

## CHAPTER ONE - ISAAC

Isaac propped up the case and slammed the cores down, and they slotted in with a satisfying *clunk*. When placed into the correct receptacles the dull spheres came to life - they were old tech that shone brilliant, cyan light. With proper application remnants of old technology thought long decrepit and useless became batteries, blacksmithing tools or even decoration. For Isaac however, old tech such as this presented study, commerce, adventure.

"Putting on a light show again?" Aoife asked. "Does that help bring in trade or do you just like the pretty flashing colours?"

Isaac pretended to ignore the tall girl and carried on with a smirk. Her casual dress was offset by the blade hanging by her side. Aoife was one of the Kingdom Forces, the military unit that protected the people. She was also Isaac's friend.

He set up yet another case of lights in the centre of his stall. Two more spheres sank into place and glowed, now blaring music as well as light. Isaac proceeded to set up even more spheres, a couple of balls fit into more receptacles. This was the extent of his stock for the day, it was a myriad of superficial baubles. They pleased the crowds but didn't scratch the surface on the finer instruments he kept for his research.

"Music to my ears," Isaac grinned, looking over his almost set-up stall. "What can I do for you? Kingdom forces in need of *pretty flashing colours*?"

Aoife shook her head.

"I was just curious how your little stall was coming along, to be honest - it looks like business is booming," Aoife said. She peered at a crowd of people behind them waiting anxiously for the sign to flip from Closed to Open. "You've amassed a following,"

Isaac's stall had been running for a few weeks now, supplied from his most recent expedition into the deep ruins and technological catacombs of Seren. Whatever wouldn't further his research went up for sale - an ancient civilization's equivalent of lightbulbs had stopped providing for him academically long ago, yet paid for lavish meals and his rent for an entire week.

The sphere's otherworldly music, along with Isaac's notoriety among the denizens of the city of Veritas, was bringing in more custom than he had ever expected. He'd been told by some of his more talkative customers that they'd travelled far to buy a small piece of history. Isaac was more than happy to see interest in his field rise. He also unashamedly displayed copies of his book on the stall; titled *Finding the Old World*, it was nothing more than a collection of Isaac's theses and dissertations concerning the field of ancient technology. Keeping a little of the theory and intrigue around the shop made him feel much less guilty about making more financial advancements than scientific ones.

With the last of his tech in place, Isaac flipped the sign to Open and the crowd that had waited patiently advanced upon him. Within the first thirty minutes of opening he didn't

stop, and Aoife watched as he gave polite smiles and small history lessons along with sales. Yet she noticed the pile of his books didn't shrink as his selection of wares did. She picked up a copy and flicked through it. She smiled reminiscently until she noticed something.

"You didn't credit me," Aoife gibed. Her tone was light.

"I...uh, wasn't sure if you wanted to be," Isaac said nervously. He was restocking as the market stall had almost emptied of wares, and a second wave would soon approach and he needed to be ready. Isaac *had* thought about crediting her when he was in the process of publishing it, but given how things had ended between them he really didn't know whether doing so would have been more hurtful than not.

"I'm joking, Isaac," Aoife said. He looked at her mournful expression and frowned - she hadn't come here just to see his stall. Isaac wanted desperately to change the subject, yet he didn't know quite what to say to make things better. This wasn't the first time Aoife had come to see him since he'd set up shop, the visits had become increasingly less awkward with repeated encounters. He wouldn't have known where to find her, but she kept on finding him.

"How's work?" he asked.

Aoife sighed and Isaac felt as though he had failed some sort of test.

"Fine as always. The Kingdom always needs strong warriors to protect its borders. Right now though I'm nothing, especially compared to Princess Laufeia and her council. Even upper echelons like me barely have enough work to go around, I'm lucky I got promoted when I did," Aoife said.

Isaac had heard about the radical military front that the Princess Laufeia had surmounted so quickly. Within weeks of her temporary rule she'd changed an alarming amount within the city and the country.

It had been a year or more since the girl who was younger than Isaac had become the ruler of Seren, succeeding the late King Auroch. She had not only survived assassination attempts lined up by her own family, but had also endured a personal attack from the King himself. Tragically, Laufeia had been forced to kill her own father in self-defence.

She had very quickly assumed her place at the throne and began a rule that was soon to be called 'The New Age'. She ruled with her council and took meetings to decide how the country should act based on *their* best judgement and not that of the people.

Isaac had to admit he initially found her straight forward optimism almost too forced, but he couldn't deny the positive changes she had made to Seren in such a short time. She had re-enacted Faith as a legal right to the people and promised churches would be constructed to all those with a large enough following. She encouraged the inter-mingling of races and often sent envoys to implore visitors to increase tourism to the country. Scholarships were created to encourage Serenians to employ foreign study.

All previous wars had ended within months of her taking the throne. Isaac had heard that she personally rode with her council to all of the countries that there had been conflicts with, even those Seren was not directly involved in. Within days of her appearance the wars,

no matter how small, had come to an end. Agreements were made and land was either shared or sold. Isaac didn't remember reading any articles about countries that had disagreed with this, or lived to argue about it.

She was singularly beautiful, with all of the elegance, politeness and grace that came with being the child of the royal line, the Aurochs.

Laufeia was also known for being ruthless towards those who disagreed with her, and equally so towards the corrupt and unjust. She reinstated the death penalty for major crimes and harsh punishments for any other crime falling below the banner of serious. Military presence had risen and patriotism was at an all-time high. There were few men and women that would not have gladly fallen on their own swords to defend the country that Princess Laufeia was building. Not that they were necessary - her council was made of around seven people that had been performing her will, like fingers on a powerful hand. They were rumoured to have remarkable power, the kind not reserved for the average warrior.

"Cheaper to send one powerful thing than that of thousands of weaker ones." Isaac remarked, "It's happened throughout history."

"Doesn't make us *weaker ones* feel great about it, though," Aoife said despondently. Isaac quickly served a customer, his book pile untouched.

"You'd prefer war to peace?" Isaac asked.

"I'm not a warmonger, Isaac," Aoife smirked, "I just prefer doing rather than waiting."

Isaac felt like this was his opportunity to ask her to come with him again, and this was as good as any other moment. He was about to speak up when an excited, electronic yelp sounded through the air.

"Howl!" Aoife said cheerily.

Isaac turned just as Howl ran past him and into Aoife, nuzzling her and pawing excitedly at the ground, his tail wagging. The furry creature currently being stroked by Aoife was called Howl, a being somewhere between wolf and machine. He had the same markings of the older tech similar to what Isaac was selling on his store.

Aoife stroked just under Howl's ear until he caved in and rolled onto the floor with an excited bark.

"I wondered where you were keeping him," Aoife said. She continued to stroke his ear as she looked up at Isaac.

"He likes to walk around the city," Isaac shrugged, "I didn't want to keep him locked up in my room all day." The guards hadn't reacted too well in the first few weeks of Howl's prowling but his harmlessness was made obvious soon enough, with a few gifted bribes from Isaac.

"Seems like he'd be the perfect mascot for your stall." Aoife said, "*Yes he would!*" she said, stroking Howl's ear lovingly.

"I've thought about it more than once, I think he prefers the road though,"

Howl looked up at Isaac with an expectant expression.

"You should stop by more often," Isaac said absent-mindedly, as though fed the line by the wolf at his feet. Was telepathy and mind control in Howl's repertoire of skills?

Aoife smiled and stood up fully.

"I think I will. I'm not working today, so is it okay if I grab a drink and come back?" Aoife asked.

"Sure,"

She bid the two of them goodbye and walked off into the market past the other street vendors. Isaac watched as she went through the streets and Howl gave a static whimper. A collection of clothing, jewellery, antique and food stalls laid out neatly in the market district of Veritas, their canopies making a beautiful rainbow of colours on the tan bricks they stood on. Mosaic depictions of grand historical events and figures were darted about the district, Isaac took the time to examine each one the first time he'd explored Veritas. Almost two years ago he decided to move here on a permanent basis, after moving around so much he needed a place to call home. A base of operations to resume his research, it had paid off. With what money he'd at the time he found a cheap flat in a loud and exquisite part of Veritas.

Moving here from his hometown was a real change of pace - the streets all over the city were paved in a light cream marble-like stone. Every building he could see was built from a multitude of pastel bricks to create a soothing but solid look on each house. Daylight shone through the streets and refuge could be found under the pleasant trees that sprouted from the ground, covered walls and hung from lampposts. Benches and ornate street lights were dotted along the hilly street, birds perched atop the two-story roofs and cried their songs elegantly.

The rest of the districts did not vary too differently. Sprouting from the living districts were the financial, professional and shopping districts. These were just as large, spreading out across the sprawling city that grew outwards as a circle. Within the northern sector were the elevated political and military houses, large towers shadowed grand spherical buildings with arching points. The largest of these were surrounded by cascading water that came from a central reservoir, it trickled down in patterns in-between the boroughs, blue lines reflecting the clouds above.

Wide bridges led out of the city over waterfalls, these led to forested sections on the outer city limits where trees and houses intersected. The tops of these houses sprouted crops as cascading farm tiles expanded outwards like a tiered chessboard of varying colours.

Contrasting with this were the many cranes hanging over the city, progress in motion.

Veritas was a city of flux, the old was being transformed into new and nothing useless was left behind. The moment Aether had become a legalised form of energy, the growth of not only the city but the country had accelerated exponentially. A lot of old methods and traditions were being mercilessly left behind. Isaac shook to think of so much history being eclipsed.

Howl nipped at Isaac's hand, a customer was looking over his stall. They asked him about his book and he was more than happy to divulge, swinging into a detailed explanation of his first

essay centred around the modern day applications of ancient technology. They only took a brief look at Howl before deciding he was a friendly guard dog and carried on.

Halfway through his long-winded explanation Isaac noticed someone out of the corner of his eye. He quickly ended his sale and offered the customer the book.

"Uh, thank you," Isaac said.

The customer he'd imparted with perhaps too much knowledge hurriedly bought the book and walked away before they could suffer any more enlightenment. The person he noticed before was now walking up to his stall. Their face was hidden with a hood but they appeared to be very well dressed, fine silks adorned his hood where the patterns of a well-to-guild swirled over his hooded shirt.

Isaac gave a pre-emptive smile and nod as they approached and expected to have to start a hard sale when a blink of light flashed across his eyes and a sharp pain panged at his leg. He looked down to see a knife had punctured his leg.

He froze in pain as Howl paced forward in front of him, barking at the stranger.

"What...?" Isaac began.

He couldn't process what was happening, Howl was barking but he couldn't hear anything. The man in front of him didn't say anything but kept advancing until he stood in front of Howl.

With a swift movement he kicked Howl aside and looked down on Isaac, who he dwarfed considerably. Isaac moved without thinking and threw a punch at the stranger.

The punch didn't land and Isaac felt his weight shift and he toppled to the floor with the stranger's hand on his wrist, he felt his arm dislocate and cried out in pain. Howl jumped to his feet and lunged at the stranger who threw him off, he brandished a blade in warning. Isaac clambered to his feet as his assailant was distracted and knocked him to the ground with little resistance.

"Who are you?" Isaac demanded. His voice was shaky and his head felt heavy. His heart was hammering. His leg was throbbing but he didn't feel any pain.

Howl was ready to attack, on guard at the stranger's face.

"My name is Sable," he said without fear. He should have been afraid, a snarling wolf was inches from his face.

"What do you want with me?" Isaac asked, "I don't even know you,"

"Suffer as I did, through your ignorance," Sable said sharply.

He rose to his feet quicker than Isaac could react to and landed a punch to his chest and then another to his face, kicking him over his stall. Spheres and boxes full of tech smashed around the floor and made a loud cacophony that rang out in the market as lights and sounds sparked around them. Attention was brought to Sable's assault and someone screamed for help.

Isaac looked up to see Sable drawing something from his hooded coat and threw a sphere at him that exploded in a shower of light. Sable scoffed as Howl went to bite him again, he was thrown off and Sable aimed a withdrawn gun at the wolf.

Isaac's eyes widened.

He moved quicker than he thought himself capable and jumped in front of Howl as the shot fired.

*Bang.*

He felt a sharp pain in his upper leg and froze. He fell to the ground while Howl barked, jumping ahead of Isaac and leaping onto Sable, tearing and ripping at whatever he could find. Isaac held a hand over his bleeding leg in panic.

"Isaac!" Aoife shouted as she ran up to him, her gleaming silver rapier drawn. Two Kingdom Forces men stood behind her, identically armed with a towering shield in one hand and a mace in the other.

"You're under arrest, lay down your weapons," Aoife said loudly.

Sable responded by throwing a handful of small knives and jumped backwards, Aoife was ready and ducked underneath the hail of sharp objects and jabbed the Rapier's edge in his chest twice. With a sharp stab Sable fell to the ground, the men that had accompanied Aoife rushed the fallen assassin and barricaded him with their shields.

"Isaac, are you okay?" Aoife asked urgently.

He responded with a nod, his mouth agape.

"You will pay for this heathen!" Sable shouted.

He was promptly knocked on the head from one of the guards.

"Was my book that bad?" Isaac asked desperately as Howl licked his face.

## CHAPTER TWO - ISAAC

The sun was shining through the window and light bled through the drawn curtains, as if to spite Isaac, his sour mood not enabled by showers of rain or lightning striking the top of his building. Howl scratched at the door of his room.

"Howl," Isaac moaned loudly from the bed.

His arm was on his chest and with one leg on the floor he laid back and stared up at the ceiling.

The sound of cheering came from outdoors, Isaac remembered there was a festival in time, a celebration or something. He didn't care and he hadn't been outside in weeks, he hadn't tended his stall, he hadn't done any research or written a word since it happened.

Howl jumped onto the bed which creaked under his intense weight and he sniffed at Isaac before laying down next to him. His head leaning on Isaac's leg, the wolf looked up at him expectantly.

Isaac dazed off in to sleep with Howl looking at him and woke hours later from a nightmare where a monstrous beast was chewing on his face. He awoke to instead find Howl barking lightly at him inches from his face.

"Howl, not so close. You're not a puppy anymore," Isaac muttered. He raised a hand and stroked Howl's head, ruffling the black fur gently. He was interrupted when Howl whipped his head towards the door downstairs and Isaac heard a loud series of knocks. Whoever it was definitely wanted to see him. It had been days since he'd spoken to anyone, so on a whim he jumped up from the bed. He opened the door and Howl sprinted through, almost knocking him aside as he went.

"Manners," Isaac said.

He walked down the stairs of his modest one bedroom flat in the centre of Veritas and opened the door to darkness, and a familiar face. An Ielfécale, with the telltale markings adorning her face and her arms. She was wearing a hooded black and pink shirt which hid most of the blonde hair he knew was in there. Howl looked up at her, pawing the ground with a wagging tail.

"Lucina." Isaac said simply, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to see you." Lucina said. Her voice was hushed.

"Come in," Isaac said, motioning for her to walk past him and up the stairs. His house wasn't a big one so he rarely had visitors, suffice to say a messy and smelly bedroom was not the ideal place to host company. He can't have imagined Lucina would disagree as she walked through the only door on offer to a musty room.

It didn't seem to bother her much as she sat down on the edge of his bed.

Isaac followed her in whilst Howl sat at her feet, she gave the wolf a loving stroke but seemed more focused on Isaac himself.

"So?" Isaac asked.

He wasn't being polite but estranging himself from society the past couple of weeks hadn't done much to sharpen his social tact. Besides, he was curious.

"Have you ever been to Zahrun?" Lucina asked.

"Can't say I have," Isaac said.

He knew about Zahrun, of course. It was nothing more than a junk pile, if there was anything of value to a tech researcher such as himself it was long since buried under piles of useless scrap metal. Suffice to say the place itself was well known as home for some of the most violent creatures known to man, strange fusions of monster and mech that tore at the living for sustenance and warmth. Isaac looked at Howl for a second, his innocent face made even more so by being stroked.

Zahrun was also known to be a breeding ground for a race of creatures called the Lapsis, a bizarre blight of things that were rumoured to take hostages, and return later wearing the faces and body parts of those lost, like a macabre festival. Fathers would see their sons, wives see their husbands and friends see their old companions torn and shredded, put to new use as flesh.

They came, they took, what happened next was a mystery. They dwelled in large numbers and approached as a swarm. The difficulty in fighting the Lapsis is that no one had lived long enough in their presence to even attempt killing them, they were survivalists and never stuck to one form.

With all of that in mind, Isaac had to wonder quite why Lucina had even brought the place up. It seemed like a fair enough question to ask, so he did.

"Why?"

"I need an escort there." Lucina said. She sounded disappointed. "I figured you might have at least seen the place,"

"I know about as much as I need to, and that's there is nothing of worth for me there," Isaac shrugged, "It's not what you'd call fruitful. Plenty of places in Seren are rich with the kind of stuff I can salvage for one purpose or another, Zahrun isn't one of them."

The 'stuff' Isaac spoke of littered the room, boxes were piled high in one corner with screws, cores and gear-ended shafts. The more interesting and valuable finds were kept in his closet under lock and key. The most interesting of which was a compass that he eventually understood to be a device constructed in order to find storms and contain the lightning as a power source.

Next to that was a bracelet with qualities that enhanced the wearer's fitness, this he'd quickly discovered whilst outrunning the beasts hoarding it. Above it was a box that he still didn't have any answers for but had an air of grandiosity about it.

None of these were found in scrap heaps like Zahrun.

"That's a shame, I'll have to look elsewhere." Lucina said, "Thanks anyway, Isaac."

"Wait, you didn't answer my question." Isaac said. He was leaning back on his desk now, truly curious. He'd almost forgotten about the attack.

"There's something I have to find there." Lucina replied, "It might be nothing, but I'm almost one hundred percent certain that I'm on the right track. So while there might not be anything of worth for you, it could be something special for me,"



*You're more than capable of making this trip alone,* Isaac thought to himself, *why do you need an escort?*

"Does this have to do with what you found in that ruin?" he asked, sidestepping one obvious question with another. Lucina just nodded.

Isaac sighed, looking outside the window. She hadn't left yet, and Lucina was usually in a hurry, so she must have been his only option. She could have tried any number of mercenary gangs, other explorer adventurer types more interested in money and monsters than he was. But this wasn't a simple loot run, if he knew what Lucina was looking for then having per hour types around wasn't the best idea.

"How much?" Isaac asked.

"1000 Aurochs now, and 2000 Aurochs when we get back," Lucina said, the sentence triggered like a trap.

It wasn't an overwhelming amount of money, he made that in a few days at his shop, *without* treading into dangerous territory. But being needed was a rare feeling for Isaac lately, he also had a less than professional interest in Lucina. Spending more time with her was definitely something he wanted, and he'd rather risk his life with her than risk *her* life by making her go with a mercenary. Besides, the earlier attempt on his life didn't make him want to stay in the city, he needed out.

"Alright, when did you want to leave?" Isaac asked finally.

"Tomorrow." Lucina said as she walked to the door.

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It had been a routine delve, get in, get out.

Isaac had just gotten the hang of riding Howl, sitting atop him and speeding through the outskirts of Veritas with relative ease. His eyes watered and he found it difficult to keep them open when Howl really pushed himself, which only made it more fun.

His heart pumped as they sprinted up the sides of hills, the engines in Howl's legs reverberated with a deep hum as the rotors and gears charged faster alongside each other. The spark of power and combustion boosted Howl to speeds no animal could ever go. Isaac had little trouble encouraging Howl to go as fast as he could too - they blurred past the checkerboard farms and past the waterfalls going over bridges and stone paths into the hills on the outskirts as farmers and walkers looked on with curiosity.

Soon Isaac was used to the speed, he found goggles to keep his vision unobscured by moisture and wind, and Howl was used to having Isaac's weight on him too. He'd grown more than big enough to act as a mount months ago. Isaac was cautious in his approach to doing so, so as not to hurt him.

If anything his mechanical wolf was more than happy to do it, taking his role of mount in his stride with every mile they traversed together. There was purpose in their rides however, Isaac had been scoping out potential sites for investigations.

Monster dens (as they had been dubbed by the Kingdom Forces) were as they sounded, a dwelling place for creatures that roamed the countryside in pursuit of flesh, treasure and dominion. Dangerous and tempting at the same time, they often disguised themselves in order to invite hapless adventurers within.

They were easy to find once you knew what you were looking for.

The telltale signs were simple, a nicely decorated entryway leading into a cave. The one Isaac had come to on this particular journey used the same coloured paving stones that Veritas was known for. These stones had been polished with some unknown fluid and shone from their jagged placements along the floor. The stones were accompanied with a row of coloured trees in a beautiful pattern leading above the path. As beautiful as the path was it slowly shrunk in width so that whatever was walking into it became easier to contain as they got deeper. A wooden door, simple but welcoming, fit into the mossy stone wall at the end of the walkway. Patterns of moons and stars were etched into the door, with a sign saying: 'Wel come weery travlur'

This would have been the point most people would have turned tail and run away. Grammar extremists and well-versed adventurers would have known this was not a place to be loitering.

Isaac and Howl instead took one look at the sign and he laid a hand on the door. Sat in each tree for the whole length of the path would be a creature small enough to fit. Perhaps a krobleen or a screffler with a ranged weapon, a stolen crossbow, a spear or even a hand cannon - if they were cunning enough to use it. Isaac had heard their breathing and kept quiet, Howl would have smelled them a long way away and kept quiet. Any traveller who *did* decide to run would have been instantly held up or killed, depending on the whim of whichever creature happened to be in charge that day. Isaac knew better, so twisted the knob on the door and watched it fall to the ground with a heavy *slam*. Half idiocy, half alarm system - these creatures were no carpenters. The likelihood was they had stolen this door from some poor farmer and propped it up as best they could. Isaac had to scoff and look at Howl.

The honey pot continued within, and while it was now clearly a cave, a welcoming campfire sat in the centre. Any tired or uninformed traveller would probably have sat down and relaxed, looked around them at the discarded pikes, torches, walking sticks and staffs and marvelled at how popular a place this was. Isaac saw them as individual tombstones, markers of the lost.

There was a large rug set next to the campfire, and it was inviting. Next to that were some beaded cushions and even a set of beanbag chairs. Reading material and snacks were provided on a table, Isaac shuddered to think quite what those snacks contained. Torches lit the room from sconces and a crooked chandelier dripped wax occasionally.

Some creature had definitely taken their time setting this up, perhaps their most sophisticated krobleen had a keen eye for Feng shui. Any adventurer that had gotten this far would be killed or robbed while they slept and left the cave penniless or lifeless.

Yet this was just an entry hall, certain visitors stopping here would presume it was a gateway to something grander. Sure enough, a sign similar to one that had welcomed Isaac sat near a jewelled walkway leading out of this room and into the other. It read 'Nachral Cayv Hot Spring'.

Isaac walked in and Howl followed, the scent of something un-'nachral' caught his nose and he drew his sword and shield from his back straps. His sword gave off a gentle blue glow, its core a remnant of a divine spider, its edge composed of one of the strongest metals known to Seren. It was alive in a way, but not in the way Howl was, he could tell several stories about that. His shield was round and solid, he'd paid good Aurochs for this one, after the last one had shattered into pieces from one arrow.

The walkway was hard to fully see, the light from the entry room had faded somewhat. He heard the sound of something extremely loud off in the distance and couldn't quite place what it was. Isaac ignored it for now, disregarding it as a monster banging a drum or something similar. The hot spring they had come to wasn't a lie at least, steam blanketed the cave in a thick vapoury veil - perfect for an ambush.

The smell of soaps and oils was pleasant yet did little to cover up the reek of the creatures, as much as they'd tried to hide it the resulting odour was a cacophonous disaster for the senses. The sound of rushing water coming in from a nearby waterfall covered up any sounds creeping creatures might make. In short, this room was their death trap. Any hapless visitor would be too distracted by the smell and have their sight and hearing too busy to react.

Isaac quickly retrieved something from the bag on his back, a small black disc with blue glowing writing on it. This was what he had named a 'distract-o-disc'. If he ever wanted to avoid a sticky situation, such as this, he deployed one of the hundreds he'd found on his travels (he always carried at least half a dozen with him) and completely sidestepped any danger.

With the disc in his left hand he used his right index finger and swiped it around the disc, placing it on the ground where he stood. Once placed he touched at two blue points on the disc and watched it begin to spin slowly in place. Isaac motioned to Howl as they snuck through the steam and past the hot springs that were dotted around this particular section of the cave. Lights danced across the roof of the room and the slosh of the water mixed with the waterfall was calming. Isaac knew that within minutes they'd be surrounded and then suffer an onslaught from creatures that made their living within hotter waters, shapeshifting water demons were not something Isaac wanted to fight today. Any more than two or three would easily hop their way out of the water and attack with their stunning agility. Their scales shining silver as they thrust with watercrafted spears. A mesh of boiling hot water and monster magic changed into sharp objects pointed directly at Isaac's side, back and front. But that wasn't going to happen.

Isaac kept the pace through the steam but had been mentally counting down. Once his count reached zero the distract-o-disc exploded, yelling musical notes with an almost aggressive lack of tune or rhythm, multi-coloured flashing lights shone from the disc. The

result was a mini music festival destroying any chance of peace or harmony. The din reached all over the cave and surprised even Isaac who grinned. Each disc was different so he had no way of knowing what kind of audible bomb he was letting off, this one hadn't disappointed. The water-creatures revealed themselves behind Isaac and attempted to strike the disc with gleaming liquid tridents, as Isaac had suspected they were fully distracted by it and had no idea where he was. Distracted enough that Isaac barely had to worry about sneaking away and simply ran instead.

The shots became louder as they traversed deeper and Isaac quickly found out why.

They descended deeper through rooms filled with books of unsavoury subject matter and a room filled with nothing but shells painted in different colours. Isaac and Howl eventually reached the room with the source of the shots, now recognisable as gunfire.

They came out on top of a hill, with a steep path leading downwards towards a long wall of grey with a huge door in the centre. Another path led to a rock formation overlooking the wall, alongside this ran a gushing waterfall with a pool of water at its end. Lanterns floated all around the sky, red glowing things provided a dim light. From the top of the leaning rock formation Isaac saw a campsite, a single tent propped up next to a stamped out campfire. At the edge of the rock in a prone position, holding the biggest handcannon he'd ever seen, was her.

Lucina.

She was firing at an approaching army of stygmens, large pig looking creatures with floppy ears and fat bodies, that were walking through the huge door in parties of two or three at a time. The gun blasted with such intensity that each shot produced a halo of light and shimmered around the room, flashing the waterfall and the lanterns with a white, blinding light. The white light shot like a comet in the darkness and found its home, completely obliterating the stygmens' huge red body. The shot went through with such speed and ferocity that space seemed to warp around the bullet, squeezing the spot of the impact around itself. The stygmens' flesh convulsed as it fell to the ground, instantly dead.

Isaac watched as she cocked the gun as a large shell flew out and fell to the ground behind her, glowing white.

She fired again and again, never missing, but they were making their way up the hill slowly. Her shots were powerful but not quick enough to take them all.

Isaac leapt forwards with his sword and shield drawn and charged for the nearest stygmens. His combat training had taught him most everything about fighting people his size, but up close these creatures were almost twice the size of the average human in both height and width. He narrowly dodged an aggressive swipe from the roaring beast who smelled oddly of old decaying vegetables and raised his shield to block another, as fist found steel Isaac swung his blade skyward and cut the beast from his groin to his chin. The stygmens fell backwards down the hill. Isaac spotted his next target gearing up for a two-handed hammer strike and simply walked backwards as Howl leapt past him and tore at the creature's face. Howl wasn't quite big enough to completely dominate their top half, but his momentum gave him strength and the mechanical wolf bared his teeth and ripped at his unlucky foe's

face. It stopped shouting in protest fairly quickly as Howl ferociously dove to another, Isaac found another enemy to face. Gunfire rang throughout, and within minutes the flow of stygmens had come to an end.

Isaac put away his sword and wiped the sweat from his brow as Howl rolled around in the corpses yapping gleefully.

"Good job, buddy," Isaac stammered, his breath not quite returned to him yet. Before he could reclaim his composure Lucina walked around the top of the hill to see the field of dead, a slim but muscular man and what appeared to another monster rolling around in the dead.

"Thanks for the help," Lucina said, her gun propped over her shoulder, "I'm Lucina,"

"Isaac," he said between harsh intakes without looking up.

"Need a second?" Lucina asked.

"No, I'm good," Isaac coughed, stood up to his full height and looked at her properly for the first time.

### CHAPTER THREE - SABLE

"All passengers, all passengers, alight for Indor," came the blaring voice from the train conductor. His prayers read, he slowly placed his reading material inside his pocket and stood. He made his way towards the exit of the train he'd boarded from Veritas and smiled at the sun before him. It shone through dark and overbearing clouds. The skytrain left the station, leaving Sable to stand and beam at the city below him. Towers upon towers, much smaller than Veritas, were built up around entrances to what he knew were subterranean mines. Mine carts repurposed for transportation and rain ducts to gather water in this arid desert of a city.

This was Indor, the home of his sacred God.

He knew it well, for he travelled here often. His room kept for him in a glorious inn next to this city's largest producers of the more valuable metals. Gold, silver, whatever could help supply one of the largest Goldsmiths in the world. Sable led his family company with pride, taking extreme care to let it flourish. Should they be watching blissfully from their God's abode somehow, he knew they would be proud of him.

It didn't take him especially long to walk through the city each time, he enjoyed the raucousness of the city. Having been raised in the high class area of Veritas it was serene, tidy and above all, quiet. Indor was an explosion of smells, sounds and sights. He was careful not to walk too close to the rails and carts as they sped by, the first time he visited he'd almost been bowled over by a cart in fast transit. The second time he visited the sparks had burnt his shoulders, he felt them twitch instinctively as the carts drove by. Sable had time to admire the stalls on the way but only ever stopped at one for more than a momentary glance. The scent of the city mixed in with this particular stall always gave him a feeling of tranquillity, a fragrance store housed in the middle of the smelliest and sweatiest part of the city. It was aptly named Desert Rose and it served him well. As much as this city pleased him the smell of the slag heap managed to find its way in his nose and invade his senses, this shop was a home away from home for him.

"Good morning Lanfen," Sable said, as the bell rang on the store door behind him.

Lanfen, a girl around Sable's age stood working behind the counter, writing something intently. She'd cut her red hair back since he'd last met her, but was as short as ever. Sable stood rather tall so he tended to look quite intimidating, the brown hair and narrow eyes didn't help much either. Even on his first visit into the city people tended to avoid him, often hesitant to walk on the same side of the path as him. When he eventually stumbled his way in to Desert Rose on his second or third visit, he felt welcomed. Not to mention she talked to him like a person, not a high-class member of society.

"And a good morning to you," Lanfen said. "What brings you here again so soon?"

"I try to get down as often as I can, you can't find everything in the Capital," Sable said, "Your mother was wrong by the way, you suit short hair,"

"Flattering already, you know you still have to pay right?" Lanfen said, straight-faced.

"Well, it was worth a try. So, how's business?" Sable asked.

"Not as good as yours I'm sure. But there's a lot of call for nice smells in this pile, so yeah, we're doing well," Lanfen said, "We might even have to expand, any room in Veritas for a Rose? I heard a certain Blossom is doing rather well,"

"I think perfume has more of a need than magical lingerie Lanfen. And besides, I've offered time and again to help out with that, you should be opening a shop in every city,"

Lanfen shook her head impatiently.

"Thanks Sable, but no thanks. We're well off enough to expand any time we want, we're taking our time though. I'm sure there's plenty of fragrance parlours in other cities, so without knowing what we're up against why move?"

"Fair point, move slowly and ensure safety,"

"I'm sure you didn't come here to talk business anyhow. What brings you to Indor? Sure you didn't come just to peruse our wares?" Lanfen asked, pushing back a large set of liquid bottles.

"You know you're always a large part of my visits," Sable said, and at a interrogative glance he continued, "It's the mine, the main Indor one in the mountain. A few things there require my attention, although most importantly, I think the owner might be skimming me,"

"That's rough, sort them out quickly and get what you're owed," Lanfen nodded.

"It won't take long, the owner's a coward but thinks he's a business genius," Sable said, "I'd better move on, what are you doing later?"

"Dinner sounds nice," Lanfen smiled.

"See you tonight then," Sable said, taking his leave from the floral fragrances. The bell rang as he left the shop and its sweet scent out into the noisy, smelly city. He looked to the east and saw the Indor mountain looming over the city, casting a large shadow. This mountain protected and provided for them, like a dominating parental figure it stood safe and secure, giving to the city what it could. Unfortunately it was ruled by a greed-driven man who couldn't see far enough past his money to witness what treasures were within his property.

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Past his office, up an elevator to an abandoned mineral chamber was one of the only Renasch left in existence.

Sable discovered this a few years after his parent's death, he hadn't stopped in his journey to find one. Their death had only served to exacerbate his fear and desperation to encounter such a being. How he had found the creature was pure luck in fact.

Or, more accurately, it could be described as fate.

As soon as his parents had passed on, Sable had inherited more than their fears. He was now ruling the Goldsmithing Guild that they had created, so he had also inherited certain responsibilities. One of the many of these was correspondence and negotiations with their suppliers, which more than a few times meant his travelling around the world. The long train rides always gave him time to think, which he despised. Sable imagined his parents suffering the same issue and it haunted him.

His journey eventually led him to the pig of a manager, Edward Odalis, at Indor Mine. Sable met him at first with a few things in mind. He had been advised that as the young successor, there would be those that would try and take advantage of him. By any means they would undercut, lie, cheat or even threaten him to deepen their pockets. Sable took their warnings seriously and quickly developed a stiff upper lip. Luckily none of the other mine owners he had met in other parts of Seren proved to be as conniving as they had preached.

Edward however had ticked all of those boxes and more.

On their first meeting he had, ready to sign, an agreement that would have (had he not studied the fine print hidden away) halved the amount of material that Sable would be receiving and doubled the amount of money that Edward would receive. Sable set a precedent by tearing the contract in two pieces and renegotiated the terms of their agreement to work in his favour, to do so he was just as conniving and intimidating as Edward thought himself to be. As their negotiations drew to a close,

Sable was offered a tour around the mine by a humble and amused advisor. Sable was grateful for the offer yet preferred to take a look around himself, he spent enough time entertaining sycophants at home.

His self-guided tour around the mine didn't last long, the map wasn't extremely helpful to an outsider yet he didn't regret going alone. He took a look at every floor, even the dormant Atrotium sitting at the bottom of the mine. Eventually he reached the top floor, which was signed off as being closed off to both workers and visitors. He opened the elevator cage to find a creature that he couldn't have imagined he'd ever find.

Fate works in mysterious ways, Sable often reminded himself.

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Today his meeting with Edward would run as short as he wanted it to, these meetings were always courtesy upfront - warning in disguise. If what he had been told was true and the manager of Indor mine was skimming him, this meeting would be even quicker. Sable, now older and considerably more threatening than when he first walked through that door was now even less tolerant of Edward's dishonesty and deception.

Sable politely knocked on the door and walked straight in. Edward was sat at his expensive desk, looking somehow more disgusting than the last time he had visited. The same slimy clean shaven but boiled face, the pristine and expensive clothes that didn't quite fit and the elegant pen pressed tightly between his grubby wrinkled paws, Edward Odalis had grown more grotesque with each Auroch he managed to squeeze out of his mine.

"Good morning Edward." Sable said.

"A pleasure as always." Edward smiled over his arched fingers, the smile dropped quickly, "Let us make this as quick as we can,"

"Agreed. Stop overreaching Edward. I'm fully aware of what you're doing," Sable said, he didn't even bother sitting down.

Edward sighed. He was old, tired. He was a sneaky criminal and had the gall to try stealing underneath his buyer's nose, but when found out he very quickly admitted it or brushed it off. If Sable knew, and the secret was out, there was no point denying it. The problem was that neither of them were in a position to remove the other from theirs, Sable had to deal with Edward and vice versa. So Edward would get away with everything he did, Sable could only stop it for so long. Though the idea of arranging a permanent way of removing Edward from his office had entered Sable's mind more than once, Sable knew for a fact Edward had actually tried at least once to have him removed from his.

"Understood," Edward said coldly, he could no longer look Sable in the eye and instead focused on his writing.

"That's all of your chances gone Edward, I've been more than understanding with you," Sable said. It wasn't, but threatening him might stop him trying anything like this for a few months at least.

"Mm," Edward replied. He always reverted to a mood of childlike shame when discovered, like he'd wet the bed.

"Fine then, carry on as normal. If anything should change with the rates let me know," Sable said, as he left the room. He shut the door quietly and left Edward to boil. He found that indirect aggression was always more effective, these meetings were always anti-climactic as a result of that. The reason he came to visit didn't lie in that office, his preoccupation with the petty schemes of overlords was a



small concern of his, but didn't preoccupy his mind quite like the thing that was nested within the top floor of this mine.

With no need to sneak he rode his way to the top floor and opened the elevator's cage doors. He was slow with the door, he didn't want to startle what lay within. When he had come the first time the entire chamber within was covered in a blue and overwhelming crystalline surface, from the ceiling to the roof the room was a reflective blue metal. The creature that he had met had been friendly and gentle, if not a little frightened. The first time Sable met the crystalline spider, he had cried with joy. He opened the door to an empty, black tomb.