

Silicia

The scent of sagebrush and rabbitbrush grace Silicia's nostrils as she inhales the morning air. She rolls to stretch and yawn, her straw mat scratching the bare ground. She peers out of the opening of her tent and sees hues of purple and orange on the horizon pushing back the night sky. She lets out a long sigh, then pushes herself from the ground to stand.

Her muscles ache in protest from yesterday's battle with Nyx's children, but Silicia forces her body to move. She looks to her door at the sound of yawns and rustling to see the cubs outside are already awake and chasing one another. Her youngest sibling, Thabo, pokes his black, maneless head in and gives her a toothy grin before screaming "Good morning!" and running off. She smiles softly before pulling her Ibheshu and Slene around her waist. Next comes her black and white beaded necklaces and lion hood, its arms drape over her torso and end at the tops of her thigh. Her hands run across her scarred body as she secures each item in place before she ties her iNgwe around her bicep, the hides dangling over the names of her brothers and sisters etched into her fur and skin.

Her pride, Diamond Claw, is home to sixty-eight Leonin, who are family, friends, elders, and their Speaker. Today, they and many other prides travel to Tethmos, the most treasured Leonin city in Oreskos, where elders of each pride gather to share wisdom and knowledge. So, as a member of one of the seven noble prides, she must represent herself well among the attending Iconoclast. She stands tall and shrugs her shoulders to ensure everything fits her comfortably. Her gear's fit and weight are optimal for temperature management and range of motion. The last to go on are her gold gauntlets that have been passed down from her ancestors, who were part of the generation that the gods betrayed. From their powerful, battle-scarred paws to her own bruised wrists and knuckles, she bears the weight of avenging her race against the Archons someday.

Only so much could come from serving the celestial Archons, champions of merciless justice. But for Archon Agnomakhos to completely be overthrown by humans was a feat that only the help of Ephara, God of Poleis (city and building), could execute. This could be seen as a blessing to others, for the humans received Ephara's blessing to bring down Agnomakhos. One could even say humans saved the Leonin, who were treated as Agnomakhos' foot soldiers, brutalized into submission for his operation to conquer the lands of Theros. But their God's demise only brought continued suffering after the humans cast the Leonins out of Meletis and left them to be roaming nomads in the shining lands of Oreskos.

Silicia's Leonin ancestors stripped their worship traditions and denounced the divine superiority of all gods and celestials, and they wouldn't dare to waste their breath on human

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matters. So, her pride and the many others like hers who roam the lands outside of the are left to guard themselves against Nyx's predatory children.

Before Silicia leaves her tent, she reaches to collect her intricately beaded purse, filled with small tools and runes, and she smiles at the small, yellow, and orange-beaded lions. The pad of her paw gently rubbed over it as she remembered when her grandmother gifted the purse to her. She was a smaller cub, which, as one would imagine, surprised her parents when she grew to be taller than most of the females in her pride. Her grandmother was a fierce and cunning Leonin who crafted the family's journeys and milestones. After her passing, Silicia rubbed red clay into the ends of her curly black hair to mimic her grandmother's mane. The two had matching white patches over their eyes, so it would make sense to honor a resilient life to the fullest.

Silicia emerges from her alabaster tent and is greeted by her nomadic village with its many pitched tents of different sizes. The sounds of Leonin rustling in their tents and chatting outside – this was home. Their pride didn't need to establish huts, buildings, or formal roads because home is where the lions are. That, and it's harder for them to be hunted by Nyx's children, mainly the bumbling cyclopes and Fiends of Theros. Her parents and sister Jama's tents are adjacent to hers, more so because her mother and sister don't want to be far from the eldest rather than convenience.

Silicia is the eldest of seven children to her parents, Izula and Dumisa. Jama stays close to their parents so she can help with the younger cubs, Unathi, Thabo, and Dingani, but her adolescent siblings, Sipiwe, Bheka, and Jama, have their own tents. Silicia peers into Jama's tent, but it's vacant, so she must already be with her parents. So Silicia turns the other way to see if her closest friend, Anele, is awake. She walks past her pride members, who greet her in various awakened states, some with a groggy head nod and others with bright smiles and chipper waves.

She nears where Anele tends to set up her tent – across from her fathers near the Elders, but not directly in front to where he can look in her tent when he wants to. Her tent is also in slightly better condition than most besides its bone-white fabric torn near the bottom edges. Anele's always been one to take an extra 10 minutes to rest or will wake up right before the pride is on the move. When Silicia rounds the corner, she's surprised to find that Anele's tent was already broken down. Silicia looks to see that Vala's, Anele's father, tent is still perched. *Where could she have gone?* She thinks to herself. She doesn't want to disturb Vala as he's quite the grouch in the mornings.

Silicia turns away to start looking for Anele among the pride when she bumps right into Jama, who nearly falls to the ground after colliding with the equivalent of a stone wall.

"Jama, dear sister!" Silicia says, reaching out to help steady the second eldest sibling to herself. "You cannot sneak up on me like that," Silicia chuckles. Her sister's fur is a lighter shade of black than hers, closer to charcoal than Silicia's onyx-black fur.

"I was not sneaking, Silicia," Jama states, putting a hand above the belt on her hip. "I've come to tell you that Anele has... *gone*," she whispers.

Silicia's brows furrow with confusion at why her sister was whispering and where Anele could've gone before the pride set to leave for Tethmos. "What do you *mean*?" Silicia whispers back, cautious of the Leonin walking by them. A thought crosses her mind, but she immediately dismisses it. *She would not go through with that, impossible.*

"I awoke earlier this morning, and I couldn't get back to sleep, so I went for a walk." Jama says, then gestures down the trail between Anele and Vala's tents, "When I saw her already walking into the distance with her gear. I couldn't go to her because it was nearing the time when Thabo and Unathi would wake." Her hand drops to her side, and she looks back at her sister, "I was coming back to see if she returned, but I ran into you instead."

Silicia's blood runs cold, a gust of wind blowing between her and Jama as the two stare into each other's eyes. "She actually did it..." Silicia voiced just above a whisper.

"Ah, so you know where Anele is, Silicia?" Vala questions, closing the distance between the three of them. The sisters greet Vala, his beige fur and ecru mane glistening in the early rays of morning light. Jama's eyes are panicked and unwavering from Silicia's gaze.

"I do not know, sir," Silicia stated.

"Oh, come now. I heard the two of you clear as day," Vala smiles, a golden fang catching the light, which causes the two Leonin in front of him to break their focus. He notices how Jama's mouth is pinched shut and the frantic wideness of her eyes. His smile fades when he shifts to look at Silicia, who looks like the wind is blowing right through her.

"Has something happened to Anele?" Vala questions

"I do not exactly know—

"Then what *do* you know? Please, she is all I have left," He begs in a whisper, looking between Jama and Silicia, expecting someone to speak up. But the deafening sound of near silence broke his calm demeanor. The look in his eyes goes from a concerned father to a frantic, desperate beast. He lets out a sharp exhale when he exposes his claws and swings at Silicia's face. She dodges her head to the right, effectively shoving Jama out of the way

simultaneously, and goes for a right hook to his jaw.

It connects but doesn't faze him.

He continues punching with paws nearly twice her size, growling and snapping his jaws with each swing. Silicia can't get a word in to tell him that she realized she was missing this morning and how she didn't want her best friend to leave either. She continues to evade his advances when she realizes this situation isn't going anywhere productive, and she swiftly analyzes her takedown method. Vala goes to grab her shoulders, and the moment he's about to touch her, she snaps her arms up and crashes them down on his forearms. Before he catches his footing, she crouches to his midsection and grips his leg, using the weight of her head to force him to the ground.

Vala roars in frustration and thrashes, kicking up sand and dirt before his elbow connects with the back of her head. Thankfully the blow's absorbed by her hood, but it knocks her off him enough for Vala to twist and catch her in an armbar. He gets control of her wrist and shoulders and starts raising his hips to snap her arm at the elbow, but she notices how he's holding her gauntlet rather than her bare wrist. Before his hips can fully extend, she leans to one side and tries to inch her elbow free, but she twists her paw and wrist in a way that causes his immense grip tension to snap back into his snout with a satisfying crunch. He cries out and goes to cover his muzzle, releasing the gauntlet and the control he had over her shoulder.

Silicia stands and jumps back, knees slightly bent and her open paws facing her opponent. "Stop this!" she calls to Vala. "Don't you see that the gods continue to trouble our people?"

Vala shoots up to stand before charging at her head-on. Right before he goes to tackle her, she sidesteps, clenches the fist still clad with her gauntlet, then cranks her arm up and gets him with a clean uppercut. His feet kick a semicircle of dust into the air before crashing on his back. His golden eyes are wide open and teary-eyed, his mouth agape as he tries to catch the breath forced out of his lungs on impact.

"Please, Vala," Silicia says between breaths, straightening her stance as she slowly lowers her fists. "I know you are hurting but fighting each other solves nothing." He lies in the dirt and winces at the air that now seems to cut into his lungs. As the desert's dust settles around him, he closes his eyes and grimaces before speaking.

"I cannot continue to *do* nothing," he admits. "Anele has chosen an ignominious god over her people – her *family!*" He roars. He stands again and turns to Silicia, but she doesn't flinch. Silicia looks past Vala and the Leonin that have gathered around them. She looks back to Vala,

his golden eyes filled with rage and urgency, searching for answers within Silicia's before seeing his piercing eyes look at the white patch of fur over her eye. He blinks, and his eyes change, not completely, but enough for Silicia to feel comfortable enough to clap her hand down onto his shoulder in comfort.

"As much as it pains me, Vala," she begins, "I cannot guarantee that the pride will find her."

To this, Vala's shoulders sag in defeat. Realistically, he knows it's the truth. The Elders walk slowly, the children wander too far sometimes, and running into any monsters will surely slow them down. But spiritually, he knows they will meet again someday. "But we have not tried to look—

"Nor can we right now." Silicia interrupts. "We know that the few who worship the gods no longer find peace within the pride." She looks to the crowd behind him and the bystanders surrounding their fighting area. Her eyes lock on her parents, her mother nods slowly, and Silicia returns it. "We both know Anele will never forgive herself if something happens to you on your search for her," she states. "But there are some things she's told me about the gods, and—

"I knew you were hiding things from me!" Vala roars, throwing Silicia's hand off his shoulder and stepping back. "You're the reason she's left. You didn't warn me when I could've protected her!"

"I am sorry, Vala. And for that, I will find her," Silicia states. The voices of her siblings erupt in protest from the crowd around them. "It is my burden to bear," She turns to say. "But I cannot withstand the suffering, my brothers, and sisters—

"Whad about' us?" asks the gentle voice of Unathi, the youngest at the tender age of two. Silicia looks down to see him tugging on her Slene. She crouches down to meet him at eye level, his crow-black fur has a white strip of fur that travels from between his brows to his now sniffing little nose.

"You will have the pride as you always have," Silicia assures as she cups his fuzzy cheek. "I beg, remember they have been here for you when the gods have not. Understood?" Silicia asks. "I will pummel you if I must hunt any of you down after my return," she says, turning from Unathi to meet the eyes of Thabo, Dingani, Bheka, Sipiwe, and Jama. They nod and watch Silicia stand, but before she turns back to Vala, Dingani hands her the gauntlet discarded in the fight. She smiles and scratches behind his gold-cuffed ear.

"I'll take my leave now," Silicia says to Vala, then walks straight into her parents' tight embrace. Her father, Dumisa, is the first to pull away so he can add runes from his bag to her

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purse, while her mother, Izula, continues to squeeze her torso. Silicia waits for her mother to pull away, who immediately pushes down her lion hood to expose her onyx black hair to the desert sun.

"You're a brilliant fighter," She claims, tenderly pushing the pads of her paws against Silicia's black cheeks. "But please look after yourself," her mother behests, her voice just above a whisper. Silicia grips her mother's paws in her own and pulls them from her face to kiss them gently. Then her father pulls her into another tight hug, his near-empty rune bag swaying stiffly in the gentle breeze. After they part, she walks away from those gathered around to go break down her tent.

With each step she takes, the seething hatred for the gods that's been passed down from her ancestors boils within her. She notices the weight and heated metal of her gauntlets as if reminding her of their own legacy. Silicia's promise to Vala melds into the pact with herself, her grandmother, those who wore the gauntlets before her, and the Leonin race. *First, I'll find Anele. Then, we'll destroy the Archons.*

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