

A hand holding a flaming torch against a dark background. The torch is lit, and the flame is bright yellow and orange. The hand is visible on the right side of the image, holding the handle of the torch. The background is dark and textured.

Lyrion

🌀 The Reckoning 🌀

TALIA REJES



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Lyrion

The Reckoning

First published by Talia Rejes Diaz 2020

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First edition

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I dedicate this book to the people I love

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Acknowledgement

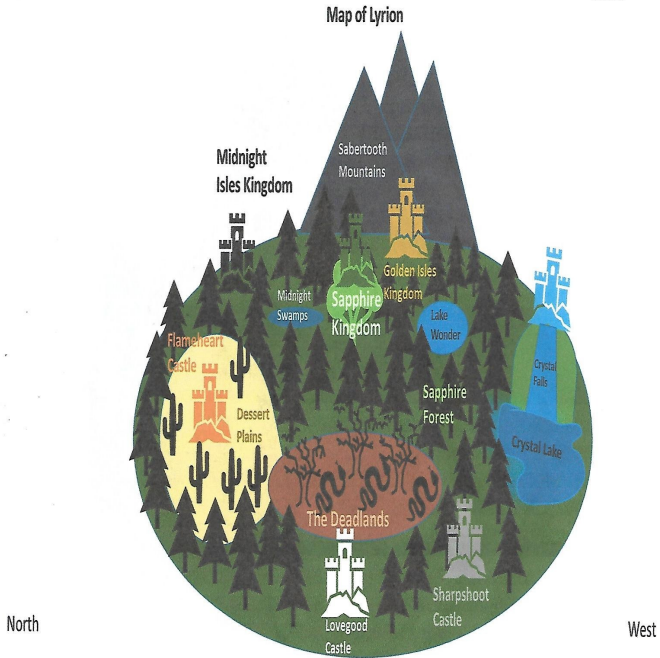
The act of writing this excerpt has been an amazing adventure and it would never have been made possible without the amazing support of everyone who has helped me improve this novel for the better. First, I'd like thank my christian faith in God and Jesus Christ for helping me break through the occasional writers block and get me to step out of my comfort zone in writing this book. As well as my friends and family for supporting me through the writing of this book. This includes both my parents, Pedro and Oneida, and especially my sister, Tatiana, who has never been afraid of giving me constructive criticism to make my drawings and writings even better than what they were. In fact, I would often call her, asking for her advice on any new images or important quotes that I wanted to include in this book. Also I'd like to thank all of my incredible friends because their fascinating ideas about character names and personalities have really given life to the characters in this book. Additionally, I'd like to thank my two amazing professors Dr. George and Dr. Chase for helping me make this project a reality. Dr. Chase has really helped me plan out my goals for this project and Dr. George has given me amazing proofreading commentary that gave my original drafts a splash of excitement. Last but never least, I'd like to thank all of my amazing readers for reading this excerpt and I hope this helps encourage any future writers to embark on their own creative journey! As a

result, the biggest advice that I have for future writers is that not even the author knows what is going to happen next until the words come pouring out into some form of meaning onto the page. Therefore, don't be afraid to include creative twists of your own to make your story truly unique to your writing style!

Map

East

South



Lineage

<i>Lovegood Castle</i>	<i>Golden Isle Kingdom</i>	<i>Sapphire Forest Kingdom</i>	<i>Sharpshoot Castle</i>	<i>Diamond Halls Kingdom</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • King: Zander Lovegood • Queen: Nora Lovegood • Villain: Derick Lovegood • Princess: Hazel Lovegood • Prince: Daniel Lovegood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Queen: Chrysalis Blade • King: David Blade • Prince: James Blade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • King: Fellar Roanoke • Queen: Emerald Roanoke • Princess: Arrow Roanoke 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Queen: Radiant Sharpshoot • King: Elizar Sharpshoot • Prince: Harold Sharpshoot 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • King: Drake Stone • Queen: Laura Stone • Princes: Angela Stone

- Other two kingdoms not yet in book

Prologue

He had been staring at the computer screen for so long that he was starting to fall asleep from boredom, but a sharp response from someone who was approaching from behind startled him back into reality. He quickly straightened his back trying his best to appear focused and driven. When he noticed who it was, his cheeks burned red from embarrassment and he hoped that he hadn't been caught sleeping on the job. General Day, of the United States army, loomed behind him in a position of parade rest while wearing her military uniform. She gazed over the green computer screen in front of him that repeatedly turned on and off as a white circle blinked constantly, emitting sonar signals into the sea in its search for any sign of land or creatures nearby.

“Any signs of the island yet private?” she speculated looking down with a scrutinizing gaze at the soldier engineering the computer.

She had indeed noticed the private sleeping on the job when she approached but she pretended not to notice. She wasn't in the mood for reprimanding or punishing anyone right now, her concerns were mostly elsewhere. However, she would be sure to reprimand him later for it, she never forgets anything.

“No ma'am, I'm afraid there is nothing here but water on all sides.” he replied coolly now that he thought he was off the hook.

Their ship had been drifting off in the middle of the Atlantic for weeks now looking for the mysterious island that had appeared right smack dab in the middle of these waters, only to mysteriously disappear the day after. Many would think this was just a strange coincidence or an illusion of some kind but that's just because many were unable to open their minds to the island's true nature.

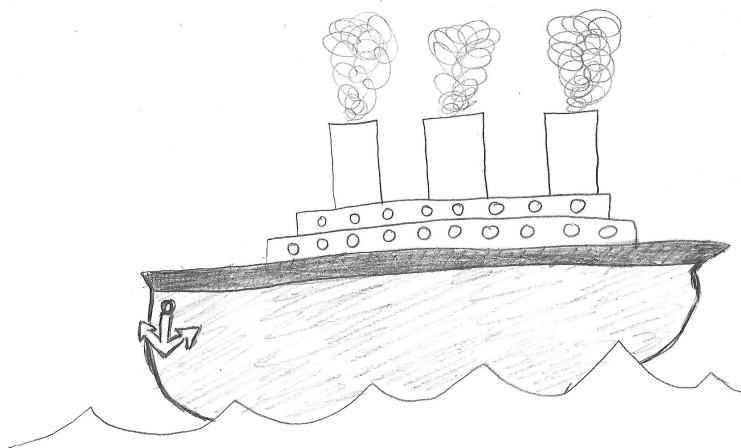
The general sighed, disgruntled at the news. How could an entire island disappear without a trace? They had recently spotted it weeks before and they had returned to their base to give a report to the government and make preparations to map and claim the land, but it had completely disappeared when they had come back to inspect it the following day. General Day knew there was something significant about this island, but it continued to remain a mystery to her as to why she felt it was so important.

"Maybe we were just imagining things before. I mean, when we discovered it, it didn't even show up on our radar." the private retorted. However, the general seemed unconvinced. She had seen that land with her own two eyes and had stepped foot on its sandy and rocky shores. It had been a very real experience but if it had been there before where could it have gone now?

"Just keep an eye out for any more signs of it. Besides, it's not like islands can just completely move positions in a day, we probably just miscalculated the coordinates. I will check back with the captain to try and pinpoint any possible regions from the calculations." The private nodded as she strolled over to the door of the hull headed for the captain's quarters.

Little did she know how close to the truth she had come. The island they had discovered was indeed a moving island and it

had remained a secret from the rest of the world until the fateful day of their discovery. The island itself defied the laws of nature with its lush vegetation that could yield incredible cures and poisons, technology and weaponry so advanced that it dwindled the advances of the Industrial Revolution, and a strange kind of people with unique skills and abilities that were ruled over by monarchs in grand medieval castles. It is a land so strange and mystical that you would expect to hear of it only in myths and fairytales. However, it has always existed within our modern society, keeping itself a secret from the rest of the world. Who then will be the ones to bridge the divide between these two worlds and bring peace to a war that could destroy them all?



True Beauty

The sun shone brightly against the early horizon. Its bright rays scattered throughout the land, tanning the skin of a beautiful young princess. She strolled gracefully across an elegant garden found only within Lovegood castle's own backyard. Her hair was a piercing black that stood out against the green of the trees. Her dress was an elegant array of white silk, smoothed down onto her body, and laced with golden latticework of swirls entwining together into figures of flowers. The garden stirred with life as the trees swayed against the playful wind, the grass tickled her bare ankles as she walked in fancy gemmed slippers across the thick vegetation, and the critters zipped away from her footsteps as if they were playing a thrilling game of tag with each other.

The princess, who was widely known as the princess of Lovegood castle, was particularly interested in a pair of black ravens that were perched on top of a looming tree branch, the branches extended out towards the horizon like menacing claws trying to touch the sky. The birds chirped cheerily at her as she glanced up at them, but then they began squawking in distress

when they noticed someone new approaching from a distance. She urgently ushered them into silence, fearing that they might alert the stranger of her location. She looked back, fearing that her servant, Aida, might have heard them. If she found her strolling outside wearing such a fine dress on the day of the signing, Aida would surely have a heart attack.

The signing only happened once every decade and it was a very traditional formal event. Her father, the king, had managed to convince the other royals to host it at her castle, which didn't require much convincing because her father was rather well liked amongst the other royals. He had spent most of his life helping to innovate the castles of Lyrion with technologies, security cameras, air conditioning, bullet proof armor, and advanced weaponry in the use of guns, swords, shields, and bows. He even managed to employ pollution friendly technologies with the help of the royals that lived in the Sapphire Forest. The treaty, of course, covered the most basic peace guidelines such as no more war, no more battles, just peace for as long as that ruler lived. Princess Hazel would finally get to witness her first signing on this day. However, she had no intention of staying cooped up in a room for hours waiting for all the rulers to talk about dreary politics until they finally decided to sign it, it always ended up giving her a massive headache anyway.

Instead she was waiting for someone special to arrive so that he could be her accomplice on her mission to avoid entering the signing room. Clearly, she wanted to take him with her on another one of her insane adventures. She smirked quietly to herself as she thought of how their last adventure into the Sapphire Forest ended up leading them straight towards a wolf pack that nearly killed them had they not accidentally fallen into

a nearby stream. The fact that they were wet made it really hard to come up with an accurate excuse for their parents when they came home, but they managed to pass it off as an accident with the hose in the garden. She wondered what today's adventure would bring as she giggled mischievously to herself. However, her smirk soon faded into a grunt when she heard her servant, Aida, approaching.

Aida must have finally found her amongst the crazy twists and turns of trees in the castle gardens. However, to be honest, she considered her more of a friend than a servant. The birds flew off in a frenzy of feathers as Aida's rushing footsteps came echoing from behind her. Hazel maintained her attention on the raven's graceful flight to avoid the argument that she knew would immediately arise between them.



“Princess! For the last time. Must I continue to remind you

how filthy you can get when you're outside surrounded by all this...this...nature! Honestly, why do you continue to make my life more difficult?" Aida screeched at Hazel, panting from the run she had to take to get there. Hazel only smiled up at her in amusement.

"Forgive me, Aida, I only wanted some fresh air." She replied coolly as her voice took on a tone of silky resonance.

"Oh rattlers! Look at your dress. You have smeared it with dust and dirt and now it's covered in fallen maple leaves." Hazel rolled her eyes at her remark about Rattlers, the most poisonous and feared snake in Lyrion. She knew that her appearance couldn't possibly be as bad as the stories she had heard concerning the snake's venom. In fact, there was no actual known cure for it.

"Your parents won't just fire me if you make an appearance like that in front of all the royal guests during the signing. They'll cut off my head for letting you loose within the gardens with a white dress on! Have you any idea how easily white silk gets ruined?" Hazel grunted in annoyance. There goes the exaggeration again. There's no way her parents would ever behead anyone.

"Of course, I know. I may be young, but I'm not stupid."

"Then you should also know that it is your duty as a princess to look presentable for your guests. Especially on this once in a lifetime opportunity. In fact, your father's reputation depends on it!" Hazel scoffed at her remark. Her blood was beginning to boil in annoyance.

"If my dad had been worried about his reputation, then he wouldn't be the king he is today. So, if being covered in what you call nature is what it takes to prove that a princess's job isn't just about waltzing around looking pretty, then I'm sure our

royal guests would understand if I make an appearance looking a bit unkempt.”

“You mustn’t go looking like that! They might think you mean to offend them.”

Hazel raised her chin up in defiance and the servant prepared herself for the cutting remark that would follow.

“If they happen to take offense, then I shall express my motives to them. After all, a princess may have values to live by but she must also stay true to herself. Besides, I’m not afraid to speak my mind.”

Aida struggled to find words to argue her case but, to her frustration, all she could manage to do was make an agitated grunt as the sound of the welcoming horns went off with a loud honk in the distance. This meant that the first royals had already arrived and were waiting by the castle entrance. Hazel gathered her bearings with a new boost of confidence, and she twirled around, strutting down the path to greet the newcomers. Aida just watched in shocked disbelief as Hazel’s dress danced in the wind, whipping the dirt streaked satin against the rustling leaves.

Trouble

The royal carriage thudded lightly against loose cobblestones that were scattered across the pavement. The constant pounding of the horse's hooves entranced a young prince into a dreamlike state. He wore a regal black suit with golden buttons lined with golden loops around his broad shoulders. His dirty brown hair was cropped short and his eyes were in a daze. The sound of the horse's hooves rapidly began to slow until the coachman finally stopped beside a massive castle. The castle was probably as big as his own. The young prince, James, jerked awake and quickly shuffled in his seat.

James slowly rose and rushed outside with his parents. The sun shone ruthlessly bright and there were no clouds to provide them any cover from its burning light. However, he didn't mind. He was just grateful to be able to smell the fresh air once again and to feel the smooth rustling blades of grass beneath his shoes. After all they had been cooped up in that carriage for hours! He searched his surroundings, entranced by the beauty of it all. The castle loomed high above him with its gray pillars. There was a watch tower at the very top and right in front of

him there stood a huge arc. It was big enough to fit two fully grown dragons inside, that is if the fairy tales were true about their existence. As he admired the architecture, a voice in the distance caught his attention.

“James!” screeched a young princess who was running towards him. He smirked knowing precisely who it was. Princess Hazel stood before him in a royal mess. He smiled out of courtesy but his eyes betrayed hints of humor behind them. A humor that she could read as plain as daylight.

“Like my new look?” She said flaunting her dress at him and his parents. James’s mother burst out in a current of giggles at her remark.

“I should have expected no less from you, Princess. It seems your father was right in informing us that you are quite a creative one.” Hazel beamed with joy when the queen mentioned her dad. She curtsied before the queen and the queen repeated the gesture.

“Dare I ask what you are up to this time, Princess?” James’s father asked her. Hazel looked up at him giving him one of her innocent smiles. However, her eyes twinkled with a few hints of mischief.

“I’ve only come to greet my most honored guests and to show James around the premises before the signing begins.” His parents smiled down at her in disbelief.

“Carry on then. If you are going to go adventuring you might as well go now before someone drags you both back into the castle premises. James has very little patience for long meetings such as this one anyways. I guess a little adventure would do him some good. Besides you two are only seven years old. Go out and have some fun while you still can.” James glared at his mother; he wasn’t impatient he thought accusingly. His mother

smiled down at him communicating in silence how strongly she disagreed.

“Will do Mr. And Mrs. Blade.” Hazel squealed, curtsying once more. She leaped up from the curtsy and lunged straight at James. She grabbed his wrist and dragged him towards what looked like a beautiful mosaic garden with the forest looming right beside it. Once she saw that his parents had both gone inside she swiftly changed directions, swinging wildly to the right towards the forest side. James knew that going into the forest was a terrible idea. Even though they’d gone into it before, he still had nightmares from the last time they went in. In fact, he still had a slight scar on his ankle, that he had received last time they went from the claws of a wolf. Back then, they barely made it out alive. James pulled back, holding his ground at the forest’s edge. There was no way he was ever going back in there!

“What’s wrong Jay?” Hazel knew exactly what he was thinking but she asked the question anyways, pretending to be clueless to his sudden hesitation.

“Maybe we should return to your castle and clean ourselves up. My suit is covered in mud from our journey here, and we both know that the forest is dangerous.”

“Well that didn’t stop us from going in last time, did it?” She smirked up at him with her carefree smile.

“Yeah and it almost got us killed!” He grumbled, agitated at her. Hazel knew of only one thing that could convince him to go. She had to challenge him. Boys never could resist a challenge.

“So, then you’re too chicken to go?” She scolded.

“What? No way! That’s not what I..”

“Then I dare you to go!” Hazel’s heart cheered in triumph.

Her challenge had been cast. Now she held her breath for the response.

“Fine! Then I’ll go. You’re going to go whether I go with or without you anyways.”

“Then I give you the honor of going in first.” He rolled his eyes at her remark and stepped into the forest. She followed him, then ran past him calling out from behind her.

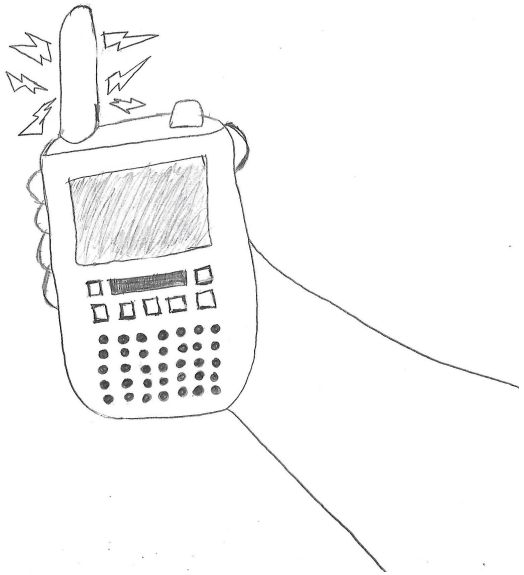
“You’ll never catch me, slow poke!”

James laughed at her. He knew all too well that he could catch her within seconds with that long dress of hers slowing her down, but he followed her tail, keeping his distance from her as if to make her believe she was winning. The wind whipped past them as they ran, and dust flew up with every footstep. However, they weren’t alone. One lone soldier stood watching them, hidden behind the trunk of a huge willow tree. He gathered his weapons and sent a message to his commander. The soldier was wearing a red uniform, which was the color of Derick’s army, and Derick was an enemy and traitor to all of the rulers of Lyrion.

LYRION



The Corporal



The walkie talkie buzzed with life as the commander of the troops walked by the soldiers standing before him. They were hidden behind a crowded tree canopy and

the soldiers stood stiffly as if communicating to him that they were quite impatient to leave such a cramped space.

“Corporal, sir! We have a minor problem.” The red armored soldier, who was hidden behind the beautiful willow tree claimed, speaking into the walkie talkie once the children were out of sight.

“You dare interrupt me over a minor problem, soldier?” The corporal threatened. He didn’t take kindly to interruptions.

“Sir, I have reason to believe that two of the royals’ kids snuck into the forest near our fort. How would you have me handle the situation?” The soldier, who was named Sergeant Corbin, continued blatantly ignoring the empty threat from the corporal.

“You know the answer to that question soldier.” The corporal’s voice seemed to growl with each passing word.

“But I have reason to believe that the girl is King Lovegood’s daughter and the boy seems to be from the eastern region. Their parents have been our greatest threat yet. If we capture the children, we could gain an upper advantage during our attack on the castle.”

“You shall stick to the plan, soldier! You know the rules. Derick has ordered us all to kill on sight.”

“But...”

“You dare question his judgment!” He hollered into the walkie talkie.

“No, of course not, sir.”

“Then I shall see to it personally that you get the job done.”

The walkie talkie went silent. The corporal faced his troops and as he stood before them, yelling his orders at his men. They stood confidently and walked behind the corporal once his orders were given. They made their way towards the giant

THE CORPORAL

willow tree with silent footsteps as the soldier with the walkie talkie stood waiting for them with a bow and arrow in his hands.

Ambush

James was barely a breath away from her now. He could almost smell the scent of the rose perfume on her satin dress. Hazel was gasping already out of breath from the chase but unwilling to give up. He decided to end the chase then and there by reaching out to touch the smooth silk of her dress. The moment his hand made contact with the fabric, she came to a sudden halt having been defeated but seemingly unfazed or despaired to have lost. After all, she was growing tired of tripping over her long dress despite her efforts to lift it off the ground as she ran. Although she agreed dresses were rather nice to wear, they served little purpose in any form of athletic activity. Part of her wished that someone would invent a dress that could be utilized for running, but of course everyone turned the idea down, claiming that it wasn't the proper way of doing things. Well she was getting rather fed up with being proper but despite her dislike she knew that being a princess made it nearly impossible to escape it. Instead, she relished this moment of fun with a wide grin upon her face that radiated her joy and excitement with each labored breath.

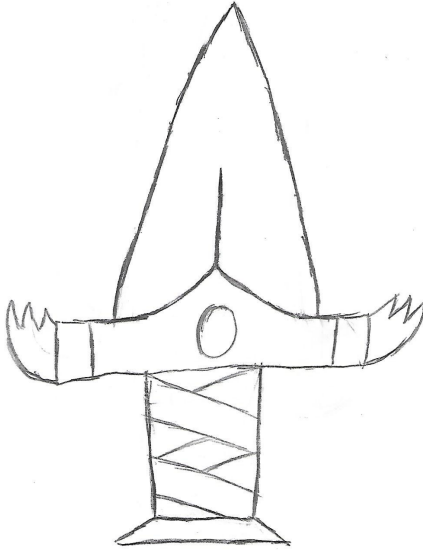
They both laughed loudly allowing their voices to echo throughout the forest canopy. There was no one there that could tell them that they couldn't run, laugh or not do anything fun, and they both relished it because being royal doesn't leave much room for any type of behavior other than etiquette. The moment, however, was short lived when they heard the snapping of a nearby twig. They both froze in silence. They slowly turned their heads towards the source of the noise.

James actually saw it first or rather, he saw her first. She must have been around their age with light blond hair that seemed tousled with various loose tangles, and she had white skin that had a reddish tan, which was rare compared to the typical brown tan James usually saw on people. Her eyes searched them curiously with a few hints of intrigue within them. There was a long moment of silence, but it was quickly shattered by the rushing sound of an arrow piercing the air right in front of James and Hazel. The mysterious girl disappeared in a flash as if she were never there to begin with and the kids found themselves surrounded by an entire troop of red uniformed men. Hazel shrieked in surprise and turned pale when she realized whom had ambushed them. James grabbed her wrist and pulled her behind him, doing his best to keep her away from their attackers. One of the men smirked wickedly at them, possibly the leader, but he was already ordering the troops to kill them and that was all the warning James needed to react.

James pulled out his small dagger from around his belt, a birthday present he got for his sixth birthday, and hurled it at the soldier in front of him. The soldier dodged just in time before the dagger pierced his armor, but at least the knife had served its purpose. It had caused the soldier to create an opening within the circle of soldiers, but they didn't wait for them to

react as he and Hazel dashed towards the opening right as the soldiers began to reassemble their circle. They managed to get away, but the troop of soldiers started chasing after them with a vigorous resolve. James and Hazel were both running faster than they had been during their race as a surge of adrenaline rushed through their veins. However, their legs were far smaller than the fully-grown adult soldiers and it didn't take long before they were surrounded once more.

AMBUSH



Hazel heaved a much-needed breath of air as she tumbled to the ground after tripping over her own dress, running in dresses was such a pain! The soldiers laughed and pointed their arrow shafts right at her with the intention to kill, but James pulled her out of the way just in time. She barely avoided being skewered by a volley of arrows that came crashing down where she had

fallen moments before. The men seemed aggravated to have wasted so many arrows and now they unsheathed their swords and juted them out towards James's chest. James held his breath waiting for the worst but luckily, at that moment something incredible happened.

The Arrow

A young girl named Arrow stood timidly awaiting her parents behind a giant tree trunk within the comforts of the forest canopy. Her mother was Queen Emerald and her father was King Faller, and they ruled over the entire forest region of Lyrion. However, right now she was bored out of her mind as stood all by herself in the forest, she wished she were back home in her tree hut deep within the depths of the giant forest. Lulu her wolf companion snuggled her snout into her hands sensing her troubled nerves. Arrow smiled down at her remembering the first day they had met. Arrow had saved her from being eaten by a giant tiger that had scared off her pack and they had been inseparable ever since. Although, as she thought to herself, chuckling lightly at the thought. She had accidentally saved Lulu's life by tripping over her own two feet and sending an arrow shooting past the tiger. The tiger had merely dashed off in distress. However, her tribe considered this a wonderful feat and they had rewarded her with the tribal name, Arrow. It was quite a big deal that she had managed to earn a tribal name at such a young age. She was only five at the

time and she chuckled lightly as she realized that it has only been a year since she and Lulu had been together.



These days it seemed that Lulu saved her life more often than she liked to admit. She laid back against a nearby tree trunk, enjoying the peaceful silence of the forest. Well, what one

could call silence if you didn't count the noises of the forest creatures. However, to her those sounds were music to her ears because she had grown up in the forest all her life. Therefore, she relished all its sweet callings. She focused her gaze on the immensely green trees around her. The trees in the Sapphire forest ranged in all shapes and sizes, some were small others were taller than a castle, but her favorite tree was the willow tree. The Sapphire forest of course had every kind of tree imaginable, clearly the most common ones were the Sapphire trees that the forest was named after, but there were a mix of other trees as well. There were willow trees, pine trees, fruit trees, etc., but they weren't always easy to find if you didn't know where to look. Arrow of course knew where to look, and she easily found a willow tree under the forest canopy. She stared at it trying to fall asleep to its rhythmic sounds of ruffling leaves, chattering squirrels, and melodic birds skittering about its beauty. She had nearly fallen asleep, but the noise of multiple rushing footsteps woke her up in a jolt.

Arrow peeked out from behind the tree trunk and found that there were two kids laughing and exhausted from what seemed to be a game of tag. Their clothes revealed that they must have been kids from one of the royal families that had come for the gathering, just like she had. She wondered which castle they were from and what in the world were they doing in the forest? Out of pure curiosity and because she had nothing better to do with her time, she silently stepped out into the open to get a closer look at them. Unfortunately, Lulu hadn't yet mastered the skill of stealth, and she snapped a nearby twig on the forest floor. Arrow froze as the kids became silent and looked straight at her. Her cheeks blushed red from having been caught, and there was a long moment of awkward silence between them.

However, from the corner of her eye she saw the pointed arrow of a drawn bow, and she scurried behind the giant tree trunk right as the arrow zipped past the two kids. She held her breath, hoping she hadn't been spotted by the archer. Thankfully, she hadn't. However, the kids weren't so lucky.

Arrow watched the two children, in shock as they were ambushed by a troop of red soldiers. She witnessed how they had managed to bravely run away from the troops, but she knew that their victory would be short lived. The soldiers out skilled them in every way and they certainly weren't dressed for battle. So Arrow dashed over to where she had laid her tiny wooden bow and arrows adorned with peacock feathers (her favorite kind of feathers) and she ran after them, making sure to stay hidden behind the safety of the looming tree trunks. Once she found them again her heart skipped a beat as she saw that they were being held at sword point. They both stood bravely, ignoring the pointed swords aimed right at their chests. Arrow trembled knowing that what she was going to do next could put her own life in jeopardy, but all she cared about at that point was helping them. Besides, she refused to just stand around and do nothing as innocent blood was being shed. She gulped in a deep breath and pulled her bowstring back up to her cheek. She was using a recurve bow that she had made herself using willow tree bark and the mane of a horse's hair. The peacock feathers from the arrow brushed lightly against her cheek as she pointed her bow right at the head of the nearest soldier.

She quickly flickered her gaze down at Lulu and whispered, "Attack!"

Lulu obeyed, lunging herself at the guards' legs, managing to distract them and take their attention away from the kids.

"Good" she whispered, bringing her gaze back on her target,

she hoped that Lulu would remain cautious around the soldiers weapons.

As she had suspected, the closest soldier hadn't moved from the sudden distraction and still held his clenched sword now at the boy's throat. That was when Arrow let go of the bowstring and let her arrow fly. She watched it miraculously hit its mark and she cheered to herself after having accomplished such a difficult shot. The arrow streaked across the soldier's face and managed to slash a very unpleasant scar across his eye. The soldier screeched in a yelp of pain as he put up a hand to his now bloody face. He dropped his sword as he did this, leaving a giant opening for the kids to escape.

The children seemed aghast and surprised by the sudden miracle, but after their shock they took that momentary distraction to run for their lives. They ran straight towards Lovegood castle and Arrow followed from close behind yelling, "Retreat!"

This word meant that Lulu should hide and get away from the bad soldiers. Lulu did as she was asked and Arrow sighed in relief as the wolf disappeared from view. She ran faster now with a new purpose in mind. She had to warn her parents about the upcoming attack, and it seemed that these kids had the same goal in mind.

Meet the Villain

Hidden within the forest canopy, Derick and his army were preparing for an invasion. Derick was wearing a red uniform that was a brighter red than any of the other uniforms his soldiers wore, and his uniform was specifically adorned with gold filigree. The gold gave off a glow of its own within the darkness of the woods and shined brightly in the sun, giving off the illusion of power.

Derick was a man who enjoyed showing off his power through the clothes he wore and the battles he won. His skin was tan from years of sun exposure and his hair was black and cropped short across his forehead. His eyes were a dreary hazel color that occasionally appeared blood red in the lighting of the sun, this only served to make him more intimidating. He was a very tall and foreboding man. He was the kind of guy who would carry through with something no matter the cost. Derick stepped out of the forest foliage that was covering him and his army as he took his first peek of Lovegood castle. There was once a time that he thought he would never return to this cursed place, not just because he had been banished from ever

stepping foot on those grounds again, but because he knew that it would stir a flood of unwelcome memories from the tragic day that he had lost his only child. He clenched his hands into tight fists at his sides turning them white from the tension, one of them was clutching tightly to the sword scabbard at his waist.

Upon seeing the castle, the memories crashed into him like an unexpected tidal wave, leaving him completely senseless and unaware of his surroundings. For the slightest of moments, he was tempted to cry as he stared at the rough cemented castle walls and the smooth marbled sculptures of gargoyles looming ahead, this was the place that he had grown up in. However, despite the brief moment of hesitation, he had prepared himself to face his past and he refused to let it prevent him from taking what he rightfully deserved. He pulled the sword from out of its scabbard, pointing it straight towards the castle looming ahead. This was the signal for his soldiers to advance.

There was a loud rumbling sound as metal met earth through the rumbling of thousands of soldier's footsteps. Each soldier was as determined as the next to win this war. For Derick had spent years gathering up traitors, rebels, and outcasts from the seven castle regions of Lyrion in order to unite them and defeat their common enemy: the royals. They of course had not been too keen on him becoming their leader because he was brother to the King of Lovegood castle. However, after besting anyone who had the guts to challenge him in a fight, it didn't take long for them to accept him as the powerful leader he was.

Once they had established him as their leader, he had used them to cause trouble and chaos throughout the castles of Lyrion. In fact, their most recent attack had been against the rulers residing in the Sapphire Forest. A few months ago he had managed to sneak a small elite group of scouts into their main

village where their castle, or in their case their treehouse, was burnt down and their entire village was set aflame. Although the royals and their subjects had been able to put out the fire quickly with the use of Soofi liquid, they had been forced to relocate their village and close it off to visitors from the other kingdoms. Of course, Derick knew that Soofi liquid could be used to quench any flame and that it could be gathered from the sap of the Sapphire trees within the Sapphire forest, but his main purpose was to create chaos amongst them not to destroy the forest. Therefore, it was on that day when they had decided on their official combat uniform color, red, representing the burning destruction that they left in their wake. Of course, red wasn't an easy color to hide. This meant that it would be more difficult for them to sneak up on their enemies, but Derick was never too keen on sneaking around anyways, and his tactics mainly included the use of grand entrances. It was these small but vicious victories that had made his name a rather popular subject amongst royals and rebels alike.

Derick was feared on both sides. The royals feared that their castles would fall into the hands of a dictator. The rebels didn't dare anger him for fear of serious punishment or death, and that was exactly how Derick wanted things to be. He would do whatever it took to seek vengeance for his daughter's death, even if it meant becoming the thing, he never thought he'd become, a monster. He smiled to himself knowing that this would be his biggest and most powerful invasion yet. For if this invasion succeeded then he would gain ultimate control of all the kingdoms of Lyrion in one fell swoop. For each king and queen was gathered here today for the signing and now because of his army they were surrounded with nowhere else to go.

“Commander gather up the troops and lead them in a battle

formation against the castle's front and rear gates. Don't stop to report to me until your troops have reached the interior castle premises. Rhyme bender, you are coming with me" Derick declared to the rhyme bender and general who had stayed behind awaiting his orders. Even as he spoke, the other foot soldiers were ahead of them, cheering with loud battle cries in their fight against the castle guards.

The rhyme bender crept up behind him with a black rattler snake coiled around his neck, the snake bobbed it's head up and down as if searching for its next victim. Rhyme benders were a group of ancient fighting soldiers who could use flute music to control a viper snake's movements as a weapon in battle. Currently, they were very rare and had nearly gone extinct because they had been hunted down and their scrolls had been destroyed, due to everyone's fear of the death and destruction that followed their teachings. However, Derick had been fortunate enough to find one who had been in hiding for many years, although he had to admit finding him was a rather dangerous and difficult task. Especially since everyone knew that looking for a rhyme bender was basically signing yourself up for a death wish, but Derick didn't care because he no longer had anything left to lose.



“Where are we going, sire?” The rhyme bender asked in a raspy and eerie voice that sent shivers down Derick’s spine every time he heard it. The rhyme bender wore a black cloak with a hood covering his face, making it appear as if he were the Grim reaper himself standing before Derick in the flesh.

“Why to the signing, of course! Me and my brother have some

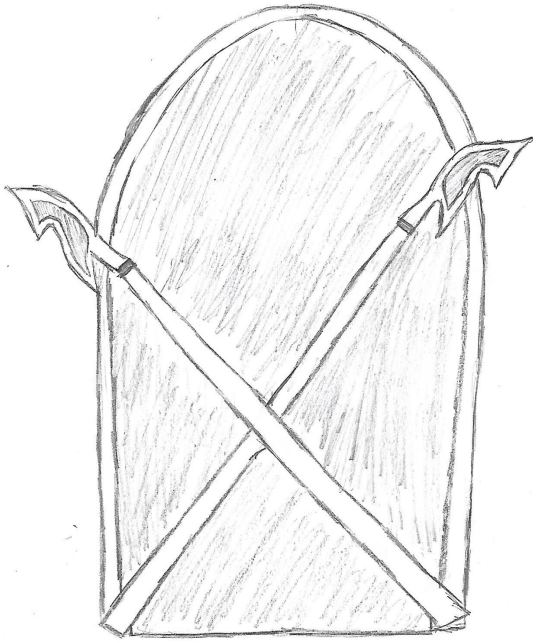
unfinished business to take care of," Derick declared with a look of pure resolve.

They made their way slowly towards the castle as the battle unfolded around them. Derick relished every moment of their victory in his wake towards the room of the signing to kill his own brother. Although, a part of him didn't really want to kill his brother, he knew that he didn't have a choice. He would do anything for his daughter, even if it meant taking his own brother's life. For when it came down to delivering the final blow, he knew he wouldn't hesitate.

Mystery Girl

Hazel ran faster than she ever had in her entire life. Ever since the first incident in the forest she had decided to keep their little adventures to herself, and James had agreed that the less their parents knew the better. However, this was one adventure that she couldn't keep secret. It was time to confess, and that's why she didn't sneak into the castle this time. There was no time for sneaking, no time to even change her clothes as she rushed down the hallway with James right beside her and the mysterious girl following them from close behind. Who was she? She couldn't help but ask herself now that her mind was finally able to process everything that happened at the forest. It had all gone by so fast! Also, how had the mysterious girl even been able to get into the castle with the guards stationed outside? She quickly pushed her thoughts aside, focusing once more on what needed to be done. Whoever that girl was, it didn't matter. All that mattered now was that she had saved their lives, and Hazel was eternally grateful to her for that. As the doors to the meeting room loomed overhead, she sprinted even faster, gaining speed with each new footstep.

She hoped that she would have enough time to warn her family about the incoming invasion before the soldiers decided to attack! However, the guards stationed by the door blocked the door with their spears interlocked in an X formation right in front of her. Hazel almost screamed in aggravation. There was no time for this right now.



“Let us in, gentleman.” She almost screamed. The guards, unfazed by her placid tone of voice, continued to block the door.

“Forgive us, princess, but we can’t allow you to enter the room while the signing is in session.”

Hazel wanted to shout at them now, her blood was already

boiling with impatience. This was a feeling she wasn't used to having, but she knew she didn't like it one bit. James seemed to sense her annoyance with each passing word, and he decided to try to reason with them instead.

"Gentleman, this is a matter of utmost importance. If you don't let us in a lot of innocent people could die!" He did his best not to seem rushed or too demanding. After all, these weren't his guards and he wasn't in his castle. James did his best to maintain his composure, although it was a difficult task considering the circumstances.

"This meeting is nothing to joke about, kid. If there is something you need to say, then you can wait until the signing has ended." The guard said sternly.

It was clear that he thought that they were just up to their childish antics again. It also didn't help that they all looked messy and unkempt.

"Glimmer," The mysterious girl spoke up.

The guards froze in place. Something about that word meant something to the soldiers but what did it mean?

"Forgive me but what did you say?" The guard asked skeptically.

"I said *glimmer*. I'm sure my mom, Queen Emerald, has mentioned that if anyone comes in here and mentions that word to you, then you were to take it as a matter of extreme emergency," the mysterious girl replied confidently. Hazel gasped at the mention of the girl's mother. She must be the forest princess her parents had been telling her about. James was shocked, too. Apparently, he had just come to the same conclusion she had.

"Of course,... princess... you may all enter, but this better be important!" The guards opened the giant double-sided doors

in hesitation. They gave the kids a skeptical side glance as they signaled for them to enter the room.

“Trust me, we will!” Hazel replied rushing in as the doors were pulled wide open. She began searching the room wildly for her parents. However, when she realized that every queen and king from Lyrion was in that room staring right at them, she momentarily froze in embarrassment. Even some of the royal children who had decided to stay and witness the signing looked up at her, but she didn’t have time to worry about that now. Hazel shook herself out of her daze and continued to scrutinize the room. She needed to find her parents, she just had to! That was when her gaze fell upon the far corner of the room where her parents were staring at her in shocked disbelief. She beamed with joy as she raced straight towards them, embracing them in a huge hug.

Hazel’s parents were slow to respond, but eventually they embraced her too. However, the hug didn’t last long because her parents pulled quickly away from the hug with frustrated expressions on their faces. They weren’t at all happy about the interruption. Hazel didn’t blame them; she was causing a scene during the middle of the signing after all. She gulped in hesitation, in her rush to get there she had imagined it’d be a lot easier to confess to them the truth about everything but now she was terrified. Suddenly all the people in the room made her feel uncomfortably nervous. She opened her mouth to speak but her mind went blank, and her empty thoughts were slowly replaced with panicked ones. Why couldn’t she remember? That was when she looked at Arrow and James and she suddenly realized the urgency of their situation. It was more than just confessing; this was about keeping the people she cared about safe. She looked at Arrow who was fidgeting

nervously with her bow and James who, although was good at hiding his emotions, had eyes that betrayed his own fear. Seeing them was all it took for her memories to come rushing back to her. She turned towards her parents once more. They were furiously waiting for her response and she sighed at their disappointment, but this was no time to apologize. She needed to explain to them what had happened before it was too late.

"I...I have a...confession to make," the princess told her parents, mumbling over her own words. She didn't dare look up at them. She didn't want to see the disappointed expressions on their faces again.

"Me and James snuck out into the forest like we've always done..." There were gasps in the room as she said this, but she ignored them. She held her head high as she looked her parents straight in the eye. There was no turning back now.

She risked a second's glance at James. He was fumbling nervously with his dagger belt in an effort to distract himself from his parents scrutinizing gaze. Well at least she wasn't the only one feeling this way.

"While we were in there, we were ambushed by Derick's soldiers. They were about to kill us, but we were able to escape thanks to her." Hazel pointed at the mysterious girl from the forest.

The girl turned red from embarrassment after being put on the spot. Then out of the corner of her eye she watched a few of the queens grab their fans and begin to fan themselves frantically. Arrow shuffled her feet, uncomfortable with the fact that everyone was staring at her in awe. Hmmm...She must be shy, Angela thought to herself.

"We have reason to believe that they're planning to attack us and put an end to the signing!" Hazel finally blurted out. This

got everyone in the room chattering hysterically, and many people were already rising up out of their seats. Hazel stood paralyzed in front of her parents, awaiting her punishment. She no longer felt confident with resolve as she had felt during the beginning of her confession. Why does guilt always make you feel worse after doing the right thing? However, her parents did something she hadn't expected them to do. Her mother, Queen Nora, knelt down and hugged her tightly and her father, King Drake, put his palm on her shoulder as he addressed the rest of the royals.

"This is all the more reason to finish the signing. We must stand united as one to face the threat looming before us. I will have my servants gather your children and send them home immediately. Each of them will have one of my most talented soldiers to protect them."

The royals seemed reluctant to send their children away. They grabbed on tighter to the children already in the room. Many of them looked outside thinking about those who were currently playing outdoors. The king noticed this, so he continued.

"This is our best option if we plan on getting out of here alive. We must not waste time. This signing is more than just a compromise. It's an establishment of peace that Derick hopes to destroy. For long ago, our lands were once divided, and we were constantly at war with each other. However, seven people from each of the seven kingdoms were devastated by the destruction and chose to leave their homes, seeking peace. That was when they met each other and became friends, and it was their friendship that led them to create the first Signing to unite Lyrion in an era of peace. Therefore, if we don't make peace with each other now, our children will grow up divided and in constant warfare just as our ancestors before us."

An army messenger's footsteps pounded down the hall as he was speaking but the king already knew that Derick's army had begun their attack. He could hear the clashes of swords in the distance and the battle cries told him that his defenses wouldn't last much longer.

"Where will they go?" Queen Emerald replied, her voice gave a hint of authority and passion.

At this the king wasn't sure how to answer. He knew that there wouldn't be enough time to take them back the way they came. There was an awkward silence as they awaited his response. He cleared his throat about to speak when Hazel cut him off.

"We know a place!" She said staring right at James as she said this.

He looked back at her confused. What was she talking about? But then he remembered one of their previous adventures and her plan suddenly dawned upon him as hope lit up his eyes.

"One day during one of our occasional adventures, we stumbled upon a secret tunnel within this castle. It leads out into a beautiful meadow which is concealed from view through the forest side. We have followed the path and figured out that it branches off towards all of the palaces in Lyrion. One travels west into the Sapphire Forest and another travels as far as the Golden Palace which is far south from here. It's a long walk for some but the paths all lead straight home. We like to sneak in there every now and then when we find that we have a lot of free time on our hands."

James turned red as he realized that his parents were furiously staring straight at him. His mother had that, so this is what you do in your *spare* time face, and he knew he would never get the liberty to do anything on his own from that point on.

He would surely be grounded for life for something like this. However, as he looked around the room, he could see rays of hope in everyone's faces. They believed her, and he couldn't help but hope that they all might just make it out of this alive. All the parents began to nod their heads in agreement to the plan. He could tell that Hazel was bursting with excitement.

The king took Hazel with him to go to the control room, while the queen remained in the room to handle the signing while they were gone. They had to get access to the speakers to alert everyone where they needed to go, but James knew that wouldn't be enough. As they left, James realized that the kids would need a guide and he was the only other person who knew where to go, other than Hazel of course. He dared take a quick glance at his parents, they were making their way towards him right now, getting angrier with every step. He had to get away from there. So, he did the first thing that came into his mind.

"Hey, follow me I know where to go!" He yelled at the kids as he burst out the door.

He looked back and saw that most of them had hesitated at first but then they followed him at a fast jog like bees after honey. He sighed deeply relieved that his idea had worked and as he turned the corner, he saw his parents looks of disappointment. His heart almost shattered into pieces at the sight. He deeply wanted to go down there to apologize and explain everything, but there wasn't any time for everything. It was already too late to turn back now.

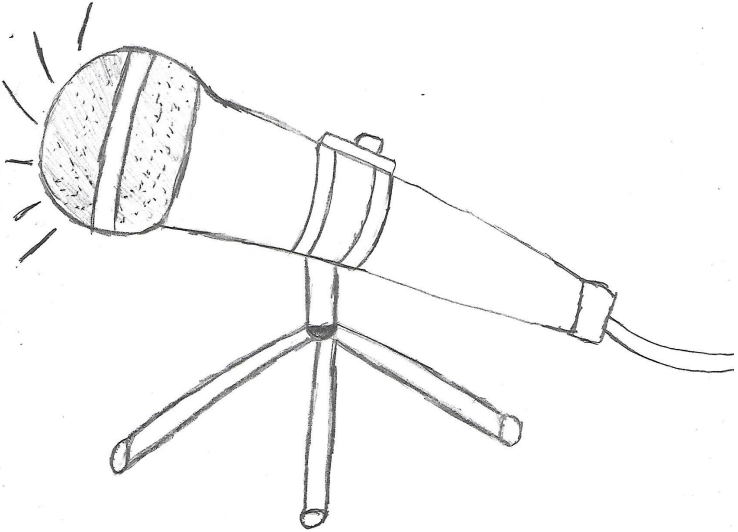
Tiny Room

The control room was smaller than Hazel had expected. The wires and computers covered up most of the space in the tiny room that was barely bigger than her bathroom. Well, in the room's defense, her bathroom probably had the capacity to fit an entire elephant inside of it. However, it was still the smallest room she had ever witnessed until that point. The crowded space made her feel almost uncomfortable, even though there was still plenty of room for her to move around.

"Turn on every speaker in the castle. My daughter has an urgent message to deliver!" Hazel's dad cried out to the only two workers in the room.

They were sitting on Rolly chairs typing feverishly into the computer. As they typed on the keyboard, they pulled up the speaker transmission signals and grabbed a hand-held speaker within a matter of seconds. They handed it to Hazel and she grabbed it awkwardly. She had never used a microphone before. The green light beside the speaker's cable glowed bright, signaling that she was live. She took a deep breath and focused

on sounding calm but regal.



“Warning! Everyone must make their way inside Lovegood castle immediately. Go to the east side of the castle premises. We are under attack! I repeat to the east side of the castle premises. That’s the upper right corner. The upper right

corner!”

When she had finished her speech, she nodded at the two workers who swiveled around in their chairs. They continued to work their magic into the giant computer screen as they rerouted the message to repeatedly broadcast itself inside and outside the castle grounds.

“Thank you for your help, gentleman. You may go now,” the king told them.

“But sir, without us in the control room, how are we supposed to monitor the incoming army?” the taller worker replied. He stood ruffling his dark black hair as he looked at the cameras, confused.

“That’s because we aren’t going to stop the invasion. We are going to suppress it.”

“You can’t possibly mean we are abandoning the castle?” the shorter worker with light brown hair and chubby cheeks gasped.

“The castle is just a castle. Our main goal is to protect our guests and subjects. They are what makes this castle a castle. Their safety is more important to me than losing my kingdom,” her dad boomed in a resounding voice.

Although his voice hadn’t wavered, Hazel managed to catch just the slightest tremble in it. She knew that her dad did not want to give up their kingdom. Their kingdom was the most famous kingdom in all of Lyrion. They were known for having the largest armies, the most wealth—they had become so famous that even their citizens were wealthy. However, despite having the best generals in all of Lyrion, a battle for the castle would get too many innocent people killed. If they went to war with Derick now, chaos would erupt, and the royals and their children would not survive the turmoil long enough to make

it home. That would leave the other kingdoms too weak to defend their own castles. As a result, all of Lyrion would fall at the hands of a dictator.

This was no easy choice for her dad to make, but Hazel agreed with his decision. She just hoped that they would all survive long enough to fight for the castle another day. The workers nodded their heads in agreement with her father, too, and left the room heading straight for the East wing. Once they were gone, her dad pulled Hazel out of the room and closed the door behind them. He dismissed the guards at the doorway, and he ushered Hazel to go with them. He wanted her to get as far away from the castle as possible and to stay safe, but she wanted to stay.

“I’m not leaving you.” She said firmly as she planted her feet into the ground.

She knew she was being childish and completely crazy for wanting to stay, but she really wanted to help. Her dad looked momentarily startled at her outburst and breathed deeply to prevent himself from yelling at her.

“You are far too young for this my child. My response was not a request, it was an order. You must go now before the enemy makes it through the castle entrance.”

Hazel stared up at him, shocked. He had never ordered her to do anything before. She almost did as she was told, but although she really wanted to listen to her dad, she also really wanted to stay. So, she ran down the hallway towards the signing. She was never good at following orders anyways.

“Where are you going!” he yelled at her, outraged.

“I’m sorry daddy, but I’ll see you back at the signing,” she yelled back, not daring to look directly at him. Unfortunately, she knew that if she ever did manage to survive the night, she

TINY ROOM

was totally going to be grounded for the rest of her life.

Surprise

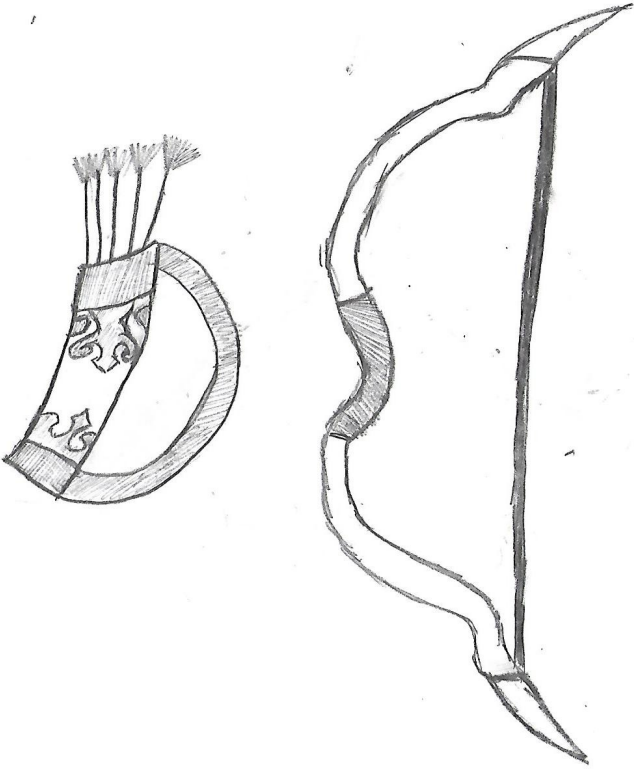
Two young royals stood side by side along Lovegood Castle's fenced stables. Seven-year-old princess Angela was from Diamond Halls, one of the most well-known castles for its beauty. Eight-year-old prince Harold, hailed from Sharpshoot Castle, a kingdom known for its outstanding military tactics.

The children watched eagerly as Daniel Lovegood showed off his skills to all his companions and any nearby onlookers. The 15-year-old prince was quite famous for his charisma and skill in weaponry. He never ceased to amaze his opponents. As future ruler to the throne of Lovegood castle, he is famed for his wisdom in military tactics. Although he might have been destined for glory, the young boy was still too wild to take up the throne.

Daniel's free spirit was exactly what had brought him to the stables upon the day of the signing. He didn't take kindly to long meetings such as this one and besides, he had promised Chide a rematch during their last weapons combat. How could he say no to that? Chide chose his long and sharp double-edged

sword for this short-ranged battle. However, Daniel remained with his bow and arrow, a weapon used for long ranged attacks, but somehow, he always managed to pull off using it in both.

Harold and Angela watched in a trance as they saw the epic battle unravel. Chide was twice as tall and muscular as Daniel but he was also hot headed, which was why he always made the first strike in a fight. He angled the sword to the side as he raised it above his head, hoping to scratch Daniel's shooting arm with the dull end of his practice sword. He made sure to add a quick and abrupt surprise twist to the movement to disorient Daniel. Daniel deflected the attack easily with his weapon, a bow made out of pure silver with sharp-edged blades on both ends. He knew that Chide was planning to surprise him with some new moves in order to best him. Certainly Chide had been training for months, hoping to finally beat Daniel on the day of the signing. Unfortunately for Chide, Daniel was on high alert and he rather enjoyed being surprised during a battle. Besides, it took a lot to break down Daniel's defenses.



However, Chide had anticipated Daniel to defend himself with his bow, the move always left Daniel's stomach open to an attack. This was Chide's moment to surprise him! He retaliated by swinging his knee up to Daniel's unprotected stomach, but Daniel sidestepped the attack and lashed out a kick of his own at Chide's nearest kneecap. Daniel smiled as he did it, this was just too easy he thought.

The pressure from Daniel's foot forced Chide's legs to buckle underneath him, sending him crashing down to the ground. As

he fell there was a brief moment when his brain realized that he was falling. The thought fed his anger and he involuntarily reached out to grab Daniel's shirt pulling him down with him. At least if he was going to go down, he was bringing his opponent down with him, he refused to be defeated so quickly!

Daniel had not expected Chide to retaliate, so he was shocked when Chide pulled him down to the floor, they both landed with a loud crash. Daniel's bow and quiver were flung off in the fall and the arrows were scattered across the dirt in the stables. Daniel was now without a weapon but Chide still clenched his longsword tightly in his sword arm.

Everyone gasped in disbelief, could it be possible that Daniel would lose his first battle today? It seemed that Chide would finally get his wish at beating Daniel after all. However, Daniel didn't appear worried nor did he waver at the loss of his weapons.

Chide quickly scrambled on top of him, what he lacked in speed he made up for in weight as he kneeled on top of Daniel to keep him trapped on the ground. He grinned as he raised his sword high above his head pointing the edge of it down at Daniel's chest. Pride flooded his whole body; this was the moment that he had been training for.

However, Daniel merely smirked up at him in amusement. Chide looked down at him in utter confusion and stared down at his own throat. It seemed that Daniel must have grabbed one of his arrows during the fall and was now pointing the bladed end right at Chide's throat. Chide flung his sword at the ground in pure outrage. How did Daniel always manage to slip something past him without him noticing? He almost didn't offer Daniel a hand up with all the fury building up inside of him. Daniel smirked as Chide decided to offer him a hand,

despite his better judgment, and watched Daniel slowly pick up his bow and scattered arrows. At this, he didn't offer to help.

"Sorry man, but you forgot the most important rule of combat." Daniel chided with his know it all attitude.

"Oh yeah! Well what is it?" Chide asked in an outrage. He knew every rule there was to know. He had practiced so hard for this moment!

"Never underestimate your enemy." Daniel said cunningly as he continued.

"The moment you saw me on the ground you assumed I was defenseless. In that moment I took the opportunity to prove you wrong."

"Whatever man" Chide remarked in agitation.

"Oh and Chide.."

"What?"

"Don't worry about our deal. I guess you won't be polishing my armor this week."

"What! Why are you so kind all of a sudden?"

"Well I already got what I wanted."

"Really, and what is that?"

"A good show for the kiddo's," he said, winking over towards Harold and Angela.

Angela turned red at the gesture and nearly fainted from the attention. Harold waved his hand in front of her face trying to wake her up from the trance, girls were so weird. Daniel smirked and made his way inside the stables talking with Chide in a wild frenzy.

"Did you see that? It was like he knew what Chide would do before it even happened!" Harold said astonished as Angela finally managed to recover from her stupor.

"Yeah..." Angela said with a dreamy look in her eyes. Harold

rolled his eyes at her as he tried to cover up his jealousy.

“You know one day I’m going to challenge him and when I win, we’ll see who you’ll be wooing over.” Harold said with a small chuckle. He knew that would annoy her and it did.

“I wasn’t wooing!” she said shoving him to the side.

He smiled at her and his heart skipped a beat when they locked eyes for a sliver of a second. They both looked away, blushing in the process.

“No maybe not. But I will defeat him one day you’ll see” Angela snorted at his remark.

“Yeah maybe when he’s too old to pick up a sword” She chuckled as he glared at her. She knew a thing or two about annoying him as well.

“Hilarious!” He said, the sarcasm was evident in his voice.

“Well what should we do now?” Angela asked, but her question was cut short by the shouts of battle cries in the distance.

The castle alarms went off and soldiers raced off towards the castle grounds. The speakers screeched in their ears repeating the same thing over and over and over again.

“Warning! Everyone must make their way inside Lovegood castle immediately. Go to the east side of the castle premises. We are under attack! I repeat to the east side of the castle premises. That’s the upper right corner. The upper right corner!”

They both looked at each other in absolute silence. They already knew at that moment everything was going to change.

The Pen

Harold took Angela by the hand, pulling her behind him as soldiers were rushing past them into battle. He made sure to stick close to the castle walls as they made their way towards the castle entrance.

“Harold stop!” Angela screeched and he stopped walking.

They were only a few feet away from the entrance now. The guards were already rushing everyone inside, but they were too far away for the guards to notice them yet.

“What’s wrong?”

Although he had asked, a part of him already knew what she was going to say, and he knew that he wasn’t going to like it.

“What about our parents? We can’t just leave without them!”

The moment he heard those words dread fell over him. He had been wondering that same question, but he also knew that the castle was way too big, they may never find them in this chaos.

“Ang, we don’t even know where they are. For all we know they could be on their way to the east wing as we speak, or maybe they are already there.”

Even as he said it though, he knew it in his gut that it wasn't true. He knew his parents would stay behind to help fight, that's what they always did. There was one other place he thought they might still be, but it was too risky. He needed to make sure that they stayed safe, he couldn't live with himself if Angela got hurt trying to find their parents. He always seemed to be running into dangerous situations that put himself and the people he cared about at risk and he wasn't willing to bring Angela down with him if things went wrong.

"What if they're still at the signing?"

He was afraid she'd say that. That was exactly the place he was trying to avoid. What if something happened and he couldn't protect her?

"No Ang it's too..."

"I know the risks Harold, but I'm going there with or without your help."

Her face was stern, and her shoulders arched back making her taller, stronger, and more confident. He knew there was nothing he could do to change her mind now. She was as stubborn as a mule.

"Fine! Then follow my lead. I have an idea"

He knew this was a bad idea but at least she wouldn't be on her own. Besides, he was kind of relieved at the idea of seeing his parents again.

They walked over to the looming entrance where the guards ushered everyone to the right side of the hallway, but the signing was to their left. They had to figure out a way to get past the guards. They stood near the doorway waiting for just the right moment to sneak past them. They were only two feet away from the door as they waited, hoping for a distraction and thankfully that's exactly what happened. Someone tripped on their way

inside and one of the guards bent down to help the man to his feet. The guard's back was now positioned in front of them, which meant that he wouldn't be able to see them, this was the chance they were looking for.

"Now!" Harold said in a loud whisper as they slid past the guards, the two feet distance

felt longer than he liked to admit, they barely even made it out in time.

The guard turned back in the direction they had come from just as Harold's foot vanished behind the wall. Once they were in the hallway they dashed towards the signing, away from the safety of the tunnel and straight towards their parents. When they arrived, the doors were wide open. All the kings and queens were frantically signing a parchment of paper. As each ruler signed the parchment, they left the room heading straight toward the east wing. One by one each ruler passed by them barely noticing the two kids standing in the hallway.

Angela searched wildly for her parents, her heart beat faster each second she couldn't find them, until she finally found them! Angela's parents were standing next to the king and Queen of Lovegood castle and Harold's parents. She noticed that their signatures were scribbled upon the parchment already, but none of them were leaving. Of course, they would wait! Their parents never ran away from a fight. At least not until the mission was complete. It seemed that they were waiting for the rest of the rulers to sign the parchment before they left.

"Let's wait for them to finish. If we come in now, they'll order the guards to take us away." Angela told Harold as she imagined her parents ordering the guards to send her to the east wing, away from danger, away from them...

"Agreed" Harold mumbled.

They both headed towards the wall and sat down on the floor. They saw a girl around their age in the room as well. She must be princess Hazel from Lovegood Castle but what was she still doing here?

Angela wasn't sure, she had thought she had heard the girl's voice resonating from the speakers earlier. Even so, she wasn't going to risk getting caught to find out why. Harold didn't seem to have noticed the princess. He was too busy looking down the hallway in case any of the enemy soldiers made it past the castle entrance.

Angela fixed her gaze on the clock inside the room their parents were in. Each minute felt like an eternity. They were stuck there for about 5 eternities, when the final royals from the sapphire forest approached the parchment ready to sign it but an explosion so loud, it nearly burst her eardrums, went off from behind her.

Harold tackled her to the ground when he noticed the flying grenade. He tried covering her from the soot of the explosion with his body as the wind and heat from it blew over them. Now everyone in the room was staring at them. Angela waved awkwardly at her parents as Harold helped her up.

"Hi mom," she said casually.

Honestly, she didn't know what else to say.

Her parents were on the verge of tears as they looked at her. They looked mad but also overjoyed so at least that was a good sign. They ran towards her, embracing her in a huge hug. Right beside her she could see that Harold's parents were also squeezing him in a tight family hug.

"How did you...?" her mom's words were cut off as chaos erupted inside of the room.

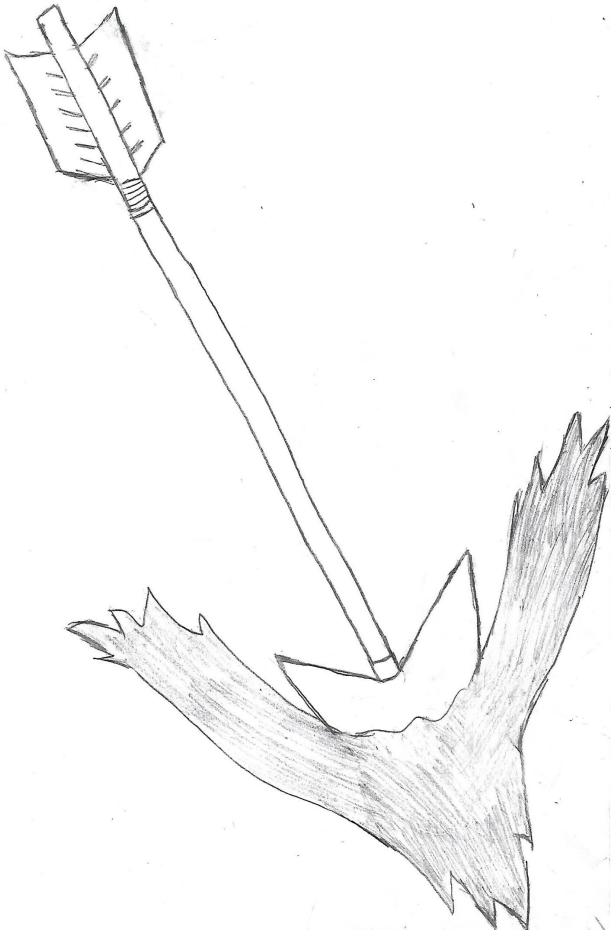
Her parents turned around in a rush towards the noise. What

could possibly have gone wrong now?

“The pen, we lost the pen!” Hazel shrieked as everyone panicked trying to look furiously for the missing pen.

Angela and Harold joined in the search. They couldn't believe their bad luck. They only needed one more signature, just one more, they were so close! But at that moment a flaming arrow came whistling into the room. Everyone screamed as the arrow struck the paper parchment with the signatures. The flames went up in a fiery rage consuming the words written on its surface. That was when Angela finally found the pen lodged between the wall and a bookshelf, but by then it was already too late. The paper was already consumed by the fire and was now a pile of ash. At this point, the pen was merely taunting her with its presence. Then suddenly, a second arrow went flying towards her and the world went spinning in slow motion before her eyes. She was glad that at least this arrow wasn't covered in flames.

THE PEN



Break Free

Hazel tried to ignore the tension in the room between her and her parents. They weren't too happy with the fact that she had disobeyed their orders and stayed, but they didn't tell her to go away either. In fact, they didn't even acknowledge her presence. This annoyed her immensely, but she didn't say anything about it. She just focused on the signing as she watched each of the royals from all the seven kingdoms line up silently to read the signing agreement and scribble their signatures on the delicate scroll.

Forcing herself to watch them helped her ignore her parent's disappointment, but after a while she got bored and her eyes betrayed her as they wandered around the room. That was when she noticed someone in the hallway. Hazel locked eyes with a pretty young princess around her age who was wearing a fabulous red dress and was sitting on the floor. The girl seemed shocked to see Hazel and Hazel could only imagine just how shocked she looked herself. She wanted to ask her what she was still doing here. Except a lot of things happened all at once at that moment.

One second she was staring at the girl and the next second a huge explosion sent the whole room shaking and everything seemed to pass by in slow motion as she watched the pen go flying across the room and land somewhere out of sight.

“The pen, we lost the pen!” Hazel shrieked after she had recovered from her daze.

She had just been flung across the room by a huge gust of explosive energy.

At her shouts everyone scurried around trying to recover their bearings while looking furiously for the missing pen. She crouched down on her hands and knees searching wildly for it, but then came the burning arrow, and only a minute later did she stand and watch as the paper was consumed in flames. Hazel screamed in distress.

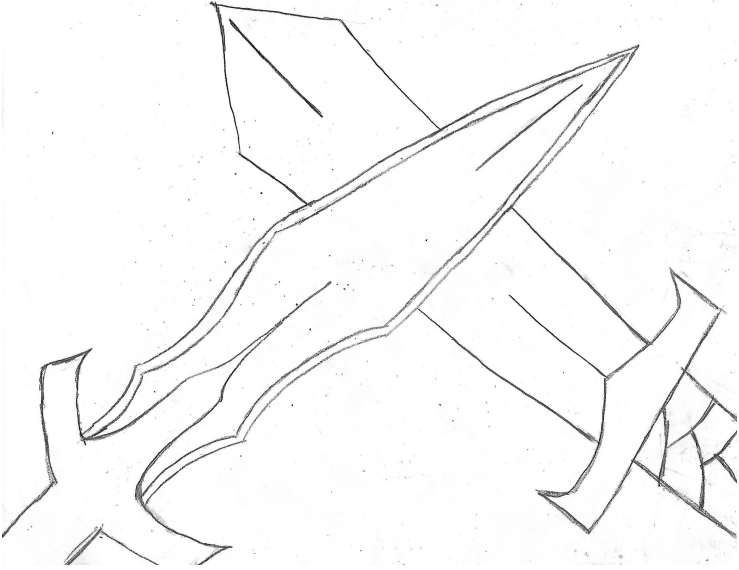
She couldn't believe what had just happened. The peace treaty had been destroyed! She must be imagining things; this couldn't be real! But from all the shocked expressions in the room, she knew that they had all seen the exact same thing she had. Hazel staggered up in disbelief. What now? She looked out into the foggy tendrils of smoke coming in from the hallway. That was when she saw the dark figure walking out of the smoky fog and she knew that this person had to be Derick, her banished uncle and their sworn enemy.

Derick stood looking down at the people in the room. This was the first time she had ever seen him in person. She had only ever heard talk about him in stories, but from the way his presence alone struck waves of fear into the adults in the room, she knew it had to be him. She had to admit though he didn't really look quite as evil as she had imagined him to be. She thought that he would be the 'I wear an eye patch and have vampire teeth' kind of evil, but thankfully he looked quite

ordinary.

Her dad stood beside her clutching his razor-sharp sword in a tight fist. She could see the white of his palms as he clenched it in pure anger. Then he bellowed a thunderous battle cry from beside her and dashed across the room effortlessly cutting off the few feet between him and Derick as he pounced with his sword held high at Derick's chest.

Hazel had never seen her dad this outraged or determined before. It was actually beginning to scare her. With the first clash of their swords there was an intense moment of complete silence and everyone stood frozen in place, watching as Derick and her dad engaged in a deadly battle that brought them closer to the west wing of the castle corridors with each clash of their swords. Eventually they were so far away that they disappeared inside the corridor, engaging in a battle of their own. When they had gone the room around her erupted into chaos. The remaining royals scattered into a battle formation against what seemed to be a rhyme bender and a rattler. She gulped in dismay. She would never again make fun of Aida for fearing those snakes. All the stories she had heard about them didn't do the snake's justice on their appearance. It seemed that every storyteller seemed to have left out the fact that the snake was black as night and had orange eyes that blazed like fire. It was definitely unnerving to watch its ginormous fangs stretch out like a giant weapon every time it opened its mouth.



She shuddered at the sight. She would not let appearances fool her into a false perception of fear, she would face this snake head on! She waltzed over to the battle but was stopped short by her mom who tightly pulled her back by the arm. Unfortunately, her mom had different plans as she dragged her far away from the snake and straight towards the hallway.

“Mom! I want to stay and fight. Please let me stay!”

“No! Staying will only get you killed. You are coming straight with me to the secret

passageway like you should have done earlier with your father. Now is not the time for one of your childish shenanigans.” Her mom said coarsely.

Her mother’s voice clearly indicated that nothing was going to change her mind. Hazel slumped her shoulders in utter defeat and let herself be carried away. She looked behind her at the room of the signing and watched the room as it became smaller

and smaller with each passing footstep. As they walked through the desolate hallway Hazel heard a pained scream and her ears perked up at the familiar voice. Could it really have been Aida? Is she in trouble? Hazel searched for her mom's reaction to the sound but all she saw was her mom biting down her lips in an effort to ignore the shouts that still hadn't subsided.

But with each new scream Hazel seemed to become even more agitated. Her senses were on high alert, and all she could feel over her pounding heartbeat was the overwhelming desire to help Aida. She gathered that desire into pure adrenaline and managed to break free of her mother's grip. Hazel quickly turned around and ran straight towards the source of the noise. She could hear her mom's footsteps chasing after her, but she didn't dare look back. Aida needed her, and she wouldn't abandon her in her time of need. Call it brave or even stupid, but she couldn't leave the palace knowing that she had left her to suffer at the clutches of their enemy.

Venom

Angela's mom shoved herself in front of Angela faster than she'd ever seen anyone move in her entire life. She blocked Angela from the arrow's deadly blade and allowed the arrow to pierce her own thigh instead of her daughter's head. She screamed in agonizing pain as the arrow pierced her skin. The blood was flowing rapidly out of her wound and Angela screamed in horror as she watched her mother stumble to the ground.

"Mom are you okay?" Angela gasped barely able to muster the strength to speak. Her words came out raspy and wavered.

"Yes... of course sweetheart... I need you to do me a little favor okay sweetie?" Her

mom uttered each word through clenched teeth. Her voice was still strong and resonated in confident authority.

"What...what is it?" Angela stuttered as she held her breath for her mom's reply.

Her mom unhooked a beautiful blue sapphire necklace off of her neck, it was their family's royal emblem. It had been passed

down from generation to generation of royals within their castle. It was only ever passed down at the end of someone's reign.

"Wait! What... what are you doing?"

"This belongs to you now my child. With the power vested in me I hereby grant you the royal sapphire diamond emblem to establish you as my future successor. I need you to stay strong for me pumpkin. I mourn that I will not be able to see you grow into the beautiful young lady I knew you'd always become."



"No! Mom don't give up! I'm sure a doctor would be able to heal you! It's only your leg!"

"I'm afraid this is an injury that even they can't fix my child."

"What...what do you mean?"

"The arrow was coated in viper venom. Even now I can feel its effects wearing me down. It won't be long before it reaches my heart."

At that Angela cried. There was no known cure to a viper's venom. She felt helpless and weak as she lunged at her mom embracing her in a tight hug. She didn't want to let her go.

"Angela?"

"Yes?"

"I need you to run back to your father and get out of here."

"No! Not without you!"

"Sweetie, I love you, but you must let me go. I will always remain right here in the memories of your heart." Angela's mom said pointing at her daughter's heart.

"But..."

"Shhhhhh...not now pumpkin, there isn't much time. You must go."

"No!"

"That's an order Angela!" At that Angela's heart shattered with grief.

She considered disobeying her orders, but by the pain etched across her mom's face, she knew it would only cause her more suffering. She turned around in a cascade of sobs and ran to the corner of the room where her dad had been. That was when she saw the viper snake for the first time, it didn't seem to be moving. Then her heart turned cold as she heard a soft rhythmic flute and saw the viper snake come to life with fangs bared straight at her.

Soar

The eruption that went off in the castle's west wing scattered goosebumps across Arrow's skin, but she was gratefully comforted by Lulu's presence sitting by her side. She nuzzled her wolf's pelt of grey hair. Lulu's hair was soft to the touch bringing back memories of the moss they used to make makeshift pillows at home, she was really starting to miss the comforts of the jungle. At her touch Lulu perked up and stared at her with those magnificently blue eyes of hers, her tail wagged back and forth, and her tongue stuck out as she showed her a big toothy smile. Arrow smiled back remembering how Lulu had snuck back into Lovegood castle by following Arrow's scent. That was the best thing about Lulu, she was an amazing tracker just like her!

However, her joy was short lived as her thoughts trailed back to her parents. They still hadn't arrived, and she was beginning to worry as doubts that they'd ever come back started slowly creeping into her brain. Already the crowd around the secret passageway was beginning to die down. She glanced over her shoulder and noticed that she wasn't the only one who was

worried. She caught glances of the boy, whom she knew now as James Blade, stealing quick glances down the hallway. It seemed that she wasn't the only one concerned about their parents.

Out of curiosity, she peeked through the secret passageway and saw that it led into an unknown section of the Sapphire forest, her home. She hadn't been waiting for too long, but she was already rattled with nervous energy. Each minute that passed by made her even more anxious and she was beginning to fear that her parents might be in terrible danger. She hoped that they weren't still at the signing, but somehow her heart knew that they were.

She glanced back at the passageway knowing that they would want her to go through that tunnel and get as far away from here as possible. As the only future heir to the throne of the Sapphire kingdom it was unwise for her to put herself in dangerous situations, but at the same time they were always the ones who told her to never leave anyone behind.

She looked at the passageway one last time and began walking towards the signing room. Lulu was trailing beside her in her advance, her soft paws barely made a sound against the slick marbled floor. They were headed down a gaping castle corridor that would lead her back into the signing, when she heard a high-pitched scream off in the distance. She froze in mid-step as the sound reverberated through her bones.

She turned around and saw James frozen in fear. It was clear from the paleness in his face that he recognized that voice. He pulled out the hunting knife that she had given him to compensate for the one that he had lost in the forest. Then he ran towards the source of the noise.

Should she follow him, or should she go to the signing? She really wished she were able to do both, but she knew that she

couldn't be at two places at once, so she had to choose one. Her instincts called her to the signing room but as she looked down at Lulu, she realized that there might be a way that she could do both. Her heart shuddered in protest at the new idea.

She could tell Lulu to go help James while she was gone, but that would mean she would be separated from her. However, she knew that the signing was a dangerous place to be and she didn't look forward to putting Lulu at risk there either. So, she knelt in front of the wolf cub and whispered.

"Go help our new friend. This is a place I need to go on my own." The wolf whimpered in protest.

It seemed Lulu didn't like the idea of being separated from her either.

"It'll be okay. I'll come back for you. Now please go before you lose him!" She yelled as she stood up and ran as fast as she could down the now deserted corridor.

As she ran, she looked back one last time at Lulu and saw her gray pelt disappear behind a wall in pursuit of the boy she had just met. She hoped that she had made the right decision in sending Lulu away and that James wouldn't be frightened by her, but a part of her knew that they would get along rather well. However, Arrow wasn't sure how she was going to handle not having Lulu around, but she tried not to think about it too much as she ran straight towards the most dangerous room in the palace. In the end she trusted the young prince even though she had only just met him.

As she made her way towards the room of the signing, she noticed that a few royal adults were clustered inside of the room with a few of their children. How odd. It was strange that their parents had not sent them away to the secret passage by now. What was going on?

She hid behind a pillar in the hallway. As she observed the room, she saw a princess talking to an injured queen on the floor, she was crying. Something was definitely wrong here, she wanted to comfort the girl, but she didn't because her instincts were telling her to stay hidden and she always listened to her survival instincts. Even when she couldn't really figure out why.

She looked around the room and saw that there was a viper snake in the room. The sound of a rhythmic flute was causing it to move straight towards the only young prince in the room. Her heart beat faster as it came closer and closer to him. She had heard of rhyme benders before but never had the chance to meet one in person.

Rhyme benders were soldiers that could control vipers using specific tones of flute music. She watched the rhyme bender closely and at last had found her parents. The rhyme bender was hidden behind a semicircular barricade of soldiers and her parents were fighting relentlessly to make their way inside. They seemed to have managed to open a small hole in their ranks, but it wasn't big enough for them to pass through.

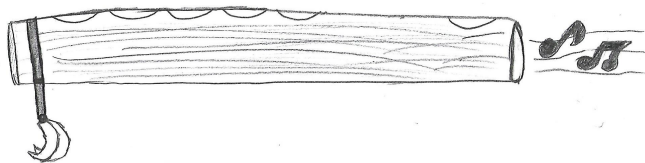
Evidently by the few red soldiers sleeping on the floor, it seemed that her parents were using flower dozer. Flower dozer was a liquid extract from the Sapphire forest that could cause even the mightiest of warriors to fall into a deep slumber for at least 24 hours. The liquid can only be extracted from a purple flower called Purpura, it was a rather easy substance to come by if you knew where to look.

After living in the forest her entire life, Arrow knew just about every poison and herb that could be used during battles. Her and her parents always carried pouches filled with a variety of them. Now it seemed that her parents must have covered their daggers with that same purplish liquid. However, the fluid can

only take effect when it encounters someone's bloodstream.

She lifted her bow at one of the nearest soldiers and aimed it at his outstretched arm, but she froze in mid shot. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she release the quiver? Her mind beat with a whirlwind of questions until she finally realized what her instincts had wanted her to do.

She changed her trajectory at the last second and let her arrow soar across the room, her aim was true, and the arrow hit its mark. It came crashing down onto the wooden flute on the rhyme bender's hands and it splintered in half. Then the music from the flute finally ended just as abruptly as it had come, and the snake stopped its deadly advance on its victims.



The destruction caught the surrounding enemy soldiers off guard, giving her dad just enough of a distraction to break through the barricade of soldiers and send the bender crashing

down onto the floor. He seemed to have been knocked unconscious with the strike of a heavy punch from the handle of her dad's blade, he was no longer a threat without his weapon.

Meanwhile, her mom took charge of the bewildered soldiers attacking them with unnatural speed as she hit them at just the right spot and with just the right amount of force to temporarily paralyze their limbs, her parents weren't big on killing but their techniques were just as effective at subduing their enemies. As they lay on the floor unable to move, Arrow just about jumped up with joy over their victory, but the moment of joy was soon short lived.

When she looked inside the room, she realized that she had been too late. Two of the royals had already been attacked by the snake and a young prince was kneeling on the floor next to them both. Her heart shattered with grief after realizing that both of them had been his parents, seeing this tempted her to run up to her own parents and embrace them in a huge hug.

At first, they were startled to see her, but they quickly recovered and hugged her back. Thankfully they weren't asking her any questions, at least not yet. It seemed that worrying about them helped her realize just how important they were to her, especially when she saw them risk death to keep her and their kingdom safe.

She thought back to James running towards the source of the screaming and she really hoped that him and Lulu were okay. She could only imagine what had caused that girl to scream before, but she sure hoped it wasn't anything worse than defeating a rhyme bender. However, little did she know that the rhyme bender was the least of their worries.

Renewed Hope

All the stories Harold had heard about vipers could never have prepared him for the real thing. Why were things always so much scarier in real life? Maybe because in the stories he always knew that the hero was going to survive, but in real life anyone could die.

As he saw the snake racing towards him, he knew this was the end for him. No more annoying Angela, no more late-night training sessions, and no more boring royal meetings. Although he wouldn't really miss those meetings too much, he was still going to miss everything about living. Thankfully, his parents weren't planning on letting him die.

He saw his dad curve his steel longsword in a diagonal slash at the slithering viper who barely missed being sliced in half. The snake dodged by flinging itself into the air to dodge his sword. His mom stood in front of him as she pulled out her num-chuks and struck the snake right in its frightening face while in midair. The snake landed with a resonant thud against the far side of the wall. The music that was causing it to move finally stopped and the room was consumed in a deadly silence.

“Honey are you okay?” Harold’s mom asked him.

At the sound of his mom’s voice, Harold was finally able to move again.

“Yeah mom I’m fine.” He replied almost annoyed that he was unable to help them stop the snake.

Why had he frozen up like that? What the heck was wrong with him?

“Oh, thank goodness. I thought you had frozen up on us kiddo.” His dad retorted with a smirk.

Was it really that obvious?

“I did no such thing!” He remarked unable to admit defeat.

His parents smiled at him with their sarcastic I-believe-you smiles. He sighed knowing that they would never let him forget this moment. Although he was mostly just relieved it was finally over, but something about this battle still didn’t feel quite right, it almost felt too easy.

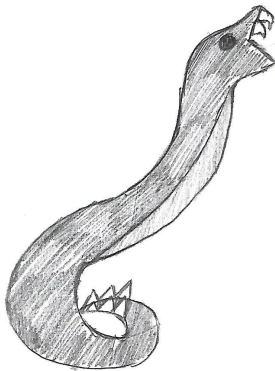
Angela stood on the far side of the room staring at the snake on the floor and a strange memory popped in his mind. He had heard stories about these snakes being able to slither off a roof and still be okay. If those stories were true, then this snake should still be okay. Wouldn’t the rhyme bender know that?

Unless, that was exactly what he wanted them to think because he knows that royals know little to nothing about vipers. He watched as the rhyme bender lifted his flute again, preparing to blow a new tune into his instrument of death and Harold’s heart raced in fear. He realized that his new victim would be Angela. He had to do something before the snake killed her.

He dashed towards Angela and tackled her to the ground just as the music began to play. The snake’s fangs almost sank into his arm, but luckily, it had missed him by a hair, quite literally!

LYRION

They both crashed onto the floor with a loud bang. The snake landed in a graceful coil of fury on the floor and it quickly turned around in a flash of speed towards them with its fangs bared wide.



Great, he was going to die, this was the end of the line for him!

However, he refused to show fear as he stared straight at the snake's red eyes, which emotionally seemed furious but also displayed a hint of sadness behind them, why was that? Oh well, at least if he was going to die, he would do so honorably.

He pulled out his tiny dagger, a birthday present given to every prince once they turned six and tried to jab it into the snake's lower jaw. However, he miscalculated the movement and missed the snake's jaw entirely, only managing to smack the snake in the face. Despite the mistake, the viper was still sent flying onto the wall beside them with a satisfying thump and the impact from his swing sent one of its two poisonous teeth skittering across the floor.

The snake hissed in pain and it quickly curled its body around itself poised to strike him again with its barbed poisonous tail. At this point he wasn't sure if the snake intended to kill him for revenge or because the rhyme bender was still in control of it. He wished he could use his dagger again, but it had flown off across the room when he had first hit the snake. Now he finally understood what his parents meant by having butterfingers.

He made a mental note that if he ever made it out of this situation alive, he would never again let himself accidentally drop his weapon during a fight. He knew he wouldn't be fast enough to avoid the incoming blow from the viper. So he stood paralyzed, waiting for the impact from its poisonous tail, but right as it had begun to strike him. His mom stepped in between him and the snake's tail.

"No!" He cried horrified as he watched the barbs strike her arm and saw her stumble onto the marbled floor.

After this, the snake realized it was winning and it sprung into the air with a renewed vigor trying to attack his previous victim, Harold. Harold stumbled back in grief and watched as his dad

grabbed the snake in midair and brandished his sword to kill it underneath its vulnerable underbelly, but the snake writhed in his hand and sunk its one poisonous fang into his palm. Harold stood in shocked disbelief, this couldn't be happening, this couldn't be real, but he knew deep down that it felt too real to be a dream.

His dad cried out in irritable pain and slashed off its final tooth to stop the poison from spreading, but it was too late. The poison had already reached his bloodstream. In that brief moment the music stopped once more, and the snake dropped to the ground in a heap. It slithered away in agony, finally free from the rhyme bender's trance.

He looked back expecting it to be another trick but all he saw was the rhyme bender's broken flute scattered in pieces across the floor. He sighed in relief and dropped to his knees next to his parents on the floor.

"Mom, dad, please don't leave me." He pleaded.

He was their only heir to the throne and was still far too young to rule the kingdom by himself, there was still so much he wanted to learn from them, and he would miss them way too much.

"We're not going anywhere, my sweet brave boy. Even when we pass, we will always be within your heart. You are our son and our legacy will carry on with you. You are not alone in this world." His mom said smoothly with tears streaking down her eyes.

"But I don't want to lose you." He said crying for the very first time in his life.

The tears only intensified his feelings of despair, but there was nothing he could do to stop them.

"You have not lost us, our love for you will shine within you

even after we're gone." This time it was his dad who spoke with a gruff but regal voice.

He too was misty eyed. A single tear streaked down his face, he was never one who would ever be caught crying, but this being the last time he would ever see his son changed everything.

"I... love you" Harold stammered to them both.

He could see his mom's eyes turn cloudy from the effect of the poison and he could hear his dad's breaths grow smaller and smaller with every exhale. He didn't like seeing them like this but he couldn't will himself to look away. He knew the seizures would come next indicating that the poison had reached their heart but before he could witness that, a hand landed upon his shoulder and he trembled. He didn't want to leave them behind.

"We love you too, my son. Now you must go. Do not let our sacrifice be in vain. Drake get him as far away from here as possible!" His mom said regally in a raspy voice to both him and the king who was holding his shoulder.

The king holding his shoulder was Drake, Angela's dad, and Harold stood up in an effort to be strong for his parents. He would be a kind and strong ruler just as they were. He would do it for them.

"Be brave my son. Lead our kingdom towards a brighter future." His father grumbled through a small parade of coughs.

Harold was led out of the room by Drake as he continued to watch his parents with tears flooding down his eyes. The doors of the room were being swung shut by the adults and he tried to focus on the image of his parents, for one last brief second, so that he would never forget their faces and all that they had sacrificed for him.

Once the doors were slammed shut with a horrible crash

it sent a tremor up his spine and they were soon joined by the remaining royals from the Sapphire forest as they made their way towards the secret passageway in complete and utter silence.

The corridor was a disaster. Large chunks of rock and rubble were scattered around the floor, the floor itself was covered in gaps and cracks, and there was a huge hole in the middle of the hall indicating where the bomb had landed. It was a miracle in and of itself that the walls were still intact, but no one dared to say a word about this.

For they had all lost much on this disastrous day, but in Harold's eyes, there was still hope, hope that one day all these honorable deaths would be justified, and that Derick would finally be overthrown. For in that moment, Harold made it his mission to never stop training until he was finally strong enough to defeat Derick himself.

Down We Go

There was a horrendous crash as the cookie jar toppled over the kitchen counter and cascaded into tiny pieces across the floor. Aida, the servant who had reprimanded Hazel before the signing, gasped feverishly for air as she hyperventilated from fear. She took a deep breath to calm herself as she looked wildly around the huge kitchen for some way to get out of there without using the front door.

Hundreds of Derick's soldiers were waiting for them outside the barricaded doors and she knew that the fridge she and the other servants had dragged in front of the door would not last long as a barrier. She needed to coordinate a new plan quickly.

Aida looked around the kitchen. It was a huge room filled with hundreds of plates and silverware stacked high to the brim with mouthwatering delicacies. The smell of food gave her an eager desire to eat in this heart wrenching situation. However, she nudged the thought aside, this was no time to be thinking about food. She wandered all around the room searching wildly for something, anything, that would get them out of there, but she found nothing.

She noticed that most of the younger servants were clustered in a small group in the far corner of the room. The elderly servants were comforting the younger ones by singing to them quiet songs and words of comfort. Meanwhile the rest of them were gathering whatever knives they could find to use in case of a battle. Most of the servant boys knew little to nothing about fighting and the girls never even bothered to learn how to fight. If the soldiers broke through that door it wouldn't take long for their small group to be overwhelmed.

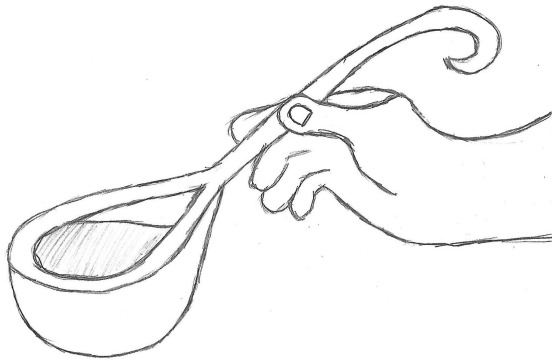
Aida slumped against the marble counter in despair. There was nowhere to go, they were sitting ducks waiting to be hunted. However, the angle she had lowered her head in had revealed to her a large hole blocked by a metal barrier in the sidewall towards the middle of the room. This hole was a trash chute and it had an electric panel beside it that allowed them to open and close its metal wall at will.

She gasped as a brilliant idea popped into her head. What if she could send them down the trash chute? Which, as she thought about it, might be a bit stinky and gross but getting a little messy was better than dying at the hands of Derick's army. Besides, once outside they could go through the secret tunnels built underground that lead outside into the woods. Up until that point the servants have only ever used it to collect ingredients from the forest for the cooks when it was first constructed, but today it would be their salvation.

Another loud bang went off from behind the wooden door and a loud cracking sound followed indicating that the wood was already starting to splinter. She ran over to the other servants in the room and recited her plan to them. Their worried and fearful expressions suddenly showed hints of hope. It warmed her heart to see their joyful eyes. She ushered them

quickly towards the trash chute in the middle of the room and gathered up her bearings preparing herself to be the first volunteer down the chute, but the cook stopped her by setting his wrinkled hand upon her shoulder.

The cook was an old but chubby man. From what she knew about him, he had spent most of his life in the kitchens. He was more than old enough to retire, of course, but anytime that anybody brought that up, he would claim that cooking was his passion and that he would rather die holding a wooden ladle in his hands. He wore the typical white chef's hat and apron uniform of a cook and was giving her one of his heart warming smiles.



“We don’t know who or what could be down there. If someone must go, I will. I do not wish for harm to come upon any of you. I have served the crown a good and hardy life, you are all

still young, but I am not. Whomever may be down there could be our enemy. Therefore, I wish to volunteer to go down first.”

Aida stared into his eyes and hesitated. This was her idea; she would never forgive herself if he got hurt because of it, but from the determination in his eyes she knew she would never be able to change his mind. She sighed and stepped aside for him to climb through the chute. He did it with little to no trouble partly because of the massive size of the hole. Everyone bade him off with slaps of gratitude and farewell comments and within seconds he went tumbling down the chute like a soaring arrow.

There was a prolonged moment of silence as everyone seemed to be holding their breath awaiting his reply. How would they know if he made it through okay? Why was everything so unbearably quiet? Her emotions were in a turmoil as a full minute passed by with no reply. Tears went tumbling down her cheek as she still grasped on to the hope that he was still okay. Thankfully, his voice boomed back up at them through the chute startling all of them as he cried out

“All clear!”

Hearing his voice sent a blast of relief coursing through her body. After this, everyone scrambled around the chute trying to be the first to go down. Aida managed to arrange them in a semi-single file line, sending them down one by one so that no one would get hurt or trampled. Aida stayed back allowing everyone to pass through first, she mentally resolved to be the last person to go down.

With each person that went down, the booms at the front door were beginning to grow louder. The wooden door had already splintered away, and the fridge was the only thing protecting them now as it made loud clunking sounds from their constant

poundings.

Then just as the last servant, a young boy, was about to go through the chute. The soldiers gave the fridge one final charge and it collapsed in an ear-splitting heap on the floor. They came pouring out and Aida gasped in disbelief.

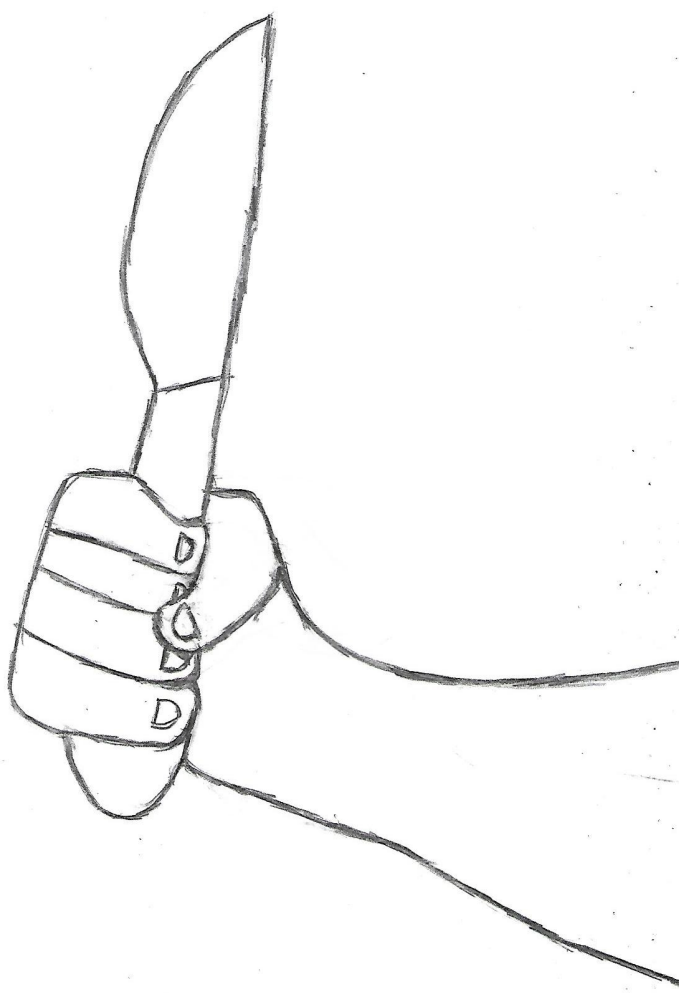
She pushed the young boy down the chute in a panic and pressed the dial on the wall to close the panel. Then she pulled the control panel out of the wall watching it sizzle with sparks of electricity hoping that would at least grant the servants enough time to escape. Besides, there was no way those guards would be getting through that chute without the use of force, but right now she was mostly cornered with the fact that she was surrounded on all sides by guards. The once large room seemed so small now. She screamed in defiance as the first soldiers came rushing forward trying to drag her away.

The Butter Knife

The hallway rushed past Hazel at lightning speed as she forced her legs to keep running. She tried not to focus on the fact that she kept tripping over her white satin dress for the millionth time. She ran blindly towards the kitchen door and ended up tripping over the wooden remains of what was once the kitchen door. She screamed as she slipped and grabbed for the nearest table. With the force of her body weight, the table was flung out from underneath her and it was sent flying across the room, colliding with one of the soldier's in front of her.

As she crouched to stand back up again, she grabbed the deadliest thing she could find and pointed it menacingly towards the soldiers. The soldiers burst out in laughter as they saw her threatening them with a butter knife. Hazel's blood boiled with humiliation and anger. How was she supposed to save Aida, her servant and best friend, if they couldn't even take her seriously? Suddenly she got the sinking feeling that this situation wasn't going to end well for either her or Aida. Thankfully she wasn't alone.

THE BUTTER KNIFE



As the soldiers advanced towards her with a mocking sneer in their faces. Her mom came out from behind her like a ninja and stabbed the first soldier in the arm with her dagger, she dislocated the leg of the second soldier with a swift leg sweeping motion and slammed her elbow into his leg, the third was knocked unconscious by Aida! She was holding a frying pan and whacking soldiers upside the head with it. It was proving to be a very useful weapon, even acting as a shield against their swords. It proved to be such a useful weapon that Hazel began searching the floor for a frying pan of her own but there weren't any nearby. Oh well, she would just have to make do with this butter knife then.

Hazel stood watching the battle unfold in a state of shocked disbelief after witnessing a side of her mother that she had never seen before. Her mom was actually an incredible fighter and Aida had a fierce side to her as well. While she was lost in her trance, she didn't notice the guard that was creeping up from behind her. Before she could even process what was happening, he pulled her by her straight long hair and placed his sword up to her throat. It was a rather uncomfortable position to be in and she felt outraged to be treated with such disrespect.

Her mom and Aida immediately stopped their attacks as they watched the soldier hold his sword up to the princess's throat. Refusing to be used as leverage against her mom and Aida. She bit the soldier's hand and kicked him as hard as she possibly could where the 'sun didn't shine'. He screamed momentarily surprised by the assault and she smirked up at him as she ducked away from his arms and smashed a wine bottle that had fallen on the floor right upside his head. It shattered upon impact and the red velvety liquor cascaded down upon his uniform and onto his eyes momentarily blinding him. He stumbled back

a few steps and tripped over the overturned table. His head hit the wall hard and he went still, probably unconscious she hoped because she had never killed anyone before.

Her mom and Aida quickly finished off the remaining soldiers long enough to push them back towards the door, but there was no way that they would be able to leave the way they had come in, at least not with all those soldiers blocking the way. Her mom pulled her by the arm and dragged her towards the far side of the kitchen.

“Mom where are we going?”

“Sweetheart there’s a lot of things that you don’t yet know about this castle. There’s secrets hiding within its very walls!”

And with that her mom pulled back a towel rack holder plastered to the wall and the entire wall opened up revealing another secret passageway. Hazel was shocked, there were two passageways! Could there be more?

“How did yo...” Hazel gasped but her mom only shushed her, pushing her into the dark tunnel.

“There isn’t much time. This tunnel will lead us back to one of the halls in the west wing because right now there are too many soldiers on this wing of the castle. So, if we can make it to that hall then we can make a run for it to the secret passageway in the east wing.”

Her mom said all these words quickly as if trying to make time speed up. She went to grab a lever in the tunnel to close the wall but as she was pulling it down, a loud and horrendous whistling sound whisked through the air just as the wall slammed shut. Hazel screamed as she watched her mom fall to the ground with an arrow sticking out of her chest. Blood was slowly starting to leak out of the wound as she lay sprawled on the concrete floor of the tunnel. Hazel’s entire body was trembling as she

lunged towards her mom, but Aida pulled her back. Hazel tried to fight from her grip, but she wasn't strong enough. She just stood there in tears as her mother gave her, her final words.

“Go!...And be brave Hazel...I... love..yo...”

There was a moment of stillness as her mom's face turned pale and her eyes shut into an eternal never ending sleep. Hazel stood staring down at her body unable to accept the idea that her mother was gone.

Aida gently pried her away from the scene as she pulled her by the hand through a series of dank and dark tunnels. They made their way to the end of the tunnel in complete silence, not even the rats dared skitter across the pavement. Aida was holding her hand the entire way to comfort Hazel and Hazel didn't dare look back the way they had come, she was still in denial and she tried to convince herself this was all just a really bad nightmare. Finally, they reached a corridor that led them back into one of the castle's west wing and after a bit of rummaging Aida was able to find the lever to open the wall.

Then they both stepped out into the warm glow of sunlight but as their eyes adjusted to the light, Hazel screamed at the scene unfolding before her. She was confronted by a red uniform that was so bright red that it looked like real blood and wearing that uniform was none other than Derick himself.

Derick was sneering like a maniac as she witnessed him raise his sword high in the air to puncture her dad's heart. Her dad stood unaware of the attack as he clutched his injured hand, his sword was nowhere in sight. Her entire world began to slow as she pulled out her butter knife, the one she had kept from her trip in the kitchens and lunged at him with it.

The knife sank deep into Derick's thigh and he screeched in agony at the unprecedented excruciating pain. Hazel sighed in

relief as she watched his blade barely miss her father's heart, but to her horror it still managed to puncture his stomach. She watched her dad fall to the floor turning the white tile red as he lost a lot of blood, a lot more blood than she felt comfortable with.

She looked up at Derick as he turned around in a fit of pure fury casting a murderous gaze at the child that had dared interrupt his advance, suddenly she felt very powerless under his scrutinizing gaze. How was she going to defeat Derick? Especially since he was her uncle! Her blood ran cold as she watched Derick, her banished Uncle, raise his sword right at his own niece. She lifted her head high and closed her eyes for the blow. If she was going to die, then at least she would do so with dignity.

Derick's Decision

Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion when James heard the first scream. When he heard it, he clutched tightly onto the hunting knife that Arrow had given him. He recognized that voice in a heartbeat, it was clearly Hazel's voice. He stood paralyzed by fear of what could have happened to his best friend. Everything was happening way too fast and it seemed like so long ago that him and Hazel had been playing tag in the forest together, but now they were in the middle of a war. He also knew that her scream wasn't any ordinary scream, it sounded pained and heart wrenching. It's the kind of screaming you hear that changes your life forever and he knew it wasn't going to be a good kind of change.

He searched around and locked eyes with Arrow. She seemed to be distracted by the enormous explosion that had come from the signing room. He could tell that she was worried about her parents and so was he. He noticed that she was headed towards the room of the signing. Which meant he would have to rescue Hazel on his own. He knew that his parents would have wanted him to stay put because it was the safe thing to do, but that

didn't make it the right thing.

So he ran as fast as he could down the hall trying to pinpoint the location of the screaming and after a nerve racking search through a series of hallways, he finally found her. However, at the moment he had arrived, he witnessed that she was about to get stabbed by Derick's sword!

James watched in horror as Hazel's servant jumped in front of Hazel to protect her. The sword stabbed through her servant instead and he heard her scream as Derick pulled his sword from out of her rib cage. The servant staggered to the floor in a bloody heap and Hazel crouched down sobbing over her body. He knew that he had to act fast before things got even worse. He crept down the hall, hiding behind a series of armored knight statues that were meant for decoration. He was heading straight towards Derick as quickly as he dared without drawing attention to himself.

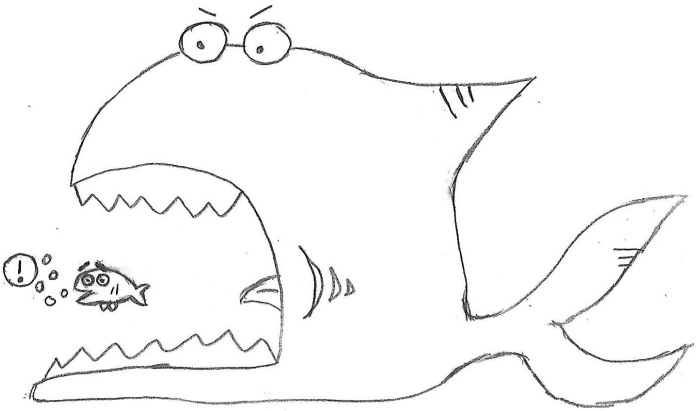
James clutched the hunting knife that Arrow had given him tightly, he was nearly upon Derick. Thankfully the knife wasn't too heavy for him to carry, but it wasn't quite as sharp as he would have liked. Oh well beggars can't be choosers. He would have to make do and attack Derick from behind so that he and Hazel would have enough time to run away.

He ran up behind Derick's looming back and jabbed his knife towards Derick's exposed back but Derick noticed the movement from out of the corner of his eye and he shifted effortlessly out of the way, which was exactly what James had expected him to do. He changed the descent of his knife and jabbed it at the opposite side of Derick's belly. Derick, who was rather surprised at the comeback, moved again but this time he wasn't fast enough, and the knife managed to impale his arm. James couldn't help but notice that Derick was rather

astonished by his swordsmanship.

At that moment James was grateful to have invested so many long hours of wooden sword practice training with his father. Derick pulled the knife from out of his arm and James trembled as he watched the blood pour out from his arm, he had never hurt anyone before.

Derick grinned down at the boy's pale face, clearly unfazed by his new wound. James gulped in fear as he glanced down at the king of Lovegood castle and noticed that he was unconscious and wounded on the floor. He searched the rest of his surroundings and saw Hazel was still crouched by her servant on the floor. Her tears fell freely as she gripped onto her servant's hand, willing her to wake up, but it was clear that she was already gone. His veins ran cold knowing that there was no way they were going to win this fight. He was weaponless and far too overpowered in this battle. It was like playing a game of sharks and minnows, and unfortunately, he was the minnow.



Derick raised his sword and jabbed it straight towards his heart. James braced himself for the blow, but centimeters before the blade would have hit its mark. Derick stopped himself for a moment and started to think. James stood frozen in place as his heart beat faster in what felt like an eternal silence. He could smell the blood dripping off the tip of Derick's blade that was hovering only centimeters from his face. How many lives had the steel of his blade killed before him? Was Derick trying to toy with him?

Then Derick's sword slowly dropped back to his side. Derick smirked as he stared right at him and Hazel, the gesture was so carefree and frightening at the same time that he trembled. Something told him that death would have been a treat compared to whatever crazy idea was going through that man's head.

"Did you know I was once a father, boyo?" Derick remarked with a glossy look in his eye as if remembering a memory of

his distant past. James only stared at him confused. What did this have anything to do with not killing him?

“No because you are murder! How could you take away a life after having a child of your own?” Hazel screeched in tears as she stood up to wave an angry fist up at Derick.

James withheld his gasp. It was never a good idea to offend the crazy guy with a sword, but then again Hazel was never one to keep quiet.

“What do you want with us?” James asked Derick in hopes of making him turn his attention away from Hazel. Derick only smiled.

“Well I want you of course! Every great leader needs his own successor and I have

decided to make you two the successors to my new empire. You shall be my children and I shall be your father!”

“Only in your wildest dreams! I already have a father!” Hazel yelled; her face was boiling red with rage as her hands fisted up in fury at her side. Who did this guy think he was?

As James looked over at Hazel, he caught the smallest glimpse of fur from out of the corner of his eye. He focused on the spot and realized it had to be Lulu. What was Arrow’s wolf doing here?

Grounded

The battle outside was complete and utter chaos. The soldiers never even had time to form up in their battle formation before the attack began. So now they were scattered around the castle premises trying to take out as many soldiers as possible. Both of James's parents stood outside the castle's looming entrance, attacking any enemy soldiers that dared pick a fight with them. However, as they were fighting the incoming invaders, they began to engage in a leisure conversation.

"That boy is in so much trouble when we get home! I knew that him and Hazel were scheming something but to sneak out into the Emerald forest is insane even for them! I mean, we've told him thousands of times that the Emerald forest is filled with deadly animals that could try to kill him!" Said his mother, Queen Chrysalis, as she knocked a soldier unconscious with a blow to the head from her elbow and then stabbed another soldier's shoulder.

"Well you know kids. When you tell them not to do something that is exactly what they

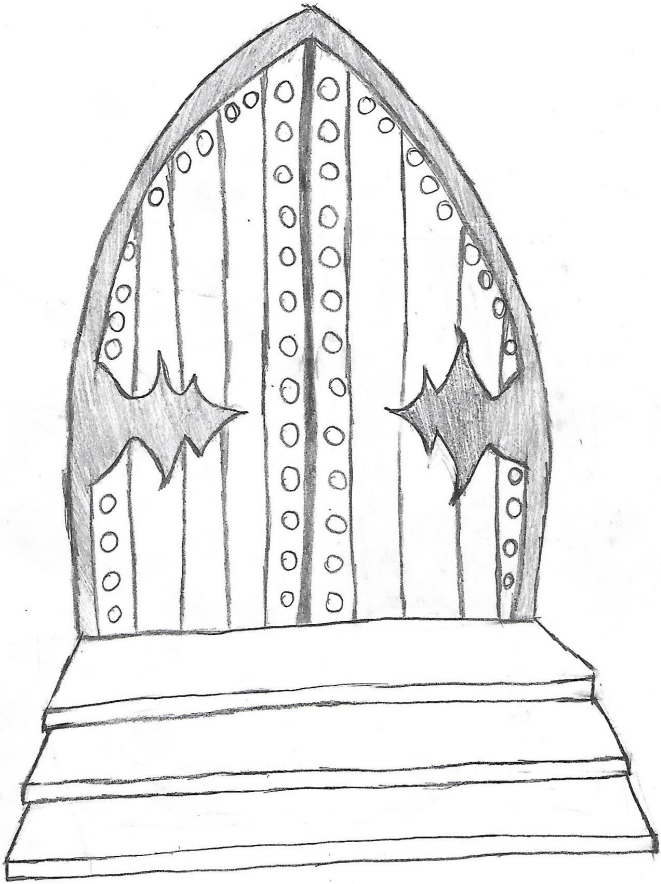
do. We weren't too different ourselves when we were younger." The father, King David, replied impaling a soldier's leg with his scabbard and then stabbing another soldier in the stomach right in between the hole of their armor.

"That is still no excuse! Watching him run away from us after confronting us with the truth is beyond my understanding. Whenever we make it out of here, I will be sure that kid is supervised at all times! He will never hear the end of what happened today."

"Agreed! I say a month's grounding from combat practice will do."

"Oh and not just that but I will never let him out of my sight again. Wherever we go, he goes. We can't risk having him sneaking out again!" James's mom concluded with an agitated exhale.

The king nodded in agreement. Then they continued to push back the soldiers for as long as they could before they had to shut the massive doors of the castle entrance closed. There were just too many of them! The soldiers had multiplied into an army unit outside of the doors. They continued to bang and push against the doors making them creak with each shuddering impact. Chrysalis knew those doors wouldn't hold them off for long.



“We’ve held them off for as long as we can. We have to get out of here and search for our son.” the king said coolly.

He was drenched in sweat and blood and he looked on edge, though he tried not to let it show.

“But the king was supposed to report back to us once he had defeated Derick. You don’t think that Derick could have...”

The queen stopped talking, unable to finish her phrase. The

king turned pale at her unsaid words. From the looks of it. It was evident that Lovegood castle was going to fall. Which meant that the king was either dead or captured. Nonetheless, neither of them dared say it out loud.

“Do you think our son is already at the escape tunnel?” The king asked.

“Well for his sake, let’s hope so. Because if he’s not, then when we find him, I will pull him by his hair and drag him there myself!” She finished off as they rushed down the hall towards the tunnel.

However, as they made their way there they heard the sound of two kids screaming. Suddenly an icy chill sent goosebumps coursing through their bodies. They both knew exactly who those two kids were and one of those kids was their son.

Armored Knights

James stood there in shock as he watched Arrow's wolf, Lulu, pounce on top of Derick's back. The wolf cub planted her fangs on his back as Derick jerked away from him in a flash of pure pain. Derick shook his body trying to get the wolf cub off of him but the wolf refused to let go. He was enraged at this animal for interfering during his evil speech and he tried to slam his back against the wall to squash it.

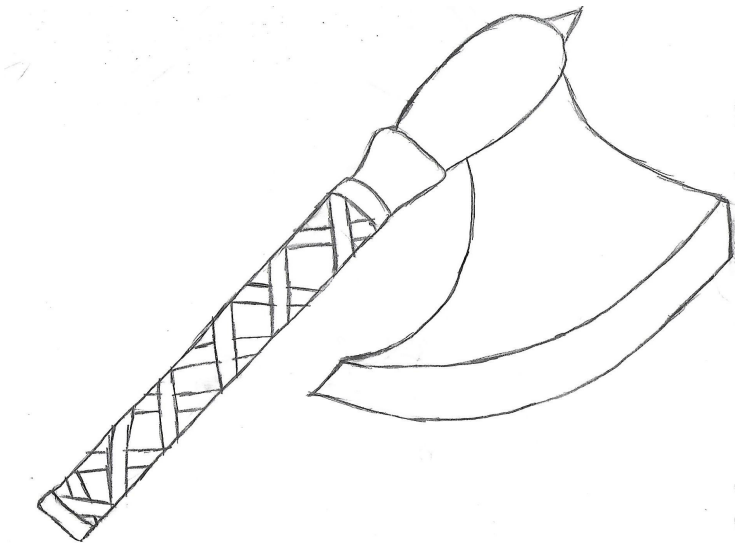
However, Lulu managed to unclamp her jaw from his back moments before she would have been smashed against the wall. Instead, she landed softly on her four paws and began growling at Derick with her tail pointed up in the air in an attempt to look more menacing. Derick let out another yelp of pain as his back slammed into the wall full force. The white wall was smudged red with his blood as he stood up from it and grabbed a nearby axe belonging to one of the armored knight statues in the corridor.

James's blood went cold as Derick slammed the axe down hard towards the wolf cub, trying to kill it. However, Lulu managed to dodge out of the way barely avoiding getting her

head chopped off, but in the attempt, she was severely wounded as the edge of the axe slashed across her pelt.

The wolf whimpered as she limped away from Derick, but Derick already had his axe raised again to finish her off. As he swung it full force at the wolf for a second time, James dashed towards the wolf and slid on the floor pulling the wolf cub away from him.

The axe landed with a thud on the floor inches away from his face. He stared at the sharp smooth metal of the axe and shivered as he realized how close he had come to getting his head chopped off.



As Derick struggled in vain to get the axe dislodged from the marbled floor, James watched Hazel come up from behind Derick and smash the arm of a metal knight against his already injured leg. Derick yelped in surprise and went tumbling down

towards the floor.

In retaliation, he turned around in a frenzy grabbing Hazel by her white satin dress that was now stained with blood and dirt and flinging her against the nearest armored knight. Hazel screamed and landed with a crash against the heavy metal. Her head slammed hard against the armor as she landed on the floor amidst a heap of metal. There was blood dripping down her forehead, and she went as still as a statue, James prayed that she was just unconscious.

James let go of Lulu and in a burst of rage slammed his body against the wooden handle of the axe. The stick snapped in Derick's hands and the momentum sent the stick flying back across Derick's head leaving a pretty nasty slash across his forehead, it looked like a wound that would definitely leave a scar.

James was so shocked at what he had just done that he didn't even notice when Derick had pulled out a long-edged sword from out of his scabbard. By the time he saw it come swinging down for his throat, there was no time for him to dodge, and he knew that this was the end for him.

That was until Lulu lunged off the floor using her forepaws and bit into the arm that Derick was using to hold the scabbard. In that moment of pain Derick's sword was sent in a downward spiral and slashed across James's chest instead.

James cried out as pain surged up throughout his entire body, it came as sudden as a wave. He collapsed to the floor, unable to stand. He could feel his own blood dripping down his chest and could sense his heart was beating so fast that it hurt. It was almost impossible to concentrate on his surroundings. His vision became dazed as he watched Derick fling Lulu across the other end of the hallway and saw him turn back towards

him in a frenzy. It suddenly became very difficult to breathe as Derick stalked closer to him. He knelt down next to James, who lay immobilized on the floor. Blood was flowing onto the floor from his wound. It was war itself for James to try to stay conscious, but he focused in on what Derick was doing anyways, Derick smirked down at him and began to speak.

“You two are strong willed. I can use that in my army.” He exclaimed as he gave out a wicked laugh that sent a chill down his spine.

Then his vision began to blur, and the world turned black around him, but he could have sworn that he caught a glimpse of his parents just before he lost consciousness. He figured it was just his imagination creating illusions in his head. However, a sense of guilt overwhelmed him from seeing them again, even if it was just an illusion. He realized that after today he might never get to see his parents again.

First Aid

It hadn't been long since Harold had left the signing room after witnessing the horrifying death of both his parents. As he walked down the corridor towards the secret tunnel, he heard the sounds of screaming from the distance. Those sounds made the entire group of royals pause.

Their group consisted of Harold, Angela and her father King Drake, and Arrow with both of her parents King Faller and Queen Emerald. They were gathered around in a tight little circle avoiding the main corridors where the enemy soldiers would certainly be found. The source of the screaming sounded like it had come from two kids. He watched as the forest princess looked in the direction of the screams, clearly recognizing those voices. Harold briefly remembered her name was Arrow because his parents had made him memorize the names of all the royal kids that would be gathered for the signing today.

The adults looked at each other concerned. Clearly, they were deciding between risking going into battle with all of us in order to save those two kids or taking us to the tunnel where we

could be safe. However, from the look in their eyes he didn't like what they were planning to do. It seemed to have dawned upon Arrow too because she ran out in pursuit of the screaming. Her parents tried to call out for her to come back but she refused to listen to them. Their shouts only made her run faster. Now the royal parents didn't really have a choice but to follow her.

He was grateful for what she had done. He wasn't sure what he would have done if he had to leave those kids behind. Would he have run too? Could he afford to? He was now the only heir to the throne of Sharpshoot castle and even the thought of it made his heart ache as he remembered what had happened to both of his parents. How was he supposed to rule over an entire kingdom when he was just a kid? Well his parents always said it's not the throne that defines a king, it's his actions. What kind of king would he be if he couldn't help others? There was no way he was going to leave those kids behind. He would help them even if it cost him his life because that's what his parents would have done. So that is exactly what he did as he followed Arrow's lead trying to catch up with her.

Shockingly she was pretty fast for her age. This made sense considering she was literally born in the forest. Then as they were chasing her, he watched her stop suddenly in disbelief. What was she looking at? Well whatever it was he knew that they weren't going to like it. As they arrived at where she was, she spoke to them in a hushed tone.

"It's Derick, he's here." She managed to mumble hoping it wasn't true.

They all turned their heads to see what she was talking about. On the floor lay princess Hazel surrounded by metal statues of armored knights. Her face was pale, and she wasn't moving. He held his breath as he realized that she might be dead.

Arrow's dad, king Zander, was also on the floor next to another body he couldn't recognize but he neither of them were moving either. Then he swiveled his head to the side and found Derick looming over a young prince. Harold could tell the prince was younger than him, but he was still somewhere around his age.

Derick raised a sword towards the boy and Harold held his breath. There was nothing he could do to help him from this distance. When the sword came swinging down towards the prince, a wolf pounced suddenly towards Derick's hand making him screech out in pain. However, the sword still struck the prince across the chest and he watched as he fell to the floor with a loud crash. He heard Arrow gasp as the wolf was flung into the air.

Arrow's mom saw this too and she clutched tightly onto Arrow's arm, she was infuriated that Arrow had stormed off on her before, Arrow had never behaved so irresponsibly before.

"Come on we're leaving, now!"

"No! I'm not leaving without Lulu!" Arrow cried out as she yanked her arm away from her mother's grasp.

Her mother tried to grasp for her again, but she had already run off down the hallway towards the young wolf cub. Both of her parents were about to go after her but stopped when two royal parents that looked to be from the Golden Isle kingdom suddenly appeared approaching their tiny group in a run. They were covered in blood and sweat. They must have been outside fighting the enemy troops. When they looked towards the scene their faces paled and they both went still. It was clear that the boy must have been their son. These two royals advanced towards the scene, they looked like they wanted to kill Derick, but the other parents were holding them back.

“Let us go! We must avenge the death of our son!” Yelled the newcomer, king David, in a frenzy. He was still struggling against the bonds of King Faller and King Drake. Queen Emerald was holding back the other queen, Queen Chrysalis. However, it seemed that the queen would throw her off at any moment.

“If you go there now you will both die, and your kingdom will fall! We are outnumbered in this battle. Derick’s army has broken through the castle’s defenses and it won’t be long before they arrive here. If you go into battle with Derick now, you will both perish!” This time it was King Drake, Angela’s dad, who spoke to the king and queen of the Golden Isle Kingdom.

At those words they realized that Drake was right and that there was nothing more that they could do for James here, they stopped fighting them as they collapsed defeated into the other royal’s arms. Going after Derick now would only get them all killed. Besides, if they were dead, they couldn’t avenge their son’s death, they would just have to fall back to fight another day. Goosebumps coursed through Harold’s skin as he realized that they had lost the only heir to their throne, their only child.

Meanwhile, Harold spotted Arrow trying to nurture her wolf back to health but she seemed to be having some trouble healing her. The pouch of herbs she had been carrying around her waist must have ripped during the chaos and all the healing herbs must have spilled out of the hole in the fabric. He followed her with Angela by his side. The girl was kneeling on the floor by the body of the young wolf. There were tears in her eyes as she gingerly put her arms underneath its body and carried the wolf in her arms.

“Don’t worry, Lulu. I’m here now. I’ll heal you up in no time!” She whispered, choking back a sob.

Harold froze. He had never heard anyone name a wolf before. This wolf must be her pet. He turned a sideways look at Angela, and she shrugged, clearly, she had never witnessed anything like this before either. He looked down the hallway and watched as Derick was leaning over the boy he had slashed with his sword. There was no way that boy could have survived that, he shuddered at the thought. Thankfully Derick hadn't noticed that they were there yet because his back was turned to them while he talked to one of his generals who had appeared at the opposite end of the hallway.

Angela placed a hand on Arrow's shoulder to comfort her. The girl smiled up at Angela at the same time that Harold pulled out a small first aid kit. His parents had given him one when he was 5 in case of an emergency. Besides, he did come from a castle that is well known for its strong military, a first aid kit came in handy during battle practice.



“This might be able to help staunch the bleeding, but we are going to have to move fast. We don’t want Derick finding out we’re here.”

Harold took a sideways look towards Derick who was still busily chatting away with his general. What could they be talking about? Then he looked back at Arrow and saw her pause as she looked at his offering.

“I have no idea how to work with your first aid kit. I know how to heal wounds but I usually use the forest’s resources. I’ve never used a first aid kit before.” Arrow squealed in utter disappointment.

“No worries. I can do it. I know how to apply the bandages, well at least enough to help stop the bleeding. You can heal her once we get to the forest after that.”

She looked up at him with eyes filled with gratitude. He nodded back at her and got straight to work trying to move

as fast as he could while ignoring the fact that they could be discovered at any minute.

“It’s done!” he whispered and sighed in relief.

The whole process had taken a mere few moments, but it almost felt like a lifetime. He watched his handiwork and gasped at his success. He had never applied bandages to an actual victim before. Up until now his parents had always had him train with dummies.

The white bandages were wrapped all around Lulu’s pelt. They were tight and layered to make a firm boundary against the blood flow. For now, no blood had leaked through the bandages, but he knew that wouldn’t last long. The wolf’s wounds were deep and even the slightest jerk or stretch could cause the blood to leak through the bandages. The wolf whimpered after he had finished. Her pelt was rising up and down with each labored breath.

“Thanks,” Arrow remarked with tears streaking down her eyes.

She smiled down at Lulu as she picked up the wolf gingerly between her arms. Harold stiffened as he felt someone clutch his shoulder firmly from behind. Had Derick spotted them? He clutched the dagger around his belt readying himself for a fight but when he looked back, he saw that it was only Queen Emerald thanking him for helping her daughter. She was smiling down at him, but it was only a half-smile because she still seemed a little frustrated at her own daughter, his grip on the dagger loosened.

The adults pulled them back towards the secret passageway. No one dared look back as they walked in complete silence for the second time that day trying to get as far away from Derick as they could. The only difference this time was that Queen

Chrysalis made sure to grasp Arrow's arm the entire way. Once they were through the secret passageway they gasped as light from the sun hit them from the other side.

The Village

Shortly after Daniel humiliated Chide at the stables, the castle alarms went off. Daniel was now out in the castle courtyard fighting off the incoming invasion of red soldiers. There were hundreds of soldiers charging towards him all at once, but he was faster and better skilled than they were. In fact, every soldier that dared take a swing at him, he managed to disarm and cut down within seconds with his sword and occasionally his bow.

However, for every person he managed to defeat more would come to replace them and there just wasn't enough coordination among the guards of Lovegood castle to stop them from breaching the castle grounds. He knew it wouldn't take long before they made it inside and attacked his parents and the other royal families, he just hoped that he could buy them enough time to escape. Sweat was now beading down his forehead as he continued to fight them nonstop, his blade cut across skin and metal faster than his enemies even had time to perceive it.

It didn't take long before the first of the red guards breached the castle entrance and from that point on everything was

complete chaos because the red soldiers were swarming in and out of the castle attacking them on both fronts. If this carried on, he would be too exhausted to fight, he noticed that there was already sweat beading down his forehead. How had Derick managed to gather up such an enormous army anyway?

Daniel looked back at the castle entrance which consisted of two wooden doors made from a thick layer of African Blackwood. The doors at this point had been unhinged from the castle wall but the wood on the doors remained surprisingly intact. Streaming through the doorsteps were soldiers in red and he noticed that the Castle Lovegood guards at the entrance had all been killed or severely wounded, the steps were streaming with the blood of soldiers from both sides of the battle.

Daniel wanted to go inside and search for his parents, but he knew he would never get past the guards. His only hope now was that his family had been given enough time to escape. Besides, there was someone else who needed his help more than they did. He fought his way towards the castle's main village as his heart skipped a beat at the thought of his boyfriend Jayden who lived in the village. What did the army do to the villagers? Where is he now? He couldn't make himself even imagine the thought that he had been killed during the raid. He had to find out what had happened to him and his people. He needed to know if there was still anyone left to save.

He sprinted down the castle courtyard and streets taking down as many soldiers as he could as his adrenaline pulsed through him stronger and stronger with each step. Finally, he came to a halt gasping for air upon the village's cobblestone path. His heart froze in place when he noticed the destruction. The market was ablaze with fire and the wind only fueled it

with oxygen making it bigger and bigger while spreading ash and smoke across the clearing.

His throat constricted from the lack of oxygen as he struggled to gasp for air through the fog of smoke. It was so dense that he couldn't see anything through the fog. He quickly pulled his arms up in front of his eyes trying to keep them from tearing up from the ash. He stumbled his way through the chaos as villagers screamed past him bumping into him from the rush. Once he had finally made it to the houses, he found the entire place empty. There was no sound, no noise, no screams, and no soldiers. He hadn't seen a single soldier since he had arrived and somehow the thought of that terrified him even more than them being there.

He sprinted straight towards Jayden's house hoping to find him or his family there but the moment he arrived he found that the door had been blown off its hinges and the entire house had been ransacked, all that remained was a bunch of shredded furniture and broken glass. He searched everywhere trying to find him but there wasn't a single trace of human life, the entire house was in ruins and it was on the verge of collapsing in on itself. Finally, after he had searched every crook and crevice in the house he finally gave up and stumbled out of the house on the verge of tears.

Then suddenly a firm hand grasped his shoulders and Daniel spun around towards the perpetrator, pulling his dagger out with the movement and placing it on to the person's stomach. Their eyes locked for a brief moment of tension before they both softened their eyes in recognition. Jayden was standing in front of him with a big arrogant smile on his face, his skin and clothes were stained black from the smoke and ash in the air, he was clenching his longsword tightly to his side as droplets of

blood dripped off the edges of the blade. Daniel nearly strangled him in a bear hug from the excitement of finally seeing him again. When the excitement was over, he pulled away from him in annoyance.

“Where in the blazes have you been? Don’t you ever sneak up on me like that again, we are in the middle of a bloody war! I could have killed you, you idiot!” Daniel hollered at Jayden who merely chuckled in response.

“I’m glad to see you too Danny. To be honest I wasn’t expecting you to be here, I thought you were still in the castle. I was actually just headed up there to save your sorry life.”

Daniel scoffed at him over his remark, he was the last person who needed saving.

“Actually, I came here to save you and from the looks of things it looks like you needed it.”

Daniel nodded towards Jayden’s demolished house. The roof was barely attached at this point, all it took was a slight breeze to send it collapsing in on itself. When the wooden roof landed it sent a big burst of hot air across them only adding to the unbearable suffocation and heat that they were already surrounded by.

“Nah, that’s nothing I can’t handle. I could build a new house anyway, though sadly I can’t say the same about your castle.” Jayden replied, putting a firm but gentle hand on Daniel’s shoulder.

Daniel sighed finally realizing that he had just lost his home and his entire kingdom in less than a day. He was now a prince with no castle, maybe now that meant he wasn’t a prince at all. Daniel nodded at Jayden in silent appreciation. Then Jayden dropped his hand from his shoulder as his smile was replaced by a stern expression. Daniel knew this conversation was about

to get very serious.

“We will worry about that later though. Right now, we have to get out of here before the soldiers come back and finish us off. I have been trying to help out as many injured villagers as I possibly could. I carried them out into the forest with the rest of the survivors and now we have to go as well. Already I see Derick’s soldiers headed back towards the village entrance as we speak.” Jayden replied as Daniel looked back at the street and heard the distant sound of galloping footsteps from the hooves of horses that were being ridden by red uniformed men, there were so many of them!

“What about your parents? Are they waiting for us there?” Daniel asked.

Jayden froze for a moment at the question, unwanted memories flooded back to him that he didn’t want to be reminded of, so he kept his response brief and monotoned.

“No they aren’t. They went somewhere that they can’t come back from.” There was a brief moment of silence as Jayden said this trying to avoid eye contact with Daniel.

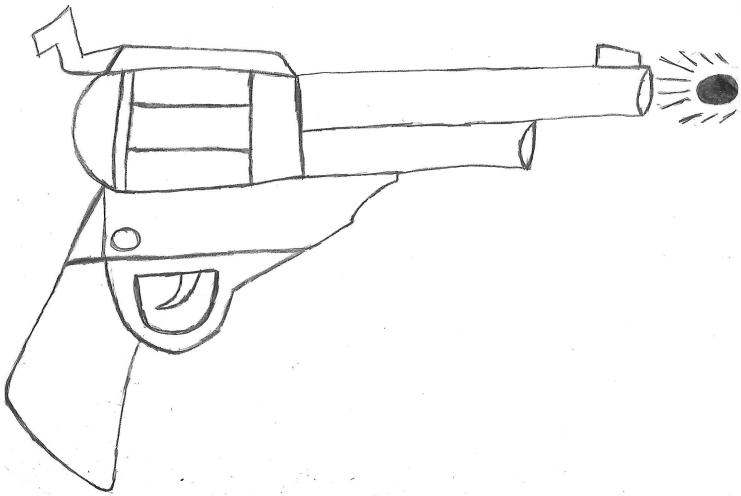
“Let’s just go and get out of this dump, there is nothing left for us here anyways” Jayden continued as he strolled off towards the forest with Daniel following him closely behind.

They continued their journey in silence, neither of them willing to speak to break the uncomfortable silence. Then Jayden noticed one of the soldiers on horseback raise a gun and point it straight at Daniel’s back. Daniel hadn’t seen the gesture and had stopped in place to see why Jayden had stopped, this made him a perfect shooting target.

“NO!” Jayden roared as he pounced in front of Daniel shoving him forwards into the forest floor and the covering of the trees.

Daniel landed with a crash, getting thorns and splinters stuck

on his hands and face after a direct face plant into a nearby bush. The next thing he heard was the ear-splitting boom of a gunshot and he felt Jayden carelessly fall on top of him. He struggled to get out from under Jayden's weight. He rolled him over to the side and watched him flop down beside him, his face was pale, his shirt blood stained, and he wasn't moving or breathing.



Daniel was still with shock and for a moment time stood completely still. He willed himself to stare at Jayden's pale face, his faded eyes, and finally his blue lips. The life had been sucked away from them, his soul was gone and now all that remained was the shell of his body. He knew that their lips would never touch again, he was truly gone. Tears began streaming down his face at this realization, he let them fall freely in mourning for the one he loved.

He blamed only himself for what had happened to Jayden. How could he have been so stupid? He should have seen the man with the gun or done something, anything to prevent this. Guilt flooded his heart even though he knew there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. He only wished it had been him instead.

Daniel clutched him close sobbing into his blood-stained shirt but he didn't get the liberty to mourn for long. The soldier with the gun hadn't finished his attack on him yet and he was already sending a second bullet right at Daniel's face. This time Daniel had been ready for him and he dodged the bullet just as he had been trained to do during battle practice, the bullet skidded right past his cheek and into a nearby tree trunk.

He quickly scrambled out of the firing range with only a moment's hesitation. He didn't want to leave Jayden's body behind, but he knew there was nothing more he could do for him now. So, he hid behind a nearby tree trunk trying to survey the field for the soldiers on horseback. That was when he spotted the man pointing his gun at the woods and was outraged! This was the man that had killed the person he loved and he would pay dearly for what he had taken away from him!

He raised his bow and aimed it at the soldier's heart, he was using one of his specialized arrows that could pierce through metal armor. He pulled back the bowstring, he could still smell Jayden's blood on his hands, which only strengthened his resolve. Then he let go of the bow string and watched as the arrowhead pierced the red soldier through the heart just like he had pierced Daniel's own heart.

He watched him fall off the side of his horse as the confused horse galloped wildly away. He looked one last time at Jayden's face and tried to imagine those lifeless eyes staring back at him

with the full color that had been in them moments before. Then he quickly looked away, not bearing the thought of seeing him like this.

The horses were nearly on top of him now and there was nothing more that he could do for Jayden. So, he ran in no particular direction or destination, all he wanted to do was get as far away from the death surrounding him as possible. So, he ran and ran until he could run no more. And while he ran, he could think of little else that was more devastating than the suffering wounds caused from a broken heart.

Boom

Angela's red dress shone brightly as she stepped out of the secret passageway and into the luminous forest that's beauty left her in awe. The forest around them was filled with trees of all shapes and sizes but the forest was so thick with vegetation that no one could enter it, even if they wanted to. Not even a hatchet could get past those thickets and branches overflowing with leaves. The only thing untouched by vegetation were four dirt paths pointing North, South, East and West. Each of the four paths branched out to all of the seven kingdoms of Lyrion. The only reason she knew this was because of the emblems nailed upon the trunks of the trees near each path. Each emblem indicated the multiple kingdoms that it would lead to. The entire experience was unbelievable. She noticed that not even the royals from the forest kingdom recognized this part of the forest through the shocked expressions on their faces. Who had created these paths and why did nobody know about them?

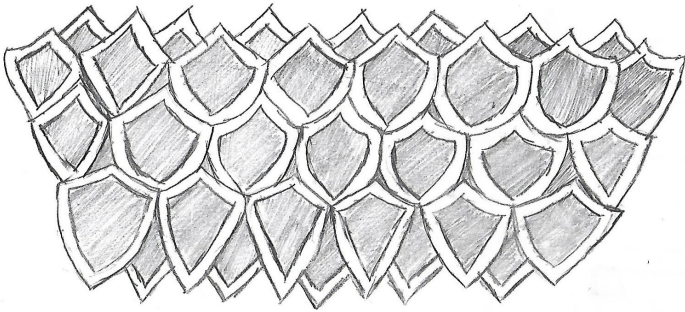
She looked at the people who were gathered around the small clearing. Most of the royal families, servants, and villagers

were gathered around it chatting hurriedly with each other. It seemed that mostly everyone in the castle had survived, except for those who hadn't of course, such as her own mother. She held the blue sapphire necklace tightly in the palm of her hand, hoping to feel her mom's comforting love flow through it but it just felt cold and lifeless. It only made Angela miss her more. Harold noticed she was upset so he held her hand to comfort her. She smiled back at him and gripped his tightly remembering that she wasn't the only one who had lost someone today, they both had.

However, she let go of his hand when she heard footsteps from an incoming army of soldiers from behind them in the tunnel of the secret passageway. She held her breath. If those soldiers made it through the secret passageway, they would easily be overrun. It seemed that the same idea dawned upon the kings and queens as one of them pulled out a grenade and her blood ran cold. What were they planning to do with that? There's no way they would survive an explosion like that within such a close radius.

Yet the royals didn't seem bothered by that idea as they unlatched the top of the grenade and threw it into the secret passageway. Everyone who had fled through the passageway ducked down immediately except for the royals and soldiers near the entrance of the tunnel. They stood firmly in front of it with their shields lifted in front of them and kneeled down in a tight formation creating a blockade to protect everyone against the explosion.

BOOM



Then just as suddenly as they had formed the barrier, did Angela hear the bomb go off. The bombing of the grenade sent the whole passageway crumbling down on itself, closing off the once huge entrance which was now covered in tons of solid rock. The blockade was broken by the explosive heat wave within moments and the royals guarding them were sent flying off. She screamed as she felt the heat wave warm against her skin, but it wasn't hot enough to burn her. The shields had absorbed the worst of the shock, but it was still uncomfortably warm.

The once peaceful forest was now surrounded by huge clouds of dust which made her eyes water. She could barely see as she struggled to keep her eyes open. She heard Harold breathing behind her and felt his hand on her shoulder. She turned her head back to look at him. He was filthy. His hair was covered in dust and leaves, his suit had cuts and patches of dirt from the ground, and his shoes looked like the forest threw up on them. Despite that, he still looked hot as always. She sighed as she thought that only he could pull off the messy look. Hopefully he wouldn't look at her too much. She knew she didn't look any better than him as she rustled her hand through her tangled hair.

“Your dad Angela! Where’s king Drake?” He asked in between coughs.

It seemed the dust from the air was choking him. Her heart jumped a beat at his question. Where was her dad? She looked around bewildered. Where had he gone? Then she froze as her eyes caught on one of the royals thrown off by the explosion. He was wearing the royal Crest from her castle. That had to be her dad. She ran towards him coughing from the dust. The dust was making it hard for her to breathe but she kept running ignoring the pain. Her dad couldn’t be dead.

Please don’t be dead! she pleaded in silent prayer.

As she arrived, she kneeled down next to him already crying. She sensed that Harold was standing just behind her.

“Dad?” She gasped fearing the worst.

“Hey honey.” He exclaimed, slowly raising himself to a crouching position.

He cringed and Angela saw that his leg was broken.

“You’re alive!” she screeched as she enveloped him in a giant bear hug. King Drake chuckled in response.

“Of course, I am. It takes a lot more than a little explosion to kill your old man.” he told

her, giving her an enthusiastic wink.

“Do you need help getting up?” She asked.

“Nah, I’ll be alright kiddo.”

He ruffled her hair making it even more tangled than before. However, Angela didn’t really care at the moment. As long as he was still alive, she was happy.

“I’m going to go check up on the other royals. You kids stay here and prepare yourselves for a long walk. We’re all going home!” he managed to grumble as he clutched onto a nearby tree trunk to pull himself onto a standing position.

King Drake carefully forced himself to stand and limp away towards the clearing. The smoke was finally beginning to clear as she surveyed the clearing. She noticed that none of the servants, royals, soldiers, and villagers gathered around had died from the explosion but some of them seemed to be severely wounded, either from the battle or the explosion she wasn't sure.

She really hoped they would all be able to make it out of this alive. However, everything went silent when she heard the first loud boom from behind the rubble of rock where the secret passageway used to be. Everyone stood still, almost paralyzed as boom after boom erupted behind the rocks. Each one made the ground shake and the Earth tremble indicating that their enemies were trying to break through. Everything turned into complete chaos as everyone panicked! Everybody was running in different directions trying to help the wounded and find their families in preparation of a quick departure.

"Dad!" Angela screamed searching for him frantically.

She had lost him in the frenzy of the crowd. Then Harold grabbed her arm and pulled her down to the ground just seconds before another thunderous crash came through the rubble. It sent dust and chunks of rock flying in the air.

Once the dust had settled again, she mustered the strength to stand and swiveled her head towards the rubble fearing that their enemies had successfully brought it down. However, what they saw sent a cheer throughout the crowd. It seemed that in the enemy's attempt to get through, the foundation of the castle had crumbled from above them and a section of the roof had toppled on top of the preexisting rubble.

The roof which was made out of panels of reinforced metal created a metal wall between them and Derick's army. Everyone

knew that it would take years for Derick's army to get through that wall. It seemed that Derick realized the same thing as they heard shouts and finally the shuffling of footsteps fading away from the other side. Everyone cheered once more and resumed their casual regrouping routine. Angela spotted her dad helping a wounded king and knew that it would take him forever before he would come back for her. So, she allowed herself to fall carelessly to the ground and finally rest and relax.

She planted her head in her hands as she finally paid attention to the pounding headache she had. Harold sat down on the ground next to her in exhaustion as he tried to calm his ragged breaths. They soon engaged in casual chit chat making the situation seem almost peaceful, despite the fact that they had barely survived the journey. She stared at the giant metal wall thanking God for the unbelievable miracle.

Mysterious Elder

Daniel didn't know for how long he had been running but he knew it must have been a long time from the sweat coursing down his entire body and the blood blisters on his feet, but he still didn't stop. He kept going and going until the ground gave way from underneath him and he fell into a deep underground hole. He screamed in his descent trying to grasp onto something that would break his fall but all he managed to do was flail helplessly in the air as he hit rock bottom.

The moment his head touched the ground pain coursed through his entire body, his vision began fading to black and he couldn't move. He was completely helpless and at the mercy of his enemies. He struggled to stay awake but eventually his mind could take no more and the world gave way around him. The last thing he saw before he closed his eyes was a dark figure walking slowly towards him and there was nothing, he could do to stop it. He thought about Jayden's sacrifice to save his life, realizing that it was all in vain now that he had recklessly fallen back into the enemy's hands. He thought that at least

now when he died, they could be reunited. Then as he blacked out, the world was consumed in darkness.

...

He woke up with a jolt which he quickly regretted as pure pain began surging throughout his sore body. He was laying on a bed cot in a small but neat little underground chamber that looked a lot like a cave. He sat up slowly trying to get his blood flowing again, all while ignoring his tired muscles and groggy mind. He looked around at his prison and it looked strangely pleasant. He wasn't bound and there were no prison bars so he must have been dropped off in a torture chamber.

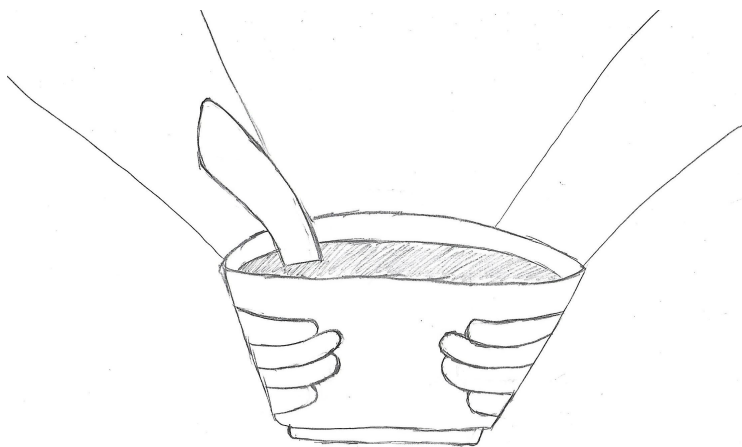
None of the royals used torture chambers anymore but Derick used them often to intimidate his prisoners. Well if Derick wanted to torture him, he wouldn't be getting anything useful out of him. He wasn't afraid of death, he had already lost Jayden, he would probably never see his family again, and his kingdom was gone. There was nothing left for him to lose. But the person he saw step through the dim glowing light in the underground tunnel wasn't Derick at all. It was an elderly lady who strutted towards him with a plate of soup balancing off the edge of her spiraled walking cane. She took the soup and gently placed it on his lap.

"Eat!" was all she said.

Her voice was raspy, and her hair was frizzled. She had many wrinkles from old age, and he stared at her in confusion. Why would Derick send an elderly woman to torture him? Was he trying to trick him or poison him? He stared at his soup hesitantly, it smelled and looked so delicious, but he refused to pick up the spoon. Then the old lady picked up her cane and whacked him upside the head so quickly that he didn't even see it coming.

“Eat you fool! You need to be well nourished if I am going to train you!” The woman replied as Daniel clutched his aching head in astonishment.

What in the world was this woman talking about? He looked around and realized that there were no cameras, no torture weapons, and no red soldiers. He wasn't in a torture chamber after all. So where was he and what was this lady doing living underground? She gave him a scrutinizing eye and he did as he was asked. He picked up the bowl of soup and started drinking it. The old lady nodded in satisfaction and sat down on a rocky outcropping which was crafted out in the form of a chair.



“You have today to rest and then tomorrow we train” she told him as she assessed him from her seat.

“Train for what?” he asked after taking another sip of the delicious soup.

“Training to stop Derick, of course! Why must all of you teenagers always ask such ridiculous questions?” She grumbled as she entertained herself by carving a knife out of stone on the large wooden table in front of her.

Daniel stared at her in astonishment, surely this woman had gone mad! How long had she been living in the forest by herself?

“Ugh..okay... well why choose to train me?”

She whacked him in the leg this time with her wooden cane. He flinched struggling not to drop the bowl of soup on himself from the sudden burst of pain.

“Why shouldn’t I train you? Do you see anybody else around for me to train?”

“Umm..”

“No of course not! You are the only one I found, so I will have to do with training you.”

He just blinked at her dumbfounded. This lady was rather terrifying in a crazy and bossy kind of way. He placed the now empty wooden bowl down on his lap. She grabbed her cane without warning and he prepared himself for another lashing out but all she did was use the cane to drag the bowl over to her makeshift sink, she did all of that without even having to get up. He had to admit that the cane was rather handy.

“Can you at least tell me your name?” Daniel asked but she sighed at the question.

“My name is irrelevant, it would be wise to know that names are a powerful thing, boy!

You should sleep now, you will need your rest for tomorrow. We train at 5am sharp and you better not be late or you will certainly regret it. Now sleep!”

Daniel didn’t bother to ask anything else. Clearly, he was getting nowhere with this conversation and he didn’t want to

risk getting whacked upside the head by her cane again. He laid down on the makeshift cot and drifted off to sleep. When he was fast asleep the elderly lady smiled as she continued to carve out her knife. At last her visions had finally revealed to her someone who could hopefully put the skills she teaches to good use!

The New King

Derick watched his army push a battering ram against the rubble. His uniform emanated a glow of its own in the darkness surrounding them. The royals were proving to be even more of a nuisance than he had originally planned. Well either way, he was going to finish the job he had come here to do. He would destroy the royals and conquer all of Lyrion. He would do it all today to avenge the death of his daughter! For today was the very day in which she breathed her last!

“Faster! The longer we delay the more time they have to escape! I need to have every kingdom under my control!” He ordered his army as he grew impatient with every boom of the battering ram against the rubble.

“Sir, the rubble is too thick. It will take too long for us to reach the other side at this pace!” the corporal remarked.

The corporal was using a great effort not to look at the slash across Derick’s face as he spoke. Derick’s eyes turned cold as he looked directly at him and the corporal froze. He knew fully well that it was never a good idea to make the boss unhappy.

Derick raised a dagger against the man's throat and whispered very calmly in his ear.

"Then I would suggest you find a way. Unless you wish to be the one who dies in their place."

"Yes sir, right away sir!" The corporal squeaked.

He was relieved when Derick finally lowered his dagger with a curt nod. He touched his neck where the dagger had once been and felt a small trickle of blood against his throat. He gulped down his fear and walked towards his troops. How was he supposed to bring down this blockade? The only way anyone would be able to do that is by bombing their way through. Unfortunately, they had all run out of bombs. Besides, it wasn't easy getting your hands on a weapon when you worked for a banished man. However, he was very creative, and an idea dawned upon him as he caught sight of the battering ram.

"Element attention!" He ordered.

The soldiers stood tall as they halted their advance. They were still holding on to the battering ram. The corporal walked over carefully into a storage office. He smiled as he pulled out a rope and a ladder. His men stood patiently awaiting his orders. No one dared speak a word.

"Sergeant Corbin go off and acquire us more supplies! The rest of you are going to hang the battering ram from the roof."

He glanced up at the relatively low roof. This section of the castle's roof sloped downward, which worked greatly to their advantage.

"Once the battering ram is set up, we will swing it down towards the debris. The momentum should send the rock crashing down onto the other side."

The men and women in red armour looked up at the corporal, their faces were lit up with hope. He smirked to himself.

He could already envision himself leading the troops over to surround those pious royals. Somehow, he knew this would be a battle he would never forget.

“On your feet soldiers! Begin setting up and do it quickly!”

The soldiers all got back to work in a frenzy. Sergeant Corbin fell out of formation to acquire the supplies. It took him a mere 5 minutes before he came back with more ropes. Thankfully there were storage offices every 3 meters from each other. As was a castle’s protocol. The protocol was set in place to accommodate the servants in charge of maintenance and to allow them to store their supplies nearby without having to travel all the way back to their quarters to acquire it.

The other men set up quickly as they tied the ropes around the battering ram and slowly lifted it up to the roof. Once it was secured the remaining men assembled near the tunnel and awaited his orders.

“Let the land flood red with their blood!” The corporal cried out in his loudest battle cry.

The soldiers repeated his cry and then they let go of the battering ram. It came crashing down with a loud boom against the rubble. Almost instantly the rubble split apart and came tumbling down. They cheered as they saw the terror painted across the faces of the royals on the other side.

They ran forwards advancing onto the scene but then they heard a crack just above their heads. They all paused as they stared up at the ceiling and watched it come tumbling down on top of them! Everyone dashed out of the way trying to avoid being squished by the enormous roof. However, a few weren’t fortunate enough to escape in time.

The corporal looked back towards the secret passageway in between coughs and saw a looming metal blockade. He was

leaning forward trying to catch his breath despite the dust that threatened to choke him. He continued to watch in shock as realization about his failure finally hit him.

Derick watched him with enraged eyes and he never even got the chance to plead for mercy before he felt the sharp edge of a sword go through his stomach. He gasped as Derick pulled the sword away. He tumbled to the ground surrounded by his own blood. His vision became dazed as he wondered what life would have been like if he had never met Derick. Would he have been happy? However, he would never know for he was losing sight of life and was falling into the hungry hands of death.

“You!” Derick said pointing at the man who had gathered the supplies.

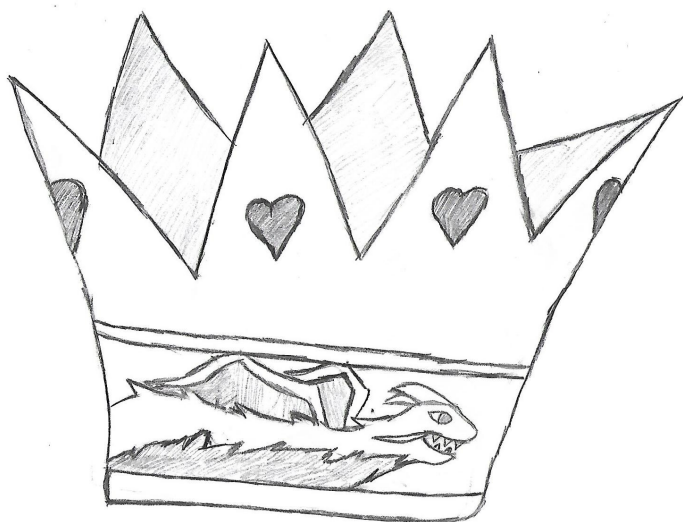
“You are now the new corporal, Sergeant Corbin. Take charge of your unit and fall back. We will regroup outside and continue our attack on the nearest kingdoms.” Derick told the Sergeant as he tossed him the sword that he had used to kill the previous corporal.

“As you wish, commander” he remarked.

“No! From now on you will regard me as King. This will be our new dwelling, and this is my castle!” Derick exclaimed earnestly.

“As you wish, my king” the corporal remarked slightly annoyed that their leader had pronounced himself one of the very royals they were fighting against. However, he dared not show any sign of dislike as he bowed slightly before Derick and walked back towards his unit to take charge.

LYRION



Daddy

“What will you have me do with the children?” A lady healer called Lucinda asked Derick.

She was a simple nursemaid who had been captured by Derick as a child after he had killed both of her parents. Even now being around him sent shivers up her spine. Derick watched the kids from the other side of the glass enclosure. He could see the kids, but they couldn't see him from his side of the one-way mirror glass.

The boy was still laying down upon the concrete slab the nurse had placed him on to heal his wound. The girl was fully awake and leaning against the stone waiting for him to wake up. She had a big bruise on her forehead from the crash with the armored knights but otherwise she was fully healed. The boy was covered in bandages but suffered no major wounds. However, it would be awhile before his wounds would fully heal enough to allow him to train for battle.

“I will take charge of things from here, Lucinda. You are dismissed.” he remarked waving his hand towards the door.

She nodded curtly and did a quick bow before leaving the

room. He continued to watch the kids as he stood stiffly by the glass, awaiting company. He didn't have to wait long before he heard the door open and watched as a frail old woman walked into the room. She made her way slowly to his side balancing her one cane with a tennis ball at the end against the floor.

"Hello mother, you look well." he said curtly.

"Yeah, yeah, cut the small talk and show me those kids you were telling me about!" she replied scoldingly. Derick held back his irritation, it seemed his mother would never stop treating him like a child.

"Here they are. I've seen them in action. They have the potential to be great warriors! That is with the proper training of course. However, the problem is..."

"That they would never work for a knucklehead like you because you kidnapped them."

He glared at her for interrupting him but nodded curtly.

"Yeah well that is a minor obstacle. They are still young which makes them fully susceptible to the procedure."

"So, there wouldn't be any fatal side effects?" he remarked questioningly, remembering the issue with their previous victims.

"Of course not! Their minds haven't yet developed a strong enough hold on their memories yet. However, as they grow older, I won't be able to erase their memories again. Well not without provoking unwarranted side effects. Therefore, you must make sure that they never find out who they truly are."

"Yes, yes, I know. How soon can you begin?"

"Right now. Take them outside and bring them into this room one at a time. Bring the girl first and then I'll work on the boy." she said smiling over at the kids.

She sat gently at a nearby table resting her cane against the

armrest of her chair. Derick left the room and unlocked the door to the glass enclosure. As he walked in, he picked up a cup of water from one of the two food trays for the prisoners. The food remained untouched as he had suspected.

The girl stood in front of the boy in an effort to shield him from Derick. Hazel wasn't going to let Derick hurt James again. However, there wasn't much she could do as Derick yanked her away from him. She screamed in defiance and thrashed under his hand but couldn't get free of his iron grip. He took the cup of water and splashed the cold water against the boy's face. James woke up with a start crying out as he felt the rushing pain from his wounds.

Derick yanked him mercilessly off the slab and he nearly collapsed on the floor as he was pulled away towards the door. James did his best to struggle against him, but everything hurt, and his vision was beginning to blur again. He stumbled as Derick threw him at a nearby guard who held him down. Then Derick pulled Hazel closer towards another door. What was he planning to do with her? He couldn't just let him take her away!

"No!... Let her go!... Hazel!" he cried out knowing he was powerless to do anything else but watch as they took her away from him.

She was struggling against Derick's iron grip trying to escape and run back to James to protect him, but she knew that her struggles were in vain because Derick was far stronger than her. She screamed as Derick finally pulled her away, slamming the door shut behind him.

James stood there for a while hoping that Hazel would miraculously come bursting through the door and escape but after a full minute of standing there, she never came out, his

waiting was only greeted by the sounds of silence. Finally, he collapsed defeated onto the guard holding him, almost passing out from the pain of his wounds.

He was truly hoping that this was all just a terrible nightmare that he would eventually wake up from. Unfortunately, the longer he stared at the door the more real the situation felt. He knew he wasn't dreaming but somehow, he truly wished he was. He stood there in silence, knowing Derick would come back for him too. By now, the guard had given up on restraining him, knowing it was just a waste of effort. It was clear from the very beginning that James's injuries wouldn't allow him to get very far.

Now that the guard was no longer holding him, James leaned against the wall instead. He began inspecting his bandages and noticed that one of his wounds had reopened. The bandage was seeping through with sticky, red blood and he shuddered. Was he going to die? What did Derick want with him and Hazel? I mean, he was injured and could barely walk. Why in the world was he still keeping him alive?

He froze as Hazel reemerged from the room. She walked into the open hallway followed by Derick who was wearing a wicked grin. Goosebumps flooded his body when he saw that smile. What had he done to her? She seemed the same as before, but he knew that something wasn't quite right with the way she was looking at him. Her eyes seemed too carefree and oblivious.

"Hazel, are you okay?" James questioned her, fearing the worst.

"Yeah why wouldn't I be?" she remarked gleefully and stared at him speculatively.

James didn't answer. Was she joking around? Why was she so happy?

“Daddy why is my brother bleeding?” She asked Derick as she stared at James’s bloody bandages.

Brother? Daddy? James’s heart shattered. Derick had brainwashed her into believing they were a family. How had he managed to do that? He wasn’t sure how but all he knew for sure was that he would be the next victim.

James tried to run away from the room despite his wounds but was easily stopped by the guard who had held him down before. He didn’t want to forget everything; he didn’t want to think of Derick as his father. He absolutely loathed him for what he had done to him, his family, and to all the innocent people of Lyrion. He didn’t want anything to do with this man!

Derick let go of Hazel and walked towards him. James struggled in vain to protect his memories as he was dragged away towards the horrifying room. He tried screaming and fighting his way to freedom but the only thing he accomplished with that was intensifying the pain of his wounds. He watched as Hazel covered her ears from the screaming. She was definitely confused about what was going on, it wasn’t just an act.

Then Derick pulled him into that awful room, and he felt all his hopes sink as the door slammed shut behind him. Derick let him go and pushed him towards a nearby chair. James stumbled forward looking around the room. He had expected some kind of laboratory with mad scientists holding pointy objects trying to mess with people’s brains. He wasn’t expecting an encounter with an elderly lady sitting patiently on a chair. He stared at her confused. What was going on? Who was this woman? She gestured for him to sit on the chair in front of her.

“Please take a seat my boy.” she replied.

Her voice carried a tone of authority despite having grown

hoarse over the years. He hesitated. Should he listen to her? Well he wasn't really given much of a choice as Derick practically shoved him into the chair. He sat down with a cry; his eyes began to water as another wound reopened.

"Now, Derick, that isn't any way to treat your son, is it?" she said curtly.

His heart skipped a beat as he stared at the old woman.

"He's not my father!" James spat out in defiance.

The old woman merely smiled back at him as she pulled out her dream catcher. The dreamcatcher itself was black as night but the threads were rainbow colored interlocking in an amazing display of color. When he looked into it, he witnessed a brief memory of Hazel hugging her family but as soon as the image had come it disappeared as if it had never been there. How could that be? It looked almost like magic, but magic didn't exist. Maybe he was just imagining things, he must still be delirious from all the blood he had lost.

"Oh, you like it don't you? Well this little trinket of mine was carved out of the stone of a meteor that fell into Lyrion on the night of a full moon. Each string was plucked off a dodo bird's feathers before those poor creatures became extinct. So here you see two wonderful things put together into one extraordinary trinket. Although without me it is nothing more than what I tell you, a mere trinket." He stared at her skeptically, what was she going off about?

"You see I have developed the rather useful ability to use telepathy to read human thoughts"

James cringed at this. How much of his thoughts could she read?

"Well to answer your question, I can read any of your thoughts, even the ones hidden inside that little subconscious

of yours. But, for me, reading thoughts alone wasn't enough. So, one day I decided to do a little experimenting and I realized that I could do more than just read them. I could manipulate them as well!"

James clutched the edge of the table searching the room for some way out there but there was none. He was trapped in a room with a nut job!

"But in order to manipulate memories I need a place to store the originals or else I risk confusing the real ones from the fake ones." She lifted the dreamcatcher for effect, but James just sat there dumbfounded. Certainly, today had been the craziest day of his entire life.

"Oh well, it doesn't matter anyways because by the time I'm done with you. You won't remember any of this"

Then she grabbed his arm and pulled him closer to her as she placed her clammy palm on his forehead. For a moment he felt nothing but her hand but then he felt his memories rush by inside of his head until there was nothing. She pulled out the dreamcatcher placing one wiry finger against one of its delicate threads. His memories traveled inside it as if they were feeding the thing. James would have done something to take them back, but he felt empty and drained, as if his entire identity had been taken away from him, which it had. So, he just stared.

Then she placed her hand on his forehead one more time and a rush of new memories flooded into him, except all of these were clearly fake. Then she pulled her hand away and he passed out.

"There it is done. Wake him up and check it out for yourself!" she told Derick gesturing towards the boy.

Derick went and gently shook him awake. James woke up with a start. He looked around the room in a daze but when his

eyes caught sight of Derick he beamed.

“Dad, where am I?” he asked, confused.

Why couldn’t he remember why he was in this strange room? And why was he bleeding?

“Nowhere important my son, but don’t worry. When we leave this room, I’ll take you to go see your sister Hazel. Then I will show you both your new bedrooms. I’ll send a nurse to tend to your wounds once we’re there. This is going to be our new home!” He remarked, taking the boy’s hand and leading him outside.

When they both stepped outside, James met up with his sister again and this time they both smiled at each other.

“Is he feeling better now daddy?” Hazel asked Derick as he grabbed her hand with his

other arm and led them down the hall.

“Of course, sweetie. You’re both going to love it here, you’ll see.”



The Story Continues...

Sneak Peek into Part 2 of the Story:

- ❖ Angela Stone and James Blade both discover they have special abilities
- ❖ Daniel falls in love with a guy named Xavier
- ❖ The “Other World” is a term Lyrions use to describe the 7 unmoving continents on Earth
- ❖ Two characters from the “other world” will discover Lyrion
- ❖ The two old women in the book both have special abilities and are related in some way
- ❖ The deadlands (look at map) was once the beautiful forest paths that the royals used to escape Lovegood castle, but it was later burnt down and is now a barren wasteland that vipers use to live in.
- ❖ 6 main characters engage on a quest to finish the signing



About the Author

Talia Rejes Diaz created this book excerpt as a senior in high school. She lives in Florida with her with her two amazing parents, crazy supportive sister, and adoring fishy pets who are surprisingly very needy. She is a Track and Field varsity runner who gains most of her ideas for writing from running and through her faith as a christian. This book is a small excerpt of the book series that she has always dreamed of publishing and hopes to one day publish in full upon its completion. She also loves spending relaxing vacations by reading a good book and hanging out with friends and family.