Chandler Flowers
January 31st, 2024
Mrs.Graff
Advanced Fiction Writing

The Ashen Prince

Long ago, the continent of Malia was forged by the hands of three great Guardians: The Nature Phoenix Iviana, The Blood Boar Garnash, and The Golden Dragon Oro. Garnash tore half of the continent of Malia with his horns, creating the desert kingdom Obelisk which only accepted the strong. Iviana flourished the other half of the continent with life, sculpting a verdant land called Alathain where all could heal and prosper. Oro preferred his privacy, so with his might raised an island from the earth and forged a volcano with his flames, creating a paradise deemed Terestria to protect his people from all threats. Once their work was done, the Guardians accepted their followers and granted them strength and magic. Oro gave his followers the strength to bend fire to their will, creating anything such as arrows and bolts of flame or the power to heal wounds. Iviana blessed her followers with the gifts of nature, allowing them to control water, grow plants, fire bolts of lightning, and purify others' souls.

“And what about Garnash, Vayle?”

Julian's voice spoke quietly as I snapped out from my story. The boat rocked ever so slightly, making Julian jump a bit in his bed. Sitting so close to him, I could still see the scars on his body. Too little for a warrior, too much for a child. My flaming collar illuminated Julian’s face and provided warmth to the otherwise cold quarters below deck.

“I’m getting to that, young one.” I said calmly.

"Is it my time to shine yet?" a familiar voice echoed in my head.

"Not now. Let me finish." I thought

I cleared my throat and continued the story.

Garnash had the most unique gifts of the three. He gave his mages the ability to manipulate blood and control minds, frightening abilities to let his followers study. But, he added something cruel. Something that affects everyone in Malia.

The Bloodcurse.

When a human experiences something, something cruel and unforgivable and manages to survive, Garnash sees this as potential. Thus, he implants a vengeful spirit of war and fuses it into your blood. This spirit of war is violent and causes the cursed individual to go on fits of murderous rampage. The Bloodcursed kill anyone, friend or foe, and they are often sent into exile.

"That's scary," said Julian.

"Don't worry. Recently, mages from Alathain have been working on suppression collars to keep the spirit in check." I assured him.

"...Would the Bloodcurse get me too?" Julian asked innocently.

I felt my eyes sting with tears and I quickly looked down at the wooden floor of the ship.

"No, it won't. Once we get back to Terrestria, nothing will hurt you." I said.

I stood up and walked towards the door leading to the above deck.

"Vayle, the flaming collar you're wearing. Is it a…" started Julian.

My body froze on the door handle. I could hear the voice in my head laughing at me, the rage building inside at my own stupidity. My grip on the door handle tightened and a resounding snap

echoed through the room. Julian yelped and I held the broken door handle in my hands. Not again. I let him take over again.

"...Good night, Julian." I said and rushed up the stairs without looking. I was at my quarters in five minutes and lay down on my bed, breathing heavily.

"Dumbass." said the voice.

"You're very lucky, Lay, that I don't have to speak in order to talk with you." I thought.

"*I'm sad about that. It makes you slightly less crazy than you already are." taunted Lay.*

"Shut up."

"That kid is not going to be safe with you."

"He won't be safe in the desert alone, either."

"You sure about that?"

I slowly took off my armor and placed it neatly next to my bed. My golden claymore lay quietly next to my bed, ready in case something were to happen. My suppression collar still glowed in the dim room and its magic helped me start to relax, but not rest. Today's memories swirled in my mind and the terrified look in the eyes of that young slave boy.

If a collar knew its true purpose, would it refuse to obey?

It might seem like an odd question, questioning the sentience of a collar, but it is something I think about often while I kneel and the Dragon Mages place the Collar of Suppression upon my neck once again. Blazing healing fire touches my skin and the mages chant their words of protection:

"Golden Dragon, by your will, grant our Captain your strength." the mages chanted.

Finally, the high mage, a master from Alathain, added nature magic to the collar. The golden fire was amplified with tinges of green, a sign that the Nature Phoenix's soul soothing power was added.

"Nature Phoenix, by your grace, protect our Captain's soul." the high mage added.

With the high mages's words, the Collar was finished.

"Thank you for my chains." I said.

I stood back up, grabbed my golden claymore, and left my tent. The Dragon Knights, my family of brave warriors, were waiting for my command.

"Today, we end 3 years of war against Obelisk, who have gone through us to try and capture Alathain for their own selfish desires. They have been encroaching on our territory, slaughtering innocent people, and capturing citizens from our homeland and from Alathain to use in their battle. Today, we free those citizens and show those bastards of Obelisk that Terestria will not accept their savagery any longer! Are you with me, Dragon Knights?!" I roared.

"Yes, Captain!" echoed all of the knights in unison.

"Good, then let's move out! Knights in front, archers, mages, and healers in the back. Maintain this formation." I commanded.

The formation was quickly made and we moved out. I adjusted the collar, trying to ignore the rage and blood boiling inside my body.

The worst part of battle isn't the screams.

It's something, as a soldier of war, that you get used to, like the sun rising in the sky every morning or the cool metal of a collar around your neck. The worst part of battle isn't the clash of steel on steel, a sound that reminds every soldier of their own mortality, even mine as I dance between soldiers much weaker than me. One slip of mind, one loss of focus, and you are taken

by the golden dragon's wings to see your family. Depending on who you are, that might actually be a blessing. The worst part isn't even the cracking sound of bones, a sign of Obelisks blood magic taking into effect. Their mages are stronger than our fire ones and they have taken more of my men than I would like. No, the worst part of battle is something far simpler.

The sickening stench of blood.

I should not be allowed to succumb to something that simple, that…common in a battlefield, but I can't. The stench litters the desert sand of Obelisk and these…monsters called Obeliskians revel in it. In front of me, as I make my way to the front alongside one of my lieutenants, Gabriel, another of my Dragon Knights has fallen. He was a youngling, I remember seeing him put on his golden armor for the first time, his smile so bright that you could mistake it for fire. But, now, he was just another casualty, another splash of blood that I have to report to the Dragon King when I return. His killer looked back at me with a manic smile and I felt my head split apart with rage.

"No! No, I can't, not now." I begged.

Gabriel's attention rapidly shifted to me.

"Captain Vayle, control yourself!" Gabriel commanded.

My vision was turning red and the flaming collar on my neck that my guard was supposed to maintain was cracking apart. I found myself kneeling on the ground in agony and through it all Lay's familiar, yet terrifying voice boomed in my head, erasing all other noise.

"*Are you just going to let them kill your men?"* said Lay

"N-no, but I won't let you hurt anyone else!" I yelled

"You say that every time but yet I always win." Lay mocked

*"*Please…stop…stop…it hurts!" I said

“Ah, poor, poor, Vayle. You are never going to win. Now, it’s my turn to have some fun!” Lay reveled in ecstasy.

My vision faded from red to black.

And I was forced into a dreamless, endless void once more.

By the time I regained my faculties, I was standing over the freshly killed corpse of the commander of this group of Obeliskian’s. I looked behind me and there was a trail of corpses and dried blood, coating the desert sand red. I didn’t even react when the mages showed up and placed my collar back on me.

“It’s over now. You’ve killed them all.” the high mage said

The rest of my men came up to me and knelt down, waiting for my command. Their knees shook and I even saw one of the younglings soldiers' tears hit the sand. I hated this, what the Bloodcurse turned me into in their eyes, but I’d rather have these men alive and afraid than another tally on the death count. I turned to Lieutenant Gabriel and told him to gather some men.

“Lieutenant Gabriel and I will go into the slave camp to rescue survivors. The rest of you head back to the ship and make preparations to head back to Terestria.”

I cleared my dry throat before I continued.

“You fought well, my loyal soldiers. Pray for the dead and celebrate your lives. Dismissed!” I commanded

“Yes, Captain!” echoed every soldier in a combined monotone voice.

I watched the group of soldiers vanish in the distance and nodded to Lieutenant Gabriel to bring his men to a march. I walked ahead into the slave camp and felt that something wasn’t right. There was absolutely no noise, not even the chirping of birds or insects.

“Captain…”started Lieutenant Gabriel.

“Weapons, now.” I commanded.

Blades were removed from sheathes in a chorus of steel. Our steps were silent and careful and our eyes darted across all directions. Until we reached the center of the village.

And we saw why there was no noise at all.

Piled atop an altar dedicated to Garnash were the bodies of 40 slaves, all maimed beyond recognition. Their eyes were cut out, their mouths were sewn shut, and the words “All is fair in war” were written at the bottom in the slaves blood. One of the soldiers vomited while Lieutenant Gabriel ran his fingers through the dried blood.

“They didn’t want to give us the satisfaction of victory. How despicable.” growled Gabriel.

“…I’m sorry that you had to see this, young one.” I said quietly.

“Captain, what are you…”

Gabriel turned around and saw a young slave boy standing right behind them. He didn’t look older than 10 and had too many scars across his body and clothes.

“How did you even know he was there?” asked Lieutenant Gabriel.

“While we were staring at the altar, I thought I heard something and turned around. He was very quiet, so don't feel too bad for not noticing.” I said

I knelt down to the boy.

“What’s your name?” I asked calmly.

“J-Julian.” the boy murmured.

“My name is Vayle Vestri. Me and my friends are here to take you somewhere safe.” I said

Julians eyes wandered to my blood tipped blade on my belt.

“Are you…bad guys? The bad men used to hurt me with those. Do you…also hurt people?” Julian asked innocently.

“Heheheh” Lay snickered.

I said nothing and hugged Julian tightly. It was the only thing I knew to do at that moment.

“…I won’t hurt you. Where you are going, no one will hurt you. I promise.” I said while buried into his chest.

I stood up while carrying Julian, not daring to look into the eyes of my soldiers.

“Let’s go home. Protect Julian with your life.” I commanded.

There was a slight pause.

“Answer when you are spoken to.” I yelled.

“Yes-of course, Captain. We’ll make haste.” said my men.

We left the slave camp in the desert sands and made the trek to our camp. Julian was fast asleep on my shoulder, my hot armor somehow providing comfort to him. It was sunset when we made it to the ship and we were prepared to sail to Terestria. Julian was given his own space with the crew and after we all finished eating, Julian immediately went back to his room. As I was going back to check on him, I heard Lieutenant Gabriel and my men speaking to each other.

“Today was my first time seeing Captain Vayle in action. He’s just like what everyone says: a monster.” said a youngling

“I’ve seen it multiple times. When his eyes turn red, it’s like he’s an unstoppable force. He mowed down the Obeliskians like it was nothing.” said Gabriel

“You’re in his personal guard. I would be worried about him killing you.” said the youngling.

The high mage who assisted forged my flaming collar responded with an air of arrogance that angered me.

“The only reason I took up this job was because the Dragon King promised me whatever salary I wanted. Even though the Dragon King places his trust in Captain, I wouldn’t be willing to put up with this if it wasn’t my job.” said the high mage.

“Hey! Not so loud.” said the youngling, only just now realizing that I was standing within earshot of them. The high mage sputtered upon gazing at me. I knelt down at him and picked him up by the collar.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell the king *but if you want to keep your head, you best keep your mouth shut.”*

I slapped my hand over my mouth as I put the mage down. Everyone on the deck was staring at me with fear. Quietly, I sprinted to Julian’s room and slammed the door.

“Are you ok? What happened?” Julian asked.

I turned to see him in his bed, rubbing his eyes. I must have woken him up.

“Don’t worry. It’s just a little scuffle between my men. Happens all the time.” I assured him.

Julian said nothing.

“I just came to check on you, Julian. If you don’t need anything, then I’ll take my…” I started.

“Can you tell me a story?” Julian asked timidly.

The simple innocence of that question rooted me to the spot.

“Every…every night, before the bad men would hurt us again, mommy would tell me a story. It would be about a golden dragon and a nature phoenix coming to save us from the bad men. She never finished it.” explained Julian.

I vigorously wiped my eyes and went over to Julian. His brown curly hair in knots, his skin flayed with scars, and the evident sadness in his eyes. He was a child, he deserved food, a hug, and the Guardians to look upon him with favor. But all he asked on this cold dark night was for a story.

“Those stories your mother told, the golden dragon and nature phoenix, all of them are real.” I told him.

Julian’s eyes lit up.

“Really?!” he said happily.

“Really. Now listen carefully, this is the tale of our home, Malia.” I said.

Thus I told him the story of Oro, Garnash, and Iviana, as much as he would understand anyway, and left before Lay could take over again. Laying back down on my bed, I let a single tear escape my eye and hit the wood of the ship.

“Are you still awake, Vayle?” asked Lay

“...Yes. I wanted to talk with you about this tomorrow, but since I’m awake, I might as well get it over with.” I thought angrily.

The tone in my thoughts surprised Lay.

“*Why are you so upset at me, Vayle?”* Lay said.

*“*You know why, Lay. That mage didn’t deserve you threatening him.”

“*Seriously? Not only did he insult us, but he isn’t even taking his job of “controlling” us seriously.”* said Lay

“Not every problem is solved with violence.” I retorted.

“*No, but that’s the only way some messages can be sent.*” argued Lay.

“...I’m going to bed. Don’t you dare control me in the middle of the night again.” I said sternly.

"*Can you blame me for getting a little hungry , Vayle? You haven't fed me enough these days."* complained Lay.

"Well, the last time I let you control me in the middle of the night, you were hovering over a woman covered in blood and guts with her husband on the floor dead." I said.

"It's a shame that you don't remember what happens when we go berserk. Then, you'll understand why we did what we did." Lay replied.

"Don't equate me for a monster like you!"

Lay started to laugh, first quietly, then loud enough to make my ears hurt.

"*You are so naive. I'm not the one killing innocent people. It's the people who let the Bloodcurse take over their mind. If you want to blame anyone, blame the person who let their emotions control them. Blame the person who wanted to inflict pain on the world because the world hurt them. Blame the person who couldn't even save their sister when she needed her little…"* Lay said.

"SHUT UP!"

Lay's satisfied laugh accompanied me as I drifted into a restless slumber.

I woke up in a familiar prison cell, stripped of my clothes. The chain around my neck was tight and I couldn't move far from the wall. I was hungry, unbearably so, and it grew worse with each passing second. From outside my cell door, I could hear voices.

"Is he just down there?"

"Yes, I hope that you can help him."

“I’ll try my best, my lady.”

The two people made it to my cell and my heart leapt with joy. It was Princess Dracea, my childhood friend, and Chrome, carrying a sack that smelled delicious. I ran to Dracea, but my chain held me back. I tried to speak, but my voice only came out as monstrous growls. Dracea looked at me with pity, or was it fear? It was hard to tell. Chrome opened the cell and threw the sack at me. Inside was a piece of unidentifiable raw meat. I dug in and Chrome slowly cast his spell. I suddenly felt extremely tired and my vision grew hazy.

“Sleep, young Bloodcursed. Sleep and be at ease.” said Chrome.

My eyes closed and I was faced with someone I lost. She was wrapped in chains and crying, calling out my name desperately.

“Vayle?! Vayle, help me!” she yelled.

“Veni! I’m coming!” I replied.

I ran as fast as I could towards her. Just as I was about to reach her, she was starting to slip away. I reached for her hand. Our fingers barely touched and Veni was ripped away from me.

And there was nothing I could do to save her.

I burst out of bed with hot tears decorating my face.

“Good morning. How did you sleep?” said Lay

“Awful.” I muttered.

“Awful? I thought it was nice, reminiscing on such wonderful days.” Lay spoke dripped with sarcasm

“Shut up.”

As I was getting dressed, the captain of the ship knocked on the door.

“Captain Vayle, we will be at Terrestria in 10 minutes.” said the ship captain

“Thank you, I will be right there.” I said.

I finished putting on my armor and walked out from my quarters. I saw my men working on the ship with diligence, whispering amongst themselves. But as soon as I approached them, the whispering stopped. I sighed and walked to the front of the ship, where Julian was leaning against the front looking at the ocean.

“How did you sleep?” I asked him.

Julian jumped slightly upon hearing my voice.

“Oh, morning Captain Vayle. I slept ok.” said Julian.

“You can call me Vayle. Only soldiers call me captain and you are not a soldier.” I assured him.

“Ok…” said Julian meekly.

“You picked a good spot. We’re about to see something awesome.” I told Julian.

Right on time, the golden dragon statues appeared. Two bursts of golden fire echoed from them followed by one long grand burst of flames. Julian looked more scared than I thought.

“What was that?” Julian asked me.

“That is the Golden Dragon Salute, saved for when the knights return. It means we’re home.” I said.

The morning sun illuminated the Shimmering Port, where hundreds of people were busy buying and selling wares. All of them paused to look at our ship and cheer for our safe return.

“Welcome home, Dragon Knights! The Golden Dragon welcomes you!” the people cheered.

I waved at them with a proud smile. This welcome never gets old. My men, Julian and I disembarked from the boat and we began our journey to the main city. Fishmongers, fruit

vendors, and jewelry makers were trying to sell their wares, but I refused them all with a polite wave. Julian was holding my hand, obviously nervous with all of the attention that we were receiving. While still politely waving to everyone, we passed the beautiful golden beach sand and into the tropical forest. I looked through the trees and reached up to grab a peach.

“Julian, you have to try this!” I insisted.

“Isn’t this just a peach?” Julian asked.

“Not just any peach, the best peach that you’ll ever have in your life.” I said

Julian stared at the peach, then took a cautious bite. His eyes widened and I watched as he devoured the peace with a gigantic smile on his face.

“You get to eat this every day?” said Julian happily.

“Not just this. On the other side of the island, there are fruits of all kinds growing under the care of our farmers. Also, we have the best seafood in all of Malia. These are the blessings granted to us by Oro, the Golden Dragon.” I explained.

“Oro sounds really nice.” said Julian while licking his fingers covered with peach juice.

“He is.” I said.

After a long walk, we reached a golden road, leading to a gate with basins with golden flames burning on both sides.

“We’re almost there. Just a bit longer.” I assured everyone.

We made it to the gate.

Through it was our paradise, the city of Everflame.

Houses constructed of marble and limestone populated the golden painted streets. Children played with dragon kites and men in fancy colored robes walked leisurely alongside them, watching the children with love in their hearts. Dragon Knights that weren’t dispatched with us

were patrolling the streets, watching for a hint of malice that would dare hurt Terestrians. Vendors selling fried food, fruit and desserts talked with women wearing fancy silk dresses, collecting their money and joy all at once. Artisans were busy decorating the streets with flowers and other fabrics to celebrate Princess Draceas upcoming marriage. As we moved past the artisans and arrived at Ember Square, we saw a fire mage sitting calmly on the fountain surrounded by children and their mothers. The mage molded a picture of the guardian Oro sleeping in the Dragon's Heart volcano, much to the children's delight. Carts delivering ore made their way to the Dragon's Heart, where the palace sits comfortably inside under Oro's protection. I turned to my exhausted men.

"You may go home! Enjoy your rest and leisure!" I said.

My men cheered and scattered among the streets.

"Vayle, what about me?" Julian asked meekly.

"Well, first we'll grab something to eat, then we will seek passage to the castle. The Dragon King and princess are waiting for us."

I took Julian over to a stall serving shrimp skewers and he already ate his share by the time I ferried one of the carts to take us to the castle.

"Hey, Vayle, why is the castle built inside the volcano? Isn't it not safe?" asked Julian as the cart rattled along the mountainous road.

"It's because of Oro. He wanted to protect our Dragon Kings and Queens by putting their castle right above his resting place. Before Oro dove inside the volcano, he placed an enchantment to keep the castle comfortably warm at all times." I explained.

"He can really do that?" said Julian.

"Of course he can. He's the master of fire." I said pridefully.

“Does he ever come out? Isn’t he lonely being in that volcano?” said Julian.

I couldn’t help but smile as I answered.

“The legends say that Oro only comes out if Terestria is in grave danger or in front of the king to give him a blessing. The last time any normal Terestrian has seen him was centuries ago.” I explained.

“I see,” said Julian.

The cart finally made it to the entrance of the volcano and I led Julian inside. The interior of the palace was adorned with gems of ruby, sapphire, and gold. The golden throne room doors loomed in front of us and Julian stopped, his breath becoming restless.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“What if the king doesn’t like me?” Julian questioned.

“The Dragon King loves all children. He won’t hurt you and even if he does, I will protect you.” I said.

“*Fighting words. I can’t wait to see this.”* said Lay.

I pushed the golden doors open and walked into the throne room. What was once volcanic stone was replaced with obsidian laced with gold sparkles. In the middle of the throne room was the entrance to the magma chamber of the volcano and right above was the vent of the volcano, letting the golden afternoon sun shine into the room. The Dragon King and Princess Dracea sat on their thrones, both made of gold with the only difference being Dracea’s was adorned with an amethyst gem in the middle. Dracea’s orange hair was curled beautifully and with her casual blue silk dress and Oro’s blessing glowing on her chest, she looked even more beautiful than normal as she talked with her father. By contrast, the Dragon King was still dressed in his golden military armor. His orange hair was tinged with white strands, his chest also glowed with Oro’s

blessing, and his right eye was covered with an eyepatch, a sign to all Terestrians of what he would sacrifice for his country.

“Vayle, why is the king’s chest glowing?” Julian whispered to me.

“*He doesn’t even know about this? This kid needs a lot of help.”* said Lay.

“Lay, Julian might have been taken at a younger age. Give him some slack.” I thought.

I cleared my throat and the Dragon King looked down from his throne at me and Julian. Julian hid behind me instantly and I saw the heartbreak in Dracea’s eyes.

“Report, Captain.” said the Dragon King forcefully.

“Yes, my king. The Obeliskian soldiers were defeated with 20 casualties on our end. In the slave camp, the soldiers killed every slave as a sacrifice to Garnash for their efforts. There was… only one survivor.” I explained.

I turned to Julian.

“It’s ok. They will help you.” I told him.

Julian nodded and came out from behind me.

“What is your name, young one?” asked Dracea.

“Julian.” said Julian

“Where are you from?” asked the Dragon King.

“O-obelisk, but I don’t want to go back. Please don’t send me back!” said Julian.

“We won’t send you back, but where do you want to go? It would take some time for us to find a suitable family to take you in.” said the Dragon King.

“But, the peace negotiations and the wedding the day after. He can’t stay at the castle without raising some questions from the Alathainians.” said Dracea.

“My lord, if I may offer a suggestion.” I said.

The Dragon King's gaze turned from Julian to me and I gulped, the room suddenly growing hotter than it should be.

"He might be able to help us in the negotiations tomorrow." I said.

Dracea raised an eyebrow while the Dragon King put a hand on his chin.

"Go on, Captain." said the Dragon King.

"Julian has first hand experience in those awful slave camps. Remember that no one outside of Obelisk knows their exact conditions, so Obelisk won't be able to squeeze out of it. With his testimony, we'll be able to end the war and while the negotiations are happening, my best knights will be able to find someone willing to take Julian in." I explained.

"....Julian, is this what you want?" asked Dracea.

Julian was quiet for a moment, his face imperceptibly still, Finally, he opened his mouth.

"Vayle saved my life. This is the least I can do to help." said Julian.

"Thank you. You are doing a great service to Terestria." said the Dragon King.

"...I have one condition, however." said Julian.

"Anything," said Dracea.

"...I want a grave for my mom. I want to say goodbye." murmured Julian.

"....Shit." said Lay.

I quietly nodded at Lay's surprise. Even Dracea was blinking away tears.

"You will have it and it will be the best gravestone that our artisans will create," said Dracea.

"Julian, you are dismissed. I have things to discuss with Captain Vayle in private." said the Dragon King.

A servant came up to Julian and escorted him out of the room. Once he was gone, the Dragon King's expression morphed into a smile.

“Well done in battle, Captain. You led the Dragon Knights well.” said the Dragon King.

“Thank you.” I said.

“For the wedding and for negotiations, you are in charge of security. The Florauna Knights of Alathain and the Blood Reavers of Obelisk that are coming tomorrow must listen to you.” explained the Dragon King.

“I will protect Dracea and Elagorn with my life.” I promised.

Dracea looked away from me.

“I know you will, you have the Bloodcurse. That’s what makes you strong and capable to protect Terestria.” said the Dragon King.

I nodded silently while Lay’s laughter echoed in my head. The Dragon King stood up from his throne.

“I have duties to attend to in my study. You are dismissed, Captain.” commanded the Dragon King.

The Dragon King left and Dracea walked up to me, her beautiful emerald eyes judging my soul.

“Dracea, let me explain…” I started.

“Yes, please explain why you gave that suggestion to my father. He’s a child! Julian should be away from all this madness.” exclaimed Dracea.

“Your father would have thrown him out like trash if I didn’t say that. That’s how he operates, everyone and everything is a tool to protect Terestria.” I explained.

“That’s not how I operate.” protested Dracea.

“Yes, but you aren’t the queen yet, aren’t you?” I retorted.

The silence told me then that I had gone too far.

“That may be true now, but I will be queen in two days. And the second I’m queen, you will have to do things my way.” said Dracea.

“I…listen, Dracea, sometimes you have to do things you don’t want to to protect someone. Even if it hurts you to your core, the pain of hurting someone that you care about hurts more.” I said.

Dracea stayed silent, then moved her hand to the suppression collar on my neck. Her blessing ignited and more healing fire was added to my collar.

“Is it getting better?” Dracea asked.

“Yes, thank you.” I said.

“...I should go. I have a wedding to prepare for.” said Dracea quietly.

Dracea started to walk out of the throne room.

“Dracea, hold on.” I said.

Dracea stopped and looked at me.

“Congratulations on your wedding and…I’m sorry.” I said.

Dracea smiled softly.

“Thank you, Vayle.” said Dracea as she left the room.

I waited for a few seconds before I left the throne room. The servant was waiting for me outside and he explained that Julian was waiting for me in my room.

“*Coward.”* said Lay as I started walking to my room.

“What, did you want me to confess?” I thought.

“*That was your only chance to. Dracea will belong to Elagorn in two days.”*

“And what do you want me to do about it? She’s a princess and I’m a…”

“Monster. I know what you were about to say.”

“Are you feeling sorry for me?”

Lay remained silent for a moment and then spoke.

"You're not the only one that's trapped, Vayle."

I stopped outside the door to my room in shock.

"What do you mean by that?" I said out loud.

Lay refused to respond. I sighed and opened the door. Julian was sitting on my bed, dressed in a clean white shirt and brown pants. He was playing with a necklace that was initially on my bedside table. When Julian saw me, he jumped up slightly.

"Sorry, I was just looking at it, really. I wasn't going to steal it." stammered Julian.

"It's ok. It is really pretty." I assured him.

Julian's shoulders relaxed at my affirmation.

"Listen, Julian, I'm so sorry." I said.

Julian looked at me quizzically.

"For what?" he asked.

"For making you speak tomorrow. It is a lot to ask of you, speaking in front of royalty, and I…"

"Vayle, I said yes because I wanted to."

"What?"

Julian's gaze turned from tired to serious.

"I remember everything those men said to us. I remember every punishment they gave to my mom because she wanted to give me food. I remember sleeping outside the cold desert nights starving. And…I remember how my mother hid me inside a barrel as the other slaves were killed."

Julian's breath caught in his throat, but he continued.

“When my mother left me in that barrel, she told me something: Make sure that you live for us. Never forget what happened to us. Speaking in front of those people, I’m not going to let them forget.”

I stared at him in disbelief. What reflected back at me was not a child, but a survivor, willing to stand for others that gave him life.

“I…thank you.” I said.

“You’re welcome. Um… do you want me to leave your bed?” asked Julian.

“No, you can stay. The sun is about to set, so I’m going for a walk. Want to join me?” I asked him.

“Thank you, but I’m going to lay down now,” said Julian.

“Ok, no problem.” I said.

I went back to the door of my room and turned to Julian.

“You can keep the necklace.” I told him.

“Really?” said Julian excitedly.

“Of course. Consider it a good luck charm for tomorrow.” I replied.

I closed the door behind me and left for one of the many balconies carved into the volcano’s side. Marble benches were elegantly carved for the viewing pleasure of the royalty or the other castle guests. I sat on top of the bench and gazed at the sunset. Hues of orange, gold, and a splash of red blanketed Terestria. I could see the forms of Terestrians rushing inside their homes and vendors moving their carts away from the square to make way for new ones. Other forms were turning on the firelights to illuminate the streets for safety and some were leaving their homes to also drink in the glorious golden spectacle.

“I forget how beautiful this place is.” said Lay

“It really is. I’m proud to call this place home.” I replied.

“Even with everything that happened to you?”

“What’s with the questions? Are you ok up there, Lay?”

“I’m fine! I’m just restless without any action.”

“...Sure, I believe you.”

“....I underestimated that kid. He may not know much, but he’s braver than most.”

“I agree. The war will have to end because of his testimony, I just know it.”

“Then what?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what will you do once the war is over? You haven’t forgotten the deal, have you Vayle?”

“It’s not really something I can forget, Lay. I will be exiled like all of the other Bloodcursed once the war ends. That’s what the Dragon King said.”

“Everything is a tool to that bastard.”

“What does it matter to you if I’m exiled? You get to take over freely and hurt as many people as you want.”

“Yes, but I…”

Lay stopped talking, as if something was caught in his throat. If he was standing right in front of me, I could imagine him looking down at the marble floor, holding back his tears.

“Lay, what’s wrong?” I asked with concern.

The sun finally set and I was met with silence, the most uncomfortable one I’ve had in a long time. I rose from my seat and walked back to my room. I found Julian on top of my bed, fast

asleep. Chuckling to myself, I carefully tucked him in and made myself comfortable on the floor. I drifted off to sleep, accompanied by blurred memories.

I knelt before the Dragon King's throne in chains, the Collar of Suppression flickering in the firelight. Lay had been inside my blood for 6 months and his presence was a sickness. Every waking moment, I could feel him crawling in me, begging for blood and violence. Even now, as I face the king, Lay was waiting for his moment to strike. Then, the king spoke.

"Vayle Erathen Vestri, 18 years old and a member of the Dragon Knights. You are here today because you have committed immeasurable sins."

The king's eyes blazed with fire as he stared at my skinny form.

"First, you disobey direct orders from your Captain Jeremiah and charge into the slave camp alone. Next, you were afflicted by the Bloodcurse and killed 15 of your fellow knights and Jeremiah before you were stopped. And finally…"

The king's stare grew hotter, enough to burn me to ash if I dared look back at him.

"You hurt my daughter, my daughter that you told me that you loved."

Hot tears streamed down my face.

"My king, I didn't mean to." I echoed feebly.

"Enough! I could execute you right here for what you've done."

"Then do it! I don't want to live with this curse anymore!" I shouted.

The boiling lava from the magma chamber was the only source of noise for a moment. It would be so easy to…

"Don't you dare!" exclaimed Lay.

"Don't I dare what? It would benefit everyone if I died right now." I said.

“If you die, since I’m fused to your blood, I will die too!” said Lay

“Good! All you do is cause pain. It will be better for everyone if you die.” I said.

The Dragon King’s booming voice interrupted my thoughts.

“I will give you your death, but at a price.”

“What is it?” I asked.

The Dragon King smirked and started walking down from his throne to me.

“Our war with Obelisk is just getting started and our forces are not going to keep up with them, no matter how much morale boosting I give and now because of you, Captain Jeremiah and 15 more men are dead.”

The Dragon King made it to my side and lifted up my chin with his glove.

“Now, we have a Bloodcursed member of the knights who wants to die and I think our solution is simple. Vayle, I want you to be the captain of the knights. Kill as many Obeliskians to make up for the Terestrians you murdered. Litter the ground with blood and end this war by any means necessary. Do this and I will grant you the exile and death that you seek.” said the Dragon King.

“...I refuse.” I said.

“What?” said the Dragon King in surprise.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone else anymore. I-i can’t guarantee the safety of my comrades. Please, just let me die and be at peace.” I begged.

To my horror, the Dragon King started to laugh, a sonorous laugh that was void of any joy or light. No, it was the laugh of someone who had predicted this outcome and was just about to show his hand.

“Vayle Vestri, I am not giving you a choice. You will become a Captain. You will serve your nation. You will end this war, because that’s all you are good for. And besides…”

The Dragon King kneeled down and whispered into my ear.

“You want to avenge your sister, do you?”

Before I could react, I felt Lay start to take control of my body. I lunged at the king and put my hands around his throat.

*“*Stop! Stop it!” I shouted feebly.

My grip alternated, tighter, looser, tighter, fighting to keep my king alive. The Dragon King kept a smile on his face.

“Do it. Do it. It’s all you’re good for. You will always be a monster.” the Dragon King goaded.

“*That’s not true*!” Lay and I both said.

Tighter, tighter.

“It’s your fault. Your fault that she died. Your fault that you were cursed. You deserve everything that happened to you.” the Dragon King continued.

My grip tightened further.

“You can’t protect him, you know. Not even from…”

I stopped resisting and heard the cracking sound of the Dragon King’s neck. I sighed in relief.

The voice was gone. I could stop fighting. I could have peace. I could…

“Vayle?”

My entire body froze, but I forced myself to turn around. It was Julian, his brown eyes staring at the scene in horror. Right next to him was Dracea, who’s blessing burned brighter than ever before.

“Why? Why did you do it?” asked Julian in horror.

“I-i can explain–” I stammered.

“No, you can’t.” said Dracea.

Dracea started walking up to me, summoning blades of golden fire from her fingertips.

“I have come to kill you. Stay still and accept your fate.” commanded Dracea.

Dracea launched the golden blades towards me and just before they reached me, my vision turned to black.

I jolted up from the floor and heard Lay breathing heavily inside my head. The sun had just risen and Julian was sleeping soundly.

“What was that?” I said quietly.

“You tell me, it's your nightmare,” said Lay.

“I’m not so sure about that.” I said.

I got up from the floor and moved quietly to dress into my ceremonial armor, a brighter shinier gold adorned with topaz gems.

“What do you mean?” questioned Lay.

“In the 3 years I’ve been cursed, I’ve never had you speak in my dreams.” I said.

“*That’s true. I don’t know what’s going on.”* said Lay.

“Chrome is going to be here today. Maybe he’ll have some answers.” I theorized.

I finished getting ready, left a small note for Julian, and left my room to join the royal family in receiving the Obeliskian’s and the Alathainians.

By the time I arrived at the Shimmering Port, the Obelisk and Alathain ships were already docked. The Dragon King and Dracea were there, both dressed in ceremonial outfits similar to mine. The Obeliskian’s disembarked their ship first, starting with the Boar King and Queen. They were dressed in bronze-colored attire laced with red gems and their chests glowed red with

Garnash's blessing. Behind them were their two sons, Prince Dimitri and Prince Elagorn. Prince Dimitri was hunched and his figure was hidden inside a bronze robe. Meanwhile, Prince Elagorn's long blonde hair was tied into a braid, wore bronze armor with a spear attached to his back, and he had a red gem necklace to make up for his lack of a blessing. The Blood Reaver soldiers were right behind them and as soon as they saw me, they visibly tensed.

"That's not the reaction that we want right now." I thought to myself

"I mean, its the Dragon King's fault for arranging the wedding at this time," said Lay.

"True." I thought.

Prince Elagorn walked up to Dracea and kissed her hand.

"Dracea, it is nice to finally meet you. You are more beautiful than the letters can ever portray." said Elagorn.

Lay puking inside my head almost broke my stoicism.

"Thank you for the compliment, Prince Elagorn." said Princess Dracea with a smile.

"Welcome to Terestria, Prince Elagorn,." said the Dragon King

The king looked over at Prince Dimitri and nodded his head. Dimitri nodded back quietly.

"No welcome for me, old friend?" said the Boar King

"Of course, Alistar. I just had to speak to your son. He is marrying my daughter after all." said the Dragon King.

The Boar King laughed heartily.

"Oh, Earhart, always so serious. I'm just messing with you." said the Boar King.

The two kings embraced each other and laughed while the Boar Queen and Dimitri watched on.

"Pay attention, you two. You aren't the only ones here."said the Boar Queen.

Her remark forced me to look at the Alathainian's disembarking their ship. First was the Florauna soldiers, equipped with their bows and arrows. After they marched off the ship, they parted and made way for the royalty. First was the Phoenix Queen. Her dress was emerald green and lined with flowers and branches. It complimented Iviana's blessing shining brightly on her chest. Following behind her was Princess Chloe and Prince Chrome. Chloe's black hair was curled and her dress was light green with a pink necklace and jewels. Her hair was adorned with a flower crown with flowers of many colors and Iviana's blessing was the finishing touch. Prince Chrome was dressed in a casual robe and carried his spellbook in his hands. He glanced in my direction and gave me a warm smile, but I could sense his nerves from here.

The Phoenix Queen walked to the other royals and my claymore couldn't cut the tension in the air.

"Welcome to Terestria, Eliza. It is nice to have you here." said the Dragon King.

"Likewise, Earheart. A pleasure." said the Phoenix Queen.

"Everyone, now that we are all here, I would like to introduce the Captain of the Dragon Knights, Vayle Vestri. He will be in charge of security over the next two days." said Dracea

All eyes turned to me and Chrome was the only one who looked happy to see me.

"Tough crowd, huh." said Lay.

"Were you expecting an applause, Lay?" I said.

"At least a change in expression, I guess," said Lay.

"Follow me and we will head straight to the castle to the meeting room." said the Dragon King.

"Straight to business, huh?" said Prince Chrome.

The Dragon King stared daggers into Chrome.

“We won’t be able to celebrate my daughter’s marriage if we don’t take care of business, Prince Chrome. Now, let’s move along.” said the Dragon King.

Chrome shrugged and we all started walking to the castle. It was deathly quiet except for the sounds of birds chirping and our feet hitting the forest floor. I started walking near Chrome and he smiled at me.

“It is good to see you again, Vayle,” said Chrome.

“Likewise, Chrome. I never got the chance to thank you.” I said gratefully.

“If anything, I should be thanking you. You were the first test subject for the Suppression Collar. If something went wrong, you’d be dead.” said Chrome.

“You didn’t really have a choice. I would have killed Dracea if you didn’t do anything.” I said.

I looked up at Dracea talking quietly with her father a good distance away. It may be covered by her dress, but that long jagged scar was still there, a constant reminder of what I did to her.

“Dracea will forgive you one day.” remarked Chrome as if he could read my mind.

“I’m not sure about that.” I said.

“She will, Vayle. Just give it more time.” said Chrome.

We arrived at Everflame and were greeted by the roaring cheers of Terestrians. Citizens stood on their roofs throwing flowers, the streets were filled with people waving handmade banners of all three kingdoms, and the road was paved with gemstones of gold, red, and green. The finishing touch was a mage standing by the side of the road. She summoned golden flames, shaped them, and launched them into the sky. The shaped flames became images of Iviana, Garnash, and Oro. The citizens all cheered at the sight. I looked around and everyone looked visibly relaxed, even the Phoenix Queen.

“Good job, Dragon King. You know how to make everyone happy.” said Lay.

Three carts were chartered and painted for each of the kingdom's representatives and we all ascended to the Dragon's Heart. A servant led us all past the throne room and to the meeting chamber. When we made it to the balcony, I couldn't help but smile at the knights of each kingdom gawking at the view of Terestria from above. The meeting chamber was just above my room and had a balcony of its own.

"All knights are forbidden to enter the meeting chamber," said the Dragon King.

"My king, didn't you say I could…" I started.

"Including you, Captain Vayle. Watch over them." commanded the Dragon King.

He slammed the giant golden doors behind him and I looked over at the knights.

"I didn't expect us to be put on babysitting duty," said Lay.

"So, *Captain,* why are you even in charge of us?" said one of the Blood Reavers.

"What are you talking about?" I said nervously.

"We all know what's on your neck. The mark of the curse." said a Florauna Knight.

"Everyone in Obelisk talks about you. They call you the Cursed Dragon, with how many soldiers you killed." said another Blood Reaver.

"We're famous, Vayle." said Lay

"Don't expect us to give you an inch of respect while we're here." said a Flourana Knight

"Of course. Respect is meant to be earned, after all." I said.

The rest of the knights became silent and then smiled.

"At least you know your place." said one of the Blood Reavers.

The Reaver drew his blade and pointed it at me.

"Let's settle this, right now." the Reaver said.

"Not in front of the meeting room." said a Florauana Knight

The Reaver sighed.

“You have a point. Captain, you know a good spot to fight, don’t you?” said the Reaver.

“We can’t leave. We have to make sure Julian is ok.” Lay reminded me.

“I can’t fight you right now. It would go against today’s purpose.” I said, trying to calm them down.

The Reaver slammed me against the volcano’s wall as an answer.

“Stop, I don’t want to fight you.” I pleaded.

“He has a point. We can settle this later.” said a Florauna Knight, who moved forward to try and pull the Reaver off of me. The Reaver refused to let go. He was choking me, tighter, tighter.

“Let me take over. I can teach him a lesson.” said Lay.

“No, you’ll ruin the peace we’ve worked for.” I said.

“I won’t kill him,” said Lay.

“You will.” I replied back.

“I won’t! Please, Vayle, trust me.” said Lay.

“Pardon me, do we have a problem?” said a voice.

I didn’t even hear the chamber door open but Prince Elagorn was standing there on the balcony, glaring daggers into his own men. The Reaver let me go and I gasped for air.

“My prince, it was just a misunderstanding. He provo–” the Reaver stammered.

“I could hear you from outside. Stop your slander this instant!” commanded Elagorn.

“Weak brat.” the Reaver muttered under his breath as he walked over to his comrades.

Elagorn sighed and reached his hand out to me. I took it and stood up.

“Thank you.” I said.

“It is no problem. Besides, the Dragon King requested your presence.” said Elagorn.

“He did? Didn’t he just say–” I started.

“Well, its more like the witness requested your presence. He won’t speak without you.” explained Elagorn.

“That makes sense. I knew he’d be nervous on his own.” remarked Lay.

“Alright. Let’s go.” I said.

Elagorn and I walked into the meeting chamber. The chamber was an ornate marble table with chairs carved of limestone with silk cushions for comfort. The walls were lined with lava flowing down into the magma chamber and the table had a dragon carved into the middle. The Dragon King sat on one end of the table and the Boar King on the other with Alathain on the left side of the table and Obelisk on the right side. Dracea was using her blessing to fireshape a map of Malia showing each battle between each kingdom. The battle on display was the most recent one, which showed 50 BloodReavers killed in contrast to 20 Dragon Knights. Standing in front of the table was Julian. The servants cleaned him up nicely and presented him with a blue silk shirt and brown pants for him to wear. He was still wearing the necklace I gave him and upon seeing me, his eyes lit up.

“Captain Vayle is here. Now, will you tell us what you saw in the camps?” said the Dragon King.

“Earheart, slow down and let the child speak.” said the Phoenix Queen.

“What is your name, young one?” said Princess Chloe.

“J-julian. Julian Kamden.” said Julian.

“And where are you from?” said the Boar Queen.

“The outskirts of Obelisk, a small village called Eris.” replied Julian.

“Eris? That whole village was destroyed.” croaked Prince Dimitri.

“It was destroyed, but my mom and I ran away from the fire. We were captured by Blood Reavers on the way to the main kingdom. That was three years ago.” said Julian.

“Three years? You were in a camp for the entirety of the war?” asked Elagorn.

“I was. And it was hell.” said Julian.

“I was told that the camps were in the best conditions. That’s how it was when Elagorn and I observed them.” said the Boar King.

“You must have not observed all of them,” said Julian angrily.

“Tell us everything, Julian. Don’t omit a single detail.” said Prince Chrome.

“Of course,” said Julian.

Julian took a deep breath and looked at me. I nodded my head at him and smiled.

“When we arrived at the camp, we were promised a fair wage. 15 gold coins for an hour of work, then we could buy food, drink, and eventually our freedom. But within one week, we were only given one copper, not even enough to buy bread. Slaves worked and worked for barely enough money to survive. We became a community, us slaves, pooling our money to buy kids like me food while the adults starved. It wasn’t…fair, but my mom told me it wasn’t our fault.”

Julian’s eyes welled up with tears.

“We were beaten for anything and everything, especially for food. The worst was when we had to sleep outside. I remember my mom holding me in the cold as we listened to the soldiers laugh on the inside. They called us maggots, filth, worthless, and any other word that meant nothing. And if you still don’t believe me after everything I said, then look at this.”

Julian lifted up his shirt to reveal the scars that I saw not long ago. Chrome and Elagorn immediately looked down upon seeing the scars, Chloe and the Phoenix Queen gasped, and the rest of them remained silent, as if they could not accept what was before them.

“Finally, two days ago, the soldiers gathered all of the slaves and sacrificed them in the name of Garnash. To guarantee victory, they said. If Vayle hadn’t found me when he did, I wouldn’t have been here to tell you my story.” finished Julian.

Everyone’s eyes shifted to me for a second before giving their attention back to Julian.

“...My child, I am sorry,” said the Boar King.

“That won’t bring back my mother,” said Julian.

“You’re right, but that’s all we can do.” said Elagorn.

“That’s not all you can do.” spoke Dracea.

Dracea dispelled the fire map and stared at the crowd of present and future royals.

“You have now seen what the slave camps have done to innocent children. This war was started so that Obelisk could capture Alathain. Tell me, Boar King and Queen, is the lives of innocent children worth this?” said Dracea.

The entire room shifted to the two boars.

“...No, it’s not. We were blind to our sacrifices and it led to this.” said the Boar Queen.

“So, have we come to a consensus?” said Chrome.

“We have. Obelisk will bring all Reavers back home and free the rest of the slaves as soon as we are able.” said Prince Dimitri.

“And you must ensure that you will not encroach on our territory again,” said Princess Chloe.

“We will not. We have no more reason to.” said Prince Elagorn.

“In that case, the treaty shall be drafted with the appropriate terms. Captain, Julian, you are dismissed.” said the Dragon King.

Julian ran up to me and engulfed me into a hug. I carried him out of the room with a smile and faced the Blood Reavers and Florauna Knights on the other side. All of them had tear-stained eyes.

“We heard everything. I can’t believe the war is over.” said a Florauna Knight.

“I’m sorry for what happened to you, Julian. I don’t know what to say.” said a Blood Reaver.

“Vayle, was it? You saved him and helped end the war.” said another Florauna Knight.

“Well, that’s not true. Julian had the guts to speak in front of everyone. Thank him.” I replied.

“If you weren’t in the room, Vayle, I wouldn’t have been able to talk at all.” said Julian.

Just then, the Blood Reaver that tried to choke me came up to me.

“Listen, I saw you in combat, saw how you decimated my friends. You are Bloodcursed and I’ve seen many of them be exiled, killed, or in the middle of a rampage. That isn’t something that I’m going to easily forgive.”

The Reaver took a deep breath.

“But, you saved Julian and contributed to ending an exhausting war, so maybe you’re not as bad as I thought.” the Reaver finished.

“I’ll accept that. Thank you.” I replied.

“Now that that’s done with, how about you give us a proper tour, Captain? The light is still out and we have plenty of time till the pre-wedding party.” said a Florauana Knight.

“I don’t think we can…” I started.

“Come on, Vayle. I want to see more of Terestria too!” begged Julian.

“You can’t resist Julian, Vayle.” argued Lay.

I sighed.

“Alright, let’s go. I’ll give you the grand tour.” I declared.

The soldiers celebrated and Julian took my hand. His face wore a smile, shining brighter than all of the gems in the throne room. I wished that it would last forever.

"We're growing soft, aren't we Vayle?" said Lay with a tint of happiness in his tone.

"We are, but I don't mind." I said.

"...Neither do I." replied Lay as we continued down the volcano towards happier and brighter days.

It was announced to the Terestrian's first that the war had ended, so everyone was celebrating heartily at the banquet held on the Golden Coast for Dracea's marriage to Elagorn. Expertly cooked seafood, fruit, and mead were served at tables on the beach. Lanterns illuminated the beachside and everyone was merry and bright. Dracea was playing with the children who adored her presence, and the current kings and queens all gathered at a table in the front, talking with drunken faces and tired smiles. I was seated next to Prince Chrome and Elagorn, who were merrier than the others by far.

"You invite the citizens to your royal banquets?" questioned Elagorn as he watched the children play in the shallows.

"You don't?" said Chrome while eating a bite of grilled lobster.

"No. It's tradition for only royals and knights to attend banquets. I've been trying to change that rule for a while now." said Elagorn.

"I know this is rude for me to ask, Prince Elagorn, but did you and your father really not know about the slave camps?" I questioned.

"I was wondering that as well." said Chrome.

“You can call me Elagorn now, Vayle, since we are going to be seeing each other for a bit now. And yes, every time I showed up at the slave camps, the soldiers treated them well, gave them a wage, and they had only scars that would normally appear from working. When I would report to my father, he said the same thing. I really didn’t know and if I did, I would have tried to stop it, you have my word.” said Elagorn.

Chrome thought to himself for a moment.

“I believe you. Just one more thing: If you hurt Dracea, I will kill you slowly and painfully.” I threatened.

Elagorn flinched at first, but then laughed heartily.

“I thought that was your curse talking, but regardless I won’t hurt her. I promise.” said Elagorn.

Elagorn stood up.

“I’m going to check on Dimitri. I’ll see you later.” said Elagorn.

Elagorn left the table and Chrome suddenly snapped out of his funk and turned to me.

“You are holding yourself together well,” said Chrome.

“I am. There’s something wrong with Lay, though.” I confided.

“What do you mean?” asked Chrome.

“Well, Lay doesn’t seem to want to fight,” I said.

“He doesn’t…want to fight?” questioned Chrome.

“I don’t think so. It’s kinda like, he’s acting like me.” I concluded.

Chrome’s eyes widened.

“In our recent tests with the Surpression Collar, we’ve been seeing results similar to what you are describing. I brushed it off as ramblings, but now I believe I have a theory.” said Chrome.

“You do?” I questioned.

“Yes. When the Bloodcurse is first fused to the body, it is fused through the blood as you know. Through the blood, the curse travels to your brain and your heart, which is when people go insane due to the corruption of the soul.” explained Chrome.

“You explained this to me before. How does it relate to your theory?” I questioned.

“Well, what the Surpression Collar does is through Iviana’s magic and Oro’s flame, protect your soul from corruption, thus keeping you you. The Bloodcurse, now attached to your brain and not your heart, starts adopting facets of the cursed personality, making it more likely to work with you.” finished Chrome excitedly.

“I–that’s incredible.” I said.

“It is incredible. People can learn to live with the Bloodcurse instead of having to face exile or die. And it’s all thanks to you.” said Chrome.

“You created the collar, Chrome.” I reminded him.

“My sister did most of the work.” said Chrome sadly, glancing over at Chloe. She was on the side of the beach finding shells with Elagorn and Julian, laughing to her hearts content with her blessing glowing brightly.

“Don’t sell yourself short because your chest doesn’t glow. We help Malia in our own way.” I reassured Chrome.

“Thank you, Vayle.” said Chrome.

Just then, Julian ran up to us, with Elagorn and Chloe struggling to keep up behind him.

“Vayle, Vayle, look at this one!” he exclaimed.

He held up a shell that was perfectly flat and smooth to the touch. It was white with brown lines along its lining. If you looked at it from a distance, it could easily be mistaken for an opal that hadn’t been purified.

“Julian had to find the perfect one for you. He was searching for ages.” said Elagorn breathlessly.

“I had to use my blessing to light up the ground because he couldn’t see properly. I never thought my blessing would be useful for anything other than healing.” said Chloe.

I chuckled and then I heard it in my own head. Lay was laughing, not out of mockery or malice like normal, but out of pure joy. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Lay, I’ve never heard that from you before.” I said.

“That-that was my first time too.” admitted Lay.

“Your laugh sounds nice.” I almost said out loud.

Lay didn’t respond, but if he were with me, I know he would have smiled.

“Alright, how about a toast?” slurred the Boar King.

With all the merriment, I almost forgot the other royals were even there. All eyes turned to their table and I noticed that the Boar Queen and the Dragon King had left already.

*“Tired, perhaps?”*questioned Lay.

“Probably, but that doesn’t explain the Boar Queen.” I said

“Raise yourrrr glassesss and follllloww me. For Mallllliiaaa’s peeaaace!” the Boar King toasted and slurred.

“For Malia’s peace!” everyone echoed, some more slurred than others. I hugged Julian tightly and he hugged back. This night, this peace, would last forever.

“Do we really need to be doing this right now?”

Lay’s question echoed through my head as I walked to the throne room. The party was still going on on the coast but something in the back of my mind dragged me back to the Dragon’s Heart. I entrusted Julian to Chrome and Dracea, the people I trusted the most to keep him safe.

“I’m worried about the Boar Queen.” I said.

“She could have just retired to her room early. The party was pretty intense.” said Lay.

“It’s our duty to ensure the safety of the guests. We’ll ask the Dragon King where she is and if she is ok, we’ll go back and take Julian back up.” I assured Lay.

“Alright.” agreed Lay.

I nodded at the Dragon Knights that were on patrol and swiftly made my way to the throne room.

“You idiot! You’ve ruined everything we’ve worked for.”

That voice belonged to the Boar Queen. I peered inside the throne room and saw the Dragon King, the Boar Queen, and Prince Dimitri talking together.

“Excuse me, you were supposed to make sure everyone in that camp was dead.” argued the Dragon King.

“Not so loud. You’re going to wake up the whole castle.” said Prince Dimitri.

“What are we going to do now? We aren’t going to take Alathain in this situation.” said the Boar Queen.

“Take Alathain? Did I hear that correctly?” said Lay in surprise.

“There is only one option: We have to delay the marriage,” said the Dragon King.

“It has come to this, hasn’t it?” said the Boar Queen.

“Give it to him. Without delay.” commanded the Dragon King.

I watched as the Boar Queen closed her eyes and channeled her blessing. It glowed brighter and brighter until the entire throne room was glowing red.

“By my authority as Queen, I pass my blessing to my son Dimitri. By the wrath of the Blood Boar, may this strength lead our nation to conquer all!” declared the Boar Queen.

As she spoke, the red light left her chest and entered Dimitri's. He screamed in agony and I heard the sickening sound of bones crunching. The ritual was complete and Dimitri and the Queen were breathing heavily.

"It is done." said the Boar Queen.

"Dimitri, you have only one purpose: The rulers of Alathain must be dealt with, as well as anyone who gets in the way." commanded the Dragon King.

"Of course. Does that include that child?" questioned Dimitri.

"Kill him first." said the Dragon King without any hesitation.

I felt my entire body freeze up. The king would do anything to protect his kingdom, it was something that the knights admired about him. But to go this far was unimaginable. Lay was saying something, but I could not hear him. I only had one thought: Get to Julian and run. But before I could take a single step, I felt my blood move on its own. Dimitri pulled me into the room using his newfound powers. The Dragon King stared at me with the utmost annoyance.

"Is he one of them?" Dimitri asked the Dragon King.

The Dragon King studied my fearful expression for a moment. I couldn't move my body or form words to prove my innocence.

"Knock him out. We'll give him one chance." declared the Dragon King.

Smiling, Dimitri forced my mind into a peaceful slumber, accompanied with no dreams or memories.

My body felt like it was on fire when I woke up and I soon realized why. I was tied up directly on top of the magma chamber. Dimitri was using his magic to hold me down. The Dragon King's face was right in front of mine, goading me with his existence.

“My king, what is this?” was all I could manage to say.

“I am protecting our kingdom.” said the Dragon King.

“I don’t understand. We just signed a peace treaty. We ended the war, just like you wanted. Why?” I questioned.

“A peace treaty? It was a temporary solution to a problem. Alathain is a small nation, it cannot defend itself on its own. Obelisk was just going to destroy them anyway and where would that leave Terestria? Next in line. Allying with Obelisk was the only option.” explained the Dragon King.

“But why Julian? Why are you going to kill Julian? He has nothing to do with this.” I begged.

“On the contrary, his existence ruined our plan. Consider his death…correcting our mistakes.” said the Dragon King.

“I won’t let you!” I yelled.

“And what are you going to do? Your Bloodcurse is the only reason that you’re strong and you can’t even control it. You’ll kill everyone else on the way to me.” said the Dragon King.

I stayed silent.

“I’ll give you one more chance to stay alive, Vayle. Our mission needs your strength. Kill the Alathainians and you will be given your life back. Or else, you’ll die right here, and our nations will grow strong.” said the Dragon King.

“Vayle…” pleaded Lay.

“I’m sorry, Lay. You know what my choice is.” I told him.

Lay sighed.

“I know. I’m ready.” Lay replied.

I looked at the Dragon King and made my choice.

“I am not your monster anymore.” I told him.

The Dragon King laughed maniacally, but I wasn’t afraid.

“He has made his choice. Drop him.”

Dimitri stopped controlling my body and time seemed to slow. The magma grew closer and closer and my stomach became heavier and heavier. I saw Chrome, placing the suppression collar on my form and telling me that it was going to be ok. I saw Dracea, running by the beach, telling me to hurry up to see the giant waves that morning. I saw Veni, putting seashells in my hair, assuring me that it was a good look on me. And I saw Julian, holding that shell, smiling as if he found a piece of gold. It might as well have been. I became aware of the shell in my pocket and I started to smile. At least I did something right. At least someone would remember me as Vayle Vestri. If Lay could see my smiling face, he would call me insane. Perhaps I am.

I hit the boiling lava.

I felt nothing.

“Vayle. Earth to Vayle Vestri. Wake up!”

A familiar voice stirred me awake. I was in the familiar void of blackness, but how was that possible? I was falling into lava. I should be…

That’s when I realized that there was someone across from me. He looked to be made of blood red liquid and had bright yellow eyes. His hair was similar to mine but it was made of the same material of his body.

“...Lay, is that you?!” I said in surprise.

"Yep. Am I as handsome as you hoped?" said Lay teasingly.

"I'm glad you're still in the mood for jokes, but where are we? How are you here?" I questioned.

"Your guess is as good as mine, but I'm pretty sure we're dead." said Lay.

"I could guess that." I said annoyingly.

The dark void was suddenly filled with golden light. Lay and I both shielded our eyes and when it disappeared, floating in all of its glory, was Oro. His golden scales seemed to stretch on forever and we were both moved to stunned silence.

"Oro, my guardian. I am honored to be in your presence." I said.

"Vayle Vestri, I have been watching you for a long time." Oro boomed.

"Y-you have?" I stammered.

"Indeed. I believe you are worthy of my blessing, both of you." declared Oro.

"Why? All I've done—" started Lay.

"No, all we've done is kill." I finished.

"Vayle."

"May I ask you a question? Why do you kill?" asked Oro.

Both of us remained silent.

"Allow me to remind you," said Oro.

Oro summoned his golden flames and shaped it with his talons. Once he was done shaping, the image was of me and…

"Veni." I said, reaching desperately for her figure.

I was holding her in my arms, the slave camp painstakingly in the background. Behind my form was Lay, seconds from entering my body.

"Veni told me that if there was no report in one week then to come find her." I recalled.

“Precisely, and what did the Captain say?” said Oro.

“To wait. There might have been an error, but I went anyway, and…I couldn’t save Veni and the other scouts. They were found and murdered by the Obeliskians. I couldn’t control myself then.” I continued.

“That’s where I came in. We killed all of those knights and innocents in the name of vengeance. I don’t see your point, Oro.” said Lay.

“It is true that you killed in the name of vengeance, but ever since then, you’ve fought to control yourself, to redeem yourself. Even when the king offered you Captain, you would rather die than hurt any innocent people like that again. I knew then you were worthy.” explained Oro.

“On the battlefield…” I started.

“On the battlefield, you only went berserk in defense of your men, not out of vengeance. You are not a monster, Vayle. You are what Terestria needs.” finished Oro.

I stared at him in disbelief.

“I need you to promise me, both of you. For Terestria’s and Malia’s future, you will only kill in order to protect. You will never kill out of vengeance again. Do you promise?” commanded Oro.

“We promise.” we said together.

“Good.”

Oro shaped a blade of golden fire. It was beautiful and deadly all at once.

“I have managed to keep your body alive through my flames. When you wake, you will be in the throne room. The Dragon King is about to get to Julian and the Alathainians. You must hurry and retreat to Alathain.” said Oro.

“With your blessing, are we not ready to fight the Dragon King?” questioned Lay.

“You are, but your comrades are not. Buy them time to escape.” explained Oro.

“He’s right, Lay, that’s the highest priority right now.” I said.

“You’re right.” said Lay dejectedly.

“Take my blade, and accept your blessing.” said Oro.

Lay and I walked forward and each grabbed the blade. Swirling golden fire enveloped us, but it was warm instead of boiling hot. We felt ourselves leave the void and out towards a shining light.

I woke up and saw that I was at the base of the volcano, just as Oro said. I looked down at my arms and legs and found that they were replaced by ash and gold covered scales. My back felt heavier and I felt behind me to find dragon wings had sprouted.

“Looks like Oro couldn’t completely heal our body. This was all he could do.” said Lay.

“No time for that. We have to find them.” I replied.

I willed my wings to move and they did, but I was only hovering above the ground. I settled with the height and shot forward to the Golden Coast. I didn’t have time to learn my abilities. I saw that the lanterns were still on near the coast and when I got closer, I could see a crowd of people. As I got closer, I saw a body on the ground, and my mouth fell open. It was Julian, bleeding heavily and screaming . Dimitri was using blood magic to torture him.

“If anyone comes closer, they’re next!” Dimitri yelled.

“LET HIM GO!” I yelled and rammed my entire body into Dimitri.

His concentration stopped and Julian stopped screaming. I ran to him, not caring that the Dragon King was there.

“Julian! Julian, stay with me.” I said.

“Vayle, I knew you’d come for me.” said Julian weakly.

The Dragon King stared in shock.

“Oro…chose you? Oro chose…A MONSTER LIKE YOU?!” the Dragon King yelled.

“He’s not a monster,” said Dracea.

She stepped out in front of me and Julian as a shield. She glared at her father.

“The only monster I see is you, father. You would willingly disregard peace to make us strong. I could never accept that.” said Dracea.

“My daughter, I thought you of all people would understand.”

The Dragon King drew the greatsword attached to his belt. Dracea summoned her blades of flame.

“I guess I’ll just have to teach you!” the Dragon King yelled.

The Dragon King charged at Dracea and she parried his blow with her blades. I ran to Prince Chrome and Chloe in the crowd.

“Lead everyone to safety. Take Julian. Please protect him.” I begged.

That snapped them out of their shock.

“Leave it to us, Vayle,” said Chrome.

The two rallied the citizens together and started to make their escape.

“Dimitri, don’t let them escape!” the Boar Queen commanded.

Dimitri prepared a volley of magic but my blade of fire cut through it.

“Everyone, just run! I’ll cover you.” I yelled while parrying another blast of Dimitri’s magic.

Blood Reavers under the command of the Boar Queen surrounded me, but a slash of a spear and blade cut them down. To my surprise, Prince Elagorn and the Boar King were fighting with me.

“You should be running.” I said to them as I parried another blow.

“I can’t run. I should be atoning for my sins.” said the Boar King.

“Same here. Dimitri and my mother are our responsibility. Vayle, help Dracea. She needs it.” said Elagorn.

“Vayle,” said Lay.

“I know. I trust you.” I said.

I closed my eyes and felt Oro’s blessing pulse through my veins.

“Take over.” I commanded.

I felt Lay take over my body as before…

But this time, I could see.

I could see myself surging forward, laying blow after blow assisting Dracea against the Dragon King. I saw Prince Elagorn and the Boar King fighting against Dimitri protecting his now powerless mother. Lay focused against the Dragon King, parrying his blade while Dracea provided support with her blades of fire. After parrying and parrying, Lay finally landed a blow, stabbing the Dragon King in the chest. But the Dragon King just smiled, pointing a shaking finger behind me.

I turned in horror. Dracea had been hit by Dimitri while Elagorn and his father were knocked down. Instantly, I took control of my body and ran to her. She was bleeding and she was desperately trying to heal herself, but she was too weak. My flames couldn’t heal her.

“Dracea!” I shouted, holding her.

“...Run, Vayle. Take Elagorn and run.” stammered Dracea.

“I can’t leave you. I won’t leave you!” I yelled.

“Please…you need to live. You…need to protect Terestria." said Dracea.

“I…”

“I’ll be ok, Vayle. Julian needs you. Malia needs you. Please, go.”

“....Don’t die on me. I won’t forgive you if you do.”

Dracea smiled softly.

“You’ll see me soon, Vayle. I promise.”

I let Dracea go and ran to Elagorn. He was standing above his father, crying. I didn’t need to look at him to know that he was dead. I started to hover and took Elagorn away before his family could react. Elagorn was screaming but I did not care. I had to get to the boat. The boat had already left the dock, but it hadn’t gotten too far away. I quickly landed on board with Elagorn and was greeted with a crushing hug from Chrome.

“Vayle, you’re ok!” said Chrome happily.

“Where’s Julian?” I questioned.

“In the lower deck…” said Chrome and I raced down to see him before he finished his sentence.

I threw open the door and Julian was laying on the bed being looked after by Chloe.

“Vayle, he needs a bit of rest, but he’ll be ok,” said Chloe.

“Thank you, Chloe.” I said.

Chrome walked into the room and sat down on one of the chairs. There was an uncomfortable silence.

“I heard the soldiers give you a new nickname. I think you’d prefer it over Cursed Dragon.” said Chrome

“What is it?” I asked.

“The Ashen Prince, for your bravery in battle,” said Chrome.

“Ashen Prince.” I said to myself.

The boat continued to sail towards Alathain, towards a future fraught with violence and conflict. I would have to fight the Dragon King, there was no way around it. Everything that Malia once knew will be turned to ash and I can't stop it all from burning down.

But I could rise from the ash and take others with me to build a better tomorrow. It would take time and blood, but it will happen.

We will make sure of it.