

EARTHS G MAGUS 71

71 Surrounded

[Emery Ambrose]

[16 years old]

[Battle power 17 (12)]

[Spirit power 32 (21)]

Although his battle power had surpassed way higher than that of the common man in its unlocked form, his current battle power was still above the average physical prowess of the general adult. Aside from raking in some experience in life and death battles, battling techniques of the Magus Academy, he still of course shouldn't face a battle head-on especially with multiple marauders who made a living by stealing, fighting, and killing people with low chances of succeeding.

Inside the old abandoned house, the five marauders stayed behind. The three appeared to be common thugs, and in hindsight, the biggest threat among them was probably the burly marauder whose height almost reached the ceiling. As for the leader, Emery didn't know how to evaluate him, but since marauders usually based their rankings on strength and cunningness, this short man might actually be the deadliest of them all.

Emery quickly racked his brain with different scenarios, considering the fact that Lanzo probably couldn't stand up, he had to make sure he could deal with them swiftly and cleanly. In his heart, he wished for the symbol in his hand to be able to measure the opponents' battle powers in front of him, so he could analyze the situation better and release his full potential but alas, not everything could be handed to him on a platter.

In order to increase his chances of succeeding, Emery opened his bag and took out a small red-colored salve. He then loosened some cords that were holding his fur clothes together and immediately applied to his arms, forearms, thighs and legs before tying the cords back. A warm sensation spread through the parts he had applied the strength paste on before feeling his muscles contracting and relaxing after.

Another notification popped up in his mind that said his battle power had increased by another point. As he was about to head into battle, he remembered what his father had liked used to say, 'The outcome of a battle is determined by the preparation made beforehand,' and this was what he was doing now.

Since that was all he could do with the things he had on hand, he proceeded to the next phase of his plan. Emery picked up a stone lying on the ground just below him and threw it on the area of the ragged house that had trees nearby.

"What was that?" The sound caught the attention of all the marauders inside; the short man added, "The two of you, check it out."

"Okay."

Emery waited patiently for the two marauders to be out of each other's sight while he listened in to the conversation inside.

Back in the room, the leader of the marauders said, "My patience is running thin."

Again, the leader sunk the knife into Lanzo's other thigh. "I won't ask again. Why were you looking for our chief?"

"Graahhh! Please, enough! I-I already told you," Lanzo gritted his teeth as he grabbed on to his thigh pulsing in pain.

The remaining marauder, the one who had been punched, stepped in and said, "B-Boss, if I may?"

"Speak," ordered the leader.

"W-When we followed this lad, there was another person with him. We're assuming he's also the same age but h-he disappeared like thin air," said the remaining marauder. The leader extracted the knife as he stood up, startling the shaking marauder.

"I see, so two boys want to join our ranks but are asking for our chief specifically?" commented the leader, he looked back at Lanzo once more, his eyes extremely cold. "I'd have to be quite dumb if that's all your intent, right?"

Outside of the ragged house, Emery made his move. The two marauders were now quite a distance to see each other clearly in the darkness of the night. If he were to attack inside, the probability of success was still low; so, divide and conquer, one of the time proven successful strategies was what Emery had decided to enact upon. He moved quietly but as fast as he could and knocked the marauder unconscious before snatching the sword.

Emery said to himself, "Excellent, a sword that costs nothing. Lanzo, keep it together..."

He left the man lying there as he went back to his previous position. This was intentional, so when the second marauder shouted the moment he found his colleague, everyone in the house was alerted.

"Gery is down! There is someone here!"

The boss sent the hulking marauder outside. Nothing less could be more than according to his plan now that the most obvious threat had gone amongst the trees, with that said, Emery jumped into the open window and dashed to slash the closest marauder.

The marauder's chest was ripped as he fell on the ground, groaning in pain. The situation had turned into one versus one. Not wanting to miss his preemptive advantage, Emery shot forward at the leader of these marauders, but unexpectedly, he sidestepped Emery's blade.

The short marauder wasn't perturbed even a bit. And just like what Emery had feared, a leader in a band of killers would always be above the others.

"You came," cried Lanzo, hugging the ground.

Emery hurriedly cut off the rope tied around Lanzo's, grabbed the sword of the marauder lying on the ground and gave it to Lanzo. The two marauders outside seemed to have heard the commotion and went back into the ragged house. He then stepped back, Lanzo behind him and placed his sword in front.

It was now three against one. Emery could see how Lanzo's thigh had been injured. Blood peeking through the fur clothing, so he took out his healing salve and let Lanzo apply some of it into his wounds. For now, Emery wouldn't be expecting a person with an injured leg to fight.

"Anyway, this is just funny. Two young lads thought they had a chance against us? Hah, You better know what you are doing, boy. Nobody messes with the Crimson Fang and gets away with it," said the leader, taking a seat as if he was about to enjoy a show.

"Shouldn't we just run while we can?" asked Lanzo, rubbing his wounds with the green paste.

"You know you can't run," Emery said, carefully watching the two marauders, especially the marauder whose height almost touched the ceiling. He was, however, as calm as still water. Although the height and the protruding muscle of that marauder far exceed anyone he had seen so far, there was no comparison that could be made against the menacing orcs. Quite on the contrary, there was a tinge of happiness that the leader had blurted out the name of their group, Crimson Fang, and the chief was confirmed to be Padraig.

"Just stay low and try to keep out of sight for now," Emery said when the hulking marauder lunged at him with a big sword on hand. Emery tried to meet it but he was knocked back three steps instead. Evidently, he messed up. He became too confident thinking his strength could match against this giant man.

"Stop wasting time, Gondo," said the leader of the marauder.

Gondo grunted and tried to raise his sword once again, but it touched the ceiling. Still, he hacked the large sword to Emery and Emery ducked. The sword got stuck in the window pane from where Emery had entered!

Emery then pierced straight into Gondo's chest but out of nowhere, Gondo's fist appeared on the corner of Emery's eyes and immediately pulled back his extended sword to try and block the fist. The unexpected fist threw Emery, flying. but as he remembered the positioning of the marauders, he twisted his body and stretched his sword once more, hitting a marauder who was moving towards Lanzo. The sword went through the guts, making the marauder fall on the ground, dead a few seconds later. The poor guy didn't see it coming.

The leader laughed before saying, "Hah! Not bad, not bad at all! Ahh, we would have loved to see you fight in the pits more, but unfortunately, this party is over. You have no chance against Gondo. Gondo, finish this boy."

Emery tugged the bloodied sword and got ready for the large marauder who had just pulled out the sword from the wooden window's pane. Looking around, Emery searched for more opportunities, there were only a table, some chairs, and a pouch of coins sitting on top of the table.

Just as he was about to make the first move this time, the thudding of footsteps echoed from the distance and from the sound of it, there were more than one pair of feet running on the damp soil.

The marauder who had left earlier returned with more of his mates.

72 Swordsman

The marauder who had just arrived gave news to their leader, making the leader frown before saying, "Men, it appears our operation has been compromised. Let's finish this mess as soon as possible, so we could leave the city."

Meanwhile, Emery cracked his brain once more trying to find the plan to get out of this problem. The best move was obviously to run away as soon as possible and save himself, but he was not that type of person. Sacrificing the others for the sake of himself. That was not who he was. Not to mention, he, himself had planned for this in the first place. Hence, he needed to find a way to keep Lanzo safe as well as not die in the process.

Emery's eyes fell on the table once more. An idea popped in his head as he dashed toward the table, grabbed the coin pouch and threw it to the marauder who had just arrived. The solid thud of the heavy coin pouch, which seemed to have been filled with several coins, knocked out the marauder cold. He also quickly turned over the table to make some safe space between him and Lanzo, the hulking marauder would have more space to work with, but so did he, but having some sort of shield over Lanzo would at least take off some pressure in protecting him. Finally, Emery raised his sword ready to face whatever coming at him.

The leader of the marauders didn't seem that bothered as he simply said, "I don't know if you're just that stupid or brave, boy but there's a thin between the two. In any case, I've thought about you joining our crew. Of course, that's after both of you are dead! Haha!"

A couple more marauders entered the house, and Emery was besieged from all sides. Gondo stood in the middle while the rest stood on the flanks, making sure Emery wouldn't be able to circle around them easily.

Lanzo attempted to stand up with the table as his support but taking even just one step caused him to groan and fall in pain. "Go, you know I'm a lost cause. I won't be able to run, save yourself now... I'll hold them off..."

"I'm getting tired of both of your idiocy. Men, finish them," said the leader as he stood up and pointed his dagger at them.

Gondo tried to lead the charge but the moment everyone moved one foot forward, the clashing of metals and the screaming of marauders outside entered the ragged house. Then, the door swung open as a bloodied marauder holding his stomach came in.

"A-a knight has arrived!" said the wounded marauder, but he fell down on the ground a second later as a man with bluish eyes, long hair, white armor and red robe appeared behind holding a blood-stained sword.

"Heh, it's just a knight! Take care of him first, men," said the leader of the marauders.

The marauders who were on Gondo's flank switched stances and charged the long haired man, but the knight's sword movement simply passed them as if he became a blur for the marauders. Emery, however, could see each parries and swings of the knight's sword made in conjunction with precise footwork before finally delivering a thrust right in between their chests and shoulders, leaving them alive but incapacitated. The battle between the marauders and the knight was over before anyone knew it.

Emery gulped, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to match that, but right now, he knew he wouldn't be able to hold a candle.

All the marauders who had attacked the knight fell while grimacing in pain on the ground. Some of them still tried to stand up and fight, but those who had resisted didn't receive a second chance.

"Gondo! Take care of him!" shouted the leader of the marauder.

Gondo charged with his large sword held horizontally on his waist but a deafening roar from the outside shocked everyone to their cores. A large furred figure with rich golden mane entered the fray and met Gondo's sword with its fangs. A lion had appeared!

The lion's large teeth and Gondo's sword clashed, but Gondo seemed to be losing ground. The leader of the marauder took a step back and shakingly said, "N-n-no...! Y-y-you're Yvain, the knight of the Lion!"

The name rang a bell in Emery's mind. He had heard tales of this knight's name for it was he who had been often compared with his father, Geoffrey, the Lion's Fang. Emery had also heard stories from his father on how this guy was a force to be reckoned with in the battlefield. He had asked his father to meet with this person several times, but his father had never introduced him.

Right now, this famous knight standing near by the door was the current Lioness Kingdom's best swordsman. It wasn't only his sword skills that made him popular throughout the kingdom though, partially, it was because of the exotic and unique companion that no else had except for him, lion.

The leader of the marauder's face seemed to have lost all its color after identifying who this knight was.

"G-Gondo! B-Buy me some time!" After saying that, the short and thin marauder turned tail while Gondo tried to have a bout of strength against the big lion. But Gondo couldn't contest it as he also dropped on the ground, crushed under the weight of the lion before being mauled into bits and pieces.

It was no longer a fight when the leader of the marauder tried to run away in fear only to be pounced by the lion who had just finished ripping Gondo whose arms and legs now were all over the place.

"Halt!" commanded Yvain to his companion just before its fangs touched the marauders leader's face. The lion left its paw on the leader's chest and Yvain pointed his sword and said, "Surrender and order your men to drop their weapons."

The moment those words left Yvain's lips, more marauders came in from the direction the leader was about to head to, but of course, they were late to the battle.

"Do as he asks, men," said the leader and one by one all the marauders who had just arrived threw their weapons across the wooden floor.

A girl's voice sounded behind the door and asked, "Is it done, sir Yvain?"

"Yes, princess. The place is now secured," said Yvain with a bow and then wiped his sword with a cloth before sheathing it.

73 Her Duty

On the night of her coming of age, she had cut off ties with the only friend whom she had shared her dreams of venturing the wondrous world. But thoughts of him soon faded into something else as she became embroiled in the world of politics, which her father, the king was pushing her into.

Somehow being preoccupied with courtly duties, council meetings and kingdom activities had kept her mind off some of the unwanted things her father had introduced to her now that she was considered as an adult. Suitors. Her father kept meeting with many envoys from different kingdoms that had arrived in their palace wishing to tie their kingdom with the Lioness. A new kind of unhappiness sprang within herself even though she knew this was one of her duties as the Princess of the Lioness Kingdom.

In some days, she was required to stay by her father's side as envoys from other kingdoms went to see her. Of course she knew what these meetings meant. In the larger scale of kingdom politics, this was only done to achieve one end purpose and that was marriage.

Arranged marriages between kingdoms were a common practice for princes and princesses. After all, there was no other more powerful political tool than marrying a daughter to another kingdom in order to strengthen the nobility as well as keep the royal blood amongst themselves. It would bring a lot of benefits to both kingdoms, but as for Gwen, the thought of being locked in a palace was the most repulsive thing she could ever imagine.

The time she had used to spend outside became less and less as her father and the royal advisor gave orders not to let her out of the palace especially without supervision. Just like what she had thought, since she was the only one who had royal blood who would continue the line of her father's legacy, whatever freedom she had before was now like a far away dream.

She understood it was her sole duty as the Princess of a kingdom, still... it was not the thing she wished for. It wouldn't be wrong to say she hadn't dreamt of being courted by a handsome prince or a charming knight on a white horse, making decisions for the better of her people but her true passion lay elsewhere. It was to ride off to the sunset on her own horse and be on an adventure just like what she had shared to that boy...

The King had responded with more patrol guards along the roads and tasked some knights and soldiers to eradicate the threats, but Gwen knew that wouldn't be enough. So, on her own accord, she had tasked some people and delegated her personal knight to protect her beloved people from being terrorized.

And during yesterday's audience with the King, one particular plea for help caught Gwen's attention. A representative from the many settlements that had arrived in the capital city requested for protection against those thugs and crooks who had been extorting them after exchanging their yearly tribute for coins. Again, her father, the King, responded with the generic 'I'll let the garrison commander know about your situation' and from that moment, she knew she had to do something.

Luckily on that same day, Yvain returned and reported to Gwen that he had received information that a marauder group had entered the city and was planning some big operation the night after. With that in mind, she became determined to capture and eradicate those city rats who had been poisoning her people today.

Her door issued a knock and quickly several handmaidens entered her room.

"Prepare my combat gear," said Gwen. After receiving a look of shock from her handmaidens, they quickly composed themselves and nodded before proceeding to help Gwen wear her preferred outfit.

Evening arrived and a group of knights and several garrison soldiers led by Sir Yvain started searching for any out of the norm activities in the Lionarch City.

"Princess, I beg that you reconsider joining us. It's too dangerous," said Sir Yvain.

"No, I need to be here. I want to see it first hand. These hateful people are damaging my people's lives," retorted Gwen.

"But—"

"I won't have no as an answer. Anyway, the order is not to go outside unsupervised. With you there, I am not breaking any of the rules," said Gwen.

With that being said, Sir Yvain complied with the princess and made sure she would be staying safe beside him or on the backline. Within hours, they had managed to capture and eliminate dozens of them.

Then, one of their scouts returned and reported the location of an abandoned house where there seemed to be an unusual amount of people heading toward. Sir Yvain's group of knights and garrison soldiers came bursting in that area and within minutes, they had completely subjugated the whole area.

"You all better surrender now," demanded Yvain.

And just like that the operation was a big success.

"Is it done, Sir Yvain?"

"Yes, princess. The place is now secure."

The knights tied ropes to all the evil doers and had them sit in the front lawn of the ragged house. Princess Gwen then heard that this group in particular belonged to the Crimson Fang and like a flash in her mind, she recalled a person.

Gwen approached the short man who had been identified as their leader and said, "You're part of the Crimson Fang, aren't you? If so, then you should be behind the attack of the Ambrose estate! Tell me now! Was there a boy? Did you guys kill him?"

The small man had actually been half-blue by some of the garrison soldiers; he wasn't in the right state of mind, so he said, "What... a boy? Yes... The boy's in there. We didn't kill him."

Gwen's eyes widened as she hurriedly asked, "He's there?"

"Yes."

After hearing that, Gwen's heart started pounding and asked Sir Yvain about a boy who had been captured by the Crimson Fang.

Sir Yvain then led her to the boy and said, "That's him, Princess."

As she laid eyes on him, at first she thought saw Emery's face but when the light of the torch landed on brighter, she sighed. It wasn't him.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"My name is Lanzo, your highness," said Lanzo, keeping his head down.

"I see. In any case, I'm sorry we didn't get to you in time. Sir Yvain, please have someone cater to his wounds," said Gwen. She didn't know what had gotten into her but after she thought more about it, that boy she wished to see should have been dead by now.

74 Hesitation

He quickly kneeled to Lanzo and said, "You're going to be safe now. I have to go."

"But—"

Emery barely heard what Lanzo had said afterward because he had just jumped out of the window when a thud of something dropping on the wooden floor sounded.

He heard a person inside the ragged house say, 'Drop your weapons and surrender now!'

What soon came after were more clashing metals and a deafening roar of a beast. Emery heard how much panic was contained in the voice of the leader as he yelled, 'Yvain, the Knight of the Lion'. Emery moved a bit further toward the trees but the sight of the inside was still visible.

In his heart, Emery was a bit relieved that he had been able to slip away just before Yvain arrived. He was sure that Yvain would recognize him, despite half of his face being covered with a fur cloak. And that would spell a terrible future for him, if ever someone else within the nobility found out he was still alive.

Emery was about to run deeper into the dark wood when a familiar voice caught his attention, making him stop his tracks. He sneakily hid behind the trees and there he saw a young woman, wearing beautiful red battle armor with a lion emblem embroidered on her shoulder, standing behind a couple of knights.

His heart skipped a beat seeing Gwen in her war suit, and for a moment he felt the urge to tell her all the things he had experienced, all the highs and the lows. It felt like forever since he had talked to her.

Once more, he used the shadows of the trees as cover and moved closer to try and eavesdrop why there were here. He was surprised by the words that came out of Gwen's mouth.

"You're part of the Crimson Fang, aren't you? If so, then you should be behind the attack of the Ambrose estate! Tell me now! Was there a boy named Emery? Did you guys kill him?" Gwen said.

Emery's heart trembled when he heard her say those. He unconsciously reached out his hand when a buried memory of her ran a scene in his mind 'We can't be friends anymore, Emery'. That single sentence froze his whole being, unable to move. He clenched his fist, thinking to himself he should hold back. It wasn't the time yet.

He took back and accidentally stepped on a dead branch. A knight turned his head on toward Emery's location and drew a sword while walking slowly. Emery knew he had messed up. He shouldn't be caught or seen here. Not now, especially with Gwen being nearby!

He couldn't tell how far he had run away but at very least, he was sure that the knight who had caught notice of him should've stopped chasing by now. As he pondered her words and based on how she sounded, he tried to think of every reason he could logically come up with but not a single one of them managed to convince him. Still, deep down, a hint of joy sprang inside him at the knowledge of Gwen looking for him, despite about two seasons having passed, and no matter was the reason. Not wanting to think any deeper, he placed the matter in the back of his head once more and continued on with his escape.

The night was coming to an end with layers of light lifting the curtains of darkness, welcoming the kingdom's people with a new day. Lanzo arrived at the inn, escorted by the knights, to where Jacob was. The Princess's knights even gave him a bag of coins as compensation for his trouble.

When Jacob came out of the inn in his sleeping clothes, the shock on his face couldn't be more as plain as day when he saw Lanzo's covered in bandages from the waist down. Lanzo smiled sheepishly and simply explained he had quite an adventure that night. After getting rid of Jacob's talk, Lanzo quickly used the coin to celebrate his near death experience with his newfound love for ale.

Emery went down and gave Lanzo a brotherly hug. He was somewhat glad that Lanzo didn't hold a grudge against him but he still had to reject Lanzo's offer since he wasn't in a celebratory mood to drink. His mind was still filled with thoughts of Gwen, and after seeing her once more, her new image as well as seeing Sir Yvain's swift swordsmanship, his desire to become stronger burned even more violently. Last night's experience was proof that he was still far from being able to hold his own life, let alone take revenge for his family.

Ever since his childhood, he had always dreamed of being a knight just like Yvain and his late father, Geoffrey, fighting valiantly for his kingdom. Unfortunately, his physical condition didn't allow him to do that before but now, after receiving benefits from the Magus Academy and future possible benefits, he was confident he'd eventually surpass all his enemies.

They spent another day in Lionarch to give Lanzo more time to heal up. And as soon as the next day arrived, only Emery and Jacob were standing in front of the horse carts. They had decided it was time to go back home in Mistshire but when they woke up earlier, Lanzo was once more missing.

After half an hour of waiting, in the distance they saw a person carrying a large package strapped on his back heading their way. That was Lanzo.

Old man Jacob had a great, huge frown as he shouted, "Damn kid! Aren't you injured? Where have you been?"

"Bought some things for the villagers with the leftover coins from yesterday," answered Lanzo with a wide smile, placing the package on the horse cart.

"What kind of things?" Jacob asked, examining the packages.

"You know... Things that the villagers don't have," Lanzo answered with a cheeky smile.

"What things, you rascal! Let me kick you for making me wait for so long!"

"No! Don't! Ahh, my legs, my legs!" said Lanzo, acting as if he was hurting all over again. Emery laughed so hard that he could his ribs hurting before asking them to stop.

As soon as things settled down, the three of them traveled back to Mistshire.

On the way, Lanzo talked incessantly about the stuff he had bought for the villagers, particularly how he had bought a special hand-knitted coat for Granny. Emery listened attentively to Lanzo while grinding the sword with a whetstone and checked his bag filled with plants with a smile on his face.

Due to their late departure because of someone's fault, the group of two youngsters and old man arrived at Mistshire when the sky was already dark.

"Brother, look! The moon in the sky!" exclaimed Lanzo, pointing up.

Emery raised his head and witnessed a sight that he had only seen once in his life. The dark heaven was devoid of stars, only the crimson moon, known as the blood moon, decorated the empty sky. For some reason, Emery's heart began pounding against his chest as he realized only now that the surrounding was also lacking of life. He then turned his head to Jacob who also appeared as confused as he.

"What happened?" Emery asked.

"This isn't right... I know we're late, but why isn't there anyone, not even hunters guarding by the gate? They still should be expecting us even if we're a day behind!" Jacob explained.

Authors note.

Please comment and give me input about the novel as I am sure it will improve my writing as well.

I also welcome you all to come to my discord server with the 100+ other readers. I plan to create an end of year giveaway event in the discord as I will have 10 vouchers of 100 coins each that I would give to my lucky reader who joins the discord server and win a quiz. Detailed information will be on the discord server. To join, just google doomsday pillars, or go to www.doomsdaypillars.com there you will see a link to my discord.

Sorry for the long message. don't forget the power vote button please. thank you.

Yours sincerely, Avans.

75 Eerie Silence

"Wha-what's happening? Where's everyone?" exclaimed Lanzo, putting the wagon to a stop. He jumped out and hurriedly headed toward the nearest hut.

"Jacob!" Emery called out as he also got out of the second wagon and went after the old man. Lanzo followed suit, although a bit limping behind, but the two youngsters had drawn their swords, in case of any danger that might head their way.

"Hey! Is anyone there!" Jacob's muffled shouting exited the hut but only the eerie silence replied in return. Emery almost bumped into Jacob, but Jacob didn't mind him not one bit as he entered another hut.

Emery and Lanzo entered the second hut where Jacob seemed to have already turned inside upside-down but just like the first one, aside from the mess Jacob had created, everything that seemed to be of value stayed untouched.

"Did the marauders attack?" Emery asked, waving the torch around for better visibility.

"I don't think that's the case... there aren't any horse tracks or signs of fighting... this looks like—"

Lanzo didn't finish his words when Jacob suddenly shouted, "Daisy, Greg, where are you? Anyone! Can you hear me, please..."

Jacob this time pushed his way against Emery and Lanzo and proceeded to check more huts. The population of Mistshire should be around thirty people but after searching about a dozen or so huts, even a single soul was nowhere to be seen. Jacob then sat on the ground, trying to catch his breath. He stutteringly said, "W-w-we must've passed them along the way... hahaha... T-t-t-they must have gone to another village... Yeah, that's p-p-probably it..."

Emery knew these words were just words of comfort, and although he had barely known these people, he himself was starting to feel his heart pounding against his chest. His thoughts then were drowned out as Lanzo spoke.

"Let's go, there's still one place we haven't checked out yet," Lanzo said, giving a knowing look at Emery and Emery nodded in reply.

Lanzo's words had only meaning, Granny's place. Unlike the rest of the Mistshire settlers, Granny's hut was located at the farthest edge of the settlement near the trees. Emery then followed Lanzo's limping hurried steps with the torch only providing the faintest of light from the darkness that seemed to be wanting to swallow them alive.

As the two youngsters neared Granny's hut, a faint moving shadow and the sound of digging entered their perceptions. They headed toward the unknown and when they got there, the shadow of a man was scooping the earth with what appeared to be a shovel. Emery shone the burning torch on the person and saw Obed, one of the Mistshire settlers, who seemed to be out of sorts.

Lanzo had just caught up to Emery and when it was his turn to see, he fell to knees and vomited a greenish, foamy barf.

"W-w-what? H-h-how?" Lanzo said, heaving hard while wiping his mouth.

Jacob arrived not long after and had the same reaction.

Emery fought off the urge to cover his nose. He opened his mouth to ask Obed what had happened while they were away but decided against it and let the man continue to dig in tears.

Just when Emery turned toward the hut, the door opened and Granny stepped out. In a moment's notice, Obed had already thrown away the shovel and ran toward Granny.

"How is my wife!" Obed kneeled and grabbed Granny's robes, but the old woman kept silent and shook her head. Her eyes exhibited deep sadness as she watched Obed who was now wailing and hugging his poor, poor, wife inside her hut.

Jacob stood before Granny and asked, "W-what happened? Is e-e-everyone..."

Granny sighed heavily as she took a seat. Her shoulders slumped as she explained that when the three had left, everyone in the settlement started exhibiting coughing, which spread within just hours. Granny worked nonstop brewing potion but despite her best efforts, one by one, the residents soon became unable to move and died.

Lanzo, standing beside Emery, had a grim expression as if he had remembered something terrible. He said, "These symptoms... Granny, please don't tell me it's following us..."

Granny shook her head once more and buried her face in her hands. From that, Emery could tell it was the same disease that Lanzo's family had suffered. More on that, however, it seemed that the same thing had happened during their almost two years of travel.

Granny then stood up and rummaged through the countless bottles before finding three bottles with greenish content and asked the four men to drink the potion.

"Even though you weren't here when it happened, it's better to drink this potion as a prevention. This will help you to resist the disease," she said while handing the potions to them.

Lanzo and Jacob chugged the potion without delay but somehow for Emery, the back of his head was screaming that there seemed to be something out of place. He stared at the green potion when a wild idea flashed through his mind. He trembled and then looked at Granny whose saddened eyes earlier now seemed to have disappeared altogether.

"What's wrong, dear? Drink it, it should be good for you," urged Granny.

76 Betrayal

[Analyze]

[Paralysis poison]

[A concoction that shocks the nervous system rendering the receiver unable to move and lose consciousness for an extended period of time]

His eyes widened at the revelation. Although he had no idea what the nervous system was, the following words were more than enough to know what would happen to him the moment he drank this potion. Then it clicked in Emery's head. Why would the illness that Lanzo had told him would appear here and from the sound of it, not only once but had happened multiple times as he traveled with her? There was only one answer. So, without delay, he smashed his potion on the floor and slapped the potions out of Lanzo and Jacob's grasps.

Emery took a step back and stared at Granny as he accusingly said to her, "Why Granny! Why!"

He went behind Lanzo and tried to make him regurgitate the poison but apparently he was too late. The effect of the poison had already spread throughout Lanzo as Emery struggled a bit to carry Lanzo's weight.

Lanzo could only barely move his lips to say, 'wha...you...' before thudding on the ground, unconscious, with Jacob and Obed following suit.

Emery's stare bore a hole into Granny's shifting appearance, which no longer resembled the one he had known for months. Her face contorted and twisted, replaced with more wrinkles, her bulging eyes seemed to pop out of their sockets, her teeth became sharper as if they were all fangs and her hair turned greasy white.

He drew his sword and the 'Granny' now who no longer resembled her old warm appearance said in a high pitched nasally voice, "Kekeke, young child, you truly are full of surprises! Extremely talented, in fact maybe even better than me, I daresay. But too bad..."

Her outward appearance, mannerisms, everything had changed. Emery shakingly pointed his sword at her and said, "Granny, please... I – don't want to hurt you. Why are you doing this?"

"Hurt me? I thought you were smarter than that, my dear Emery, kekeke," she said with a cackle. 'Granny' then raised her bony hand and the thin roots from outside started creeping inside the hut.

One of the roots had managed to sneak up behind him but he was able to barely dodge and cut it off with his iron sword. He kept moving around and hacked the crawling roots while at it, making sure that not even a single one would wrap around to any of his limbs.

"Interesting... it looks like you have seen this magic before. How curious. I wonder what other secrets you may have," said the old woman.

From the sound of it and her appearance, he could infer that she didn't seem to have learned this from the Magus Academy. She looked too old to know only the lowest level of spell from the plant element and didn't dare mention the Magus Academy, wherein whatever restriction that had been casted on her should be broken by now.

As he kept blazing his way through the hut, a distant memory from one of his family's scholar lessons resurfaced in his mind. The lesson of how there were rumours and some evidence and sightings of magic and mystical creatures in the land of Britannia albeit being extremely rare. Considering that memory that had emerged and with the existence of the Magus Academy, Emery became somewhat convinced those rumors might actually be true!

Granny then raised her other hand and black smoke emerged from her palm. The smoke rose up to the ceiling of the hut before it started wiggling and twisting itself, forming a rope-like appearance. It then pounced at Emery but he was able to jump just in the nick of the time on the side.

The half-circle with a vertical line symbol on Emery's palm faintly glowed and showed information in his mind.

[Shadow rope - rank 3 darkness spell]

He remembered he had seen this spell being able to be used by a rank four acolyte or above. Granny kept channeling the two spells on her both hands, which Emery couldn't help but be unsure of what to feel, terrified or amazed.

Both spells continuously threw themselves at Emery, he was able to chop whatever came his way but at the same time, he felt that the sword was getting duller after each wave. A rope of smoke attacked him directly and when Emery tried to chop it off, like what he had feared, the blade didn't cut through as the smoke-rope ensnared the sword and attempted to pull it out from Emery's grip.

Emery held on with all his strength and tried to tug it back only to result in the iron sword bending almost straight. He let go of the sword at the peak of the tug, causing it to be thrown away with force. Emery wanted to run but when he saw Lanzo staying still with eyes wide open, that moment of hesitation became his downfall for he was caught off guard by the root that wrapped his leg just beneath his feet. He kneeled in an attempt to pry it off but the black smoke-rope swiftly circled around his body. He struggled to break free but with each twist and turn of his body only made the grip of the smoke become tighter and tighter.

"G-Granny... Y-You—"

Emery didn't manage to finish his words as the flying bottle of paralysis potion was shoved into his throat. In just seconds, Emery's vision darkened, he couldn't move until everything within his consciousness finally became dark.

77 Ritual

Here Emery lay on the table staring at the rounded ceiling composed of straw and wood. It was just like when the first time he had awoken in Granny's hut. There was the strong scent of medicinal herbs but there was also a foul stench, which probably came from the corpses outside. Still, this moment was unlike his first experience, that time had a warm atmosphere but now it had a cold, dark and a deathly aura permeating the surrounding. It was the total opposite, his distant memory was, compared to his present situation.

Waves of prickling needles like ants crawling through his whole body. The poison was still in effect as he tried to move his whole body, but only his pinky finger was able to make small movements, nothing meaningful. He could move his eyes though and was able to faintly see on the edge of his vision four silhouettes lit by the faint several candles standing on the edge of the table and the burning furnace where the cauldron stood.

One of the bodies was that of a woman, lying next together to another burly man, which were most likely Obed and his dead wife. As for Jacob and Lanzo, they were closer to him and after looking carefully at their chest, he saw they were slightly heaving with eyes closed.

Once more he struggled to break free from the bondage but it was for naught no matter how hard he ordered his body to move. Then Lanzo's silhouette rustled, Emery whispered, "Lanzo! Hey, Lanzo! Wake up!"

"He's fast asleep, my dear. I'm quite surprised to see you already recovered. Your body's healing truly is a marvel," said Granny with a wicked grin while entering the alchemy room. She first went to Lanzo,

caressed his cheeks, before moving to Emery. "Anyway dear, it seems like you're not a simple boy found in the woods, are you?"

She then pounced on him and grabbed his cheeks, forcing his eyes to gaze directly into hers. After she seemed to have confirmed what she wanted to know, she released her bony hand and said, "A tint of green. So, that's why. You're a Fey. Care to tell me the name of your parents?"

Emery stayed silent as he was now able to wiggle his toe.

"What about your mother's name instead?" asked the old hag.

Granny raised her hand and said, "Actually, you're right. Don't bother. It doesn't even matter."

"Granny..." he said tiredly. "Why are you doing this?"

For a moment, Granny looked about to answer but only the dull thumping of the wooden floor against her feet replied in return. She stood before the unconscious Jacob and grabbed the container sitting beside him. She lifted it up, scooped her hand inside then rubbed it on Jacob's arms, legs and head. Emery watched as the red watery substance from the container, some of them seemed to have already formed chunks, was smeared on Jacob. It didn't take long for Jacob to be covered all over except for his chest when a new metallic scent traveled in the air. Granny moved closer to Jacob and then drew a circle with a six-sided star on Jacob's chest and proceeded to grab a small, jet black dagger.

As she raised the dagger, she chanted a spell that was foreign to Emery's ear before fiercely puncturing Jacob right in the center of what she had drawn. Emery wanted to close his eyes but refused to avert his gaze while watching Jacob suddenly waking up and grimacing.

Jacob's body started convulsing violently and a few seconds later, a screeching white stream flew out from his orifices; mouth, nose, ears, including the eyes until it got sucked into granny's wide open jaw. After nothing more came out of Jacob's orifices, only then he stopped shaking and became dried up, looking similar to the corpses Obed had buried beside Granny's hut.

The ungodly ritual sent goosebumps up Emery's spine for only one explanation made sense in his mind. She had just sucked a person's life. Jacob's wailing reverberated inside Emery's head. The village elder of Mistshire died just like that.

She placed the jet black dagger carefully on the table and even though the room's visibility was close to none, Emery had seen how her body shook in delight.

"You... you... What did you do to old man Jacob?" he demanded.

Granny lifted the lifeless corpse of Jacob and turned to Emery. Her greasy white hair had become richer and a bit darker after she had consumed a person's soul. She said with a less nasally voice, "I am a plague, my dear. A curse towards all living things."

Her lips curled upward before going out of the room. After returning with no Jacob on her arms, she kneeled before Lanzo and placed him on the table. She tore his shirt with the dagger.

"No, please no... Granny, stop. Don't do this. Not to him..." pleaded Emery. Again Granny worked in silence and didn't heed any attention to Emery. She hastily scribbled the blood from another container she had prepared and once all preparation had been finished, she licked her lips and raised the dagger.

"Granny! That's Lanzo, he cares about you more than anyone. Don't do this to him!"

Granny pierced down but stopped midway. She then said, "Ahh... my dear Lanzo... I see that you're awake. Why didn't you say anything?"

Emery was finally able to turn over his body to the side and saw Lanzo had his eyes open.

Lanzo was shaking, his eyes wet. "I-I am afraid..."

"Aww, it's okay to be afraid, child. Don't worry it will be over soon..." she said with a patronizing tone.

"Granny, I am afraid to die. But I am also terrified to know the truth. Still, will you tell me?"

"Of course, go ahead and ask me anything, deary Lanzo," Granny answered.

"Tell me the truth this time. Was it you?"

"Yes, you are correct," said Granny.

"I... see..." These were only the words that Lanzo seemed to get out of his throat.

At first Lanzo was as still as a rock, then it became a slight tremble, but now, he was calm again. And just like a volcano, Lanzo erupted, "I treated you like my mother!"

"Kekeke, I never was your mother! Be happy now that you can reunite with your family!" she replied and struck down the jet black dagger straight into Lanzo's chest.

Lanzo was able to spare a glance into Emery's eyes who had turned his head to see, and Emery could feel the fear and despair in Lanzo's. Emery shouted, pleading Granny to stop this madness, but the knife stayed punctured in Lanzo's chest. And in his last moments, Emery and Lanzo stared at each other as Lanzo's face slowly paled. Emery's heart dropped. Lanzo was dying.

He howled in torment as the white stream also exited his body and got consumed by Granny's inhumane opened-jaws before falling limp, lifeless. She burst out laughing after she looked at her reflection in the cauldron. Once more she turned to Emery with her face now clear of wrinkles and eyes no longer bulging out.

"Why, Granny, why!" Emery shouted in tears.

"Isn't it obvious yet? All this work just to gain my youth hahaha—huh?"

Granny stopped laughing madly and touched her cheeks with her finger that looked less bony.

"Why do I have tears?" she said to herself before wiping it. "No matter, you're next, my dear Emery. You'll accompany my poor Lanzo."

The numbing feeling still covered Emery's being but the raging fire inside him didn't die down. He now could feel Granny's grasp, which felt stronger than an average adult male.

At this moment, he was starting to hate himself as she slammed him down on the table. He hated how helpless he was as Granny tore open his shirt, revealing his scarred chest; he hated how that all he could do was watch as she smeared blood on him; he hated how naive he had been as Granny raised her dagger and was getting ready to kill him.

Emery roared while the blood in his veins started to boil. A surge of energy exploded within him. His body grew hair rapidly, teeth were turning sharper, ears were starting to be that of a wolf and nails were turning into claws. Then his bare chest started to emit a black light before it formed into some kind of wavy engravings spreading from his scarred chest up to his cheeks.

[Fey bloodline activated]

78 Rage

The symbol on his glowed as it issued a notification in his mind.

[Fey bloodline activated]

[Battle power has increased by 15]

Emery tapped into the bloodline of his ancestors and began his transformation. He didn't care whatever information the symbol showed him in his rage-filled mind. All he cared about at the moment was that he had a surge of energy and was able to move his body free from the influence of the paralysis poison.

His strength and speed had doubled and with the natural strength of his transformation, so that when he jumped toward the ceiling and ricocheted himself straight to the old hag, the ceiling of the rounded hut exploded as he managed to charge the old hag into the storage room.

With such powerful charge, any normal human would have died, especially an old woman, but of course this old hag was far from normal. From the rubble of the wood and straw, Granny stood up uninjured with her skin looking as brown as an oak.

[Oak flesh - Tier 2 plant magic]

[Turning flesh into a hard oak wood, strong but light]

Emery's attack virtually had no effect on her and instead of being fearful, Granny appeared to have been more excited than before.

"Hahaha! Wonderful, excellent! You truly are special! Such a rarity even to those who are direct descendants of the Fey!"

"I... I'll rip you...apart!" He roared and once more charged at Granny when a wall of wood sprang from before her. He quickly shifted his position mid-air and waved his arm, sending Granny outside flying where the blood moon shone its ominous crimson light.

He chased after the body lying on the ground but when he arrived, her figure became a black smoke, dispersing into thin air. The roots on the ground then started creeping on him and managed to latch on his legs. After he hacked the roots with his claws, Emery darted his eyes until he found Granny's silhouette going into the forest wherein he followed suit.

Inside the forest, the tall trees little light from whatever the crimson moon shone on the land below. He tried to track down Granny's mocking voice as she kept on saying, "Come here, boy. Come! I'm over here!"

She moved faster than any old woman should've been able too, but Emery was nearing her evident by the faint black smoke he had been seeing signs of. Emery understood that he had no spells nor even a sword, but he understood that his claws right now would probably be more effective against the old hag than a weapon.

After clearing everything of the spells that had managed to twist itself on him, Emery breathed in and out. The cold winter made him look like he was breathing out his own smoke coming straight from his nostrils. He was calming himself since he had fallen to her tricks twice. If he continued being reckless and wouldn't be more careful, he realized that he would eventually fall prey into the hands of an old mad woman.

Now that he had gotten back some sense to himself, Emery surveyed his surroundings and came up with a plan. This time, Emery ran in circles in the hopes of confusing Granny and her wicked spells. His advantage was speed and he would take advantage of that until she finally slips out and that would be his one and only chance to get close and tackle the old woman to the ground. He believed that as long he pinned her down, her wooden spell of defense would eventually break apart.

"What are you doing now, boy! Can't you even catch an old woman?"

Despite making himself calm earlier, he could feel his emotion was starting to rise up once more. It looked like his transformation not only affected his body but also his psyche. He gritted his teeth as he continued to catch his breath, trying hard not to fall out of grace by her nonstop taunting.

As he ran around, another of Granny's shadow rope appeared behind a tree rope, his fast momentum made him barely dodge it causing him to crash into one of the trees. He stood up, uninjured, and saw the aftermath in his wake. The thick tree was half broken and was almost about to fall. Then a new idea popped in his head.

Emery once more ran around and purposely crashed into the trees where Granny's shadow rope appeared. He noticed a silhouette jump out of the way of the fallen tree and this confirmed his theory. Granny's couldn't be far away or was most likely hiding behind the tree the shadow appeared from since it was attached to her directly.

He continued doing the same stratagem and after a dozen of trees later, Granny's voice rang out and said, "Hahaha, looks like you've gone mad, my dear Emery. Sadly, falling trees won't be enough to hurt m—"

Before Granny was able to finish her words, Emery appeared above her, standing on top of a nearby fallen tree and pounced on her. They were only an inch away when Granny chanted a new kind of spell at such speed that a black light in the shape of a crescent moon appeared on the top of her palm and shot toward Emery.

Emery barely had the time to twist his body in mid-air when the unknown spell sliced past him. The notification of the sleep arrived at the moment of impact:

[Enfeeble Blade - rank 3 darkness spell]

[A powerful and extremely sharp blade created from the shadow of the darkness element]

Blood splashed against the trunk of the tree and Emery could no longer feel his right arm. He turned to see what had happened and only to find his right arm was still hovering in the air while he was descending fast on the ground.

Distracted by such a shock, he didn't notice Granny had whipped her jet, black dagger, pierced him right into his scarred chest, slammed him on the ground and got on top of him.

Emery howled as he could feel every fiber of his being forcefully drawn out and consumed by Granny.

"Grraaaahhhh!!!"

Each second felt like eternity while witnessing his own white stream being pulled out of his body. Emery struggled trying to push the old woman away, but it seemed that even her strength was quite unusual while his was starting to dwindle. And he was starting to lose consciousness when

Emery then heard the familiar voice again.

"You're in trouble again aren't you, kid?" said a voice in his head.

"You! Who are – why are you always messing my head" he replied with his thoughts.

"Huh? The feeling is mutual, kid. Stop messing around, your pathetic actions will be the end of us both!"

"I-I—"

"I what, kid? I'm trying your best? Heck, you can't even defeat an old woman!"

"Whoever or whatever you are... you either help me or shut up!"

Emery bit his tongue just to force himself awake. It barely did anything as his vision was waning. The white stream became even thicker like endless smoke entering through Granny's wide open mouth.

"Such a rich life force!" yelled Granny. "This... this!... what is this!.. What are you really Emery!"

She laughed madly as a black shadow mixed within white stream and entered her mouth. And in just a few seconds, her hair became thick and dark, skin tightened, until she finally became an attractive young woman in her 30s.

She touched her face before taking a look at her body, her wrinkled skin turned smooth and white. She grinned and shouted, "This is the best! Finally! Finally! After two hundred years of seeing that disgusting face, I'm back to my prime! Now, I'll be able to return the favor to that bitch!"

Emery shakingly raised his hand. The feeling of feebleness grew stronger as he could tell her rate of absorption was getting stronger by the second. He knew he was on the boundary of life and death. If he didn't do something, anything, this would spell his inevitable doom.

And with such desperate situations, came desperate measures. He decided to not even try to escape, instead, he decided to embrace it. He grasped Granny's hand that was holding the hilt of the dagger and pushed it deeper into himself. His sudden actions surprised her, making her lower her head, and at that moment Emery found the strength to sit up and bite Granny's neck with all the force he could muster in his jaws until the blood was starting to drip down.

Granny was startled and then immediately broke away. But Emery was not willing to let go. He released his left arm, put it around Granny's torso and once again bit as hard as he could until a chunk of meat was taken off.

Granny screamed and pushed him back with both hands before turning herself into a shadow and disappearing.

79 Dying

"Sigh... You truly are hopeless, kid," said the voice in a low tone.

"Why? Why is it that when you say something, it's always about mocking me. Can't you see I've tried my best?" said Emery, indignant.

"Why don't you reflect on your actions, kid? Look and ask yourself, how many times have you gotten out in such a crucial moment only to be saved by pure luck? You won't survive this time," replied the voice.

"Haha, but at least this time, I've won!" Emery's laugh got cut short before he curled in pain. His vision was getting blurrier and the sound from the surrounding was waning.

"This is definitely not winning..." retorted the voice, clearly disappointed.

"Well ain't she the one running? I believe I could say I won fair and square," Emery said to convince himself before coughing out blood.

"You know she'll return and she's alive. Based on what I had felt from her earlier, she should at least be a rank 6 acolyte, and for her to live that long, she should also have a healing spell on her sleeve. As for you though, you'd probably be dead once she comes back," explained the voice.

"Hahaha — cough cough — maybe you're right... Hahaha, this is so funny... I'm talking to myself. I've become crazy as well... "

"Kid... haven't you figured it out already? You are not talking to yourself..." criticized the voice.

"Is that so? Then who or that are you? Come on, humor me in my last moments," chided Emery.

"I am Killgragah, the Guardian of Khaos! Thou should remember my great name for my greatness was once and still feared by the whole galaxy!" announced the voice.

Emery burst out laughing. "Hahaha... God... I really am dying... My imagination has gone wild!"

Once more, Emery's lungs issued a fit of coughs filled with blood as he yanked the jet, black dagger out of his chest. It didn't take long for him to feel all the warmth was exiting his body, only the coldness remained. These were all the things that registered in Emery's head before plunging into the eternal darkness called death.

Or so he thought...

A moment later, the swearing of a woman sounded not far away coupled with the crunching of branches and hard thumping.

Just like Killgragah had said, she wasn't dead and had come back to finish her loose end.

But in the second that that happened, a sudden deafening buzzing caused pain in Emery's head, making him open his eyes only to find what was supposed to be an open sky blocked by tree leaves had changed into what appeared to be a ceiling made out of rocks.

Emery shot up, sitting before exclaiming, "Wha-what just happened?"

A throbbing pain came rushing through his right shoulder as well as his chest. Emery grabbed his shoulder with his left arm as he gasped for air while gritting his teeth and grunting, "Urrgghh!"

These pain were too real for Emery to consider he had died or dreaming. The only explanation he could come up with was he once more transported into some kind of space or something.

Eventually, the pain calmed down to a point he could somewhat bear it. He tried to stand up with his wiggling legs, using the wall as a support.

Once he had stabilized his footing, still leaning on the wall, from the darkness the familiar voice echoed in the air and said, "Kid..."

Emery tried to peer into the darkness that appeared to be more like an abyss into nothingness. He was unable to see anything, so he called out instead. "Killgragah? Is that you? Where are you?"

Now that he had gotten back to his senses, Emery felt like he had been here before and similar to that time, his body now was also emitting its own light to provide some vision in the surrounding.

He decided to walk toward the voice, and as he trudged along the path, he could barely see a monstrous shadow, and some sort of black fire lighting up the tunnel. Emery thought to himself that whatever would happen, would come to pass, and proceeded to exit the tunnel.

"I am here," said the voice above Emery's head.

Emery looked up and saw the species that only existed in mythical stories. Its size was at least ten times of that of a war horse, its neck stretched like a snake connected with its huge chest. Its four limbs, two in the back acting as legs, and two in the front that was connected to its wings spanning at least ten times the dragon's total size.

The dragon moved its pointed and scaly snout at Emery. If this was another time, Emery would've probably been scared to death or frozen to the point where he wouldn't be able to move even an inch of muscle. However, considering what he had just gone through in some unfortunate event and had half-given up, Emery issued half a smile as he said to the mythical creature, "Haha... so, is this how I'll go to the afterlife? Are you going to eat me now?"

"Should I?" said the dragon's booming voice. It opened its wide maw and Emery just stood still before a flash sparked inside its mouth and spewed out an invisible energy like a gust of wind, pushing Emery to his knees.

"Hey! Did you just spit on me?" Emery said in a rage as he stood up without issues. Only then he realized that the throbbing pain on his right shoulder disappeared and bleeding chest closed up, looking just like how it died before. On top of that, a surge of energy revitalized his weary spirit that he felt like was back to his previous self.

"Hahahaha! Be grateful, kid, for you have been blessed by the awesome, mighty, great and powerful Killgragah!" declared the dragon, seemingly overpraising himself by using the same descriptions.

Emery received a slight headache from talking to this narcissistic dragon. Still, a gratitude was due, so Emery said, "Thank you, Killgragah. But if you're so powerful, why can't you grow my hand back?"

"Too bad but I don't know such spells," immediately replied Killgragah, moving around.

Emery noticed a chain rustled behind Killgragah's leg. He said, "How come the great and powerful is in chains?"

"I-I don't want to talk about it!" Killgragah snapped as he once more moved into a corner.

Emery stopped pressing the issue and placed his attention elsewhere. Looking around the chamber, there were two things that caught his eyes. Floating on one side of the room was a huge window while on the opposite side was a rather massive door.

He first walked up to the overbearing door that it felt like he was an ant once he stood just a few steps away from it. When he moved closer, an invisible force pushed against him and no matter how much strength Emery placed through his legs, he couldn't get one foot nearer.

"You won't be able to get near much less open the door with your current understanding of the elements, kid," commented the dragon.

Emery opened his mouth to ask what was inside about but decided against it. He had a feeling that no matter how much questioning he did, the dragon would probably say to prove his worth by opening it by himself.

He then took a step back and headed toward the window instead. Through the window, he could see the forest where he had just fought with the woman who was supposed to be Granny. In fact, the woman was also there running around and looking behind each tree or under the rubble of trees in search of him.

"Killgragah!" said Emery with gritted teeth.

"Don't bother. She can't see you, and you also can't get out," replied the dragon, sitting calmly.

"What do you mean? Are you taking me as a prisoner here?" questioned Emery.

"Is your mind really that simple, kid?" glowered the dragon.

"If I'm not a prisoner, then what? Why am I here? What is this place?" interrogated Emery.

The dragon stood up and spanned his wings amidst as if he was stretching. "You are currently inside a space created by Khaos, The Ruler of Darkness, Lord of Shadow."

Emery twitched his brows, not understanding one bit Killgragah had just explained.

"As for the reason why you can't get out, it's simply because you don't have the sufficient power to do it. Like what I said earlier, you are just too weak," taunted the dragon.

Emery clenched his fist. Again, he wanted to give this dragon a piece of his mind, but he calmed himself before asking, "Then, tell me. How did I get in here the first place? I'm assuming it was you?"

"Correct, I used a lot of energy and broke a rule by letting you in," replied the dragon, yawning.

Emery released his fist. He tried to fight off the urge to ask why but something at the back of his head was telling him that was not the right thing to ask next. Instead, shouldn't he be grateful that this Killgragah had actually gone out of his way to place him in this spatial space? After collecting himself once more, he asked, "So, Killgragah. What should I do before I can get out of here?"

The dragon's eyes beamed, looking as if Emery was finally asking the right questions. Killgragah said, "Simple enough. Cultivate your understanding of the elements until you are strong enough."

"How strong are we talking about?"

"Until you've become a magus, of course. I've seen your talent, so that should probably take about five to ten years in human time."

"Ten years?!"

80 Pure Energy

"Are you being serious? Five to ten years? Are you expecting me to stay here for 10 years?" questioned Emery with a furrowed brow.

"Kid, I am not expecting anything from you. What I am saying is, that is the way," retorted the black dragon.

Emery gave it a thought. He tried to recall his experiences back in the hut that somewhat jumped start his understanding of the elements. He would cultivate in the morning and evening, and when he practiced his and increased his knowledge with some tasks like watering the plant, caring for the garden or tilling the ground the associated affinity would increase. However, there was nothing similar here that he knew of, so he didn't consider that as an option.

Also, based on experience, the increase of his spirit power, which was the basis of his acolyte ranking, grew at a snail's pace compared to the rest of acolytes he knew. Eventually of course he would reach it, but like the dragon had said, it would take years, and he didn't have the time considering his situation.

He then searched around the room for anything that he could use, such as the elemental origin stones, potions, or any kind of tools but came up empty handed. This large chamber only housed the dragon, a swirling thing above that looked like a whirlpool of black stuff, the window showing the outside world, a humongous door and the tunnel he had come from. As he kept thinking and searching for things that may help, his eyes fell on the dragon once more and thought of an idea.

He said with the most flattering voice he could muster, "Oh, mighty and powerful Killgragah."

The black dragon's ear twitched.

"My humble self believes this challenge is something too great of a difficulty for me to achieve. Hence, I implore to your great self, for any thing that could help this little one in his journey."

"Hmm..." the black dragon grunted.

In Emery's ear, however, it sounded like a happy grunt. Hence, he decided to flatter the dragon further. "I beg thee, supreme being, for any generosity that you can bless me with, perhaps an item or an artifact?"

The black dragon decided to stand on all fours. He pointed to his back leg, using his sharp snout, and said, "Kid, can't you see that I'm in chains and am not sleeping on a pile of treasure? I have nothing to give you. And even if I have, why should I give you a piece of my precious treasure?"

"You're weak. You can't handle the spell of someone as mighty as me," said the black dragon, proning back into the corner.

Emery was starting to feel a vein was about to pop in his forehead as he thought this dragon was once again playing with his emotions. He couldn't be cooped up in this place for ten years, he still had a lot to do. Of course revenge would never be too old, but his established trail of clues against those who had killed his family, as well as Granny disappearing to who knows where, probably massacring innocent people in secluded settlements, he just didn't have the luxury to waste ten years in this place.

"Killgragah... you know I'm an acolyte at the Magus Academy, right?" said Emery with no repercussions or the urge to keep his mouth shut about this magical place.

"Of course, but what about it?" said the black dragon, not even a bit concerned.

"Then you should know that in a couple of months, I'll be transported there again. So, I guess I'd be forcefully ripped away from whatever you call this space, right?" said Emery, feeling a bit proud of himself that he had outwitted this black dragon.

"Maybe, but I doubt it," dismissed the black dragon.

"What do you mean?" inquired Emery.

"Any orders or spell from the outside going to that left palm of yours won't be able to penetrate the barrier Khaos, the Ruler of Darkness, had created. They'll probably assume you have died because that low-level symbol will only react if its host has some lifeforce. So, the recall spell will not work."

After that explanation, Emery couldn't help but feel he had no choice in the matter. Especially if that truly was the case. He was trapped in this spatial space with the dragon as his sole companion. And it looked like this dragon wasn't that keen in helping him too much. If so, why would Killgragah bring him here in the first place and use a lot of energy to break some kind of rule? It didn't make sense.

"Hahaha, why are you looking so downcast, kid? Have you no eyes to see, no ears to listen, no nose to smell, no tongue to taste, no skin to feel and no mind to think? Observe and pay attention to your surroundings, the secret of the Lord of Shadow is in plain sight, and with my guidance, the acolytes and magi in that academy will not hold a candle against you in due time," said Killgragah, the black dragon.

Emery deeply closed his eyes and took a deep breath before opening it. He focused his thoughts in to see, to listen, to smell, to taste, to feel, and to think. At first there was nothing helpful, just things he had been experiencing ever since he had arrived here. The sight of the black dragon in front, both his and the dragon's breathing, the smell of his bloodstained clothes, the taste of blood in his mouth, the cold

air in the surrounding, and the thoughts of why was he doing this in the first place. However, as he continued on to be mindful and focus on the present, a faint sort of energy was actually before him and the dragon. Soon enough, he could tell it was everywhere, at all once. He snapped out of his trance and stared at the black dragon, unsure of what to say.

"Excellent, so you indeed have talent. Not many can feel the energy of Khaos. So I, Killgragah, the Guardian of Khaos, shall guide you with my unparalleled intelligence!"

Emery sighed, thinking the wonderful moment just now had been broken. Still, this ridiculous dragon had somewhat cheered him up. He asked, "Am I right to assume then that if I take in this energy to learn the other elements, it would help me tremendously?"

"Indeed, well, pretty much the same as those special rooms with the puny stones in that human academy. But unlike those stones, this chamber is filled with pure energy that'll work with all elements. For a supreme being like me, this spirit aura doesn't have much benefit but for you a lowly rank two acolyte, you'll reach magus much much faster. From ten years to... I'd say around two or three years."

This was certainly good news for Emery. Two years at the very least was still better than ten years. But why didn't this dragon tell him that earlier? He wouldn't have to feel dejected from the way this dragon mocked and withholding of information in the first place. Also, his problem about returning to the Magus Academy still wasn't resolved. Nevertheless, it was better than nothing.

After Emery nodded, he went into the corner opposite the black dragon, took a seat, and started to reflect on his four affinities. At first he wanted to push through his plant element's understanding, which had already reached the middle stage but decided against it because that wasn't the most beneficial thing to cultivate right now. So, he decided to go with the second element he was most familiar with and because it would give him the most benefit in conjunction with a spell that would increase his survivability, the earth element.

Emery started following the manual he had bought from the Golden City's Magus Guild and dived right in into understanding it. Steadfast thy heart, unmoved, unshaken. The words resounded in his mind and the illusion of giant rock trying to swallow him returned. Unlike the time he had first witnessed this, a sense of confidence inside him as he faced whatever came his way.

Due to Emery being so focused, the sense of time became slightly distorted as he didn't notice the notifications the symbol had been throwing itself in his mind.

[Spirit power has increased]

[Spirit power has increased]

[Spirit power has increased]

[Congratulations! You have mastered the middle stage foundation of the earth element]

The moment the congratulations appeared, only then Emery's focus broke because of the new surge of earth elemental energy flowing inside his body. Just like that, only a few days had passed and he already managed to achieve what took him weeks to reach with his plant element. His eyes beamed with a newfound determination.

