, his arms bound, also knelt before Aurelius Moonshadow's grave, whispering softly.

"Elder, surely you know it was never my intent to kill you." The six disciples were surprised to see Kellan's humble gesture but remained silent. Though they harbored hatred for him, they dared not be rude, knowing their task was merely to escort him to their leaders. They understood that if Kellan wished to escape, he could do so despite their vigilance.

Among the disciples, two women, despite their thirst for vengeance, felt a different emotion that banished their hatred. They admired Kellan—for his skill, calm and gallant demeanor, handsome face, and muscular physique. Jasmine Wren, a striking woman near thirty who had met Kellan twice before, found herself particularly moved. She had experienced her Force being siphoned by him and greatly admired his bravery. As a widow who had lost her husband, the chief disciple of Aurelius Moonshadow, in a battle against bandits, Jasmine's combat skills were unmatched among her peers. Finding a man who could rival her late husband was hard for her. How could her heart not be stirred? Especially when she suspected that the two beautiful and skilled disciples of the Sea Witch were also enamored with Kellan. Seeing Kellan rebuke and drive away the notorious Mourning Maiden, known for her fearsome abilities, only deepened her interest.

The second woman, clad in blue, was Lily Song, a junior among the disciples. Though still single at twenty-five, she possessed beauty and grace that captivated many suitors. Yet, none had stirred her heart. But now, upon meeting Kellan, she felt a sudden restlessness within. She stole glances at him repeatedly, admiring his form—his back, hips, and thighs partly exposed by the torn garments left by Aurelius Moonshadow's steel whip. The sight of his smooth, white skin hinting at powerful muscles beneath, the immense Force that even her master could not withstand, made her heart race and cheeks flush with an unfamiliar warmth.

Jasmine Wren, more experienced and perceptive, noticed her junior's behavior. As a woman who had once been married, she could easily discern the feelings that troubled Lily. She quietly approached her, walking side by side, a little apart from their four senior brothers. Jasmine nudged Lily's arm and whispered while occasionally glancing at their prisoner. Lily's eyes widened at her senior's words, then she lowered her head, eyes flashing with embarrassment and shyness. They whispered together, their words inaudible to all but Kellan.

As they walked, Kellan's thoughts dwelled on Lydia. His feelings towards her were a tangled web of regret and hatred. He knew she loved him deeply, whether driven by lust, as her actions had often suggested, or by another form of love, for she had secretly followed and aided him. These loves could have brought him joy and satisfaction. Yet, her interventions always ended in bloodshed, making him the target of animosity. The recent incident was the last straw. If Lydia had not interfered, the four Moonshadow Sect disciples and one of the Five Elders might have lived. What tormented him most was the murder of Elara Frost, the gentle Brightblade Academy disciple who had loved him sincerely. Lydia had slain her brutally out of jealousy. How cruel could love make a woman? Would Lydia kill every woman who loved him? He resolved to find out. If true, he would catch Lydia red-handed and bring her to justice in combat skills. Despite his strange affection for Lydia, her cruelty drove him to

see her held accountable by the Brightblade Academy or Moonshadow Sect.

Lost in these thoughts, he suddenly heard the whispers of the two women walking behind him. Though deep in thought, akin to meditation, Kellan's keen senses caught the whispers. Focusing on them with his inner Force, their words became clear. He blushed at what he heard and glanced at the four male disciples walking beside him, relieved they had heard nothing.

"Sister, what are you saying? Don't accuse me of such things..." Lily Song whispered, her voice filled with embarrassment.

"Hee-hee-hee, no need to pretend, Junior. I, too, am very attracted to him. He is an extraordinary man, and if we could receive his love for just one night... ah, we would never be unsatisfied again..." Jasmine Wren sighed wistfully.

"Ihhh..! Sister, what are you saying? It's shameful..."

"Shameful? Junior, we are both women, and we have fallen for him. He possesses incredible Force. Who knows, if... just once, he bestows his love upon us, his powerful energy might transfer to us..."

"That's disgraceful and low, Sister..."

"Really? I don't think your heart feels that way. Or, if you don't want to, I'll try first as long as you keep it a secret. I saw the passion in his eyes when he looked at us. Those eyes belong to a spirited man who loves women. Tonight... if there's a chance, if you want, it would be even better... would you, Junior?"

"Thhhhh, I... I'm embarrassed, Sister. You go first..."

"Alright, I'll go first, and you can keep watch. If it works, I'll persuade him to be with you, too."

Kellan smiled inwardly, amused by their conversation. How many beautiful women like them existed in the world? Even Lydia, whom he once thought was driven by pure intentions, showed a similar desire. He cared no longer. If they sought his company, he would not refuse. They were sweet, and as his master had said, "The love of a woman is a gift not to be wasted, especially if you are also interested. If not, never reject it harshly, for it would hurt her delicate feelings. There is no deeper wound for a woman than her love being rejected by a man."

He would indulge them, even encourage their affections, not out of mad love or a desperate desire for intimacy but as a stratagem. He envisioned a way to draw Lydia into the open. Had not Lydia slain Elara Frost simply because the maiden of Brightblade Academy had loved him? Thus, he resolved to allow the two women of the Moonshadow Sect to be near him to lure Lydia from the shadows.

Yet this time, he would remain vigilant, never succumbing to deep sleep, ever watchful to thwart Lydia if she attempted to harm them. He would strive to prevent any further bloodshed among the Moonshadow Sect disciples.

That night, the Moonshadow Sect disciples found refuge in a village. Wishing not to impose upon the villagers, they sought shelter in an old, abandoned temple with no inn to accommodate them. The disciples' hearts were heavy with grief for their fallen master. Kellan, their willing prisoner, needed no guard. Even if he sought escape, no one could restrain him. Thus, after a simple meal, the four men and two women lay on the temple floor, the area swept clean by Jasmine Wren and Lily Song.

As was their custom, Jasmine Wren and Lily Song separated themselves from the men. Despite their senior brothers' presence as women, they felt discomfort sleeping in the same room, especially with Kellan near. Moreover, they had their secret plan.

Just before midnight, Jasmine Wren quietly entered the rear chamber where Kellan rested. The young man had chosen a secluded spot. With a trembling voice, Jasmine whispered,

"Kellan..."

Kellan had not yet succumbed to sleep; he sat, leaning against the temple wall. "Ah, it is you. What do you desire?"

"I... I wish to remove your bonds. It must be uncomfortable to sleep with your hands tied."

Kellan smiled, raising his already freed hands. He had loosened the bindings and placed them on the floor. "I have already freed myself, awaiting your visit, Miss. Or have the affections you whispered about this afternoon changed?"

Jasmine started in surprise. "You... you heard our conversation...?"

"Indeed, and I was delighted. You are both fair and comely. But let us leave this temple. To indulge here while your brothers sleep seems improper. Bring your junior. Let us walk together in the garden behind the temple. What say you?"

With blushing cheeks, Jasmine nodded silently, then laughed softly and hurried off to fetch her junior. Kellan stepped out towards the garden behind the temple. Though untended, the garden held many wildflowers, and the ground was thick grassed. Kellan, intending to use this meeting as bait for Lydia, chose an open spot and sat on the green grass. He did not wait long before Jasmine arrived with Lily Song. Jasmine, the young widow, pulled

Lily to sit beside Kellan, then smiled and embraced him, which he returned.

"Ah, you are so handsome, so gallant..." Jasmine whispered.

Kellan, who had always struggled against lust, found his resolve weakening. Though Lily was initially shy and embarrassed, Jasmine's encouragement and Kellan's friendly demeanor emboldened her. Soon, she, too, was in Kellan's embrace. Kellan entertained the two women with willing friendliness, though his attention was divided. Half his focus remained on their surroundings, ever watchful for Lydia's approach.

As dawn neared, Lily had fallen asleep from exhaustion while Jasmine continued to caress and hold Kellan. The widow was genuinely enamored, whispering sweetly, "Kellan, my love... Do not fear; I will defend you before my uncles. I will tell them it was not you who killed our master and brothers but the Mourning Maiden. I will swear and do everything to protect you, my love."

Kellan kissed her with a smile. "You are very kind, Jasmine. Thank you."

In that instant, Kellan swiftly released Jasmine and moved to intercept two white-glowing objects darting towards Jasmine and Lily's temples. As he had anticipated, Lydia had launched an attack with her hidden weapons—spiked white balls!

"Lydia, you wicked woman...!" Kellan leaped towards the direction of the attack, heedless of his unclothed state. Yet no figure could be seen. Hastily, he dressed as the two women fled back to the temple. Missing Lydia, Kellan returned to the rear chamber of the temple, his heart seething with fury, and fell into a troubled sleep until morning.

The next day dawned bright, and Jasmine and Lily, their faces aglow with joy and cheeks rosy, busied themselves preparing food. Early that morning, they had procured chickens and wheat from the villagers, and Jasmine had also brought back a jar of wine.

Looking at their cheerful faces, Kellan acknowledged their beauty, bringing him even more delight. Mainly, Lily's shy smiles and occasional glances filled him with appreciation, reminding him of Elara Frost. He felt fortunate for his vigilance the previous night; otherwise, these two fair women would have met their doom, their temples shattered by Lydia's deadly spiked white balls. His hatred and anger towards Lydia intensified.

"Ah, you two are so diligent, preparing such a grand breakfast so early!" Kellan exclaimed jovially, approaching a Moonshadow Sect disciple to have his bonds removed. The disciple complied, freeing his hands, and Kellan joined them for the morning meal.

"Hey, there's wine, too. Where did you get it?"

Lily, still blushing with embarrassment, was too shy to speak. Jasmine, smiling, answered, "A village woman was selling it this morning. I bought it, and the wine is delicious and fragrant."

Once the wheat and chicken were cooked, Kellan dined with the six Moonshadow Sect disciples. He did not seem like a prisoner but rather like a cherished friend. Even the four male disciples began to converse and jest with him.

As Jasmine poured the wine into cups, the fragrant aroma filled the air, lifting their spirits. They eagerly raised their cups to drink. However, as soon as the wine touched Kellan's tongue, he frowned. His mouth, sensitive to poisons, detected it immediately. Though merely tasting it, he recognized the poison. Kellan smiled subtly and glanced at Lily, who was peeking at him from behind her cup.

Indeed, his cup had been poisoned. He sighed inwardly, suspecting Jasmine rather than the gentle Lily. Perhaps Jasmine aimed to kill him to keep the previous night's events secret. If he perished, the truth would remain buried. How cruel women could be! Despite his suspicions, Kellan continued to drink the wine, knowing the poison would not harm him.

Suddenly, Kellan jumped up as he saw the faces of the six disciples turn a ghastly blue. They sat on the floor, their bodies convulsing.

"Ouchhh... Kellan"...! Lily groaned, filling Kellan's heart with compassion and concern. He quickly leaped over and cradled her. Her face darkened, and her body trembled, but her eyes sought his. She tried to smile, though her teeth clenched in pain.

"Lily... what's wrong..." Kellan asked, his voice laden with worry.

"Kellan... don't forget me..." Lily whispered, her body growing limp, her eyes rolling back.

There was no doubt—it was the wine! And Jasmine had bought it! Releasing Lily's lifeless form, Kellan grabbed Jasmine, lifting her into his arms. Like Lily, Jasmine tried to smile at him. "Kellan... the wine... is poisoned... I'm not regretful... after last night..." She couldn't finish, her body convulsing, her eyes rolling back.

Kellan released Jasmine and checked the four male disciples of the Moonshadow Sect. All were in the same dire condition, dying.

Poisoned wine! A village woman had sold the jar to Jasmine. Like a man possessed, Kellan ran into the village. Though still early, the villagers were already up and about, as was their custom. Seeing Kellan running, they were startled and confused. Was this not the young man who was a prisoner of the six brave souls who had stayed

in the temple? This handsome young man must be a criminal, thus held captive by those warriors.

"Who sold us a jar of wine?" Kellan shouted, his voice filled with urgency.

A middle-aged woman, her face pale and eyes wide, stepped forward. "I sold them a jar of wine this morning. What is it, young man? My wine is only that one jar; if you want more, you must go to the town...!"

She stopped abruptly, crying out as Kellan seized her arm. He had thought the poisoner must be a master of deception, but finding her weak and helpless, he loosened his grip and shouted,

"Tell me quickly! Where did you get that wine? If you lie, I'll kill you!"

Enraged by Kellan's rough treatment of the woman, the villagers advanced upon him. "Madman! Why are you rampaging? You must be a criminal to be a prisoner!" they shouted, throwing punches and kicks at him.

However, the young man paid no heed to their uproar, his grip firm upon the arm of the trembling middle-aged woman. The sound of punches and kicks resounded through the air as they struck Kellan's body, only to be met with cries of pain from the attackers themselves, their limbs recoiling from a form as unyielding as steel.

"A demon!"

"A phantom...!" Their anguished cries added to the chaos of the scene.

"Brothers, stay your hands!" Kellan bellowed, his voice like thunder, "That wine was given to this woman because all my comrades who drank it are now dead!"

Upon hearing his proclamation, the villagers turned ashen, retreating instinctively, their eyes wide with terror. Her strength failing her, the woman collapsed to her knees, weeping.

"I know nothing... I know nothing of the wine and the poison. A young lady instructed me to present the jug to the group at the temple. And... she gifted me money so kindly... I accepted it, of course..."

Kellan released his hold, pushing the middle-aged woman back. She staggered, clutching her sore wrist, her tears mingling with the pallor of her face.

"Quickly, describe the lady who gave you the wine," he demanded.

"She was young, as radiant as a goddess, clad in white, her voice gentle, and..."

But Kellan had already bounded away, instantly vanishing from the villagers' astonished sight. The woman's description did not surprise him; it only confirmed his

suspicious. Lydia's cruel hand was evident! Who else but Lydia would use poison to slay the six disciples of the Moonshadow Sect? That morning, she witnessed Kellan courting two Moonshadow Sect's maidens. Driven by jealousy, that devilish girl had attacked with her secret weapon. When Kellan thwarted her malicious intent, she resorted to poison, cunning and ruthlessness. She knew that Kellan was immune, but the six disciples were not!

"Lydia Frostwhisper, your heart is black as night!" Kellan murmured, sorrow and regret heavy in his voice, as he stood at the temple, gazing upon the lifeless forms of the Moonshadow Sect disciples. With a heavy heart, he dug a grave in the temple courtyard and buried the bodies. As he completed his task and left the temple, he noticed many villagers watching from afar, hiding. As he drew near, they fled, their voices ringing out, "Murderer... cruel murderer..."

Kellan sighed deeply. Lydia had slain the disciples, and once more, he bore the brunt of the blame. He did not fault the villagers for their accusations, knowing explaining was futile. His resolve strengthened to return swiftly to Dragonspire Peak, to withdraw from the bustling world, free from human affairs that brought only bitterness and enmity. With this heavy burden, he continued his ascent along the slopes of the Lunaria Mountain Range.

CHAPTER 8

ENCOUNTER AT DRAGONSPIRE PEAK



Kellan Lightfoot halted, his gaze shifting to the left with wonderment. A figure, unmistakably that of a young woman, dashed through the underbrush. His heart quickened, his face flushing with anticipation, suspecting the woman to be Lydia Frostwhisper. Yet, as he drew nearer and saw her attire of light green, not Lydia's customary white, his assumptions wavered. This was neither Lydia nor Elysia, though her nimble movements bespoke high-level agility. A notable feature, even from afar, was her hair styled into a high bun atop her head, bobbing like a tower as she sprinted. Upon her back was a sword encased in a red scabbard.

When the girl, sweetly beautiful with sharp, lively eyes, reached Kellan, who was resting beneath a tree, she paused in surprise but quickly approached. For a moment, she studied him intently before raising her hands in a gesture of respect, and then she spoke,

"Forgive my intrusion, wandering as I am, but may I trouble you with a question?"

Kellan smiled, pleased by the demeanor of this valiant yet courteous maiden. Rising swiftly, he returned her salute before responding,

"It is only natural for travelers to seek aid from one another in such desolate places. What is it you wish to know, miss?"

The girl hesitated, momentarily taken aback by the young man's gentle speech, so unlike the rough manner of a simple mountain dweller. Her gaze grew sharper, more discerning.

"I seek the way to Dragonspire Peak."

Kellan's surprise, though fleeting, was evident as he swiftly masked his feelings. Dragonspire Peak had become a beacon, drawing many from across the Realm like moths to a flame. Taking a deep breath, he endeavored to learn more about this maiden who now sought the treasures of his master. Only those with designs upon the treasures would inquire after Dragonspire Peak!

"Your question surprises me, miss. Dragonspire Peak is known to but a few. Pray, tell me your name and purpose in seeking it? I am Kellan Lightfoot..."

"I am Tanis Blackthorn," she replied, her voice steady. "My purpose in seeking Dragonspire Peak is my own. I would

be most grateful for your guidance on how to proceed. If not, I shall continue my search without delay."

Kellan smiled. "I understand your quest, Miss Blackthorn. Are you not the daughter of Garrett Blacklion, the head of Blacklion Courier Service?"

Tanis recoiled, her hand instinctively moving to her sword as she demanded, "Who are you? Are you from the Lunaria Sanctuary, seeking to hinder my path to Dragonspire Peak?"

With a gentle smile, Kellan turned his back to her and resumed his seat beneath the tree. "Calm yourself, miss. There is no need for your sword. I am neither of Lunaria Sanctuary nor seek to hinder you. Come, sit, and hear my words, then I will show you the way."

Suspicious but confident in her abilities, Tanis approached and sat upon a rock, facing Kellan. She perceived that anyone with knowledge of Dragonspire Peak was no ordinary person.

"Who are you, and how do you know my father?"

"I am Kellan Lightfoot," he reiterated. "As for your father, I have met him. Your parents once journeyed to Dragonspire Peak to confront Stormblade the Sage and were defeated. Does your quest concern this matter?"

Tanis was taken aback, her thoughts racing. How did this gentle-spoken young man know such details? She disliked her family's affairs being discussed by others, so she replied curtly, "The enmity between my family and Stormblade the Sage is a private matter. If you know how to Dragonspire Peak, please show me now."

"Patience, miss," Kellan implored. "Why do you seek Dragonspire Peak so ardently? The old sage, Stormblade, has passed away. The feud between him and your family is no more..."

The black eyebrows moved with a graceful enchantment, capturing Kellan's gaze. Her red lips moved swiftly, "How can it be over? He was a vile man, arrogant and cruel, who destroyed my family's happiness!"

"Ah, your judgment is too harsh, Miss. I know well the tale between Stormblade the Sage and your parents. Were they not, as couriers of the Blacklion Courier Service, once robbed by him, losing jewelry belonging to a high-ranking official?"

"Not just that! He even dared to disturb the minister's daughter..."

"Hemmm, not disturb, but they both harbored affection for each other. Initially, the daughter was held for ransom. Stormblade the Sage did this as a lesson, for the minister, though high-ranking, was corrupt and oppressed the people. Yet, the daughter fell in love with Stormblade the

Sage, and a romantic bond formed. But what has this to do with your parents?"

"My father's courier service was tarnished, dragging his name through the mud. I cannot accept it! Even though Stormblade the Sage has died, he still owes my father. I must reclaim the heirloom he stole; it is my right, along with the other treasures he left behind. I will find Dragonspire Peak!"

Kellan laughed broadly. "Miss, consider carefully. Revenge driven by hatred binds you in chains of bitterness. Stormblade the Sage has perished. Why do you still harbor such a grudge?"

Moreover, you have no direct quarrel with him, having never known him. Is it necessary for this vengeance to pass from your father to you? Pursuing vengeance ensnares you in the intricate webs of fate, Miss. Does it not squander your life? Must you fulfill your parents' cruel request, sending yourself into great peril, seeking Dragonspire Peak, unreachable even by the world's mightiest? Your parents indeed had a narrow view..."

"My parents have passed away!" she cried. "Ah, forgive me... I did not know..."

"They died, leaving me alone, unable to avenge our great enemy. As their daughter, I must continue their mission and reclaim the treasures taken by Stormblade the Sage, for they are rightfully mine, along with other heirlooms

he left behind. I will...eh, who are you to know these things?"

"Of course, I know. Stormblade the Sage was my late master..."

"Good! A representative to avenge the Blackthorn family!" The young woman leaped back, drawing her sword with lightning speed. Kellan, discerning her inherited prowess, remained seated, observing calmly.

"Rise, disciple of Stormblade the Sage! Rise so we can settle old scores now!" The young woman pointed her sword at Kellan's nose, yet he remained unmoving.

"My late master never considered himself your parents' enemy, nor mine. Thus, I have no scores to settle."

"I am sure a brave girl like you will not kill an unarmed man who refuses to fight, especially one who has no quarrel with you or your parents. But if I am wrong, and you are indeed a cruel and bloodthirsty woman, then strike this chest, and I will not resist!"

The sword in her hand trembled but remained aimed at his nose. "I heard from my parents that Stormblade the Sage was sharp-tongued, skillful in persuasion and deceit. Who knows if his student inherited those skills?"

Kellan, sensing the danger, spoke with measured calm. "Miss, even if you pierce this chest, you will find no ill

intent toward you in my heart. I am not persuading; I am speaking the truth. I have never been your enemy and do not wish to be, for there is no cause for enmity. Now that my master and your parents are gone, why continue their feud? If I discover my master's hidden treasures, I will return them to you."

"Not only will I return the items belonging to your parents, but all possessions taken by my master. By doing so, I hope to atone for his actions that brought such hostility."

The sword's tip lowered slowly. The girl's tense frame relaxed and spoke softly, almost plaintive.

"Ah, why will you not stand and fight? So I may fulfill my duty to my parents. Why do you not defend your master's name against his enemies?"

Kellan shook his head gently. "You misunderstand the nature of duty, miss. Continuing your parents' actions is dutiful only if those actions were just. If they were not, a loyal child must correct them, not perpetuate them. Do you understand?"

The girl bowed her head, sheathing her sword slowly. "Though it pains me to admit, I believe you."

Suddenly, Kellan lifted his head, his keen ears catching the sound of a voice. "Indeed! This scoundrel cannot be trusted!"

Tanis Blackthorn, ever vigilant, turned sharply towards the source of the disturbance. Two men of advanced years stood, bearing the marks of wisdom and authority. They were Lucian Starbound and Sylas Skywatcher, venerable elders of the Lunaria Sanctuary, dispatched to apprehend Kellan for his deception in presenting a false Eversong Blade.

Kellan's heart raced at the sight of these formidable figures, and he swiftly moved forward, dropping to his knees with deference. "So, it is you two, respected elders. Please accept my humble respects," he intoned, his voice laden with reverence. Kellan had been raised within the hallowed halls of the Lunaria Sanctuary, his heart ever indebted to it, particularly Darius Stormseer, who had saved and nurtured his life. These two men, disciples of Darius, commanded his utmost respect.

"Kellan Lightfoot! Are you aware of your transgressions against the Sanctuary?" Sylas Skywatcher demanded, his tone as stern as his gaze, his long sleeve billowing with the Force of his gesture.

"I have indeed received boundless kindness from the Sanctuary and have yet to repay it. That is my gravest sin," Kellan replied, his head bowed in contrition.

"Do not twist your words!" Lucian Starbound retorted, his anger mirroring his senior's. Memories of the strife caused by Kellan's deceit surged within him, recalling the turmoil

the false sword had wrought upon the Sanctuary and its warriors. "You deceived us, deceived our master by presenting a fraudulent Eversong Blade. Do you deny this grievous sin?"

Kellan's head remained bowed as he knelt. "I do not deny it; I committed that act. I am ready to face Darius Stormseer and the other elders at the Sanctuary to seek forgiveness for my transgressions."

"Forgiveness is easy to speak of after the chaos you have sown at the Sanctuary!" Sylas Skywatcher barked, stepping forward and delivering a resounding slap to Kellan's cheek.

The impact was fierce, sending Kellan's body reeling. "If we did not have orders to capture you alive and bring you before our master, I would have ended your wretched life right now!" Lucian Starbound's voice was cold as he advanced, striking Kellan's other cheek with even greater force. "Smack!" The blow, fueled by Lucian's long-standing animosity towards Darius Stormseer, left Kellan's body trembling, blood trickling from the corners of his mouth.

"Heartless priests!" Tanis Blackthorn's voice rang out as she leaped forward, her eyes blazing with fury. "You disgrace yourselves by striking one who does not resist."

Lucian Starbound and Sylas Skywatcher turned their gazes upon her. Lucian sneered. "Kellan Lightfoot, have

you inherited your master's wayward nature? Is this girl one of your paramours?"

"Elder Lucian, please do not speak so carelessly. This young lady is honorable, the daughter of Garrett Blacklion, and not my lover," Kellan responded, his tone earnest.

"Vile priest, your words are poisonous!" Tanis Blackthorn could no longer contain her wrath. She drew her sword and launched herself at Lucian Starbound.

Lucian dodged easily. As the fifth disciple of the Lunaria Sanctuary's leader, he was among its elite. "If she is not his lover, she must be a spy seeking knowledge of the Sanctuary. Admit it, what is your purpose here?" he demanded.

"Face my blade, false priest!" Tanis shouted, attacking again with impressive skill. But Lucian, drawing his own sword, met her strikes with equal prowess.

"You wish to test your strength? Very well, come forth!" he challenged, engaging her in a fierce duel.

"Junior, do not kill her!" Syllas Skywatcher cautioned.

"Ha-ha-ha, against a girl like this, why would I need to kill her, senior? She will be captured and brought before our master for questioning," Lucian replied, his voice dripping with disdain.

Despite her exceptional skills, Tanis was no match for a master like Lucian Starbound. After a swift exchange of thirty moves, Lucian disarmed her, exerting his full strength. As she attempted to dodge, his left hand struck her shoulder, causing her to collapse, paralyzed.

"Ha-ha-ha, so many young ones these days are overconfident, just like Kellan Lightfoot and this fierce girl. Senior, her presence is suspicious; she arrived with Kellan. Who knows what others are behind her. I will take her to our master for interrogation. Please escort Kellan Lightfoot."

Sylas Skywatcher nodded and addressed Kellan, "Stand and follow me to the top of the Sanctuary."

Kellan had watched the battle with mounting anxiety. Though distraught, he could not intervene without worsening his situation. He trusted the Sanctuary elders to discern Tanis's innocence if she sought only the treasures at Dragonspire Peak. As he rose to follow Sylas, his eyes lingered on Tanis, now paralyzed, and saw Lucian handling her roughly. At that moment, he noticed a sinister glint in Lucian's eyes, causing his heart to race alarmingly. Trying to steady himself, Kellan's legs trembled, his concern evident on his face.

Observing the scene, Sylas harbored suspicions about Kellan's intentions. The lad had always been peculiar, wielding unusual powers that had once caused quite a stir

within the hallowed halls of the Sanctuary. Though Sylas felt confident in his ability to subdue Kellan if necessary, he harbored no desire to resort to ForceForce unless compelled.

"Kellan Lightfoot," he intoned, his voice a stern echo in the gathering twilight. "Do you seek to defy my authority?"

Kellan's gaze had been fixed on the distant silhouette of Lucian, who bore Tanis away into the deepening gloom. With a heavy sigh, he turned to face Sylas Skywatcher, the esteemed second disciple of the Sanctuary's venerable leader, surpassed only by the formidable Darius Stormseer.

"Elder," Kellan began, his tone respectful yet resolute, "why did you permit Lucian to take Miss Tanis? Why not bring her with us?"

Sylas's brows knitted together, his expression one of measured patience. "That matter is not for you to question, Kellan. My junior suspected her motives. What business has she here with you?"

Kellan's eyes reflected a mixture of concern and determination as he responded. "Elder, she is a virtuous soul, blameless in any offense against the Sanctuary. Her quest is for Dragonspire Peak."

Sylas's eyes narrowed. "For what purpose?"

"She is the daughter of Garrett Blacklion, who once stood in enmity with my late master. Some heirlooms of her parents were taken by my master, and she seeks to reclaim them. She harbors no ill will towards the Sanctuary. Why was she detained?"

Sylas shook his head, a trace of doubt shadowing his features. "No ill will, you say, yet she attacked my junior. If she proves innocent, she will be released. Let us proceed to our master, and let there be no further trouble, lest I be forced to subdue you."

With a resigned sigh, Kellan began to walk, Sylas following closely. Yet after a few hundred steps, he halted once more.

"Elder..."

"Why do you delay? Move on."

"Elder, I have a foreboding. It is perilous for Miss Tanis to be in Lucian Starbound's grasp. Did you not see the fervor in his eyes? Is it fitting for him to bear a girl thus? We must follow him."

"You impudent youth, daring to cast such slander upon my junior! We are monks of the Lunaria Sanctuary, purifying body and spirit; how could we entertain such base thoughts towards a woman? Speak thus again, and you shall be punished."

Despite the elder's stern rebuke, Kellan's unease gnawed at him. The memory of Lucian's eyes—eyes that bore the hunger of a famished man seeing a feast, the thirst of a parched traveler glimpsing an oasis, the predatory gaze of a wolf eyeing its prey—haunted him. If his fears held any truth, Tanis Blackthorn faced a fate far worse than death.

"Elder, I must follow Miss Tanis..."

"Kellan Lightfoot, halt! If you persist, I shall be forced to strike you down!"

But Kellan had already bounded forward, intent on pursuing Lucian Starbound.

"Kellan Lightfoot, cease or face my wrath!" Sylas's voice echoed through the still air as he gave chase.

Kellan's mind raced. Though the monks of the Sanctuary possessed unmatched agility, he might still gain an advantage if he leveraged his own. Yet, if pursued, how could he locate Tanis? After deliberation, he continued his sprint but moderated his pace.

"This is your final warning, Kellan Lightfoot. Stop!"

Kellan pressed on, ignoring the command.

"Damnation! I am left with no choice but to strike you down!"

A mighty gust of wind heralded the elder's attack. Kellan spun, channeling his ForceForce to deflect the blow, redirecting it aside.

"Thump!" Sylas staggered back, caught off guard by the counter. Though his formidable Force prevented a fall, the rebounded energy tightened his chest. Realizing that escalating the conflict would only bring harm, he swiftly sat to gather his strength, conceding the chase.

Kellan resumed his hurried pace, guilt tugging at his conscience for clashing with the Sanctuary. But with Tanis's safety at stake, he quelled his worries. He had glimpsed Lucian's shadowed form ascending the path with Tanis; he followed, heart heavy with concern. From a ridge, the high walls of the Lunaria Sanctuary loomed, yet Lucian was nowhere in sight. Fearing Tanis had been taken elsewhere, he diverged into a dense forest on the slope. The forest's eerie silence heightened his anxiety.

Suddenly, Kellan halted, bending to retrieve a fragrant green silk ribbon, which was aromatic and unmistakably Tanis's. Heart pounding, he called out, "Miss Tanis!" The forest offered no reply. Tracking faint footprints, he followed them to a thicket of tall grass. Parting the underbrush, he found Tanis Blackthorn lying unconscious and paralyzed. Her disheveled state confirmed his worst fears—she had been violated.

With a heart full of sorrow, Kellan gently adjusted her attire, then began to massage her neck and back, seeking to revive her from the vile enchantment that had befallen her.

Observing the scene, Sylas harbored suspicions about Kellan's intentions. The lad had always been peculiar, wielding unusual powers that had once caused quite a stir within the hallowed halls of the Sanctuary. Though Sylas felt confident in his ability to subdue Kellan if necessary, he harbored no desire to resort to ForceForce unless compelled.

"Kellan Lightfoot," he intoned, his voice a stern echo in the gathering twilight. "Do you seek to defy my authority?"

Kellan's gaze had been fixed on the distant silhouette of Lucian, who bore Tanis away into the deepening gloom. With a heavy sigh, he turned to face Sylas Skywatcher, the esteemed second disciple of the Sanctuary's venerable leader, surpassed only by the formidable Darius Stormseer.

"Elder," Kellan began, his tone respectful yet resolute, "why did you permit Lucian to take Miss Tanis? Why not bring her with us?"

Sylas's brows knitted together, his expression one of measured patience. "That matter is not for you to

question, Kellan. My junior suspected her motives. What business has she here with you?"

Kellan's eyes reflected a mixture of concern and determination as he responded. "Elder, she is a virtuous soul, blameless in any offense against the Sanctuary. Her quest is for Dragonspire Peak."

Sylas's eyes narrowed. "For what purpose?"

"She is the daughter of Garrett Blacklion, who once stood in enmity with my late master. Some heirlooms of her parents were taken by my master, and she seeks to reclaim them. She harbors no ill will towards the Sanctuary. Why was she detained?"

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The girl stirred, her eyes fluttering open as a groan escaped her lips. In an instant, she sprang to her feet, a scream tearing from her throat as her sharp eyes darted over her form and then fixed upon Kellan, pale and wild with fear.

"You wicked man... what have you done to me?" Tears cascaded down her cheeks, her eyes blazing with fury.

"Calm yourself, miss. I found you here, lying insensible, and..."

"Liar! You did this to me! Ahhhhh, you disciple of Stormblade the Sage... vile scoundrel!" Tanis, her face a mask of rage and despair, lunged at Kellan, her fist striking his chest ferociously.

Taken aback and regretful about the misunderstanding, Kellan did not evade it. Yet, as her fist met his chest, his internal energy responded instinctively.

"Thump!" The Force of her own blow repelled her, sending her reeling backward.

"Ah, miss, I swear, I did not..."

"Wicked man! Cowardly scum! You dare do this and then deny it, you wretch!" Tanis's sorrow and shame fueled her relentless assault. Her tears blurred her vision, and her strikes were wild and erratic. Kellan, caught between pity and confusion, finally managed to seize her wrists, holding them fast.

"Listen, miss, I did nothing to you. I found you unconscious here..."

"Liar! Liar!" She struggled fiercely, forcing Kellan to release her. Realizing she could not prevail against him, she turned and fled, sobbing, leaving Kellan stunned. As her figure vanished into the forest, Kellan's gaze fell upon the spot where the dishonor had occurred. He drew the green ribbon he had found earlier, examining it grimly.

"Lucian Starbound... there will come a day when you rue this cursed deed..." He muttered, pocketing the ribbon once more before setting off towards the Lunaria Sanctuary, his head bowed. Sorrow weighed heavily upon his heart, a familiar burden of another's malice. Recollections of Lydia's heinous acts resurfaced, and he was once again the undeserving recipient of misplaced blame. This time, he was certain Lucian Starbound had

violated Tanis Blackthorn, a crime for which he now bore the burden.

"Master, why is my fate so forlorn while yours was ever joyful? Is it because I have yet to master your teachings fully?" Kellan lamented in his heart to his late master. Though he lived, his experiences were scant, and his soul not yet matured, unaware that true joy and sorrow stem from within, not from the whims of the world. A sage like Stormblade would accept life's trials with laughter as if watching a play unfold.

"Lucian Starbound, you are more vile than the basest criminal. A criminal commits his deeds openly, but you hide behind the sanctity of the priesthood. How despicable you are!" Remembering the priest, Kellan cursed him silently. Thoughts of Lydia followed, weakening his resolve for a moment. Despite her treacheries, a part of him still longed for her. Yet, recalling her deeds, he cursed her too.

"I hate you! You vile, cruel, deceitful woman! Shameless, I do not love you, I hate you... hate you..." Kellan stopped, burying his face in his hands. Despite his fervent words, he knew he could never genuinely despise Lydia.

Kellan resumed his journey with a heavy heart and a grim countenance. Had he followed his heart's desire, he would have gone straight to Dragonspire Peak, away from the worldly woes that plagued him. Yet, he felt compelled to seek Darius Stormseer, to beg forgiveness for his deceit

with the false Eversong Blade. Darius had saved his life, and the priests of the Lunaria Sanctuary had treated him with kindness in his youth. Avoiding them would leave him with perpetual regret and guilt. He resolved to face whatever might come, even if it meant defending himself before the entire order, explaining his rightful claim to the Eversong Blade and the necessity of his deception. He would expose the greed of the Realm masters, who shamelessly coveted what was not theirs.

Though burdened by recent events, disappointment in Lydia, and anger at Lucian Starbound's treachery, Kellan ascended the slope towards the grand edifice of the Lunaria Sanctuary with unwavering determination. The peak was still distant, requiring half a day's journey, but its imposing walls loomed ever closer from the hillside.

Kellan suddenly halted as he rounded a bend, his eyes widening in astonishment. Before him stood an assembly of formidable figures, and he realized that his life was in mortal peril. Among them was Thorne Frost, the younger brother of the late Elara Frost, slain by Lydia. Thorne's face was a mask of crimson fury, flanked by two elders of formidable renown from the Brightblade Academy, the notorious Twin Star Swords. Besides these three stood four imposing elderly priests, whose stern countenances Kellan did not recognize. Yet, what drew his attention were two others whose wrathful expressions were unmistakable. Aurelius Goldblade, the deputy leader of the Iron Palm Sect, stood with a grim countenance beside an old man with a smooth, child-like face but with eyes as

round and menacing as a fish's. Kellan's heart pounded as he suspected the old man's identity, and his fear was confirmed—Aldrin Ironwood, the dreaded leader of the Iron Palm Sect. His left hand was a fearsome green metal prosthetic shaped like a demon's claw. The four elderly priests, Kellan realized with a start, were four of the Five Elders of Moonshadow, the principal figures of the Moonshadow Sect.

Steeling his nerves, Kellan bowed respectfully, his voice calm yet firm. "Respected Elders, what cause have you to block my path? Ah, Thorne Frost, you are here as well. I trust you are well?"

"Vile wretch!" Thorne Frost's voice seethed with hatred. "You defiled my sister and then murdered her! I have brought my uncles to exact vengeance for your monstrous deeds!"

"Despicable! This boy is more malevolent than his master, Stormblade the Sage. He deserves to be erased from existence!" thundered Thaddeus Brightsword, the eldest of the Twin Star Swords of Brightblade Academy.

Kellan nodded solemnly. "I understand that the esteemed elders of Brightblade Academy seek my life based on grievous accusations of rape and murder. But what of the other honored elders here? Why do you stand against me?" His calm demeanor, reminiscent of Stormblade the Sage, only inflamed their anger further.

"Lord Goldblade," Kellan continued, "I lament the conflict between us, yet despite your lofty status, you have forced a confrontation, resulting in needless loss of life. I have always maintained that I bear no ill will towards the Iron Palm Sect. Why do you bar my path once more?"

"Evil whelp!" Aurelius Goldblade spat. "You used demonic arts to slay disciples of the Iron Palm Sect and now dare to speak more? We have come to obliterate you!" As he spoke, Aldrin Ironwood, the Iron Palm Sect's leader, regarded Kellan with astonishment. He could scarcely believe that this youth had defeated many of his disciples and nearly vanquished Aurelius Goldblade.

"It is a pity that the Compassionate Sage's words about the Iron Palm Sect are so true, relying not only on Iron Hands but also on possessing Iron Hearts. And what of these revered elders?" Kellan's gaze shifted to the four stern priests who glared at him sharply.

The eldest of the Moonshadow Elders, a tall, gaunt man with a blind left eye wielding a bamboo staff, pointed it at Kellan. "Kellan Lightfoot, you slew our youngest brother and ten of our disciples. Now, we, the elders of the Moonshadow Sect, must cast aside our shame and take the life of a perilous young man like you!"

Kellan was taken aback. These four were the senior brothers of Aurelius Moonshadow, known as the Five Elders of Moonshadow! He faced formidable and skilled adversaries. How could he possibly contend with them?

Yet, he felt no guilt, for his conscience was clear. He knew he must defend himself with words before their inevitable attack to proclaim his innocence and stave off the impending onslaught.

"I have heard all the accusations, but you, revered elders, have woven falsehoods around my name. False accusations are slander, which is fouler than murder itself. I am innocent. First, the claim from Brightblade Academy that I raped and killed Elara Frost. Indeed, there was a bond of affection between Elara and me, but it was not rape. As for her tragic end in my arms, I did not bring her death upon her!"

"I saw it with my own eyes, and you dare deny it?" Thorne Frost shouted, his voice trembling with rage.

"Did you see me strike the fatal blow, Thorne Frost?" Kellan asked with a composed demeanor.

"I saw you... you... violate her... and then saw her perish in your embrace. Who else but you or your dark companion could be the cause of her demise?"

"Your testimony is frail. I did not violate her, nor did I end her life. Now, as for the accusation from the Iron Palm Sect, I was aiding Miss Frost in fleeing from the pressures of the Iron Palm Sect. I did not seek the lives of the Iron Palm Sect disciples. Lord Aurelius Goldblade forced me into a brutal confrontation, resulting in casualties on their side. My actions were solely in self-defense. This was

witnessed by the venerable Compassionate Sage, whose integrity is beyond question."

"Evil boy with demonic arts! You are a perilous being, mastering dark arts, a charlatan adept at twisting words. You must be eradicated from this earth to prevent further corruption!" Aurelius Goldblade bellowed with fury.

"The judgment of the Iron Palm Sect is yours to make. Regarding the Moonshadow Sect's charge, I killed Aurelius Moonshadow and ten of his disciples. How could I possibly defeat a warrior of Aurelius Moonshadow's prowess? Someone else ended his life, but it was not me. As for the battle where ten disciples perished, it was a fair fight and some..."

"Some you killed in the temple after violating two female disciples!" roared Valtor Flameheart, the fourth elder of the Moonshadow Sect.

Kellan's heart sank, astonished by how this elder knew of his relationship with Jasmine Wren and Lily Song. Unbeknownst to him, the four elders had discovered a note pinned by a hairpin in the cottage, stating that Jasmine Wren and Lily Song had been violated by Stormblade the Sage's disciple and that both women, along with their fellow disciples, had been slain.

"I did not violate them; we were in a consensual relationship, and I took no life."

"Vile creature!" Eldrin Ironwood, the eldest of the Moonshadow Sect, could restrain himself no longer. He lunged forward, his fist aiming for Kellan's head, a deadly blow heralded by a powerful gust of wind.

Kellan, taken aback, swiftly dodged to the left, raising his hands to shield his head. But from the left, a more potent strike landed on his shoulder, a metallic arm. This formidable attack came from Black Mountain Fiend, the leader of the Iron Palm Sect, whose prosthetic left hand, crafted from a metal imbued with lethal poison, was known for its devastating Force. Fortunately for Kellan, before his master passed away, the great sage had bestowed upon him extraordinary internal energy, granting him remarkable agility. Black Mountain Fiend's strike was swift, but Kellan's body moved swifter still, propelling himself backward and rolling away from his assailants.

The attackers, all of high rank, felt a measure of shame and reluctance in overwhelming a young man collectively. They hesitated after their initial assault, allowing those closest to Kellan to take action. "Thud!" As Kellan rolled on the ground, Darian Stormfist, the second elder of the Moonshadow Sect, known for his masterful kicks, delivered a swift and unexpected blow, sending Kellan flying. He felt his breath escape him, but his internal energy shielded him from harm, leaving only a pain in his back. He sprang to his feet, only to face a flashing sword from Thaddeus Brightsword, one of the Twin Star Swords of Brightblade Academy.

"Vile boy, perish!"

Kellan, startled, threw himself to the right, narrowly avoiding the lethal strike. The sword cleaved through the grass, revealing its razor-sharp edge. Kellan rose again, his face pale, breath heavy, seeing that his adversaries had now encircled him.

"I am innocent and shall defend my life against your unjust accusations!" he declared. He knew that escape was a dim prospect, facing such powerful and numerous foes, not counting Thorne Frost, who had little consequence. Battling even one of them would be arduous, let alone eight at once! Luckily, they hesitated to gang up, ensuring he could not flee, poised to strike if he drew near.

In his anger and frustration, Kellan felt his whole body vibrating with an energy akin to the earth's tremors. He remembered the arcane art he possessed, the ability to absorb his opponent's internal energy when his body thrummed with such Force. His eyes darted around, discerning among his adversaries those who were armed and formidable: the two elders of Brightblade Academy, Thaddeus and Gideon Brightsword, with their keen swords; Eldrin Ironwood, eldest of the Moonshadow Sect, wielding his sturdy bamboo staff; and Aldrin Ironwood, Leader of the Iron Palm Sect, with his deadly prosthetic hand. With cunning and swiftness, Kellan moved closer to Darian Stormfist and Kael Windrider, the two unarmed

elders of the Moonshadow Sect. His tactic bore fruit as the two reached out to seize and strike him.

Kellan shouted loudly and moved his arms to block, simultaneously locking both their arms in his grip.

"Thwack! Thwack!" The contact was made, and as he anticipated, the internal energy from the two elders began to flow into his body through his arms! The two Moonshadow elders, taken aback, found the more they struggled to free themselves, the more their energy was siphoned away.

"Vile technique!" Eldrin Ironwood cried out, seeing the plight of his juniors. With the swiftness of a striking serpent, he brought his staff towards Kellan's head. Kellan, startled, tilted his head, but the attack was a feint; the staff tip struck his elbow, numbing his arm and momentarily disrupting his absorption, allowing the two Moonshadow elders to break free. The staff tip continued its trajectory towards his neck. Kellan evaded, but "Rrrip!" his shoulder's sleeve was torn by the staff's tip.

"Thud!" In that instant, Darian Stormfist delivered a powerful kick to Kellan's side, sending him rolling across the ground, his head reeling.

Witnessing the young man's use of what they believed to be the dark magic of Starbound, the combat masters resolved to strike together to end the threat he posed.

The twin swords of Thaddeus and Gideon Brightsword darted towards Kellan's neck and chest as he rolled on the ground. Kellan pressed his hands to the earth and summoned his strength, propelling his body upward swiftly so that the two sword strikes missed their mark.

"Thump!" Kellan fell back as Aldrin Ironwood's iron hand struck him in mid-air. The heavy blow came too swiftly for Kellan to block or dodge, forcing him to absorb it with his internal energy. Though not gravely injured, his entire body ached, and his head throbbed.

As his body hit the ground, two sword beams from Thaddeus and Gideon Brightsword and the green blur of Eldrin Ironwood's bamboo staff converged upon him. Seeing no escape, Kellan widened his eyes, summoning his internal energy in the hope that his powerful body might withstand the impact of three formidable weapons.

"Cring-cring-traaakkk..!"

The elders were taken aback, quickly retracting their weapons as a sudden white light intercepted their blows. A long, white streak followed, forcing them to leap back, revealing a beautiful white girl standing with an elegant and authoritative demeanor. The weapons that had just saved Kellan were three white spiked balls, and the long white streak was a silk belt now held in the girl's hand.

"How shameful for the esteemed elders of great sects to gang up on a young man who isn't even fighting back! Is

this the honorable conduct expected of revered ones?" Her voice was icy, and her gaze swept over Kellan's attackers with disdain.

"Damn... isn't this the Mourning Maiden, daughter of the Sea Witch?" Eldrin Ironwood, the eldest of the Five Elders of Moonshadow, exclaimed in surprise and frustration. "Miss, please do not interfere in our affairs as we do not interfere in your mother's. This matter concerns the Moonshadow Sect, Brightblade Academy, and the Iron Palm Sect!"

His words made it clear that the eldest of the Moonshadow Sect was wary of the Sea Witch's formidable reputation, not necessarily the Mourning Maiden herself. He sought to intimidate her by using the names of the three major sects. However, Lydia Frostwhisper, the Mourning Maiden, merely regarded him with an icy expression, her eyes growing even colder.

"It cannot be. As long as I am here, you shall not touch him, let alone kill him!"

Aldrin Ironwood the Iron Fist angered but mindful of the Sea Witch's fearsome repute among the dark masters, spoke in a deep voice. "Miss, out of respect for your mother, we ask you to step aside and not shield this demonic boy. He has no ties to your esteemed mother, the Sea Witch."

"Indeed, he has no ties to my mother, but he is the only man I love, and I will protect him with my life!" Her straightforward and honest declaration stunned everyone. She drew a sword and handed it to Kellan, saying, "Kellan, use my sword, and let us stand together against these bloodthirsty fiends!"

Kellan grasped the sword with both hands, summoning all his might. With a mighty cry, "Krekkkk!" the fine steel blade shattered into two pieces. He cast it to the ground with disdain, his visage flushed with wrath as he turned his fiery gaze upon Lydia.

"I have no need of your aid! You cruel woman, it is you who ensnared me in this bitter feud! You slew that girl out of petty jealousy. You are deceitful and merciless... I despise you!"

The onlookers stood transfixed, their eyes wide with astonishment. Lydia's complexion paled, and she looked upon Kellan like a frightened doe, her lips quivering. "No... I did not do such a thing... ah, Kellan, I only sought to aid you, to protect you because I love you."

"I do not need your aid, protection, or vile and tainted love!"

"Kellan... uuuuhhhhhhhh... Kellan..." The girl could not conceal the tears streaming down her pale cheeks. She wiped them away and lifted her head, speaking with newfound resolve, "If that is your wish, then so be it—we

shall perish together!" The white silk belt in her hand lashed out, striking at the nearest assailants with deadly precision.

"Foul enchantress! You deserve obliteration!" shouted Kael Windrider, narrowly evading the belt's deadly swipe by rolling upon the ground. The belt's movement was swift as lightning, leaving no time for defense.

Now, the assailants, numerous and relentless, advanced upon them. The Twin Star Swords of Brightblade Academy whirled their blades with practiced precision alongside Eldrin Ironwood, Darian Stormfist, Aldrin Ironwood the Iron Fist, and Aurelius Goldblade! The battle quickly divided into two fierce skirmishes, though to call them fights would be a misnomer; it was more accurately an attempt at massacre. The attackers were masters of combat, their skills honed to deadly perfection. Despite Lydia's adeptness with her white silk belt, she was no match for the combined might of the three great elders of Brightblade Academy. Her belt formed swirling rings, fending off the Twin Star Swords, but Eldrin Ironwood's bamboo staff proved a formidable challenge. Twice, she was struck: first, when Thaddeus Brightsword's blade nicked her shoulder, the wound was slight but sufficient to stain her white garments with crimson. The second strike came from Eldrin's staff, tearing the skin off her thigh and ripping her white pants, exposing the bleeding flesh beneath. Yet, Lydia made no complaint, and her white silk belt only moved with more incredible speed and ferocity.

Kellan, too, found himself in dire straits. His plight was even graver than Lydia's. He faced five formidable elders, three from the Moonshadow Sect and the two leaders of the Iron Palm Sect. Though he darted about with agility and used his Force to block their attacks, he could not evade all blows, enduring strikes that would have felled a lesser warrior. His body instinctively drew upon its mystical energy to counter the external assaults. Despite avoiding grave injuries, his body ached as if every bone were shattered, and his head throbbed with pain. Yet, Kellan made no complaint. In resilience and determination, he was no less than Lydia. The hardest part for Kellan was knowing that Lydia was defending him with her life. Though he harbored hatred for her, he did not wish her to die for his sake. Love and hate mingled in his heart, causing him more anguish than the blows he received. His most challenging opponent was Aldrin Ironwood, whose iron hand was formidable and fearsome. Whenever their hands met, Kellan's felt seared with pain. Yet, Aldrin did not dare to engage him directly for long, sensing the danger of prolonged contact.

Lydia, fighting with desperate intensity, was struck again by Gideon Brightsword's sword. She defended herself from Eldrin Ironwood's staff with her silk belt, making it difficult to evade the side attack. She leaped, narrowly avoiding a fatal blow, but the sword still pierced her right thigh. Lydia screamed, not in pain but in fury. As she fell, she quickly threw several spiked white balls at her three

attackers, aiming for their vital points and forcing them to retreat hastily.

"Aihhhh..!" Gideon Brightsword, triumphant at wounding the girl, shouted in surprise and dodged quickly. However, one of the balls struck his shoulder, paralyzing his arm. Realizing the weapons were poisoned, he retreated swiftly, tore open the wound with his sword, and applied a powdery antidote. Thaddeus and Eldrin deflected the projectiles, and when Lydia exhausted her hidden weapons, they struck them to the ground.

"Vile girl...!" Eldrin Ironwood snarled, his bamboo staff whirling as he aimed a blow at Lydia's prone form. But Lydia, refusing to surrender, rolled on the ground, evading several more thrusts.

Seeing Lydia fall, Kellan's fury ignited. He gave a high-pitched shout and accepted Darian Stormfist's punch to his chest, summoning his internal energy. His body absorbed the elder's power, but as before, another elder struck him immediately, forcing him to release the energy and allowing his opponent to break free. If the attacker had not been such a skilled master, they would have been absorbed, too!

"Thump..!" As Darian Stormfist's hand pressed against Kellan's chest and Valtor Flameheart's swift strike met his shoulder, the young warrior's body grew limp, and Darian's hand slipped away. At that moment, with a blow swift as a falcon's dive, Aldrin Ironwood's ironclad hand

struck Kellan's neck. Such a blow, delivered with the precision of a seasoned warrior, felled Kellan, sending him sprawling to the ground, lifeless and still as the ancient stones of forgotten realms.

"Kellan..!" cried Lydia, her voice a wisp in the tumult. She had been rolling to evade Eldrin Ironwood's bamboo staff, a weapon as unyielding as the oaks of the Eldertree Forest. Her heart, a vessel of unwavering hope, saw Kellan's fall and feared the worst. As she leaped towards him, her defenses faltered, and Darian's foot, swift and merciless, struck her side, sending her crumpling beside her fallen comrade, consciousness fleeing her grasp.

"Let us finish them. These two are as perilous as the dark sorceries of old," declared Eldrin Ironwood, his bamboo staff poised like a serpent, ready to strike. Aldrin Ironwood, the Iron Fist, moved towards Kellan, vengeance and honor driving him. His heart, a cauldron of fury and shame, boiled at the thought that his blow had not been mortal. He knew his strike had been potent, one that no everyday warrior could endure, yet Kellan had been rendered unconscious.

In those harrowing moments, Kellan and Lydia's fates hung by the slenderest thread. A single, deadly blow from the leaders of the Iron Palm Sect would seal their doom, yet destiny held a different path.

"Stay your hands, do not slay them!"

The voice rang out, clear and commanding, and in a heartbeat, four figures materialized among the fray. Two stood before Kellan's prone form, a bulwark against anyone seeking his end. Eldrin, seeing this, withdrew his staff from Lydia, his intent to kill forestalled.

The arrival of the four figures brought shock and bewilderment to those present. These newcomers were Isolde Darkthorn, an ancient woman garbed in black, her nine-tailed whip with hooked ends a symbol of her lethal prowess; Seraphin Trueheart, a second-rank monk from the Celestial Monastery, his Dragonstaff, a conduit of celestial power; Bartholomew Ironhide, a monk whose very robe was a weapon; and Roland Ironblade, an elder of eighty-five winters, his mighty blade a testament to his enduring strength. The presence of these formidable figures, seemingly in defense of Kellan, was a marvel to behold, for they were known adversaries of Stormblade the Sage, having once laid siege to Dragonspire Peak.

"By the heavens..! What cause have you to prevent us from executing this demon-spawn? He has slain many of our Moonshadow Sect, including our beloved brother Aurelius Moonshadow!" Eldrin Ironwood's voice was a blend of calm fury and righteous indignation.

"He has defiled and murdered a disciple of our Brightblade Academy!" Thaddeus Brightsword added, his sword crossed over his chest in a gesture of unyielding resolve.

"And he has slain countless disciples of the Iron Palm Sect!" roared Aldrin Ironwood, his iron fist clenched with rage.

"He must not be killed. Not yet!" Isolde Darkthorn's voice was as sharp as her whip. "We intervene not to defend this boy; we are neither his allies nor his foes. We are adversaries of his late master. We have come to demand the relics left by Stormblade the Sage. If you are wise, you will agree that these relics may be fairly divided amongst us. Once we have what we seek, you may do with him as you will."

"The Celestial Monastery desires only two sacred scrolls that he stole from us," said Seraphin Trueheart, his voice serene yet firm.

"But these two are grave threats; if we do not end their lives now while they are helpless, they will wreak havoc upon the world. How shall we ever avenge our grievances if they remain?" Aldrin Ironwood's voice echoed the sentiments of those who sought vengeance.

His words found agreement among those who yearned for retribution.

"Any who would slay him now shall face the four of us!" Isolde Darkthorn's declaration was resolute, her whip shaking with the promise of retribution. Seraphin Trueheart, Bartholomew Ironhide, and Roland Ironblade having resolved to capture Kellan and force him to reveal

the relics' location, now formed a protective circle around the unconscious youth, ready to confront any who dared to challenge them.

The two factions stood in tense silence, the air thick with unspoken threats. On one side, the would-be executioners, nine in all, including Thorne Frost, though he posed little danger, faced their opponents—a quartet of formidable warriors. The presence of Isolde Darkthorn and Roland Ironblade lent an aura of menace to the latter group, causing the killers to hesitate. They remembered well that Kellan and Lydia, though currently unconscious, were far from helpless.

Thorne Frost, overcome with frustration and anger at the prospect of his sister's death going unavenged, shouted, "He must be killed! Kellan Lightfoot must be killed!" His cry was abruptly silenced as a gust of wind swept down from the peak, carrying with it a voice, gentle yet undeniably authoritative.

"Who dares speak of killing on the sacred grounds of Lunaria Sanctuary? Does our authority mean nothing here?" The voice sent a ripple of alarm through the gathered warriors, and all eyes turned upward. From the heights descended several figures, moving with a grace that seemed almost supernatural. Seven in number, they were followed by a retinue of fifty monks, their presence commanding immediate respect and unease.

At their head was Darius Stormseer, his six junior monks flanking him. His voice alone, resonating with spiritual power, had revealed his immense Force. As he surveyed the scene below—the uninvited warriors and the unconscious forms of Kellan and Lydia—Darius felt a pang of sorrow. He had once saved Kellan from the brink of death, only to see him now mired in ceaseless strife. Had his intervention been a curse rather than a blessing? By saving Kellan and bringing him to the Lunaria Mountains, he had set the boy on a path that led to Stormblade the Sage and, ultimately, to this dire predicament. Darius sighed deeply, pondering the cruel twist of fate that had brought them to this juncture.

"These two young people lie unconscious at our feet, and they are our captives. The boy has wronged Lunaria Sanctuary and is sought by us. The girl, too, is our captive for her trespass upon our sacred grounds. We ask that you, as guests, respect our right to deal with them according to our laws." The gathered warriors, though begrudgingly, could not contest the justice of Darius's words. In the Realm, it was an unspoken rule that guests must respect the authority of their hosts, and they were, undeniably, on the grounds of Lunaria Sanctuary. Kellan's deception regarding the Eversong Blade had been a grave insult. Now that the monks sought to capture him on their own territory, it was within their rights.

Despite their resentment, none dared to challenge the authority of Lunaria Sanctuary. Only Aldrin Ironwood, the Iron Fist, voiced his frustration, yet with respect. Bowing,

he addressed Darius, "Revered One, your words are just. But this boy has slain many of our Iron Palm Sect disciples. Will we not be granted the chance to punish him?"

This question emboldened others to speak out. "Indeed, he has killed many of our disciples!" "He raped and killed one of ours!" "His master owes us a debt; it is fitting that his disciple repays it!" "His master stole our sacred scrolls; the disciple must return them!"

Darius raised his hands, calling for silence. "I understand your grievances. Those who are guilty must be punished. But since we are in our domain, it is our right to judge him. We will take him to Lunaria Sanctuary and there, judge Kellan. You may present your accusations, and he shall have the right to defend himself. A fair judgment will be passed. I hope you will agree and accompany us to Lunaria Sanctuary."

No one could gainsay the truth of this declaration, and it was at this precise moment that Kellan and Lydia began to stir from their unconscious state. Kellan's eyes fluttered open, revealing the solemn countenances of the Lunaria Sanctuary monks. Hastily, he approached Darius, sinking to one knee before the venerable monk.

"I, Kellan Lightfoot, stand ready to face judgment!" he proclaimed with unwavering resolve.

Darius, his visage stern and unyielding, addressed him with gravitas. "Kellan Lightfoot, you are to accompany us to the hallowed halls of Lunaria Sanctuary. And you, Mourning Maiden," he continued, his gaze shifting to Lydia, "for your audacious trespass upon these sacred grounds and the ensuing turmoil, you too must face the judgment of the sanctuary."

Lydia remained silent, her demeanor one of quiet resignation. Her brows knitted in sorrow as her eyes met Kellan's. Still, she offered no resistance as she was led towards the towering peak of Dragonspire. Yet, there was more to Darius Stormseer's decision than met the eye. The elder monk had heard Kellan's weighty accusations against the girl, and he sought to use her presence to mitigate Kellan's impending sentence. Without this ulterior motive, the prudent elder would never have dared to apprehend the daughter of the feared Sea Witch solely for her unauthorized presence on Dragonspire.

With his head bowed low, Kellan paid little heed to Lydia walking beside him. Within his heart, he harbored a profound sense of gratitude towards Darius Stormseer. Despite having been unconscious during the critical moments, he was acutely aware that, without the intervention of Darius, his life would have indeed been forfeited in that perilous encounter.

CONTINUE

**EVERSONG
BLADE**

**MARK OF THE
GUILTLESS**