

PROLOGUE

A Solitary Witness

Death clutched Liam's hand with its pitiless misery. Stubborn as ever, he endured and recoiled from the alluring presence beguiling a respite from the pain searing through him.

The stench of pine, mud, and blood bombarded his nostrils as proof of his survival. He must have hit a rock with his fall as an opponent's swift sword hilt bashed into his face. The chaos of battle: cries, steel on steel, flesh tearing open, all of it silenced along with his consciousness. He let his ears hone in on the surroundings, expecting the chaos to return. Wistful stillness ensnared the glade. Liam's gaze examined the nearby forest. A hushed breeze shuddered the lank tree trunks reaching toward a misty-grey sky.

It must be dawn, Liam explained. The battle ended hours ago, or perhaps it had moved further into the enemy's forest. He cursed. A wince escaped past his blood-filled lips once his body shifted. Again death sired near, filled with promises of peace and ease. A chunk of blood followed an unfamiliar and foreign cough as he refused death a second time.

The battlefield had turned into a gruesome garden filled with wilted flowers. The Vesilian soldiers bloomed red. The iron-reeking

sap felt cold against his exposed fingers. He did not know what he expected, laying on a heap of dead or finding a fallen opponent. The sight revealed the verity behind the agony keeping him on the ground.

Like the pine trees sprouted from the ground, so did a spear from his belly. Dread fogged his thoughts and ceased his efforts of moving. A dead soldier's half-closed fist rested atop Liam's belly near the weapon. The slain foe was probably the one who invited death to approach Liam. A cough, wet and tenacious, aired his vulnerability. A shiver gnawed through his aching bones. The sight of his woe notified his brain of the struggles facing his being.

"H-help." His faint call was scarcely loud enough for himself to hear over his rushed breath. "Help."

The gruesome garden answered his plead with silence, a strange occurrence in a forest basking in the first light of day. Birds chirping, crickets singing... where were they? Where were the wolves and ravens who would ravage the garden's wilted flowers?

Where was the Keeper in these, Liam's desperate last breaths? Where was the pure light from her sword that held evil at bay? Had none of the Almighty come to claim him?

He calmed his worried mind. He was alone. Nightbringers, the Beast's servants, had yet to approach. Their predatory stare had yet to descend on him. His time was yet to come. The forces of malice and benevolence had yet to claim him. A weak smile pulled his dry lips apart.

The Unborn's protection extended to him, keeping him safe. Safe may have been an overstatement, but alive, which meant someone would come for him. Someone would hear his call and return him to his dearest. Home to the vast open plains where grass and sky nuzzled. Back to the Riveroak's side as their protector. Not that he minded the campaign. The lands to the west needed protection, and he would supply it.

Dawn gathered clouds of mist over the forest. Gorges and valleys blurred with fog while dew formed droplets in his thick beard.

It could have also been blood, though he chose not to linger on it. At the slightest sound, he twitched and called for attention. The silence was smothering.

The mist spun by an abruption further up ahead where the glade began. Liam focused his rambling thoughts on the disruption of silence. Another man stepped into the garden. An ashen grey cloak coated with crud trailed the owner. Equally somber rags clothed the man, except for his feet. Dirt soiled the stranger's bare feet, gently tasting the moss covering the forest floor. The stranger's presence could have gone unattended to the unobservant as if one with the forest.

If the stranger were a foe or friend did not matter. Liam's ragged voice intruded on the peace. "H-help. Sir, I need your aid."

Like a spirit, unresponsive to the other side of the veil, the stranger focused his attention on the newly departed, the wilted flowers. Attention... perhaps not, but his curiosity. The man came to a halt, feet away from Liam.

"Sir, I need a hand," Liam said in Vesillian but contemplated speaking the few words of Eckrosie and Burrousie he knew.

Wrapped with indifference the stranger's head turned to lock eyes with Liam. Beneath a hood, the man's pasty skin stayed shielded. An angular face ending in a sharp chin peeked forward. The man was no different from any other. Stubby ebony hair strands rested beneath the hood, and no facial hair grazed his features. However... a crimson horizontal streak reached from ear to ear across cold blue irises. It seemed to hold every shade of blue known to man, from the purest sapphire to a deep sky-blue tint. The colors fused in harmony in a synchronized dance. Upon further scrutiny, Liam witnessed an infinite misery carrying the weeping souls of the departed inside the stranger.

Nay. Inside the Wanderer. Liam's tired eyes widened at the sight of the Almighty's vessel. It had to be. That was the only explanation for the absence of its sisters, the Keeper, and the Unborn. The soul

of the Wanderer walked the continent to keep the forces of nights at bay.

“You... are you the Wanderer, aren't you?” Liam stretched his bruised hand toward the stranger, seeking his guidance and empathy.

The stranger did not move.

“I beg of you, Almighty,” Liam said despite each breath inflicting increased ache. “Please take pity on my soul. The Unborn must have blessed me. No one has come to claim my soul, but now you're here.”

Again, Liam's words carved through the silence. The Wanderer knelt to the fallen soldier by Liam's side, letting the departed steal the focus from the living.

“Where are the souls walking by your side, Almighty?” Liam spoke, ignoring the annoyance he might cause the stranger. “Please. I need help, and I don't want to die. All you need to do is help me on my feet.”

The utter indifference... the fact that Liam tried to plead for mercy and it fell on deaf ears awoke an annoyance he had carried for many weeks.

The dead soldier's leather armor that failed to protect his torso followed the stranger's forceful tug as he inspected the wounds closer.

“I'll pay you whatever you want. I'm sure we can work something out. For fucks sake, help me. You can see me with a bloody spear sticking out of my belly. I'm a person. I fucking matter!”

“You find a doe in the woods.” The stranger spoke. The voice was flat, void of emotion, yet appealing. He kept probing the wilted flower while focusing his gaze on Liam. “It's limping, barely holding itself upright. You hear its' ragged breathing. You try to save it initially but notice you will only prolong its suffering.”

The frigid attention his blue eyes pinned Liam with made the hair at the back of his neck curl. This was not the Wanderer. This was different from the Almighty he had heard stories and tales of.

“Tell me, Liam, would you save the doe?” The stranger said calmly as though they were old acquaintances.

Liam hesitated. The throbbing ache coursed through his being, yet it subsided with the mystery surrounding the stranger. “How... how do you know my name?” Seeing as the stranger awaited an answer, Liam grunted through the pain. “I’d try saving it. It has a second chance at life and isn’t ready to die.”

The stranger’s jaw tightened, and a quiet snort followed. The cloak unfurled with its owner’s rise. All attention fell upon Liam. Like a disgruntled parent, the stranger towered over him.

“It was never fit to live. Life is suffering and writhing. A vicious evil we force upon each other when punishing souls with life.” The stranger revealed a frugal knife along with wounded wrists. The blade ascended to the man’s skin and cut into his flesh. His gaze refused to leave Liam. “The vile act of keeping the doe alive when all it needs is rest... is not mercy. The same goes for civilization; only we let the doe suffer.”

Fresh red sap bled onto the moss. But accompanying it... Liam could swear he saw tar pouring out of the stranger’s wounds. The tar propelled to the ground, but in mid-air, it took flight like black smoke rising from a pyre.

A deep-toned vibration spread through the glade. A consistent, growling, and frightening growl, Liam believed only thunder could supply.

The general spoke to them often of the brutality of war, the unforgiving battlefield, and the fear it would bring. But witnessing creatures made of smoke leaving the stranger felt like staring into an abyss of malice. *What the...*

He was not alone in his fright. The moss came to life with insects penetrating the ground. They writhed in pain, trying to escape whatever threat approached.

The stranger’s stare remained as yellow, green, and white eyes appeared in the smoke. Nightbringers. The servants of the Beast had laid their eyes on him.

“Do not fret.” The stranger’s voice carried through the rumble. “Your being wanders onward, nourishing the living while granting you peace of eternal oblivion.”

The spear kept him pinned to the ground as the monsters descended. The smoke twisted and turned like a windless whirlwind. Claws, nails, and teeth tore into his flesh, ripping and tearing it asunder.

The stranger conquered the ground his naked feet touched. Firmly standing only feet away. Unwavering. A solitary witness to a feeding frenzy.

Liam’s final glimpse of the land of the living ended with the stranger’s cloak swinging at its owner’s bare feet, leaving Liam to his fate.



Watching the creatures of the dark devour the gashed man was nothing the stranger relished. Each step across the soft moss leading him further from the dying man’s scream weakened him. The sudden urge for a long and peaceful slumber called him. However, the peace he bestowed on Liam remained far from the stranger’s grasp. There was still much to be done. He could not linger further by idle distractions. Perhaps not distractions, it was necessary to complete the puzzle. Although hard to admit, he had enjoyed it—a lot.

And there it was. A growing rumble not caused by either thunder or rain. A hum matched by nothing the forest had heard before. The dying man’s words silenced, and for a moment, the stranger heard nothing but steady rain pattering against his bleeding skin. He stopped his advance and tilted his head towards the blackened sky, waiting. He inhaled.

The cries settled abruptly, and the rumble dispersed.

It was the reassuring sound of death.