

# INFINITY GATE

*TWO YEARS BEFORE  
THE TRAGEDY OF NORTHSHARD*



# **INFINITY GATE**

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# PART 1

## *CREATION DAY*

Spectra wished she could enjoy the view from her family's balcony, but knowing her older brother intended to kill her spoiled the moment.

She stared off at the Genesis Bridge cresting the horizon, one hand firmly planted on the railing while the other cautiously gripped the hilt of her sword. Although she had little belief in the gods, the bridge attracted tens of thousands of religious pilgrims each year to cross its two-kilometer span and reach the gently droning ring of waterfalls plunging into the massive hole in the middle of Merkon's lake.

Another ring, this one man-made and encircling the seemingly endless abyss, was constructed with enough stone to build a small city of its own. It had dozens of arches through which the overflowing waters cascaded in a brilliant sheet, providing a final moment of beauty to onlookers before it vanished below. Although the cause of the remarkable natural phenomenon was unknown, the pilgrims believed that the Infinity Gate—where the entirety of existence had entered the world thousands of years before—was acting by the will of the gods to pull all living things back into the Divine Fields.

In only a few hours, Spectra would lead the Royal Family across the bridge to the Ring of the Faithful, allowing them to behold the depths of the Gate. She'd never seen the waters flowing into eternity, and part of her looked forward to it.

A servant brought her a chalice, but a stern voice stopped him.

“Don't give her anything. We don't serve traitors here.”

Spectra abandoned the view of the Infinity Gate to face her brother.

Jonn was one of the last of the primary heirs to House Corvane. There was no doubt about their blood relation, as they both had the same penetrating tan eyes, sharp chin, and crown of coal-black hair peppered with gray. He was currently wearing a bright blue tunic that concealed his

muscular frame. Stitched to the front of the tunic was the stegosaurus sigil of his House.

The servant holding her beverage slunk away.

“Don’t bother serving the man she brought with her either.” Jonn drunkenly gestured toward the door of the chambers, where Sir Rathburn stood in a gleaming full metal shell, his fingers wrapped hungrily around the hilt of his sword as he watched the siblings squabble.

Spectra rapped her fingers against the railing. “From the perspective of the king, it was your family who were the traitors.”

Jonn grabbed the chalice from the servant as he walked by, then took a long swig. “*My* family? Have you so completely disavowed us that you no longer claim us even in casual conversation?”

“If I were to maintain my claim of kinship with you, the king would never allow me to serve him. Look where I am now. I’m an overmaster on his Supreme Council, while your House remains shattered and hemorrhaging its wealth. Even your closest allies have either been slain or retreated to Mariannas.”

Jonn finished what was in the cup and tossed it aside. It *clanked* as it struck the stone floor and rolled toward the chamber doors. Rathburn casually maneuvered his foot so it ricocheted to the side of his boot.

Spectra caught the potent scent of wine intensifying as Jonn approached.

“Just because our rebellion failed doesn’t mean it wasn’t justified. The Shrales haven’t properly reinforced the southern Houses, and so we have been dying for generations from Cazarathian and Brelinarian raids. Their deaths used to mean something to you.”

“They still do. King Gadrion is the first king with a real plan to eliminate the other kingdoms and bring about true eternal dominion for humanity. Once he does that, the southerners will never again have to worry about non-men raids.”

“We had the support of the Grimshaws, the Vorcastles, the Bludsows, and every other major House in the south, and even some in the center. Our House would have been a part of the new Royal Family had we succeeded in toppling the Shrales.”

“You were never as close to victory as you believe. A handful of battles and some assassinations spread over the better part of two decades doesn’t qualify as a war.”

Jon's bootfalls echoed as he stepped onto the balcony a few strides from her. He leaned on the railing without reaching for his sword.

"We came close on the Night of the Fallen Crescents," Jon reminisced. "When a few of our brethren slaughtered the king's siblings. I know Gadrion would never have been mad enough to be involved in any of that, so the only explanation I ever accepted was that someone close to him had led the assassins into the palace." Jon turned to her, his previous scowl softening for a few heartbeats. "Perhaps someone who still had glimmers of loyalty to the southern Houses."

*You would have been right if you had believed the king capable of that, you idiot,* Spectra thought.

Jon would also be right in assuming she'd led the assassins into the palace, but it had been done at Gadrion's behest.

She hardened her face as she returned his gaze. "It was never me. Those involved have all met the king's justice."

Jon's scowl returned. "A shame. Even now, I would've overlooked your previous betrayal of our family if you'd had a hand in it. I could've accepted you back as my sister, to make the Corvanes united again."

*I, on the other hand, still embrace you, Specky. Regardless of your innocence that night.*

Jon rolled his eyes and snapped for a servant to bring him a replacement drink.

Spectra's twin brother, Ardian, strode confidently through the chamber doors. Spectra couldn't help but share his smile, though she quickly returned her face to stone.

*I can't show them any emotion,* she reminded herself. *Not this day.*

While Ardian used to resemble Jon more than her, he now appeared to be lacking a healthy diet. The bones of his face protruded, his eyes were sunken, and his cheeks revealed healed scars. The robes adorning his skeletal frame were brown, worn, and appeared as if a stampede of parasaur had trampled them in the streets.

Unlike the last time Spectra had seen him, Ardian wasn't carrying any weapons.

He raised his arms. "Would you embrace me in return?"

Spectra felt as if Ardian had reached into her chest and grabbed a hold of her heart. She longed to enwrap her arms in him, seeing flashes of their

childhood play through her head, but knew that holding him would be the moment of weakness she couldn't afford.

"The time when I would've returned the sentiment has passed." Spectra felt the grip on her heart tighten as she spoke the words.

Ardian's arms slowly dropped to his sides.

Jonn chuckled from beside them, taking a fresh chalice from a scantily-clad female servant. "See? I told you our sister was dead."

Ardian shook his head. "No. I have faith that she is there somewhere. One day, the gods will return her in full."

"That's as much a fantasy as bringing our father back from the dead." Jonn punctuated his grumbling with a long sip.

Spectra's eyes ran up the height of her brother's gaunt frame. "You're dressed like a Man of Robes. Have you fully converted?"

Ardian touched the scars on his cheek. "I had a revelation the night after the siege of Valdoon. Kalor came to me as I lay in a fever dream, urging me to leave my life of conflict and join our cousins in Mariannas."

"You conjured such a dream to justify your cowardice," Jonn countered. "Spectra may as well have held your cock as the two of you pissed on our House together. Our father would have beheaded the both of you, had Spectra not slain him."

Spectra spun from Ardian. "Father came with the intent of killing me. As you well know."

Jonn shook his head. "You know that's a lie. He went to you to tell you that he believed you were involved in the Night of Fallen Crescents, and that if you finished what you had started, he would restore your birthrights to you."

"Those are both incorrect," Ardian cut in.

Spectra and Jonn turned to him.

"Hm, perhaps neither of you know what he intended to say." Ardian took a cup of water and strode toward his siblings. "Father spoke to me before he left. He said he didn't believe Spectra would give him a chance to speak, but he wanted to try to talk her into leaving the king's service, and in return he would take the same vow that I have made—to leave the rebellion, to live in chaste, and to walk in the sandals of the Men of Robes."

Jonn snorted into his chalice. "It's absurd to believe a man who sired thirteen heirs would take such a vow."

Ardian stopped a pace from his sister, his eyes never straying from her own. “Did our father ever get a chance to tell you the parable that the High Valkor of Xyr told him? The one of the young knight running from a pack of deinonychus?”

Spectra tapped the hilt of her sword with a finger. “He didn’t get the chance.”

Ardian licked his lips. “Well, in the story, there is a young knight. He’s fleeing through the forest as a pack of deinonychus chase after him. They’re closing quickly. He stops at a cliff and sees vines hanging over its side. Below the cliffs, there is an ocean, but he notices the fins belonging to a drift of mer. The mer know he’s there, and eagerly await to see if he jumps. Halfway down the cliff, within arms’ reach of the vines, are some emerald-berry bushes.”

“What a ridiculous situation,” Jonn scoffed.

Ardian’s eyes didn’t waiver toward their brother. “The point of the parable is not to tell a story. It’s to have the listener examine themselves, to decide what they would do in the situation, no matter how ridiculous it seems. What’s your instinct, sister, if you were in that inescapable predicament? If you were the young knight, would you turn to fight the deinonychus? Or would you choose to have the mer in the waters tear you apart?”

Spectra’s mind burned with a brief thought. Jonn was correct that the situation was illogical, but part of her wondered what she’d do.

“I would fight,” Spectra answered. “Better to die an honorable death on my feet and face the deinonychus. I might be able to take one with me, or at the least cripple one, if I had a proper sword.”

Ardian set his chalice on the balcony beside her. “Before meeting you in Valdoon, our father told me that he never thought of *himself* as the young knight. Instead, he thought about what each one of his children would do if *they* were the knight. He realized, with much regret, that he’d taught each of us to stand and fight. He did not think any of us had any choice because of how much he had forced that instinct upon us.”

“He taught us honor and courage,” Jonn snapped. “Qualities you apparently have forsaken.”

Ardian reached out and grabbed Spectra’s hand.

“Father told me he had heard you were an overmaster in the king’s Supreme Council. He hated that he never gave you a chance to achieve a higher rank in his army because you were a daughter, and thought that it helped drive you and your loyalties to Gadrion. Although the king was his sworn enemy, he said that part of him felt immense pride at your title.”

“Him holding me back is only part of it. Father was leading the south to ruin, while the king planned to save it. Everything I’ve ever done was to defend the people he put in danger.”

“Let’s look past your reasoning for now. Our father told me that he was haunted by how you would stay to fight the deinonychus in his story. He should have taught us to climb down those vines, to eat the emeralberries. He said that the parable was a metaphor for knowing that we were mortal, and that we would always be facing our deaths. But there was an option to climb down that vine, to eat something truly satisfying, and to enjoy the time that the gods allowed us to have. He was going to appeal to you once more, to see if he could convince you to climb down that vine, and to see if you would teach others to do the same, rather than to teach them to die on their feet. If we die a warrior’s death, we may all fail to find any enjoyment or fulfillment.”

Spectra was speechless for a few moments, though she felt her mind tumbling in thought at Ardian’s words.

The clatter of Jonn tossing another chalice across the chamber severed her thoughts like a sharpened blade. Spectra withdrew her hand from her twin.

“It’s too late for me to be that kind of person,” Spectra responded. “And yes, I may be teaching others to be the same way, but I don’t live in a world where I can afford to eat emeralberries. The world is cruel, and it needs me and the people I mentor to bring it to peace by force.”

Ardian lowered his head. “Well, I wasn’t expecting to change who you are in one conversation.” His voice cracked as he choked on the last couple of words. Her brother cleared his throat, his fingers lightly brushing against his scars. “I wanted to deliver to you our father’s final message, but I also wanted to tell you that I’m leaving now to return to Mariannas, with no intention to return to the lands of Valkalor for the remaining years of my life. Like you, I’ve disavowed the name Corvane. I don’t intend to be in Merkon for tonight’s celebration.”

“Good.” Jonn pushed off the balcony and approached Ardian, getting close enough to press their foreheads together. “Because of men like you we were never able to escape our exile and conduct a proper war against the Crown. Know that both Spectra and myself no longer consider you our kin.”

Ardian stepped back, eyes fixed on Spectra.

“You know where to find me, if ever you wish to tell me otherwise.”

“Don’t wait for the message,” Spectra told him.

Ardian’s thinned face fell. Spectra felt as if she had thrust a dagger into him.

*Just go, she mentally willed. I must be harsh right now. If I give you hope, you will stay. And if you stay, you will die, along with everyone else.*

“Then do me one final favor, Sister, even if we never speak again. When you stand before the Gate and stare at the waters falling into its depths, try to reflect on how we may be easily enchanted by majesty and power—only to forget the danger of the shadows lurking beneath.”

His final words felt as if he had pulled the dagger from his heart and thrust it into hers. Ardian lowered his head as he strode from the room.

Jonn smacked the cup Ardian had left on the railing over the side. “So, where were we, before that pointless interruption?”

Spectra cleared her throat and felt her heart harden to stone as she faced her older brother.

“Since this is the first time I’ve spoken with you after you were driven into Mariannas, I came to tell you that I have a proposal from the king. I want you to officially renounce all your old rebel ties during the Creation Day celebration tonight. I can guarantee House Corvane not just the royal pardon the king has offered you to be here today, but I can get you the prominent position of Lieutenant Sentinel of the South under Wystan Grimshaw.”

Her brother shook his head. “I can’t believe Wystan accepted that title from your king.”

“He accepted it because the Grimshaws abandoned the rebellion in its early months. They *knew* you would fail, and that the true power would come from those who supported King Gadrion before and during his final war with the non-men. Because of their loyalty, the king allowed the

Grimshaws to claim half of the land from your House and the other rebels. He *earned* that title.

“I can still get you enough favor that you can be a part of the king’s court and fight alongside him in the only war that will matter. Maybe, if you demonstrate your loyalty as Lieutenant Sentinel, you can get some of the old Corvane lands returned to you.”

Jonn waved to the two knights at the door. As they marched forward, their armor clanged noisily and their metal stegosaur plates along their backs wavered.

“I’m not going to take any offer from you or the king,” Jonn decisively told her. “I’ll still attend the celebration on the Ring of the Faithful to honor Wystan’s accession to Lord Sentinel, because Wystan has promised me and the other former rebels that we can return to his lands to live out our days. After that, I don’t want to see you again.”

“The Lord Sentinel offered you a place to live? Is that all? My offer could be much better.”

“I told you, I’m accepting *no* offer from the king. We only trust southerners. If Wystan wants to make me one of his lieutenants, then I will accept it only from him, so long as the title was not ordered by Gadrion.”

Spectra felt her pulse quicken. Rathburn subtly raised an eyebrow from next to the door. He awaited her orders on whether or not to kill everyone in the room, and she signaled to him to stand down by moving her cloak over the hilt of her sword.

“Don’t be a fool, Jonn. With Ardian disavowing Corvane, that makes you the last primary heir. If you continue to oppose our king, then your House is on a path to being lost to history.”

“At least it will fall with honor, something it has needed since you left us in shame. And let’s not forget I am the final heir because *you* slaughtered half our siblings in Valdoon.”

“Every Corvane I slew in Valdoon attacked me first. I tried to spare them. Ardian should have explained that to you.”

“Ardian always was soft toward you, so I don’t believe his word in this. You also betrayed and killed your betrothed, Torrin, in Edokari. If you can’t keep your word to the man you were to wed and serve, no one should trust you.”

“He captured me. Maybe I could have lied to get out of that cage to escape him later, but my honor will not allow me to disavow my king, even to save my life.”

Her brother turned to his knights. “There is nothing more for me to discuss with her. See the overmaster and undermaster out of here. If they attempt to return, treat them as hostiles.”

Spectra held up a hand to halt the advance of the knights. “Last chance. You’re making a mistake by turning down my offer.”

“It’s my turn to renounce *you*, Spectra. I don’t acknowledge our blood ties. You may as well be a Shrake.”

Spectra was surprised to feel her veins grow hot at his words.

His stubbornness was going to get him killed.

And he was embracing a destiny of their House collapsing into nothingness.

Spectra stomped toward the guards, halting a sword’s length away. “We won’t need an escort out. I’ll see you at the Infinity Gate.”

She stepped through the knights and left Jonn at a fast clip. Rathburn fell into step at her side. The knights managed to keep up, following to make sure they left the premises.

A large knight at the exit opened the doors. Spectra noticed he was wearing a bright blue cape with gold stitched stegosaur plates. Carved into his right spaulder was a prominent tyrannosaur head with open jaws.

“Sir Fendor,” Spectra identified him. “I should’ve known you’d follow Jonn here.”

Fendor gestured toward the street. “My sword swings where he commands. I’m hoping he will soon command it in your direction.”

Rathburn stepped up to him.

Fendor glared. “Do you need your undermasters to do your fighting for you now?”

“I don’t need him,” Spectra said. “But when someone isn’t worth my time, Rathburn takes care of them. He’s like a starving titanon that constantly needs fed.”

Rathburn licked his lips and tapped his daggers excitedly.

Fendor continued to stare down Rathburn for a few moments longer before backing away. “When Lord Corvane wills it, we’ll see whose blades satiate their hunger first.”

“Come, Undermaster.” Spectra tapped Rathburn’s arm to make sure he followed her into the streets.

They angled their way through the crowds of excited pilgrims, a third figure slipping into step a few blocks later. Out of her peripheral vision, Spectra recognized the newcomer as one of her other undermasters, Cinderr Rosh. The young Crescent had dark hair in warrior’s braids much like her own, though Cinderr’s skin was a shade lighter and she had a prominent dimple in her chin. A faint scar from an acid burn was partially concealed on her forehead near her hairline.

“Who was that large knight outside the Corvane residence?” Cinderr inquired.

“That was Sir Fendor, a tyrannosaur melder. He’s someone you should keep an eye on at the Creation Day celebration.”

“I committed him to memory.”

“What do you have to report?”

“I placed Crescent Guards outside of the residences of the Klandesses, Akechis, and Vorcastles. With the supplements from the Reclaimed Guard, we have enough men to follow everyone they brought—even the servants.”

“Well done, Undermaster.”

“There are swords remaining to watch the Corvanes, if you wish it.”

“We leave the Corvanes alone for now.”

They emerged from the streets into an expansive plaza in the city’s center. Thousands of citizens sprawled out before them, dancing and singing while wearing the costumes of various species of saurians.

Spectra led her two undermasters to the palace at the other end. Its prominent towers stretched into the sky, rivaling even the buildings of Rudana. Spectra couldn’t help but take note of the dozens of archers on the battlements, their eyes scanning the crowd suspiciously.

A pair of knights allowed them through a door in the palace wall leading into a garden courtyard.

“Undermaster Rathburn and I must meet with the king,” Spectra announced. “We’ll then join the king’s guardsmen in the parade across the Genesis Bridge. Rathburn will rendezvous with you during the celebration while I remain with the king on his balcony overlooking the Infinity Gate. Do you know your assignment?”

“I oversee the protection of the queen and the children,” Cinderr recalled. “I’ll stay posted near the stage on the opposite end of the Ring of the Faithful from the king.”

“Very good. You may as well go check on the king’s children to make sure they are ready.” Spectra dismissed Cinderr, who went down a separate corridor once they entered the palace.

King Gadrion was waiting for them in a large chamber across a long banquet table. He was concluding his lunch and waved them to the chairs nearest him.

He finished taking a bite out of his steak before pushing his plate aside.

“How was your conversation with Lord Corvane?”

“He didn’t accept your offer, my king. I doubt he would want to accept the pardon you offered him to bring him to the city in the first place.”

Gadrion looked around to make sure there were no servants or knights in the room. “That makes everything easier for us. Sir Fendor launches his attack against the queen, without knowing we are behind it, which allows us to credibly declare that the rebels have come to Merkon to assassinate me and my family. While he does that, we slaughter every last one of them on the balcony. The rebellion ends today, with maybe a few months of sweeping up their remnants, and we can begin implementing the final phases of our preparations for the war against the non-men without worrying about their interference. Over the next few years, we spread propaganda to our people that the rebels planned the assassination from Mariannas with the non-men, and cultivate their anger to make our preparations for the final war. Depending on political conditions, we can bring my shadow queens and heirs into the fold of the Royal Family.”

“The kingdom will never forget this day,” Spectra agreed, noting that Rathburn was not even pretending to hide his excited grin from across the table.

“Did you brief Undermaster Rosh about any of our plans?”

Spectra shook her head. “She’s not ready to be brought into your full confidence with Undermaster Rathburn and myself.”

Gadrion studied her face. “And how do you feel about your brother falling tonight?”

Spectra took a moment to steel her emotions. She was aware that Gadrion could sense her feelings through the power of his crown.

He would know that every word she spoke next was true.  
“My family betrayed you. House Corvane deserves to fall.”

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Cinderr relinquished her weapons to the knights outside the princess chambers and announced herself as she entered.

“Get away from me!” one of the princesses was shouting. “I don’t want to change my hair!”

Sighing internally, Cinderr knew exactly which princess was resisting the handmaids even before she strolled into the sleeping chambers. It was a conflict that the young woman would never be able to win, despite her sizable efforts.

Princess Kendra threw the brush against the far wall. The wooden handle splintered upon impact and the two handmaids ducked.

Relief crossed the faces of the handmaids when they saw Cinderr standing in the doorway.

“Undermaster Rosh,” one of them greeted with thick exasperation. “May you please tell the princess that it would be improper for her to wear the braids of a warrior to the celebration? She must have her hair down, like her sister.”

“No,” Kendra corrected, spinning toward Cinderr. “You will tell them that I can present myself however I wish.”

Kendra was still wearing her battle leathers from her morning training. Her hair was indeed tightly hugging the side of her skull, the braids slightly disheveled from wearing a helmet. Most of her braids were auburn, save for one that was a silver hue, a trait that she had received from her mother’s side of the family.

Despite their bright green color, the princess’s eyes burned like flames as they regarded her. “Tell them that the king declared that he wouldn’t be marrying me in the future to any lords, so I am a warrior more than I am a princess. And I sure as fuck am not wearing any more dresses!”

Cinderr felt her mouth go dry. Why couldn't she have arrived just fifteen minutes later so she wouldn't have to deal with this? There was nothing worse than a disagreeable princess sixteen life years of age.

"Did the king himself declare his preferences?" Cinderr inquired.

The handmaids exchanged unsure glances before one of them mustered the courage to respond. "Well, no, but tradition dictates a high level of decorum."

"Fuck decorum," Kendra snarled. "I want the kingdom to see me as I am. I want the knights to look at me as one of their own."

Cinderr stepped closer and placed a hand on her shoulder. "My princess, today your father is expecting to not only honor Wystan Grimshaw and his new title, but he'll be receiving the official declarations of allegiance from the former rebels while he pardons them. You must respect that he won't want you to draw attention from those victories. How about you keep your hair as you want it, but put on the dress?"

Kendra looked over at the two handmaids, who shrank back a step under her gaze. "I hate when you bring up my father's affairs."

"As a princess, even a *warrior princess*, you still have a duty to your father, the king."

Cinderr noticed Kendra's face soften as her eyes stared into hers for a few moments.

"All right. I will wear the dress, but I keep the braids. *And* I can have a sword."

"A sword won't work with your dress. But you can have a dagger."

Kendra nodded slowly. "All right. And you'll be by my side?"

Cinderr thought she detected something beyond hope in Kendra's tone but decided not to overanalyze it. "Yes, I'll ride beside you across the Genesis Bridge. I promise."

"I'll hold you to that oath, Undermaster."

"I have no doubt that you will. I also came here to make sure you understood that I won't be with you throughout the entire celebration. I have other duties to attend. But you need to listen to any guards that stand at your side."

Kendra smirked. "I'll listen to your knights, and I'll make sure no harm comes to them."

Cinderr mirrored her smile. “I appreciate that. I like all of my men alive. I will see you in a couple of hours when we leave.”

She left Kendra and strode over to the adjoining sleeping chambers.

The younger princess, Cerelia, was sitting with her eyes sweeping across a book while her handmaids casually brushed her golden hair.

“She always makes things more difficult than they need to be,” Cerelia commented.

“Your sister likes things a different way. What are you reading?”

“Some early history of the Tollax Dynasty.” The princess kept a hand on her page while she laid the book on her lap. “You won’t have to worry about me listening to the guards, Undermaster. I know what is expected of me.”

“You’ve always been great at obeying your father.”

Cerelia’s face wrinkled up. “I worry for my mother, though. One of her handmaids tells me she is sick.”

Cinderr frowned. “Do you know what ails her?”

“No. But she has not come to check on us since she arrived.”

“I’ll see to her.”

“Thank you, Undermaster.”

Cinderr left the princesses’ chamber and grabbed her weapons from the guards.

Aside from Kendra’s tantrum, she didn’t see any reason to worry about the king’s two daughters—at least for now.

Having all the former rebels in the same city *did* worry her.

Cinderr ordered one of the guards to check on the queen and Prince Jaronas, then report their status to Overmaster Spectra.

It was a higher priority for her to check in with her men watching the rebels.

There was no time to deal with the Royal Family.

## PART 2

### *WARNING*

The people scattered as the tyrannosaur pounded its way across the Genesis Bridge. It snarled when bystanders weren't moving fast enough, prompting occasional screams and curses. Despite how chaotic the crowd became, the tyrannosaur slowed just enough to avoid stepping on anyone.

Cinderr masked her amusement at the panic. She sat high on her destrier, sweeping the crowd for threats.

Typically, the fifty-meter-wide bridge offered more than enough room for the throngs of religious pilgrims marching to the Infinity Gate, but it was pushed to its limits as the royal procession of a hundred men and saurians forced their way through. The tyrannosaur was in the front to clear the way, fully adorned in battle leathers, a spear-wielding rider perched on its saddle. Behind it were dozens of men-of-arms surrounding the palanquins and chariots holding not just the Royal Family, but other families of high esteem. A half dozen deinonychus, the largest of the raptor races, defended their rear, followed by thousands of worshippers eager to reach the Gate.

Although the back of the tyrannosaur was not an ideal view, Cinderr felt secure knowing it was a mere twenty meters from her. She wore her black metal armor, trimmed in dark green to match the king's House colors.

Kendra rode beside her, attempting the appearance of confidence despite constantly griping about her uncomfortable plum dress. "I hope the tyrannosaur shits on us and I'm forced to change into something more practical," she grumbled.

Cinderr snorted but kept her face stoic, mindful that the cheering masses on either side of them were watching. The people were so tightly packed that she couldn't discern the gray stones of the bridge or the waist-high railing that kept the people from being shoved into the churning lake below.

“Perhaps the days are not far when you will be able to wear what you want, my princess.”

“I want armor and a sword so these people would think of me as a *knight*, not a weak princess.”

Cinderr glanced over at the carriage beside them, noting that the window was closed. She doubted that Cerelia had heard that remark on the other side.

“There is nothing wrong with being a princess from time to time,” Cinderr reminded her. “And sometimes it’s useful to use your status to help your father during events like this, which are important for his reign. Tonight, he’ll bring stability to the south.”

“Would stability allow you to stop traveling for missions and focus more of your time training me?” Kendra asked, her eyes on the crowd as she gave a few obligatory waves.

“The crown requires me to be in more places than the south. If I’m not there, I will still have missions in the center or north.”

An intensifying cacophony of shrieks sounded overhead. Despite herself, Cinderr turned and watched as hundreds of pterahawks, pteranodons, and quetzalcoatluses swooped by the sides of the bridge. The crowd erupted and many children tried in vain to reach out to touch them. A gust from the diving creatures swept over them.

The quetzalcoatluses were the easiest to linger upon. They were the largest known flyers in the world, with wingspans stretching as far as six men. Cinderr was always drawn to the prominent crests rising from the backs of their skulls and their membranous wings, pulled taut like the sails of a ship and scarcely flapping as the wind collided with them. Their elongated beaks clapped open and shut in echoing *clacks*, eliciting a roar of approval from the masses on the bridge.

Cinderr forced herself to rediscipline her eyes to continue assessing the crowd for threats.

“I don’t understand Creation Day.” Kendra released one hand from her horse to reassuringly pat the bulge of the dagger hidden beneath her layers of clothing. “We don’t even know if any men were around to see what happened at the beginning of time, so why do they just assume that the Infinity Gate is where the gods sent all life into our world?”

“I don’t share those assumptions, but this day is the highlight of the year for the kingdom’s most devout, so the king makes a point of being seen in Merkon every few years to remind the people of his humility before the gods.”

Kendra laughed. “My father never talks about the gods, and I doubt he’s ever felt humble.”

“Your father is wise enough to know that *perception* is often more important than reality, Princess. Even if he doesn’t feel the humility, he must look the part.”

The tyrannosaur grumbled, the low growl reverberating through the bridge stones. A group of people parted before them.

Cinderr didn't pick up on the soft rumble of the waterfall amidst the crowd clamor, until she reached the end of the bridge where it merged into a massive ring curving around the enormous hole in the lake. The falls did not roar as one might expect—the water struck only a few jutting rocks on its descent, filling the air with a low, trembling hum. The ring was made of the same gray stone as the bridge and was indistinguishable from it, save for the currents flowing through the hundreds of arches at its base. The orange and crimson colors of the sunset illuminated the stonework and reflected captivatingly off the water.

Despite her usual discipline, even Cinderr faltered at the sight.

No one knew how far the Infinity Gate plummeted, or for that matter if it ended at all. When the water level of the Merkon Lake was high enough, it would pour over the sides of the chasm, splashing down over cliffs of rocks before disappearing into absolute darkness. Since its discovery, many men had tried to climb into the abyss, but no one returned. One sect of Men of Robes often preached that the Infinity Gate was really a portal that swallowed the souls of men and transported them into the place where life had begun—the Divine Fields.

Cinderr could tell from the thousands of people standing along the several kilometers of the ring surrounding the void that these beliefs were still deeply ingrained in the commoners.

The tyrannosaur stalked to the side of a stage that had been set up next to the edge of the ring. The stage faced the crowd with the cascading waterfalls at its back. A half dozen Men of Robes stood upon it, their serene leader, the aging High Valkor of Merkon, positioned at their center.

“I’m afraid, Princess, that you and the other Royal children must go greet the High Valkor,” Cinderr said. “Your father arrived earlier and is already on his balcony.”

A pair of knights stepped forward to take Kendra’s reins.

“I’ll find you when this is over so we can train,” Kendra vowed. “I need to swing my sword at something.”

“I look forward to it.”

Cinderr discreetly swung herself from her destrier and lightly pushed her way into the throngs, watching as Kendra and the carriages continued their march through the congregation and toward the beaming face of the High Valkor.

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The crescendo from the crowds rippled around the ring of the Infinity Gate, reaching the opposite end where King Gadrion stood at the edge of his balcony. He placed both hands on the railing, squinting as he tried to discern his family’s convoy from among the endless tides of people. It didn’t help that hundreds of pterahawks and quetzals were constantly flying through his view.

“Try this, my king.”

Gadrion grabbed the monocular Spectra extended to him. He peered through the lens and adjusted it until the stage came into sharp focus.

His daughters, Kendra and Cerelia, strode behind their older brother, Prince Jaronas, and returned the bows of the High Valkor and his Men of Robes. The monocular was powerful enough that, even through the twilight, he saw Jaronas’ disdain for the moment and Kendra’s lack of interest.

The only one of his children who seemed to enjoy herself was Cerelia. She excitedly turned to wave to the crowd with one hand, a large book tucked under her other arm.

Gadrion used the monocular to rake the crowd behind his children.

“Where is the queen?” he demanded.

Spectra raised her own monocular. “She was falling ill before we left. Her handmaids told me they would do what they could to get her here.”

A *squawk* from overhead prompted Gadrion to step away from the railing’s edge, allowing a gargoyle-like pterahawk to make its landing. Its claws scraped audibly against the stone as it struggled to find balance. Its hot breath sent the smell of fish into their nostrils.

Spectra grabbed the small tube strapped to its leg before the pterahawk had a chance to fold its leathery wings to its sides. She unscrewed the end and dumped a piece of parchment onto her hand.

The overmaster’s eyes darted back and forth as she read the note, then she waved off the knights to their rear. Gadrion heard the *clanking* of their metal shells as they obediently stepped beyond earshot.

“It’s about Queen Deama.” Spectra handed the note to Gadrion. “The handmaids say she’s unable to make a public appearance.”

The message crinkled as Gadrion closed it tightly into his fist and aggressively shooed the pterahawk. The beast’s wings beat the air in panic as it fell over the side and flew away.

Gadrion’s fuming reaction was showmanship for the pterahawk melder and onlookers. Only Spectra was aware he couldn’t feel any actual emotion, save for when the crown fed him the emotions of those around him.

“The queen is not *ill*. She took more of that stain.”

Spectra licked her lips. “I assume that’s correct, my king.”

Gadrion tossed the crumpled paper over the balcony edge. “I should have done more to restrain the use of this drug over the last few years. Deama is missing more events. I’m sure the people have taken notice.”

“If you’d like, I can find out where she’s getting it and cut off her supply.”

“It’s too late now. We needed her to be here.” He leaned in close to whisper. “She was supposed to be on the stage when Fendor made his move. She is our entire justification for what is about to happen. With Deama absent, Fendor may go after my heirs instead.”

The glinting crown on Gadrion’s head mentally fed him Spectra’s growing anxiety, even if it was evident enough in the rocking of her heels and tightening expression.

“My men in the crowd can still eliminate Fendor before he launches his assault. Rathburn was going to ambush the southerners anyway, so we can

fold Fendor into that attack. The fighting can be convincing enough to justify what we do on the balcony.”

Gadrion considered the new scenario. Should he allow Fendor to attack and possibly slaughter one or more of his children?

The king spun on his heel, facing the interior of the balcony. Most of it was shaded beneath a domed roof, with dozens of men standing behind him.

He signaled to a pterahawk melder. The melder sprinted in their direction.

The king extended his hand as the man arrived. “Parchment.”

The melder reached into his pocket and withdrew a fresh piece of paper and quill. Spectra grabbed the bottle of ink from him and uncorked it. The melder removed himself from earshot and turned so he’d be unable to see what the king wrote.

Gadrion stepped to the railing and used it to lay out the paper.

“It’ll be difficult to time everything, so I want us to stop Fendor now,” Gadrion told her. “He doesn’t know you and I are the ones who manipulated him into this, so we can’t directly send him a message. Your undermasters will have to kill him. While they move on him, let’s start our celebration early to ensure we conclude our ceremony with the lords. Hopefully we’ll prevent any of my children from being hurt.”

Gadrion continued hastily scrawling his note. “Fendor is a disciplined man. But should he prematurely attack and my children die, then Prince Ethan becomes my sole heir, or I declare it to be one of my shadow heirs. The result will still be the same, with the kingdom believing even more strongly in our call to destroy the non-men and rebellious southern Houses.”

The crown flooded his mind with the maelstrom of emotions that poured out of Spectra as he spoke the words.

“I know you feel trepidation.” Gadrion stopped his quill and faced her. “Although my children are useful to secure the support of the powerful Houses before the war with the non-men through arranged alliances, I can still find another way to solve that problem later. Stopping Fendor is easier, but not necessary to achieve our ultimate ends.”

He felt Spectra harden her emotions and watched as she straightened her back. Her gaze momentarily lingered on the surging waterfalls dissipating

into the depths. “Yes, my king. Forgive me for my moment of weakness.”

“I value your sentiments, Overmaster.” Gadrion dipped the quill and resumed his writing. “It reminds me that I sometimes need to consider what others feel.”

Gadrion handed Spectra the quill, rolled the parchment, and signaled to the pterahawk melder. Moments later, Gadrion heard another shriek of a pterahawk landing on the railing behind him.

He tucked the parchment into the tube on the beast’s ankle. He stared it in the face, knowing the melder would hear him through the creature’s ears.

“This is for Undermaster Cinderr Rosh *only*. Do *not* deliver it to anyone else, or I will slit your throat and toss you through the Infinity Gate. Is that clear?”

The pterahawk’s head reared back and it hesitatingly made a cackling noise before bobbing its head.

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“Undermaster Rosh.”

Cinderr had escorted her horse by the reins to a position beside the stage. She noticed a man approach with a dual crescent sigil on his spaulder identical to her own.

She easily discerned who he was from his narrow face and beak-like nose.

“Undermaster Rathburn,” she acknowledged, trying to keep her voice low as the High Valkor preached from the top of the stage. The crowd had shushed, listening intently to his every word.

“We must speak.” Rathburn took Cinderr by her arm and led her away. She reluctantly turned to stare at the king’s children, knowing she shouldn’t stray far.

“If you are quick with it.” Cinderr shrugged out of Rathburn’s grasp.

“We have intelligence that House Vorcastle has men in the crowd planning to disrupt the ceremony by going after the Royal Family.”

Cinderr frowned. “The Vorcastles would be mad to attempt something here. This is a holy site.”

“They’re desperate. We’ve hunted them and their allies to the point where there are almost none of them left.”

Her mind burned as she considered how an assassination attempt would play out. “There are too many civilians for them to control every scenario. If enough people get hurt, they’ll never be able to gain the favor of the commoners.”

“They may believe that a public incident is just what they need to reignite the rebellion. The south is still angry that the king has worn the crown nearly two decades and hasn’t made good on his word that he’d wipe out the non-men.”

Cinderr’s eyes scrutinized the area around her. No one looked suspicious or focused on the king’s children.

“I only know what Overmaster Spectra told me.” Rathburn shrugged. “I had some of our men sweeping the crowd. They’ve identified loyalists to the Vorcastles and to their old allies in House Akechi and House Klandess.”

Cinderr rapped her fingers along the hilt of her sword and bit her lower lip.

An attack by the former rebels on the Ring of the Faithful during the Creation Day ceremony seemed too bold.

If Rathburn’s intel was true, why hadn’t her men who’d been following the southern Houses reported anything suspicious?

“We should be sure about a threat before we take extreme action,” Cinderr finally agreed.

Rathburn’s lips partially lifted into a smile. “Would you care for me to show you where we found a cluster of Vorcastles?”

Cinderr’s blood hardened.

Was Rathburn’s intelligence credible?

The Men of Robes were beginning to hum and sing.

Cinderr walked over to a pair of knights. “Sir Argold, Sir Jace.”

The knights stood straighter upon her approach.

“Yes, Undermaster?” Argold responded.

“I need you to discreetly remove Princess Cerelia from the stage and evacuate her to the palace. Use my horse since hers is too far.”

The two knights grabbed her reins and moved without hesitation.

“Why just Cerelia?” Rathburn inquired.

“She’s the one least needed on that stage that we can remove without disturbing the crowd, so we wouldn’t lose any favor with the king if we are wrong.” Cinderr gestured toward a wagon with a cage built onto its back. Several empty manacles dangled from the crisscrossing bars on its roof and sides. “Before you show me where you found the Vorcastles, let’s tell the knights at the prisoner wagon to prepare themselves in case we need to detain anyone.”

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Gadrion ignored the proceedings on the opposite end of the ring. The softly rumbling waterfall at his back did nothing to distract him as he beheld the men arrayed at the banquet table before him.

He was at the head, flanked by his brother, Prince Eduart, and Spectra. As usual, Eduart was heartily drinking from his chalice, dripping burgundy wine into his blond beard.

Beside them were loyalists from the northern and central regions, including Lord Sentinel Egar Harward, the portly father of Queen Deama.

At the far end sat the new Lord Sentinel of the South, Wystan Grimshaw. Though short in stature, the Lord Sentinel made up for it in muscle. Like most knights from his region, he was accustomed to battling non-men raiding parties while defending the southern borders of the kingdom.

At the sides of Wystan and the Grimshaws were a dozen other heads of southern Houses.

Next to them were Brayt Vorcastle, Renzo and Noboru Akechi, Rogen Klandess, and Jonn Corvane. The latter man had his large arms folded across his barrel chest while one hand stroked his graying onyx beard, eyes staring intently like daggers at Spectra.

Gadrion had no doubts that Jonn was ignoring everything that was being said. He wished that the crown could give him the specific thoughts of the

man, imagining that he wanted to slay Spectra on the spot.

“It pleases me to host you all tonight,” Gadrion told the assembled men. “We are here, in sight of the gods who watch us through the Infinity Gate, to honor the promotion of Sir Wystan of House Grimshaw to the title of *Lord Sentinel*.”

The men slapped their hands in acknowledgment along the table’s surface. Many of them raised their chalices and hollered their congratulations to Wystan. The man himself ran a hand through his oiled hair before taking a large swig from his chalice.

Gadrion took a sip of his own.

“My short rule of this kingdom has seen its share of turmoil,” the king continued. “I had to take over for my father after he unexpectedly fell to illness. Tragically, I failed to address the concerns of many of you, and that miscommunication led to a series of unfortunate conflicts that saw us lose people we loved.” Gadrion felt anger from the rebel Houses. As he raised his chalice in the direction of Eduart, he felt that same frustration. “My brother and I will never forget the Night of Fallen Crescents, when our siblings perished from the blades of assassins.”

The crown told Gadrion that many of the men on the far end of the table were barely holding their tongues.

“In the years since our fighting ended, we have reinvested most of the Royal Treasury into reinforcing the southern defenses, and have rotated northern knights along the front lines to defend the lands of our brethren who felt ignored in the early stages of my rule. We have seen a sharp decline in raids by the Cazarathians.”

The men applauded once more.

On the far end of the Ring of the Faithful, dozens of archers released flaming arrows into the Infinity Gate. After noticing the signal, hundreds of pterahawks, pteranodons, and quetzals appeared at high altitudes along the horizon. Each dragged lanterns chained to its ankles or chest harnesses. The light reflected off the clouds above them, then streaked as the flying beasts spiraled down for the open chasm of the Infinity Gate.

The crowd roared as they flew in tight circles along the interior of the Gate, the light from the lamps shimmering against the walls of the cascading waterfalls.

Explosions lightly echoed across the abyss as fireworks launched and detonated.

One of Gadrion's knights made a show of sprinting from the stairs in the king's direction. Gadrion held up a hand to his guests to signal that he'd continue speaking momentarily, leaning in toward the man.

"Everything is ready, my liege," the knight informed him, voice barely audible over a cluster of nearby detonations.

A rainbow of colors from the firework blasts lit up the balcony and table around him. Gadrion imitated a look of concern and surveyed the men.

"I have disturbing news." Gadrion slammed his chalice down. "Despite the peace I was *just* speaking of, I have received word of an attack that is under way by men loyal to guests at this table. They came here pretending they wanted my pardons so they could kill us all at once!" Gadrion pointed to the former rebels. "Apprehend those men and their knights!"

"This is absurd!" Jonn yelled, standing and dropping his hand to his weapon. "I know nothing of an attack!"

Gadrion unsheathed his sword. "My knights are being slaughtered in the Ring by men you hid in the crowd! I call on those loyal to the crown to arm themselves and stand beside me!"

A pair of Reclaimed Guards with body-length shields stepped before him, protecting him as every man at the table pulled out their swords or daggers.

At the far end of the Ring, the tyrannosaur roared with hostility.

# PART 3

## CHASE

Lanterns hanging from the flying reptiles cast inconsistent illumination as Cinderr shoved her way through the crowd. She did her best to stay at Rathburn's ankles, but the man refused to slow his strides.

She bumped into him when he abruptly halted. Rathburn didn't seem to notice, instead pointing at a cluster of men standing at the railing of the ring.

The five men stared up at the stage, ignoring the orbiting lanterns and the exploding fireworks.

"Their attention is on the king's children," Rathburn observed.

Cinderr traced where the men's attention was focused and indeed could see that Prince Jaronas and Princess Kendra were still standing on the stage. She didn't see Princess Cerelia anywhere.

She spun and grabbed the knight at her rear. "Tell the Reclaimed Guard to evacuate Jaronas and Kendra. Do it now!"

The young knight's face blanched but he sprang to action as Cinderr shoved him away.

She turned back to Rathburn. "Let's get close to those men, but we do *nothing* unless they make a move. If we are wrong about them, the king won't be pleased with us for disturbing his crowd."

Rathburn renewed their surge through the onlookers. Most of the people were too preoccupied with what was going on above to notice the knights snaking their way toward the edge of the Ring.

When they reached the balcony, Cinderr nearly pulled her sword out and impaled a pterahawk that abruptly landed next to her. A group of startled citizens yelped and backed away.

"Hold!" Rathburn grabbed her wrist. "It's a messenger ptera."

She glanced down at its ankle.

The cylinder it carried had the dual crescent sigil on its top.

Rathburn pulled the tube from the pterahawk and dumped the message into his hand. He quickly scanned it, his eyes widening before he pushed it toward Cinderr.

Cinderr barely heard Rathburn as she read the note in the bursts of light from the fireworks erupting overhead. The ground rumbled from the echoing detonations, rattling her bones beneath her armor.

Her skin grew cold at the words.

“The king says someone is about to attack his heirs.” Cinderr looked up at Rathburn. “Keep an eye on these men, I’m going after the prince and princess!”

Cinderr dropped the note and turned before Rathburn was able to dispute her command.

This time she didn’t hesitate to roughly shove her way through the crowd. Women shrieked and men cursed as she shouldered them aside.

“Move! By order of the king, move!”

She managed to get most of the way back to the stage without incident. Cinderr saw Prince Jaronas riding off on the back of a destrier while Princess Kendra stood beside the prisoner wagon waiting for another horse to be brought to her.

For a fleeting moment, Cinderr thought that the king’s children were going to be smoothly evacuated.

Then the ground trembled beneath her boots.

The tyrannosaur bellowed and the crowd shrank away like a torrential wave. The alarm in the air was palpable as hundreds of people began to chatter in apprehension.

The beast agitatedly swung its head from side to side. The rider on its back plummeted from his mount and landed with a back-shattering *crunch* onto the stone ground. An arrow, snapped midshaft, protruded from his neck.

A chill ran from the base of her skull into her extremities.

Someone had killed the tyrannosaur melder with an arrow.

No one was commanding the giant saurian, which now was in distress as the mental connection with its controlling knight had been abruptly severed.

With a deft motion, Cinderr swept an elderly man aside and bolted into the bustling expanse as the crowd scrambled to avoid the looming

tyrannosaur. A group of daring knights surrounded the colossal predator, thrusting their spears with ferocity as it grunted and writhed in protest.

She veered sharply as the creature swung its head low. She barely ducked in time, feeling a burst of wind as the tyrannosaur's jaws swished overhead. The crowd distantly shrieked, but Cinderr tried not to think about how close she was to being crushed by the animal.

"Get the princess out of here!" Cinderr shouted, waving to the knights at the prisoner wagon.

None looked her way, their gazes transfixed on the tyrannosaur.

Kendra locked eyes with her, noticing her waving hands. The princess pointed and shouted, but the crowd drowned her words. The knights slowly began to take notice of Cinderr's approach.

She looked over her shoulder, realizing the tyrannosaur had regained its composure. Its gaze fixated on Kendra.

It looked determined, completely under the control of a melder.

But the only person that should have had a tyrannosaur Melding Clasp was dead.

The tyrannosaur roared. Cinderr felt a wave of hot air wash over her and the stench of decay fill her nostrils.

The beast swept its head across the knights standing in its way, easily knocking them aside. It clamped its jaws below the waist of one of the men, effortlessly lifting him and hurling him for several meters before he crashed into the stones.

Cinderr turned away as the tyrannosaur stomped in her wake.

The realization struck her that the beast was not chasing her, but was going after Kendra.

"Get her out of here!"

None of the knights made any effort to reach toward the princess.

Cinderr felt through the vibrations in the ground and from the scared expressions of the fleeing knights that the tyrannosaur was closing in. She grabbed onto Kendra's arm as she arrived, half-dragging her toward the prisoner wagon.

"Get into the cage!" she ordered. "It can't get you there!"

Kendra's verdant eyes sprang toward her. "Wait, what are you going to —"

The princess's protest was disrupted as Cinderr forcefully shoved her through the cage door.

Cinderr slammed the door shut and ran around the side of the cage. "Go! Get this thing moving!"

She leaped onto the side of the cage and used the bars like a ladder to get to the roof, then crawled to the driver's bench.

The man sitting there looked behind him and screamed.

Cinderr seized the reins and slashed them toward the large, crest-headed parasaur tied to the prisoner wagon. The parasaur seemed to sense the approaching tyrannosaur and didn't argue with her. The wagon jolted as they dug their feet into the ground and sprang forward.

Something heavy collided with the cage in the back, bucking the entire wagon. Cinderr reached back and barely grabbed onto the bars to prevent herself from being flung from her perch.

The tyrannosaur had smashed its skull into their side. Kendra sprawled to the ground, crawling back from the tyrannosaur as it charged again and smacked its head into the cage, denting it inward.

Cinderr held on tighter, her body shuddering from the impact.

She tossed the reins back into the driver's hands. "Take these and get us out of here!"

The crowds on the bridge had thinned out, most of them having gone to the Ring to watch the celebration, but there were still plenty of people who shrieked and dove out of the way as the two parasaur pulling the wagon smashed their way through the market stalls.

One of the parasaur lowered its head, ramming it into a protruding cart in their path. The cart splintered with the sound of crashing thunder, several of the shards bouncing resoundingly off of Cinderr's metal shell armor.

The tyrannosaur fell back, swerving to avoid the cart's spinning remains. It let out a menacing growl and rushed towards them, gaining speed with every stride.

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The distraction from the roaring tyrannosaur allowed Rathburn to make his way through the crowd to where the Vorcastle men were standing.

Rathburn knew full well that these men held no actual intention of assaulting the Royal Family.

In fact, they had come here simply to partake in the pilgrimage to see the Infinity Gate.

But their intentions had nothing to do with his orders. He was supposed to slaughter them to further sell the illusion that the former rebel Houses were launching an attack.

Throughout the Ring, the king's knights were gradually ambushing the men belonging to the rebel Houses. Rathburn heard screaming escalate from different areas in the crowd, the horrified yelling echoing across the gaping, black maw of the Infinity Gate.

Several of the deinonychus, the largest raptors in the kingdom, snarled and weaved their way through the mass of humanity to another group of men only twenty meters from where Rathburn prowled. More screaming erupted as the deinonychus tackled them to the ground, their jaws clamping onto their prey's faces and throats while the curved claws of their feet slashed through their abdomens.

In a matter of seconds, Rathburn made it to the five Vorcastles. They were too preoccupied with the commotion to notice him pull out a pair of daggers and begin cutting through their ranks. Two of them collapsed with canyons sliced through their necks, blood geysering into the crowd.

Rathburn glided past to the third, piercing his heart with a dagger before withdrawing it and driving it into the jugular of the fourth.

The attack had been so unexpected and swift that the fifth Vorcastle was the only one who managed to pull out his sword.

Without much effort, Rathburn deflected it and stabbed his side. He twisted the dagger once before repeatedly driving both of his blades into the man's defenseless stomach and ribs, not relenting even as his victim dropped his sword and slumped into the railing.

When he was sure the man had no remaining strength, Rathburn dropped his daggers and grabbed him by his legs. He picked him off the ground and bent him back over the railing. The man's fingers weakly reached out for Rathburn, but he was unable to grip anything as the blood rushed out of his body.

“Tell the gods I’ll be sending more of your kin soon,” Rathburn mocked.

With one final heave he sent the Vorcastle somersaulting over the edge, his silhouette quickly disappearing into the darkness of the cliffs.

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From behind the wall of Reclaimed Guard shields, Gadrion watched his knights converge on their foes. The lights of the lanterns strapped to the pterahawks flashed off dozens of swords as they aggressively cut through the air, causing crimson fluid to spray.

Spectra sidestepped most of the fighting, narrowly focused on the far end of the table. Her brother, Jonn, held his own against a younger, faster Reclaimed. He grabbed hold of the knight, turned him around, and swiped his dagger across his throat.

Spectra swung her sword in a wide arc, aiming for her brother’s side.

Jonn twisted the knight in his arms to intercept her swing, the sword cracking into the lifeless knight.

Before Jonn could balance himself, Spectra kicked him hard in the chest, knocking him back into the table and sending plates and goblets clattering into the fray. The overmaster pressed her attack.

Jonn retreated along the table’s edge, sparks leaping from their blades as they traded blows, barely managing to keep up with Spectra’s lethal rhythm.

Gadrion pushed the Reclaimed Guard from behind and the men obediently marched forward. They cleared a path through anyone who stood in their way, steering the king in Spectra’s direction.

Jonn went into a counterattack, his blade just missing Spectra’s face. The overmaster stumbled, her guard opening.

“Part!” Gadrion ordered.

The two guards did as commanded, separating their shields and turning to protect Gadrion’s flanks.

The king charged and thrust his sword through Jonn’s unprotected back. The Corvane heir’s body spasmed as the sword burst through his organs and

out his front, splashing Spectra with blood.

Jonn dropped to his knees. The amount of blood spilling from him was enough to saturate Gadrion's nostrils with a coppery scent.

Spectra drew back her sword and held it in place for a few heartbeats. Gadrion felt the crown feed him her emotions.

Sorrow... Anger...

And fear.

It was Gadrion's favorite emotion to evoke from people.

He couldn't be sure what the source of the fear was in Spectra as she finally swung with all the strength she could muster. Her weapon split her brother's skull, ending the primary bloodline of House Corvane.

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A pair of horses carrying enemy combatants swerved around the tyrannosaur's legs. The two knights didn't acknowledge the giant saurian, closing the gap to the prisoner wagon within a handful of strides.

One knight leaned toward the other to issue commands, the Melding Clasp on his neck dimly glowing with an orange tint through the dark of night.

It was the new tyrannosaur melder.

In the back of her mind, Cinderr recognized the snapping blue cape behind him and the tyrannosaur spaulder on his shoulder. It was Sir Fendor, the man she'd seen conversing harshly with Overmaster Spectra at the Corvane residence.

The second knight spurred his horse forward and it galloped parallel to the cage. He extended his chainmail glove to grab its side.

"Kendra, stay away from the sides!" Cinderr warned.

The wagon turned sharply. Cinderr braced herself, grabbing onto the cage with both hands as one of the parasaur hit something in their path. More shattered timber burst past her, some of it stinging at her helmet-less head. When it was over, she felt warm fluid trickle down her cheek.

Cinderr looked back at the knight nearest her and saw that he was climbing his way along the side of the cage toward the rear door.

The door, which Cinderr hadn't had time to lock earlier, was swinging ajar from the previous tyrannosaur impact.

She rolled onto the cage's roof and clambered five meters to the knight. Kendra had backed away from where the man was climbing, sensing the danger.

The tyrannosaur bellowed and lowered its head. Cinderr watched as the beast headbutted a protruding sign from a market stall, completely knocking it off the side of the structure and scattering it into the street. A mother barely managed to throw herself and her child behind the stall as the monster brushed past.

Cinderr was careful not to slip through the crisscrossed bars of the cage as she crept into position.

The knight looked up just as she grabbed his helmet and smashed it against the bars, the force of her attack vibrating harshly into her hand, but the knight managed to hold on and reached down to retrieve a dagger.

Cinderr rolled away as the blade whispered past her.

The tyrannosaur roared and stepped up toward the cage's side. Cinderr grabbed on tightly as it sideswiped them.

The wagon temporarily tilted to one side before crashing down. The two rearmost wheels detonated and Cinderr screamed as the back of the cage slammed into the road. Kendra shrieked and grabbed onto one of the bench seats, barely stopping herself from sliding out the back door. Sparks flew up at the princess as the metal cage grinded against the bridge's stone surface.

The dagger in the knight's hand had fallen from his grasp. He came after Cinderr, aggressively climbing onto the roof and avoiding the gaps in the cage while he crawled toward her.

Cinderr tried to get up but the man slammed his body on top of her, her armor crunching from the impact. Her world temporarily blackened as the back of her head clanged against one of the bars.

The knight's fingers grabbed her throat and tightened. Cinderr gasped, still recovering from the blow to her head, unable to raise her hands to fight back.

Her assailant suddenly shouted obscenities and turned from her. Cinderr glanced down, watching as Kendra finished snapping a manacle around the

man's ankle and pulled hard on its chain. The princess awkwardly yanked his leg through the metal bars.

The knight's chainmail fist punched toward Cinderr's face. She just managed to redirect it with one of her hands, two of her fingers cracking painfully.

Her enemy twisted and lashed out with his free leg through the bars of the cage. He struck Kendra's arm, dislodging her grip. The princess flailed and fell down the incline of the cage, smacking into the bars next to the open door. She quickly pushed off, the sparks stinging her exposed skin like tiny projectiles.

The tyrannosaur fell back and snapped at the doorway. Kendra's arm muscles tightened as she escaped up the bars, away from the snarling tyrannosaur maw.

Cinderr's vision fully returned as the knight reached down for the manacle on his ankle.

"Hey!"

The knight turned as Cinderr shouted to him—just in time for her fist to crack into his lower jaw. She watched in satisfaction as he sprawled along the roof, desperately clawing at the bars but finding no grip.

The wagon jolted and Cinderr grabbed onto the cage as she went temporarily airborne. The knight was not so lucky, landing hard on the edge and rolling over. The manacle chain snapped taut and prevented him from completely plummeting into the bridge stones.

The knight tried to reach up for his ankle as the metal of his binding dug grotesquely into his skin. His body bounced painfully against the transport's side, the railing of the bridge swooshing by centimeters from his skull.

Cinderr threw herself toward the driver's bench.

"Give me the reins!" she ordered.

The driver shook his head. "They're panicked! If I let go, we might lose control of the paras!"

"Then command them to turn hard to the right! Do it now!"

The driver clenched his jaws and jerked the lines. The parasaur did as commanded and Cinderr held on as the wagon swung hard for the railing.

The man dangling from the side wailed as he watched a pillar rush toward him. He threw his arms in front of himself, but it was futile as he was scraped off on the jutting column.

Cinderr heard the screeching of metal against stone replace the man's cries, then saw that most of the knight was no longer clinging to the side of the wagon. Instead, all she saw was the bloodied and dented manacle gripping a severed leg.

"The other side!" Kendra hollered.

Cinderr looked over and watched as Fendor grabbed onto the cage and began to climb up to her.

"Hard left!" Cinderr ordered.

The driver pulled them in the other direction. The people on the road scattered as the parasaur burst through a barricade of market stalls. Fruit and wood tumbled through the air.

Fendor managed to hold on, his metal gauntlet grinding against the bars as he tightened his grip. He crawled toward Cinderr, assessing that she was the greater threat.

He abruptly stopped as Kendra thrust her dagger through the cage and into his stomach. The princess let out a war cry while she twisted it with all of her strength.

Cinderr reached down to her ankle, pulled out a spare dagger, and crawled over to Fendor. She swung her dagger before he could react, embedding the blade into his neck.

The melder's mouth opened in a silent scream. He looked up at her, eyes wide with sudden fear as he realized he'd made a mistake.

"Hard left!" Cinderr ordered while withdrawing the knife. "Kendra, release him!"

The driver did as commanded, striking another line of stalls. This time Fendor couldn't hold on as the stalls disintegrated in front of them. His head cracked hard onto the street and bent unnaturally backward.

Kendra screamed below. The cage was now rattling so hard that she was losing her grip, the open door just a meter from her feet.

Cinderr crawled down a few rungs before leaning over the side, reaching in and grabbing one of Kendra's wrists.

"I've got you!" was all she could coherently shout while her own skull vibrated painfully against the bars. It felt like the cage was dislodging from the wagon and was about to break off.

She mentally forced herself to hold onto the princess, despite the intensely pulsating bars. If she released her, Kendra would fall through the

open door, and the tyrannosaur would have her.

She saw the tyrannosaur break through the debris of the stalls before bearing down on them, its jaws open.

Then it abruptly stopped and honked in agitation. It swung its head, feeling the loss of a second melder.

“Watch out!” the driver yelled.

Cinderr turned her head toward the front of the wagon. The end of the bridge was approaching, and two tyrannosaurs were charging toward them.

*No...*

She couldn't believe that they were about to face another ambush.

Cinderr had no idea what to do other than press herself against the roof. Her head shook so harshly that she thought she might break her own teeth.

The tyrannosaurs closed in.

Then the beasts ran past on either side of their wagon, barreling toward the other tyrannosaur.

Cinderr twisted, watching as the tyrannosaurs collided with the one that attacked them. One of the beast's managed to latch onto the enemy's neck with its jaws.

“They're...with us!” Cinderr exclaimed.

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The fighting subsided. The rebels were sprawled on the ground with blood pooled beneath their bodies.

Gadrion set his sword on the table with a dull thud. His crown couldn't identify any more threats from the people around him.

Spectra's face was completely red, not just from exertion, but from the dripping blood of the men she had cut down. Her gaze didn't leave the body of her brother as she sat beside it.

*“You are my most loyal soldier, Spectra, and someone who will go through with even the most difficult kill, regardless of who is on the other end of your blade.”*

Those haunting words that Gadrion had spoken to her after the Night of Fallen Crescents thrashed through her mind, making her relive the sick feeling in her stomach she had felt after being forced to slay her siblings in Valdoon.

“Leave us,” Gadrion commanded his knights. “There are no more enemies among us.”

His men finished jabbing the tips of their swords into the bodies at their feet and took up defensive positions by the balcony entrances.

On the far end of the Ring, civilians were still screaming. In the back of his mind, Gadrion wondered how many injured or dead commoners he would hear about as a result of the panic.

Gadrion stepped closer to Spectra. “I sense that you don’t know how to feel about killing Jonn.”

Spectra cleared her throat and seemed to suddenly awaken from her stupor. She pushed herself off the ground and got back to her feet.

“I...I knew that he’d die tonight, but seeing the last leader of my former family slain was stranger than I expected.”

Gadrion grabbed an unspilled chalice of wine from the table and handed it to her. She snatched it and chugged.

“We lost no one of consequence on this balcony.” Gadrion surveyed the remaining lords, seeing that his brother, his father-by-law, and the Lord Sentinel Wystan Grimshaw each appeared unscathed.

“Then our plan worked.” Spectra tossed the chalice aside. It clanked across the stone.

“Yes, everyone here witnessed as I received a warning about the impending attack, and watched as the rebels drew their weapons first to make an attempt against us. And that’s what I’ll ensure they tell others before they leave.”

“Wystan may be the most difficult to convince to follow our narrative,” Spectra noted.

“He just became a hero who helped save his king. The entire south will *know* that he did that. No matter what he does when he leaves here, they’ll assume he has fully committed himself to me through that act, and so he might as well embrace his new standing.”

“He would be a fool not to take the praise of the kingdom after saving his king.”

Gadrion sat down on one of the chairs. “Find out what happened with my children. I’m not sure if Ser Rosh acted in time.”

“What do we do if any of them fell?”

The king found another untipped chalice, saw that there was some wine in it, and took his own drink. He casually set it aside when he was finished.

“We’ll go forward with our original plan, but instead of making a martyr of the queen in order to rally the kingdom, we make martyrs of my children.” Gadrion glanced over at the balcony. It was much darker without the pterahawks, pteranodons, and quetzals swooping around the Infinity Gate with their lanterns. “Either way, we finally have the justification to kill the last of our enemies, and forever consolidate my rule of this kingdom.”

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Cinderr was relieved when her feet were finally back on ground that wasn’t shaking. She was caught off guard as Kendra threw her arms around her, but reciprocated the hug.

“You did so well, Princess.” Cinderr pushed off from her.

Despite her usually intrepid demeanor, Cinderr noticed Kendra angrily swiping away the moisture in her eyes.

“Thank you, Undermaster. They...they would have *killed* me if you hadn’t done what you did.”

Cinderr squeezed the princess again, allowing her to bury her face into her shoulder. “As long as I live, I’ll give my life for yours, Kendra.”

The princess quaked in her grip. Cinderr held on long enough for Kendra to compose herself, then the princess pushed away and ran her hands through her dress. Her voice gradually regained its edge.

“This stupid dress got in the way. From now on, I only wear battle leathers or armor. At least something where I can easily access things I can use to stab people.”

Cinderr laughed. “After what just happened, I think we can talk your father into letting you dress more functionally.”

“And maybe he’ll let me accelerate my training,” Kendra added. “I helped slay both of those assassins.”

“The driver and the pillar get most of the credit for the first one. The second one you could have stuck in a better spot, so that one counts as my kill.”

A handful of knights on horseback rushed over to them.

One of them dismounted from his destrier. “Undermaster Rosh, we need to evacuate the princess.”

Cinderr nodded and turned back to Kendra. “He’s right. You need to get on his horse and fall back to a secure location.”

Kendra grabbed Cinderr’s arm. “Not without you.”

Cinderr was about to berate the princess for wasting time, but she saw the stubborn look in Kendra’s face that she’d seen many times before—the same one she gave when she insisted that training wasn’t over.

“Don’t make me give you a royal command,” Kendra warned, though her tone indicated she wasn’t threatening.

Sighing, Cinderr gently removed Kendra’s hand. “Very well. I don’t want anything to happen to you after everything I just did to get you across that bridge.”

She ordered one of the other knights to dismount. The knight helped Kendra onto his horse while Cinderr took another one.

“Now give the princess your sword,” she added.

The knight removed his sword and handed it over.

Kendra smiled widely as she took the sword and slid it into a sheath on the horse’s side.

Cinderr turned her destrier toward the city. “Keep up with me, Princess.”

“You couldn’t lose me if you tried,” Kendra retorted.

She didn’t doubt the princess’s sincerity as Cinderr kicked her horse into a full gallop.