

## The Warrior's Broken Mate – Chapter 117

I shifted on the floor, every muscle screaming with exhaustion, my eyelids heavy as stone. My body ached from running, fighting, and narrowly escaping death more times than I could count. Yet beneath it all, a faint pulse thrummed through me—subtle at first, almost like a whisper beneath a roaring wind.

Elias was already awake, sitting back on the chair next to the window. His eyes followed me as I flexed my fingers, a faint tremor running along my arms. “You’re shaking.” He said quietly, his tone calm but wary. “And it’s not just because you’re tired. Something’s... happening.”

“I... I don’t know.” I admitted. “It’s like... something inside me is waking up.”

Before I could speak, the door creaked open. A swirl of gray ash drifted in, curling around the doorway before fading into the hut.

Elias jumped to his feet, and I backed toward him, fearing the sorcerer had returned.

Then she stepped fully into the dim light—the Ash Queen.

She moved with an almost unnatural grace, her ash-colored robes flowing around her feet, the swirling particles around her hands as if alive. Her presence was commanding, yet calm, a quiet authority that made every instinct in me tense.

I knew that she contained power. But now it was like she was trying to show off what sort of power she possessed. How she was able to use her power and what she could do.

Elias straightened immediately, placing himself slightly between me and her. “What do you want?” His voice was steady but wary, protective.

The Ash Queen lifted her hands in a gesture meant to soothe, not threaten. “I am not here to harm you. I am here because the sorcerer you fear is real, and he is dangerous. I have opposed him for longer than either of you have lived, and I am here to help you stand against him.”

I shifted again, exhaustion pressing into my limbs like a physical weight, but the pulse in my chest grew stronger, curling along my arms like molten fire. “Why should we trust you?” I rasped. “Why now? Why come to us now when we needed help last night?”

“Because hiding does not save lives.” She said softly, her gray eyes catching the light coming through the window. “Because you survived what many others would not. That makes you important. And the sorcerer cannot be allowed to continue.”

Elias’s gaze flicked to mine, a mixture of caution and something that looked like hope. “You expect us to just take your word for it?” He asked. “After everything we’ve gone through?”

"I do not ask for blind trust." She replied, crouching slightly to bring herself closer to us. Her eyes swept over both of us, serious yet calm. "I ask only that you see the truth. I cannot do this alone. And neither can you. But together..." She let her words hang, and the swirl of ash around her hands seemed to emphasize her sincerity.

I felt the warmth in my chest pulse again, stronger this time, and the shimmer along my arms. reacted, tracing patterns I hadn't consciously created. "It's... responding." I whispered. "To me or maybe to all of us."

The Ash Queen nodded. "Yes. Your power is alive. It has been growing even when you did not notice. Today has pushed you to your limits, and now it has awakened fully. You must learn to control it, to focus it, or the sorcerer will exploit it."

Elias stepped closer, his eyes scanning my arms, then locking with hers. "So what now? We just... start learning? Right here, in this hut?"

"For now." She said. "Slowly. Carefully. The sorcerer must not know the full extent of what you are capable of—not yet. But you will begin. And when the time comes, you will be ready."

I flexed my fingers again. The shimmer spread further, dancing over my skin like liquid fire. Exhaustion still gnawed at my mind and body, but it no longer dragged me down—it sharpened my senses. Every sound in the hut, every flicker of shadows felt alive. Elias watched me closely, awe and concern in his eyes, but I saw the same faint thread of hope flickering there I felt inside.

"You'll need to practice." The Ash Queen said, addressing both of us. "Control comes through focus. Discipline and courage. Every moment of doubt is an opening the sorcerer will exploit. You must trust yourself... and eventually, perhaps, you will learn to trust me as well."

Elias let out a slow breath, nodding, the tension in his shoulders easing fractionally. "She's not pushing herself too hard." Elias said, determination evident his words. The shimmer along my skin pulsed brighter, responding almost as if it recognized his reaction.

The Ash Queen allowed a faint smile to flicker across her face, soft and fleeting. "Good. Begin with small steps. Learn to channel your power. And remember—you are not alone. Not now. Not ever."

And beside me, Elias, cautious but ready. The Ash Queen's presence was unsettling, yes, but purposeful, grounded, and oddly comforting. For the first time all day, I allowed myself to believe: perhaps together, we could stand against the sorcerer—and perhaps, just perhaps, we could survive what was coming and emerge stronger for it.

The Ash Queen moved closer. The swirl of ash around her hands began forming shapes- creatures, symbols, flickers of light—that shimmered briefly before dissipating into the air. "Your power is not only for survival." She said. "It is for resistance, for protection, for shaping the outcome of this realm. But it requires focus and control. Every moment of doubt weakens you. Every hesitation can be exploited. You must face it, acknowledge it, and bend it to your will."

I flexed my hands again, the shimmer crawling along my arms in response to her words. Exhaustion still pressed in like a weight, but the pulse in my chest grew stronger, more insistent. Every nerve ending thrummed, alive and electric. My body felt like it was becoming something more than human—something raw and dangerous and vital.

Elias leaned closer, his eyes wide, his hands hovering near mine, almost reverently. “I... I think I can feel it too.” He said, voice barely above a whisper. “It’s like it’s connected to both of us. Together, maybe we can learn to control it.”

Elias has never had any power before in his life. But being here in this realm seems to be showing us that that might not be the case.

“Yes.” the Ash Queen said, a flicker of approval crossing her ash-gray eyes. “The bond between you strengthens the power within. But it also creates vulnerability. You must learn to focus your intent, or the sorcerer will exploit any weakness.”

“Why didn’t you

tell me all of this at your castle?” I asked, cautiously.

“Because Arthur was there. And he had no idea about any of this. About the power that the sorcerer was going to accidentally unlock after approaching you.” The Ash Queen said.

I swallowed hard, letting the warmth pulse through me. The exhaustion pressed in, gnawing, yet there was clarity beneath it—an awareness I had never known. I was alive in a way that terrified and exhilarated me at once.

“I... I think I can do this.” I whispered, my voice steadier than I expected. “I think I can control it... if we practice.”

Elias smiled faintly, cautiously. “Then we’ll do it together. If this power is going to be part of us, we’ll learn to use it, no matter how dangerous it is.”

For the first time that day, a fragile thread of hope wove through my exhaustion and fear. The night pressed against the hut’s walls, dark and heavy, but inside, there was light. The shimmer along my skin pulsed softly, a sign this new power might be a gift I could learn to wield.

Beside me, Elias, awake and resolute, grounded me. The Ash Queen’s presence was unsettling yet purposeful, her intent clear.

For the first time in forever, I allowed myself to believe: together, we could stand against the sorcerer and survive what was coming—perhaps even triumph.

## The Warrior's Broken Mate – Chapter 118

**\*\*ELIAS POV\*\***

For the first time in what felt like days, she slept. Truly slept—not the restless half-doze she'd been plagued with since the sorcerer's attack, but a deep, steady breathing that signaled exhaustion had finally dragged her under. I sat beside the door of the hut, watching the faint rise and fall of her chest in the dim light.

Relief washed through me, though it carried its own weight. It meant the watch was mine alone, and I welcomed it. I had no intention of letting anything slip past while she was finally getting a bit of rest. The night outside was unnervingly quiet, the forest holding its breath as if aware of her fragile peace, and I found myself straining at every rustle, every whisper of wind, determined that nothing would disturb her sleep again.

The forest outside pressed in like a wall of shadows, the night still humming with unseen movement. Every sound pricked at my ears—the crack of a twig, the shuffle of wind through dead leaves. But more than sound, I felt something. A pull. A vibration beneath my skin. At first, I thought it was only the adrenaline that hadn't burned out yet, the echo of fear still rattling through my body. But when I turned my fist into a ball across my knees, sparks of faint light threaded through my hands. My breath caught. I blinked hard, but they didn't vanish. Instead, they grew brighter, tracing faint lines across the veins and muscles of my arms, as though some ancient pattern had been waiting there all along, hidden beneath flesh and bone, just waiting for me to notice.

I jerked my hand back. The glow winked out instantly, leaving my hand instantly. My pulse hammered, not with fear, but confusion. She had powers—that much was clear. I had seen her flames, flames hot enough to turn the air to fire. But me? I was no sorcerer. No heir to ancient gifts. Not of royal blood. Just Elias, the one who stood and tried to protect the ones that couldn't protect themselves. Well, that's what I used to do before I met Lyra.

And yet... the air still hummed in my blood, restless, insistent.

I forced myself to steady, to breathe, to focus on the rhythm of her sleeping. I would not wake her for this—not yet.

When dawn broke, pale gray light filtered through the slats in the hut's walls. She stirred, slow at first, then with a sharp breath that told me her mind was already alert even before her body could follow. I offered her the small skin of water we'd saved, and she drank greedily.

"We need food." She muttered, her voice still hoarse.

I nodded. The hollowness in my own stomach had long since turned into a gnawing ache.

Stay close.” I said, though I knew she would insist on coming. Her eyes flicked toward the trees in the distance. Another forest that had been spared from whatever happened to his realm, already scanning, already hunting.

We didn’t find much. The forest had grown quiet, too quiet, as if the curse of this land had taken every animal away. Not just the dangerous ones. Still, we managed to trap two scrawny creatures—barely enough to call a meal, but enough to keep us moving another day. The silence lingered with us, heavy, unsettling, as though the trees themselves watched.

Back at the hut, I gathered what dry branches I could and set them in a pile. Lyra knelt across from me, her hands outstretched. A spark of orange light shimmered between her palms, then leapt to the wood. The fire caught instantly, roaring with heat far stronger than it should have, chasing back shadows that had clung to us since morning.

I leaned back slightly from the intensity of it. Even her smallest flames carried the searing bite of dragonfire. She grimaced, frustration flickering across her face.

“I can make fireballs strong enough to burn stone.” She said quietly, “but I can’t control these new... gifts. They come and go like storms.”

I reached for the spit we’d rigged and set the rabbits over the blaze, careful not to meet her eyes just yet. My hand brushed the edge of my own bow that she made me, and this time, the glow returned, shining the wood on the bow—brighter, steadier, a faint heat running up my arm, pulsing with a rhythm that felt alive. Sparks of light flickered along the string, and for a moment, the air around me seemed to hum with a quiet, potent energy I could almost hear.

I froze. Then, slowly, I angled the bow toward the fire. The lines of molten light pulsed faintly, as though answering the flames.

Her gaze snapped to it immediately. “Elias...”

I shook my head, feeling both exposed and unsettled. “I don’t know how. It just started.”

For a moment, silence stretched between us, broken only by the crackle of the fire and the faint hiss of fat dripping into the flames. Then, to my surprise, she smiled—tired, but fierce, her eyes glinting with quiet determination.

“Then we train.” She said.

The food was gone quickly, and hunger still lingered, gnawing at our insides, but it gave us just enough strength to stand and stretch our stiff limbs. We moved outside the hut, where the morning light filtered softly through broken branches, casting dappled patterns on the damp forest floor, and the air was thick with dew that clung to our clothes and hair.

She showed me first, conjuring flames that spun into orbs in her palms, bright enough to make the air shimmer and twist around them. Each orb danced with life, tiny tongues of fire licking the edges, casting flickering shadows on nearby rocks and fallen logs. Then, with a swift, practiced motion, she hurled them at a charred stump, the wood hissing and cracking beneath the heat, sending sparks scattering like miniature fireflies across the dewy ground.

“Your turn.” She said.

I stared at my bow and arrow, willing the glow to come. At first, nothing. Just silence, and the weight of my own doubt pressing down on me. Then, when I thought of her—of the way she had stood against the sorcerer even when her body was breaking—something surged inside me. The arrow flared to life, golden veins racing across its length, humming with energy. My breath caught, chest tight, as the weapon seemed to respond not to strength, but to memory, to loyalty, to the unyielding fire that her courage had lit within me.

I let it slip from the bow, and the air seemed to split. Not with fire, not with shadow, but with a force that rang like struck steel. The stump shuddered as if hit by a hammer.

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it. Rough, disbelieving. “I think I did something.”

“You did.” She said, pride flashing in her eyes. “Do it again.”

We trained until sweat soaked through our clothes and the sun rose higher, burning away the mist. She wrestled with her new powers, frustrated when they slipped from her grasp, but I saw the strength in her, the way each failure only made her more determined.

And when my arrows lit with that strange golden fire, I felt—for the first time—that I was not just her shield. Not just the one who stood beside her.

I was something more.

And together, we would learn what that meant.

## The Warrior’s Broken Mate – Chapter 119

**\*\*LYRA’S POV\*\***

The mornings began early, though “morning” had little meaning where we were. Light filtered in through the canopy in shades of gold and orange, but it never truly signaled the start of a day or the end of one. Time felt different here, slippery, like water slipping through your fingers. I hated it.

Every day, we trained, until our bodies ached and our magic hummed in our veins like live wires. I had never been patient, but patience was the only thing keeping me alive long enough to see my baby again. I missed him more than I thought possible. Just thinking of his small hands curling around mine made my

chest ache. Every time I closed my eyes, I imagined him toddling across the living room, a stumble turning into a giggle, and my heart twisted with guilt. I couldn't lose any more time—not with the time difference here. I didn't even know how big he'd gotten already.

"Focus, Lyra." Elias' voice cut through my thoughts, sharp and precise. He was moving around me like a storm contained, his control over his power so much smoother than mine. I was still flaring and sputtering, bursts of energy shooting from my fingertips at the wrong moments, singeing the edges of the training ground.

I clenched my jaw and drew a deep breath. I could do this. I had to—for my baby.

We spent hours running through exercises, starting with basics and moving to complex combinations of force and control. Elias's patience never faltered, though I could see the strain in his eyes when I lost focus and nearly sent a bolt of fire through the training walls.

"You're letting your anger drive you." He said finally, stepping back to let the energy in the air settle. Sparks fizzled and fell like tiny stars, and I felt the familiar surge of frustration rise.

"I'm not angry." I said, though my voice cracked. "I'm... I'm just—I need to get back. I need to be with him." The words slipped out before I could stop them, raw and unguarded.

Elias's expression softened, just slightly. "I know." He said. "I feel it too, in my own way. But if we rush, we die before we even reach him. Control comes first. Every burst of magic must have purpose. You'll get there, baby. You will."

"How are you doing so well?" I asked, curiously.

"Honestly, I only think it's because I'm the one who's going to get us through this, and it is coming easily to me." He said.

I gritted my teeth and we continued, again and again. Hours bled into one another. Sweat ran down my back, my muscles burned, yet we kept pushing. I learned to let the energy flow, to bend it without letting it consume me, to channel it like water through a narrow channel instead of a flood over cliffs. The sparks that had once threatened to tear me apart now danced around my hands obediently, and I felt a thrill of triumph I hadn't felt in weeks.

Finally, when we collapsed onto the moss-strewn ground, our bodies trembling and our lungs screaming, Elias nodded. "Enough for today."

I closed my eyes, feeling the lingering buzz of magic in my veins. My body ached in every joint, but beneath it all, I felt a spark of hope. We were ready. Or at least... we were close.

"We can't wait any longer." I said finally, voice hoarse. "We have to go after him. The Sorcerer -he won't wait for us to be perfect, and neither can we. Every day I stay here, I'm losing more time with my son."

Elias was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, "I've felt it too. The pull. We can't ignore it anymore. But we have to be smart. The Sorcerer will have traps. He'll expect us."

"I don't care." I said, a flash of defiance sparking inside me. "I care about getting back to Grayson."

He studied me, his eyes narrowing, and then finally, with a reluctant nod, he said, "Alright. We leave at first light."

I hardly slept that night. Every time I closed my eyes, I imagined his little face, bright with curiosity, oblivious to the danger ahead. I pressed my hand against my belly, feeling the memory of his tiny heartbeat, a rhythm I would carry into battle.

By the first light, painting the sky pink and amber, we were packed and ready. Weapons, supplies, and focus aligned. Magic hummed faintly beneath my skin, a steady reassurance that I was finally ready to face him.

The journey to the Sorcerer's domain was treacherous. The world twisted unnaturally as we drew closer. Rocks floated where they shouldn't, trees shifted subtly, and shadows clung like sentient creatures. Every step tested us, every breath reminded us we were far from the familiar.

Elias moved ahead, scanning constantly, and I followed, muscles coiled, senses sharp. Despite the dangers, purpose propelled me forward. I imagined holding my son again, seeing him take his first steps, hearing his laugh, smelling his hair. That thought was my fuel, made me unstoppable.

When we reached the Sorcerer's stronghold, I froze. Black stone jutted from the earth at impossible angles, reality warped around his will. Mist curled along the ground, thick and choking, carrying whispers of fear and despair. A black cloud swallowed the area; no light could penetrate.

"This is it." Elias murmured, his voice low. "He's inside."

I nodded, drawing a deep breath. My fingers tingled as the magic inside me stirred, eager, impatient. "Let's do this." I said, though my throat was tight.

We moved cautiously, every step measured. I felt the Sorcerer's power ahead, a dark resonance pressing against my bones. My heartbeat thundered, but I kept walking. I would

not let fear control me. Not here. Not ever.

The entrance loomed—a massive archway carved with symbols that twisted like living things. I hesitated. Something screamed this was a trap, but urgency outweighed caution. My son's face flashed in my mind, and I stepped forward.

Elias fell into step beside me, his hand brushing mine briefly, silently acknowledging we were in this together. We passed through the arch, and the world seemed to shift around us.

Then it happened. The ground gave way, sending us sprawling. We landed in a chamber that had appeared from nowhere, walls closing with a grinding, almost sentient force. Magic pulsed thick in the air, and the Sorcerer's cold, triumphant laughter echoed around us.

"I told you it would be a trap." Elias muttered, gritting his teeth as he readied his magic. "We should have been more careful."

I felt a wave of panic, but I pushed it down. Not yet. Not now. We had made it this far. We could fight. We would fight. And then, after this, I would get back to my son.

The walls were lined with runes that glowed with a malevolent light. I could feel the energy pressing against me, testing, probing. I tightened my fists, letting the magic coil in response.

The Sorcerer's laughter grew louder, filling the chamber, wrapping around us like a suffocating blanket. "Ah," his voice slithered through the air, "you finally came. How... persistent."

I stood taller, letting the magic flow through me, my fear hardening into determination. "We're not afraid of you." I said, though my voice shook slightly. "Not anymore."

Elias's energy flared beside me, a shield and a weapon all at once. "Stay sharp." He warned. This is exactly what he wants—us thinking we're ready."

I nodded, letting the power inside me burn brighter. Every step, every spark of magic, had led to this moment. And no matter the trap, no matter the danger, I would fight. I had a life to reclaim.

And as the walls began to shift again, and the Sorcerer's power washed over us like a storm, I braced myself. Whatever came next, we were ready—or at least, as ready as anyone could ever be.

We were walking straight into the heart of his trap.

## The Warrior's Broken Mate – Chapter 120

The cage was cold and unyielding, the iron bars digging into my wrists as I tested them, searching for some weakness, some chance of escape. Elias crouched beside me, his eyes scanning every corner of the dimly lit chamber. The air smelled of smoke and old stone, and I could feel the Sorcerer's power radiating from somewhere deeper within the castle—a suffocating weight that made my stomach twist.

"How many damn castles are in this world?" Elias asked.

"Too many. Too many people wanting control." I said.

"Well we can't wait." Elias whispered. "He'll only tighten his traps."

I nodded, trying to steady my racing heartbeat. Our hands hovered near our magic, waiting, testing. I closed my eyes and focused on the energy humming beneath my skin. The light that had begun to flow from my claws during training surged, almost of its own accord, and I felt it pulse like a heartbeat, responding to my desperation. But what I didn't expect was the light to turn orange as the dragonfire mixed with the new magic that I had picked up.

Elias touched the bars beside me, muttering something under his breath. Sparks danced along his fingertips, colliding with the iron. I mirrored him, sending out strands of my light and dragonfire, weaving them together with his fire and energy. The cage groaned as if resisting us, but slowly, impossibly, the bars bent, twisted, and finally gave way. The sound of metal snapping echoed through the chamber like a clap of thunder.

We didn't pause to celebrate. The hallways ahead were dark, twisting, and silent, and every shadow seemed to move with a life of its own. I led, claws glowing faintly, light spilling like liquid across the floor. Every step felt like walking into the beating heart of the Sorcerer's world.

Then we saw him.

He stood at the end of a vast chamber, draped in robes darker than night itself. Shadows clung to him, writhing, stretching, coiling around his boots and curling along the floor like black snakes. The Sorcerer's face was calm, almost smug—but I knew better. His eyes flicked briefly to my claws, and I could feel the recognition, the calculation behind it.

"Ah." He said, his voice smooth and cold. "So you've freed yourselves. How... persistent."

The shadows shifted behind him, forming monstrous shapes, hunched and jagged, faces half-formed and writhing, reaching for us. I hissed, feeling Elias tighten his grip on his weapon. This was the moment he had been waiting for, the moment to test us—but the shadows were faster than anything we'd faced.

I didn't hesitate. My claws flared, light bursting outward in sharp, concentrated arcs. When they struck the shadows, they shrieked and melted into mist. The darkness recoiled from the brilliance, and for the first time, I felt a surge of hope.

"Lyra!" Elias shouted, knocking one of the shadow beasts aside with a blast of fire. "Keep going! They can't stand it!"

I lunged, light cutting through the darkness, each strike precise. The shadows screamed, slamming into the walls, dissolving into nothingness wherever my claws touched. Elias was relentless at my side, combining fire, energy, and sword strikes, driving them back.

The chamber trembled, stones cracking beneath the force of the battle. One shadow lunged at me from above, a jagged mass of darkness with a mouth that seemed to stretch impossibly wide. I leapt, slashing my claws downward, and light tore through it, burning it away like paper. The acrid scent of smoke and shadow filled my nose, but I didn't falter.

Elias shouted beside me, "Behind you!" A wave of shadows surged from the Sorcerer, twisting into a single, enormous beast. My claws blazed, but even I had to duck and weave to avoid its snapping limbs. The light burned, but it wasn't enough to destroy it outright. I realized then that I had to be precise, clever, strategic. Random strikes wouldn't win this battle.

I focused, feeling the energy flow like water through me, and struck at the joints, the seams where the shadows weren't solid. Each touch of light caused it to scream and dissolve in pieces, until the monstrosity staggered, fractured, and finally fell apart. Elias exhaled, a victorious grin on his face, but we didn't pause.

The Sorcerer's eyes narrowed, and for a moment, he looked... irritated. But then, as the last of the shadows fell, he straightened, a small, cruel smile curling on his lips.

"You think this-" he gestured to the melting forms of his creations, "-changes anything? I still control this place. I am inevitable."

And then the air shifted.

A presence descended, commanding and absolute. The temperature dropped, and a glow, cold and fierce, cut through the darkness. I froze, my claws still sparking with residual light, and turned.

The Ash Queen.

She stepped into the chamber as if the shadows themselves bowed before her. Her armor shimmered with ashes that seemed alive, moving, shifting, flickering with every step. Her eyes met the Sorcerer's, and I could see the hesitation there, the subtle recoil that we had never witnessed before.

"You..." he said, voice low, wary. "You shouldn't be here..."

Elias glanced at me, eyebrows raised. My claws still glowed, but now it wasn't just my magic -it was her presence, her power amplifying everything, twisting the battle in our favor before it had even begun.

The Sorcerer faltered, the shadows that had been his strength flickering at the edges, uncertain and wavering. His movements were no longer fluid or confident; each step was deliberate, cautious, as if he were measuring every possibility before acting. For the first time, he seemed achingly human, gripped by a fear that made his usual arrogance vanish, leaving only a man facing the unknown. Even his eyes, once sharp and commanding, darted nervously, betraying a vulnerability no one had ever seen before.

The Ash Queen didn't speak. She merely raised her hand, letting the light of her arrival pierce the darkness. The shadows writhed, shrinking back from her, hissing like a cornered beast. I could feel the energy in the room change, the very air thrumming with power that was older and deeper than anything we had touched before.

I looked at Elias. He nodded, understanding that this was our moment. Together, we pushed forward, our combined magic creating a wall of light and heat that shattered the last remaining shadows. The Sorcerer stumbled back, his smirk gone, replaced by something fragile, something panicked.

He raised his hands, trying to summon more darkness, but the energy recoiled, meeting the Ash Queen's power and shattering harmlessly. I felt it—a weight lifting, a shift in the balance that we hadn't dared hope for until now.

And then, just as I thought we had him, the Sorcerer's lips curled into a dark, dangerous smile.

"You think this is the end?" He whispered, his voice low and trembling with barely contained rage. The air in the chamber thickened, shadows twisting once more, coalescing into something far more sinister than before—larger, faster, sharper. This was no longer the familiar wave of beasts we had faced. This was a new kind of terror, alive with malice.

Elias shouted a warning, but it was too late. The hidden shadows that we didn't see before surged forward, and I realized with a sinking heart that the Sorcerer had one final, terrible trick up his sleeve. The Ash Queen's glow flared, but even her presence couldn't stop the new horror from advancing toward us.

I braced myself, claws blazing, heart pounding. We had won battles, yes—but the war... the war might not be over. Not yet.

And in that moment, as the shadows lunged and the Sorcerer's laugh echoed through the chamber, I understood that the real fight—the one that would determine everything—was only beginning.