

Erin Albus

Forever the Same

She never thought she'd be awoken. She had thought of thousands of possibilities of what would come once she left the world of the waking, but she honestly, to the Lords of Breath above, never thought that it would be the sun of another morning.

Her first breath in what she assumed was years (if the layers upon layers of dust suggested anything) was jagged and painful, her lungs not used to working anymore. Once her lungs were back under control, she slowly, tentatively, opened her eyes. It was a mistake. The light filling the room burned into her eyes, leaving shifting shapes on the lids as she snapped them shut.

Slower, she told herself, the sun shall wait for you.

Instead of opening her eyes again, she sat up sluggishly, her elbows scraping along the stone on which she slept. *How many days have passed? How many years?*

When she finally sat up, her feet dangling over the side, she again tried to open her eyes. She loosely covered them with her hand. It wouldn't do much to impede the sunlight, but it should make it a bit more bearable. Her eyes responded better this time, allowing her to remove her hand after a few minutes.

Glancing around herself, she saw that everything in the Halls of Mourning was exactly as she left it. Not a stone out of place. She dropped off the platform, landing lightly on the balls of her feet. She was still in her simple clothes and cloak. Her sword was still laying on the cold stone ground where she dropped it so long ago, and her small dagger sat resting against the ledge she was standing on.

Nothing out of place.

So why was she awake?

On her way to the entrance of the hall, she picked up her weapons and placed them in their familiar places. She had her sword on her hip, hanging from a belt. A small knife placed in her boot.

The door was large and stone, sealed long ago by the ancient magic flowing through her veins. No one but her, those like her, and the Lords could open the doors once sealed. With her hand placed on the cool stone, she gave a light push, watching as the doors parted as the armies part for their leaders.

Without thinking, she straightened her back, her hand coming to rest on the pommel of her sword. *Always conscious of my bloodline*, she thought bitterly. Loosening her stance, she drew in a breath and finally to a step into the world.

The breath promptly left her in a startled wheeze as the door shut behind her. Her own image, immortalized in stone, stood before her. It was old and worn, the face starting to lose some of the finer details, but still unmistakably her. It had her short, neatly kept braid, straight nose, and hard-set mouth. There were other signs of worship scattered about, nearly lost to time. Raising her chin slightly to regard the statue, she noticed the rusted but readable plaque just under the feet.

“Here lies the Nameless, Hero of the Ages. May she pass seamlessly to the Great Sleep.” Her voice was quiet as she read the words. She scoffed. The Great Sleep would never come to her. Only the artificial sleep she had put herself in.

“Not often we see strangers around here.” She carefully reigned in her surprise at the voice, refusing to show a stranger any weakness. “Not often we see anyone at all, actually.”

Her head barely turned, but it was enough to take in the person who had snuck up on her while she stared at her likeness. It was a man, barely older than a boy. His hair was messy and his clothes covered in patches. Turning fully, he watched as she squinted at him briefly, taking in features.

There was not anything in particular that confused her. His face seemed pretty normal, but there was just something *off*— a subtle peculiarity that had her forehead pinched in slight confusion. Maybe it was in the mouth, the way it curved. Maybe it was the strange mesh of everything together, his features collating into a collage that wasn't *quite* normal.

He cleared his throat quietly, drawing her attention away from her speculations. She didn't pretend she hadn't been staring. She didn't even acknowledge what happened.

“Who are you?” he finally asked. She knew she was intimidating— she had been told many times by many different people.

“A traveller.” Her answer was short, clipped. He looked slightly taken aback by her voice, his eyes dipping take in her appearance once more.

“You have a strange accent, traveller.” His eyes fell on her sword and the hand that rested lightly on it. His hand went to his own side where she could see what looked like a small dagger. “One that I have never heard before.”

She blinked, tilting her head slightly. She barely noticed how her intonation was slightly different than his, a slight lilt lacing through each syllable. But it was there, and how she did not

notice it, she wasn't sure. Her observation skills were never this bad, but she chose to blame it on her long sleep.

"I come from far away, my friend." It would be best not to get into the details of who she was and why she was here. At least until she figured out the second part, that is.

"Are you visiting your kin?" At her blink of confusion, he inclined his chin toward the statue behind her. His face was not untrusting, but it held a guarded note as he regarded her. His hand still had not left the hilt of his knife. "You hold similar features to the Nameless."

"The Nameless had no kin," she answered almost immediately. When she saw him nod, she could tell that he already knew it to be true. He was testing her, she supposed. Seeing what she did and did not know; one could tell a lot about a foe that way. "I am a simple traveller. I stopped to admire the statue."

"As one should." He glanced at the statue once more before his eyes settled on her face. "Town is that way; I suggest you make haste. The land becomes much less friendly at night." He raised his hand and pointed toward the east. It was the direction of home, the small village from which she hailed. "Though you look to be one capable of defense."

"Thank you," she said, dipping her head in acknowledgement. "I shall head there at once." She stayed still for a second, looking out to the horizon.

"I hope you make it to your destination, traveller."

She nodded at him in thanks. "May the Lords guide your step," she said quietly as he turned around to head back down the hill. She could see a horse standing restlessly at the bottom. He must have seen her on his travels and come to investigate.

She did not miss the way his steps faltered nor the sudden stiffness in his shoulders.

"I wish you the same."

The village was a little more than two miles away. She had not seen a single soul since she departed from the man, and it was starting to confuse her. These lands used to be filled with life and joy, but now there was just emptiness. Nothing.

Once she stepped under the gate of the town, however, it was like she was back home. It was not the same village as she once knew— that had been a few miles past this place— but it warmed her chest as she looked around. There weren't nearly as many people as she expected and they all had the same eerily familiar-unfamiliar faces of the man she encountered outside of the Halls of Mourning.

She had no money, of course. It had not been on her mind when she slunk back to the Halls to put herself to sleep. She could offer labor instead, as she did back when she was still just a child and the weight of her bloodline did not pull so heavily on her shoulders. Hopefully there were still those in need of working hands.

“Hello, stranger,” the voice was deep and gruff behind her. She had heard him approach so she did not jump, but she did turn to greet him. He was tall and portly, a beard covering his chin. “I have not seen you here before. What brings you to Sanctum?”

She could see the mistrust in his eyes as he stared down at her. Despite her relatively small stature, she had the air of a warrior. Her hand wanted to twitch toward the hilt of her sword, to grasp the pommel and ease her mind, but she did not move. She did not ponder her wish to draw her sword against an unarmed foe, but it caused a bit of uneasiness in the back of her mind.

“I am a traveller.” She spoke slowly, her voice calm despite her firing nerves. She didn’t fail to miss the way his brows pinched in confusion at her voice. Perhaps it was the accent the previous man spoke of. “I am just passing through and I came for supplies. I assume you are the leader of this town?”

His jerky nod gave her her answer. He wanted more, but there was nothing else she could give him. She came to town to find supplies. Once she was set, she would travel to the heart of the land to figure out why she had been awoken.

“What is your name, traveller? There are many creatures of deceit wandering this valley.”

“I have gone by many names to many different people.” She paused, thinking. She watched his face as she spoke but he made no indication of whether or not he was satisfied with her answer. “I suppose you may call me Traveller.” By her answer, he should realize what she is, but still, his face did not change. “How is asking my name supposed to help?”

“They cannot lie.” He rubbed his hand down his face as he regarded her. “They may only trick. Traveller is not a name I have heard from the elder, so you may enter this town.”

She nodded to him in way of thanks, her hand finally moving to take up its place on her sword. It was her neutral position, the one in which she felt most comfortable. But she knew it could be mistaken for a threat.

“Thank you,” she said with an honest smile. It felt unfamiliar on her face, but natural all the same. “Do you know of anyone in town who will exchange food and shelter for work?”

He nodded briefly, pointing to a small house not too far from where they stood. "Miss Harkens would surely take you in for a night. I'm sure your help will not be turned away; she lost her husband two years ago."

She nodded in thanks as he turned away. Moving toward the center of town, she went to the house he pointed out. It was small and comely, much like the woman who opened the door for her.

It was not long after she explained why she was there that the woman smiled brightly and ushered her inside. She did not push for a name out of her guest, accepting the name Traveller, but insisted on being called Lena. She was a kind woman and the Nameless was more than happy to help her around her house to earn her keep.

But she only stayed for one night. She gathered the supplies that she had earned through her labor, bidding Lena farewell. The woman gave a small smile as she watched the young girl strap her sword back to her side.

"Be safe, my friend. The east hides many dangers."

She knew Lena wouldn't lie to her, but she was still puzzled by her assertion. The east had been a haven for her people before she fell asleep. People would travel hundreds of miles to find safety inside the high walls of Mirenth. Choosing to stay quiet, she nodded her head to acknowledge the worry presented and headed back out into the world.

The world was not as she remembered it. Her trek out to the capital of her people had never been so... harrowing before. She hadn't met very many people, but those she did would not be moving again.

What had happened while she slept? The question plagued her as she braced her foot on the man's shoulder and pushed his body from off her sword. He had the same distinct difference that everyone else she saw had.

"May you find rest in the Great Sleep," she muttered quietly as she slipped her weapon back into its sheath. She supposed he did not deserve that honor, but the phrase was so embedded in her being that it was hard to not utter it when she killed. Life was sacred, a gift from the Lords. To do away with it was to take a child from their arms and to not give respect was to soil their names.

Turning from the body, she continued her march. It was still about two weeks walk until she reached Mirenth, but it was no worry to her. Her body was efficient due to her bloodline and position. She could survive almost any condition. But as she drew closer to the city, doubts

began to plague her. She had not seen a single person without the strange face. And what was worse was the squirming feeling in her gut that pushed her further toward a precipice that she could not allow herself to fall over.

It was beginning to wear on her, but she simply straightened her shoulders and marched on, keeping her who she was in mind as she walked. She could not fall into despair for that led to darkness. She went to sleep to avoid darkness growing in her for that could very well spell the end for all that she worked for.

And so she marched on, her footsteps barely making any noise as she crossed the now barren wasteland. She pulled her cloak closer to her body, bringing the hood a little further over her eyes, and like a wisp of smoke, she disappeared into the east.

The walls had crumbled. She was still a few miles from the great city, but she could easily make out the gaping hole in the side of the walls she once stood to protect. They were said to have been built by the Lords themselves, the Earth Lord raising the ground to protect their children. How could they have fallen?

She had not run into anyone in a few days, the emptiness of the land weighing heavily on her shoulders. Has she actually failed? Were her efforts before her artificial sleep all for nothing? *Did she do this to herself for nothing?* Her heart thundered in her chest for a few seconds before she forced herself to get a hold of her nerves. Anxiety would not help her survive.

Picking up her pace, she jogged the last stretch to the once great stronghold, taking stock of the damage. There were no bodies, something that she was grateful for. But it begged the question: where was everyone? These stone walls had once been filled with so many people at cross purposes, their lives weaving together in a picture of homely strength. Yet... Now there was no one. She placed her fingers to her lips, whispering words of prayer so quietly that she wasn't sure they were said out loud.

She heard the person long before they reached her, but she did not move. She stayed still, waiting for them to come to her. Was it one of her people, a person without the unfamiliar face? Her head turned slightly to look at him, her eyes taking in every detail that was available.

The bottom of his face was covered by a mask— she supposed it was to keep out the sand of the now barren landscape— but she could see how his face was slightly different from everyone else she's seen, but not like her people all the same. He was tall, taller than her, with

messy hair. But all she really cared about was the sword strapped to his side. That marked him as an enemy.

“You’re a Lordson.” His voice was quiet and smooth. “I have not seen your kind in two hundred and fifty years”

“Two hundred..?” She narrowed her eyes on his tall frame, her hand slowly making its way to her sword. “What are you that you’ve lived that long?”

“The same as you.” He paused. “At least what you once were. I am simply from another bloodline, but a powerful one nonetheless.”

“You know who I am?” She did not hide her suspicion as she drew her sword. It was pointed at the ground by her side, but she knew that she would not hesitate to strike him down if she had too. A little spilled blood never bothered her.

“I assume you are the Nameless,” he said with a small smile. It grew slightly when he saw her stiffen. “I, too, was born without a name. You may call me Sentry.”

“How did you know me?”

“Your face is immortalized all over this city.” His eyes fell to hers. “And it seems it was not the only thing immortalized. The Nameless was thought to have fallen into the Great Sleep nearly two thousand years ago.”

“The Great Sleep does not come to me,” she said, her voice quiet. Her eyes sought the ground by his feet, feeling a small chill curl itself through her body. She did not allow herself to dwell on the feeling.

“So it would seem.” Sentry gazed off into the distance, not looking at her. “I must say I feel bad for you. To live with no hope of sleep...” He trailed off for a second, his eyes connecting with hers. “It is a terrible existence.”

She did not break eye contact as she nodded, the shadows under her eyes suddenly deeper. Her breath rattled slightly in her chest she fought back her emotions. She could not allow such weakness to show. “Where is everyone? What has happened to my people?”

“That is not something I can tell you, my friend.”

Her thoughts hadn’t even caught up to her hand before she had her sword pointed at his neck. She did not really want to threaten him, nor did she want to harm him. Blinking at the hand in question, she slowly sheathed her sword. She flicked her gaze to Sentry, only to see a single eyebrow raised in muted question.

“Forgive me,” she said. She clenched her fist at her side, not sure what to make of the action. “I wish you no ill will. I do not know what came over me.”

“No offense was taken.”

“If you do not mind my asking, Sentry, why can you not tell me what happened?” She moved on quickly from her troubling thoughts. She could not focus on it for it would only distract her. Distractions led to death. And not her own.

“I am bound by my blood.”

She nodded absently, familiar with the binding situation. Kin of the Lords, mortals with but a single drop of divine blood, cannot speak of the Lords’ actions. Their tongues were bound by eternal servitude, forced to keep all mentions to hopes for guidance. No words of animosity may leave their lips when speaking of their creators. She has struggled with it when she was chosen by the Lords to take on the Adversary.

“Is there anything you can tell me that will not violate your blood contract?” After a lifetime of the rule, many Kin of the Lords learn to work around such limitations. The only way she was allowed speak their names was to offer hope, a blessing, but it was a way to speak of them nonetheless.

Sentry did not speak right away, mulling over what to say. When he spoke, it was slow, as if he was weighing each word in his head. “You are the last of the Lordson.” The words did not shock her but she did not quite know how to respond. She had noticed the absence of the Lordson ever since she talked to the young man outside the Halls of Mourning.

“What do these people call themselves if not Lordson?”

“Tyrh.”

“Thank you, Sentry, Son of the Stars,” she said, giving him a small smile. He had been as helpful as he could. Not many of the Kin were as forthcoming as him and she took that as a blessing. “May you one day find rest in the Great Sleep.”

He did not blink at the honor she just bestowed upon him so casually. That phrase was only supposed to be said to warriors who might perish in battles, to give them hope for peace. He nodded in thanks, bending slightly at the waist. “May you one day find the answers you seek.”

She too nodded to give him the respect he deserved. She followed him with her eyes as he left before turning back to the ruins of Mirenth. She supposed she would just have to seek out someone who was not bound by the blood to find her answers.

There were rumors, back when she was still young, of immortals living deep in the mountains. They were supposedly the Lords’ first attempt at creation; they were deemed a

failure because the Lords thought no one but themselves should be immortal. They, if anyone, should be able to give her answers.

She did not let herself think too much as she hurried to her new destination. Ever since she woke up, she had tried her best to stay in constant motion, for to stop is to think and to think is to allow. She could not let her thoughts stray to the feelings bubbling like hunger in the pit of her being. She could not let herself dwell on the way her hand moved without her thoughts, threatening a man who could not give her the information she wanted.

To think was to let it grow inside of her.

Her actions had been reckless, her measures too extreme. She never should have made that sacrifice...

No! She would not let her thoughts drift into such territory. The past was the past. It could not be changed, no matter how much she wished to simply reach back and pluck such terrible ideas from her head. She was a Daughter of the Stars. She would find out why she had been awoken and take care of it so that she may once more return to her slumber.

The mountain was just as she remembered it. On her journey so many years ago, she had gone there to find the Lords' Star, a remnant of the Days of Creation. The Elder of her village had said that it would guide those— and only those— whose intentions were selfless to their goal. She supposed that she would no longer be able to use it if it was still in her possession.

It had taken her three days to reach the bottom of the rocky terrain and she knew that she would have to move much faster. She could feel the uneasiness spreading from the iron ball in her stomach, leeching out into her limbs through her spidery veins. Something was very wrong.

The immortals could give her answers and they could maybe prolong her strength until she could sleep again. They could tell her what happened to her people. They were the answer. It was the only thought that kept her moving; they could make everything all right.

The only problem was that she was not quite sure just where the village was. All of the stories she had heard were just that— stories. She would have to walk the entire mountain until she happened to stumble across the village, though she still was not entirely sure if they existed. The Elder had told her that it was true, that she had witnessed one when she was a small girl. She had fallen while climbing and was saved by a man with silvery hair.

For the first time in her life, she had no idea what to do. Ever since she was a child, she knew exactly of her destiny as it was laid so painstakingly perfect in front of her. As soon as she

was born and the midwife saw the small mark on her shoulder, her life was no longer hers. She was a Kin, a godlike creature bound to human form. She was bound to her blood. She wasn't quite familiar with the restlessness that settled in her as she started to scour the mountain. It could take weeks to finish this expedition and that was time she did not have.

She was so invested in her thoughts that she did not hear the beast approach. It was only the small growl from her right that alerted her to the thing's presence and she barely had time to draw her sword before it came crashing down. With a quick step, she moved out of the way and readied herself, her grip on her weapon loosening to a more comfortable grip.

It was tall and humanoid, its skin hanging loosely from frail limbs. Its eyes were hollow and black, pits in a sunken, withered face. She knew what it was; she had seen it in her travels long ago. They were creatures called Lyians. They were once people but were punished by the Lords for trying to obtain the immortality of the first creations. There were few left when she first came to the mountain and she had killed the last one. At least, she was told she did.

Rolling her wrist slightly, she jumped forward to try and impale the sorry thing on the end of her sword. She expected it to put up a fight, try and move out of the way of her blade. What she wasn't expecting, however, was for it to actually succeed. It tilted its head slightly as it settled out of her reach, its mouth opening and closing as if to taunt her. The ones she fought before were slow, easily dispatched and returned to the earth. This... this was able to move out of the way of her strike.

The Lyian came for her, its arms outstretched. She would not let herself be shocked again. This thing would die by her sword like the rest of its kind. Just as she was about to kill it, her weapon inches from its neck, an arrow flew past her ear, hitting it square in the eye and ending it. The arrow had come so close to her that her hair had shifted at the wind.

She found the immortals.

"So it seems the Nameless has awoken." Her eyes were drawn to a man resting on the mountain side, his silvery hair kept up in a braid not quite unlike her own. He stared at her with pale eyes that analyzed her from beside his bow, readied to fire again. "I thought you had had taken the leap that we cannot."

"It is a leap that I cannot take either." She sheathed her sword, watched as he finally lowered his bow and stowed the arrow in the quiver strapped to his back. "I have lost the ability to enter the Great Sleep."

The man did not seem surprised nor concerned. He only stared at her with an impassive look. "I have figured as much considering it has been two thousand years since you have been seen." He raised a pale eyebrow at her scoff. "What brings you to the mountain, Nameless?"

"I have come for answers," she said, straightening up and pushing out her chest. She was never fond of her bloodline nor her lineage, but she knew that worked in her favor when it came to intimidating those around her.

"Then leave," he said, waving a flippant hand. "You will find no answers here."

"What—" She cut herself off, her eyes narrowing on his lithe form. For a second, her vision seemed to fade to black as her hand gripped the hilt of her sword in her shaking hands. Her breath hitched at the unusual experience, stumbling back only to fall to the ground.

"Strange..." she heard from above her before there was a light thump. She felt a hand on her shoulder and her vision returned. Her breath was ragged as she stared up at the man with wide eyes. Hardly ever was she in such a state. She had been near death a few times on her journey, but even then she was completely in control of herself.

He dropped into a crouch beside her, his face suddenly close to hers. "You've done something incredibly dangerous, my dear." His breath hit her face in small pants, but she had nowhere to retreat.

"I know," she said quietly. She was afraid to break eye contact with the immortal, so she continued to stare at him with unblinking eyes. "I know it was foolish."

"More than foolish."

He finally stood, offering a slender hand for her to take. She grabbed it and allowed him to haul her to her feet. Taking stock, she checked to make sure everything was in place before she glance at the man before her. He was taller than her. He seemed to look down his long nose at her as he stood there.

"I know someone who might be able to help you." He turned and started up the mountain, expecting her to follow him. She didn't even hesitate before she trailed behind him, leaving the rotting monster in the dust.

"Help?"

"The darkness must be contained or it will destroy you from the inside out."

She blinked, stopping to look at her hands for a second. They shook slightly. She knew what he was saying was true. She could not contain the evil forever. It was a fool's errand that led her to accepting it inside of her in the first place. She must contain it or she will fall into

darkness and drag everything down with her. It had been shown to her by the Lords when she made the decision.

The trek to the village was not as hazardous as she thought it would be. It was not hidden in some alcove in the mountainside. It was actually quite visible from the path cutting through the rock face. It was a wonder that no one was able to confirm the existence of the immortals when it didn't seem like they were exactly hiding.

"The person you seek is in the house at the end of the path," her guide said with a small bow. He did not stay after that.

She hurried to the house at the end, gazing at the intricate designs that covered the walls. Her knuckles rapped quietly on the door, not wanting to just enter the house. It only took a few second before she was greeted with the sight of a tall woman with long, silver hair. Her life-hardened eyes juxtaposed against the smooth planes of her face. She looked like she had seen almost all the world had to offer while still maintaining a face of youth.

"I thought you were dead." Her voice was deeper than she expected, scratchy and harsh. The Nameless blinked slightly at the language. No one used that word for it was considered rude to refer to the Great Sleep as death. Only those undeserving were given a true end.

"I am unable to enter the Great Sleep." Her voice came out much stronger than she thought it would considering this woman had probably been alive longer than she could even comprehend. "What can I call you?"

"We were not given names by our creators," the woman answered. "Much like yourself, we live with titles to satiate our need for identity. I am the First."

She did not try to hide her surprise at the woman's admission. The woman before her was the first attempt at life cast upon the earth.

"First, it is an honor to meet you." She gave a small bow to her.

"Spare me the pleasantries, child, and tell me why you are here," she growled. The woman did not move to allow the Nameless entry nor did she return the kindness given. She was used to people giving her every respect due to the blood in her veins. And now this woman... She felt her face twist into a sneer, her eyes narrowing on the woman. *How dare sh-* The Nameless shook her head slightly, unnerved by the thoughts floating around. They were not her own.

"Forgive me, my lady," she said as she regained control over her emotions. She tried on a small smile to try and ease the tension. "I am not used to being addressed that way." Her

smile faded to a somber look as she gazed upon First. The reason why she was here weighed heavily on her as she bowed her head. "I am here to find out what happened to my people. Why are there no Lordson?"

The woman tilted her head to the side, a small smile finding its way to her face. When she wasn't glowering, she was actually kind looking, welcoming. The smile was short lived as her face settled back into a glare. "The Lordson have been recalled to the Lords' Land."

"What?" she said quietly. That... that was impossible.

The woman waved a flippant hand, bidding the Nameless entrance to her house. She followed quietly, leaving her sword at the door. "Some two or three hundred years ago— it all runs together when you are as old as I am— all of the Lordson had disappeared into the night. Their cities lay collapsed and their monuments crumbled."

The Nameless stood, motionless, in the First's small kitchen for a few moments, trying to take in everything she was just told. She opened and closed her mouth, not sure where to start her questioning. "Why the Lordson? Why did they create new beings in the Tyrh?"

The First shrugged slightly. "The Lordson were always the Lords' favorites. They thought it time to give them something in return for loyalty. But gods can't exist without people to worship them, so they created the Tyrh." She paused for a second. Her eyes caught the First's and for a second, she was frozen. "Now, I wonder, why have your gods forsaken you?"

"I have forsaken myself," the Nameless said quietly. "The Lords had nothing to do with the burden I now bear."

"No, the darkness in you is all your own doing." The woman put a battered kettle over the fire. "It's eating you alive, bit by divine bit."

"I can resist," she murmured, unable to stop herself. "I am strong."

"Not strong enough." It was a statement. A fact. "No one is strong enough to contain what you now hold inside of you. You think you were the first to try?"

"Miren." She said the name under her breath, but the First heard her all the same. "The woman Mirenth is named after, the first of the Kin of the Lords, and the only to ever be given a name. She tried to take the same evil within her to destroy it."

"Yes. She was corrupted beyond recognition." The woman looked down. "I knew her. I was in love with her." She looked up, her eyes shining with tears. The Nameless did not move, letting the woman grieve. To live for centuries and millennia with the weight of grief on one's shoulders is punishment she would not wish upon anyone. "If Miren, one whose blood was

almost completely of the Lords, could not contain the darkness, why would you be able to stop it?"

"I..." she trailed off. "I can't; I can only hold out for as long as I can. It needs a host or it will run free."

"A body to contain it, to provide corporal limitations." The First nodded slightly. "That's what Miren told me when she left to face her destiny."

"I tried sleeping— artificial, but still sleep. It seemed to slow the process but just three weeks ago, I woke."

"It will not let you sit by and let time pass." The kettle whistled and she hurried to take it off the flame. She poured it in a cup and added a few leaves and herbs before shoving it toward the Nameless. "It wants you to give in and and cause havoc."

"So it woke me up?"

"That's what I would assume." The First shrugged and took a sip of her drink. "But who knows."

The Nameless finished her drink in silence, mulling over what she's been told. She knew from the moment her sword connected with the evil and she dragged its essence into herself that she had made a choice. There was no going back to her life once she finished the process, but she did it anyway because that was her job. She knew of two other Kin of the Lords who had done the same before her, taking on the darkness so that the world could enjoy peace. She thought if she slept, she could contain it forever.

But she knew what the First said was true. It was eating her alive. Some of the actions she had taken in the last few days were not her own. She lashed out when she would normally show restraint, and she could feel parts of herself falling away into a gaping hole inside of her being. It was only a matter of time before she fell completely.

What would become of the world then? Would other Kin of the Lords rise up to slay her just as she rose to kill the last vessel?

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She would not let herself fall into darkness. There had to be a way to put an end to it for good.

"Is there no hope?" She still had not opened her eyes. She could hear the First shifting around the small room and the clattering of things as she moved them around.

"Hope is not what you need. It will not help you."

There was a hand on her shoulder, resting hesitantly on her tense muscle. She blinked her eyes open, taking in the doubt on the First's face. She drew in a ragged breath, looking at the cup in her hands. "Hope is all we have."

The Nameless sat in the bed the First provided to her, her leg pressed against her chest as she stared out the window. Her conversation with the immortal repeated in her head over and over, taunting her with the hopelessness it provided.

She would fall into darkness. She would be torn apart by the evil she accepted into herself to save everyone else. She had spent most of her life striving toward her time to fall into the Great Sleep. It was all that she wanted out of the mess that had become her life. It was the final freedom that would release her from the prison of her blood. But now, as she stared down her destiny, she didn't want to die.

She drew in a breath, watching the immortals go about their lives below her. Her exhale fogged the glass, obscuring her view, so she just closed her eyes. Tomorrow, she would head back to the Halls of Mourning. She would sleep until the end came. It would be easier that way. She would not have to watch herself slip slowly into madness and her sword be drawn against friend and foe alike. The world might fall by her hand, but she will not willingly extend it to meet that fate. She would curl it closely to her chest and force fate to rip it from her.

The First seemed to think that she would not be able to fall into slumber with this... *evil* growing inside of her, but the Nameless was prepared to lock herself in the Halls if she had to. The Walls of the building should be able to hold her until someone came to put an end to her suffering. She would not be able to enter the Great Sleep, nor will she gain a true death. She will simply fade away into nothing.

Emptiness.

The Halls were exactly as she left them. Her face was still watching over the door, calling back to the time when she was actually a hero. She let her finger skim across the edge of the platform that her likeness stood upon, a small, serene smiling growing. She didn't want to face this. She wanted to turn around and find a place to hide from her destiny, but she knew that she couldn't run forever. This thing would keep growing inside of her.

She entered the Hall quietly, sealing the doors behind her. Only herself, the Lords, and Kin could open the doors once sealed. She would be safe here and everyone would be safe

from her. Standing in front of the table she woke on just three weeks before, she let her sword drop to the ground. She knelt and pulled the knife from her boot.

She took a deep breath and slowly laid herself back on the stone, letting the ancient magic of the walls seep into her being. She could feel her heart rate slow and stutter to a halt as her breath stopped.

She had no name, but many called her Cavalry. She was the last line of defense for the Tyrh. She was a Kin of the Lords, a god bound to the flesh of a human. Her people had called on her to destroy a rising darkness in the west. It was coming from ancient ruins that were said to house the remains of the Nameless. Legend said that she had exited her tomb some hundred and fifty years ago after two thousand years of slumber. Perhaps she was still alive in there, stuck between the slumber and the darkness crawling around her resting place. Cavalry did not know, nor did she particularly care. She was sent to do a job, that was it.

She had traveled to the immortals in the mountains to gain insight on how to best go about defeating this evil. The one called the First merely scoffed and told her that it could not be destroyed. She said that the cycle could only be reset, all power of the enemy being set back to zero.

As she travelled further west, she came across a man in the ruins of Mirenth. He called himself Sentry. He was old and withered, barely holding on to the scraps of life. He told her of the last Kin of the Lord he saw who sought out answers. She had not fared well. She did not let his words get to her anymore than the First's. Her people were depending on her to end this evil and she would do it even if it killed her. It is what she was born to do; she was a Daughter of the Stars, a warrior born to die for humanity.

She would enter the Great Sleep with arms wide open.

At least, that was what she told herself when she started the journey. But now, as she reached her goal, she wasn't quite sure. Cavalry never had much of a life outside of what she was born to do. It was not in her blood to follow her own wishes— she was bound to the job she was given. And she was meant to be a hero like so many of her kind before her. Like the Nameless, Hero of the Ages.

She stood outside of the temple once called the Halls of Mourning by the Lordson. Beside her, a cracked statue of what used to be the long dead hero lay forgotten in the dirt. The air was oppressive, wisps of darkness swirling around her as she slowly drew her sword. This evil will fall by her blade. She was chosen by the Lords; she could not fail.

Placing her hand gently on the ornate stone door, she gave herself a second to gather her thoughts before slowly pushing the door open. It was loud and grating as it swung inward, giving her a wide shot of the inside of the Halls. The air was even more oppressive here, the tendrils of darkness curling around her as she walked in.

It wasn't long before she found the source of the darkness deep within the ruins. There was a table in the center of the room and upon it sat a woman, the dark aura emanating from her chest. A sword sat on the ground, a small dagger beside it. Cavalry inched slowly closer to the woman, her sword clutched in trembling fingers.

She recognized the woman's face— it was the same one that lay broken and forgotten outside these very walls. The Nameless. Her face was twisted by the darkness, but her features were still clear. She looked so peaceful, as if just in the midst of a dream. But the darkness pouring out of her very being said otherwise. She was the source.

Her breath hitched slightly at the realization. She would have to kill the hero she had grown up hearing stories about. She had saved the world from evil, ushering in nearly over two millennia of peace. She thought of the First's words, how no one could kill this evil. Had the Nameless tried to do what she was now tasked with and failed? Is that why people saw her roaming after her supposed death thousands of years before? Her blade quivers in her fingers, rattling against the armor on her legs.

She knew she couldn't dwell on the matter or she would lose her resolve to finish her journey, so she raised her sword high above her head. Deep breath in, deep breath out. She plunged her sword down, aiming right for her heart. Just as it was about to pierce her smooth skin, a hand shot out to grab the blade. Cavalry gasped, glancing up to see that the Nameless' eyes were wide open— black.

She froze; she didn't want to move and startle the woman. The Nameless did not say anything, nor did she really react outside of her eyes slowly sliding closed once more. Her fingers fell from the blade, black blood oozing from the fresh cut on her hand. Whatever she was, it wasn't the hero that saved the world.

Cavalry took a deep, shaky breath. The Elder of her village had mentioned something about the evil; she called it the Adversary, the darkness to the Lords' light. It was something created wholly to balance out the divinity of the deities. If that's what she was up against, what chance did she have?

She felt a tendril swirl slowly up her leg, dragging up her calf until it rested on her hip. Closing her eyes, trying to block out everything, she tried to think about what to do. She needed

to kill this darkness, but she had grabbed her sword faster than seemed humanly possible before. The Nameless was one of the best warriors to ever walk the land, how could she hope to best her?

She batted the tendril away lightly, bending down to retrieve the small knife she kept in her boot. She moved carefully, not wanting to disturb the relative peace that had settled over the temple. The knife in her hand gleamed in the low light as she settled it inches from the neck of the warrior. A quick flick of her wrist and it would all be over.

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

Stop, a voice whispered quietly. Glancing around, she saw no one. Her eyes settled once more on the woman in front of her. *I am able to keep the Adversary contained, but if you kill me, it will be free to do as it pleases.*

Cavalry sucked on her teeth, staring at the woman before her. Her mouth never moved, nor did it look like she was awake, but she could hear her speaking as if she was standing right there.

“The energy is flowing from here and corrupting the surrounding lands. I have been sent from Sanctum on a divine journey to end it,” she said, her voice dripping with confidence that she didn’t have.

I was once like you, the Nameless sighed wistfully. *But that hope cannot last forever in this world. You must leave here. Yes, some of the energy and darkness will escape from the Halls of Mourning. That is but a small price to pay in exchange for keeping what’s inside of me at bay.*

Cavalry clutched her knife in her hand, her knuckles turning white. How could she say that? The evil leaking out of these ruins was causing havoc in the nearby villages. The soil had turned acidic and creatures rise from the earth, killing all those left unprotected. Her people were counting on her to end the misery. The Nameless immortalized through stories and legends was one of great integrity, one who always fought for her people. How could she condone the destruction of innocent lives?

As a child, she always looked up to the hero before her. She was strong and compassionate. She was everything that Cavalry could never be. Cavalry was the last defense because no one hoped it would get to that point. She was a Kin of the Lord, but she had such little divine blood in her that she was less than half of what the Nameless was. All of the other Kin had fallen to the evil that poured out of this place, leaving only a young girl left to face off against what was thought to be a faceless evil.

The First had said that she could not destroy the evil before her. It was immortal, making the host unable to enter the Great Sleep as it slowly chipped away at their soul, claiming it for its own. The stronger the host, the longer they could go before the darkness took over and started to terrorize the land.

It cannot be destroyed, only reset.

She could not end the darkness, but she could take it within herself, restarting the cycle. Her body was young and strong. It was uncorrupted. The Adversary would have to start all over to try and wear her down. She would lose her chance to sleep. She would lose her chance at freedom. But her people were depending on her. She couldn't just turn away when the chance to prolong their fate was sitting right in front of her. All it would take was a little sacrifice.

And the Nameless... she had held onto this for over two thousand years. How tiring it must be to sleep without rest for so long. She could find no end to the corruption inside of her, no way to find peace. And Cavalry could help her; she could release her from the prison she has created.

"Will you let me help you, Nameless?"

I do not wish my burden upon you, my child.

Cavalry smiled slightly. "I know. It is one that no one should bear. But like all burdens, it must fall on someone. You have done your duty, Nameless, Hero of the Ages and Daughter of the Stars. I will release you from your prison."

If that is what you wish... I always craved my turn to fall into the Great Sleep. They say it is like waking up from a long, forgotten dream. The air seemed to pulse with the force of the Nameless' words. Gripping the edge of the stone slab on which the woman slept, Cavalry gave her a small smile, unsure if she could even see it.

"Does it hurt?"

Not at first. The pain comes later, long after you have accepted your fate.

She nodded slightly. She told the Nameless to stay still and when she didn't receive a response, she slowly raised her knife back over the woman's heart. One stab was all it would take. With all the strength she could muster, she plunged the knife down, breaking skin and ribs alike.

At first, nothing happened. Then, like a wall hitting her, a coldness slid up her arm. Her vision faded and all she could see was pulsing darkness. Unconsciously, she twisted the knife and drew herself closer to the twitching body of her childhood hero. The darkness, which she

did not think was the dancing shapes from closed eyes, started to tug away from her. She could feel its desires, its want to escape from the confines of its prison of flesh.

Grab hold of it. Grab hold and do not let go.

Cavalry reached out, taking hold of the tendrils flailing about her and tugged it toward her with every last bit of strength she had. It collided with her chest, fusing with her with a surge of coldness sweeping through her.

She was left shivering, her arms wrapped around herself— in an attempt to stay warm or keep the Adversary inside of her, she did not know. She could feel it squirming and writhing inside of her, trying to break free. She could feel it fusing with every cell of her body, filling her with its corruption. When it settled, she was left with a feeling of *wrongness*. She was still in control of herself and all that she did, but she could feel it making itself a home deep within her being.

It spoke softly to her, its words curling around her head in a language she couldn't understand. But she knew what it wanted, what those words meant. The Adversary was seductive in its corruption, but Cavalry was resolute. She would not sway to the words of this darkness. Using all her concentration, she pushed down on the bubbling feeling until it was a lead ball in her stomach. It would weigh on her through every word and action, but it was manageable. It was something that she could force herself to get used to in order to maintain the balance inside of herself.

With tear-blurred eyes, Cavalry looked up to see the Nameless smiling down at her, blood dripping from the corner of her mouth. She absentmindedly noted that she must have nicked her lung when she twisted the knife. She wiped her eyes, watching as the hero extended a slim hand down to her. Gripping it, she allowed the Nameless to lift her up until she was standing once more. She stumbled slightly, but did not fall. She would not allow herself to fall.

Thank you. The woman still did not physically say the words, but Cavalry heard it all the same. She watched as the woman slowly closed her eyes, her body fading into nothingness. Cavalry's eyes widened, but then she smiled. If she could help but one person on her journey, it was all worth it. The Adversary, the darkness that plagued the land, was not gone, but it would be contained for as long as she could manage it.

Her knife clattered on the stone table, soft tissue no longer holding it up. Picking it up, she placed it back in her boot. She pondered what she should do from here on out. The evil inside of her would only continue to grow until the next hero comes forward to take her place.

She glanced once more at the platform and the sword laying on the ground not far away. She could take the Nameless' place and sleep until the end.

But she wasn't the Nameless. She was Cavalry. She had gotten her name for her bravery in battle, despite her not being the first her people turned to for help. She would not hide away from her destiny. She would face the darkness inside of her head on. It may not be a wise decision, but she wholly believed the First when she said that the darkness could not be destroyed. It would only be switched from one host to another. And she was that host now.

She would not run. She would stand resolute until the very end.