

The land of the dead was not what Nyla had imagined it to be, nor was it what the tales described. She was standing in the same forest clearing that she had performed the ritual in; the dead fallen leaves still underfoot, and tree branches waving ever so slightly in the breeze. But there was no color to the fallen leaves, nor to the ones waving from the forest canopy. The sun was setting behind the snow-capped peaks that separated her from the battlefield where her brother's body lay slain, but the brilliant rays had no heat. Even the light breeze that normally carried earthy notes of moss and fresh soil had no scent to it. Save for the shifting shadows in the corner of her vision, it felt like the world had been drained of everything that made one feel alive. And indeed, upon closer inspection, the shifting shadows were not signs of life either. The spirits of the dead wandered from tree to tree, trying to find their last ounce of meaning - something living that they could transmit their life force into and finally be at peace.

She glanced right, taking in the sight of her death again. All humans had a death, but it was forbidden to meet them until your time had come. Unless, of course, you performed the ritual. Nyla had only ever heard the village crones whisper about it in tales, and had half believed it to be a myth herself, even as she duly drew blood and chanted the rites to the Scorpion. But indeed, her death appeared in front of her - and she had no doubt it was hers, for it was merely an image of herself - and took her hand, and led her soul to the land of the dead.

"Remember what I told you," her death said. Though it looked just like Nyla, its voice sounded as hollow as the land of the dead looked. "You can search for your brother for as long as your physical body can survive on its own. But let go of my hand, and your soul will no longer be tethered to the land of the dead."

Nyla shuddered. She stepped away from where she had left her body, collapsed in the center of a drawing of the Scorpion's star pattern. She hoped that the god of death himself could

not see her, as he was just starting to rise in the sky along with the moon. "May the Bear protect me," she muttered, tracing the symbol over her heart, and walked away from her body.

Souls did not tire as bodies did. She could run as fast as her legs could carry her to wherever she chose to go, and her eyelids would never droop with sleep. And her brother could only go so many places, for they had spent their entire lives nestled in this tiny valley. She broke into a jog, making sure to keep her grip on her death's hand tight.

Resolutely, she began her search. Down to the shore of the Giant's Eye, where they had sparred with wooden swords in the moonlight. In the land of the living, the lake water was sapphire blue, and so clear and still that one could see straight to the bottom, but in the land of the dead, it was clouded with spirits. The wispy figures of soldiers were flocking to the shores, wading into the shallows, and disappearing into the depths. It was a beautiful place to lay to rest, and Dragontail Peak and the Eye were all that the denizens of the valley had ever known. Save, of course, for the black smoke from elven fyre that rose in ominous clouds above the peak.

Upon closer inspection of the soldiers wandering down the slopes to the lake, Nyla noticed that they were *her* soldiers, wearing the Gallarian sigil - the peak and the Eye themselves, as seen from her village. It was Zax's regiment. Her heart jumped into her throat, and she rapidly scanned the masses for her brother's face. It was so much harder to distinguish faces so devoid of any color or life, and panic blurred her vision. She jumped to her feet, pulling her death with her, and shouted to the horde of spirits as loud as her lungs could muster. "Zax! Zax, where are you -" She received a few befuddled looks in passing, but none of the spirits ceased their slow march to the lake. She squinted closer at the faces, and at last spotted someone she recognized - Cadron, whose twisted jaw distinguished him from the rest of the blank-faced dead, just as it had in his life at the orphanage. She bolted to him, her feet

weightlessly skimming over the water's surface, and grabbed his arm with her free hand.

"Cadron, it's me, do you know where Zax is - "

The look he gave her was not one of recognition, and his dark eyes displayed nothing but confusion. He shook off her hand and continued stumbling into the lake. Nyla felt shaken. They hadn't been friends in life, but she had been kind to him, and he to her. "Why doesn't he recognize me?"

Her death shrugged. "The dead remember little of life. Only the most core parts of one's being remain. These soldiers remember their homeland, the place in which life was given to them. Friendships and love are temporary in life, and even more so in death." It paused for a moment, its cold eyes darting over Nyla's increasingly distraught expression. "Even if you find your brother, he may not remember you. If he does, he loved you very much indeed."

"He will," Nyla said fiercely, digging her fingernails into her death's hand as she clenched her fists. "We are blessed by the Twins. Nothing could keep us apart."

But as she continued to search the places that she and her brother had frequented in life, her confidence began to wane. He was not on the steep trail that led to the pine forest where they sparred with wooden swords, nor in the lumberry grove where they had stained their mouths purple during the summers. He was not at the overlook where they had sat with feet dangling off of the edge of the cliff, watching the sun fall behind the peaks that stretched off far to the west, to the center of the Funarth kingdom. It would be destroyed soon, once the elves marched over Dragontail Peak and razed the valley. The valley people had accepted this numb finality after decades of sending their fathers and sons and brothers to fight a futile war.

Zax was nowhere to be found in any of their favorite places, and Nyla, panicked, started back towards Gallaria. She could not think of why Zax would be in the village, for they had few good memories of it. The matron scolding them at the orphanage; the priestesses who spoke of

the gods' love for children but still forced the orphans to work the fields; the village children who laughed and threw rocks at the orphans - Zax could not have wanted to return to any of those places. But there was nowhere else to look.

As the sky started to melt to a shimmering grey dawn, it began to snow. Nyla loved snow. She loved the crunching sound it made as she tramped across the village square. She loved jumping off of the highest branch of the great oak on the banks of the Eye into an awaiting snowbank. She loved letting flakes fall on her tongue, which she attempted to do now, but could neither taste nor feel them quickly melting in her mouth. She did, suddenly, feel a deep sense of cold, emanating from the very center of her chest. It was the first physical sensation she had experienced in the land of the dead, and something felt wrong. "I'm cold," she said to her death, and as she raised her hand to her chest, her joints screamed with stiffness. "What's happening?"

Her death observed her expression candidly for a moment before replying, "The snow is starting to cover your body. You will have to return to it soon, or it will freeze."

And here Nyla realized the mistake she had made by performing the ritual in the forest clearing, exposed to the force of the elements. Hot panic ran through her veins. "How much longer do I have?"

Her death smiled, an unpleasant, mirthful smirk that Nyla never wanted to see on her own face. "As long as you wish, but proceed at your own risk."

So Nyla began to run. The steep path from the Eye to Gallaria passed under her feet as easily as flat ground. Where could he be? She ran through every nook and cranny of the village, and there were not many of them, for Gallaria was surrounded by unscalable mountain walls.

*Think, Nyla*, she told herself fiercely, and tried to think back to their last days together. She had tried to stay strong and cheerful despite the overbearing feeling of finality that had overcome the

entire village, but on the night before the army marched off, she had wept to Zax uncontrollably. *I'll never see you again*, she had stammered out through sobs, *not until I follow you into the land of the dead*.

Zax could not have refuted this with false words, for they both knew that the war was a lost cause. His eyes, normally sparkling with laughter and bluer than the sky, were clouded over with defeat. *I'll always be with you, no matter where I am. I promise*.

And suddenly, Nyla knew where her brother would have gone. She raced towards the orphanage, bolted up the stairs, and ran straight through the walls into the girl's living quarters, where the rest of the orphanage girls were huddled up under thick blankets in their beds, fast asleep. And sure enough, there was Zax's spirit, standing over her bed in the corner, wearing the most tired and forlorn expression she had ever seen, but his eyes widened in recognition. She *knew* he would remember her, but of all the places she had looked for him, this was the last place she would have thought to look - somewhere that *she* would be. He had kept his promise. A wild sense of desperation rose in her throat as she yanked her hand away from her death and ran towards him. "Brother, I'm - "

Something tore deep within her chest, and she was falling, suddenly, as if she had taken a misstep off of the footpath along the cliffs of Eyre. Her eyes were wide open, but she could see nothing but blackness, and felt cold, so cold, as if her body was frozen to the ground -

The light of the sun burned her eyes. She gasped for breath, and clawed at her chest, the tips of her fingers tinged a light blue. The world seemed to explode with color, and she was *alive*, and her death was no longer beside her.

And finally, resigned to her fate, Nyla fell to the cold earth and wept, and wished that she had let her body freeze, if only to tell her brother that she loved him one last time.

*The moon was just beginning to descend into its daily slumber as Nyla and Zax clambered up the treacherous paths along the cliffs of Eyre. It was a race against the light of day - and against the sting of Priest Goren's switch if they were late for the morning shift at the fields. "Hurry up, you goat," Zax called down to Nyla, his voice echoing off of the bone white cliff face as he smirked down at her, unruly tufts of black hair waving every which way in the light breeze. She was several lengths behind him and keeled over, panting with her elbows resting on her knees. The leather armor was hanging heavy on her shoulders, making the steep hike even more painful. She looked up at him and scowled, sticking out her tongue and making a face at him before retorting, "You know, if I'm a goat, that means you're a bigger, dumber goat."*

*"Yeah, but boy goats look much cooler." Zax shifted his pack to his other shoulder and held up his hands to his forehead in a crude imitation of horns. Nyla rolled her eyes and pushed away the sweaty strands of hair coming loose from her braid, before resuming the climb.*

*The trail flattened out into a sparse pine grove covered in a layer of needles undergoing various stages of decay. After a long climb, the tangy scent of pine alone was enough to refresh them, and Nyla flopped down onto the forest floor for a moment to catch her breath. "Come on!" Zax called out impatiently, waving at her from the overlook. "We don't have that much time!"*

*Nyla wondered when Zax's legs had gotten so much longer than hers as she picked herself up off of the ground, grumbling. It wasn't fair. They were supposed to be identical twins, so didn't that mean that she was meant to grow that tall too? The gods didn't think so, apparently.*

*Their destination was not the grove itself, but the massive oak that stood behind it, its sturdy roots stretching out to the edge of the cliff. It reminded Nyla of an old man, sitting gravely and watching over the entire valley. Galleria was a mere collection of tiny white dots from here; the Giant's Eye was dark, as if the giant Gallar himself was asleep. And far beyond, the*

*mountains stretched west into the horizon, where the center of their kingdom was. Or, so it was told. Nyla had never seen it herself, and save for the tax collectors that rode up the treacherous trails into Gallaria once a year, had no evidence to believe that it actually existed.*

*Zax was rummaging around at the foot of the tree, frowning as he plunged his hand between the roots and felt around. "I swear, I left it here last time..." he muttered to himself before his face brightened and he gingerly pulled a long burlap sack out from the tangled mess of roots. Grinning, he reached in and tossed Nyla's sword to her, and though years of honed reflexes had taught her how to catch it, she still cursed and fumbled the hilt, nearly dropping it on her foot. She scowled at Zax. "You're going to kill me doing that one day."*

*"Get better at catching it then," he countered, twirling his own sword in his hand. Nyla rolled her eyes as he commenced with a series of complicated flourishes, turning her back momentarily to complete her own pre-bout ritual. Grabbing the hem of her skirt, she carefully ran it along the blade to wipe the dust away, holding it up to the light of the moon to examine it once she had finished. The crimson jewel set deep into the center of the hilt shone dimly as she turned the sword from side to side, but as always, her gaze was drawn to the foreign inscriptions carved into the slightly curved blade. Save for the inscriptions, which seemed to have slightly different lettering, the two swords were identical, but their father had only left them the swords before he disappeared, and not the meaning of the strange lettering.*

*But, pondering the meaning was a useless pastime, as Nyla and Zax had realized after many hours of theorizing about the significance of the swords. The one thing they did know was that the swords were not Gallarian, nor did they themselves look particularly Gallarian. Gallarian swords were as short and stumpy as its people, whereas the twin swords - and the twins themselves - were long, slender, and lithe. Their mother had been as Gallarian as could be,*

*according to the matron, so they often fantasized that their father had been from a far off land, or had beat a formidable warrior to win these swords. But only the gods would know the truth.*

*“Ready?” Zax called out from across the clearing, jolting Nyla from her musing. He was facing her in the offensive position, wrist stiff, blade slightly outstretched, and body coiled, like a viper waiting to strike. Nyla raised her arm parallel to the ground, pointing the tip of her blade at his chest. “Ready.”*

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When Nyla opened her eyes, her world was burning.

The shackles were cold against her wrist, but the air was warm and thick with smoke. High up on the cliffs of Eyre, Gallaria burned as bright as the sun, a horrible midnight sun against the pitch dark of the moonless night. She felt delirious, her head spinning amidst the excess of stimula - the few dozen women and children around her were screaming and crying, the strange eight-legged elven horses were whinnying in protest at the proximity of the fire, and her own heartbeat was beating like a gong in her ears.

Ever since visiting the land of the dead, her body seemed to be crumbling in on itself. She supposed she should have known that, given how much of her life force it had cost just to perform the summoning ritual, and how much she had spent frantically searching for her brother. Her death would return for her soon, she was sure. At this point, she would have welcomed it. The world where she had spent her life was no more.

Bleary-eyed, Nyla slowly sat up, wincing at the acute pain radiating from her forehead. The last thing she remembered was an elven soldier swinging the blunt edge of his sword at her, knocking her unconscious. Her hair was sticking to the dried trails of blood streaking the sides of her face, and the grime and sweat coating her face didn't help.



Through the haze of noise, Nyla could faintly hear someone calling her name. Slowly, she managed to turn her head, gritting her teeth at the stiffness of her neck. "Nyla!" the voice said again, desperately, and this time, Nyla recognized its source. Though the orange light from the burning village was dim, she could just make out the features of the women and children shackled together around her. "Gyria?" she called out through the havoc, hoping that she had heard the voice correctly.

"Over her!" And indeed, when Nyla turned her head, she saw her only friend, golden hair loose and tangled around her shoulders and dark green eyes wide with fear. "Are you okay? Oh gods, they hit you quite hard, I thought you might not wake up..."

Nyla nodded and swallowed back her irritation at Gyria's pity. Nyla had always been the stronger of the pair. Gyria was frail, diminutive and bird-boned where Nyla was tall and lithe; Gyria was a typical Gallarian beauty with the cheer and positivity to match, while Nyla's dark looks and piercing eyes had never garnered much attention from the boys. But to her surprise, Gyria seemed remarkably composed now - despite the other orphan girls screaming around her, she remained demure and still, hands clasped in her lap. Nyla couldn't help but be impressed that this girl who screamed and fled from the tiny spiders in the girls' quarters at the orphanage was so calm in the face of horrors.

There was enough slack in the chains for Nyla to move slightly closer to Gyria, so with great effort, she maneuvered herself across the hard ground, coughing as she struggled to breathe the ashen air. She noticed the concern flash across Gyria's face, and felt another pang of irritation. "I'm fine," she said brusquely. "What's happening? What are they going to do with us?"

“I think they’re rounding up the mages. They’re testing all the women for magic proficiency.” Gyria’s eyes suddenly filled with tears and she put a hand over her mouth. “Oh Nyla, I saw them kill Matron Bessia, the poor woman...”

Nyla shuddered and felt a dull pang of disgust. Matron Bessia had been the kindest by far of the three matrons at the orphanage - round, smiling, and friendly, but indeed, not particularly proficient in magecraft. “Why do they care?”

Gyria bent her head to her shackled hands to wipe her eyes, her voice shaky. “They have many wounded soldiers, and no women. It seems that they are trying to use us as healers.”

Nyla had thought that elven men would have had some aptitude for magic that regular men did not, but it seemed that the gods had made all men the same. Anger bubbled in her throat. “They cannot force us to be their slaves.”

“What do you mean?” Gyria said in a hushed voice, furtively looking around. “They will kill us, Nyla, in cold blood, and we will forget all the good moments of our lives in the land of the dead...”

What Nyla wanted to say was that she had seen the land of the dead and would prefer it to this burning hellscape, but she resolutely held her tongue. “I would rather die than...” She trailed off as her gaze landed upon a group of elven soldiers walking towards them. They were finally close enough for her to get a good look at them; she had never seen an elf, and observed, for the first time, that the nightmarish tales the old villagewomen told to the children were anything but true. These elves did not have grotesque twisted features, pointed ears or teeth, bone white hair, or sharp claws. Their movements were lithe and catlike, and they would tower over Gallarian men; they wore their jet black hair long, and their faces were pale, sharp-featured and aquiline, like the birds of prey that roosted upon Dragontail’s Peak.

Something about them struck a familiar chord in Nyla. Perhaps it was the color of their hair, which she had never seen on another living being, save for herself and Zax. But there was something more about them that she could not put a finger on...

A flash of crimson caught her eye as the soldiers walked past, and her entire body seemed to awaken from its haze at once. Heart pounding, she focused her gaze on its source. Swinging from the belt of one of the soldiers was a familiar scabbard, and emerging from the scabbard was an even more familiar hilt. Her throat was scratchy and hoarse from the smoke, but she wanted to scream, for that sword was her brother's, and the elf who had killed him and stolen it from his corpse was undoubtedly the one walking past her.

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*The clang of metal rang out over the valley as their swords met. They always sparred with the blunt edges of their swords, and jabbing was strictly forbidden, although the leather chest armor was thick enough to protect them from a misplaced swing.*

*Zax, on the offensive, quickly disarmed Nyla within seconds, knocking her sword out of her hands with a strong downwards slash. "Again," he said, raising an eyebrow at her. "Have to be better than that. Where's your parry two?"*

*Nyla pursed her lips in frustration as she picked up her sword. She was much less practiced than he was, for girls were strictly forbidden from attending training with the master of weapons. Often, she wondered how different her life might be if she had been born a boy. She could have been a soldier, instead of being forced to do chores and practice healing spells with the rest of the girls. She could fight for Gallaria when the elven army stormed the valley.*

*But for now, she could only practice in secret, and hope to outwit Zax with a smart parry from time to time. He lunged at her again, but this time she was ready, and took a single step back, letting his momentum carry him forwards before parrying and stepping out of the way, the*

*edge of her blade to his throat. "Ha!" she crowed, and Zax grinned as he stepped back and bumped her lightly on the shoulder with his fist. "Not bad, sister. Not bad."*

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[her plot to kill him, also actually killing him and escaping]

The exact moment that Zax's spirit crossed from the land of the living to the land of the dead, Nyla had felt it in her bones. It was as if some part of her heart had been slowly severed and ripped away, and she had fallen to her knees in the middle of the fields, screaming and writhing upon the ground in agony.

And now, just as she had known then, she knew that she had to kill the elf who had killed her brother, or die trying. How dare he lay his dirty hands upon her brother's sword, how dare he have the audacity to steal it from her brother's slain corpse.

*The sun had not quite risen when they finished sparring, but morning light was starting to color the horizon a light grey. Nyla was carefully wiping the dust and dirt off of her blade, and Zax was gingerly rubbing his knuckles from where he had foolishly tried to block one of her swings with his hand. "By the time the elves get here, you'll probably have cut off my hand and I'll die a cripple instead of a soldier," he grumbled, wincing.*

*"Hopefully, you'll never have to die a soldier either," Nyla said pointedly, glancing east to where the sun would soon rise over Dragontail Peak. Somewhere beneath that sun was the elven army of Alfhart, surely - marching slowly but surely towards the valley, and trampling any forces Funarth sent its way. It was said that the elves were fuelled by religious fervor, for the Funarhi capital sat upon holy grounds - the highest peak in all the lands, from which the gods appeared so close that one could reach up their hand and brush them with their fingertips. But privately, Nyla believed that the elves simply wanted revenge - a thousand years ago, all of this*

*land had once been theirs, before the great mage queen Funartha had ridden with her army from the far west and driven the elves back to their small corner of territory in the east. If she was an elf, Nyla thought, she would have wanted this land back too, for it was beautiful and filled with all the resources the gods could have provided. And slowly - very slowly, for elves lived long lives and seemed to be in no hurry to vanquish Funarth - they were coming.*

*“No, I hope not. Or at least, I’d like to be there when we drive the elven army back east once and for all.” Zax’s pale blue eyes were glimmering with a fire kindled by the glory of war, something that Nyla could not comprehend. It faded after a moment, and he said, more practically, “But if I die, I’ll die a soldier, and I can feel proud even when my death takes me to the afterlife.”*

*“And you’ll be leaving me here alone,” Nyla retorted, as she always did whenever this line of conversation arose, for it did so often. “And I’d have to come find you, and tell you off for being so horrible and abandoning me here.”*

*“How would you find me?” Though the topic was dark, Zax was grinning, as was typical. “Summon your death and ask it to take you to me?”*

*“There are ways.” Or so Nyla thought, for she had heard of them in tales. There was a powerful ritual often whispered about, which took a horrible toll upon the spellcaster’s life force, but would allow her to wander the land of the dead. “Just...stop talking about dying. I’d be sad without you around.” She hesitated for a moment, disliking the sentimentality of her words. “...I think.”*

*Zax laughed and leapt to his feet, throwing his arm around Nyla’s shoulder and nearly knocking her off balance. “We’re blessed by the Twins. I don’t think I could leave you alone, even if I was dead. I’d have to haunt you until I forgot my own name.”*

*“I’ll hold you to that.” There was some comfort that even in death, perhaps the blessing of the Twins would keep them together across worlds. But, those were dark thoughts, and the sun was about to rise over the peak, and few could claim that there was a more majestic sight in all the lands. Nyla leaned her head against her brother’s shoulder and put her arm around his waist, and together, they watched the light of the morning sun spill into the valley, illuminating the verdant forests and the clear blue of the Giant’s Eye in a fresh golden haze.*

[flashback with exposition - elves are trying to reclaim their holy land at the center of funarth kingdom

their parents are dead and they are shunned in general for looking different

Maybe lampshade her being determined to go to the land of the dead

In the present, the valley is on fire and she’s a POW

Sees one of the elven soldiers carrying zax’s sword