



Phoenix Fated

Author: *Ashe Moon*

Category: Romance, Adult, M-m Romance, Paranormal

Description: Deep in the closet, former soldier Jackson Bird has spent his life running from the truth. Leave it to fate to drag him from a war zone into a mythical world of alphas and omegas, where every man is gay, and he's somehow mystery-pregnant with a phoenix baby. It's one hell of a way to start a day.

As one of three "Chosen" meant to save this realm, Jackson needs to accept his new reality fast. Enemies are closing in, his pregnancy is drawing deadly attention, and worst of all, the devastatingly gorgeous mercenary monk who rescued him is making Jackson's carefully constructed walls crumble with every smoldering look.

Good thing Airos has taken a sacred vow never to claim a mate. And Jackson's not about to beg.

But when shadow threatens to consume everything, their reluctant partnership might be the only thing standing between salvation and destruction. If they can stop wanting to murder each other—or rip each other's clothes off—long enough to save the world.

Total Pages (Source): 70

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

1

JACKSON

I'm in that little spot my mind goes to when I'm tired as shit, but my consciousness refuses to give up to the black abyss of sleep falling over me like a heavy blanket. It's like being in two worlds at once, and I'm watching the coming dream on a feed inside my head as I hold on tight to whatever shred of wakefulness I have left.

I never fully go dark. I haven't in a long time. It's one of the first habits we all pick up in an active warzone. Sleeping with one eye open can often mean the difference between life and death. And sometimes, even when the fight is finished, the things you've seen and done refuse to leave your head. They don't care if it's bed time.

Clarke and McScott...

Shit... How long ago was it before this crazy reality took hold of me? I can't remember. Feels like forever, almost like my life on Earth—before phoenixes, magic powers, and getting goddamnman-preggers—is just a fading dream. Nah, my whole life is just a series of faded segments, one shitty ending after another.

Pop. Speak of the devil. That little dream monitor in my head is on. I can still feel the low drumbeat thrum of the aircraft prison around me, can still smell the tar and musty timbers, like the hull of some old pirate ship. I'm not asleep. I'm watching the dream.

Clarke and McScott...

A gray naked forest under a crisp blue sky with a falling sun. My breath comes out in thick clouds, and the air smells like moss and birch bark. My right hand tightens around the familiar shape of my DDM4 carbine's textured grip while my left rests across the rifle's lower receiver, keeping it steady against my chest as I walk.

McScott...

Ah—this isn't one of those "I can fly" dreams. I'm reliving a memory. I'm back in Zhovnipol, in the International Vanguard.

"Bird. Bird! You fuckin' dreaming?"

I turn around and see Roy Clarke and Jim McScott walking up to me from the abandoned school we've taken as a base of operations. Clarke is grinning at me. I pull the headphones off my head. The tinny sound of Linkin Park drifts from the black foam earpads before I hit the pause button.

"He sleeps with his eyes open," he tells McScott. "I've seen him do it before."

"Bloody 'ell," McScott groans. "Last thing we need is this bastard on the gate."

The two join me, with Clarke coming up on my left and McScott on my right. McScott pulls out a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket and plugs the end of a bent stick into his mouth. He doesn't light it.

McScott is from London, England, and Clarke from Las Vegas, Nevada. We'd all arrived on the same commuter flight and quickly picked each other out as soldiers, and it hadn't taken long before we were all getting drunk at a shitty little bar and swapping war stories. And in just two weeks, enough bullets had flown in our direction for us to become as close as brothers.

"Music," I tell them. "And I was thinking. I know it's a foreign concept for you."

"You still lugging around that ancient hunk of plastic?" McScott says. I pull the portable Sony CD player out from a pouch on my MOLE vest and hold it up proudly. "Fuck me," he mutters under his breath. "Swear to God, it's been ages since I've seen one of those."

Clarke reaches over and tugs on one side of the headphones around my neck, and it snaps back and smacks me in the Adam's apple.

"Hey, dammit, careful," I say. "They don't make these anymore."

"Yeah, no shit," he replies. "They make AirPods now. I know your ass owns an iPhone."

I tuck the CD player and the headphones away into my vest.

Clarke bumps his shoulder against mine. "We found this left in a desk drawer. Score."

He pulls a bottle of vodka from his pocket and shakes it in front of my face. When he smiles, the scar on his cheekbone arches up, and the two little freckles above it make it look like a little frowny face. It's something I noticed a while ago, and the way it makes me feel pisses me off every time. I shouldn't be picking out details like that about another man's face.

I quickly push the bottle away. "Hell nah. I know how you like to drink."

"Bro, this is our last chance. Tomorrow we're going to get new orders, and I'm pretty sure we're gonna be getting into the shit."

McScott finally lights his cigarette. "Reckon we're heading down to back up the boys in Malyi Sorych. Need to shore up the defenses there."

"Fuck," I say. "About damn time we get something interesting."

"That's what I said," Clarke agrees. "So. We finishing this, or what?" He unscrews the cap.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I snatch the bottle from his hand. It tastes like plastic-infused rubbing alcohol, and I can't stop myself from hacking up a lung. I drink hard liquor but I never enjoy it.

"There you go," Clarke says, shaking my shoulder. "There you go!"

We find a seat on a plastic bench across from a rusting swing set. McScott draws from his cigarette like he's taking his last breath, then swigs from the bottle. He hisses through his teeth. "Fuckin' hell."

Clarke takes a huge mouthful from the bottle, gargles it, then swallows. He grins and sticks out his tongue, showing me his open mouth.

I look away. "Nobody wants to see that."

"What? It reminds you of your girlfriend?" Clarke pouts and drops onto his knees in front of me. "Come for me, daddy," he says in a high-pitched porn voice. "Ohhh, come for meeee."

"Oi. Pass that here if you're just gonna fucking mess about with it," grunts McScott, reaching across me to grab the bottle off the bench. He smells like cigarettes and a hint of cologne.

"Shit, man, you could make a career doing that," I say, shoving Clarke in the chest with the heel of my boot. "Maybe we should start you an OnlyFans."

He falls onto his ass, laughing hard. "Was I on the money? C'mon, man. You've gotta tell us something about your life at some point."

"Don't need to say a thing," McScott grunts in my defense.

"My boy saved our asses twice. We would've been chunks if Bird hadn't taken that M72 to those tanks. Don't tell me you don't want to know more about our hero."

"Clarke, if I had someone back home you can be damn sure I wouldn't be volunteering here, fighting someone else's battles," I say. "I'm not a deadbeat like you; I actually stick by the person I love."

I immediately feel a pang of guilt. What a load of shit. I'm such a liar.

"Ooh, burn," Clarke says. He has three kids and a trail of disappointed women waiting for him back home.

"They're better off without me around, anyway."

"Face it, mate, you're hooked on the rush," McScott says. "Probably all of us, if we're honest."

"Speak for yourself," I say. "Give me a regular, boring, normal life. I'm here because I need to be. I was meant to be here."

The two of them burst into exaggerated "ooohs" and dramatic gasps.

"Fuckme," McScott says, a thin smile cracking on his normally serious face. "You are a real hero, aren't you, Bird?"

"Give me that." I snatch the bottle of vodka away and take a good, hard swallow.

I'm telling the truth. I volunteered for the International Vanguard because of a feeling I had, one that some people might call the direction of the universe, or a call from

God, or destiny. Not to fight in someone else's war, but for something even greater, something I can't yet work out. Is there the possibility that my brain simply made up another perfect excuse to stay away from home? Yeah, definitely. After all, in a way, they're right. There's a girl behind all of this.

Her name's Rachyl, and she is the reason I'd first joined the army four years ago.

"You ran," McScott says suddenly, staring into my eyes. "You fuckin' ran."

"W-what?"

Everything goes dark, like lights on a stage dimming except for a single spotlight around McScott and me.

He leans in and grabs my wrist. "Yeah. Rachyl's no fool. She figured out your secret. And that's why you abandoned her. You abandoned your best friend, the one person who truly loved you, all because she realized who you really are. She realized you're ga?—"

"NO!"

I leap backward into the darkness.

I'm done with this dream.

The school quad is busy with students eating lunch. Over by the stairs, I see a group of girls doing dances in front of a phone set up on a stand. By the fence, some kids sneak a hit off a vape. Oops. The husky security guard who always rides around in a golf cart saw them. They all scatter as he zooms over.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Jackson. Jackson!"

"What?" I say, snapping to attention.

Rachyl, sitting beside me on the concrete step, scowls and rolls her eyes at me. "I knew you weren't watching."

She flips her favorite pair of retro headphones over her ears and turns back to whatever she's doing.

Wait. Rachyl, the quad at lunch, Lincoln High School...

Great, another dream. How many fucking years ago is this memory from?

I reach over and pull the headphones off her.

"Hey!"

"I am watching," I say apologetically, and lean over to look. "What's that?"

She has two lengths of paracord and is carefully winding them around each other, like a braid.

"It's called an eternal knot." Her voice has gone unusually soft; I almost can't hear her over the noise of everything else.

"Internal snot?" I ask, grinning.

"Eternalknot, dumbass!" she replies, and punches me hard on the shoulder.

"Ow, fuck."

"I went down a whole YouTube rabbit hole," she says as she works. "Ancient people used to believe these knots have power."

It's pretty incredible, the way she weaves the cords together. Mesmerizing, really. Out, around, make a loop, slide the end through, tighten it, repeat. She's obviously practiced this a lot. She's always been into arts and crafts.

"Damn, you're really good at that," I comment, pressing my face closer so I can see her process.

She smiles. "And some say that this knot would tie two people together for eternity. Best friends, or... or more."

I burst into a fit of laughter. "Rachyl, you are into some weird-ass shit. I coulddefinitelysee you starting an Etsy store, though."

She stops what she's doing and stares at me. Then, she slaps the knot into my lap, grabs her backpack and walks away.

"W-wha... Hey! The hell, man? Rachyl, where are you going?!"

Too late. Headphones are on and hoodie is up. I've been shut out.

The corded knot is unfinished. The end still hangs apart as two loose strands. I stuff the thing into my pocket and turn back to my lunch. Whatever. I'll see her after school.

Slowly, the world around me fades away, and the sounds of the past go soft and muddy.

It all vanishes.

Damn... What a dumbass I was. How did I not see what she was trying to say?

My eyes open again.

I'm awake. Actually awake.

I quickly shake off the haze of sleep to return to the noisy, dark, smelly brig of the flying ship I'm a captive in. My heart hammers against my ribcage. Memories swirl around my mind, and I fight to empty my thoughts of them. Now is not the time to get caught up thinking about McScott or Rachyl. It's not the time to be thinking about my failures as a man. I'm not going to get into another fight with myself, another shouting match inside my head to remind myself of what I'mnot.

I raise my right hand to press my palm over my pounding chest, and the weight of the wrist shackle and bump of the iron chain against my swollen belly rudely reinforce my current reality.

Our current reality.

I know nothing about him, other than that he's one of us—the third Chosen omega. That part was obvious from the moment I laid eyes on him, two days ago. The clothes are a dead giveaway—nobody else around here wears cargo pants and Nikes. He's a man of few words, and I get it. Anyone would question their sanity waking up in a place like this. He's been in Circeana as long as I have, but it's clear that he hasn't dealt with his new reality quite the same as me. I think he still doesn't quite trust that I'm really from Earth, or that I'm real at all. I've seen this kind of thing before in people I served with. The first time you find yourself in a combat situation and realize that it's nothing like how you imagined, and that you're not nearly as brave as you fantasized. It's like your brain just shuts down a little. Goes from zeroes and ones to just zeroes.

A blinding shaft of sunlight wipes across the wooden stairs leading up to the trap door out of this place, and the werewolf in charge of guarding our door clomps down them with a clay cooking pot of gruel hanging from his furry fist.

"Food," the wolf grunts, and he pours the slop into bowls and slides them across the floor to us, spilling half their contents, then tosses two pieces of hard bread that clonk along the wood like stones.

My cell mate squeezes his eyes shut and sits very still, like a kid trying to will away an imaginary monster. I crawl out to the limit of my chain and grab the bowls. It's the first food we've had in a day. As the guard heads back up the stairs, I crane my neck to try and get a better view through the trap door. I make some mental notes about our captor—his stature, his weaponry, his capability. Some people look tough but aren't;

others are more subtle. This guy looks like no slouch. He knows how to use the sword hanging at his waist. How many more like him are there on board this ship? The one who captured me was a cat shapeshifter carrying a bow and arrows. I haven't seen her since I was brought onboard.

The trap door slams shut. It takes a minute for my eyes to readjust to the amount of light shining through the gaps and knots in the wooden hull.

"Here," I say, sliding the bowl over to my cell mate.

He looks at it distrustfully. I can't blame him, but I know that our captors are going to want to keep us healthy until they've gotten what they need from us.

Which is... what, exactly?

As far as my knowledge of their MO is concerned, it's to get us to their leader, Umbrios. A certifiable deity, according to Tyler and the others. This dark god needs us to complete his takeover of this world, apparently. But it's the nitty-gritty details that I'm lacking.

What are they planning to do with our babies?

I examine the stale bread and flick a wriggling weevil larva off the crust. Then I dip the bread into the gruel and take a big bite.

"Honestly, you'd think they would give us better food. We're precious cargo." I flash a wry smile. "Yeah, that's a goddamn baby in your stomach."

"And... you are too?" he asks in a soft voice, hesitating. "Pregnant?"

I'm startled to hear him speak, but I maintain my composure. I lift the front of my

cloak.

"Sure am," I say. "As much as I want it to not be the case, this ain't no dream I can force myself awake from. Don't worry. It's not gonna bust out of you, Alienstyle."

His smile carries a tinge of relief, like it was something he had been concerned about. Then he picks up the bowl and slowly dips the bread into the gruel and takes a bite. It's not long before both of us are scarfing that shit down.

"Always eat, and always eat fast," I say. "You never know where or when your next meal might be in front of you. And we're going to need to stay fueled if we're gonna bust out of here."

"How?" he asks hesitantly.

"Still working on that. But don't worry. Let's just say this isn't my first rodeo. You ready to tell me your name?"

He nods. "It's Dustin. Dustin Levine."

"Jackson Bird." I raise my hand in front of my face to show the shackle. "Before we can do any escaping, breaking these is priority number one."

2

AIROS

“Airos.Airos!”

My eyes snap open. Kalistratos is standing next to me, tapping my ankle with his sandal. The night sky is lightening with the coming morning, our camp fire has

burned down to cinders, and on the other side of it, Tyler is packing up his blanket.

"You were dreaming," Kalistratos says. "Moaning in your sleep."

I sit up on one elbow and smirk at him. "Would you like to know what you were doing to me in my dream?"

With an irritable snort, he rolls his eyes and returns to Tyler's side. It's so very entertaining to get under that man's skin.

The visions from my dream are pressed to the forefront of my thoughts, screaming for my attention. They're more vivid this morning than usual, more difficult to extinguish—a mountain of muddy earth at my feet where a village once stood, the drum of rain all around me as the flow of soil and rock slowly comes to a creeping stop. Then a thin wail rising from somewhere, the terrible sound of a child's lone and desperate cry.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I get up and pack away my bed roll, and as I do, I take a quick drink from the wine gourd sitting beside my things. It's the brew given to me by the villagers of Metsova, and it's already nearly gone. The dream of unlimited free-flowing wine was cut short all too quickly. A damn tragedy.

I take one more swig. Unfortunately, there's no way around it. It's a two-swig kind of morning.

My head is clear, finally, and I get up to join my companions.

My friends.

The fact that I've allowed myself such a fondness for Kalistratos, Tyler, and Alyx... It's dangerous. I've already destroyed too many lives with my very existence.

And it's for this reason that I will never allow myself a mate.

With a wave of my hand, I draw a cover of earth across our fire's last smoldering embers, smothering it cleanly and discreetly. The three of us then work to quickly cover any other evidence of our camp, brushing branches over where the ground has been flattened by our bed rolls. Tyler carefully weaves the protective wrap around his glimmering phoenix egg and ties the bundle to his body like a swaddled child. Kalistratos helps him, then gently presses his palm to the egg after the task is complete. They both share a look—a tender, loving glance that lasts but a second. I turn away, not wanting to intrude on their moment.

I can't deny that I feel an ache for what they share. Physical desires are one

thing—they can be easily sated with a trip to a brothel. But the journey of love—of sharing yourself with another person... That's something far different.

I understand these needs can't be erased or suppressed. I must be content to experience them vicariously, as a spectator, and to allow the rawness of that longing to serve as some small atonement for the things I've done.

The smell of the ocean drifts across us, and with it the faintest roar of waves crashing against a rocky coast. We've camped on the precipice of our destination—the town of Aktaia, once known for its skilled flyer shipwrights.

It's not long before we've closed the remaining distance to the Aktaia gorge. The road is still there, though abandoned and overgrown. I lead our group, with Tyler in the center and Kalistratos at the rear. We pass the wreckage of a large multi-oared trireme lying broken with the splintered belly of its hull facing the sky. A snapped mast juts from the ground with the last tattered shreds of a sail hanging from the beams.

"What happened here?" Tyler asks.

"The wrath of an angry sea god," I say. "A storm unlike any known in the Gnosis records struck this coast and leveled the town two years ago."

"Wait, you're telling me this boat here was tossed up from the ocean?" he says in disbelief. "No fucking way."

"Indeed," I reply. "The flyers were often stored in caves after construction or before repair. I'm counting on something being left over and sheltered from the worst of the damage."

"I don't like this," Kalistratos mutters as we enter the shattered remnants of the town.

"If we'd gone after Jackson in our phoenix forms, we could've caught up with them quickly. Look at this place. It's a ruin."

"Just a little reminder that you were on the brink of dying," Tyler says to Kalistratos. "We were in no shape to go after that airship, even though we all wanted to."

The wind whistles through piles of timber and rubble that were once dwellings. I move carefully from the overgrown road and walk close to the rubble, keeping my senses sharp for anything that might be of use to us—or a danger. A flock of startled sea birds darts out and takes to the sky. Everything is covered in a layer of mud, salt and bird droppings. I nudge a clay pot with my foot, rolling it over to see that it's broken on its opposite side. There are parts of flyers everywhere—intricately crafted components of iron and bronze jutting out from the dirt along with pieces of broken hulls and decks.

As we continue through the area, it becomes quite clear that anything of use has either been completely pulverized or picked through by other scavengers. But what we're looking for wouldn't be here at the forefront of the town, where access is easiest. To our left stretches the ocean, with a boundary of a steep gorge separating us from the shoreline. A part of the town lies right along the edge of the gorge, now nothing but skeletal wooden frames jutting out from stone foundation cut into the rock.

"Cheesus," Kalistratos says, taking a moment to peer over. His toe hits a stone that clatters across the precipice and drops for a long time before disappearing into the churning surf below. "These people must've truly pissed off whichever god watches these waters."

The destruction of Aktaia is just another notch in a long record of dark happenings throughout Circeana. I've witnessed enough of it in my travels—the increase of slave traders, the emergence of more and more monsters, especially in regions that have

long been considered safe... But it's through all the records and stories I've ingested in my studies that I've been able to gather a greater picture of what has been happening in our realm, stretching back generations.

Tyler crawls on his belly to take a peek. "Ugh. I don't like this," he mutters. Then something catches his eye, and he points at where the gorge splits into two. "Hey! Look, do you see that? There's like a staircase down there."

"That's where we're headed," I say.

Making our descent through the ruins feels like climbing down the skeleton of some ancient sea creature. Along the gorge's walls, stone buildings cling to the rock like barnacles, their foundations still gripping the face despite the destruction wrought by the storm. This area seems to have fared better than the area above.

"The wrights used to launch their creations right off the edge of the gorge," I say, "and then fly them down to the caves below. Quite the spectacle, I've heard. They used to have a festival every year."

"Why didn't they rebuild?" Tyler says. "Seems insane to just abandon an entire town. Where did everyone go?"

"A good question," I say. "I don't know."

"So he doesn't know everything," Kalistratos says. "You had me convinced you had all the knowledge of the world rattling around inside your head."

Why did they abandon the town? The answer must be simple. The possibilities tumble through my mind like pieces of a puzzle that doesn't quite fit together. Important tools and equipment could have been lost, yes. We'd seen cypress groves on our approach that were young and unestablished—perhaps the groves that had

supplied their woodwork had been too damaged to utilize. Yet plenty of towns have recovered from worse.

The wind picks up as we descend the path cut along the rock face, whistling through the empty stone doorways of the ghosttown, carrying the mournful sound of wooden beams creaking and shredded canvas flapping. A crab scurries out from beneath a rock, but otherwise, there is no sign of life.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Very quiet, apart from this wind," Kalistratos observes as he brushes hair from his eyes. "Even the gulls have abandoned these rocks."

"Uh, guys?" Tyler says. He's standing at the entrance of one of the buildings, and he points at what I'd initially taken for a pile of driftwood at the corner of the room. No—these bleached white shapes are unmistakably human bones.

Kalistratos folds his arms over his chest. "Poor bastards. Looks like they were hiding from the storm."

He and I go inside the building to look around. We find more skeletons, most gathered toward the rear near the walls, behind overturned tables and furniture. Kalistratos walks to a skeleton slumped against the rock wall and knocks some debris away from its hand with his foot. I see the tarnished bronze handguard and part of the blade, partially hidden beneath the soil. Kalistratos and I share a curious look.

"Who needs a sword to hide from a storm?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Looters, perhaps?"

Kalistratos shrugs. He buys the theory as much as I do. I conjure my staff to my hand.

"Better safe than not," I say to him, and he rests his hand across the sword sheathed at his hip.

"There a problem?" Tyler asks.

"Not unless skeletons can come back to life," Kalistratos says, and after a pause he adds, "They can't do that, right? Airos. Hey.Right?"

"I don't feel any dark power lingering here," I say. "Do you, Tyler?"

Tyler looks surprised to be asked, but he shakes his head no. "I mean, it's a little spooky. And what Kalistratos said. It's weirdly quiet. That might just be the ghost town vibes, though."

"Gods. Don't say 'ghost,'" Kalistratos mutters.

"Don't tell me my big strong alpha is afraid of ghosts?" Tyler teases. "Here's the thing about ghosts I learned when I was a kid. If you don't believe in them, then they don't exist."

"They exist," I say.

"Dammit."

We continue our descent, only pausing to pick through and examine the ruins of what must have been the flyerwrights' workshops. Then we reach the bottom, and the town curves around the edge of the gorge into where the cliff has split in two. Almost nothing remains here, just scattered and half-buried debris. The bow of a flyer juts up from the sand. It doesn't matter if it's in working order or not; there's no way we will be able to dig it out.

The caves lie just ahead, gaping mouths nestled below natural overhangs in the cliff face. The shape of the wall blocks our view of the ocean and has dampened the sound of its roar to a purr. The wind is what speaks in this place, and its voice rises from a whistle to a howl as it flows through the chasm. I hold my hand up to shield my eyes from the glare of the sun and the stinging sand.

Inside one of the larger openings, I can make out the shadowy shapes of what look like intact flyer frames.

"There," I say, trying to contain my excitement.

"I see it," Kalistratos replies.

"Let's go, let's go," Tyler says, and we break into a jog.

The wind calms as we approach the cave's entrance, deflected by the shape of the overhang. We're greeted with an eerie silence, and an odd odor.

Tyler's forehead crinkles. "Why does it smell like someone fried their laptop?"

"Their what?" Kalistratos asks.

"It could be the smell of the flyer cores," I say.

"The heart of a flyer," Kalistratos tells Tyler. "They give them life through a very unfortunate source of power."

"Something tells me it's not gasoline powered," Tyler replies.

"Phoenix feathers," I say darkly. "Harvested from enslaved Phoenikos."

Tyler's shoulders slump. "Jesus Christ..."

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"It's tough being popular," says Kalistratos, smiling dryly. "Seems like everyone wants a piece of you."

As my eyes adjust to the light, I see that the flyer frames at the cave's entrance are bashed up against the rocks, like a pile of discarded oyster shells.

"At least we won't have any trouble finding fuel," I say. "Kalistratos, we can pluck your tail feathers first."

"Pluck your own tail feathers, you damn phony monk."

Using a Gnosis spell, I command my illuminated staff to float freely by my side and climb up the pile of flyers to get a look inside. Kalistratos comes after me.

"Tyler, wait here," he says.

"Fuck that. I can help."

He moves Eggy to his back and finds his way up the mess of broken timber. A proud grin forms on Kalistratos's face.

"What are you smiling at?" Tyler demands.

"You've come so far. I remember when you struggled to climb a tree!"

I reach the top, and as I move from hull to hull, I direct my staff into the dark wreckage. Its green light spills through the gaps, throwing a cartwheel of shadows

onto the cave wall. I'm searching for something useable. Then I see it, deep within the wreckage—a flyer core. It's been dislodged from whichever ship it once powered, and lies cradled by broken timber like a discarded amphora. It's made of a dark metal and looks like a small kiln or furnace.

"The mouth is on the other side," I say. "We must turn it."

"Ready?" Tyler says as we gather around it. "One, two, three..."

Moving it is quite a task. The three of us are straining, and Kalistratos nearly loses his footing on a precariously angled hull plank. The wood is soft and brittle, and it starts to creak and groan along with us.

"Son of a bitch weighs a ton," grunts Tyler.

"Almost there," I say. "Almost?—"

With a loud snap, a plank gives out and the core tumbles away like a loosed boulder. Kalistratos grabs Tyler and pulls him out of the way as it smashes through the side of the hull and flies to the ground below with a loudgong. We all exchange a glance.

"Shit," Tyler says, staring at the hole in the wall with wide eyes and gripping Kalistratos's bicep. "That wasn't me."

Then the structure begins to make some very concerning sounds.

"Take him andgo," I say urgently to Kalistratos.

I know his powers are weakened right now—he doesn't have enough phoenix energy to halt time for all three of us. Kalistratos's eyes flash with acknowledgement, and in the span of a heartbeat, I feel the surge of his power washing over me like a crushing

wave. He and Tyler vanish from in front of me, reappearing on the ground outside the wreckage in a blur of motion.

I grab my staff and launch myself from board to board, the structure groaning and splintering beneath my feet. For one terrible moment I look up—everything above me is coming down in a thunderous avalanche of wood and metal. Below, Kalistratos hangs onto Tyler's shoulder, sweat streaming down his face as both of them scream at me, their voices lost in the deafening roar of destruction.

A massive beam plummets toward my head. I throw myself sideways, feeling it crash into the platform where I'd been standing a split second before. The impact sends me sprawling across boards that crack and buckle under me. I scramble forward as the flooring disintegrates, and something—a broken mast, a chunk of hull—slams into my shoulder, spinning me around and launching me toward empty air. Instinct takes over. I swing my staff in a desperate arc, driving the tip deep into solid wood, and use the momentum to vault myself upward through a gap in the collapsing maze.

As I fall backward, three pole shards fly down at me like giant arrows with splintered tips set to rip a hole through my torso. Gnosis energy blasts from the end of my staff, bouncing off them like green chain lighting and shattering them into a shower of splinters.

I tuck hard, somersaulting backward as splinters whistle past my face. The ground rushes up to meet me and I hit it in a hard crouch. The avalanche roars down above me. I reach deep for my phoenix power, and thrust my hands toward the earth. Rock responds to my call, surging upward in a protective half-dome that breaks the avalanche of debris like a wave on a ship's bow.

The thick haze of dust slowly dissipates as the last few pieces of wood bounce across the ground and roll to Tyler and Kalistratos's feet. Tyler's slow applause echoes around the now silent cavern.

"You just had to do that flip, didn't you? Fucking show-off," Kalistratos says through a grin.

"Pleased you liked it," I say, bowing.

We gather around the flyer core lodged in the sand. Kalistratos and I set it upright, revealing a mouth that belongs to a decorative face worked into the metal—complete with an outstretched tongue and two bulbous eyes inset with crystals for pupils.

"How does this thing work?" Tyler asks with a frown as he crouches down to look inside the mouth.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I hold up my arm and red, green, and gold feathers appear from my elbow to my hand in a wash of sparkling light. I pluck a small tuft of feather and place it into Tyler's hand.

"Any more than this and it might shoot up into the ceiling," I say. "Kalistratos, rope?"

He gets a length of rope out from his satchel, and we tie it around the middle of the core.

"If it functions, then all we'll need to find is a flyer platform with a proper harness to focus its power," I say. "Go on. Place it inside."

Tyler places the feather on the metal tongue and recoils back when it's instantly sucked inside. A moment later, a low hum emerges from within the core, followed by a glow matching the colors of my feather. The eyes take on this color and begin to shine brightly, and then the core shudders and rises off the sand, stopping just at my shoulder where it bobs gently in the air.

"Who wants to hold the floating head?" I ask, holding up the line.

"Ooh, me," Tyler says, taking the rope from me. "I'm gonna call him Tim."

"Tim?" Kalistratos repeats.

"Kinda looks like an old manager of mine. Tim. Same buggy eyes."

"You're adorable," Kalistratos says.

As I lead us deeper into the cave, I point out the huge sections of tree trunks littered across the ground. "They would've used these to move downed flyers around. A good sign we'll find something further in."

A gentle tug on the rope sends the core gliding forward, and it follows just behind Tyler like an obedient dog.

"That smell is getting stronger," Kalistratos observes as we near the tunnels at the rear of the main chamber. He scowls and covers his face. "Cheesus."

A warm breeze flows out from the pitch-black tunnels ahead of us, carrying the acrid, sickly-sweet smell on its back. It's coming from deep within the caves—and getting stronger still, despite us halting our advance.

Tyler pulls the front of his chiton up over his nose. "Uh, is it just me, or do you guys hear that too?" he asks nervously.

A steady, droning buzz rises over the hum of the floating core. The wind tugs at our robes and kicks up a whirl of sand.

"Sounds like a beehive," Kalistratos says.

Tyler grabs and pulls on our arms. "This is giving me a really bad feeling. I think we need to turn around, right now."

I hurl a ball of light down the tunnel, its glow briefly illuminating the rough rock walls. For a heartbeat, there's nothing. Then the light dims, overtaken by something writhing and vast—a churning mass of translucent wings, gleaming coal-black shells clicking and scraping, razor-sharp mandibles snapping hungrily in the darkness, all building to an ear-splitting roar that reverberates all around us.

"You're right,run," I say, just as the swarm explodes from the tunnel mouth like a geyser of nightmares.

3

JACKSON

"What did you call it again?" Dustin asks me as I work the tip of the nail into the hinge binding his wrist shackles together.

"Omega," I say.

"Omega," he repeats. "And only an alpha can get us pregnant? Why?"

"I don't know," I mutter. "It's like a rank, I guess. And just so we're completely clear, this thing just suddenly popped up inside of me after I got dropped into this world. What happened to us was some immaculate conception shit. There was no 'alpha' involved, alright?"

He nods.

"It's a miracle I didn't completely lose my mind during the month I was alone in the woods. Watching my belly getting bigger every day was like something out of a damn horror movie. How did you manage?"

Dustin stares right through me. I feel his hands shaking through the shackles.

"Hey, hey, it's all good," I tell him. "Forget I asked. You survived, and that's what matters. We shouldn't be here, but we are, and we're alive."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Here is a lot better than where I came from," Dustin says with a small, but surprisingly defiant voice.

The holding pin finally pushes free from the hinge, and I snatch it before it hits the wood floor.

"Done," I say, breaking the shackles off Dustin's wrists. "Alright. You ready to get out of here?"

"Yes."

"Good."

I have a plan.

Dustin has given me a crucial piece of info—there's a way off of this thing. I was dragged aboard via an extending rope ladder dropped over the side when the ship was hovering at very low altitude—impossible for us to use unless we just so happen to be flying over a pit filled with down feather pillows—but Dustin was taken aboard in another ship, a smaller vessel that we've nicknamed "the buzzer" because of the noise Dustin says it makes. All we have to do is find this thing...and figure out how to make it work. No problem.

I crawl quietly to the door. Just like on the shackles, its lock is archaic and takes just a few seconds to figure out how to break it. I put my eye up to the key hole. It's a hallway. I can't see if there's a guard.

The nail in my palm is like a railroad spike, except smaller. Roughly forged, thick as a pencil on one end with a taper to a point, and five inches long. The worst description if you're talking about your dick, but pretty awesome when it comes to a stealth weapon.

Keeping my eye to the hole, I slowly maneuver the latch and crack the door, waiting to see activity on the other side. Nothing. I pull the door open and peek out, keeping my head low. Clear.

"Stick close to me," I tell Dustin. "If we encounter a threat, and let's assume that will happen, then get your back against the closest wall or behind cover. That will limit angles of attack."

"Okay," he says. "Um, Jackson? What if they come from both sides?"

"Just stick close to me. Hand on my shoulder, so I know you're there."

We enter the hallway, cramped and dimly lit by flickering oil lanterns hanging from iron hooks stuck into the wall planks. A mouse pokes its head out from a hole and scurries along the floor away from us as we proceed forward to the T junction at the end of the hallway.

They'd brought me in from the left, but Dustin in from the right. I can retrace the left pathway in my mind, all the way back to the top deck. The right path is a blank, but that's where we have to go. Into the darkness.

The pulsing beat of the ship's engine, or whatever it is, gets louder as we approach the junction. I press my right palm against the wall and feel the growing vibration. I peek around the corner. Another empty hallway, but this one has several open passageways along it. Lamplight glimmers from the first entrance, and I freeze when the shadow of a wolfman plays across the wall. Slowly, carefully, I slide up to the entranceway. I

can just make out two voices now, growling and yapping over the engine noise. Dustin's fingers dig into my shoulder. I motion with my palm—"Quiet, relax." He only squeezes harder. He's shaking in fear.

I drop to one knee and peek around the frame. There are four armed wolves sitting at a table inside what looks like a storeroom. Along two walls are slanted racks with three levels of terra cotta jars sitting on piles of straw, secured with lengths of rope tied around their slender necks.

Dustin shrinks to the floor with his eyes squeezed shut. He's breathing hard and muttering something I can't hear.

Fuck. This would be so much easier if it were just me.

I take a deep breath, and the twinge of frustration settles for the moment. Not all of us are built to be warriors, nor should we be. I'm afraid too, I've just learned to hide it better.

But if this guy gets us both killed...

The wolves laugh about something. One slams his palm repeatedly on the table, cackling with laughter. Their conversation is finished. One stands up—and looks directly at the door.

I pull back and nearly fall onto my ass. Jesus Christ, did he see me?

I can feel the thump of their steps through the wooden floor, and the groaning scrape of a chair being moved. I try to push Dustin back, but he refuses to move. He's frozen in place, clutching my shoulder and the back of my shirt.

I see the wolf's profile in shadow on the wall, his ears perked high. Then I hear him

say, "I think my eyes are playing tricks on me."

Double fuck.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

The heavy footsteps grow closer. I flip the nail in my fist to a jabbing position. The best chance I have is to stay crouched and take them by surprise, but son of a bitch, going up against four hostiles like this is going to require a goddamn miracle.

The wolf's shadow shrinks into focus as he nears the entranceway. My mind races through the possible scenarios of how this could play out, and I realize that none of them can end well.

There must be a way out of this. All of my training, experience and instinct, is telling me to look harder and find the one little piece that I'm missing.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I see McScott in my mind's eye, staring at me as enemy suppressing fire peppers the cinderblock wall we're sheltering behind.

"Bird!" he shouts. "Do me a favor and sort this mess out, yeah?"

I turn away from the memory—and then I feel it, a little pull inside of my chest and my fingertips, just like the tug of a fridge magnet getting close to a piece of metal. My powers. There's material I can control in that room.

The terra cotta jars.

I reach out with my powers, recalling the tedious hours I spent practicing in my hideout, manipulating rock, clay and soil into different shapes and forms. I don't know why, but the jars are not as easy to control, maybe because they're not raw material. They're heavy and dense, but I can still feel them. All I need to do is get one to move...

And then I do it. Something shatters from inside the room.

"Fuck! The wine!"

"What the hell did you do?"

"Nothing!"

I grab the collar of Dustin's shirt and haul him after me as I dip past the door, snagging a glance at the chaos inside. The guards are all desperately trying to plug up

the bottom of one of the jars as red wine flows over their hands, drenching their clothes and the floor. Then the hole completely crumbles apart, and the entire contents gush out everywhere.

Fuck yeah.

We hurry to the end of the hallway, which becomes an elevated walkway crossing through a large room. The noise is intense. It's like a huge subwoofer thumping its lowest tone. My eyeballs are vibrating.

I pause for a moment to check the corners. There are two ladders on either side of the walkway going down about fifteen feet to an area below. Above, the intricate framework of the ship is exposed, spearing outwards from the ceiling into the walls. There's a mural painted all along the length of the wall, but I don't take time to look at it. My attention is on the thing at the center of the room that looks like a big stone pizza oven. No guards, probably on account of the noise.

What is that thing?

I glance back at Dustin to make sure he hasn't melted into a puddle. He's also focused on the pizza oven. He looks at me questioningly. I shake my head. My guess is as good as his.

We walk to the center of the platform. There's an opening on one side of it, shimmering with a strange light. It's definitely some kind of furnace, just like the big boilers they used to use to power trains and steamships. Except here there's no coal, no steam, no heat, just that chest thumping, brain melting sound.

But no, there's something else. There's something weirdly familiar about the light coming from that thing. Looking at it makes my skin crawl, and yet I'm drawn to it. The closer I get, the more the sound intensifies around me, and the light is pulsing

along with it. The rhythm feels wrong, like a heartbeat going backwards.

That feeling. It's like the same as when I use my powers. Same spot, same sensation, except...twisted, somehow.

Moving closer to the opening, I can see what's making the light, and my stomach turns.

Feathers. Dozens of feathers suspended in some kind of crystalline structure, and they pulse with each thrum of the ship's furnace, their light draining away only to slowly fill in again, like they're being wrung out and squeezed of all their essence. Mygod, they're beautiful, and somehow, I know exactly what they are.

"Phoenix feathers. These are fucking phoenix feathers." My voice is immediately eaten by the surrounding noise. I know Dustin can't hear me, but it doesn't matter. I'm pretty damn sure he can feel exactly what I feel. It's a part of him, just like it's a part of me.

A cold weight settles in my stomach.

I know this technology—or magic—is common in this world. I've seen them all around, from flying ships to work carts hovering across the ground. Every one of them must use phoenix power. This is industrial-scale extraction. This is what happens to phoenixes.

We enter a narrow corridor that angles upward, and the throbbing beat of the engine room fades enough for me to hear the sound of my own breath again.

"We're almost there, I think," Dustin whispers.

"You think?" I repeat back.

"I'm pretty sure," he says. "Yeah. I think there's a door coming up on the left. I remember, because it was just before the noise room."

Sunlight shines through a wooden grate in the ceiling ahead, and I stop us before we walk beneath it. There are two wolfmen standing there, and their voices drift down.

"...once we get to Al'Phaer."

"You son of a bitch. You're not really thinking of leaving Praxis Skotos?"

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Why not? Fifty shares of gold and drachmae can buy my own ship."

"He'll kill you."

"I'll risk it."

A loud bell suddenly rings out from somewhere above. The wolfmen look at each other and hurry away, their footsteps creaking across the deck.

"What was that?" Dustin asks.

"Probably our cue to get a move on," I say urgently. "C'mon."

The corridor stretches ahead of us, wooden walls closing in tight. The first door we reach comes by on our right. Then another, and another.

"Dustin," I say. "There ain't no left door here."

At the corridor's end, a wooden ladder leads up through a narrow shaft to a hatch overhead. I stare up at it.

"Maybe it was a right, after all," he stammers. "I'm sorry."

Just as we turn to double back to the first door, it swings open and two wolfmen hurry out with swords drawn.

"There they are!" one snarls, thrusting his sword at us. The other wolf turns his head

up to the grated opening in the ceiling and lets out a piercing howl.

"Back!" I shout at Dustin, shoving him toward the ladder. "Up, up, up!"

The wolves barrel down the hallway at me with their fangs bared and swords raised. I raise the nail and feel like I'm wielding the world's tiniest thumbtack. But even thumbtacks can be dangerous in the right hands.

The one on the right makes it to me first. He thrusts his sword at my head, and I dodge out of the way by dropping into a fast crouch. The blade gets stuck in the wall behind me, and I lunge forward and smash my shoulder into his knees. He yelps in surprise and stumbles off balance, colliding with the base of the ladder. Dustin nearly loses his grip, but keeps on climbing.

The other wolf is on me now, and I quickly dive forward to get inside his attack circle—I don't want to be anywhere near his sword. He snaps at me with his fangs, and I feel a sudden sting on my cheek and the flow of warm blood. He tries to put distance between us, but I crowd him like a boxer going in for an attack. My jabs are fast. For a few seconds, he doesn't even know I've gotten him. Then he slams his palm to his chest. Blood flows over his fingers and soaks his tunic and fur. He drops his sword.

I spin around. The first attacker is trying to get his sword out from the wall, but when he looks back and sees his buddy lying on the floor and me gunning for his ass with a bloody spike in my fist, he changes his tactics and clambers up the ladder after Dustin.

Time compresses in a fight. The shot of adrenaline, the way your brain separates from logic and enters a heightened primal space. Some people have trouble decoupling in the face of violence, but I've never had a problem with it. I've gotten used to it—gottengoodat it, even. Imagine being able to look death in the face without

flinching, and yet when it comes to looking at myself, the first thing I want to do is flee.

Everything happens in less than ten seconds.

The wolfman is four rungs up the ladder, reaching out to grab Dustin's ankle. Dustin clutches the ladder, his pregnant belly pressed up against the rungs. Something in me snaps. I've defended children and pregnant women in active warzones before, but the protective fury that roars up inside of me is beyond anything that I've felt before. The storm of emotion and thoughts whirling around my head all boils down to one single thing: I won't let you hurt our children.

I grab the wolfman's legs and slam my fist into his thigh, driving the spike deep into the muscle. He lets out a snarling roar and kicks me in the side of my head. Riiing. I fall onto my ass as lights flash around me like paparazzi. I hear Dustin shouting my name. He's near the hatch at the top of the shaft. The wolfman leaps down from the ladder and his feet thud on either side of my hips. The end of the nail is poking out from his leg. He grips it and tears it out with a grunt.

He tries to stab me in the face with the nail, but I shift my head out of the way just in time, and it sticks into the floor. He's on top of me and grabs my throat with one hand. I can feel the tips of his claws pushing into my skin. My vision blurs. Fuck. I can't breathe.

"Jackson!" Dustin shouts. His voice echoes like I'm inside a tin can.

I'm fighting, trying to muscle this fucker off of me, but it feels like he weighs a ton. It's gotta be because of the way his body is shaped. His physiology means a different center of gravity.

He snarls and snaps at me, foul breath pouring through his rotted fangs. I try to swing

my leg up and drive it into him, to flip him off of me, but he's shifted forms to become even more wolf-like. I can't get the leverage. I can barely even get my leg up because of my belly.

Everything is closing in. A black tunnel circles around my vision.

"STOP!" shouts Dustin.

And all of a sudden, the wolf's muzzle retracts and I feel his claws become fingernails. Instead of an ugly wolf's face snarling at me, there's an ugly man's face. He looks down at himself in surprise.

That's all I need. I grab his tunic at the waist and thrust my knee up, driving it straight into his crotch and beyond, lifting him into the air and throwing him over my head.

I'm back on my feet. Dustin stares down, eyes wide in surprise.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

Didhedo that? Did he force the guy out of his wolf form?

The man recovers, rising up to one knee. "What is this?" he yells, looking at his hands. His face scrunches up with effort. "I can't shift!"

He strides forward, eyes blazing with anger, without even a limp from the wound I put in his thigh. These motherfuckers are built tough, but at least it'll be a fair fight this time. I raise my fists into a guard, bobbing my head back and forth as I track his movements. He makes a telegraphed swing to my head, and I evade and land a solid jab on his chin. It's like hitting a brick wall. Goddamn solid bones.

Bam, bam. I cut in and connect with a gut punch, and when he lurches over, I pivot on my toes and throw my weight into a devastating uppercut that flips his chin like a Pez dispenser. He staggers backward onto his heel. For a second, it looks like he's about to recover, but I know that look in his eyes. Or lack of one. Then they roll back into his head, and he goes down hard.

"Fuckin' A," I say. "I think I broke a knuckle."

No response from Dustin. I whirl around. A patch of blue sky is visible through the open hatch at the top of the empty ladder.

Son of a... Why didn't he wait for me?

With a sharp tug, I pry the sword stuck into the wall and climb the ladder. Slowly, carefully, I peek up over the rim.

My heart plunges into my feet.

Dustin is on his knees, trapped between two armed men, their drawn blades crossed in front of him. His eyes meet mine, wide with terror. Sitting casually on the ground in front of them is that damn cat sniper, the same one that took me captive. She licks the back of her paw and hops up to her feet.

"Come on out," she calls to me. "There's nowhere for you to go."

A shadow falls over me. I don't need to turn around to know I have a sword pointed at the back of my head. I grip the rungs of the ladder, my knuckles burning and swollen. I hear shouts from the passageway below, and the thud of boots and paws.

Well,shit.

4

AIROS

"Run!" I shout. "Make for a place to hide!"

"There is no place to hide!" Kalistratos shouts back.

Tyler drags the floating core on its rope, and it hovers behind him like a sea anchor.

"They're going for Tim!" he shouts as the insects dive at the core.

"LEAVE TIM!" Kalistratos yells before one of the giant black insects rams into him. Tyler spins around with his sling and fires a stone that cracks against the beetle's eye. The creature whirls madly and crashes into the ground with a sparkling, purple fluid gushing from the wound. The sharp odor we'd smelled fills the air. He drops the rope.

The core is engulfed by the swarm.

"Oh god," Tyler says. "It's the phoenix energy. I think those things are feeding on the phoenix energy from the flyer cores."

The swarm abandons the drained core, swirls into the air, and dives for Kalistratos. He draws his sword as Tyler loads his sling. I command a bolt of Gnosis energy to explode at the head of the swarm, and the insects careen off it like rain on a canopy. They quickly regroup, moving as if with one mind, and head straight for Kalistratos.

"Why me?!"

"You used your powers!" I yell.

"So did you!"

"Not my phoenix powers!" I fire another blast of green magic. "These spells are different."

We clamber up the stairway as I hold them with a shield spell that quickly begins to corrode. Gnosis magic is greatly limited—it's gleaned from arcane knowledge discovered through research, and there's only so much one can learn from manuals and scrolls. Its original source is mysterious, even to me, and unlike my phoenix powers, my control over it is tenuous at best.

"There!" Tyler points at a building up ahead constructed into the wall of the gorge. Its walls and door are intact, and there are no windows. We throw ourselves inside, just as my shield collapses. Kalistratos slams the door closed onto the leg of an insect that manages to make it through. Its wings buzz wildly, bashing Kalistratos's body as he fights to keep the door from bursting open from the swarm battering against it. Tyler hoists a fallen beam, and with a furious scream, charges with it like a batteringram.

The splintered tip impales the bug through the bottom of its shell, and purple fluid gushes down the wood. I point my staff and fire a blast of energy that severs its leg at the joint, and though the gap closes, Kalistratos still struggles to hold the door shut as the bugs continue to pelt the building with their bodies. The sound is earsplitting, like an avalanche.

I run to Tyler's side and help him maneuver the beam to wedge it against the door. Kalistratos stumbles back into Tyler's arms.

"Are you alright?" Tyler asks, touching where the creature's wings have bruised Kalistratos's face.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Fine," he says, clasping Tyler's hand.

The massive insect twitches on the floor. Its mandibles continue to move, as though it's searching mindlessly for the source of energy it calls food. Its dark eyeballs seem to lock onto Tyler and his egg.

Kalistratos's arm swings in a fast arc, and a throwing knife plunges into the insect's head. The thing finally goes still.

"God, I hate bugs," Tyler groans miserably. "Anyone have any fucking bug spray?"

Kalistratos retrieves his weapon and flicks off the blood. "I think it's clear what happened to our friends here." He picks up a bone from the ground. "These ones were unlucky to have survived the storm."

He begins to scour the room, overturning the furniture looking for another exit. I go to help him, though we both already know there is no other way out—we're up against the cliff. There's nothing but solid rock.

"So what are they?" he asks. "More of Umbrios's pets?"

"His influence is drawing these monsters out from the shadowy places within our realm. The soul reavers, the harpyia, and only the Gods know what else... Provide the right conditions for darkness to thrive, and it will thrive." I crouch beside the insect. "Fascinating."

I hold my staff up to it to make some comparisons, noting that it measures up to over

half of it lengthwise, and a quarter of it at its widest point. The top of its shell is as tough as rock and polished like obsidian. The underside, its belly, is softer, perhaps similar to tree bark. I rummage through my waist pouch, pushing aside the small amber piece of harpyia essence to find my emergency wine flask beneath it, now empty. I uncork it and shake the last few drops into my mouth before scooping a little of the creature's glimmering blood into it. Tyler's face crinkles.

"Nasty," he says. "What are you doing?"

"Collecting knowledge," I reply.

Suddenly, a piece in the middle of the door explodes into splinters, and the open gap fills with gnashing mandibles, clicking and scraping against the creaking beam. Kalistratos thrusts his sword through the hole, but the insect that falls away is instantly replaced by another.

"Perhaps we leave the knowledge collecting for another time?" he yells.

"Aw,fuck," Tyler says. "The only way out of here is through them, and we can't outrun that swarm."

"No, we can't," I say.

There's an idea forming in my head.

Kalistratos slashes the mandibles off another bug. The door shudders and pops as it fractures down its center. Flashes of sunlight slice through.

"Not much time left!" he shouts.

"Tyler? Are you still able to feel where Jackson is? Can you take us in his direction?"

Tyler looks at me, then closes his eyes. And as he attunes to his powers, the swarm reacts. Pieces of the door explode off. Kalistratos slashes furiously, hacking away the parts that push through. One of the creatures manages to grab his sword arm, and with an angry shout he slices the mandibles off with an upward swing of his knife.

Tyler opens his eyes. "Yes, I can feel him."

"Good. Then there's only one thing we can do. You said it yourself. The only way out of here is through them."

"Fly?" roars Kalistratos in disbelief. "In phoenix form, they'll never stop chasing us!"

"Exactly," I reply.

His eyes narrow as he grasps what I'm hoping to accomplish.

"Cheesus. With two days ahead of us, I hope to the Gods you have that kind of stamina."

"Perhaps you want to make it a competition?" I say with a grin. "See who can last the longest?"

"Jesus, you guys are so gay for each other sometimes," Tyler says. He snaps his fingers. "Let's go."

"I'll clear our exit," I say.

Kalistratos crouches down. "Tyler, get on my back."

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

My phoenix powers extend out to the surrounding cliffside and take hold of the rock. The skeletons around us fall apart as everything begins to shudder violently.

"On my signal," I say. "GO!"

Kalistratos and I dash toward the door, and with a surge of my power the wall and cliff face rip apart and explode outward into a million shards of stone that tear a hole through the swarm. We leap through and shift into phoenix form, swirling to catch the wind whipping through the gorge, and soar up towards the open sky. The swarm whirls in confusion as hundreds of the insects fall from their wounds and smash against the sharp rocks below or plunge into the churning waves. It moves like a massive black waterspout, turning and writhing in the air, then recollects itself and shoots after us with incredible speed.

Tyler points the way, and we fly knowing that if we slow down even just a little, we'll all be bug food.

5

JACKSON

I'm dreaming again. My body might be out cold but of course my mind isn't. The feed comes on, and a blurry image fills the screen.

"So you're leaving, then?"

Rachyl's voice.

"Monday. Signed a three-year contract. I just wanted to say goodbye in person."

God. This night.

Slowly, it all comes into focus.

We're in the empty parking lot by the supermarket, the one we always go to to smoke cigarettes and drink stolen booze. She's standing in front of me, arms folded over her chest, staring at me with that hard look she uses when she's trying not to cry. Same look she's used since all the way back in junior high.

"Great," says Rachyl. "Well, goodbye then."

"Dude," I protest. "Why are you being like this? You've always said I should follow that greater calling, and I'm doing it."

"By joining the fucking army? That's what your dad wants you to do."

"That's what I want to do," I say firmly, feeling heated. "I want to help people."

"Whatever, you just want to shoot guns."

I smirk. "A little."

Rachyl sighs and for a moment her eyes go soft in a way I'm not used to seeing. It's the same look she had on the night when she admitted her feelings for me. The night I had to crush my best friend's heart.

"You had to choose the farthest possible thing from me, huh?" she says. "You know, I actually believed we'd always stick by each other."

"That's not why at all, Rachyl," I snap. "We're not in high school anymore. Everyone else is moving on with their lives, and I sure as hell can't stick around here. Look, just because I'm gonna be gone for a while doesn't mean we aren't still friends."

"Yeah, okay."

"It's true, though."

She's silent for a while, and then she turns away and jumps up onto the concrete base of a nearby light pole. She flips her headphones over her ears from around her neck and reaches into her hoodie where her CD player is.

"Rachyl," I protest.

"Shut up."

I hear the tinny sound of the headphones get louder. She bows her head.

I'm trying to play cool and unaffected, like I'm doing this because of some higher calling and not because I'm a fucking pathetic coward.

The music fades. She pulls the headphones off, then hangs from the light pole with one arm like she's in some old musical. She has her back to me; I can't see her face.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"So this isn't because I called you gay?" she says.

"Jesus fuck, Rachyl. I told you, just because I'm not into you that way doesn't mean I'm..." The words catch in my throat.

She turns around and looks straight at me, waiting for me to finish. I cringe. It feels like chewing on glass.

"...I'm fuckin' gay."

"It was an honest question. Not an accusation."

"God dammit," I mutter.

"So you're not running away?"

"No!" I blurt. "A three-year contract. It's not like I'm shipping off to fuckin' Mars or something. I'll be back, okay?"

Crunch, crunch. Shards in my throat. I'm a piece of shit coward that knows full well I have no intent of coming back.

Rachyl hops down from the lamp and comes up to me. She's giving me that hard look again. "Alright," she says, finally. "Well, goodbye, then. Nice knowin' ya."

Then she turns and starts to walk away.

"Seriously? So that's it?" I call after her.

She stops, and for a moment I expect her to absolutely drag me. But she just turns around, a sweet smile on her face and a shimmer in her eyes, and pulls off her headphones. She thrusts them and the old CD player into my hands.

"Here. Something to remember me by."

I stare at the Sony DISCMAN. She's had the thing since I met her, before it was cool to be into '90s tech. All the kids used to make fun of her for using it instead of the latest iPod.

"You're not giving this to me," I call after her.

"Take it, asshole! You'll be bored as shit there, I'm sure."

"I have a fucking smart phone!"

She's at the edge of the parking lot, at the rim of white light from the overhead lamps. She stops and spins around.

"Jackson!" she shouts. "I hope you'll be brave enough to tell the truth someday, before it's too late."

And then she's gone.

Rachyl's departing words thump the inside of my head like a hammer. I try to open my eyes, but even the darkness of the brig adds to my pounding headache. The 'ol ass-whooping hangover. As usual, it's not my first rodeo, but I can't remember the last time I've had it this bad. My face is throbbing and hot, especially my right cheek and eye, and I know they must be swollen as hell. My hands are clamped to the wall

behind me, and I only have a few inches of movement. The taste of blood lingers in my mouth, and it stings like a motherfucker when I lick my lips.

Son of a bitch...

I have no idea where Dustin is. The cat sniper—I've learned that her name is Sylla—had us separated after we were caught, and I can only guess he's taken the same beating. It's a fucking horrible feeling to know your actions have led to someone else getting hurt, especially someone depending on you to keep them safe. Yes, Dustin is a grown man who didn't ask for my protection, but I can't help but feel responsible for his safety.

I've spectacularly fucked everything up. Seems like I'm always fucking everything up.

My mind drifts, trying to escape this killer headache by way of distraction, but nothing but bad memories are coming up. And just like an addict getting a little taste of their poison, it's impossible not to dive deep once that dark door is opened.

The rattle of distant gunfire sounds like a snare drum over the rap intro of In the End. I've listened to this old Linkin Park album more times than I can count, and yet I haven't gotten sick of it. The trench is cold and damp, dug hastily at the edge of the forest by the opposing force and held by them until our unit had cleared the area in our push to retake the nearby town a few days ago. We're waiting for instructions to come in, and it's been a few hours. Not much to do but sit. Most of the guys are on their phones, the glow of their screens lighting their faces in the darkness. Clarke is stretched out on the bare soil beside me, hands folded over his chest as he snores softly.

The familiar smell of a Chesterfield cigarette drifts over me, and I feel my heart pick up its pace a little. Finally, he's back. I was starting to get a little worried. McScott

grips my shoulder as he drops onto the space on my left. I glance up at him and pull down my headphones. He exhales a cloud of smoke and jabs two fingers and his cigarette towards Clarke.

"Bloke could kip through a bloody earthquake." He leans in and whispers to me in a low voice. "How much did he drink?"

"No fucking idea," I reply. I don't tell him that Clarke managed to convince me to join him in sharing yet another bottle of magically procured liquor.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

McScott shakes his head and sighs. "I just spoke with Neal. It's looking like we might be stuck here for the long haul, at least until the others arrive."

I just nod. I'm happy to get this news, though I won't say so out loud—or even to myself. Spending time with McScott is... It's fun. I like it. And if we have nowhere to go, then that means more time to kill with him. We've been talking a lot. He hardly shares around Clarke, but when we're alone, he talks. It makes me feel good. I even told him a little about my parents—Dad, mostly. We have similar fathers, both obsessed with making sure their son turned out 'right'. The difference is that his dad was ex-army. Mine just wished he was.

He offers me a drag off his cigarette, and I take it even though I have a vape pen. As I pull the smoke into my mouth, a pesky intrusive thought flutters right on past the defensive gates set up in my head.

Is this what he tastes like?

"Where's it all end for you, Bird?" he asks later, flicking away the spent cigarette. "A hole in the ground?"

I shrug. Such a blunt and out-of-nowhere question like that isn't unusual for McScott, so it doesn't faze me. "Not exactly my plan."

"Onto the next battlefield if you make it out of this one, then?"

"I don't exactly have much to go back to. Life makes more sense out here."

"I hear you. You get on with the work and no one gives a fuck who you are or what you were back home."

"Exactly," I say.

I realize McScott is looking at me, and when I meet his eyes, the corner of his mouth raises with the slightest uptick. I smile back. I don't know why my heart is beating so hard. I guess it's because I'm not used to seeing him smile.

You know why, you sick bastard. Cut that shit out. You ain't like that, you hear me?

The voice in my head berates me with all the words drilled into my head since I was young.

Clarke begins to snore loudly.

"Bloody hell," McScott mutters, then stands up.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"Getting away from that racket." He pauses and glances back at me. "I know a spot right at the edge of the forest. Secluded, no one can see it from here."

"Yeah? Maybe I'll come with."

He nods, then in a low voice says, "Give it five minutes before you follow."

He disappears into the darkness. The pulse of my blood hammers in my ears as I sit there, so loud it drowns out the sound of Clarke's snoring. I tell myself I'm going to stay right where I am, that nothing good will come of this, but when the final minute ticks by, I get to my feet and go after him.

At the time, had I known what McScott's invitation meant? I'd always maintained ignorance, because after all, if I had known then I'd have no excuse for the way I'd reacted. But isn't it possible for a man's mind to split in two directions? To act in a way he didn't intend just because of... What? Self-sabotage?

Curiosity?

Maybe that was it. Morbid curiosity, to see if what I was thinking was true. It didn't mean I had any intention of following through. It definitely didn't mean I wanted it to happen.

The wood planking around me creaks as I feel the ship banking slightly, tilting me forward. The chains pull taut and the cuffs dig into my bruised wrists. I lurch to the side and spread my knees out to steady myself. We're speeding up. The rhythmic thump from the phoenix furnace comes faster like a nervous heartbeat, and I hear muffled shouts through the opposing wall.

I strain against the shackles, turning my body back and forth in an effort to find some weakness in the chain, some way I might be able to slip out, even if it means breaking my fucking hands.

I'm suddenly slammed into the wall as the ship jolts violently from some kind of impact. It's not turbulence. Did we hit something? Or did something hit us?

More shouts from outside, followed by the thud of boots and paws on the floor above me. Another hard jolt, and a loud bang from outside on the hull. My stomach lurches. The ship is turning hard, like they've slammed it into one hell of a U-turn, or something is pushing us into a spin. Then the floor tilts like a rollercoaster car ticking up for the drop, and I fall against the wall again. All I can see are dim shapes in the darkness as everything not tied down slides across the room towards me.

"Oh, fuck!!"

A large crate flies at me like the grill of a semi-truck, and just before I'm turned into a Jackson pancake, the ship rocks again, throwing the crate into the wall a dick's width away from my head. Then I hear something tapping on the opposite side of the wood behind me, like giant fingernails drumming it. Suddenly, a spear of blinding sunlight shoots into the room from a hole punched through the wall. Then another, and another, and then I'm thrown across the room as the wall comes apart, flooding the space with searing light. I'm upside down and I can't see. Everything is bleached white. My hands are still shackled tight, though the chain has ripped free from the shattered plank it was nailed into. Wind roars through the room along with the sound of a million chainsaws roaring away.

My head is ringing. If I wasn't concussed before I sure as fuck am now. I force my eyes open. The hole in the ship's wall just looks like a huge spotlight pointed at my face, and bizarre shapes flicker in front of it like shadow puppets in a movie theater. And a weird smell, like fried electronics.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

As my eyes come into focus, so do the dark shapes.

Oh god, what the fuck is that?!

A monster the size of a pig, like a cross between the worst parts of a lobster and a termite, with six segmented legs, dark orbs for eyes, buzzing wings and a thick exoskeleton covered with spines and bristling hairs.

It scuttles into the room, immediately followed by four others along the ceiling, their antennae waving as their heads bobble inquisitively back and forth. Outside, there are hundreds of them flying around the ship, like mosquitos coming in to feed. A cold chill goes through my body as the insect moves towards me, clicking its mandibles and shaking its head. It moves like a machine without any emotion or thought, just impulses. I try to right myself, but freeze in place, my legs hanging stupidly in the air over my head. Seeing the monster upside down makes it look even more grotesque, like a hallucination from a nightmare.

My eyes are watering from the ozone stench radiating from its body, and as it leans closer its antennae whip across my face like a riding crop. Well, shit. Out of all the possible ways I imagined dying, getting eaten by a giant bug was not on the list.

It spreads its mandibles, revealing a disgusting, slimy maw. Then, there's a loud crunch and a green flash, and I'm suddenly covered in tingling goo. There's a huge chunk missing from the bug, and through it I see the silhouette of a man standing in the opening of the side of the ship. The other bugs turn to attack him, but he dispatches them quickly with blasts of energy from the staff held in his hands.

My savior steps out of the glare, his golden hair pouring to the side as he tilts his head to look at me. Airos's shit-eating grin is both the most infuriating and the most wonderful thing I've ever seen. I'm thrilled to see him. Ihatethat I'm so thrilled to see him.

"Are you planning on staying like that, or...?"

"My hands are tied up, asshole," I bark. "Maybe you could fuckin' help me?"

With a laugh, Airos gets me upright. Then his expression goes stark serious as he looks me over. "Gods," he says. "What did they do to you?"

He reaches up to touch my battered cheek and I pull away.

"I'm good. There are more important things we need to deal with, like these damn handcuffs. Can you get them off me?"

"Turn around."

I feel him grip the center of the shackles, pulling me closer to him.

"How did you find me?" I ask.

"Not without trouble," he replies.

"No shit."

Suddenly, a huge shining bird swoops up to the hole in the hull. It quickly shrinks as it lands, transforming into a man. It's Kalistratos and Tyler.

"Good, you've found him!" Kalistratos exclaims. "Let's go, while our new friends are

distracted."

"Wait," I say. "We can't. There's?—"

But before I'm able to tell him about Dustin, the bugs swarm the hull with such force that I nearly lose my balance and slam my face into the wall. As they pour into the room, Airos blows the door open with his magic and forces me out. We all run as a tidal wave of bugs crashes into the hallway after us, scurrying along the walls and ricocheting off each other like manic, out of control drones.

"There goes our easy escape," Kalistratos yells.

The passageway opens up, and I realize that we're now in the lower level of the engine room. I look up to where the walkway and the phoenix furnace are, and out of shock at what I see I come to a halt.

The ceiling, the walkway, the furnace, all of it is a shimmering black mass of insects. They're pouring into the doors and holes punched through the walls, clambering to reach the very center. They must be drawn to the engine—the phoenix power.

"No time to gawk," Airos says, and he grabs me by the elbow and pulls me along with him.

The bugs behind us divert their pursuit and go for the engine too. We exit the engine room into a hold filled with coils of rope and racks of clay pots. Two guards rush in from the far entrance, but they ignore us and run past as more of the bugs chase after them. We take cover behind rope thick as my wrist coiled into a tall pile, and watch as the wolf men flee into the engine room. Their screams are quickly covered by the buzz of wings.

"Dammit, Airos, just blow a hole in the side and get us out of here," Kalistratos says.

"We can't leave," I say. "The other omega is here on this ship."

All three of them turn and look at me.

"Seriously?" Tyler says. "You're sure it's them?"

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I give him a look, then trace the outline of my pregnant stomach. "Unless there's a bunch of other preggo guys from Earth, I'm pretty damn sure it's them."

"Valid."

"Do you know where they are?" Airos asks me.

"No." I point at my swollen face. "I tried to bust us out of here. Didn't work."

The ship shudders, and suddenly I have that uneasy feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when you're on a plane that's changing altitude a little too quickly.

"This thing's going down," Tyler says.

"Then we find the escape flyer, as planned," says Airos. "That's where we'll find him." He turns to me to explain. "These large flyers typically have a smaller transport vessel aboard."

"The buzzer," I say. "Yeah, they have one. We couldn't find it."

"Follow me," he says.

"First, would you please get these damn cuffs off me?"

Airos grips the shackles again, and I'm alarmed by the sudden bloom of heat through the metal.

"Be still," he warns, gripping my forearm with his other hand. "I wouldn't want to take your hands off with them."

"You fuckin' better not, or else I'm gonna make you shake my dick for me every time I go for a piss."

My face flushes. Why the hell did I just say that? It's a joke I would've made easily to any of my army buddies, but saying it to Airos immediately feels weird. And to add to my embarrassment, Airos doesn't say a word in response. He just lets it hang in the air with the sound of the buzzing insects and the dying ship.

"That's a vivid goddamn image," Tyler says with a laugh.

Pop.

The shackles fall from my wrists.

"Hm, too bad," Airos says. "That would've been very interesting."

"Let's go," I groan.

With Airos taking point, we weave quickly through the underbelly of the ship, cutting through crew quarters where rows of empty hammocks hang at an off-kilter angle from huge ceiling beams. Anything not tied down has become a projectile we have to bound over or dodge, like a crazy obstacle course of death. The noise from the bugs is now louder than the ship, and the sound of their march bangs through the floor above us like a million hammers. The route we're taking is almost the exact same as the one Dustin had given me before, except one level down. That's why we hadn't been able to find the buzzer craft—we were on the wrong floor.

A section of the wall to our left suddenly shatters as a dozen mandibles punch

through it, chewing up the thick planking as easily as a wood chipper churns through a softwood spruce. The bugs pour in, blocking our path with their numbers as they swarm towards the engine room. A lantern is knocked from the wall, exploding across the floor in a circle of flaming oil, and the bugs go wild to avoid it, but their wings act like bellows that quickly spreads the fire to the ceiling. Some of the bugs turn to advance on us, aggressively shaking their wings and snapping their mandibles. This is their territory now.

Airos holds his staff in front of him and hurls a bolt at the bugs, shattering one of their shells and splattering the wall with acrid blood. Immediately, another takes its place. I duck my head in reflex as I feel a bullet whizz past my ear—except it's not a bullet, it's a stone from Tyler's sling, and it smashes into the bug's eye. Instinct has me grabbing for my rifle, but of course I have nothing. Except...

I reach out with my hand, concentrating hard to find the small rock burrowed deep inside the dead bug's innards.

There.

I take it, and with a rapid jerk of my arm, send it careening back and forth through the air in front of us. It whips through shell after shell like a silent, bug-seeking missile, until my concentration wavers and I lose my grasp on the stone as it gets stuck somewhere deep inside one of them. Ten bugs seize up and go haywire, purple goo spurting from the tiny holes in their shells. They collapse, and the way is open.

"Fuck!" Airos says.

"Yeah, you're welcome?—"

He cuts me off when he grabs my arm and pulls me after him through black smoke and dying bugs, and that's when I realize the swarm has changed its attention from

the engine room. Now, they're all coming after us.

Phoenix powers, you dumbass! That's what they're after!

"Dammit, I'm sorry!" I shout.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Just run faster!" Kalistratos yells from the back.

I don't need to look to know we're on the verge of being swallowed by the swarm. Their noise is all around us, as deafening as standing on a jet tarmac without ear protection. Then, my feet fail to meet the ground as the world tilts violently forward, throwing me into Airos's back. We're sliding fast along a floor that's quickly become almost vertical. He locks his arm around me, pulling me close as we careen towards the end of a long passageway, fighting in vain to trim our speed. Then we blow through the doorway, and the floor gives out beneath us. Airos manages to snag onto a railing, and we dangle there in open space with me hanging from his waist. I watch Kalistratos and Tyler sail past us into the room, and they both catch onto a rope stretched taut between a crossbeam and the bow of a small vessel hanging like a pendulum over an open gateway.

The buzzer.

Wolf guards clamber up out of the buzzer to the bow with knives clamped in their jaws. Below them, their commander Sylla is perched on the edge of the helm with her bow clutched at the ready in one hand. Below her, I catch a glimpse of Dustin being pulled into the hold by two guards.

The torrent of bugs explodes out of the doorway like water from a sluice gate. They swirl around before dispersing in every direction, some on fire, and they shoot past us and ricochet around, spreading the flames through the hangar bay.

"Tyler, six o'clock low!" I shout.

Tyler looks down and sees the cat aiming her bow at them. They're completely exposed on the rope and there's nowhere for them to go except to slide down to the buzzer. Sylla has a clear shot, but she's not taking it. She can't risk hitting Tyler.

Tyler has the same realization and starts to make his way down the rope. "Cover us!" he shouts.

"I'm somewhat preoccupied!" Airos shouts back.

"Hold on," I grunt.

Hand over hand, I scale up his body, using the ridges of his muscles like handholds on a rock face. The man is strong as fuck, unexpectedly so. I have my legs wrapped around his chest, and I shimmy myself up to reach for a place to grab hold of. It feels like I'm climbing with a full rucksack strapped to my front—the size of my stomach is making getting leverage even harder. A visceral roar explodes from my throat as I make the final stretch, and it's echoed by one from Airos right into my dick. I'm straddling his goddamn face, with my legs hooked over his shoulders.

Finally, I reach the railing with both hands and haul myself up. Freed from my weight, Airos quickly pulls himself up and hurls an energy bolt at Sylla. She dodges and immediately shoots her drawn arrow at us, but it clips the wing of a passing insect and careens harmlessly to the side. Tyler and Kalistratos are halfway down to the buzzer now, but the guards have their knives dug into the rope and the fibers are coming apart fast.

The fire is spreading fast through the bay, and more of the burning insects shoot out from the doorway like tracer rounds from a smoking barrel. One of them impacts the side of the buzzer, scattering flames across its hull. The buzzer's back end then slowly begins to rise as a new pulsing fills the air. Its engine is coming on, and the insects immediately respond. So does Sylla. With terrifying speed and a cold disregard for

the guards, she ignites the tip of an arrow off the nearby flames and shoots at the split in the rope, slashing through the side of one of the guard's hands and setting the rope on fire. With a pained howl, he loses his balance on the bow. I watch as he falls from the buzzer, his body spinning as it collides with a passing bug, and drops away. We're a thousand feet above what looks like an ocean of yellow sand and orange rock—and we're losing altitude fast.

The rope snaps, freeing the buzzer. It plunges out of the bay before righting itself with a mechanical whir. From her perch, Sylla sneers up at Tyler and Kalistratos before jumping down and retreating into the hold. The craft launches forward with unexpected speed and disappears from view.

Tyler and Kalistratos leap from the severed rope, dropping into free fall. I shout in startled alarm, watching them plummet. Then Kalistratos bursts into his phoenix form, his transformation a streak of bronze and gold against the smoke-filled air. He swoops to catch Tyler on his back, and they streak away, pursued by a surge of the frenzied insects.

A massive section of the ceiling caves in, and we're nearly obliterated by the debris. Flames lick across the exposed framework as the airship continues its death spiral toward the ground below.

Airos's eyes meet mine, sharp and assessing. "Think you can hold on?"

"Yeah, I think I can handle a little bird ride," I say.

"Excellent," he says, the corner of his mouth quirking up. "Because I've never actually carried anyone in phoenix form before. But it's a good day for a first time."

Before I can reply, he transforms, wings spreading wide, and suddenly I'm scrambling to grab hold of feathers burning with an otherworldly energy that hums

against my palms. It's like I'm touching a live current that buzzes through my nerves without burning me. It's one of the weirdest sensations I've ever felt. It could almost be painful, but at the same time it also feels strangely good. I pull myself closer, fighting the overwhelming reflex to let go, willing myself to adjust and let it in.

And then my stomach drops as we plunge into the open air. I let out a scream that tears from my throat—starting as terror but transforming into something I haven't felt since my first firefight, a raw, primal howl of fear and balls-to-the-wall exhilaration. Pure fucking adrenaline. Spread around us is a vast desert, with rolling sand dunes interspersed with islands of rock, some flat mesas and others rising high into the air like skyscrapers. Airos dives and swoops, and I get my first good look at the airship as he puts it behind us.

The vessel is flat bottomed and shaped kind of like a fish, with an upswept tail-like stern and a pointed prow painted with two wolf eyes and a mouth of grinning fangs. The entire starboard side is on fire, and insects fall from it like bits of smoking charcoal. It's nearly vertical in the air, and it feels like watching a sinking ship underwater plummeting to the sea bed. Then, like an invisible wire snapping, the ship's steady descent turns into a free-fall plummet. No more juice. It smashes into the desert in a giant plume of flame, smoke and dust. I salute the wreck with my middle finger.

Ahead, the insect cloud whirls around Tyler and Kalistratos like angry bees. Tyler manages to pick off one or two with his sling, but there are dozens of them, and Kalistratos has to do some Top Gun shit to shake them off. The buzzer is getting away.

"We must draw them off together," Airos says, his voice rising through his body and vibrating against my chest. "My power alone won't be enough to tempt those monsters."

"What do I have to do?" I ask.

"Follow my lead."

Airos's feathers flash like a gold leaf mirror hit by a glancing beam of hot sunlight, and that buzzing energy surges across my body with the same push-pull strike of a heartbeat. Below, the sand swirls into a rising dust devil that follows after Airos's wake.

It's just dirt. I've done this before.

Of course, throwing stones and tipping pots is a whole different ballgame from something this big, but there's no time for me to second guess myself.

I call back to when I'd first arrived in this world, to the hours I'd spent practicing building mannequins out of mud and making them move, and engage that muscle memory.

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

It's one fuck-ton of dirt.

But then I'm able to feel Airos's power there too, and mine joins with his, combining to work together to move our target. The synchronization is instantaneous and powerful, and the only thing I can compare it to is the way it felt when working with my squad to clear a room. Normally, that kind of cohesion comes through months of practice, drilling again and again, working to build trust and shared understanding. What I'm feeling right now is all intuition, all feel, like a dance that we've known forever. How? Andwhy?

The cloud of sand has formed behind us like a massive flag, waving and glimmering in the sunlight. The swarm takes the bait, dispersing and reforming in a dark line coming straight for us.

Airos veers sharply and heads straight for a group of rock spires. Soon, I can't see the others anymore. They're behind us now, obscured by the thick sand cloud. We fly low and fast, but the insects have already pierced the cloud and are gaining on us. Goddamn, they're relentless.

It's getting harder and harder to keep a hold of the sand. My powers just aren't strong enough, and my stamina is burning out faster than a candle in a wind tunnel. Airos is weakening too.

"I hope you have a plan!" I shout. "Because I've got about five seconds of this left!"

"Save it! Let go!" he says. "I'm going to need your help to move those rocks!"

"Oh shit..."

This motherfucker wants to bring down one of those spires?

The sand cloud begins to disperse and drop away as I let go, but before Airos fully releases, he surges his power and squeezes the cloud between two invisible palms. In the blink of an eye, it crushes into a ball that splatters half the pursuing swarm into a black and purple mist.

"Nice one!" I yell, tugging his feathers.

Airos doesn't reply, and I can immediately feel how costly pulling that move was to his energy. He's barely keeping us aloft. We're only gonna get one shot to make this work—it's either success or we're gonna be cooked.

We enter the spire field. Airos weaves through the pillars of rock with such speed and agility it seems like a head-on collision is inevitable.

"Don't close your eyes," he says. "I need you ready."

"Oh, my eyes are wide fuckin' open, Airos," I reply.

I'm not missing a damn thing on this ride. Not even if it's us getting splattered against a rock wall.

The bugs tail his maneuvers with exacting precision, latched on to the trail of phoenix energy he's exhausting to keep them interested. He makes a hard turn, swooping close to a spiky outcropping from one of the spires, and it clips a few of the bugs, sending them into a death spiral. He tries the move again, but this time fails. The bugs are too fast, or they've caught on to his tactics. Or maybe he's slowing down.

"Here we go," he says.

We shoot up, swirling around the tallest spire until we break past its peak into the open air, then corkscrew around, cutting past the bugs to pull into a sharp dive. I cling to Airos's back with my entire body. The muscles in my hands and forearms burn as I fight to maintain my grip on the roots of his feathers, which are rough and abrade my palms. I push my hips forward, squeezing as tightly as I can with my thighs in a desperate battle to keep myself from being plucked off by the g-forces.

"Now!" Airos commands, and I feel another surge of power. I immediately know what he's trying to do. I can see it in my head, and I join with him and grasp the top of the spire and pull with every bit of ability that I can summon.

I feel the rock shatter under our control. I feel it fall in an avalanche of massive boulders raining down above us. And then I feel something inside of me snap, like I've just laid my hands on a live power line. Airos pulls up hard just a few feet from hitting the ground, and the last thing I see as my strength gives out is the mountain of falling rock crushing the last of the swarm beneath it.

My grip weakens, and the warmth of his feathered body disappears as I fall away.

6

AIROS

Beneath the stars, seeing this vast expanse of sand and rock feels like looking out at the sea from what used to be my favorite perch on the tip of the helm of the thunder god's great statue at Tassos. The dunes rise and fall like waves frozen in time and bring me back to the island that had once been my home. It doesn't matter how far away I go, whether in time or steps taken—even after almost twenty years since I fled its soil, that place continues to keep me as a prisoner.

I expect I'll never make peace with what happened there. And perhaps I don't deserve to.

I've made camp not far from where we went down, where the warm breeze occasionally carries the scent of the phoenix hunter insects crushed into a paste beneath their rocky tomb. What little energy I maintained after the battle I'm using to care for Jackson. He lies on his cloak, which I've spread out across the ground like a blanket, his head cushioned by my travel satchel. His breath is steady and even. Apart from a few new scrapes and the nasty bruises left by his captors, he's not badly injured, just depleted of energy. He should return soon.

But what had happened up there with him? I'd asked Jackson to lend me his assistance in defeating the insects and had received something beyond expectation. For that brief moment it was as though we were submerged together in a shared spring of being, where our phoenix powers merged together and revealed something I'm struggling to comprehend. I saw possibilities of knowledge impossible to put into words. I felt memories of things I'd never done, and seen places I'd never been—a different realm, a different life and more. It was a glimpse of Jackson's core, and the raw determination and the deep-seated fears driving him forward. A conflict over something I wasn't able to clearly see or understand.

Jackson groans softly, and his head slowly shakes back and forth like he's trying to escape from something in his unconsciousness. I dab the sweat from his knotted brow with a scrap of cloth. Suddenly, his eyes snap open and he catches my wrist with his hand. He looks at me with wide, confused eyes. Slowly, they focus. He's back.

"Airos?" he murmurs weakly. "What are you doing?"

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Unfortunately, I have no medicines with me, barely any water, and hardly a sliver of energy to conjure any sort of magic... So, this is the most I can do for you. I've never seen someone sweat so much."

"What's going on? What happened?"

"You've been out for several hours. Five, I think."

His other hand urgently goes to his pregnant stomach.

"Don't worry," I tell him. "Your baby is safe. So are you."

His grip on my wrist loosens. "Jesus," he says with a relieved breath.

I smile, thinking of Kalistratos. "Yes. Cheesus."

I help him sit upright. He sniffs the air and crinkles his nose. "God, I can still smell those things."

"There's a puddle of them right over there."

Jackson leans over to look, then sighs again and pushes his hand through his dark hair. "Everyone else?"

I shake my head. "They haven't come."

"Five hours, and they haven't come? That's not good." He tries to stand, but he can't

get himself off the ground. He's too weak. "Shit..."

"Neither you nor I have the ability to do very much, not until our powers have recovered."

"And how do we do that?"

I've forgotten how little he knows about himself. Phoenix energy is most quickly regenerated through the heat of desire, but I'll keep that to myself.

"Rest. Food," I say, uncorking the water skin. "We don't have much, and only a few mouthfuls to drink. There's no point in worrying about the others while we're in this condition. Before we went for you, we agreed that if we became separated, we would find each other in Kausos."

"How about, uh, Al'Phaer? That name mean anything to you?"

A tingle goes through my body as my mind conjures up a memory of Al'Phaerean merchant flyers moored in the waters off the coast of Tassos, and the dread I'd felt seeing them arriving from the distant horizon.

"Why do you know of this place?"

"That's where they were taking us on that ship."

It feels as though a winter's chill has descended on my thoughts, numbing them into stasis.

"They want him in Al'Phaer." The voice echoes out of my memories and repeats over and over in my head until it becomes a screeching roar, more deafening than the buzz of the hunter insects' obsidian wings.

"Hey. Airos." Jackson claps his hands in front of my face. "You good?"

"Yeah," I say, but my voice comes out unsteady and thin, and Jackson looks at me questioningly. "Apologies. I'm exhausted."

"You haven't been awake this entire time, have you?"

"Someone had to keep an eye on you," I say with a weary smile. I wave my hand. "Don't worry, I'm fine."

"Like hell you are. You rest. I'll keep watch."

With a grunt he pushes himself to his feet and stretches his arms high above his head. The front of his tunic, stretched tight against his very large pregnant stomach, pulls back to reveal a crescent sliver of bare skin. I shift my gaze to the ground, then shuffle over to take his place on the spread-out cloak.

"Hey," he says. "While I was out, did I...say anything?"

"Such as?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"I don't know. Sleep talk."

"Hm. Ah, I think I remember something." I try to imitate his voice. "Oh, Airos! I'msohappy you rescued me!"

His face scrunches into a scowl as he skulks away. "Go the fuck to sleep."

I laugh and lay down, and as I allow myself to finally relax, the heavy weight of sleep quickly drifts over me. Then, just before it takes me, I hear him say, "Thanks. Thanks for coming after me."

The sun beats down on us like a molten hammer as we slowly move over the waves of sand. Jackson walks in front of me, head bowed and covered by the hood of his cloak, his steps a steady and even march.

"This brings me back," he says. "Al-Tanf, in Syria."

"I don't know of this region."

"Of course not. I mean, shit, even if you were from Earth, you wouldn't know it unless you were deployed there."

"Deployed," I repeat, mulling over his usage of the word. "Ah, the campaign you took part in as a soldier."

"Yep. That's where I did my tour. After that, I went freelance. Volunteer mercenary."

"You fought without pay? I'd never offer my skills without a price."

"Some things are more valuable than money, I guess."

"I agree," I say, shaking the empty wine gourd hanging from my hip. "I'll always consider a refill as payment."

"So, that's all you're after? Money or drink?"

"Not at all. I want knowledge. Knowledge of all the details of this world. The money keeps me going. And the wine makes suffering through the lunacy of it all, bearable."

"I knew plenty who thought the same thing. That shit just numbs you. Makes you make mistakes."

Suddenly, an untethered memory flashes into my mind in scattered fragments. My surroundings change. I'm in a dark forest. And there's someone else with me, a man. He's so close I can smell him; his skin is anointed with a pungent smoky aroma and the musk of his sweat. I feel a smoldering flame of excitement and need, and then a deep, cold shame.

And then I'm back in the desert. I see two Jacksons in front of me, swirling around until they slowly become one. I jab my staff into the sand and keep myself from stumbling over.

Jackson stops walking and looks back. "You good?"

I point up at the sun.

He nods. "Are you sure we're headed the right way? Because it sure as hell looks like there's nothing but sand ahead."

"I saw a well while we were up in the sky. It's not far."

Jackson gives me a skeptical look. "How do I know you're not delusional?"

"Keep going. You'll see."

My eyes had not deceived me. As we come up to the top of a low dune, we see a solitary stone trough sitting in the middle of a rocky field just a short distance away, like an island in the middle of the ocean.

"Well, goddamn," Jackson says. "That's not a mirage."

"No, it isn't."

He turns to me with a wide grin, punches me on the shoulder and sprints giddily down the side of the dune. I smile too, taken by Jackson's sudden unreserved excitement. It's the same smile he'd given me when I'd appeared to rescue him off the flyer—bright as the day and as rare as...well, water in the desert. It's clear he's not an omega who shows his delight very often, and I can't help but feel happy to be treated to it twice.

"Don't", I tell myself. "Especially not him."

But as I watch him kicking sand everywhere as he bounds down the dune, it's difficult not to be taken by his giddiness. I bolt after him and quickly overtake him.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Yo, hell no!" he shouts. "Get your ass back here!"

He chases me across the sand and catches up just before we make it to the well. I can taste a change in the air—moisture, and saturated earth.

"That baby doesn't slow you down at all, does it, Jackson?" I say admiringly.

"Not much does, and you better learn that quick." He runs his hand across the rock slab laid over the top of the well. "This is insane. How is this just out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"These wells belong to the tribes of this land," I tell him, drawing on what I know about this region. "They rely on these to travel through the desert."

"Well, fuckin' thank you very much," Jackson says.

We push the slab aside and Jackson leans over the edge of the stone-lined pit, peering into its depths.

"There's water," he announces, the relief evident in his voice. "But it's too far down to reach. Is there a bucket around here?"

There is none, just four notches in the stone on each side of the trough.

"The nomads take the frame and pulley with them to prevent others from pilfering from their well. Stand back. Perhaps I can use what power I have left to lift some up."

"No, I've got this."

Before I can protest, Jackson begins untying his cloak and slipping his arms free of the garment he calls ashurrt. He pulls the garment, stained with sweat and dirt and the purple blood of the hunter insects, over his head with a grunt, and I find myself unable to look away.

His body tells a story more clearly than any words could. Bruised muscles sculpt his shoulders and arms, built from years of soldiering, and like myself, he has many scars—some narrow and precise, others jagged and angry—like a map of battles fought and survived. But what truly arrests my attention is the swell of his belly, smooth and round, stretching taut over the egg carried within. The contrast is striking—this warrior's body, honed for combat and endurance, now cradling new life. His pregnancy hasn't diminished his strength; if anything, it seems to have transformed it into something more profound. I've seen many beautiful things in my travels, but there's something uniquely captivating about this sight. The hard lines of a soldier's physique giving way to the soft, nurturing roundness of imminent parenthood. What a sacred sight.

Jackson notices my stare and immediately tenses, his eyes narrowing with suspicion and something else—uncertainty, perhaps. Self-consciousness. His hand moves instinctively to cover his belly.

"What are you looking at?" he asks.

"Nothing," I lie. "Just wondering if you need help."

"I'm fine," he mutters.

He turns away as he removes his belt, then fastens theshurrt, cloak and belt together in a long strand with the end tied to our open waterskin. He lowers it into the well,

careful to submerge only the bladder. I move forward and help him pull the makeshift rope back up, the pouch now heavy with water.

"You first," I say.

Jackson tips the mouth of the bladder to his lips and takes several slow, deep gulps. Water dribbles down the side of his chin and falls onto his collarbone. Then he pours a bit on his upturned face, hands me the skin and runs his wet fingers through his hair with a deep sigh of satisfaction and relief. I give him a mischievous little smirk before dousing my face and head.

"So much for me trying not to be wasteful," he says, laughing.

"There's a lot more down there," I say. "And trust me when I say, I need this."

"Fuck it, I'm not complaining." He thrusts his hand out. "Come on, give it."

Jackson copies me and turns the skin nearly upside down over his head, drenching himself.

He lets out a delighted whoop. "Hellyeah! That's what I'm talking about."

We refill both the skin and my empty wine gourd.

"Man," Jackson says. "Thank God for the guys who made this thing, and may they forgive us for helping ourselves to a little of it."

I crouch to stow the bulging waterskin into my pack as Jackson unties the makeshift rope and shakes out his tattered robe. He turns to slip the garment back over his head.

"I doubt they'll ever know we were here," I tell him as I fasten my pack shut.

"Airos..."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Assist me with the cover stone," I say.

"AIROS."

He hammers me on the shoulder blade with his fist. I turn around to see we've been silently ambushed by a group of six men mounted on sand gryphs—sleek creatures with a hawk-like head and a body similar to that of the desert lion. In each man's hand is a leather sling primed with a stone, and plenty of ammunition hanging in a pouch from his waist. Layers of rust and ochre-colored fabric cover their bodies from head to foot, and their faces are almost entirely hidden behind a cover save for their eyes, just visible between a gap in the fabric.

I step in front of Jackson and thrust the butt of my staff into the sand, readying what little strength I have to defend him.

7

JACKSON

"Maybe we can talk this through," I say in a low voice to Airos. "You know? Be diplomatic? We're not in a place to take these guys on."

He gives me a slow nod but doesn't relax from his defensive stance.

"We mean no harm," Airos says, voice steady. "We're travelers, seeking only water to survive our journey."

The lead rider speaks, but I have no idea what he says. It's just a bunch of guttural sounds that seem to roll from the back of the throat. His monster bird mount rocks beneath him, its razor-sharp beak opening slightly to reveal a purple tongue, and its tawny feathered mane transitions seamlessly at the shoulder into a fur coat that covers the rest of its body, down to its paws, which spread at the toe almost like a camel's foot. It's probably how they were able to creep up on us so silently.

"You can understand him, right?" I ask, but Airos shakes his head no.

The leader gestures toward the well, his voice rising in what sounds like accusation. The other riders murmur in agreement. One of them points at me and my wet hair, then at the dark saturated sand at the base of the well, and lets loose with an angry tirade as he waves his hand above his head.

"Yeah, definitely doesn't look like they're gonna forgive us for the splashy splashy," I mutter before bowing my head, trying to look as apologetic as possible.

The leader barks an order, and his men raise and twirl their slings, filling the quiet air with an eerie whistling noise. Airos moves even closer to me, shielding me with the entirety of his body so that my belly is pressed right up against the small of his back. Then he lifts his hand, and I feel him take command of what little power he has regenerated. Two plumes of sand explode up like geysers around the riders, ruining their slings and knocking three of them from their startled mounts.

But that's all Airos has in him. I catch him under his armpits as he falls to one knee, his hand clutching his staff for support.

"Get behind the well," he tells me.

"Hell no. You know I ain't hiding. I can fight."

"JACKSON," he snaps.

The look in his eyes and the fire in his voice makes my heart jump, and I find myself scampering around the well to take cover like he told me to. There's not a single man outside of a uniform with bars on the shoulders who can make me move like this, and yet he just did. I hate feeling like I can't take care of myself, but right now, as I stare at the back of this man who has put himself between my pregnant body and six men meant to harm me, something shifts inside of me, like an engine finally coughing to life after so many failed starts, that sudden roar when the fuel line clears and everything fires in perfect sequence.

I can't explain it. I don't understand it. I don't like this feeling. I don't like it at all. But I want more of it.

How the fuck does that make any sense?

The leader's beast screeches angrily as it rears and shakes sand from its fur and feathers, and he yanks its reins and wrestles it back under control. I brace myself for the attack—but instead, the man leaps from the saddle. The others also dismount or rise from where they've fallen. There's been a clear shift in the energy. They're acting cautiously now, waiting for the leader's command.

Suddenly, he drops to his knees in front of us and grumbles something that sounds like "shalkek."

The word echoes through the group as the others all do the same. Airos's shoulders relax, and he exhales a long, relieved breath as he leans against the edge of the well.

"This word I think I know," he says, glancing back at me. "I believe we're going to be fine... For now."

"Well, what the hell does it mean?"

"Fated."

The riders are adamant that we come with them, and we aren't really in a position to say no. According to Airos, the animals are called sand gryphs, and one of them is made available for us to ride.

"Just one?" I say, eyeing the creature warily. The beast stands taller than a horse, with its feathered head bobbing impatiently and golden eyes tracking our movements. "You expect both of us to ride on that thing? Together?"

The leader of the nomads makes a flowing gesture with his hand, pointing first to the sand gryph, then to Airos and me. His meaning is clear even through the language barrier.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I'm not exactly thrilled about playing damsel in distress. The thought of riding between Airos's legs for who knows how long makes my skin prickle with a heat that has nothing to do with the desert sun.

"I can walk." I mimic a walking motion with my fingers.

The leader cocks his head slightly, then repeats the flowing gesture with his hand as he says something to me. He's insisting I ride.

"We don't both need to?—"

"Jackson," Airos cuts me off with that same authoritative tone that had sent me scurrying for cover earlier. "Don't be stubborn. You're pregnant, we're both exhausted, and we don't know how far we're traveling."

I clench my jaw, hating that he's right. The nomads are watching this exchange with obvious interest, their eyes crinkling at the corners in what I'm guessing are hidden smiles beneath their face coverings, and suddenly I feel like this whole thing is being misconstrued in the wrong fucking way.

They think Airos and I are a goddamn couple!

"Fine," I growl. "But I'm not riding in front."

Airos raises an eyebrow. "It would be more comfortable and safer for you if?—"

"Behind. You."

We stare at each other for a long moment before Airos sighs and shakes his head. "As you wish."

He moves to the sand gryph and strokes its feathered neck before gripping the simple leather harness and swinging himself up onto its back with surprising ease. The creature huffs but accepts his weight, settling its powerful haunches in the sand. Airos extends his hand to me. I stare at it like it might bite. All the others have mounted, and they're watching me, waiting. I swallow my pride and grip Airos's forearm, letting him help haul me up. The sand gryph snorts at the added weight, and I scramble to find a secure position behind Airos, fighting to keep space between us.

It's a losing battle. The animal's back is narrower than it looks, and as soon as it stands to its full height, I slide forward against Airos's back, my swollen belly pressing awkwardly against him. A murmur goes around the group, like they're perplexed about why I would choose to put myself behind him. I'm embarrassed as hell, and pissed off about it. This shouldn't get to me, but it does.

The leader shouts a command, and the entire group surges forward in unison. Our mount lurches beneath us, and I grab Airos's waist instinctively to keep from sliding off. His body is firm and warm beneath my hands, and I immediately try to loosen my grip, but another dip in the beast's gait has me clutching him tighter.

As we make our way across the seemingly endless desert, following whatever invisible trail our guides can see, I try to focus on anything but the feeling of Airos's body against mine. The rhythmic swaying of the sand gryph's stride. The shifting colors of the sand as the sun begins its descent. The towers of rock rising like red-orange skyscrapers on the distant horizon, or the strange, gutturally melodic sound of the nomads as they call to each other over the whistling wind.

But my mind keeps circling back to something that's been lingering in my thoughts since the moment I'd regained consciousness after the battle with the bugs. Not a

dream. My dreams always feel like I'm witnessing them from afar. This felt more like I'd been jacked into someone else's memory and forced to live in it. Like wearing someone else's clothes that don't quite fit. I couldn't even say if I actually saw anything at all. It was more of a kaleidoscope of feelings and impressions; of an island and the ocean, of being home, then the whiplash of being overcome by the sharpest terror and deepest sadness I'd ever felt.

I somehow know that whatever these memories and feelings are, they have Airos's fingerprints all over them. I don't know how to ask. I don't even think I really want to know.

8

AIROS

The nomad convoy moves with impressive speed and coordination, their sand gryphs leaving barely a trace on the dunes as we travel. The fading daylight paints the landscape in deep oranges and purples, creating the illusion of crossing an endless, undulating sea.

"These sand gryphs are magnificent," I say, breaking the silence that has stretched between us. "I've always wanted to see one in person. Are you comfortable?"

"Fuckin' fantastic," Jackson replies. "Nothing like bouncing through a desert with my pregnant ass squished against your back."

"You're more than welcome to switch?—"

"Nope."

I shrug. "Suit yourself. Though I don't know why you care so much about how we're

seated."

"Yeah, me neither," he grumbles.

Ahead, the leader raises his hand, and the convoy slows. As we crest a particularly large dune, I see our destination spread below us like a shimmering mirage coming to life. Tents of various sizes are laid out in concentric circles around the largest one at the center, their fabric a patchwork of browns and deep reds that blend with the desert. Small figures move between the structures, and the distant sounds of voices and animal calls drift up to us along with the tantalizing aroma of roasted meat.

"Looks like we've arrived," I say.

Jackson leans slightly to the side to get a better view, his chest pressing against my back. "Whoa. What is this, Burning Man?"

"Well, no, that's roasted goat, I think," I tell him, sniffing the air. "I hope."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"What? No, no, no. I said Burning Man. Never mind. It's Earth shit."

"I'm not sure whether to be curious or concerned."

As we descend toward the encampment, people begin to notice our approach. Children point excitedly, and adults hurry toward the edge of the settlement. Our leader calls out in their language, his voice carrying strong and clear across the distance.

"We're about to become the main attraction," Jackson says.

The gryphs gently lower themselves, allowing us to dismount. A crowd has gathered to receive us, and we're quickly surrounded on all sides. They aren't at all shy about their curiosity. Hands pat and prod at us, and a few omegas have come to Jackson and are clearly interested in knowing about his pregnancy. At first, he's patient with them, but the moment someone touches his belly, he swats their hand and holds up a reprimanding finger.

"Hey," he snaps. "Uh-huh. No touch."

The crowd only seems to get bigger and more intense. It's difficult to read their intentions. They could easily become a mob if the wrong words are spoken. I quickly move closer to Jackson and hook my arm around his. I can't let us be separated. Then, the leader's voice rises up over the noise of the crowd, and from his string of words I once again hear *shalkek*. There's a gasp, and everyone takes a step back. He's telling everyone about us, accentuating every word with a hand gesture or arm movement, and ends his speech by picking up a palmful of dirt and tossing it into the air. The

group murmurs, and eyes turn back to us filled with awe. He speaks again, waving his hand above his head, and a pathway opens through the crowd. The leader motions for us to follow him.

Jackson's eyes constantly scan our surroundings. "So, have we figured out what exactly we're fated for? Because that can mean a lot of different things. We could be fated for human sacrifice."

"Burning men?" I suggest, partially joking.

We reach a large tent near the center of the settlement, and the leader pulls back the heavy fabric door and motions for us to enter. The inside is dimly lit by a few oil lamps and a hole at the pinnacle that lets in a shaft of waning sunlight. The air is spiced with incense drifting from an impression dug into the sand, and there's a small fire pit where a few embers glow softly.

"Wood is hard to come by," I tell Jackson. "Many of the desert tribes only use it in the most sacred of spaces."

"How do they do their cooking?" he asks.

"It's said that the sand gryph's excrement makes an excellent fuel."

"No shit?"

"Yes, shit."

Patterned carpets cover the ground in overlapping layers, and I recognize the common motifs of several nearby cities, including some that must've come from as far as Athenos. And on the far side of the room, almost invisible in the low light and haze of drifting smoke, is a robed figure seated on a plush cushion. As my eyes adjust

to the darkness, I see that it's a woman with a tattooed face and long hair wrapped up in a tight braid on the top of her head like a crown. The rider speaks from across the room to her, his voice measured and respectful. He's telling the same story he'd told the crowd, but without any of the bravado. She listens quietly to him, but her gaze is fixed on us the entire time. As he finishes, she motions with her hand, and we're brought to sit in front of her.

Up close, I see she's neither young nor elderly, but the experience and aura of a respected alpha matriarch are plainly written on the story of her face. Her eyes are sharp and inquisitive, but also troubled. Something has happened to her people. That's why we're here.

Looking over at Jackson, I get the sense that he also sees what I'm seeing. He sits straight, hands resting calmly in his lap, chin raised slightly with a confident yet respectful air. How fortunate it is that he is a Chosen omega.

"Azin tells me you doused yourselves with our water," the woman says to us. "Is it true?"

"You speak our tongue," I say, surprised.

"And you do not speak ours. I thought the priests of Gnosis were supposed to be clever." She sees the surprise on my face and smiles slightly. "Just arrogant, it seems. Yes, I know of Gnosis. I recognize your colors and your symbols. I am called Niah."

"Actually, I've studied twenty dialects of the western desert," I say defensively, then immediately wince at my own pretentiousness. "But not this one, obviously," I add with a self-deprecating smile. "I am Airos. This is Jackson. We did use your water, yes, but we were desperate. We only used what we needed."

"You splashed." Niah makes a gesture with her hands, mimicking splashing water

onto her head.

Jackson and I wince. "I apologize," I say. "We didn't mean to offend."

She lets us stew in our discomfort for a moment before speaking again to me. "Azin tells me you commanded the Uthur."

"I don't know this word."

She plunges her hand into a gap between the carpets and pours sand into a pile in front of her legs. "He says it followed your hand like an obedient servant. Does he speak the truth, priest?"

I hesitate. These are my Phoenikos abilities, and revealing them to a stranger is not something I'm accustomed to doing lightly. But I don't think I have a choice.

"He does," I confirm.

"Show me."

"I...can't."

"Then you are not Shalkek. You've defiled sacred water. You will be punished...with death."

"Whoa, whoa,whoa!" says Jackson. "Wait just a goddamn minute! It takes energy to command theUthur, and we're fresh out. Give us food and rest and we'd be happy to show you whatever you want."

Niah's eyes narrow. "Or, perhaps you and your mate are the darkness-bringers. Perhaps it is you who corrupt theShimat."

Another word I don't recognize.

Jackson recoils like he's just been slapped in the face with a rotten fish. "Yo, he and I aren'tmates. We're barely even friends."

I'm more offended than I would've expected to be. "Barely even friends?"

Niah watches us bicker with an unwavering gaze. She turns to Azin and begins to give him a command. My mind races for a solution, but each concludes in demise or terrible trouble. Even if we somehow are able to leave this place alive without a dozen riders pursuing us, we won't get very far on what we have left to sustain us. But then I feel a change in the air—a surge of power that I instantly recognize as Jackson's.

"Wait," I say to him. "Not with the baby. You haven't recovered?—"

The pile of sand begins to swirl around like a whirlpool. Jackson's face is trembling and his hands are squeezed into tight fists on his lap, and perspiration gathers across his forehead. The matriarch's body straightens when she sees the moving sand, and she moves herself away from it with the same kind of cautious reverence one might take to a snake crossing their path.

On the other side of the tent, the rider Azin gasps and drops to one knee. "Shalkek," he mutters. "Shalkek."

Then, Jackson's power vanishes from the air and the sand settles back into a lifeless cone. I quickly catch him as he wavers, and he slumps against my shoulder, his eyes drifting around in a dazed stupor.

Niah utters a command to Azin, who moves quickly across the room and fetches a large skin bulging with water. From it, he fills up a small clay pot with a reed spout, which he hands to me.

"Jackson, drink this," I say.

Supporting him with one arm, I hold the pot up so that he can drink from the spout, and slowly tilt it as he gulps down the water until it's drained.

"I'm good," Jackson says in a gravelly voice.

Niah signals to Azin to refill the pot, but Jackson refuses it with a shake of his head.

He pushes away from me and straightens his posture with clear difficulty. He turns to Niah. "There. Happy?"

"It is my turn to apologize," she says to us. "It was the only way I could be certain it is you who will cleanse theShimat."

Jackson's patience has vanished with his remaining energy. "Look, ma'am, I don't have the slightest clue about what the hell you're talking about, but we aren't gonna be able to do anything until we've had some food and a chance to rest. So can you help us, or not?"

A tense silence fills the tent as Niah fixes her unreadable gaze on Jackson.

"We will provide whatever is necessary to the honored Shalkek."

Both of us breathe a sigh of relief.

"Awesome," Jackson says with a grateful smile. He looks at me. "Problem solved."

Yes... But what have we just gotten ourselves into?

9

JACKSON

"Could you not have waited?" Airos says to me as we follow Niah and Azin through the camp.

"She said the punishment was death, bro," I mutter. "Somebody had to do something."

"I would've thought of a way out. It's not wise to allow your energy to deplete so thoroughly."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Yeah, okay, I got it." I feel like I've been hit with a killer hangover, and honestly, I'm doing everything I can to keep myself moving on my own two feet. I don't want Airos to help me. I'm not gonna perpetuate any more wrong ideas about us.

Though the evening air has cooled a lot with the sunset, I can still feel heat radiating off the ground beneath my sandals. We're led past a gryph pen secured by nothing but a length of rope laid in a circle on the sand. The animals aren't tied up—they sit free and watch us pass by, the firelight from nearby lanterns flashing across their pupils.

I smell food. It seems like the entire tribe has gathered in one area, and they're all seated in concentric rings around a wide pit filled with smoldering coals. As we approach, the chatter and laughter fade to silence and every pair of eyes turns to us. The weight of their collective gaze makes my skin tingle. Niah steps forward and addresses her people in their language, her voice carrying across the silent gathering. Behind her, Azin nods as he listens to her speech, and occasionally barks out a confirmation that draws murmurs and gasps from the crowd. There's a moment of silence so complete I can hear the crackle of the torches, and someone shouts something that sounds like a question. Niah's answer ends with the magic word that everyone seems to love—shalkek—and suddenly, the entire tribe erupts.

People leap to their feet, whooping and cheering. Someone somewhere starts playing a flute and a drum. Everyone is going absolutely crazy. It's like we've just brought home the gold.

"What have you told them?" Airos asks her.

"That you are the fated ones who will restore theShimatand save our people!"

Before either of us can get a word out, we're whisked to the edge of the fire pit and offered seats on cushions and small rugs. Men push away a layer of the coals to reveal something covered in charred clay in the middle of the fire pit. Somehow without burning themselves, they extract it and smack it stones. The clayshatters and releases a cloud of fragrant steam that immediately gets my mouth watering.

Oh my god. Barbecue.

Platters of hot flatbread, dipping sauces, rice, and what smells like caramelized onions are passed around and placed in front of us. Bowls are carefully filled with a milky-yellow liquid from leather skins and shared between people, but Airos and I are given bowls of clear water.

"What are the others drinking?" Airos asks.

"Fermented gryph milk," Niah tells him.

His eyes widen. "Please, I can't accept more of your sacred water. I'll take what everyone else is drinking."

"Shalkek must be given the honor of pure water," Niah insists, and then turns privately to me. "You especially must regain your strength." She then gives a command, and even more food is piled in front of me.

"We eat all of this and we're definitely on the hook for whatever they're expecting from us," I say to Airos, though it's already well on its way into my mouth.

"Eat first, think about it later," he concurs, tearing a piece of bread in half with his teeth.

I have no idea what the meat is, but it smells like lamb and is beyond tender from roasting in its own juices inside the clay shell. Honestly, it could very well be gryph meat and I wouldn't care. If there's one thing I know well, it's to always eat what's on your plate, and to get more if you can.

Following the example of the locals, I spread a bit of thick orange paste onto my bread and then use it to grab a big scoop of the steaming meat. Next to me, Airos looks like he's trying really hard to use restraint with his portions, but after seeing the way I'm eating, all attempts at keeping it civil go out the door. Both of us are going to fucking town on our food, shoveling fingerfuls of the succulent spiced meat into our mouths chased by chomps of bread and gulps of cool water. We both take a look at each other and all we can do is giggle. We're exhausted. We're a fucking mess. And even though we've managed to get ourselves into another predicament, we're alive.

The celebration continues into the night. Airos has managed to wrangle himself a bowl of the milk wine. The tribe's attention has moved to Azin and a group of men who are in the middle of performing some kind of play. It's becoming easier and easier for me to tell the difference between alphas and omegas. It's something I can feel by looking at someone, or even just hearing them speak. I find myself watching the omegas and how they are with the alphas. There are couples around, some pregnant, some with little children. I see the way they flirt, with playful secret caresses.

Back on Earth, I probably would've hated seeing that shit. It would've made me angry. I'd probably have wondered why they couldn't keep it to themselves. And though the discomfort isn't entirely absent now, it's everywhere I look. It's just the way things are here. Who cares if I take it all in?

So I do. I notice when some of them disappear from the crowd with their arms draped around each other and hands eagerly exploring beneath their robes. And then my imagination starts to follow these couples back to their tents. I can't help but think

about the things they're doing with each other. The alpha's mouth, moving across his omega's neck as his mate strips the robes from his body. The first taste of his bare skin, the first time witnessing his naked body. The omega's hand, wrapping tightly around his hard, exposed?—

No, fuck this. I amnotthinking about this. Intrusive thought, intrusive thought.

But there's something that I can't ignore—a heat spreading down into my groin and through my cock. Precome is already dripping out of my tip and soaking the front of my underwear. And then there's something else that has me fuckingshook.

Jesus, I'mwet. Like how a girl gets wet.

I keep the reaction off my face, but I'm panicking inside.

You're an omega. This must be what happens when omegas get turned on.

But I'mnotturned on. My body is just acting up like it always has, an intrusive response that doesn't mean shit.

It's okay to be curious.

I'm not curious. I'm not fucking gay, it's just that I've been cursed with this omega body. It doesn't mean anything about who I really am. This is just how my body works here.

You know the same thing would've happened on Earth. You know it because you've gone through it a million goddamn timesbefore. It's okay to be curious.

I force myself out of my head by imagining myself sealing the thoughts up behind a giant brick wall. It's a technique I've used since I was a kid. Seal away the bad stuff.

Everything that would get me in trouble.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Tell us what's going on here," Airos says to Niah. "What are the Shimat?"

"The Shimat live within the body of the Uthur. They are water spirits, and our people have always relied on their guidance. Our migrations follow their movements. Where they live, water will flow. But they have changed. The shadows grow within them. Now they lead only to poison and death."

"But the well where you found us?"

"It remains pure, for now. But even the great oasis beneath the eastern star has become putrid, a place we have relied on for generations to provide in times when the desert is dry. Dark water. Thick as blood."

"How do we fit into this?" I ask. "Why are we Shalkek?"

Her eyes flash with excitement. "I have seen it. An outsider omega and his mate, pregnant with light, able to move with the Uthur and drenched with the water of our last sacred well. Shalkek. Chosen by the Great Fire." She nods. "It is you."

This time, I'm able to keep my patience in check. "But the problem is?—"

"—Jackson and I are not mates," Airos finishes. "Like he said, we're barely even friends." He glances at me and I look away. Ah, shit. "The truth is, he and I are obligated to each other. We're on an urgent mission of our own."

"You seek to cleanse a great darkness," she says. "Our purposes are aligned."

Airos nods. "I don't know if we can help you. But I'm willing to try. Jackson?"

I don't need to think about it. These people need our help. "Yeah. One hundred percent."

To say I'm exhausted is an understatement. My endurance level is pretty damn high and I'm no stranger to sleep deprivation, but I don't know the last time I was this shattered. Azin walks ahead of us, humming and singing to himself. Airos is silent, and I know he's gotta be as tired as I am.

I know it's probably better for me to wait until the morning when I have more than a single brain cell operating to choose my words, but I just can't let it lie.

"Airos," I grunt. "What I said before about us not being friends and shit... I didn't mean it. I was just hangry. I needed to eat, you know? Sorry."

"Hangry..." Then the corner of his mouth curls into his usual easy smile. "I like this word." The man is good-looking. Can't deny that. Like a solid ten out of ten.

Shit. I'm delirious.

We've reached a group of small tents near the center of the encampment, but far enough from the fire pit that the sound of the still-ongoing celebrations is dulled to a low murmur. Azin lifts the fabric door of one of the tents and says something in his language, gesturing inside with his hand. Airos ducks his head to go inside.

"Goodnight," I tell him.

"Yes, goodnight," he says, looking back at me before disappearing inside.

I stand there waiting for Azin to show me to mine, but he just stares at me with the

door flap still held open. He says something to me, nodding with his head and repeating the same gesture with his hand. My brain is moving like one of those kid's toys on the verge of running out of batteries, and it takes me a second to decide that I'm misunderstanding something here.

"One of those?" I ask, pointing to the other tents. "We go?"

He replies with a grunt, this time shaking his head and adamantly pointing into the tent.

"Seriously?"

Azin has a smile on his face, and if it weren't for our celebrity status here, I probably would've taken this as some kind of prank. But no, he's being polite. He expects us to share.

Alright. No problem.

I duck my head inside and see Airos in the process of stripping down to his skivvies. Or at least, that's what it looks like. He's seated in front of an oil lamp and he has his robe pulled down to his waist. His side and shoulder blade are streaked with thin scars, some of them overlapping each other like hashmarks. I only look for a second, but my impression is that they're old, and have been on his body for many years.

"Looks like we're both in here," I grumble.

There's not much inside. The floor is mostly bare sand, with just one section covered in a small spread of carpet, with a wool blanket and a couple of cushions.

"No beds?" I comment, sitting on the sand. "Weird."

He holds his shoulder and moves his arm in a slow circle, testing its mobility. "There is a bed."

Page 30

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"What? You mean that?" I point at the carpet. "Yeah. Bed. Singular. There's two of us."

Airos slips his arm back through the sleeve and reties the robe, then fluffs one of the cushions and stretches out onto the carpet. He closes his eyes and folds his hands over his stomach.

I stare at the empty space beside him, frozen like a goddamn deer about to be pulverized by a semitruck.

"Is there a problem?" Airos says.

"Yeah. I talk in my sleep. Loud. I'll take the dirt."

I lie down on the sand.

"Take the bed," Airos says, sitting up. "It will get cold."

"I'll be fine. You take it. Trust me, this soft-ass sand is like a memory foam mattress compared to some of the places I've slept before."

"Jackson—"

"Going to sleep now, Airos."

I roll over onto my side to face the wall and dig my shoulder into the sand. I don't need to be worried over.

The tent goes dark as Airos puts out the lamp, and from the sound of his breathing I know he's already passed out.

Lucky bastard.

Airos

The nights after such a thorough exhaustion are always filled with an endless vortex of dreams and nightmares. The regeneration of Phoenikos energy is like a paddle thrust into the sediment of the mind, churning it up into a choking cloud that can hardly be navigated, and once again, I experience a memory that doesn't belong to me.

I'm in that dark forest, following after a man with my heart racing with expectation for what I'm to find once we reach our destination. I'm excited, but also afraid. I feel like I shouldn't be doing this, and that this place we're going is somewhere terrible, but I can't help myself. I need to follow. The curiosity is stronger than any caution I bear, and loud enough to drown out the warnings and furious reprimands that might normally keep me safe.

The world I see exists in both familiarity and the complete unknown, where flashes of recognition come like shooting stars across a pitch-black sky.

Malyi Sorych. The International Vanguard. Drone attack. Chesterfield cigarettes.

Words with no meaning emerge from the haze and attach themselves to other memories and create tiny patches of understanding, like tiles in a mosaic too big for me to comprehend.

McScott. That's this man's name.

We've walked to a blackened stone-like ruin sitting amongst fallen and shattered trees. The word tank emerges, and I at once understand what this war beast is.

It belonged to the enemy. Destroyed by RPG a week prior, while we were still in Zhovnipol. The thought belongs to Jackson. I hear it spoken with his voice.

The memory shifts suddenly, as though crossing a fissure in time. The man called McScott has his hands on me. He grabs the sides of my vest and pulls me in. I smell the Chesterfield cigarettes on his beard as it scratches my face, and then the press of his lips against mine. Warm. Inviting. So wrong.

Flash. Another shift. The trees blur past as I run, and I hear the man's voice shouting behind me. My heart—Jackson's heart—is beating as fast as a hummingbird's wings. Fear and anger are just as sharp as the excitement, and both emotions overtake the dream like a flash flood, mixing into a brackish wash of humiliation and shame.

Then, through the trees comes a flash of fire and a crash like thunder. I feel the ground disappear from beneath my feet as an invisible fist throws me backward and sends the world spinning around me like a wagon wheel.

I wake with a startled gasp. All of the feelings of the dream memory are still racing through my veins, and for a moment I don't know where or who I am. Slowly, it all starts to settle. I see the ceiling of the tent rippling with the breeze, the light of the desert moon shining through gaps in the weave. And my erect cock strains hard against my robes, so sensitive that just a gentle movement might tip me over the edge. The feeling of need still thrumming from the dream memory is almost unbearable, beyond anything I've ever known before.

I lay still and focus on my breath to calm myself and try to make sense of what I've just seen and experienced. So many different emotions, each one of them so overwhelming, and all of them conflicting. I know with certainty this was Jackson's

real memory. Somehow, through the melding of our powers, it's been impressed onto my mind. His reality is even more confusing than I could've expected, not just in the physical features of Earth, but in the very experience that he is living.

In his world, the mating of two men is so unusual it has been designated by a name, like a clan of sorts. Tyler explained this to me when we'd first found Jackson.Gay. That was the word. He'd told us Jackson claimed not to belong to this clan. He'd been adamant about it.

The entire concept was difficult to understand. I'd attempted to adapt my point of view and force my mind into a place where I could imagine a world where one's most natural desires are considered abnormal, but I could more easily comprehend being a fish.

Now, I question whether Jackson had told the truth.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

Maybe he had. Maybe it was what he believed. I just don't understand why.

My body finally relaxes. I need to walk and to settle my thoughts. I turn over and see Jackson huddled into a ball on the other side of the tent, shivering on the bare sand. I sigh.

"Truly stubborn."

I lay the blanket over him, then step outside.

10

JACKSON

They want him in Al'Phaer.

They want him in Al'Phaer.

They want him in Al'Phaer.

A voice repeats in my head like a warning alarm, inescapable, firing at me at every turn. I'm frozen stiff, trapped and unable to move, and though I know this is a dream I can't force myself awake.

I'd seen this exact same thing last night while unconscious. For a moment, I see an ocean and shoreline. The world around me is so big. Everything changes. I'm hiding inside a dark space, a cave, or a hollow in a tree. Somewhere only a child could fit.

I am a child. Then I see two men approaching, silhouetted in shadow, with a group following behind them. I recognize them—or at least the me in the dream recognizes them, and a space that once had been filled with love for these people is filled with a terrible, all encompassing, inescapable fear.

Now I'm running. I know they're coming after me, but I can't let them catch me. I won't go with them.

Why are they doing this?!

The world blurs past me as I speed down the rocky mountain trail, hot tears streaking my face.

Why?! Why?! Why?!

I scream the question in my head.

Why did I have to be born like this? I didn't ask to be a Phoenix!!

Then, I wake up.

There's a blanket draped over me. I'm lying on my side with my knees squeezed against my belly, and my body is trembling from both cold and the feelings still lingering from my bizarre nightmare.

I guess I should be thankful for a break from my usual fucked up recurring dreams, but what the hell? It was like being in someone else's head. None of it belonged to me, and yet it all felt so familiar. Maybe I'm going crazy. This world is making me crazy after all.

I roll over. The tent is filled with cool dawn light, and Airos is gone from the carpet

bed. Do I just shimmy over there and thaw myself out?

No. Fuck that. I've made my bed and I'm gonna lie in it, even if it means freezing my ass off.

I grab the blanket and move to fling it off, but I'm stopped by a startling scent drifting off the scratchy wool threads.

His scent.

I pull the lip of the blanket up closer to my face and draw in a hesitant breath.

Jesus...

My head is swimming, like I've just taken a hit of the world's most potent drug. It's intoxicating in a way that makes my throat go dry and my stomach tighten. I should be disgusted. We've been out in the desert without a shower for almost two days now. But this raw scent has me by the throat. And I find myself taking another deep breath, letting it fill my lungs completely.

What the actual fuck is happening to me? It's like some primal part of my brain has decided to override every other function. My fingers curl into the fabric, gripping it tight as I force myself to pull it away.

I sit up. Everything is sore, especially my thighs and ass from the gryph ride across the desert. I'm going to be covered in one giant bruise, if I'm not careful about it.

Suddenly, the tent flap pulls back and Airos peers inside. My first reaction is to throw the blanket aside, even though I've stopped sniffing it like a fucking pervert.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"How do you feel?" he asks.

"Like I've been stuck in a washing machine on max spin cycle."

"Not a good thing, I take it?"

"Not unless you like being tenderized. But it's nothing new for me. I haven't had a good night's sleep in a long ass time." I stand and stretch my stiff muscles. "You look like shit, too."

"It takes a great deal to recover phoenix energy," he says with a tired smile. "Come on. We have work to do."

I leave the tent, and we walk through the camp together. Almost immediately, a group of curious children follows behind us like a parade of ants. Airos pauses dramatically, and with a flourish of his hand, he conjures a waterfall of green sparks that bounce across the sand around their feet like hopping crickets. The kids run around in circles, stomping at the sparks, shrieking and laughing.

"You like kids?" I ask.

"Of course. Do people in your world not like children?"

"Some don't. I guess what I meant was, do you want kids? In my world, some people don't."

"The gay clan? The men who cannot bear children?" he asks.

The question catches me so off guard I almost choke on my own breath. "What? No. It's a simple question, Airos. I've never wanted kids. I was one hundred percent sure I'd never have them." Then I quickly add, "Because I'd be a shit dad. And the world doesn't need any more shit dads. But I guess it doesn't matter what I think; this is happening whether I want it or not."

Airos is silent with thought. The kids trailing behind and waiting for him to do something else begin to lose interest and flit away.

"If you're destined to have a child, then you will. Desire is independent from fate. If the Gods deem it my destiny, then I'll have to accept it, regardless of what I want."

"Kinda sounds like you don't want kids," I observe.

"It's a dark world, Jackson, especially for our kind. None should have to suffer the way we do." Then he grins at me. "It's a challenge enough to keep you alive."

"Glad I could make your life difficult," I say.

The daylight has brought a different atmosphere to the encampment, and I now can clearly see the predicament these people are in. My army training has sharpened my eyes to certain signs of trouble, to spot the differences between normal poverty and a crisis point. I get the sense that these people, normally nomadic and on the move, have stayed in this location for much longer than it can sustain them. I notice how the water is being distributed—carefully measured rations poured into smaller vessels rather than freely shared. One omega is washing a child's face with just droplets from his fingertips rather than a cloth. And at the edge of the camp are several unmistakable grave mounds.

I suddenly feel even shittier about last night. They shouldn't have sacrificed so much of their resources just for us. Just because they believe we're somehow going to save

them.

Airos seems to read my thoughts. "Our coming brought these people hope. To not partake in what they offered would've spoiled that morale, and been taken as a bad omen."

"Yeah, but Jesus, they even feed the gryphs better than they do themselves. These people aren't just stuck here, they're dying here. See those?" I gesture subtly toward the edge of camp. "Those graves are fresh, but the mounds are small. They're conserving energy by not digging deep. And see how they're placed? In a line rather than the usual circular pattern I noticed at other sites we passed. They're expecting more."

"Yes... I surveyed the camp this morning and tried to gather more information about what we're up against."

"And?"

"These Shimat sound like they may be a type of elemental, specifically a water elemental. I've encountered variants of them before. Wind elementals are common in the skies north of Athenos. They're capricious and fickle creatures, and that's on a good day. If the Shimat have been soured by Umbrios, then it's no wonder they're wreaking havoc. And if we're to find them, we need a shaman. Apparently, they're the only ones who the Shimat will interact with."

"Wait, you think what's happening here is related to our business?"

"Yes," he says.

"That's a pretty huge coincidence."

"Umbrios and Aethereos are the lords of light and dark, of death and rebirth. Their cycle exerts influence over every part of this realm. When Lord Aethereos was exiled to your world centuries ago, the balance shifted towards the rebirth of his twin."

"So you're telling me that every bad thing happening in Circeana is because of Umbrios?"

"No, not everything. But as Umbrios gains more power, the world grows darker as a natural response to his presence. Ancient and forgotten monsters creep out from where they've long been dormant. There will always be dark and light, but the scales can be dramatically offset. And because Lord Aethereos was overcome in your world?—"

"Things are gonna get even more fucked," I finish. "Awesome. So how does Umbrios get reborn?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"I wish I could tell you. Much of this I've only learned recently. So much of our lore has been lost. Alyx was attempting to track down more knowledge, but I don't know whether he's even still alive."

Right, Alyx. The mysterious third alpha, the guy who lives as a cat.

"And if we can't stop this whole cycle from happening... What then? The end of the world?"

"It will certainly become a place where light and love only exist as mild whispers beneath an overwhelming thunderstorm of darkness and suffering."

"Sounds a hell of a lot like my life back home," I say.

"Then I'm very happy you're here," he replies with a smile so genuine it speeds up my pulse, making me want to punch something—preferably myself.

Goddammit.

The walls of Niah's tent are pulled up, turning the structure into a canopy. Two gryphs lay in the shade nearby, preening and nuzzling each other as they wait for their riders. Inside, Azin and another man, an omega, are sitting and speaking to Niah. As Airos and I approach, she gestures for us to come and join them.

Both Azin and the other man are dressed in matching burgundy cloaks ornately stitched with hundreds of translucent aqua beads made of some kind of crystal or glass, and their faces are painted with fine linework, like a henna tattoo. It feels like

we've just walked in on a wedding ceremony.

Azin's eyes light up when he sees us coming, and he hurries over to us, chattering and gesturing like an overly excited orchestra conductor. Then he throws his arms around our shoulders and walks us into the tent. The omega drops to his knees and bows his head to the floor as we approach.

"Uhh, hey?" I say.

"I think that's his mate," Airos says.

"This is Onar, the omega of Azin," Niah says. "Together, they are shaman."

Onar gets to his feet and Azin moves to stand with him, his gregarious demeanor suddenly becoming serious, almost solemn. They link arms, clasp hands, and touch their foreheads with two fingers of their free hand, then bow to us, all in one completely synchronized movement. The words they speak are also in perfect unison, almost like a chant.

"They say they are honored to bring the Shalkek before the Shimat," Niah translates.

The two gryphs are saddled and readied with water and supplies.

"Any chance we can get an extra one of these guys?" I ask.

"For what purpose?" Niah asks.

"Well, it'd make the ride a little easier, not having to share. I'm probably extra heavy, you know? I think he'd appreciate it, right boy?" I pat the gryph's haunch and it nuzzles my hand with its beak.

"They are strong," says Niah. "They can carry many times their weight. Do not be concerned."

Azin and Onar have already climbed on top of their ride, with Onar seated in the front between Azin's protective thighs. Azin whistles a short command, and the gryph chirps in response, rising to its full height with a graceful motion. The creature shakes its magnificent head, rustling its neck feathers to dislodge the clinging sand, its golden eyes alert and ready for the journey ahead.

Airos climbs into the saddle. "I'm afraid you're stuck with me, Jackson," he says. "Besides, do you really want them to give up more of their precious water just because it excites you too much to ride with me?"

"The fuck? That is not it, bro. Not it at all."

"Okay." He gestures to the open space in front of him.

Son of a bitch. Why would he even say that?

I grab hold of the saddle and haul myself up into place between his legs. I can feel the shape of his body against my back and my ass.

Shit.

But riding behind him again is out of the question. I'm still sore from being smashed against him like a drunk stripper on a telephone pole. I try to inch myself forward as much as I can to get some space between us, but the gryph's powerful haunches flex beneath me as it rises, and despite my efforts to latch on tight with my knees, gravity betrays me and throws me back against his chest. I quickly grab the reins before he can reach around me to take them.

"I've got it," I say.

"Go ahead," he replies.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

Niah is watching all of this go down with an unreadable expression on her face. It doesn't matter what she's thinking, I'm feeling judged. It's wild that I can go head first into a firefight without flinching, and yet this shit is what always gets my flight response going.

Every. Single. Time.

And if it wasn't for the baby inside of me, I probably would throw myself right out of this saddle.

Airos is almost right on the money, and I hate that he can see it. It's not that I am excited by riding with him. I'm afraid of the possibility that I could be.

Then, Azin whistles again and our gryph responds, falling in behind them. Holding the reins is useless—we're just in for the ride here—but I keep them tightly gripped in my hands. I'm not willing to give up control, even if it's just the illusion of it.

11

AIROS

“Back off, man,” Jackson snaps.

"I'm not doing anything," I say.

"You're in my space."

"Perhaps you haven't noticed, but we only have so much saddle between us."

Our gryph trots quickly, following the tail of the lead. Jackson keeps trying to pull himself away from me, but the rocking of the animal's gait makes it impossible to keep my hips away from him. It's simply part of riding such a beast, but Jackson is choosing to make it an ordeal.

"You must think I'm enjoying this," I say. "Believe me, I'm not."

"You better not be," he says. "Shit!"

"Oh, I'm not. If you're concerned that I might have some kind of attraction to you, then you're dead wrong. You simply being an omega is not enough for me to want you."

"Good, I'm glad we clarified that. And it sure as shit doesn't excite me to ride with you, so get that thought out of your head."

"Then please, explain this aversion you have to being close to me."

"There's nothing to explain."

"There's no one judging you, Jackson. Maybe in your world, but not here. You're an honorable person."

"Bro, you barely even know me," he says. "You have no idea what kind of shit I've done."

"I promise you, I've done worse," I reply.

"Look, Airos, it's all good. I just like my space, alright? That's it."

I would believe it, if it weren't for the scattered haze of memories I now possess.

"But that isn't true, is it?" I know that I'm treading into dangerous territory, but I only want to understand. "What happened in that forest, Jackson?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" he says with a thin voice.

"Dreams that reveal a place I've never been to, and a life I've never lived. A memory that doesn't belong to me. Something happened when our powers united over the desert."

The name McScott rests on my tongue like a feather on a fingertip, ready to be plucked away by the wind. But Jackson thrusts his fist up to shoulder height, with his palm facing forward and knuckles white with tension.

"Don't."

"Who is he?" I ask.

It all happens in a blink of an eye, and I hardly even see it coming. Jackson twists around, and in one smooth motion grabs the front of my robe and manages to yank me out of the saddle. I flip over and land on my back on the sand. The sun is clipped behind his head like a gleaming crown, and the look of rage I expect to see is instead one of betrayal.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I've gone too far. Once again, I've forgotten how to stop. Gods damn my incessant need for answers.

Azin and Onar turn their gryph and come back.

"I'm fine," I call, smiling and waving to show them I'm unhurt. "Completely my fault."

"Please. Careful," Onar replies, the words uncertain and thick with his throaty accent.

"Oh, shit," Jackson says. "You can speak our language too?"

Onar makes a gesture with his hand, as though he's trying to show us a grain of sand on his palm. He points to his ear and smiles. "I listen. Learn. Now, speak."

"Wow," says Jackson. "He's a freakin' genius."

"We are close," Onar says, pointing off to the distance. "Go."

With an amused grin, Azin shouts a cheerful comment before marching their gryph forward, the unmistakable tone of good-natured mockery in his voice. Even without understanding his words, I can tell he's ribbing us about our little 'accident.' I get up and dust myself off, and when I reach to pull myself back up onto the gryph, Jackson snaps the reins and takes off without me.

"Yes, I suppose I deserve that," I say, mostly to myself. "Not a problem, I'll walk."

The terrain becomes a mixture of crumbling rock and dried mud, with wide, snake-like channels carved into the earth where water once flowed. We come over a low rise and stop at its edge. Below is a wide and shallow valley, where the scattered remains of what may have once been a lush oasis cling to parched soilcracked into a thousand puzzle pieces beneath the relentless desert sun.

Many years ago, I studied how to open my senses to the energy of a place from a set of ancient manuscripts gathered by Gnosis priests from a forgotten sanctuary deep in the Arganon mountain range. I was never very good at it. But now, even with just my middling comprehension of that knowledge, I can sense something profoundly wrong about the valley before us. It's stagnant, like bad air trapped inside burning lungs.

Onar and Azin dismount, and Jackson follows their lead. I kick a pebble out from my sandal and drop to a crouch, clutching my staff for support.

"There certainly is something here," I say.

Jackson stands beside me and surveys the area. "Negative sighting. What am I supposed to be looking for?"

"I don't know."

Azin transfers a portion of water from the big pouch hanging around his gryph's neck to a smaller bladder that he tucks into his sash, and then starts his way down the steep rocky slope to the valley floor.

"We go," Onar says to us, gesturing. "Careful. Slow."

Both of them are now deathly serious. At first, it feels as though we're tracking a prize or game, moving carefully in order not to be detected. But then, I see the look on Azin's face is not the excited confidence of a hunter tracking prey. No, we're

trying to avoid becoming the hunted.

It's impossible not to disturb the loose rocks and sand, and little streams clatter down the slope and make little puffs of dust as they reach the floor. Azin and Onar pause to listen and watch. Jackson crouches low, and he moves his head back and forth in constant alertness. And when the two move again, he immediately follows, holding a perfect distance from them. I'm seeing Jackson the soldier again, and am reminded that the definition of a soldier in the realm he comes from is nothing like any of the common undisciplined, inelegant foot soldiers I've met in my travels through Circeana. And he's an omega. Pregnant.

How can I not react as an alpha and a warrior? It's alluring. I can't deny it.

We come to the edge of the valley floor. Lying amongst the desiccated remains of the thorny plants stretching out from cracks in the sand are bleached white bones—the skeletons of animals.

"Jesus," Jackson whispers. "This place is a graveyard."

"They search for water," Onar explains quietly.

"Then they all died of thirst," Jackson mutters.

"Not all," he replies darkly.

I'm curious to know what knowledge the debris might share with me, and take a step forward to inspect the bones. Azin grabs my arm and pulls me back.

"No!" Onar says. "Do not cross."

I then realize that there is a clear boundary where the bright sand ends and the

scattered bone field begins, and I feel like a fool for not noticing it.

"We not go further. Here is safe. Shimat far away. You look." He gestures to his eye, then points out to the distance.

"Of course," I say.

"Yeah. Look, don't touch, Airos," needles Jackson. "We're here for intel, remember?"

Azin and Onar step together across the boundary and walk a few paces forward. Jackson and I wait tensely for some reaction to their advance, but nothing happens save for a startled insect flitting out from its hiding place beneath the creaking branches of a dried-up bush.

The two then start moving rocks and other debris away from the area in a silent, practiced cohesion that reminds me of the way two craftsmen go about their work in perfect unison, each performing their actions without getting in each other's way. The ritual continues until a half-moon space has been cleared and is completely free of any obstructions. Every piece moved has been placed carefully along the perimeter of this space.

"What's with the housekeeping?" Jackson whispers to me.

"A spell circle," I tell him. "See how they've placed the bones and branches pointing outward? They act as a conduit of power. Now, they will call to the elementals."

I've seen a similar type of ritual performed by Palossian farmers calling for relief from a long drought. Next will be an offering, then the summoning, which typically is done with a set of a verse, song, or spoken prayer.

Onar uncorks the water bladder and gives it to Azin, who draws in a mouthful.

"They'll both drink," I predict. "And then offer some to the soil."

But instead of passing the bladder back to Onar, Azin re-corks it, sets it down between them. Onar lowers onto both knees and tilts his head to the sky and opens his mouth wide, like he's hoping to catch falling rain on his tongue. Azin bends over and takes his omega's face in his hands.

Jackson leans forward. "Is he gonna?—"

Azin releases a stream of water from his lips into Onar's mouth, as measured and steady as though he were pouring it from a sacred pitcher. The water splashes across Onar's tongue and drips down his neck, darkening the hem of his cloak. They hold each other's gaze with such intensity that it gives this strange ritual a heightened intimacy. I feel like it's something I shouldn't be watching. I glance over at Jackson. His face is flushed pink, and I can see he wants to look away, but can't.

It's oddly cute.

Onar turns from Azin and sprays the water from his mouth across the boundary in one quick motion. He rises up to stand side by side with Azin, and the two look out across the wasted valley and clasp their hands. They wait silently, as if listening for some signal to come to them. Then, in sudden unison they slam their right feet into the dirt with a heavy thud, sending up a puff of dust.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

They begin to move about the half-moon clearing in synchronized step, stomping and carving the earth to form a complex beat, rising like a quickening pulse. They stay connected at all times, a part of their body always touching the other's. They twirl around each other, clasping hands and reversing their direction with such intensity and speed that I'm certain they are about to collide and crumple into a pile in the

rising dust cloud. But they don't. Each movement is complimented and matched in an incredible give and take, so precise it's as though they share the same mind.

Their music is then joined by an almost imperceptible reply. It's the energy in the valley. I can feel it trembling beneath my feet, like a deep, groaning yawn.

"Oh," Jackson says, looking around in alarm. "Alright, I think I get what you mean by something being here."

"You feel it?"

"Uh-huh. It ain't happy."

A dark shimmer forms across the distant sand, like the ripples on a sun-soaked rock. It begins to look like a low-lying black smoke pooling up from different places in the ground, and it spreads across the valley in thick, billowing puddles. Azin and Onar slow their movements, and Azin drops to his knees in the center of the half-moon boundary and thrusts his hands into the soil. Onar circles around him with precise footwork, occasionally reaching out to touch Azin's body.

"I think Azin is acting as a medium to the Shimat," I say. "He's allowing Onar to communicate with them."

"Communicate what?" Jackson asks.

Suddenly, the ground jolts with enough force to throw me forward a step, and the distant smoke erupts like a geyser. Bits of rubble and stray bones fly into the sky, and black liquid spurts out from the crater like blood from a wound. Jackson and I recoil in alarm as more of the fountains spew out across the valley and meld together in a great syrupy mass that shimmers like a rainbow along its black surface. The aura that emanates from the Shimat is oppressive, and the effect on my spirit is immediate. I

can sense its source. It's somewhere deep under the ground, deep in the heart of the elemental. Like a rotting corpse at the bottom of the well, this dark seed has poisoned the Shimat and is spreading through everything it touches.

It slithers over the earth and thrusts a tendril high into the air. It does this again and again, like water bouncing when being hit by rocks. It's seeking the source of its disruption.

"Fuckin' hell, I don't like that," Jackson says.

Neither do I.

The Shimat's arms swivel suddenly, and the blob surges in our direction. Azin and Onar quickly begin their dance again, this time with more force behind their moves, and the Shimat stops. It quivers slowly, as though dazed.

There's a strain in their movements, and sweat drips from both their faces. They add complexity to the dance, stomping forward towards the edge of the boundary, as though trying to drive the Shimat backward. It retreats for a moment, flattening into a docile puddle, but then seems to break free from their pacifying hold. It erupts into chaos again and then bursts towards us in leaps and dives that make it look like some kind of horrible black fish.

Azin and Onar dance with a new ferocity, but nothing they're doing is slowing it down.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Jackson..." I say, reaching for his arm. Our eyes are held firm on the creature tearing through the valley.

"Y-yeah, time to go," he says, turning for the hill.

"Onar!" I shout. "Azin!"

I don't want to interrupt their concentration, but this is not looking good. Jackson pauses at the base of the hill and looks back at me. In that moment of panic, what I see written plainly on his face is a furious unwillingness to leave without me.

"Go!" I shout. "I'm behind you."

"Come on, Airos, goddammit!" Jackson bellows.

Then, Azin trips over Onar's leg and falls flat onto the ground. The Shimat reacts, surging out with an even greater ferocity. Onar grabs Azin and hauls him back to his feet. The two position themselves to start again, but how can they possibly stop this monster now?

They can't. There's no chance.

"RUN!" Jackson and I yell.

As the four of us scramble out of the valley, I reach to summon the small amount of phoenix power I've recovered. All I need to do is give them enough time to get away. But as we haul ourselves across the top of the hill, the Shimat reaches the half-moon

boundary and explodes against it like a wave hitting an invisible wall. Its form breaks, and it sloshes backward as nothing but a lifeless inky water pooled on the surface of the desert.

It remains incapacitated for only a moment. The cursed elemental gathers itself and immediately surges against the boundary again. It edges the wall with its body until much of the valley is covered with the black liquid.

"It's not stopping," Jackson says. "Why the hell isn't it stopping?"

We watch as it manages to break through and slowly push across the line in the sand, encroaching into the territory that was supposed to be safe.

"It has grown," Onar says. He's white with shock.

As I watch the foul shape bubbling its way up the valley wall towards us, my thoughts immediately return to the phoenix hunter insects.

We've made a terrible mistake.

"Can you stop it?" I ask Onar. "Can you try again?"

Onar speaks to Azin in a flurry of hushed, urgent tones, and their faces grow increasingly grave as they gesture toward the advancing black mass. Azin shakes his head vehemently, but Onar grips his arm, his expression pleading. After a moment of tense debate, they both turn back to us.

"Our dance... not enough," Onar says, his voice strained. "Shimat too angry now. Break free."

Jackson rubs his knuckles into his forehead. "So it's gonna keep going? There's gotta

be something we can do."

"We have to return to the camp," I urge. "We have to warn them."

"No!" Onar says. "We cannot!"

Onar translates for Azin. Both of them look reluctant to leave.

"This isn't your fault," I tell them. "It's because of us. We shouldn't have come here."

"No," says Onar. "Shalkek can cleanse Shimat."

"I don't know if we can," I say.

All I can see in my mind is the encampment destroyed by the Shimat. Everything torn apart and left scattered across the desert, along with the bones of those swallowed by the darkness. An unfamiliar panic is rising through my body. I feel it eroding me from the inside out, overtaking my senses. I can't have another village on my hands. Not again.

Jackson's fingertips squeezing into my forearm drag me back from the brink.

"We have to try something," he says to me, his eyes blazing with fire.

"We can't do anything without power," I say. "And we're far too weak right now. By the time we recover, the Shimat will have overrun the village."

Page 38

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Alright, then talk with me," he says, firmly holding my gaze with his. "If we can form a game plan, then maybe we can find a way through this thing."

My calm is returning.

"We go back to the camp," I say. "We speak to Niah, have her move the tribe somewhere safe. It's the first thing we must do."

"Okay. I trust you."

I give him a look. It feels odd to hear him say such a thing to me.

"What?" he says, and scowls at me before turning away. "Just fuckin' saying, man. You've got that big brain."

Jackson and I turn for the gryphs, but Onar and Azin don't move.

"Onar, we have to go," I urge.

"Our presence keeps Shimat here," he says. "We cannot leave."

They're still working their magic on the elemental. Slowing it down.

"Jackson and I will return to the camp," I say. "We'll figure out a way to stop it."

Onar nods. "Shalkek will succeed. I know it."

I mount the gryph, and Jackson, instead of climbing onto the second, grabs my saddle and hauls himself up in front of me.

"If they need to get out of here, they're gonna need that gryph," he says. "So let's go."

"Are you going to be okay with me riding behind you?" I ask him. "You trust me that much?"

"Learn when to stop talking," he mutters to me, and then turns to Azin and Onar.

"We're gonna be back and stop this thing. I promise you guys. Whatever it takes."

Jackson

The encampment is solemnly quiet when we arrive near sundown, and the excitement at our return quickly turns to confusion and fear when they realize Onar and Azin are not with us. Niah emerges from the crowd and gathers their attention with a commanding shout, then says some words that bring a fragile calm. I can see in their faces they're close to panic. Omegas are clutching their children close, and the alphas are speaking tensely amongst themselves.

Niah grabs us and pulls us into her tent.

"The Shimat have lost control," she says. "I have felt it."

"Azin and Onar stayed to hold them back," says Airos. "You have to leave. Take everyone and move on from this place."

"We cannot," she replies. "There is nowhere for us to go. Not without water."

"The last well?"

"You see how many of us there are."

"You have to try," I say. "At least you can get some distance?—"

"No. There is no distance we can go where the Shimat will not overcome us, not before my people die under the bright eye." She points up to the sky, to where the sun will be at high noon.

"Niah," Airos pleads, "I can't do anything until my power has fully recovered, and that could take days, even with plenty of sustenance and water. If you start now, at least there's a chance you'll be far away before this thing reaches here."

"We will not move," she says.

"Then people are going to die."

"Goddammit," I snap. "I don't fucking get it. Why not mitigate your losses and at least give us a chance? Azin and Onar are out there right now, and they're going to be the first to go."

Page 39

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I promised them we would come back to help them. There has to be something we can do, but I don't know what. It feels like I have nothing I can give, nothing I can contribute. Everything I know relies on tools I don't have here, tools that wouldn't even make a difference in this world. Am I just going to run away again?

Niah fixes her eyes on mine, and it feels like she can read my thoughts. There isn't an ounce of fear in her face. She's as cool as a fucking cucumber, and that makes me want to shake the shit out of her.

Unless she has a plan.

"You have a plan," I say.

"The same," she replies. "The Shalkek will cleanse the Shimat. But the question is whether you are prepared to learn how."

"We're ready," Airos and I both say.

She doesn't seem convinced. I really want to shake her.

"Airos?" she asks. "What did you feel when the Shimat emerged? Do you know the source of the poison?"

"It was like a thorn, or a ball of rot, deep inside its heart. Far underground."

"Deep within the Uthur," she says, agreeing with him.

Polluted rivers suddenly come into my head—sewage runoff spewing out of broken pipes into once pristine streams and turning them into stinking, putrid places where animals die and decompose on the banks and in murky pools. Where discarded garbage and human waste swirl around in places where people used to love to swim and play with their kids. Where the water was once clear and drinkable straight from the source, but now is so nasty not even the best filter could make it safe.

Yet another scene I'm way too familiar with. I've seen it across the world. And I've seen it plenty at home, too.

"Then you can reach it," she says. She holds up two fingers on each hand, then touches her hands together. "With the power of two shaman pairs, you can pacify the Shimat and cleanse the rot."

I point at myself and Airos. "You mean, we have to become shaman? How long would that take?"

"Months," she says. "But for you... Tonight."

I know she's dead serious, but I still laugh. "That's crazy. One night?"

"Why do you believe we can do this in one night?" Airos asks.

"Because, you're?—"

"Shalkek," I say. "Right?"

"Then you understand."

"Not at all. Not a fucking clue."

"Can you believe in something you do not understand?" Even though she's asking both of us, it feels as though the question was meant just for me.

There's a hell of a lot I don't understand that I've had to believe in. This world. This fucking baby growing inside of me.

And Airos.

I don't understand the way my body feels when I'm close to him. I don't understand why I can't keep control of all the things I've fought to discipline. It makes me so angry. I don't understand why I haven't learned my lesson yet. I keep fucking doing this to myself.

How can the universe put this man in front of me and expect me to not feel the way I feel, even if I believe I'm capable of finally snuffing out that horrible unwanted part of me that always seems to be creeping just below the surface?

"Just tell me what we have to do," I say. "Whatever it is, we can do it."

Now, Niah smiles. "I hope so."

12

JACKSON

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

Niah leads us into the desert away from the encampment, and we stop when we can no longer see the flickering glow of the oil lanterns. The sky is the deep blue of early night and already filled with stars, and little swirls of sand blow across our feet. It's beautiful and peaceful, which just makes that feeling of impending doom even more strange. It's not much different from being in a combat zone before the shooting starts. You know that danger is lurking out there waiting for you, but the birds are still chirping, the forest still smells sweet, and the air is as crisp as ever.

"The shaman's dance is a simple one," she tells us. "Learning it is easy. But discovering the united magic beneath the movements is not. That is what charms the Shimat. Mates become shaman because they are most suited to this union. You tell me you are not mates."

"We're not," Airos and I both say.

"You are Shalkek. This is what matters most, and what you must believe in."

Fated. I've always known I was meant for a greater calling—to help people. That's why I'm here. Believing in that idea won't be a problem. And learning a dance? How hard can it be? Compared to some of the knuckle draggers I knew in basic who could barely find their step in a march, I actually have pretty good rhythm and a knack for memorization.

"I hope you can dance, Airos," I tell him.

"Of course I can," he says.

"And I mean not theoretically. Studying it in a book doesn't count."

Niah walks us through each move by demonstrating them at a slower speed. It's like learning a martial art. There's precise footwork matched with body movements. It's intricate, but at the same time, the actual number of moves is pretty small: a certain hand pose, an arm movement, a pivot, a leg position, a type of step, but they combine in a multitude of different ways.

Thankfully, I don't have any trouble memorizing the individual moves. And as we step through them, I see that Airos is keeping up the pace too.

Niah is pleased. "And those are the movements," she says. "Very good. Now, I show you the dances. Watch carefully."

What she shows us looks a lot like what Azin and Onar did. Fast and powerful footwork with a lot of circular movements. It's like tap dancing or Irish dancing, but much more aggressive. There are twenty-seven of these form combinations. Now my head is starting to spin a little bit.

Niah pauses and gives us each a mouthful of water. She points to a cluster of stars at the horizon. "The Great Moth rises. By the time it is overhead, you need to have these kept in your mind. That is when the real trial begins. There is no quick path. You will dance until your legs stop working, and then you will dance some more. Follow!"

We beat the sand with our feet, twisting, twirling and fighting through every moment just to keep up with Niah. There's zero room for synchronization right now, and I have barely any idea how Airos is doing. All I'm focused on is making sure I'm following the movements and hitting them in the right order.

We go on and on. The constellation keeps rising.

"You know what?" I huff, "I think I'm getting this."

"Good for you," Airos grunts.

"I thought you said you could dance."

"Don't speak."

I glance over at him. "Hey, you're way behind."

"Isaid, don't speak."

Now, Niah watches us dance on our own. She hasn't given us a word of critique or feedback. I have no idea if that's a good or a bad thing. I know what I'm doing isn't perfect, and neither is Airos. But I'm at least starting to memorize things. Once you get used to the order, all you have to do is tune your brain out and repeat it. It's like patty-cake, or something.

I find myself looking up at the sky like it's the seconds on a clock ticking down to the end of an excruciating sprint. My legs and lungs are on fire. I'm cramping up. I'm doing cardio with a goddamn brick in my stomach.

And then, Niah signals for us to stop. I drop onto my knees. Airos falls onto his ass. We're both panting like we've run a marathon.

"I think we're...a little out of sync..." I say between breaths. "But we've got the dance down."

"No," Niah says. "This was not the dance the Shimat will expect from you."

"Then what was that?" Airos asks.

"That was the fake dance."

"Thefakedance?!" I exclaim. "Why are we learning a fake dance?!"

Niah then unknots three lengths of cord from around her waist and motions for us to get to our feet.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Because I cannot teach you the true dance. The true dance must be found. It is what the Shimat want to see."

She takes two of the cords and ties them around our waists, and joins us together with the third. It's knotted to us in a way where it can slide freely around our waists, but there's only a couple feet of slack. I don't like where this is going.

"They will whisper it into your ears. You will need to learn how to listen."

"What's this for?" Airos asks, tugging the cord. It jerks me toward him, and I give it an irritated yank in the other direction.

She intertwines all her fingers and clasps her hands tightly together. "For most, this is what takes months. Moving together. You will have to go beyond yourselves tonight. Break through."

Then, as if she hasn't just given us the most nonsensical set of instructions of all time, she turns around and starts to walk away.

"Wait, where are you going?" Airos says.

"I have nothing else I can offer you," she says. "This is your trial."

"But how will we even know if we've figured it out?" I shout.

"You will know. Or the Shimat will come, and it will not matter."

We're alone now.

"This is the worst dance competition ever," I mutter. "What a fucking mess we've gotten ourselves into."

I try to sit down, completely forgetting about the damn rope tied around our waists, and nearly drag Airos down on top of me. Then, when I get back up, hesits down. "What are you—Dammit!" I stumble and fall right into his lap, but quickly fling myself off and onto my back on the sand.

Airos frowns off into space. A length of his sweat-darkened hair hangs over his eye like a curtain.

"We can't just leave these people to their fate, nor can we abandon ours," he says. "But what's before us is an impossible task."

"Well, maybe my fate is to help these people," I say. "What would we be if we just walked away? If we left Azin and Onar out there?"

He shakes his head. "And the others waiting for us? The whole realm? You're a Chosen omega, Jackson."

I sit up. "If we run away from this, it's gonna chase us. We'll never be able to forget what happened here. I think you know that."

I can feel that Airos already has ghosts chasing him. I've seen them in my dreams and memories that somehow have trespassed into my brain. The island. A village. A frightened child.

Al'Phaer.

I feel that these fragments come from him, but I'm afraid to ask him. I'm afraid of being right, and I'm afraid of what it would mean. What has he seen?

"You're right," he says. "We have to try. So, what do we do, then?"

I can't help but smirk. The answer sounds ridiculous coming out of my mouth. "I guess we have to fucking dance."

13

AIROS

The rope appears to be cursed with an impudent desire to immediately knot itself around any available limb or pull taut at precisely the wrong moment in our attempts to practice the dance in some kind of unison. I'm trying to stay conscious of Jackson, to make sure he doesn't fall in a way that might harm the child, but that's exactly when I find myself wrapped up like a python's prey.

"You step this way, I step that way," Jackson says angrily.

"That's exactly what I did!"

"Bullshit!"

"Watch me," I bark, pointing at the ground.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I do the movements, stamping and sliding my feet through the sand. I pause. Jackson glares at me. He's right.

"Gods damn this," I grunt. "I'm no dancer, who am I fooling?"

"You think I am?" Jackson says. "Hell no. I hid in the bathroom when The Electric Slide came on at my cousin's wedding. But I know you can memorize shit. We just need to not get in each other's way."

I use my foot to draw a line in the sand. "I will stay on this side, you'll stay on that side."

"Right. Okay..." He claps a beat with his hands. "One, two, three..."

An hour later, the line in the sand has been completely trampled. My robe hangs off my shoulder, torn from when Jackson caught himself falling. His face is sweaty and dirty, and both of us are exhausted. My legs and feet feel as though I've just sprinted from one end of the desert to the other and back again. We haven't had any food since morning, and barely more water all day than what we drank with Azin and Onar, plus the small sip Niah provided us. The urgency of the situation and our fervor to overcome it had made us blind to our bodies' needs, but it's all caught up with us now.

"Where's that bladder?" Jackson mutters.

We both look around.

"It was here, was it not?" I say.

The rope snaps tight as Jackson tries to walk off, and I stumble after him.

"Where is it?" he repeats.

"She must have taken it with her," I say.

"No water? Christ."

I stare at my hands and watch as they split into four and swirl around my vision with flashes of starlight. It's worse than three wine gourds on an empty stomach. Jackson staggers slightly and I quickly catch him by the shoulders.

"I'm good," he mumbles, and brushes my hands away.

"You need water."

"Yeah, no shit. Both of us do. But something tells me we can't just waltz back into camp and ask for it. She took it with her for a reason."

He's right—this is part of the test. But we can't do this without water.

"Anything in there?" he asks, pointing to the wine gourd on my belt.

"Still just as empty as before," I tell him, and then I get an idea. "We'll go to the well."

"You know how to find it?" he asks.

I look up at the stars and try to focus my mind and think clearly. In preparation for a

potential escape when Azin and his riders had first brought us to the camp, I'd made observations on the position of the sun. I just have to remember them.

"The camp lies in that direction," I say, pointing off to where Niah left. "And that means...the well should be in that direction."

We start across the spine of the dune with me in the front and Jackson behind me, but it quickly becomes obvious that walking in step with such a short leash between us is not much easier than trying to dance, especially with the undulating consistency of the sand. Jackson curses under his breath as he repeatedly trips on my heels and runs into my back, and when we reach the edge of the dune, I stop and he bumps into me again. I nearly lose my footing and fall down the slope.

"Careful," I say.

"I am being fucking careful," he says. "Try walking right."

My patience is almost nonexistent. "Would you like to lead this party?" I snap at him.

"Absolutely."

I hold up the rope to help it slide around my waist as he walks to the front.

"Alright," he says. "This is how this shit is done. Left foot first. And?—"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

Somehow, Jackson misses where the slope begins and immediately trips. I grab the rope to stop him from tumbling forward, but he falls into my arms, which sends me falling backward onto my ass. Now I'm sliding down the side of the dune with Jackson sprawled across my lap, facing the difficult, furrowed landscape of sand and stone that stretches between us and the well. I drive my heels into the sand, trying to slow our descent, but it's no use. When we reach the bottom, my heels catch on firm sand, and the sudden stop flips us forward. Jackson's face plows into the sand as he skids onto his hands and knees, and I slam into his upturned ass, my hands instinctively gripping his waist for balance. Even through the layers of cloth between us, I can feel the shape of him pressed against my cock. I immediately pull away just as Jackson tries to leap forward, but the rope snaps taut between us, and he falls backward while dragging me down on top of him.

His cheek is scratched and bleeding, peppered with bits of dark sand, and his pregnant belly touches my abs as it rises with his breath. He looks stunned, and for a moment I'm worried that he has hit his head in the fall. I then realize that my right leg is pushed firmly between his legs, and his heat is blazing against my thigh. He blinks, and focus returns to his eyes.

"Airos," he growls. "Get off of me."

Jackson is proud and strong-willed. I respect that. He's a soldier, after all. But his hardheaded resistance is confounding. I hate that he ignites every protective instinct I have. There have been moments over these past days when it seems clear to me that we've been fated to cross paths, moments when our minds connect in ways that feel like we've known each other for lifetimes. But he fights against this connection with the same ferocity he fights everything else. Maybe it won't ever be possible for me to

understand why.

And perhaps I shouldn't need to.

All that matters is seeing him and his child safely to the Great Phoenix's temple. To do this, I don't need to understand him. I don't need to be close to him. I don't need to care about anything more than his physical protection, so why does every angry look and every harsh word feel like a rejection? I should be impervious to such trivialities, especially coming from him. So what is wrong with me? Why can I not ignore the way he makes me feel?

Jackson

I feel the places where Airos's body had been for that split second. The heat from his hands lingers on my waist, and so does the impact of his body against my ass. That brief moment of being on all fours, ass up like a goddamn bitch in heat, is burned into my head. I can't get rid of it. I can't shake the feeling that it actually felt good.

It didn't feel good, goddammit. It was a fucking accident, and you're a fucking idiot. So get that image out of your head.

But I can't. I'm trapped in those three seconds. My imagination is going out of control, playing out what could happen if Airos went ahead and did what my body is craving.

No! This ain't no fucking craving. This is delirium. You're not gay. You don't want that.

But now he's on top of me, his hands on either side of my head, caging me in. And his leg... It's pushed between my thighs, pressed right against my fucking taint. I feel my cock acting on its own accord, swelling up, my tip becoming a thousand times

more sensitive to every movement. And my ass... God, I've never felt this feeling of literal emptiness before. It's a deep ache, a need to be filled with something.

With what, Jackson? Admit what you want inside of you. You know what it is.

These conflicting voices bombard me from every direction. They pull me like children fighting over a stuffed toy ready to rip at the seams. I want to tear my brain out and smash it into paste.

Then, beneath the simmering arousal is something else—a heat deep within my body, from where my phoenix power comes from. No, wait, it is my phoenix power. One is feeding into the other, slowly replenishing the phoenix source.

My immediate reaction is to pull away from this feeling. It's dangerous.

"Airos, get off of me." I have to force the words out of my mouth.

"With pleasure," he says.

I stand up with him and take a moment to dust myself off. Really, I'm just trying to get myself under control again. My heart is beating so fucking fast.

"Are you alright?" he asks after a moment. His voice is thin.

"Fine," I reply, not wanting to make eye contact. I really don't want him to see what I'm trying to control. I touch my stinging cheek and wipe the blood onto my cloak.
"Let's go."

Both of us are worn down. Is this my limit? Is this really what breaks me?

We move side by side across the rugged landscape. Neither of us looks at each other

or speaks. Good. It's better like this.

The little hills of sand are like moguls on a ski course—just big enough to make traversing them incredibly annoying. We can't go too fast, or else one of us will snag the other and fall, and the constant climbing and descending is hell on my stamina. I look up at the sky. I'm useless without a compass. Does Airos really know where he's going? Our footprints trail off behind us, but at this point it's impossible to know exactly where we've come from. Everything looks the same.

I don't know how much time has gone by. We've fallen into a pace that somehow keeps us from tripping into each other or stepping on each other's feet.

And then, the terrain changes. And I thought the moguls were shitty. Now, the ground is rocky and cracked with empty river channels that present sudden vertical walls, forcing us to shift direction until we find places where we can safely climb up or down. But with the rope, even low scrambles feel like climbing a fence with no arms.

"We could just cut this damn thing," I say as Airos extends a hand to help me climb. "No one would know."

Airos doesn't say anything. And I don't reach for any one of the many sharp-edged rocks littering the ground. We just keep trudging forward. Climb up, climb down. Put one foot in front of the other. It's all I have the energy to do at this point.

But if you could do that again...

That moment on the sand suddenly occupies my brain by force, and I'm powerless to put up any resistance. What would happen if Airos had wanted to fuck me? What would happen if I had let him?

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

Jesus CHRIST, Jackson, echoes another voice. It sounds a hell of a lot like my dad. Aren't you a goddamn man?

Tug, tug, pull, pull. The ol' brain is getting stretched like dough. Am I really that weak? I'm already at that point of fatigue that I'm starting to hear other people in my head?

It's like someone has replaced my saliva with sand. My mouth and throat are drier than this goddamn desert.

Airos stops suddenly, and I run into him. I'm too tired to say anything. I rest my forehead against the center of his upper back and just stand there, waiting for him to go on.

"What's happening, Airos?" I grunt.

"Why don't you sit down?" he says distractedly. "Take a rest."

"We both have to sit down," I remind him.

"Ah, yes. Right."

Something in his voice sets off an alarm bell. I look up and see that he's scanning the sky and our surroundings.

"Airos," I say, trying to maintain my composure. It's not easy when you're running on fumes. "You do know where we're going?"

"Of course. I just need to..." He taps his parched lips and mutters to himself as he thinks. "Yes," he says, finally. "This way."

We're walking faster now, and faster means mistakes. We scramble up another plateau. His eyes are trained upward, and he trips over a rock and nearly brings me down on top of him.

"Airos! Slow the fuck down!"

He stops.

"If you don't know where we're going, wandering around isn't going to help. It's only going to make things worse."

"I'm not lost," he snaps. "I've only lost our trail. Temporarily."

"That means we're fuckin' lost," I say. "Fantastic. So we're stranded out here, then. So much for Shalkek and all that bullshit."

"You're right. None of this would've happened were we on our own. And I wouldn't have to be taking care of you."

Ohhell no.

"The fuck? Did I ask for your help? I was doing just fine before all of you came along."

"Then go ahead and go back to that forest we found you in. See how well you do before you get snatched up and put in chains. Gods, why was I cursed to be paired with an aggravating, self-deluded, meat-brained omega like you?"

My face immediately goes hot with anger. I have to grab the rope to keep myself from throwing hands.

"Well, guess what? We're not paired. We're not anything. You don't want to be around me, and I don't want to be around you. So why don't you just fuck off, huh? Forget this Chosen bullshit and fuck right off."

To my surprise, Airos grabs the middle of the rope, and there's a sudden flash of green light from his fingers. It falls into two charred, smoking ends. Without another word, he storms off toward the edge of the plateau. I drop down and sit where I am.

God dammit.

I have no idea where Airos is now. I don't want to look. Instead, I'm fixated on the blackened tip of the severed rope. I can't believe that motherfucker cut it. I can't believe he just walked away from me.

Why does he make me feel so insane? It's ridiculous that the one thing that made me see red was him saying our pairing was a curse, and not everything else he said. Because everything else is true. I am deluded. And I guess I am kind of a meat brain.

God, I feel like a fucking child.

I've gone and screwed everything up, yet again. If I'm not the one walking away, I can be sure that I'm gonna make everyone else walk away from me.

"Imagine having me for a dad," I whisper. "You've really lucked out, kid. I mean, if we even make it out of this alive."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

Then I feel something that hits me like a brick to the face—movement inside of my belly. It's barely more than a tap, but it completely shifts my world in an instant. This is something I would've expected to freak me out, but there's not a drop of fear or disgust in me, just plain awe. It's like the reality of who I am on Earth and who I am here has suddenly been tuned together and brought into sharp focus. I sit there, holding my stomach, waiting for another sign from the life inside.

"You there?" I ask.

A minute or more goes by, and there's no response. But I know they're there.

"Son of a bitch," I say to myself. "What the hell would Rachyl say about this?"

She would probably be pissed at me for having a kid before her. She always talked about how much she wanted one.

I sigh. I should probably try and make things right with him.

As I glance over my shoulder, I pray that he hasn't left me behind.

He hasn't. He's sitting at the edge of the plateau with his back to me, shoulders slumped, and head tilted up slightly. He's still watching the stars.

Seeing him like that pulls the image from my recurring dream into my mind—a boy sitting high atop some tall tower, watching a dark sea and a sky full of stars.

Alright, you son of a bitch, I tell myself. Just go over to him.

"I once got lost on a patrol," I say, taking a seat beside him. "Led my team around for three hours in the forest. I was relying on cell phone service to figure out where we were. Fucking stupid. All the towers had been destroyed and I didn't have GPS. I know you don't know what the hell any of those words mean."

Airos looks at me. "I assume it's bad."

"I didn't have a map or anything."

"You fool."

"Stumbled right into an enemy position. Somehow, we managed to take it without losing anyone. I probably would've gotten kicked out of the Vanguard if McScott and Clarke hadn't covered for me and said that I'd planned it out all along. They made it seem like I was some rogue hero." I laugh at the memory. "Those dumbasses. That was the first real mission we'd run together. After that, I told myself I would stick by those two no matter what."

"But you couldn't," Airos fills in gently. "Could you?"

I shake my head. "Nope."

He's waiting for me to continue the story. I know what part he wants to hear about. Do I really want to tell him?

What am I afraid of? I'm a world removed from everyone who would judge me, and we're probably going to die out here in this desert anyway.

It's because speaking the words makes it real. And that's too much for me to deal with. I'm judging myself.

"Yeah," I say. "I didn't stick by them. But it wasn't entirely my fault. I would've gone back after the attack, but I never got a chance to. That was the night I ended up here."

"The attack," Airos repeats to himself, as though he's slowly remembering something that had happened to him too. "It was a... 'drone strike.' Clarke was there."

My heart nearly stops and my head fills with a high-pitched whine. Everything swirls around in a bout of vertigo as the moment returns to me, fresh as if it had just happened. I don't need to ask him how he knows.

"I followed McScott into those woods. I knew why, and I still went after him. And if I hadn't?—"

"Then you would've been killed."

It all overwhelms me in an instant. The guilt, the grief, and the anger. I wasn't killed in that explosion because of my stupid, goddamned curiosity. The thing I've been trying to burn out of my existence for my whole life is the thing that saved me.

"Tell me what happened," Airos says.

I hesitate at first, but then I can't stop the story from spilling out.

"McScott, he asked me to join him in the woods. Said to wait a few minutes before following. I knew what he meant. A part of me couldn't believe that he was saying this to me. There'd always been little hints. But I think I'd denied it up until that point, that he was...like that. And I guess that's why I really wanted to follow him. It wasn't my brain doing the thinking. But when he kissed me, I snapped."

Kiss. It's the first time I've ever acknowledged that moment for what it is. In my mind, I've always framed it as him putting his mouth on me.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"I punched him in the jaw. I can still see the look on his face. Pure shock. I guess I probably looked the same. And then I ran as fast as I could. I knew why I was there. I knew what I was getting myself into. But I still hit him. I couldn't take the way my body reacted to that kiss. It felt... It felt good."

Those three words feel heavier than all of the sand in the desert. But they're out now, and I'm waiting for the world to suddenly implode on itself. But it doesn't. There's just silence, and an impossible amount of tension gone from my body. I draw in a long, deep breath. Airos still doesn't speak. There's no judgement, contempt, or anything I'd feared. Just stillness on his face as he waits for me to finish.

"I only made it like fifteen feet before the drone hit. It wasn't even a direct hit on our position, but the shockwave turned every tree into a shrapnel. If you weren't dead, you were badly wounded. Except for me and McScott. I didn't stick around for anyone to ask questions about why. I grabbed my bag and ran. No weapons, or anything. I quit being a merc right there. I walked west to the nearest town. But guess what happened? I got fucking lost."

"Is this a habit of yours?"

"Hey, I wasn't thinking straight, alright?" I say.

Again, I'd walked right into an enemy position.

I remember how they appeared out of the forest, rifles trained on me from all sides. I'd hoped that leaving my gear behind would be enough to make me pass as a civilian. It was probably naïve of me to believe it mattered. They certainly didn't care.

"They must've shot me. Because the next thing I knew, I was here."

"Incredible," Airos says, rubbing his chin as he thinks.

There it is. So much that I thought I would never say to anyone, I've now said to him. Shockingly, I don't feel any regret about it. I'm glad I told him.

"I just have one question," he continues.

I brace myself. "Alright..."

"That was the first time you've kissed someone?"

I nearly fall off the edge of the plateau.

"Seriously? That's your question?"

"It's a fair question, no? I'm curious."

"You're too curious, sometimes," I tell him.

"So are you, it seems."

"No, it wasn't my first time kissing someone. Jesus."

"Your first time kissing a man, then?"

"What do you think?" My tone sounds more irritated than I actually am, but it doesn't deter him at all.

"So you truly have never experienced the pleasure of being with a man," he says. It's

not as much a question as it is a confirmation of something he's been thinking about.

It feels like he's calling me a virgin nerd.

Because I am a virgin nerd.

Goddammit.

"No shit," I grumble.

Why? You want to show me?

The thought zips through my head, too fast for me to squash. It's like a chain reaction going off—now I'm thinking about that possibility. Fantasizing about it. My heart is picking up. And my dick...

But Airos doesn't offer to fuck me right then and there. What he says still shocks me.

"Then you don't know about the source of our phoenix powers."

I look at him, and I almost let slip what happened to me on that sand dune. No, I don't know. But I think I have a damn good idea...

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"The greatest source of our power," he says, "comes from our fire of life and regeneration. It comes from union."

There's a huge lump in my throat. I know my face is red hot again. I can't do a damn thing about it.

"W-what do you mean?"

You know that's exactly what he means.

I guess I just want to hear him say it.

"Pleasure," he says. "Sex."

I look away. "Huh. That's weird," I say, like an embarrassed dumbass teenager trying to pretend he's not interested in the topic. "So you mean, like, sex can recharge our powers?"

He nods. "Faster than anything else can."

"Why didn't you mention this?"

"Would it have mattered?" he asks.

"Hell yeah! If you're telling me that I could just..." I imitate jacking myself off.

"If that worked, I would be at full power by now," he replies with a grin.

"Fuck. Are you serious?"

"No. When would I have had the time?"

"When I came to after fighting those bugs, you looked pretty fuckin' shifty about something. How do I know you weren't choking the chicken?"

"Choking...the chicken?"

"Okay, strangling the phoenix?" I offer.

He laughs. "I was doing none of those things."

"So, it takes two, then?" I say. "To recharge."

"Indeed. It's why phoenix pairs are so powerful."

"To get this straight..." "There's nothing straight about this." "That means, if you, like...got jacked off, then it would recharge your energy? Hypothetically, and shit."

"Not hypothetical. Fact. Both would be revitalized."

So, all it would take to get our phoenix powers back to normal is for me to reach over there and...

"Choke the chicken," I say to myself. Airos raises an eyebrow.

Even if we are able to make it through this and get back to Azin and Onar, we still will need our powers to be able to face the Shimat. So, what exactly am I willing to do to make that happen?

I can't believe I'm even thinking about this. And why am I assuming that Airos would even want that? Because I want it?

Do I?

No, you don't. Whatever you're feeling is a lie. It isn't real.

It can't be. This tightness in my chest that I feel when I look at him, a feeling I've only ever really known a few times in my life, is so closely paired with feelings of guilt and self-hatred that it puts me in physical pain.

I don't want it to be real. I don't want to find myself running away again, but I can see that void, and it's calling to me.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Jackson," Airos says. "I hope you know what happened wasn't your fault."

"Huh?" I say, caught off guard.

"Clarke. And everything else."

"Yeah. I just can't shake the thought that I shouldn't be alive. Or that maybe things would've somehow gone differently for everyone had I not followed McScott. Pretty narcissistic of me, right? That's always been my excuse. My big purpose." I let out a harsh laugh. "Either way, I guess I would've ended up dead."

"Instead, you were brought here," he reminds me. "For your big purpose." Then, he does something I don't see coming—he reaches out and places his hand on top of mine. "You are meant to be alive. And I'm glad for it."

My brain just fucking stops. It's such a simple thing—just skin on skin—but it sends this jolt through my entire body. I just sit there like an idiot, staring down at our hands and trying to ignore the way his touch makes my chest feel tight and warm. The pain is still there. The guilt is still there. I want to pull away, tell him to keep his hands to himself, but I can't make myself move. No, I don't want to. For the first time in my life, I want to stay exactly where I am.

Airos suddenly perks up. His hand leaves mine, leaving nothing but a tingling warmth. "Hold on a moment," he says, and he stands up. "By the Gods. It was there the whole time."

I stand up too. Airos points to a spot just above the horizon. I have no idea what I'm

looking for.

"That constellation," he says, grinning. "I believe we've almost found our way there. The well is not far. Come on."

"Wait," I say before he starts his way down the plateau. I hold up my end of the rope. "Should we...?"

Airos considers this for a moment, then comes to me. I take his end of the rope. How do I tie it?

My hands seem to start moving on their own. It's the least obvious way possible, and yet it's the only way I can think of. Out, around, make a loop, slide the end through, tighten it, and repeat. I don't know how I can still recall this so many years later, after only having watched Rachyl do it once.

"An interesting knot," Airos says, examining it.

Does he know what it means?

It doesn't matter.

Together, we carefully start down the side of the plateau, keeping in time with each other's steps.

14

AIROS

Jackson gives my shoulder an excited shove. "Holy shit, there it is! You found it!"

The well sits like a gift from the Gods on the distant sand. We sprint like men possessed, and it isn't until we reach the stone trough that I realize what we've just accomplished. We ran in perfect unison—not a single stumble, not one moment where the rope pulled taut between us. All of the obstacles had been cleared without conscious thought, as though the rope didn't exist at all.

We carefully remove the stone cover and peer down into the pit. The sweet, cool scent of water drifts up from below, and I see a shimmer, like a window to the sky above. It's clean, and it's still untouched by any corruption.

Jackson unties the rope from around his waist, and I do the same. We then tie the separate sections together, fasten them to the neck of my wine gourd, and lower it down into the well.

It doesn't reach.

"Damn," I say. "The surface was higher before."

"We'll have to extend the rope," Jackson says, and he immediately begins to strip off his cloak.

Gods.

Once again, I'm enthralled by the sight before me. And again, I have to remind myself to quell the things I feel when looking at him.

But he is gorgeous. And it's not just his appearance. His omega presence is subtle but undeniable, like a heat that seems to radiate from him even when he's trying to maintain distance. He has no control over it. I doubt he's even aware of it.

I feel a weakening of my resolve over the things I promised myself I would never do.

The things I would never feel about an omega. And now I feel as though a gap between us has lessened. I don't know what it is or why it happened. There's an opening in his armor, and it's like his very scent has shifted, becoming richer, more complex—something that makes my mouth water and my hands itch to reach for him.

This is dangerous. Incredibly dangerous.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

It's too late. My body can't help itself. It does what it wants, despite the valiant efforts of the mind. And it is now hard as stone and aching for release. My cock wants to be buried deep inside him. My cock wants to feel his fingers tighten around its length and play across its most sensitive ridges. My cock wants to teach him the pleasures of being with an alpha—and another man.

I feel a sudden swell of phoenix power inside of me. It's slight, but undeniable.

What is this? How?

Surely my power could not be recovering simply by my arousal. It would require mutual desire?—

No. That's ridiculous.

I study Jackson's profile in the dim light, searching for any sign that might confirm such an absurd notion, but it's too difficult to know. He finishes tying his clothes to the rope and lowers the gourd back into the well. The end of the line reaches his hands, but the only sound we hear is the hollow, echoing knock of the gourd against the stone.

"No way," he says, leaning over to look. "How shallow did it get? Alright, then." He holds out his hand to me. "Airos, give me your robe."

"What?"

"Give me your tunic. It might be enough to reach. Hurry. The sun is already about to

come up."

The damn beast with a mind of its own continues to throb against the fabric of my clothing. Beneath my Gnosis robes, all I have on is a thin loincloth that will do absolutely nothing to hide the shape of my erection.

Think, Airos.

"I'm naked beneath it," I say, like a complete moron.

Jackson gives me a look. "Oh-kay... What the hell are we going to do then, Airos?"

"We dance," I say.

"Here?"

"Perhaps an elemental still resides here. We can try to reach it."

"Or you could just give me your cloak..."

"I didn't realize you were so keen to take my clothes off," I say, reaching for the clasp. "But if you insist so strongly, then I have no choice..."

"We dance," he says quickly.

The fading starlight casts long shadows across the sand around the well, and I can feel the weight of exhaustion in every muscle. I have to expel my doubts—and I have a lot of them.

"Start slow," I say, settling into the first position Niah had shown us.

Jackson mirrors my stance, feet planted shoulder-width apart, hands positioned at his sides. We look into each other's eyes. I nod my head, counting the time. And then we begin. Step, pivot, arm sweep—each motion deliberate and careful. The sand shifts beneath our feet as we move, and I'm acutely aware of Jackson beside me, matching my rhythm.

"One, two, three..." he counts under his breath, his voice barely audible over the whisper of wind across the dunes.

It's clunky at first. Both of us are focused on our own feet, our own timing, but the movements return easier than I expected, and it isn't long before I'm hardly thinking about them at all. Step, pivot, arms raised, step again, reverse, cross over.

Faster.

I can feel the dull thud of our feet through the sand, and I can feel our pace increasing. The decision seems to materialize out of nowhere for both of us. We're still linked in unison and in step.

Then something shifts. A subtle pull, like the tide drawing me forward. The hair on my arms stands up, and there's a charge in the air that makes my skin tingle.

"Do you feel that?" I breathe, not breaking rhythm.

"Oh, I feel that," Jackson replies, his voice tight with concentration.

The movements become more fluid, and soon I have the distinct impression that we're on a stage and dancing for a spectator. There is something watching us. I spin and catch Jackson's eye as we pivot in opposite directions, and for a moment it's like seeing my reflection. We're perfectly synchronized, moving as one.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

The sensation grows stronger. It's not quite a voice, not quite a presence, but something that whispers through the movements themselves. My left foot slides forward just as some instinct tells me it should, just as Jackson does the exact same thing. It's as though the dance is revealing itself to us through a voice that only we can hear, and with each beat, I feel something stirring below. We rock steadily back and forth with one foot solidly planted into the ground, like fishermen hauling in a full net, and the presence grows stronger. It's taken our invitation.

A soft gurgling sound rises from the well's opening, like water churning in a wash basin. I know Jackson hears it too, but we are too deep into the frenzy of the dance to even exchange a look. We're striding across a knife's edge with no space for error or lapse in concentration. A single mistake, and the elemental will completely disappear from this place.

We swing our hands and clasp them together, and with a final pull, the surface of the well begins to shimmer with captured starlight. The water reaches the edge, but doesn't spill over as I expect—instead, it flows upward into the night air, gathering itself into a sphere the size of a man's head that hovers just above the well's opening. It pulses with soft, silvery light, its surface rippling like liquid silver. Its aura is ancient and surprisingly gentle after the corrupted elementals we encountered in the valley.

The dance ends with a stomp. Jackson's heart pounds so hard I can feel the pulse through his palm where our fingers are interlocked. It's the only thing keeping us upright after such an exertion, and we're so in need of water that not even a bead of sweat manages to form on our parched skin.

The elemental floats closer, bubbling and rippling. I sense no hostility. It feels like a curious young creature, wanting to get a closer look at the two strangers who have woken it.

"It's kinda cute," Jackson remarks.

Without any warning, the elemental suddenly bursts forward and expands several times greater than its original size. Before we can react, it surrounds both of our heads. I can't move. It has me gripped tightly within its liquid body. Even through the blur I can see the shock in Jackson's eyes. He lets go of my hand and grabs the front of my robe. He's trying to break us both out.

Breathe.

The command comes not as a word or a voice, but a feeling. In my state of panic, it goes unheeded, and it isn't until it comes again that I realize what it is. Convincing my body to ignore its most primal survival instincts is not a simple task. It takes all of my willpower to allow my lungs to relax and release. The first breath comes like a gulp, and I nearly choke on what fills me.

Air. Or at least, that's how it feels. Pure air, though there are no bubbles as I exhale.

Can Jackson hear what it's telling us?

No. He's fighting too hard. He's thrashing to push the elemental off, but his hands plunge right through it. I grab him by the shoulders and shake him, trying to get him to look at me, but he's not paying attention. He thinks I'm struggling too.

How do I get him to pay attention? He's going to lose consciousness if he doesn't stop.

A solution comes to my mind. It's a stupid solution, but I know it's one that will work. I don't have time to come up with anything else.

Don't kill me for doing this.

I move in to press my lips to his.

Jackson

I'd read once that to stop a dog attack, the best thing you can do is startle the shit out of the dog by jamming your thumb up its asshole. That's exactly what I feel like right now—a dog with a thumb jammed up its ass. Except, instead of a thumb, it's Airos's face coming at me through the water like a goddamn great white shark, lips all puckered and honing in on mine. What the hell?!

My automatic reaction is to recoil away, and with a startled gasp I suck down a lungful of water.

Oh, fuck! I'm going to die here. I'm going to die a virgin!

But after a second, I realize that I'm fine. There's no suffocating, no choking, no burning sensation, and it takes a moment for my brain to comprehend this bizarre feeling. I'm underwater, and I'm not drowning? Am I already dead?

Another wave of panic and adrenaline hits me. I'm frozen in place like a deer in the headlights. I can't fight, I can't run, so all I can do is freeze. I'm holding my breath.

Airos gently grasps my shoulders. I tense, thinking he's going to come in to try and kiss me again.

Why not just kiss him? You're gonna die anyway.

The thought flashes through my mind and vanishes as something else takes its place: a feeling of something telling me to breathe normally. It's just like what I felt during the dance—something guiding me from outside of my body.

Now that I'm calm, I see that Airos is too. He's already way ahead of me with this.

I force myself to take a breath, and it comes easily.

I try to say, "What the hell was that?" about the kiss, but nothing comes out of my mouth, not even a bubble. Even though it feels like I'm breathing air, my lungs are filled with the Elemental's liquid.

A little disturbing to think about.

And then, another thought gets stamped onto my brain, a greeting from this creature wrapped around my dome like a floating fish bowl. It's what Niah and the others call a Shimat, and what Airos calls a water elemental, and in an instant, it seems to collect everything it needs to know from us and give us what we need to know in return.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I see that the Shimat are kind of like an ant colony, or one of those giant tree networks that somehow share impulses and make collective decisions despite being comprised of a multitude of entities. In a way, it's like an army.

There are dozens of wells throughout the desert—small tributaries of the whole that constantly separate, travel, and remix with the greater Shimat entity. Niah's people would move about, following the smaller elementals like this one, and occasionally meeting other tribes to trade at a great oasis in the desert.

Then, something unknown bubbled up from deep in the earth. Or maybe it came from the sky. The Shimat doesn't know. It shows us the change, occurring over a span of years all compressed into a single thought. Niah believes this corruption is recent, but it's been growing for a long time—a tiny malignancy slowly eating away at the Shimat's defenses until they could take no more. Then, like surface tension breaking on the rim of a glass, the infection spilled over and rapidly consumed its host. It began drawing in its tributaries, draining every small oasis, well, and independent aquifer throughout the desert to add power to its dark mass.

This one is among the last remaining, and in just a couple of days since we'd last been here, it's shrunk to a volume that probably wouldn't even fill a pothole.

I feel the elemental's sadness, or at least some kind of feeling like it. It's hard to separate my emotions from what the creature is showing me. I don't know if it has emotions at all—but its natural drive is to rejuvenate and act as a unifier for all the creatures of its realm. That's what gives it life. It wants to be whole. It wants to be pure.

But its sadness isn't just directed at its own fate. I feel it looking at me, too. And even though it only sees what I give it permission to touch, I find myself opening my mind up to the creature. It's like my soul is bathing in it.

You are not whole. That's what it's telling me. You, too, have a poison growing inside of you, and if you don't exile it from your body soon, you will be lost to it.

I'm beneath an endless crystal-clear sea, naked and curled up like a baby. And then, boom, I'm hit by another flash of thoughts and consciousness. It's like watching and absorbing ten movies at once, all in the span of a second.

It knows about our phoenix powers, and it shows me that we can get rid of the darkness if we're able to burn out the poison. I can see it all clearly: the oasis rejuvenating itself, the wells refilling with pure water, the desert creatures and plants returning, and the tribe flourishing. And I see myself.

But it's not me, at least, not who I am now. The difference is internal, though it still reads on my body and in my eyes. I'm holding an egg in my arms—the egg that's inside of me now. And then...

Who is that?

A warm presence, like the very physical embodiment of safety and assurance. Their touch is enough to make every worry disappear. Have I ever felt anything like this before?

Is this what it's like to feel safe?

To be in love?

It's so vivid, it feels as though I'm right there in this moment, like it isn't just an idea

of something that could be, but something that is, somewhere, in some other reality. Is that what I'm seeing right now?

It is you.

The elemental's "voice" fills my mind, but I don't see how what it's telling me can be possible. This Jackson hasn't gone through the shit I have, and it's obvious. I could never smile like that. I could never feel like that. Could I?

Drink.

The vision of myself fades fast into my subconsciousness, leaving me with one final thought. It's an invitation to quench my thirst.

Drink the elemental?

Alright, don't mind if I do.

I swallow mouthful after mouthful of the sweet, cool water, and I see Airos is doing the same. The elemental's body shrinks with every gulp, until the orb pops and splashes down onto our bodies like a broken water balloon. We drop onto the sand, gasping for breath.

The elemental's visions tingle in the back of my mind, and are quickly shoved aside by the recollection that this motherfucker tried to kiss me.

"Airos, what the hell was that?!" I shout.

"We just drank...an elemental," he says between breaths.

"No, no, no. Before that. You tried to...fuckin'..." Again, the words get stuck in my

throat. "K-kiss..."

He wipes his face and quickly gets to his feet. "You were panicking. It was the only way I could get your attention."

"Hell of a way to get my attention," I say. "You couldn't have said, excuse me?"

Airos picks up my makeshift rope from the side of the well. "Don't overthink it," he says tersely as he hands it to me. "Put your clothes back on."

Then he turns and heads back the way we came before I can choke out another word.

"Come on!" he shouts. "Azin and Onar need us!"

I tug the cloak over my head and shuffle after him. What's his problem?

15

AIROS

The elemental's essence warms me like wine from the gods, and for the first time in days I feel truly rested. My muscles no longer ache, my mind is sharp as a blade's edge, and though my phoenix powers still remain frustratingly exhausted, my physical body thrums with renewed vitality. It's as though I've awakened from the best sleep of my life.

"Fuck me," Jackson breathes beside me, rolling his shoulders with obvious relief. "I feel like I could run a marathon."

"Then let's run," I say, and without waiting for his response, I break into a steady pace across the sand.

I keep slightly ahead of him, and the path back to Azin and Onar unfolds before me with crystal clarity. With a recovered and rested mind, deciphering the signs of the land and the sky comes as easily as reading a map. But it isn't my confidence in navigating the way back that's filling me with doubt and hesitation.

I don't want to speak to him about my attempted kiss. I'd done it mindlessly, and it shouldn't have meant anything. But I can feel myself wanting things I've sworn to

never want, and the things I saw in the elemental's vision have made me doubt everything.

I hear the words of the Gnosis priestess who took me in after finding me sleeping amongst the rubble of what had once been my village.

“You were spared for a reason,” she'd said. “Only you can answer how to serve those who perished here.”

I was a child, too afraid to tell her the truth of what had happened. I didn't want to serve them. The anger and sorrow over what they'd done to me—and who knows how many other Phoenikos—burned inside of me for years until I found my answer: I would cut myself off from taking a mate. My abstinence would serve as part of my atonement for the lives I'd taken, and I would not condemn another phoenix child to live in this world.

I was certain that this commitment and my mission to find the Great Phoenix's temple would be the way I would find peace with myself. My destiny lies in service to this belief. It's what has always pushed me forward, and it's what keeps me strong around Jackson.

What I saw in the mind of the elemental was a life with an omega. A mate, and a family. A happy existence in which all the burdens of my past don't exist. What is unclear to me is the nature of this vision. Is it a glimpse of what could be? Or is it merely a shard of my mind reflected back at me by the elemental's powerful and cryptic magic?

Both answers leave me thinking about Jackson. I know I shouldn't, but I can't help myself—everything that had been impossible, everything forbidden, is now suddenly less infallible than I had believed. Including how he feels about me.

I can't stop thinking about the way my phoenix energy reacted when he'd taken off his clothes in front of me. I know there's only one reason how that could've happened. He'd enjoyed it as much as I had.

Gods.

I want him. I want to strip away every barrier he's built around himself, every stubborn protest, every fearful excuse. I want to show him what it means to be claimed by an alpha—to be mine. The urge to pin him against the nearest surface and make him understand exactly what his body is asking for burns through me like molten bronze.

My hands itch to map every scar on his soldier's body, to taste the salt of his skin and feel him surrender beneath my touch. I want to hear him gasp my name when I find the places that make him lose control, watch his walls crumble as he finally stops running from what we both know he needs. I want to teach him about all of the pleasures he's been missing.

I've maintained my vow with unwavering commitment for over twenty years. Why now?

Because I've tasted what it feels like to be close to him. To be one with him. This trial has done something to us. I have to focus. I can't allow this fantasy to grow any further.

And so, I put distance between us as we run. I stay ahead of him and ignore the rhythm of his steps, purposely moving my feet in discord with his. When we face the Shamat, we'll need perfect synchronization. Until then, I can't afford to be in sync with anything else about him.

Jackson

Goddammit. Something is wrong, I can feel it, but I'm too damn chickenshit to say anything.

Airos is ten paces ahead of me and holding that distance, like he doesn't want me to get too close. And all I want is to know whether that moment—that almost kiss—actually happened, or if I'd just made it all up in my head along with everything else the elemental showed me.

Why is he acting like this?

More importantly, why do I care? I should be glad he's ignoring me. But I'm all screwed up. I have a head full of crazy thoughts and I don't know what to do with them.

"Airos!" I finally shout, but he doesn't slow down. "Dammit, stop!"

In a burst of frustration, I sprint forward and shove his shoulder with both hands. He stumbles, falls and rolls across the rocky ground. Shit. I didn't mean for that to happen.

"What are you doing?!" he exclaims.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Trying to get your attention, asshole! Why are you ignoring me all of a sudden?"

He stands, and I see his leg is scraped and bleeding. I wince. I wish I had a first aid kit on me, or something to clean his wounds. God, I'm a fucking asshole.

"We have a lot of distance to cover," he says evenly.

He turns to leave, but I grab his arm.

"What did the elemental show you?" I demand.

I can see him trying to disguise the surprise that flashed across his face. "I don't know what you mean. We need to move." He tries to pull away, but I hold firm.

"Dammit, Airos. Don't make me subdue you."

"Subdue me?" he says with a laugh. The bastard doesn't think I can. "I'm not going to fight a pregnant omega. Let me go?—"

I don't give him a chance to finish. I trap his arm and sweep his legs out from under him. He collapses onto his stomach, and I pin him down by straddling his waist. He tries to wrestle me off, but I still have his wrist trapped. All I need to do is twist it.

"Ow, ow, ow," he groans. "Okay, okay. Stop."

"I'll let you go when you talk to me. What did the elemental show you?"

He lies there with his face pressed against the sand, breathing heavily.

"What I saw is not important right now," he says.

"Actually, I think it's pretty damn important. Everything comes down to how in tune we are with each other. So if there's something you need to say, then you better say it right now."

He's silent for a moment. "I made a vow, a long time ago, to never take a mate. To pay for lives I've taken."

My heart flips.

As a fellow warrior, I won't judge a man for the actions he's taken in combat. I can only go by what my intuition tells me about his character, and whether he is the type of person to use his skills for a righteous purpose. Airos is a good person. I'm positive of this. That's not the part of his statement that has my chest feeling like a fist is squeezing around it. I didn't know about this vow. But I shouldn't be so startled by it.

"But the person I saw in that vision had completely abandoned this commitment," he says, the emotion rising in his voice. "He had a mate. And a family. He was happy. It was like he'd forgotten what he'd done." He looks at me almost accusingly. "I cannot forget."

"If that's what you're worried about, I think it's bullshit. I saw something really similar. There's no way it's real."

His eyes turn soft for a moment. "That's what I hope. But I'm not sure."

"It doesn't matter, Airos. You don't have a mate. You don't need to take a mate. Your vow is as solid as it ever was."

I don't understand. Why, of all things, is this making him waver? What does this have to do with me?

And then the possibility hits me. It's what has been living in the back of my mind, and every time I think about it, I have to call my heart a liar because of how it reacts to the idea that Airos might actually want me. It's the one thing that I've been telling myself I don't want, even though my pulse quickens every damn time the thought crosses my mind. I hate that reaction. I hate how my body responds before my brain can shut it down. God dammit. That's not who I am. That's not what I want.

And now I'm afraid of what he might say next. I don't want to hear him say it aloud. I don't know what I might do if he does.

My heart is racing so fast it feels like I'm on drugs. I'm a fucking idiot. I shouldn't have brought this up.

"We needn't discuss this further," says Airos, mercifully.

"Yeah, absolutely," I say, relieved.

Something lingers in the silence between us. A nervous tension. Nothing has been resolved. If anything, it's worse. Now, both of us are pulling away from each other. I don't want to hear him say he wants me. I don't want to find out what that feels like.

We run on through the desert, moving fast over the changing landscape. We don't stop or slow, even as the sunlight tears across the rippling sand, carrying with it the heat of a desert morning. The miles fly quickly beneath our feet, and we cover the distance in just a fraction of what it took us before.

We're getting close. It's in the terrain and the familiar geography, but also a feeling buzzing through the air that cuts through to my bones like a damp chill. Something

has happened, something bad.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

Dunes transition back into the dry and fractured earth of a place hit by seasonal flash floods, and the sharp branches of desiccated and long-dead desert brush claw angrily at our ankles as we scramble up a rocky hill.

"Jesus Christ," I say as we hit the top and see the view stretching out below us.

Black tendrils fill every ancient river channel, gushing over the banks and spreading across the desert like a lava flow. Looking to my left, the smoke from the encampment's cooking fires drifts up from behind a plateau. The Shimat have broken out of the boundary set by Azin and Onar.

We're too late.

16

AIROS

There is no existing scroll or record that describes the devastating sight before us. We are the first in this age to witness such calamity. Umbrios's influence has gone beyond whispers in the darkness—his shadow is emerging in every corner of the world, and like an avalanche, it will grow faster and faster until it can no longer be stopped. We have arrived at a great shift in the fate of Circeana. The last remnants of this cycle of Aethereos are slipping away, and the path to extend it grows as narrow as a blade's edge.

We exchange a look, and I know we share the same thought—we have to defend the camp. Without speaking, we immediately sprint along the crest of the ridge.

"That means... Azin and Onar?" Jackson shouts to me.

"Given how far the Shimat has spread and how quickly it's moving, there's nothing we could have done. They slowed it down. Without them, it would have already overtaken the encampment."

Knowing this doesn't do much to lessen the impact of their sacrifice. Again, I can read what Jackson is thinking—Is there anything we could've done?

I want to take him in my arms and comfort him, though I know he would deny me. Perhaps that only makes me want him more.

Focus, Airos! Don't allow these thoughts to proceed any further!

It feels as though my defenses are being constantly tested now, over and over, at every weak spot.

What can I rely on to restore my resolve?

Your purpose is to keep him safe. Focus on that.

Yes. That's it. I could live a thousand lives and experience no greater honor than being his Guardian. I just need to keep him safe.

"There's no way through!" Jackson says as we hit the end of the ridge.

Below, the Shimat has already formed an impassable river, blocking the way to the encampment. There's no other choice but to tap into the little phoenix power I've regained and cover the distance by flight.

"Jackson, get on my back."

"Right," he says, and positions himself behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist.

I reach inside myself to touch the pool of phoenix energy and draw my other form to the surface, but the moment I do, there is a sudden change in the Shimat. It's like seeing a river halt mid-current. The black mass freezes completely.

"Uhh, I don't like that," Jackson says.

I don't either. It's like it's listening. Like a hunter, drawn by the presence of its prey.

It feels phoenix power.

Just as this thought forms in my mind, the Shimat shifts towards us and rises like a great tidal wave rolling across the desert. Tendrils stretch from its body like black water spouts, and I realize that there is no flying over this creature. It's coming for us, and we have to face it now.

Jackson moves to my side and takes a defiant stance. Together, we slide our feet into the first position of the shaman dance.

The Shimat is like an approaching storm, its size and power growing more apparent the closer it gets. The swell is like a mountain rising high into the sky, and at the very summit there is something that makes the hairs on my neck stand on end. Two figures perched on the wave.

"OhGod," Jackson groans. "No..."

Looking at the suspended figures, I feel my blood turn to ice. Azin and Onar hang limp in the Shimat's grasp, the upper halves of their heads encased in black orbs of corrupted water from the crown down to just below their noses. The dark spheres

pulse with a sickly rhythm, like diseased hearts beating against their skulls. They're not dead. Their bodies twitch and jerk as if invisible strings are pulling at their limbs. Then I realize with growing horror that the Shimat isn't just controlling them—it's feeding on them. Drawing out their life force, their memories, their very essence to fuel its corruption.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"It's just like what happened with us and the elemental," says Jackson. "Airos, they're still in there. We can get them back."

I glance at Jackson uncertainly. Could he be right?

The dark Shimat slows its approach and lowers Azin and Onar down until they are level with our ridge, floating close enough that I can make out their faces through the dark water. Their eyes are closed, as though they're deep in sleep.

Then, a thought-like voice rises up in my mind.

Yes.

Jackson's eyes widen as he looks at me. "Did you hear that?"

They can be saved.

"I think the elemental may have done more than just quench our thirst," I say.

"It wants us to use it," Jackson tells me. "It's telling us it can help us."

Azin and Onar's mouths open in perfect unison and they speak in their guttural native tongue, but then something shifts. The words come haltingly, syllables stretched and twisted as the Shimat seems to search through their minds for our language.

"Give... give us...light."

I feel the hungry intent of the corrupted elemental turn towards Jackson and the baby inside of him. Its sole purpose is to consume and drain the life from everything, and now it has sensed the purest source of power imaginable.

A tendril thrusts from the Shimat straight towards Jackson, and with only a second to spare, I summon my staff from the void and shield him with a wall of Gnosis energy. It snares the tendril like a spider's web catching a giant hornet, just barely enough to slow it down. Jackson's arm shoots up instinctively to defend himself, but instead of just blocking, something incredible happens—water erupts from his palm in a shimmering arc, forming a gleaming crystalline blade that slices clean through the attacking tendril.

Jackson stares at his hand, water still dripping from his fingers. "That's new."

The severed appendage crashes onto the sand with a wet thud, spurting black ichor as it writhes about. The water blade bursts into mist and envelops the writhing mass, and the black poison begins to fade, seeping away until only a puddle of clear, clean water remains.

The Shimat's surface trembles as it recoils from the strike, like a giant hand jerking away from a needle prick. It pulls Azin and Onar back as an eerie, toneless scream pours from their mouths.

I don't need to ask Jackson how he controlled the elemental; it rises from my consciousness, ready for my command. The Shimat attacks again, this time with dozens of tendrils that whip towards us like the arms of a stinging anemone. The elemental bursts from my palm, coiling around my staff and merging its power with mine as I unleash a storm of augmented Gnosis magic that explodes in the air like aqua lightning. Ribbons of energy lance out and blast through the tendrils, severing them from the reaching blob. They rain down in black chunks that hiss and steam as they hit the sand, the elemental's influence draining the corruption from each severed

piece.

The Shimat lets out that terrible unified scream through Azin and Onar, and lifts them far out of our reach. Then it surges forward again, its massive form rushing up against the sides of the ridge. It's going to overwhelm us.

"Move!" I shout, grabbing Jackson's arm as we sprint along the narrow crest.

The Shimat flows faster than we can run, its surface bubbling and frothing as it climbs higher, reaching for our heels. I cast my staff aside, and Jackson and I slam our feet into the sand, taking the first position of the shaman's dance. With a deep breath we move together, and a rhythm emerges from the ether, its cadence aggressive and raw.

Like a wave crashing against a wall, the Shimat rears back and sprays up into the sky. Its reaction to the dance is visceral, and I feel the clash of its energy as it fights to break free from our enchantment. Then, a familiar presence joins the fray. It's the water elemental, pulsing within us to the beat of our steps, adding its power to our movements.

Each pool of cleansed water from the Shimat glides across the sand towards us, drawn by the elemental's will. They swirl around our feet, shaking and rippling with our stomps, then flow together into growing masses of pure azure water. The elemental is building an army of itself. It wants to fight alongside us and reclaim its greater body.

A dark vibration rolls through my chest like a shout from the god of thunder. Looking up, I see Azin and Onar atop the black wave, crouched low, their torsos twisted and arms bent in a defiled variation of the dance. Blobs of corruption drip from the wave onto the sand, and they slither towards us like black slugs.

Jackson and I swirl around each other, our mirrored movements building into a dizzying flurry. The elemental responds, and it surges forward to meet the Shimat's army. The impact sends tremors rippling through the desert floor beneath our feet. The Shimat bubbles and hisses where the glowing clean water touches it, but it fights back with hundreds more tendrils that lash out like whips, trying to snare and drag the pieces of the elemental back inside of it.

Then, Jackson and I dash forward, still moving as one, and we summon our water weaponry and twirl about, slashing and severing tendril after tendril as they arc around us. The Shimat rears up again, and then it crashes down with the force of a collapsing mountain. Our borrowed power emerges as a great water shield, blocking the spray of corruption from searing our bodies, and our elemental surges forward to meet the Shimat with equal fury. Geysers of pure water explode upward, shattering the face of the Shimat into a thousand black droplets that rain down around us.

"Hell yeah!" Jackson shouts, but our moment of victory is brief. Some of the black pools are cleansed by the elemental's touch, but many of them regather and surge forward, doubled in size, and begin to overtake the elemental's forces, corrupting them again.

It's clear that as it stands, we don't have the power to stop the Shimat. The water elemental is too small, and its power inside of us is only temporary. We need to cut to the heart of the Shimat where the corruption is rooted. We need to use our phoenix powers.

17

JACKSON

The towering tar blob has us on retreat. It's using Azin and Onar to make itself more powerful, and I can see them dancing across the surface of the black wave above us,

moving like broken marionettes. The sight hits me like a gut punch. This thing has our friends.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Airos, we have to get them out," I say.

He nods. "There's only one way we can do it. From the sky."

"Do you have enough in you?"

"I have to," he replies.

We're nearing the end of the ridge. Nowhere else to go but down into the muck. We need to make a decision, fast.

The pieces of the water elemental surge around us like raindrops on a car windshield, gathering together as they sweep in defensive arcs and then deflect the bits of Shimat that power through the force field of influence created by our dance. I know that once we stop, all hell is going to break loose. We're gonna have to be fast.

"Ready, Jackson?"

"Is it cliché to say I was born ready?"

"Grab onto me."

I'm not afraid of failing. But what I realize in that moment is that I am afraid to lose him.

It's visceral. And it's shocking.

Yeah, of course you're afraid, I justify in my head. You've already lost too many friends.

But this time, the reasoning just doesn't land right. There's more to it, and I know it. I just don't want to see it. I refuse to see it.

If I ignore it, then it doesn't exist, right?

That's always worked for me. But it's not working now.

"Hold on tight," Airos says, and then his phoenix form erupts out in a blaze of ruby and emerald-gold feathers. I clutch on tight, squeezing his body between my thighs as he launches into the sky.

The Shimat immediately surges forward. Airos tucks in his wings and spirals through the cresting wave just before it crashes over and engulfs the ridge. Black tentacles whip up like the arms of a giant squid, chasing us in wild loops through the air. I manage to land a hit with my new water-bending abilities and slice one clean off, but dozens more take its place. Shit. I can't waste what little of these powers remain. I have to be surgical.

From up here, I can see the encampment sitting just beyond the dune ridges. The people have gathered and it looks as though they're moving closer to the battle.

Dammit, what the hell are they doing? Why aren't they getting as far away as possible?

But where would they go? All they have are a few gryphs. There's no way they'd be able to get far enough away to escape the Shimat.

Airos pulls up and climbs straight toward the open morning sky as the Shimat reaches

after us. My stomach flips as he hits the apex and does a corkscrew, spinning us around. I clench my teeth and suck in a deep, strained breath, fighting the G-forces that threaten to rip me from Airos's back and knock my lights out. The tentacles shoot past us, but then explode outward like a fountain at the peak and come raining down after us in a deadly shower.

"Here we go!" Airos shouts.

Azin and Onar are right below us, directly in our sights. Airos pins back his wings, and we hurtle into a breakneck dive. All I can do in that moment is pray my grip holds until the split second I'll have to act. I force my eyes to stay open, despite the burning wind and stinging sand.

Come on. Come on.

The tentacles split again and become hundreds of strands that stretch like fingers to grasp at Airos's tail feathers.

"Faster!" I yell.

Almost there. Almost?—

Suddenly, another massive wave rises off the Shimat's body and starts to crest over Azin and Onar, shielding them from our attack.

"Shit, shit!" Airos shouts as he veers to avoid it. He swoops in a tight somersault that nearly sends me flying off his back, then pulls up as the pursuing strands crash into the top of the wave.

"We still have a chance!" I urge. "Come around, get us in there!"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

The tentacles erupt out again, and zip toward us like Sidewinder missiles. Airos has no choice but to pull more evasive maneuvers, rolling right and left to dodge the oncoming attacks. The Gs are insane, and it's nearly impossible to keep track of our target. It feels like either I'm going to puke or my neck is going to snap.

There they are—but our window is narrowing fast, and Airos is slowing down. I feel his power draining, and there's not much left in the tank.

He whips around and around, pulling the chasing tentacles into knots, but they keep coming. It's endless. Then he makes a hard turn and lines us up with a gap in the narrowing wave tube. And then we enter the tunnel, and I see Azin and Onar, but they seem to be getting further away, growing smaller in the blackness.

"Jackson," I hear Airos say. "I?—"

His wing tips drag against the walls of the tube, and black veins quickly spread across his feathers.

"Fuck! Airos!" I shout.

I have to give him my powers. I have to channel whatever phoenix power I have left into him.

Why isn't it working?! Why can't I feel it?

It's like a massive wall is suddenly blocking him from me. And then I look down and see the corruption is on me now too, and as the last of Airos's phoenix energy

dissipates, his feathers disintegrate and vanish into a flurry of sparks and embers. He's in his human form, and together, we plunge toward the blackness.

18

AIROS

It's cold. Cold like death.

The chill spreads through my body, radiating from my chest, and I float along through nothingness—just the black depths of oblivion.

Let go...

The voice rasps into my ear and fills my mind.

Do not fight it. Let go.

Fight what? I'm confused; I don't know what it's talking about. If I'm dead, then this must be the River Theohel, and I must be on my way to the realm of the gods. But something tells me I'm not. Not yet, at least.

And then the voice is replaced with a thought, or a piece of consciousness, or maybe a memory.

Jackson. I see Jackson drifting in the darkness. He doesn't look at me. He just disappears.

I've failed him.

Yes... You should never have been a Guardian.

Then, I'm standing in a wide-open field, the grasses around me furrowed and flattened from the power of the flyer vanishing into the sky above me.

I failed then, too. I couldn't stop them from taking him.

Let go, the voice urges. Do not continue to fight.

I want to. If I let go, then I'll be free of my destiny and the shame crushing down on my heart. Will the underworld release me of these burdens?

Yes. Do it.

I can't. Something is keeping me here. I feel it, like a tether wrapped around my body.

I feel Jackson.

Jackson

I'm just drifting like a boat on a dark ocean. No rudder, no sail. It feels like something is trying to drag me below the surface, but it isn't strong enough. At least, not yet. And then something that looks like a tiny window appears out of the void, like a TV screen flickering in a dark room. I move toward it—or maybe it's moving toward me. It's impossible to know. It gets bigger and bigger, and soon I'm able to step through it.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

The forest surrounds me. Moonlight shines through the spindly, leafless branches reaching toward the sky like an exalting congregation. A haze drifts through, and I'm hit by the smell of burning fuel and ordnance. Then I see the flames through the trees.

God, not this.

Adrenaline floods my body and my heart is pounding a mile a minute. My entire being wants to flee from the suffocating guilt overcoming me. The worst moment of my life.

And then, a cold, dry whisper echoes all around me. They're going to know what you did. They will all know what you really are.

The forest seems to open up to swallow me whole. It's inviting me in. It's telling me that all I need to do is give in to it, and I can escape the torture of my disgrace and weakness. All I have to do is let go.

But I've been down this path before. Something pushes me to turn away from it and move toward the destruction that had been our defensive line. The groans and screams of dying men suddenly go quiet as I enter the burning rubble. There's nothing, no sound except for the heavy thudding of my heart. Lying straight ahead of me are the remains of my trench, now turned into a crater of gnarled tree roots and hunks of smoking metal. A tattered piece of the camo tarp we'd used as rain cover still hangs loosely over the depression in the ground.

Clarke is in there.

It's your fault he's dead,I hear the voice say.

But I know this isn't true. I would've died alongside him had I not followed McScott.

Then you should die.

All I want is to tell him I'm sorry. I want to tell both of them I'm sorry. I abandoned them, just like I abandoned everyone else who meant something to me. I reach for the tarp. I know what's beneath there is terrible, but I have to see.

Anger surges up from somewhere both within and around me. Fury at being disobeyed. It wants to know why I won't give in. I just ignore it.

And then I tear back the fabric.

Airos

I run through the field, chasing after the feeling that tugs at my body. I need to find him.

He's gone.

The feeling fades away, but I keep running. I'm not stopping.

It was never your destiny to protect him. You have failed. You have lived a meaningless life pursuing a meaningless mission.

I still can't stop. It doesn't matter if I'm searching blindly in the darkness.

Why? Why do you persist?

Because... I care for him.

Is that all?

The painful yearning in my heart betrays the truth about the way I feel for Jackson. It started as something unremarkable, just a tiny speck of a seed so easy to ignore, that grew into something that has rooted itself deep inside of me and spread ferociously out of control.

It's something I've never felt for anyone else. Not even myself.

Suddenly, the field around me erupts into flames like a furious scream, and vanishes into a swirl of smoke. I'm now standing on the side of a mountain, staring down at a cascade of stone and earth rolling down the mountainside like a hungry beast. Massive boulders tumble through the veils of dust, splintering massive trees as if they were mere saplings. The sound is overwhelming—a deep, primal roar reverberating through my chest. In its path lies a coastal village, twinkling with evening lamplight. My village. More and more of the mountain breaks away, and the lights vanish beneath the unstoppable behemoth. Even the ships anchored in the harbor are decimated as the earth rolls into the sea.

My outstretched hand is trembling violently. I quickly pull it back against my chest where I feel the terrified percussion of my heartbeat. I drop to my knees.

You will never be free of what you did. Guarding him was never your destiny.

The words pierce me like a poisoned knife. I feel their truth. So much of me wants to give in and release myself from this torture.

But the tether holds fast. It won't fray, despite the darkness's frantic gnawing. I'm still connected to him.

If guarding him was never my destiny, then why does it feel like fate is tied to him?
Why can't I just let go?

Page 59

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

And then I hear his voice, ringing out as clear as birdsong in the morning. He's calling my name. He's out there, and he needs me to find him.

And that's all it takes.

A bright light shines upon the recesses of my heart, illuminating the truth that I've been withholding from myself—the realization that my vow was always doomed to be broken because of my true destiny.

I'd thought that I could live a thousand lives and never have a greater honor than being Jackson's Guardian. I was wrong. There is a greater honor.

And it's to love him.

The voice of the darkness screams in my mind, trying to regain its influence over my thoughts, but I shut it out, and the terrible memory surrounding me vanishes into dust. I'm enshrouded in a suffocating nothingness. I hear Jackson shouting for me again, and I force through the thick darkness to find my way to him.

"Jackson!" I scream.

I will never stop fighting for him.

Jackson

I pull back the tarp, and with it the entire vision drops like a theater curtain. I'm no longer at the Malyi Sorych battlefield.

Looking around, I immediately recognize the mural painted on a nearby wall—a scene of children reading books beneath a whimsical cloud filled with colorful animals, airplanes, knights, princesses, historical figures, and drifting musical notes. They demolished this building the year before I finished elementary school. The mural went with it.

Kids run around the blacktop. Some play hopscotch, others smack a tetherball around a pole. A group of boys play kickball. Recess. To my right are the temporary bungalows where I took my third and fourth grade classes. What the hell am I doing here?

The sound of laughter from somewhere behind the bungalows catches my attention, and I'm hit by an intense feeling of *déjà vu*. I know this moment, but I can't remember why. It's like finding missing photos in the attic. I don't have many memories of this time in my life.

Following the sound, I have the sense that I'm walking in my own footsteps. This is something I've lived before.

There. In the shadow of the bungalow, three boys have cornered another kid. His backpack lies split open on the ground—books, papers, and his lunchbox are scattered across the pavement.

Aaron Lee. A name I'd completely forgotten pops into my head.

He was a transfer student from another state, and for some reason, all the kids used to give him shit. Maybe because he was smarter than them, or because he was a little shorter than everyone else, or something about his parents... I can't remember, and it doesn't matter. Kids sometimes don't have a reason to be cruel.

I liked Aaron. I liked his brown eyes, his glasses, and the way he smiled. I liked

everything about him. I wanted him to notice me. The first times I tried to make friends, he always shut me out. It didn't bother me. I don't think it registered as rejection—I just kept trying. I was always the one complimenting his projects, asking if he wanted to partner up, and seeing if he would walk home from school with me. It didn't matter that he said no; I was just happy to talk to him. And eventually, he let me in. It was the happiest day of my life when he agreed to walk home with me. I was in heaven the day I worked up the courage to reach over and hold his hand.

One of the bullies kicks Aaron's lunchbox, and sends the nested containers and a pair of baby-blue chopsticks clattering across the ground. Pieces of chicken and bits of rice splatter onto Aaron's pants. The rest of the group laughs.

A voice from behind me shouts out, "Hey, dumbasses!"

The boys all turn to look, and so do I.

It's me. A fourth grade me, standing there looking pissed off.

And then suddenly, I remember what this was all about. It's amazing how some memories can fade naturally over time, and how some you force yourself to forget. This one, I'd tried to forget, along with Aaron's entire existence. But I guess no memory can be truly forgotten. They can only be submerged in the archives of your mind, tucked away in a dusty corner waiting to be dredged back up at the worst possible time.

The boys look surprised, or even a little nervous, but when the leader goes, "Oooh," all the others join him.

"Look, it's hisboyfriend," the leader says, emphasizing the word in a sing-song voice. "Leelee needs a rescue from his boyfriend."

"Leelee needs a rescue, Leelee needs a rescue," the others sing.

"Shut up!" Aaron shouts.

"Oooh, he's mad," taunts the leader. "It must be true. Why don't you give him a kiss?"

"Leave him alone," I say. "Or I'll mess you up."

The leader is big. I'm pretty sure he was held back a grade. But I don't back down, even when he comes right up to me. The otherboys are nervous again. It's clear they don't want to get into a real fight.

Page 60

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I watch me stare the kid down, and I can't help but feel a gleam of pride. That was something my dad had hammered into me. "Men don't back down."

"Leave him alone," I repeat, enunciating every word.

"Come on, Tommy," whispers one of the other boys. "Let's go. The handball court is open."

Tommy the bully snorts and pushes past me. "Bunch of gay homos."

The insult doesn't even register to my younger self. It hadn't become a weapon that could be used against me. Not yet.

"Those guys are freakin' morons," I say, hurrying over to help pick his stuff up.

Aaron doesn't say a word. He doesn't even look at me. I try to hand him his papers, but he refuses to take them from me.

"Here, Aaron," I say.

"Leave me alone," he replies.

"It's okay, don't worry about them. Let's just go walk around the field."

"Leave me ALONE!" He swats the papers out of my hand. "I don't want to be friends anymore."

"What? Why?"

"Because I don't want to be gay."

"What is that?"

"You. It's gross. My parents say it's just wrong, that people like that are sick. I don't want to be sick."

"I'm not sick," I say.

Aaron grabs his backpack and hurries away, leaving me alone behind the bungalows.

I'm standing there, defiant and angry, but tears are welling up in my eyes.

"I'm not sick," I hear myself whisper again.

I remember what happens over the following weeks. The name-calling. The bullying redirected at me. Doodles passed around the classroom accusing me of holding hands with other boys. Finding slurs that no eleven-year-old should know scribbled on the corner of my desk after coming back from the bathroom. Definitions I would learn by searching on the internet, and the rabbit holes of hatred I would fall into with no guardrails to protect me.

The bullying stopped after I knocked out several of Tommy's teeth and nearly blinded him. The trajectory of my life was now set. Dad's pride in me not taking any shit from anyone. Dad's fury learning why I'd been bullied. Middle school. More fights. I genuinely enjoyed goading assholes and bullies and drawing their attention away from the weaker kids, even if it meant people thinking I was some kind of violent lunatic who might go berserk if pushed too far. The fighting helped me to ignore the things I was trying hardest to push down. Everyone avoided me, even the teachers.

And then I met Rachyl. She changed everything.

I see myself standing in the void. He's my fifth-grade self, but at the same time, he's me throughout my whole life. He's alone, trying and failing to stop himself from crying. His teeth are clenched so tightly it looks like they might break. A pathetic sight.

Remember, the world despises you...

The voice is like ice.

You should not be here.

Everything is all laid out in front of me. The whole reason why I've been running my entire life, why I've been so afraid. Why I hate myself. All because of the words of a boy I'd loved, who probably hadn't even known what they meant.

The darkness is offering me an escape from all this. It pushes at my back, driving me forward toward the edge.

Do it...

"Jackson?"

I look up and see Rachyl. She gives me her usual hard stare, the one she would always give me when she's had enough of my antics.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

This vision feels different, like it's coming from somewhere outside of the darkness. It's not a memory, or a premonition; it's not part of me at all.

"Wow," she says. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Where have I been?" I ask, puzzled. "I've just been right here."

She laughs. "Pregnant? You can't make that up."

"I know. Fuckin' bizarre, right?"

"You would troll me in my dreams."

"It's not a dream. Not for me, at least."

Rachyl closes her eyes. It's like she's looking at everything I've been through. "Wow. Wild stuff." Then she smiles. "He must be the daddy, then. I should've known you'd be into blondes."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

It feels like she's drifting away from me, like she's on a boat disappearing into a fog.

"Is this your way of telling me everything's okay?" she says. "I hope so..."

"I don't know if I'm okay," I call out. "I think I might be dying, or some shit."

"You're ready to give up, just like that? Come on, dude. Don't bitch out on me again."

Her voice is growing distant and difficult to hear. I can barely see her now.

"Rachyl!" I shout. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I disappeared on you."

"It needed to happen. For the both of us. Jackson... I know you can do it, okay? It's not too late..."

It is too late, the voice growls, forcing itself back into my mind.

Rachyl is gone. I see myself again. A crying, lonely, broken child.

"Why am I sick?" he says. "Why do I have to be sick?"

The darkness curls in, ready to plant the thoughts of self-hatred, guilt, and fear into that little boy's head.

But I step in first.

"Hey," I say, crouching down in front of him. "It's okay. None of this is your fault. You aren't sick. There's nothing wrong with who you are."

He looks at me, eyes puffy with tears. "Then...I can go to him?"

"Of course you can. That's exactly what you need to do."

I wrap my arms around myself, drawing him close.

"Thank you," we say to each other.

When I stand, I feel the darkness around me tremble. It knows that it's lost. It has no influence over me.

I step forward, and it recoils back. The world is crumbling around me, and I can feel Airos's presence calling to me like a beacon in the night.

I take another step. I'm no longer the same Jackson I was when the Shimat overtook me. He's gone.

I'm not afraid to tell the truth. I'm not going to run.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

I'm gay.

I'm gay.

I'm gay.

The unspeakable words that had been a prison of constant torture now feel like my weapons and armor. I'm powerful.

I'm free.

I want him. I want to be with him. I'm going to find him.

19

JACKSON

I rip through the boundary of the Shimat's control and tear my mind out of its clutches. I'm awake, but I'm engulfed in pitch black oil of its body. I yell for him in my mind as I fight my way toward the feeling of his presence.

You will not stop me from getting to him.

And then my fingers reach a warm hand. The contact hits me like a live wire. I yank him toward me, and he pulls back, both of us fighting our way through the churning darkness of the Shimat. Then we're crashing into each other, and I wrap myself around him as tightly as I can. I feel the warmth of him against me and the strength of

his arms locking me close, making sure that nothing can pull us apart.

Suddenly, there's this rush of energy filling me up—warm and golden and alive. It surges through my veins, and like during our flight over this desert, I feel the power crackling from me into him, where it mixes with and replenishes his energy and explodes into something more powerful than either of us alone.

This is what I was meant to do. This is my purpose. Right now, with his arms around me and our power flowing together like two rivers joining into one, I finally get it. This isn't just about saving these people or defeating a corrupted elemental, or even a phoenix prophecy.

This is about us.

His chest heaves like he's been hit by a defibrillator, and a brilliant phoenix flame explodes around us. The darkness doesn't just retreat; it screams as the light tears through it like molten steel through ice.

We fall from the Shimat's body, along with Azin and Onar, their limp forms tumbling through the air. Airos shifts into phoenix form mid-fall, his transformation a burst of emerald and bronze flames that streak across the desert sky like a comet. He swoops beneath the falling shamans and catches them in his talons before they hit the ground.

Above us, the Shimat stands frozen with a huge crater blasted into its side, and Airos veers away toward the dunes overlooking the encampment. Then, the Shimat begins to shrink and convulse, its liquid surface hardening into brittle sheets that crack and peel away like burnt skin, shattering when they hit the ground in great thundering booms.

Airos gently releases Azin and Onar onto the sand as he comes in for a landing. I leap from his back, he shifts to human form, and we run to them. They've already regained

consciousness, and we help them to their feet.

"It's over," I say.

Onar grips Azin's arm for support. "No. Not yet."

The Shimat lumbers toward us as it continues to come apart, the shattered pieces disintegrating and melting away into the sand. It's molting, but the poisoned heart still remains somewhere deep under the ground.

A fluttering inside of my chest tells me what needs to be done. It's the final remaining drops of the water elemental.

"Then let's end this," I tell them.

Behind us, the tribe approaches the dunes with Niah leading them. They're here to watch a prophecy be fulfilled. They're here to see a couple of Shalkeks kick a Shimat's ass.

Onar plants his foot into the ground with a solidthud. Azin, Airos, and I do the same. And then we dance.

The rhythm quickly reveals itself to us, flowing through our bodies like liquid fire, and we move across the sand with purpose, our feet carving intricate patterns into the earth. My eyes lock onto Airos's as we circle each other, and the world around us dissolves into a blur. He grins at me—that cocky, mischievous grin that always gets under my skin—and I can't help but laugh out loud.

Pure joy surges up through me, bubbling over and spilling out in ways I can't control. God, I don't think I've felt anything like this since I was a kid.

The Shimat's approach slows to a jerky, shuddering crawl. Airos takes me in his arms, and as we twirl around each other, another wave of phoenix power surges through me and overflows into him. Just the feeling of his touch is enough to spark regeneration. It's a chain reaction, a feedback loop. My head is filled with flashes of his hands exploring my body, of what it would feel like to finally have him the way I've been craving, and every heated thought sends another pulse of energy through my veins. Goddamn. Give me more of that shit.

With our powers in perfect resonance, the desert around us becomes an extension of our bodies. We can feel the heart of the Shimat in its aquifer deep below the ground. We capture it in a fist of sand, and the ground rumbles as we reel it to the surface. The Shimat writhes angrily, fighting to break free from both our grasp and the influence of the shaman dance, but we have it by the balls.

The desert soil erupts into the air like a massive geyser as we pull the heart out from the ground and lift it high into the air, trapped in a ball of sand. The Shimat floats above it, undulating like a sphere of water in zero gravity.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

Airos looks at me and I nod, and then we sprint for the edge of the dune. He shifts, I leap on his back, and we're in the air. Azin and Onar keep the dance going below, maintaining their hold on the Shimat as we fly toward the massive beast.

The shadow of its underbelly swallows us, and I clamp down on its heart—that poisoned core buried deep in its sandy prison. We weave between the streams of sand cascading from the Shimat's body like waterfalls, and come around for the attack. I call the water elemental, and it leaves my body and forms into a long, slender spear in the palm of my hand.

Now!

Airos and I rip the sand away, revealing a throbbing black tumor wrapped around the Shimat's glowing heart like a parasite. The Shimat convulses violently in a last defense, and manages to wrestle some control back from Azin and Onar's spell. Tendrils burst from its body and whip towards us with lethal speed, but Airos banks hard left, his wings screaming through the air as we dodge a strike that would've cut us in half.

"Jackson!" Airos shouts over the howling wind. "One shot!"

The elemental spear in my hand blazes with purifying light, but the window is closing fast. The Shimat's defenses are reforming, layers of corrupted water swirling around its core like armor. We streak in like a lightning bolt, weaving between the chaos. Tendrils come for Airos's wings, but he's too fast for them now, and a blast of phoenix fire from his feathers turns them into shriveled husks.

I draw back my arm, feeling the water elemental's power surge through the spear.

"Got you, motherfucker," I say.

Throw.

The spear cuts through the air, punches through the Shimat's defenses, and lances the poison bulb dead center. For a heartbeat, everything goes silent.

Then the corruption screams as the tumor explodes in a geyser of black pollution. The elemental's cleansing power spreads like wildfire through the Shimat's massive form, and I watch in awe as the darkness drains away like ink being washed from glass. What's left behind is crystal-clear water that catches the desert sun and fractures it into a thousand dancing rainbows. The purified Shimat hangs in the air like a giant prism, casting brilliant arcs of color across the sand dunes below.

Then the Shimat's massive form shudders once, twice—and pops like the world's largest water balloon. Its purified waters come cascading down in a torrential downpour that soaks us and the desert below, each droplet sparkling with captured sunlight as it falls. The rainbow light follows us down, painting everything in shifting bands of color—the sand, our faces, Airos's feathers as he pulls out of our dive.

For a moment, the entire desert looks like it's been touched by magic, shimmering under a canopy of light and falling water.

20

AIROS

The tribe breaks camp with startling efficiency. Within hours, the entire encampment is packed and moving north across the transformed desert. Jackson and I ride

alongside Azin and Onar at the front of the procession, with Niah leading us through terrain that's barely recognizable from the wasteland we'd crossed just days before.

Ankle-high water pools everywhere, covering the sand where the corrupted Shimat had spread its poison. Already I can see signs of life stirring beneath the surface. Tiny green shoots push through the wet sand, and birds wade around, plucking up insects emerging from their subterranean hiding places.

We follow the flow of newly formed streams as they carve fresh channels through the landscape. When we reach the edge of what had been nothing but cracked earth and scattered bones just yesterday, a collective gasp rises from the tribe behind us. The oasis stretches before us like something out of a dream—crystal-clear pools connected by babbling streams, surrounded by patches of green grass that seem to grow more vibrant with each passing hour. Palm trees that had stood as dry skeletons now rustle with fresh fronds, and the air itself feels different. Alive. I can feel the elemental's power thrumming through every part of this land, and though Jackson and I can no longer control it, I know the connection will always remain within us.

Someone behind us starts to weep tears of joy. Then another voice joins in, and another, until the entire tribe is laughing and crying. Niah dismounts her gryph and kneels at the water's edge, cupping the clear liquid in her weathered hands. When she drinks, her eyes close in what looks like pure bliss.

"The Shalkek have fulfilled their destiny," she says, looking at us with a small smile.

It's not long before other tribes begin to arrive, and soon a grand encampment has taken root around the borders of the oasis. People swim, play, and refill their water stores. Old intertribal friendships are rekindled, and new ones made. Flocks of gryphs mingle and pair off. The desert's cycle of life has started again.

It's a temporary respite from the influence of Umbrios. But it gives me hope for our

task—that it isn't too late to reverse the phase of darkness back to the light.

Jackson and I, along with Azin and Onar, find ourselves swept up in a constant whirlwind of celebration. Every time we try to catch our breath or steal a moment to process what we've been through, another group of tribespeople approaches with offerings, blessings, or simply wanting to touch the hands of the Shalkek. Eventually, we just accept that there is no escape from the grateful crowds. Niah and Onar act as our translators, and we greet every person who comes to meet us. Like myself, I can tell that Jackson isn't accustomed to being the center of attention. He's trying his hardest, but the poor man is sweating.

Cooking pits seem to materialize out of nowhere around the oasis. Two tribes present their finest goats for the feast. An elderly omega tugs at Jackson's sleeve, gesturing towards a group of young omegas.

"Come," Onar says, taking Jackson's arm. "They wish to meet your child."

Jackson catches my eye over the crowd between us and gives me a small shrug before allowing himself to be swept away toward the gathering. The last I see of him is his dark hair disappearing into a sea of colorful robes as excited voices rise around him.

Azin slings his arm around my shoulder and pulls me along to meet a group of tattooed alphas. He immediately launches into what can only be our rescue story, complete with reenactments. One moment he's flapping his arms like me in phoenix form, the next he's miming Jackson's spear throw with such enthusiasm that the other alphas have to duck. Each pivotal moment is punctuated with a hearty slap to my chest that nearly knocks the wind out of me. The men all have questions for me, but the most I can do is smile and shrug.

Then, someone thrusts a clay bowl into my hand, and a big jug is passed from hand to hand until it reaches me.

"Excellent," I say, holding out my bowl with a grin. "No words needed to understand a drink of milk wine, eh?"

Azin says something agreeable, and the alphas fill my bowl. To my disappointment, it's just plain water. Everyone looks so eager to see me drink it.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Well... Bottoms up, then," I say, and they all cheer when I drink.

The entire time, I find myself searching the crowd for Jackson. I spot him. Colorful cords drape his neck like garlands, and he's allowed his shirt to be pulled up over his belly. Two omegas crouch in front of him and use the tips of their fingers to paint intricate, swirling patterns on his exposed skin in red ochre. He looks up and sees me, but before he can acknowledge my gaze, even more people arrive, filling in the crowd between us. Water splashes from my bowl as Azin sweeps me along. There are more people to greet, more sacred water to be drunk, and not a single jar of wine around to make the chaos a little easier to navigate.

Niah emerges from the crowd and presents me with a length of woven cord. She ties it around my wrist. The alphas surrounding me erupt in celebration, grinning and pounding my back and shoulders with hearty, congratulatory thumps. I'm slightly suspicious about their extra-exuberant reaction.

"And what is this?" I ask her.

An alpha comes over to fill my bowl—this time with sweet milk wine instead of water. I take an eager sip, delighted.

"For good fortune in fatherhood...and continued fertility in the seasons to come," Niah says. Then she leans closer and whispers, "Tie it around your manhood when the time is right."

A little too eager with that sip. I spray out the wine and break into a fit of coughs. The group erupts into laughter. More back slapping. I'm choking from embarrassment.

"No, no, Niah," I protest. "This is a misunderstanding. Jackson and I... That is not my child."

I try to remove the bracelet, but she clasps her hand around my wrist and stops me.

"He loves you," she says. "Though he may not see it himself. He only needs a little push."

I don't know how to reply to her. I'm completely speechless. It feels as though she's been reading my mind, and I realize that's been the case from the moment we met. She could see something about Jackson and me that neither of us could. And, in fact, so much of my feelings for him could only have been unearthed because of her influence.

All I can do is chuckle. "It seems you were orchestrating more than just a ritual, Niah."

She pats me on the chest, then turns and disappears into the crowd.

Light falls, and the feast begins. The gryph milk wine is finally free-flowing. It's weak stuff, barely enough to make my stomach tingle even though I've drunk so much of it I could probably qualify for a spot in their nursery.

I haven't seen Jackson in hours. The assembled tribes have settled into circles around the cooking fires throughout the encampment. People drift from fire to fire, drawn by different conversations and, more importantly, the chance to dine alongside the honored heroes. They're most interested in my ability to control the sand. And with my powers near their full potency, I'm happy to indulge their curiosity with a little spectacle. They watch with reverent awe as I raise a twirling sand funnel over the fire pit, then reshape it into the terrible likeness of the cursed Shimat as it had advanced upon the encampment. A collective gasp rises when I conjure a phoenix from the

sand and reenact our entire battle in miniature.

And then, from the corner of my eye, I notice Jackson passing by behind the crowd. He's alone, and with everyone's attention drawn to my performance, he's able to make a getaway without anyone noticing. He disappears into the darkness. I quickly get up to go after him, and the sand drops out of the air and falls onto the fire, smothering it in a puff of smoke. A few hesitant claps scatter through the group as they try to determine if this abrupt ending was intentional. I hear Niah say something, and everyone cheers. May the gods bless that woman; she's covered my exit.

I hurry along the path between the group circles, following the direction I'd seen Jackson go. Now I'm away from the cooking fires and walking through a forest of tents erected alongside a small stream that trickles over rocks toward the oasis.

"Looking for something?"

I turn around and see Jackson standing beside a tent. He smirks at me and pulls the hood from his head. His neck is still laden with the ceremonial cords, and I remember the one that Niah tied around my wrist. My throat tightens.

"A stronger bowl of wine," I say. "I'm surprised you were able to escape."

"Likewise. You were putting on a pretty wild show there. You could start charging for tickets. You'd be rich."

With a chuckle, I move closer to him, but Jackson steps back. I stop, conscious of my desires and his hesitations. I don't want to startle him.

"I can only tolerate a crowd for so long," I tell him.

"Come on. You love being the center of attention."

"Only with enough wine, or the right pair of eyes. So, what now? Are you off to sleep?"

"Nah. Just a breather. Me and sleep don't really get along so well. Doubt I'll be able to get any shut eye anyway. I'm still fucking charged from today."

Jackson's hand absently touches one of the ceremonial cords around his neck, and I find myself tracking the movement. Torchlight catches the angles of his jaw, the hollow of his throat where the cord rests.

"It's incredible, isn't it?" I say. "The way your powers replenished and passed into me. Whathappenedwhen we were in the Shimat?"

"Yeah... Incredible."

"It shouldn't have been possible without an input," I say.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"Well, it was just like when we fought those bugs. Same thing."

I'm tiptoeing around it. I'd heard his voice calling out in the darkness. And when I'd found him, our bodies had responded to each other's touch with all the potency of a blistering climax. There can only be one explanation for what happened, but I don't know how to ask him about it. I can feel his tension. He's like a rabbit on the verge of bolting to safety. One wrong move and I've lost him.

"Of course," I say. "But, did you feel... Something else?"

"I felt..." He shakes his head. "Nothing."

Such a terrible liar.

"Nothing?" I press, as gently as I can. "Because?—"

"I should head back," he says abruptly. "Or else they're going to send out a search party." But he doesn't move.

Tension crackles between us. I understand. He wants me to leave.

I nod and force myself to step back from him. "I'm sure they've noticed by now that the Shalkek have gone missing."

Swallowing my frustration, I turn to leave.

"Airos."

Jackson strides forward and catches my wrist. His face scrunches in frustration, struggling to find words that seem to hang on his tongue.

"Fuck it," he says, and before I can reply, he's pulling me toward him, and then his mouth is on mine.

We stumble into the nearby tent—thank the gods it's empty—and with a quick jerk, I pull the flap closed behind us.

Jackson's mouth is warm and desperate against mine, his hands fisted in the front of my robe as he pulls me closer. There's a tremor in his touch—not fear, but the raw uncertainty of a man crossing a line he's never dared approach before. His lips are soft, tentative at first, like he's waiting for me to pull away.

I don't.

Instead, I cup his face with one hand, my thumb brushing against the sharp line of his jaw as I deepen the kiss. He makes a small sound—part surprise, part relief—and opens for me. The taste of him floods my senses, salt and warmth and something uniquely Jackson that makes my phoenix energy surge beneath my skin.

Gods. This kiss is like no other. I drink it in and crave more, and it's like no amount could possibly satiate our thirst. There's no other omega in this world I could experience this with—I know this for certain. Denying myself a mate has never been difficult, because I hadn't known Jackson yet. He is what I've been saving myself for. This moment.

Jackson's breathing hitches when I trace my tongue along his bottom lip, and I feel the exact moment his walls crumble. His grip on my robe tightens, pulling me flush against him until there's no space left between our bodies. The warmth radiating from his pregnant belly is intoxicating, and I can smell his arousal mixing with the desert

air—a scent that makes every instinct I have roar to life. He accepts my tongue as I plunge it into his mouth, and lets out a soft groan as he swirls his against mine.

We finally break apart, and a trail of saliva glimmers in the moonlight from his tongue to mine like a spider's thread. We're both breathing hard. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. His eyes are dark, pupils blown wide, and there's a flush creeping up his neck that I want to trace with my tongue. It feels like we've just traded blows.

"Fuck," he whispers.

Still cautious not to frighten him away, I carefully push my fingers through his hair and slowly rest my forehead against his. As my hand reaches the base of his neck, I feel the rapid flutter of his pulse against my palm. "Jackson?—"

"Don't," he says quickly. "Don't say anything that's going to make me think too hard about this. 'Cause I have no idea what the hell I'm doing right now."

I notice the evidence of his arousal growing firm and insistent through the fabric of his clothes. His breath catches as he realizes it too, and tries to pull back, but I catch him with my hand at the small of his back and hold him. I want him to understand there's no shame in this. There's nothing to fear.

"Then let me show you," I tell him.

I draw him into another kiss, and the moment my lips are on his, I feel some of the tension melt away from his body. I tilt my hips so that my thigh presses up against the shape of his erect cock. He draws in a sharp breath, then slips his hands around my back and presses himself even tighter against me. I slowly trace my hand southwards along the shape of his bottom, and with a squeeze of my palm I encourage him to explore the way rubbing himself on my body feels. He makes small movements with

his hips, and a quiet murmur rumbles from his throat as I claim his lips again. He pushes his tongue into my mouth and slicks it against mine with eager ferocity.

"You like that, do you?" I ask.

"Shut up," he groans, and drives his face into my neck. I feel the heat of his breath on my skin, deep and ravenous, as he murmurs, "How thefuckdo you smell so good?"

His tongue on my neck sends an explosion of power through my body. My cock flexes. It's rock hard, on the verge of ripping a hole through the front of my robe. "Come here," I grunt, lifting him onto my waist and carrying him to a mound of furs spread across the ground. I come down on top of him, driving my hand between his legs to caress the outline of his erection. I'm trying to use some restraint, but the sight of his shape alone is enough to stoke the fire inside of me.

To my surprise, Jackson grabs me by the belt and pulls me between his open thighs. In one smooth action he hooks his legs around me and somehow manages to flip me onto my back. I lie there, blinking in shock as he smirks down at me. He takes the ceremonial cords off his neck and then tugs his cloak over his head and tosses them all aside. I reach up and slip my fingers beneath the thin fabric of hisshurrt, but he catches my hand and pins it to the ground.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 1:59 am

"So we're wrestling, now?" I ask.

Jackson replies by leaning forward so the tip of his bulge presses up against mine. Slowly, he starts to move his hips, massaging our lengths together through the thin barrier of our clothing.

I understand—Jackson wants to be in control. Or at least, he wants to feel like he's in control.

So I start to untie the knot on my belt. Jackson watches, still moving his hips, and then reaches down to help me. I want to take him so badly, but not before he's ready. Not before he's begging me to touch him. Right now, my body is his to explore.

"What's this?" he asks, tugging the band tied to my wrist.

"Ah... A little present from Niah."

Jackson chuckles. "Oh. Let me guess. Fertility charm?"

"Precisely. Any guesses as to what I'm supposed to do with it?"

He wraps his thumb and forefinger around my wrist. "I dunno. Do I even need to be more pregnant? Whoa—felt that."

His casual mention of what's to come sends another rush of heat through me, my cock swelling even thicker. Now I let him take over untying my belt. His hands are trembling, but I don't let him see that I notice. With a final tug, he gets it undone and

pulls it from my waist. Then, with cautious apprehension, he draws back the layers of my robe.

Jackson swallows hard. His attention is riveted to my cock, gently throbbing beneath the thin loincloth, and he clasps his hands together in an effort to still their excited tremors. I shift slightly, just enough to make the fabric pull tighter, and watch his pupils dilate. Propped on my elbow, I let the moment stretch out. No words. No pressure. Just an invitation with my eyes to indulge himself when he's ready. A lifetime of running, and now he's here. This is where it all led. To this tent, to this moment. To me.

Jackson

Is this really happening?

The question floats on an ocean of adrenaline and phoenix energy pooled up in my brain. It feels like I've been told I've won the biggest jackpot in the world. Congratulations! Here's your prize. You have him all to yourself.

Part of me can't believe I'm here, finally letting myself want this.

Airos is reclined in front of me, his ripped thighs spread wide with a thin sheet of fabric draped between his legs like a tiny napkin. I can see the shape of his huge-ass dick beneath it, and clearly Phoenix anatomy doesn't exactly match a human male's.

Jesus, I'm actually salivating. But it's not just that—my whole body is responding. A slick heat is growing between my legs, and the emptiness there is almost painful; just a deep throbbing need demanding to be filled.

The loincloth is fastened at Airos's hip. I slowly pull the knot undone, and the fabric

falls away.

Holy shit. Definitely not a normal human dick.

I can't look away. I want to take in every incredible detail. He's thicker at the base and longer than I am, but the shape is more tapered than a human's, coming to a slightly pointed head that's already slick with precome. But what really catches my attention are the ridges that run along his shaft from the crest of his head to his knotted base. They almost remind me of the sand dunes. Beautiful rolling swells that are clearly designed for one thing: pleasuring an omega.

This is the first time I've ever really gotten a good, hard look at a dick that's not my own. It's mesmerizing. A goddamn work of art specifically designed to fit inside me. The want that fills me is visceral, a desperate desire to touch it, to taste it, to find out what those ridges would feel like moving inside of me. This feeling is fucking crazy. It's like a new part of my brain has suddenly lit up.

The corner of Airos's mouth curls into one of his small, devilish smiles. He's enjoying this as much as I am.

I hover my palm beside his throbbing erection and can feel the heat radiating off it. Then I take it into my hand and slowly wrap my fingers around the solid meat of his shaft.

It's so goddamn warm. It pulses with his heartbeat, and as I tighten my grip, a fresh droplet of precome forms at his tip and runs down the underside of his head. Goddamn, that's fucking hot. I run my thumb over those ridges, exploring each one with fascination. Then, I catch the droplet of precome and slowly spread it around his sensitive tip.

Airos's smile quickly transforms into something else. His eyes flutter closed and he

lets out a low groan. I keep going, closing my hand around his head and coating my palm in his slick, then pulling my fist back down to the thick swollen knot at his base.

His face contorts with pleasure. "Jackson," he breathes, his hips bucking slightly into my grip. The sound of my name on his lips like that makes me tighten my hold and stroke him faster. My cock is aching to be touched, and I can't help myself—I slip my other hand into the front of my pants and begin to massage myself. My underwear is completely soaked with precome.

Touching isn't enough anymore. I need more. I need to know what he tastes like.

"Let me try something," I say.

"Please."

I lean down and press my cheek against his shaft. Its warmth glows against my skin, and then the scent of him hits me like a goddamn drug—heavy and musky and raw. I've had secret fantasies about this. It's better than I could've imagined.

Page 67

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:00 am

"You smell incredible," I whisper into his skin.

He pulses against my face and I nuzzle him closer, allowing his scent to fill my lungs completely.

Then, I finally indulge myself in the forbidden question that has surfaced in my mind so many times over the years. I flick my tongue across his head. Just a tentative taste.

The flavor of him explodes across my tongue—strong and distinct and immediately addictive.

Oh, yeah. I'm gonna love doing this.

I grip him with both hands and polish his head with a swipe of my tongue, then draw my mouth over him, sucking his tip like I would an ice cream.

"Am I doing this right?" I ask.

"Absolutely perfect," he growls, threading his fingers through my hair.

He guides me back onto his cock, and I try to take him deeper this time, letting my tongue explore those ridges as I work my way down his shaft.

"Fuck, Jackson," he breathes, his grip tightening in my hair. "Gods—don't you dare stop."

I'm figuring this shit out as I go, but I must be doing something right. Good thing I'm

a fast learner. I take him even further, testing my limits of how far I can plunge him into my throat. Turns out, I don't have much of a gag reflex.

I cradle the underside of his shaft with my drooling tongue as I work my way down to the knot, unable to go another inch. I hold myself there, letting my throat squeeze around him as he throbs inside of me. When I finally come up for air, his cock slips out of my mouth with a wet pop, thick lines of my saliva dripping from his length. I grin at him as I catch my breath.

Shit, this is fuckin' fun.

Airos's copper eyes flash, and he grabs my arm, pulling me into another kiss. I feel his hand push down to join mine in my pants. He tries to pull them off, but struggles with the closure. "How are these fastened?"

"Alpha phoenix, foiled by pants." I unbuckle my belt and pop the button, then unzip the zipper. Airos does the rest.

He wants me to stand, so I stand. He pauses, running his fingers along the waistband of my underwear. He seems impressed.

"I've never seen anything like it," he says. "They stay on with no tie to hold them?"

I laugh. "That's what you're impressed with?"

He grins, then slips his fingers under the waistband and pulls my underwear down. My cock springs free and bobs in front of his face. A shiver runs through me as he draws his hands up my thighs. He grips my hips, and to my surprise, turns me around. Then I feel his face press against my ass as his fingers wrap around my length.

"Oh, fuck!" I gasp.

The heat of Airos's tongue against me is shocking. My knees buckle as he drags it slowly across my entrance, and I can't stop the moan that tears from my throat. He grips my ass with one hand, spreading me wider as he strokes my cock with the other, exploring my hole with deliberate, teasing licks that make my length throb painfully in his grip.

I'm losing control of myself. I lean forward and push my ass harder against his face, desperate for him to taste me deeper. I feel my wetness mixing with his spit, and it drips down the back of my balls and along my inner thigh. He pumps my cock in perfect time with his licks, and I already feel the rising surge of my climax.

Hell no, not yet. Not until I've tried it all.

I push him away. "Shit, stop. Stop! That feels too fucking good."

"You're delicious," he replies, licking his lips.

I'm sweating. I yank my shirt over my head and toss it aside, then turn around to face him. The moment I do, I hear voices from outside the tent, and before I can react, the flap flies open. Two strangers stand there, staring wide-eyed at us. We stare back.

"Ahh! Shalkek!" they scream, bowing reverently as they back away. "Shalkek!" The flap falls closed again.

Airos and I look at each other. He laughs, and to my own surprise, I do too. Who the fuck cares? I have nothing to hide anymore. I actually like that they saw us. Hell, there's something fucking hot about being caught like this.

"These are beautiful," Airos says, reaching up to trace the painted patterns the omegas had left on me earlier, and a buzz ripples through my body as his fingers make contact with my skin. I move closer to him, and he holds my pregnant belly

gently in his hands.

"For an easy birth," I tell him, then guide his hand to my cock. I don't want to think about that right now. "I've always wondered what it feels like to get a blow job."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:00 am

"You...want me to blow on it?"

"You know, I have no idea why they call it that. They should really call it a suck job."

"Ah, now that makes more sense."

He grips me firmly and traces over me with his tongue. I gasp and grab his hair—I'm way more sensitive than I'm used to being. He smirks and lets out a quiet, amused chuckle, then goes in again, taking my cock right into his mouth. I feel his tongue curl around me as he swallows me down, his forehead pressing against the front of my belly. I try to pull back, but he locks his hand around my ass and holds me in place. Jesus fuck! He's barely even moving his head, and somehow it feels a thousand times better than when I stroke myself.

"Wait, Airos, I don't?—"

But it's too late. My cock is already pulsing and throbbing as my balls empty into his throat. My legs tremble with the sudden climax, and I have to steady myself by gripping his head. A startled cry escapes my lips.

"Son of a bitch," I moan. "Oh god, that feels so fucking good."

He pulls back slowly, and a bit of my come spills from the tip of my dick onto his hand. He licks it clean and swallows what remains in his mouth.

"We're just getting started," he says, guiding me down.

My cock throbs. Normally, it would go soft pretty soon after I finish, but it's still rock hard, and the aching need to be filled remains as strong as ever. I can keep going. It's a damn revelation.

"Fuck yeah, we are," I say, grabbing his cock and using it to draw him closer to me.

He kisses me, and I taste my bitter finish on his lips. It's a little weird that the first time I'm tasting come, it's my own, but having it come from his mouth turns me on.

"Alright, enough fooling around," I growl, dropping onto my back beneath him. I hook my hands behind my knees and pull them up to my chest, spreading myself wide open. "Let's do this. I want you to fuck me. Right now."

Airos's eyes go dark as he takes in the sight of me laid out, completely exposed and demanding what I want.

"I want to see your face when you do it," I add. The notion of being taken from behind is something I'm gonna have to work up to.

He grips his cock at the base and positions himself between my thighs, then presses the head against my slick entrance. He pauses. "Jackson?—"

"Don't you dare go slow on me," I interrupt. "You know I can take a beating."

The challenge in my voice seems to flip a switch in him. He grips my hip, and I see a dangerous, sexy-ass gleam flash in his eyes.

"As you wish," he says, and drives forward.

I might've jumped the gun. His cock is fucking huge, and the stretch is intense and overwhelming. For a second it feels like I'm gonna be ripped in two. I scream and

grab his forearms, but in the next breath I warn him not to stop. It's always better to jump in head first—get the bad part over with so I can get to the fun stuff.

And the fun stuff comes along real quick.

The pain quickly subsides, replaced by a rising heat—our phoenix energies roaring to life like a stoked furnace, soaring and mingling together. He thrusts deeper, tearing a moan from my throat as my eyes roll back. His ridges drag against my insides, striking pleasure spots I didn't know existed. It's like a key finding the right notches in a tumbler—his cock is made for me, and my body is made for him. He falls over me and my legs hook over his shoulders. I grab hold of him, my fingers scraping at his back.

"Christ, Airos," I gasp. "Those fucking ridges?—"

He pulls his hips back and slams into me again, each ridge catching and dragging against my inner walls, sending waves of pleasure radiating through my entire body. I can feel every inch of him, every pulse of his heartbeat through his cock buried deep inside me.

"Harder," I say. I'm fucking begging now. "Harder, Airos. I need everything."

He gives me what I want. His hips snap forward, and he drives into me with increasing intensity. When I throw my head back, Airos leans down and bites the junction between my neck and shoulder. I cry out and throw my legs around him, pulling him even deeper inside. I'm leaking all over my stomach, my dick bouncing with every powerful thrust.

"Fucking mark me up," I hiss. "Just like that, you son of a bitch. Fuck, I'm close. Airos, you're gonna make me come again."

"Together," he growls against my throat. "I want to feel you come around my cock when I fill you."

I can feel him swelling inside of me, getting even thicker as his knot begins to form. The pressure is insane—it's stretching me to my absolute limit.

"Now," he commands. "Come for me now."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:00 am

I melt under the authority in his voice and suddenly turn into a quivering mess.

"Yes," I gasp as he straightens up, gripping my ankles as he surges forward with one final devastating thrust that sends me flying over the edge. My orgasm roars through me, my body arching off the ground as I paint my chest and stomach with thick ropes of come.

Our phoenix energies explode together, so perfectly synchronized it feels like we're sharing the same heartbeat, the same breath. I can feel every pulse, every hot pump of his release filling me up as I spasm around him, milking his cock for every last drop.

He wraps his arms around me as he collapses against me, pulling me close as we ride out the final aftershocks together. He presses his forehead to mine and stares deeply into my eyes. I stare back, not wanting to miss a moment of him. Then, we both start to laugh, softly and gently.

Tension floods out of my body, not just from the orgasm but from everything I've had knotted up inside of me for so long. Sweet fucking relief.

"Think they're gonna come back?" I ask. "We kinda occupied their tent."

"Does it matter?" Airos says, and he pulls one of the furs over us. "We're Shalkek, remember?"

I touch his face, then his neck, and his collarbone. There are scars along the top of his chest.

"You and I—" I start to say.

"—Will be fine," he says. "We have time. So let's take it."

Time.

Yeah... We don't need to have it all figured out right now. All of this is brand new for me, and I can't expect to know who I'm going to be from this point forward. Our scars won't heal overnight. Maybe not ever. We both came here carrying our own baggage, and that doesn't just disappear because we've found each other. But at least I'm not figuring it out alone anymore.

I push my face into the warmth of his neck. His scent is already so damn comforting. And as I close my eyes, he rests his palm against my pregnant stomach, and I feel myself fading into sleep. One where I'm not stuck in front of the TV in my brain, watching the highlight reel of my worst memories replay as nightmares.

Finally, real sleep.

21

AIROS

A low rumbling vibrates through the ground beneath us, pulling me from sleep. My eyes snap open, and beside me Jackson is up and alert, his instincts much quicker than mine.

"What the hell is—" he starts, but cuts himself off as the sound grows louder.

The dim light of early dawn filters through the smoke hole at the tent's center, and then something passes overhead, plunging the tent into darkness. The rumbling builds

into a thudding, drum-like pulse that makes the sand on a nearby chest jump and dance.

"A flyer," I say.

"Shit."

Jackson pulls his clothing on while I quickly slip into my robes. The shadow moves on, but the sound lingers as the flyer circles overhead. It's searching for something. Or someone.

I hear the nomads shouting in confusion outside the tent as the thumping grows more intense. Whoever it is, they're preparing to land.

I throw the tent flap open, and Jackson and I hurry outside. The encampment is stirring to life as people emerge from their tents to see what's happening. Above us, hovering over the oasis, is the transport vessel we'd chased from Sylla's ship. Its power churns the water below as it descends towards the sand.

"That's the buzzer!" Jackson exclaims.

"We're in for a fight," I tell him, grabbing his arm. "Get ready. We might be able to ground it."

"Get back!" Jackson shouts at the villagers as we run towards the vessel. "Stay away!"

Niah appears and rushes to intercept us. "What is this?" she shouts over the noise.

"Get everyone away from it!" Jackson tells her. "They're only here for us."

We leave the cover of the tents and advance on the vessel as it pivots, bringing its port side around. On the deck, the cabin doorswings open. Jackson and I drop into ready stances, calling up our phoenix powers to shape the sand into weapons. But then, a familiar face emerges from the doorway.

Page 70

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:00 am

It's Tyler! He waves frantically when he sees us, a wide grin on his face.

Jackson and I wave back, completely caught off guard by his arrival. The flyer lands on the sand at the edge of the oasis and its power drops to a low vibration.

"What the hell!" Jackson shouts at Tyler. "Dude! Nice fuckin' ride!"

Kalistratos appears from the cabin and comes to the railing. He looks just as surprised to see us as we are to see him.

"I told you we'd find them here," Tyler says, elbowing his arm. "Come on, guys! We gotta go!"

He throws a rope ladder over the side, and we quickly climb up to the deck. Kalistratos offers a hand and pulls Jackson up. I wave him off and pull myself over the rail.

"Another happy reunion," I say to him. "It's... surprisingly good to see you."

A smile cracks his mouth. "Yes. Same to you."

He and I clasp forearms.

"Where's Dustin?" Jackson asks. "You got him, right?"

Tyler's face becomes serious. "No. They fucking got away with him."

"But we have an idea of where they're taking him," Kalistratos says. "Tyler can point the way."

Tyler jabs his finger at the horizon. "I can feel him."

"Al'Phaer," Jackson says. "That's where they're going."

The name hits me like a cold blade. Kalistratos's face goes dark.

"You know it?" I ask, surprised.

"Alyx told me the lore," he says grimly. "A fortress city built on Phoenikos blood and bone."

"Jesus," mutters Jackson.

"Well, come on inside," says Tyler. "We'd better get a move on, and we have a lot to catch up on."

"Yes, indeed," Kalistratos says as he eyes my hand resting on the small of Jackson's back.

"Give us a second," Jackson tells them.

"We'll go get her started," Tyler says.

Jackson and I turn around. Gathered at the edge of the encampment are the desert people, with Azin, Onar, and Niah standing at the front of the group. Niah raises her hand into the air, as if to both bid us farewell and give us her blessing. Onar lowers his head in thanks, and Azin grins and lifts his fist.

"Thank you!" Jackson shouts, but the sound of the flyer's core roars to life and

drowns out his voice. He raises his hand and waves.

The ship lifts into the air, and we peer over the railing and watch as the encampment and its people shrink into the distance. The desert is beautiful. It stretches out for miles in every direction, an endless ocean of sand, marked with wondrous pillars of rock standing like majestic guardians of the land. I take in the sight of this land and will myself to keep the memory of it protected in my mind and my heart.

I take Jackson's hand, and together we follow the others inside.