

Lightning scorched the heavens, jagged veins of white fire darting across the charcoal sky and falling to the brown, rain-choked earth below. A swollen mass of darkness carpeted the sky overhead, fleecy and black with silvery streaks of roiling light, threatening to buckle beneath the destructive revelry of the Goddess. Like a leviathan, the Eternal Storm coiled over the land in a wet, undulating curtain of gloom, throwing wide it's Stygian jaws and devouring the yellow sun.

Sela dashed across the sodden field as fast as her long legs would carry her, the withering flame of fatigue licking hotter with every step. There was no time to stop or rest or even catch her breath. *They'd* find her if she did, and her body no longer possessed the strength nor her mind the will to fight off the horde nipping at her heels.

They'd hounded her continuously for several moons now, the precise number Sela had stopped counting. Sellswords, assassins, soldiers, and even those with no military inclination - but a desire for coin - took up arms against her. When the Shadow Emperor offered a bounty large enough to rival the coffers of some *nations*, few were willing to let the opportunity pass by regardless of estate.

Despite herself, Sela hoped that the mob wouldn't be crazy enough to follow her into a raging storm, that they might perhaps value their own life more than pieces of metal. The bounty would make the collector one of the wealthiest, and in turn most powerful, men alive, perhaps only dwarfed by the Shadow Emperor himself, whose wealth was said to be unlimited.

What her hunters didn't know was that, to the Emperor, her life was worth far more than the absurd sum of gold it would cost. Her death would bring an end to the Blade clan, the eldest bloodline in all the world, and with it sever the last thread of hope for the world. The Prophecy - the very last line of defense against the machinations of the Shadow Emperor - and the collective dreams of all who'd sacrificed their lives to protect it, lived or died with her.

Not at all too much for a young kitsune, only just witnessing her

twenty-second winter, to carry by herself. From the hushed whispers of tavern folk and the dubious recordings of ancient scribes, Sela'd gathered that the Shadow Emperor, in one form or another depending on who was asked, had existed since the ascent of recorded time more than a thousand years ago. None of the previous Prophecy-bearers had succeeded, and yet so many had given so much in the belief that this time would be different. What choice did she have but to carry the millstone of hope they'd borne upon her? What did her own desires matter before such a monumental destiny?

Strands of white light plunged through the darkness around her, like tangled lengths of string set ablaze and cast down from the heavens. Sela might've appreciated the storm at a distance, as often nature did manage to captivate her, but not while she was in the belly of the beast. Any lingering fascination vanished as a chaos of dirt and stone erupted beside her and wherever else the sky touched the earth. Each caress left deep furrows in the ground, where loamy black rain pooled until it brimmed over.

The world screamed shrill cries of agony beneath the bombardment, crashing into her in waves of invisible force that seemed desperate to send her tumbling to the mud. Sela's vulpine ears lay flat against her head, trying to burrow themselves under her pink tresses, seeking shelter from the shock waves and the deafening barrage of thunder.

Bits of stone fired like missiles through the air, tiny flashes of shimmering gray in the night. Small as they were, the pebbles ripped through her priestly vestments like tiny knives, scoring her flesh as she ran across the field until her white robe was dyed a rain-darkened red. The stench of burning earth and fresh blood filled her lungs with each breath, a potent blend of smoke and copper that made her heart feel less like an organ and more like molten steel upon a blacksmith's anvil.

"Finally arrived, have you?" A deep, powerful voice resonated in her mind, shoving aside her thoughts and loud enough to drown out the thunder. She froze immediately, partially to stop from leaping out of her skin at the sudden intrusion, but mostly to find out *who* had done the intruding,

and more importantly, from where. In this accursed, dark storm, the latter might prove to be the most difficult task.

Sela recognized the magic, no more than a crude form of speech projection. It wasn't telepathy, their minds weren't linked, the words simply passed from his location to hers along a direct, magic-assisted course. Her ears couldn't discern it's origin, the voice projecting from too far a distance, which she guessed was the entire point. If it were brighter, an ethereal trail would connect the two of them, but in darkness there'd be no hope of locating it.

A chill crept up her spine, one she couldn't blame on the frigid wind. Taunting her with a skill even the fledgling mages in the Libraries could master, either he just wanted to scare her, or he was extremely confident that he had no need for the element of surprise. She preferred it when only the storm was trying to kill her - at least then she knew where her death might come from.

"I was beginning to worry that one of the hired thugs had claimed you first." The voice jumped into her head again, at the very fringe of detection. Teasingly, it hovered along the boundary between clarity and obscurity, making her hands ball up into fists.

Sela tried stepping forward, backward, and to either side, but the voice seemed to move with her, never growing any more or any less perceptible. It infuriated her, and more so that she knew it was the reaction he was looking for.

"My thanks for making it this far, it really would've been a shame if someone else killed you, after all the good times we've shared." He said and laughed. Dully, Sela realized he must've been intentionally projecting that too. "Think about all the time you and I have spent together, we're practically mates without the ceremony! And who has time for that, anyway? Chasing after each other like star-crossed lovers under a moonlit sky, me killing your friends and you trying so admirably hard to stop me. It's the making of a wonderful ballad, I can hear it already! I alone should have

the right to end your miserable life, don't you agree? It's really the only fitting end to our little fairy tale."

"To the Nine Hells with you, Luther!" She yelled into the void, finally aware of her stalker's identity. There was no response, just the cackle of thunder above and the whisper of the wind.

What was Luther even doing here? Of all people, why did *he* have to be the one to find her?

Her senses struggled to delve through the darkness, desperate with both confusion and horror. But fear had always been a strong motivator in the past and this time was no different, the murky fog lifting from her eyes as her heart raced faster and faster. Thick black mud squelched beneath her aching feet, the windstorm blasted her tirelessly, and the icy chill carved through her without remorse. None of it helped her locate the Shadow Emperor's son.

Twin orbs of vermilion appeared opposite Sela, far across the field, set amid a sea of fur to match the cloud-swollen sky, like a pair of distant campfires on a starless night. A stroke of the storm's fury cast his lupine form in a spectral silhouette, clearly illuminating his massive physique despite the considerable distance between them.

In his fist, the coruscating steel of an ancient claymore shone in the dimming light, as long as the wolf was tall with twin crimson tassels floating freely from the gold-crusted pommel. The weapon was painfully familiar to her.

Many years ago, the sword had belonged to her brother, Auron, and before that, their father Caine had borne it into battle. Avalera - 'Sunseeker' in the ancient language, from a time before recorded history - one of the eldest heirlooms of the Blade family. Her father had told her the blade was forged at the turning point of a war from antiquity, when the Blades had first risen to power and snuffed darkness from the world. And now, it was held by the very darkness it had been created to destroy.

As the flash of lightning faded away, so did the wolf, seeming to meld

into the shadows without even his lambent eyes to track him with. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her arm and immediately regretted it, the limb slick with a combination of rain, sweat, and blood that stung sharply and did little to improve her vision. When she opened them again, there was no sign of Luther.

"You look lost, Harbinger. Surely the child of Prophecy isn't hindered by a little rain...?" His voice penetrated her mind again. Her breath caught sharply in her throat as the land brightened beneath a flare of lightning and there he was, sprinting towards her. Laughter bounced around inside her head as he disappeared once more into the blackness.

He's trying to distract me. Damn the storm, I have to focus.

In a moment of clarity, Sela started to count the rhythm of her heart, using her body as a rudimentary timepiece, to track the interval between light and darkness. There was nothing precise about it, but there was a pattern and even the roughest of estimations would assist her in tracking his concealed movements. Specifically, how much ground he could cover by the next flash.

Knowing that, Sela could keep enough distance between them that he would be unable to surprise her, without needing to see him at all times. Her hope was that the lightning would flash with enough time for her to react when he inevitably came for her.

As the light flared again, Sela found Luther again and quickly began to work out the details. There weren't landmarks to measure by, and part of her wondered if he'd thought that far ahead. Luther was devious, the intricacy of his schemes seemed to know no limit. Nothing to be done about that now, she thought, made her best guess on the distance and hoped it was close enough. All that was left was to hope for the best and be ready for the worst. How she loved to be forced into that mentality time and time again...

Luther was close enough for her to make out more details. The first thing she noticed was his clothing, or the lack thereof. By his standards,

the garments were spartan, a gold-colored vest left unbuttoned and fluttering in the wind and white trousers that ended just above his bare feet. There was none of the formal, tailored costumes and opulent jewelry that usually adorned the princely wolf, clothing she'd grown accustomed to seeing him in when they'd fought in the past.

It occurred to her that most of the time, she'd been the one to attack him, trying to catch him when he least expected it. This outfit must've more closely resembled his battle raiment, or as much of it as Luther was willing to get waterlogged. Sela still didn't understand why he was even out here in this perilous storm, directly risking his life and for what, exactly? Wasn't the entire point of placing such a lucrative bounty on her head that the Shadow Emperor - and by proxy his sons - didn't have to do the dangerous, or at least time-consuming work of chasing her down himself?

No, I won't let him kill me, not without a fight. Sela grit her teeth, snarling primarily at herself. After numerous defeats by Luther, she'd unconsciously let herself believe this might be the end. To the Hells with that.

I didn't come so far just to die in this wretched storm.

Sela slipped the translucent-crystal staff from her sash and squeezed it so tightly her knuckles wailed. The pain helped her focus and ignore the rest of her body's strident protesting. Waiting for so long had given her time to feel the lingering effects of traveling through the storm, the small but numerous cuts in her skin and the deep burn in her exhausted legs. Once small discomforts at the back of her mind had become difficult to ignore, and with each breath her body grew tenser and tighter, desperate to move again and spur her blood to flowing. At this rate, she wasn't certain her body would be able to hold up, much less keep going.

There was no sign of Luther or the lightning for a long time. The din of the tempest above did nothing to drown out the hammering in her chest. Something between a whistle and a shriek had begun to ring through her

head, the ceaseless, roaring thunder finally overpowering her sensitive ears. The noise reduced every sound to little more than a whisper, effectively shutting off another of her senses and leaving her alone with the timid mutter of her trembling heart.

Did he figure me out? What is he doing? By all the Hells, just show yourself al-

Lightning flashed, and Luther was above her, the sheen from the claymore nearly blinding as it arced down at her head. On instinct alone, Sela raised her staff up over her head, clenching her limbs tight and preparing for the coming impact.

Sword and stave met in the center of the storm-ravaged field, loud enough to penetrate the haze upon her ears. The lightning blazed so brightly that for a moment Sela thought it was the sun at last cresting the distant horizon. It allowed her to see every sinuous movement of his powerful body as the black wolf bore down on her, then darted backwards as his feet touched the ground.

"Ah, there is some fight in you after all!" Luther said into her mind, continuing to maintain the connection.

In the ephemeral light, Sela could at last see the trail of magical essence, like the first strand of a spider's web. In a fit of defiance, she reached out with her mind and seized the line, projecting her words at him for once. "You will regret chasing me, Usurper! I'll show you just how dangerous a cornered animal can be!"

"Oh yes, Harbinger, please! Show me precisely what the Nexus is capable of! Show me why so many have died, so that you may yet live!"

Luther raised his blade in an overhead slash, taking the grip in both hands and charging at her. The air hissed as it was torn asunder by steel, and it was all Sela could do to avoid the vicious attack, nearly losing her footing in slick mud.

Between breaths, Sela dug her bare feet into the wet loam and found purchase. Her hips pivoted in a lithe motion, like a tiger gathering before

a pounce, and Sela vaulted forward, hauling her staff across her body and swinging at his head.

Luther's body jerked into a quick duck and nearly avoided the blow, but it caught him at the base of the ear, splitting the flesh nearly clean through. He faltered, the grin erased from his lips as he stumbled to the side and clutched at his wound, a thin trail of red seeping across his knuckles.

This was the opportunity she desperately needed. If she could deal with Luther quickly she still had the time and the energy to elude the mob behind her and get away. She just needed him out of the way.

Without waiting for him to recover, Sela twirled in the mud, using the momentum of her previous swing to drive her body through an adroit pirouette. Her staff hummed through the air as she turned, the shaft trembling and beginning to bow from the sheer force she poured into it, quickly homing in on Luther.

In a blur of motion, Luther wheeled around, the steel of his sword catching her staff midair with a piercing shriek of grinding metal. The noise made him growl and wince, but he didn't so much as budge from the collision. Holding his weapon in just a single hand, the much-larger wolf was strong enough to stop her attack cold, despite the added force. He covered his damaged ear with the other hand, holding the rent flesh still as well as he could in the gale.

Lightning flashed nearby, and Sela noticed the grin spread plainly across his muzzle again. Panic bit her deeply, its venom plunging into her veins. She threw the whole of her strength into their clash, pushing through the mud and driving her feet forward, leaving deep furrows in her wake. Slowly his body began to slide backward, his arm trembling from exertion, and she redoubled her efforts, pushing the double-bladed weapon closer and closer towards his exposed chest.

In the waning light, Sela noticed strange black ribbons in the air by the wolf. They rose from Luther's sword arm and weaved around the blade,

coiling over the steel without actually touching it. The powerful wind of the storm responded to it, turning their efforts against Sela, rather than capriciously across the field. It felt like trying to hold her ground amid a raging river. She could barely keep her eyes open, squinting through the gale's sudden fury.

Through narrowed lids, Sela watched in horror as the ribbons attached to Avalera, wrapping the sword entirely in a sheath of lustrous black. Luther's strength surged against her, kindled anew by the squall driving her back. Her feet slid backward through the furrows they'd carved earlier in the mud, as her staff was thrust firmly back into her.

Damn him, what has he done? I can't even detect a hint of magic in the air. It's like he's suddenly in control of the storm!

Despite the opposition of all Sela's might, Luther thrust the crystal staff into her chest, catching her between the ribs and ripping the breath from her lungs. He didn't stop there, continuing to press her staff harder into her chest as she struggled vainly against his overwhelming strength. Sela cried out, desperately trying to hold her ground against the advancing wolf, now less than a step from her face.

Luther had baited her and she'd fallen for it, thinking him more wounded than he was. Letting himself be struck had boldly snapped closed his trap and now she was completely within his control. He just had to wait for the moment her limbs succumbed to fatigue. The fight had been over the moment she'd thought Luther might be defeated by a single, solid blow. She should've known not to try and rush past such a shrewd, and extremely lethal foe.

Their eyes locked for a moment, a victorious gleam flashing from his orange stare. Luther must've seen the recognition in her eyes.

"You lose."

His words sank into her mind with the horrifying ease of a predator's fangs, plunging into the throat of it's next meal. Luther took his sword in both hands and ripped through their stalemate with such force that Sela was

hurled backward through the air.

Her body drifted in the wind for a long, eerily-serene while, as if she were a leaf swept up in the breeze, before an abrupt reunion with the thick, sodden earth brought her back to painful reality.

Utterly spent, Sela just stared up into the storm, watching lightning arc across the buckling sky while the rain pelted her face, stinging like the tiny pebbles whipped at her by scornful village children. She'd been weak then, and she was still weak now. How exactly was she supposed to save the world, again?

The Prophecy won't give you strength, Sela. She closed her eyes and recalled the words, as if she were reading an inscription off the back of her eyelids. *But, so long as you believe, never can light be extinguished from the world.*

The one who'd told her that must not have been too familiar with this particular part of the world. If there really was any light here, it sure wasn't for her to see. Even the lightning had abandoned her. Sela groaned, every part of her body aching in some way or another, and started to lift herself from the swampy turf. Giving up started to sound better and better every second she allowed herself to lay there.

Powerful fingers curled around her throat, cinching closed her windpipe even as her hands grabbed at them in resistance. Sela felt her weight shift upward, and even in darkness, she could see the outline of Luther's forearm. Following the curve of the shadow-swathed limb, her gaze locked with his baleful stare; it wasn't the first time she'd seen that look. It struck her that it might very well be the last.

"Why aren't you using it?" His calm, glossy voice penetrated the soundless veil covering her ears. It was the first time she'd heard him speak inside the storm. While it certainly wasn't louder than the thunder, somehow he drowned it out, as if his words refused to be muted. "You said yourself you had something to show me, why are you refusing to now?"

Fear crawled in her veins as his grip tightened further. In a

desperate effort, Sela clenched her staff and thrust at his exposed chest. Luther caught it with his other hand; the hand that should've been occupied by his sword. At some point he'd must've tucked it away and she hadn't had a chance to notice. As effortlessly as Luther picked her up, he tore the weapon from her grasp and slung it into the darkness behind him.

"This is the best the last true archmage can do? I expected so much more from you..." His fingers wrapped fully around her throat, choking out the last of her air as anger flared in his face. "Did you not think I came here for a reason, Harbinger?! You think I enjoy being back here in this abhorrent storm?! I certainly didn't come here for you, I wanted to see the Nexus! But you can't even see it, can you?" He smacked her hard enough to jerk her head completely to the side. "How dare you bring me out here for nothing!"

Sela gurgled out a bitter reply, both hands straining to loosen even one finger from her throat while her feet stretched for the earth, for any shred of leverage she could get.

The black wolf sighed and closed his eyes, as if he were deciding her fate. "You really have grown up to become a consistent disappointment. I used to enjoyed our skirmishes, but where I have ascended into my birthright... for some reason you have rejected yours. It's almost as if, without my brother to hold your hand, you no longer care whether you live or die. If that's the case, I can relieve you from your self-imposed misery."

She tried to dig her claws into his hands, and Luther smacked her again, the sound ringing louder in her ear than the thunder above her head. The entire right side of her face screamed with a fiery pain that burned hotter with every beat of her heart.

"You know, I really think I've grown tired of waiting for this so-called Prophecy to take shape. I'm not sure what I expected, to tell you the truth, but I had hoped that you might somehow make things difficult for my father." Luther sighed again, opening his eyes again. They had lost

their luster, now they held only murder. "My brother was a fool to resist our father, to believe in his foolish dreams. He was even more the fool for believing that you were somehow the key to realizing them."

Master Naushka. The man who'd saved her life and taught her everything she knew. Even more than all of that, the white wolf had been the only family she had ever had the opportunity to know, though they were not of blood. Naushka had given everything for her and for the Prophecy that had weighed so heavily upon his heart. Nightly it had visited him, showing him glimpses of events that had to be in order for the light to be restored. The pain of knowing exactly when and how he would die, and knowing that to try to avoid it would mean the end of the world, or the death of the child you'd nurtured as if she were your own...

He wasn't a fool. He trusted me to finish what he started. I... I cannot die like this!

Something made a clicking noise in her mind, and she felt something start to seep into her chest. For a moment she thought it was blood, that he'd stabbed her, but then a sensation she'd never known before grew quickly apparent. An invigorating, undeniable power surged through her, Sela imagined it might be what being struck by lightning felt like without the pain. For the first time in a long time - maybe the first time ever - Sela felt... alive. Dangerous. Most of all, Sela felt whole.

Before he knew it, Sela ripped open Luther's hold from her neck and shoved him powerfully, nearly throwing him off his feet as he toppled backward. Her eyes opened wide, venomous and frenzied, almost in shock of the results. There was no denying the strength that coursed her veins.

Like water bursting through a dam, her senses poured open and flooded her with a deluge of detail, some previously concealed by the storm and some simply beyond her perception. It filled her mind at an alarming rate, but somehow that must've expanded as well, allowing her to process every bit of new information with ease.

In her eyes, the smothering darkness had brightened into a vivid,

lavender twilight, as if the sun were to rise at any moment. Now that she could see it clearly, the storm looked as if someone had overturned an inkwell upon a grey canvas, flooding the heavens with a vast pool of shimmering black. Long tendrils reached away from the storm, towards the daylight to the north as if seeking out the still-pure parts of the world.

The haze lifted from her ears and Sela noticed her hearing had sharpened dramatically as well. She could discern the individual taps of raindrops upon the earth, the crackle of lightning as it singed the air, and even Luther's hastened breath, from the clamor of thunder.

The heavy odor of smoke and blood combined with other, less noticeable scents - timber and flowers of the forest at the bottom of the hill, the brackish sea beyond the cliff south of the field, and even a subtle hint of the black wolf's musky scent. Each sense stood separate in her mind, while also combining into an elaborate mosaic of detail that left little to nothing beyond her perception.

Master Naushka... I don't know what this is, but it came to me when I thought of you. Thank you again. She let her eyes dip closed for a moment as she slipped into thought.

Angling her body slightly, so that her right shoulder faced Luther, Sela slid her feet apart into an agile combat stance, knees bent and her posture leaned almost imperceptibly onto her heels. Her fingers extended fully and pressed together, held in line with her arm as if every bone from her elbow to her fingertips were fused together.

I swear, master, I won't let your dreams die. You've given me too much, it's the very least I can do to repay your kindness. Your... sacrifice.

Sela's silver eyes opened again, glowing as they stared Luther down. Not from a passing glare of the storm, but of their own inner radiance, piercing the darkness that had not abated, but hindered her no longer.

"I'll show you who the fool is yet, Usurper." She said, not waiting

for him to make his move this time. Sela charged at the black wolf, bright coils of light spiraling over her limbs, pulsing in rhythm with her heart.
