

Lightning arced across the cloud-swollen sky.

Sela's chest heaved, gulping down the frigid air as fast as her lungs would fill, then spitting it out and starting all over again. Despite the lingering fatigue in her limbs, weighing on her like an extra blanket in winter, her body tingled with a strange, frantic energy, as if the storm's lightning coursed not over her head, but through her veins.

What was this power, anyway? In desperation, the fox had flung open a floodgate in her mind, and out poured a source of energy and strength that she'd never known was there. It surged into her body from the depths of her consciousness, begging her to drink deep from its cup, to gorge herself on the bolstering nectar and lose herself in a powerful, yet intoxicating embrace.

Already she felt the effects of this mysterious blessing. More than simply strength, it steeled her mind, gave her confidence in herself and her abilities, and silenced her doubts. It was unknown to her, yet it felt intimately familiar - warm, comforting even, like she was in the company of a close friend or companion. It reminded her of better days, when her friends were still alive and she didn't spend her days running just to stay alive.

There would be no more running this day.

Her silver eyes pierced the veil of roiling darkness around her, vigilant for even the slightest movement from the black wolf across the field. Sela trembled with anticipation, desperately trying to hold herself back while her body pleaded to be cut loose from its leash.

Why was he just watching her? The result of their first exchange was still fresh in the fox's mind - nearly having the life choked from her - and even her newfound strength wasn't enough to convince her to take the initiative again. The cost of underestimating Luther once had nearly been her life, she couldn't afford to make that mistake twice.

The wolf stood several strides away, the lambent glow of his blazing orange eyes unblinking in the driving rain, and his smug, toothy grin was

like a bandit's mask draped over his maw. He leaned forward on Avalera, the ancient claymore, its wide tip buried in the dirt while both his hands lay draped over the pommel, a stance that spoke more of amusement than any desire for defense. His demeanor did little to assuage her concerns.

How long had they been fighting for? Time meant nothing in this accursed storm, there was no passage of suns or moons, no stars or bright sky to facilitate even a guess. Sela had been about a half-day ahead of her pursuers, before running into Luther, and they hadn't caught up yet. That was the best measurement she had, and it was dubious at best. At worst, it could be fatal. If she was caught between them *and* Luther, there'd be little hope of survival.

Perhaps he knew the mob was close, and that's why he sat back and waited for her to strike? Sela shook the thought from her head. No, he was prideful to an extreme - never would he accept help from anyone else. If they started closing in, the wolf would hasten his attacks, to make sure they had no chance to interfere.

In a way, that was a blessing; though it only mattered if she defeated him, and quickly at that. Even if they *did* arrive and he forbid them to attack, the mob would pounce the moment Luther wasn't able to stop them. Though he seemed content to let Sela collect herself from their last exchange of blows, both physically and mentally, so hopefully that meant the mob was far enough away that they wouldn't be an issue.

Around them, the Eternal Storm raged on. Wherever the sky's fire touched the ground, barrages of razor-edged stone erupted from the resulting craters in the land, shrieking through the air in all directions. The tiny missiles slammed into an ethereal wall of force around both Sela and Luther, sizzling up into cinders against a veil of white light around the fox or disintegrating to ash upon the wolf's thin ribbons of black.

Every passing moment was too much to bear for the fox, the energy welling up inside her until it felt ready to spill over. Tiny sparks of lightning began to crackle around her, jumping from her body to the

translucent shell of light surrounding her, only to fire back harmlessly at her or in another random direction.

*To the Hells with this, I can't wait forever and he knows it. If he won't come after me... what choice do I have? Master Naushka, guide me. Show me what this power you've given me can do!*

Sela took hold of the energy inside her, grasping it in her mind like she was clutching her staff in her hands. It felt alive, beating in rhythm with her heart, pulsing and churning like blood. Despite never feeling it before, already Sela knew how to direct and channel it. It was no more complicated than moving her tails or making a fist. Above all, it came to her just as naturally as breathing or blinking.

Before she could talk herself out of it, Sela burst into a dash, churning up the mud behind her as her legs blurred beneath her lithe form. Despite the distance between them, she cleared it in two beats of her thundering heart. It was almost too fast, her mind hadn't figured out what she intended to do once she reached him yet.

Reflexes and training from years past took the reins. Sela planted the side of her foot in the muck, a hair's breadth from Luther's sword, and thrust her momentum forward. As her weight shifted, she leapt into the air and spun herself around, leveraging the full-force of her charge into a downward arc of her leg - her heel dropping like a hammer over the wolf's head.

At the last moment, Luther moved, his feet carrying him backwards as his hands gripped tight onto the sword. He planted and used the flat of the blade to stop the attack, bone crashing against steel with a furious clash.

Sela didn't even flinch, white light covering her striking foot and absorbing the bone-breaking force. Still hanging in mid-air, she placed her feet, then her hands onto the flat steel and, with a flash of light that would rival true lightning, Sela hurled herself feet-first at him.

Somehow, Luther ducked, flattening himself nearly to the ground to

avoid her. He lost his handle on the sword in the process, landing in the mud with a muffled, squelching thud and sinking underneath the surface. The wolf cursed and scrambled back to his feet, then started digging his bulky weapon out of the muck.

Sela landed with her back turned to Luther, her ears pricking up at the sound of the fallen sword. If she could force him to abandon the sword... she had a chance. In one fluid motion she turned, took a long stride towards him and vaulted again into the air.

The fox, fueled by her aura, turned herself through a full spin, then another, the ethereal white veil surrounding her collapsing in at her call, brightening and growing less translucent the closer it was to her body. She finished the second spin, facing Luther again, and Sela shot her leg out. Behind it, she leveled the entirety of the strange power, draping it in the veil of light as it arced towards the wolf.

Luther freed the claymore from the earth, turning and raising it like a shield, hiding his body behind the blade to try and defend himself. He didn't get a chance to duck away completely.

Her foot caught fast on the side of his head, between the ear and the jaw - very near to where her staff had landed earlier - The bone underneath buckled slightly, before his head whipped violently back and to the side, followed by his entire body. Luther spun a full revolution in the air, and half of another, before an abrupt, face-first landing in the mud, sending water and dirt flying out from the impact.

Her heart raced as she stared down at his still form, loud enough to drown out the clamor of thunder above. Tiny streams of crimson trailed down her forelimbs, like rainwater trickling over the face of a cliff, collecting at the raw tips of her fingers and dripping into the muddy sludge below. She barely felt the cuts her body suffered from the storm earlier, freshly reopened from the exertion. The only thing on her mind was awe.

How in the Nine Hells had she done that?

She didn't dare hope he was dead - the thought of it was preposterous. She'd never seen anyone wound Luther, not more than a scratch here or a glancing blow there. Luther was invincible... or at least, he had been.

He still didn't move.

In some dark corner of her mind, it occurred to Sela that she should run now, while she still could. To count her blessings this day and live to fight another time. But if she killed him now... Naushka and so many others would finally be avenged. All the faith they'd invested in her would finally have paid off. What if, whenever they'd next meet, she couldn't tap into this power again? This might be her best opportunity to make good on her promises.

Still nothing. Not even a twitch, or the slightest heave of his chest.

Sela took a cautious step forward, watching his entire body for any signs of life. Another step, then another, until she was right beside him. Slowly, she lifted her foot from the mud and moved it towards his head, intent to hold it down until she was completely convinced his flame was snuffed out.

She'd never killed anyone before. Even someone as horrible as Luther, Sela found it difficult to summon the courage, now faced with the task. Muck dripped from her limb as it floated over to his head, paused, and then firmly planted against the back of his skull and pressed down.

*Please just... be over...*

A black ribbon wrapped tightly around her steadying leg's ankle and yanked forward, ripping it from the earth and into the air. Sela shrieked and tried to remove her foot from his head and steady herself, but it slipped in the mud and sent her sprawling. Her back hit the ground hard, and before she could even scream, Luther was upon her, hands firmly wrapped around her wrists while his body pinned her to the earth.

The look in his eyes buried the scream in her throat, seizing her chest so tight with fear that naught came out but a sharp, whistling noise. They were feral with intent, framed by a combination of brown mud and

scarlet blood speckling his damp black fur, while blood dripped from his snarling maw onto her azure fur.

"Cute." He said through a labored breath, the word rumbling from his chest, thick with malice and exhaustion. "I see you *have* picked up some tricks from my idiot brother. He's the only one I knew to do all that hopping and twirling you like so damn much." Luther growled viciously as she tried to rip her hands from his grip. "Me, I happen to like a more... direct approach. A sword kills people with much more... certainty."

Sela threw her head forward, but he jerked back from her feeble attempt to headbutt him. In the confusion, the fox yanked on her arms and managed to loose one, but before she could do anything with it, Luther wrapped his emptied hand around her muzzle and slammed her head back into the earth. The sudden impact knocked the fight from her, and only with every bit of her discipline did she manage to hold onto consciousness.

"And to think, you were ready to give up and die just a few minutes ago, before you found this new power of yours. If only you'd always had the same zeal for life, my brother might've not been the first one to get his claws in you..." Luther grinned, revealing dark red teeth, blood seeping over pearly white fangs. "Though, it isn't *his* hands on you now..."

His weight shifted and pressed harder on her chest, his broad, heavy frame pressing down on her lithe, frail one. It felt like a boulder rolled off a mountain and landed on her, crushing the breath from her lungs and immobilizing the fox.

In horror, Sela felt his body shift again. Somewhere in her mind, she was grateful to be able to breathe easier, his weight lifted from her chest. But there was little consolation in that when his hips forced themselves between hers, and though their clothes were intact, a panic like she had never felt before welled up in her throat until she was flailing madly against his grip.

"You... wouldn't!" She cried feebly, his hand around her maw muffling her attempts to speak. Her free hand shoved and clawed at him, but her

mind was far too scattered to use the aura's strength to help.

The wolf roared into laughter, his body quivering atop her from the force of his hysterics. His eyes locked with hers, despite her aversion, the hold on her muzzle forced her to either stare back at him or close her eyes. And fear gripped her far too tightly to risk closing her eyes.

"As if I'd lower myself to *fuck* someone with blood as filthy as yours." He spat the words at her. And despite the venom in his voice, Sela found a fleeting, genuine comfort in them. That was the first time she was ever thankful for her Blade heritage.

Before she could feel too relieved, Luther's head leaned in close, until his bloody lips were buried in the fold of her ear. "Time to die, Harbinger. Send my brother my sincerest regards... Maybe he'll pick up where I left off." He said, his sanguine breath sickly hot on her sensitive flesh. It made her squirm and twist in his grip, an involuntary spasm rolling down her spine. Her leg twitched and slipped free from the smothering pin of his body, and a desperate thought began to weave together in her mind.

The wolf squeezed tight on Sela's muzzle and pulled her head up from the mud. As he started to slam her again, the fox raised her freed arm, seemingly forgotten by Luther. Summoning every ounce of strength left in her, Sela curled her hand around his forearm and sank her claws to the hilt into the sinewy flesh. He yelled and let her go from the shock, ripping his arm away from her and snapping the buried claws in the process.

There wasn't time to think about the blinding pain in her fingertips. Sela shoved his stunned body off her as much as she could, which ultimately wasn't very much, but was enough to let her move. She rolled her body backward, pushing into the mud to clear more space, then slid her legs underneath his chest, curling them tight so the pads of her feet pressed flush with his abdomen.

Recognition lit in his eyes just as she screamed out. The fox thrust her hands into the mud and pushed off, throwing all of her weight and the

remnants of her strength against him. When she felt his weight shift upward, Sela grit her teeth, screamed and shoved her legs out, backed by the full force of the mysterious power, both limbs glowing blindingly white in the encroaching darkness.

Luther reached for her again with his hand, but it was too late. His body sailed upward into the night, the breath ripped from his lungs as surprise and anger flooded his face, though Sela had a hard time discerning the black wolf from the charcoal sky behind him.

By the end of her push, Sela's body was fully extended and pointed vertically into the air. She half-shoved, half-rolled herself over her head and tucked her feet beneath herself, the fox's exposed toes plunging back deep into the muck as she curled over into a tight crouch. Once her legs stopped shaking and could hold her weight, Sela hobbled backward, clearing the landing for the plummeting wolf.

But he didn't hit the ground. A swarm of black ribbons sprouted from his back, weaving and wrapping over each other until they formed a massive pair of jet black bat wings, complete with what looked like sharp ridges of bone and smooth, shimmering skin between the digits. Luther broke his momentum with rapid, furious wingbeats, blowing mud and dirt out in great gusts of wind that even the Storm couldn't match. He hovered for a couple moments, then dropped to the ground with a final flourish of his ribbon wings before they dissolved.

Black ribbons coiled over his white trousers, and his body blurred into motion, disappearing into the twilight with his sheer speed. Sela realized, to her chagrin, that the power she'd been reliant upon to this point was now gone - the darkness surged around her once more, and she could track him no longer.

Footsteps stopped just behind her. Sela let out a faint gasp and spun around, catching hold of his arm on reflex alone, a mere breath away from her throat. Something was different about him, though. Luther's usual confidence had given way to wonder, his usual, cocky self vanished,

replaced by a wide-eyed, slack-jawed wolf that she hardly recognized.

"Incredible." He breathed, regarding her more like a valuable sculpture or painting, rather than the dirt they walked on for once. It was unnerving, to say the least - he *had* just tried to kill her, right?

His hand still reached for her, resisting against her grip as the wolf stepped in closer. He stood a head taller than she, a fact she hadn't realized until they were standing within inches of each other. On the ground they'd been face to face - she'd been a bit too preoccupied with surviving to notice their vast difference in height.

His orange eyes gazed down into her silver ones, a smile beginning to twist the corners of his lips. Not like his smug grin, but a faint, delicate smile, one that couldn't be faked or forced. Even by him.

"Selena really *is* still in there somewhere..." The wolf leaned his head in, their eyes drawing so close she could only see his face. "You have the gift. *Her* gift. There's no other way... She's really in there, isn't she?"

Sela made a soft, pathetic noise, then quickly covered her mouth. Selena was her sister's name... but she'd died a long time ago. The name hadn't crossed her ears in so long... it was like ramming a knife into an old, jagged scar on her heart. "What... gift?" She finally said, steeling herself just long enough to utter the words.

"We could've avoided all of this, you know." He seemed not to have heard her, and Sela questioned if she'd spoken aloud or just in her head. "Everything I've done to you, my father, you don't understand... None of this is your fault, you were just a child. That damned, meddlesome goddess and that foolish brother of mine who got himself caught up in her web - they took Selena from me! Then they indoctrinated you with their visions and stories... Gods, if I had known!"

His arm fell from her grasp as her own limb fell numbly to her side. Sela had to force herself not to crumple to the ground as his hands clapped firmly onto her shoulders, sapping the fight from her in one strong, yet

strangely supportive gesture. Her mind knew fully well that she was being manipulated, but his words oozed an authenticity that she'd never known from him.

"I don't understand... what goddess, what stories...?"

"Come back to me, Selena! I know you're in there, you don't have to hide anymore!" The wolf's eyes searched her own, scouring them for even a shred of confirmation. "I can see her now, that very same gleam in your eyes. Has that been there all along? I can't believe she's still alive, all this time they told me she was gone..."

"She is gone, Luther..." Sela shook her head, unable to maintain his gaze any longer. For the first time in her life, she felt genuine sadness for the man she'd spent her entire life despising. The things he'd done, the lives lost and the pain inflicted; for this one long, entrancing moment, Sela believed she could finally see the man behind the mask. Behind the darkness of his father, and his terrible campaign against the Blades.

"No!" Luther shook his head violently. "No, I can see her! I promise it can be us again, Selena! My father will never find us, you don't have to hide anymore!" He was yelling, and her ears drooped as near to her head as they could to muffle the sound.

"I- I'm sorry, but she's been gone a long time." Sela said after an extended silence. She watched the words visibly sink into his mind. A couple blinks, then his posture slumped and he hobbled a few steps backwards as if she'd physically struck him. It was impossibly difficult to tell, between the black of the clouds and the ebony of his fur, but Sela believed she might've seen a shimmer of mist at the edges of his eyes.

"Then truly," Luther began, sapped of the emotion of a moment ago. His voice sounded hollow, echoing from his throat as if he were speaking inside a high-ceilinged chamber. "You are of no consequence to me anymore..."

His hand struck faster than even the lightning above, the battle-hardened flesh and bones catching her square in the jaw. For the second time that day, Sela's feet slipped out from under her as the sheer force of

the impact threw her into the air and through the storm, before her body crashed to the ground.

Her own strength, as well as the mysterious strength she'd summoned in her time of need, failed her as she struggled just to crawl onto all fours. Before she could stand, Luther appeared beside her with the same blinding speed he'd shown before. A sickening crack filled her ears as his his leg smashed into her exposed torso, throwing her body yet again through the black storm.

The third time was the charm - her chest screamed in agony when she landed this time. Whichever ribs Luther hadn't broken with his own strike, Sela suspected the ground had just taken care of for him.

Sela couldn't move. Was this it, then? Sela truly had nothing left to give. Whatever strength the new power had temporarily given her, it had taken twice as much with it when it abandoned her, leaving her so exhausted it became difficult to make herself breath. The pain was one thing, the fox physically lacked the strength to fill her lungs. Only through force of will could she make herself keep going. Terror continued to be a strong motivator for her.

The pungent smell of saltwater had grown to an overwhelming level, she realized as she forced a full gulp of brackish air down her throat, with no small amount of pain in her chest. For a moment, Sela thought that was just the pain blocking out the other, less potent scents, but with a languid turn of her head, she saw the real reason.

The edge of the cliff was only a few strides away. If Lazarus tossed her again, she'd be sent over the edge, down the precipitous drop and into the sea far, far below. Even if she were in perfect health, there'd be little to no hope of surviving that.

Sela grit her teeth and rolled onto her stomach, loosing a piteous scream as fiery agony lanced through her chest. The excruciating sensation fueled her to her feet, wobbling but standing, as a fresh wave of adrenaline slammed into her mind and dulled the pain's razor edge. That, or

it just hurt so much that she was losing her mind. At this point, she didn't care one way or the other.

Something glinted in her periphery, off the flare of a lightning bolt. Thinking it Luther, Sela forced herself to move, edging herself away from the cliff at a snail's pace. Anything more was just too much, and set her chest aflame with every step. But the black wolf was still standing where she'd been before he kicked her, orange eyes blazing in the darkness - daring her to put up a fight.

Then what in the Nine Hells had she seen? Maybe she truly was losing her mind...

Unconvinced, and with little else to do at this point, Sela stumbled towards where she'd seen the glimmer of light, and when the sky brightened again, there it was again.

*My staff!*

Her body howled as she dragged herself towards it, far faster than she should have. Something inside her screamed and howled in a language only her emotions could understand, primal and fierce and even terrifying, like a mother lion protecting her cubs. It begged for Sela to grab her staff, hold on to it and never let it go again as if her life depended on it. Perhaps it did.

Whatever instinct she relied on, it yelled so loudly inside her mind that her pain seemed an afterthought. Strength, however, it could not manifest, so what should have been mere strides became the longest journey of her life.

For some reason, Luther didn't stop her, and neither did the storm. As she drew near, Sela noticed one end of the shaft had burrowed itself into the mud, leaving it to stick up at an angle like a sapling caught in a windstorm. From this distance, it seemed to resonate with some nondescript part of her, emitting a high inaudible humming that calmed her the closer she was to the staff.

Sela reached for it, but her arm stopped. Luther was suddenly beside

her, and caught her arm with a movement she hadn't seen or felt. The fox tried to cry out, but she hadn't the breath, the energy, or the will to do so.

"You don't *deserve* that." Luther said, and twisted her limb with a gut-wrenching snap, and she found the will to scream. Her entire limb ignited in sudden conflagration that made her knees threaten to surrender, before they suffered a similar fate. The wolf ignored her duress entirely, shoved her mangled limb aside and reached for the weapon himself.

Lightning struck. This time, not in the distance.

A crackling tongue of white fire licked Luther's hand the instant he touched the staff, striking the weapon like a lightning rod then surging into his flesh to devastating effect. The sound the black wolf made could only be described as combination of a scream and a hiss as he stumbled backward, disappearing into the darkness beyond her sight. She didn't think anything could overpower the smell of salt on the air, but the putrid aroma of cooked flesh was able to. It nearly made her already-sickened stomach turn.

The same instinct that guided her here now forced her attention back to the staff and away from Luther. The weapon started radiating an intense light, and within moments of the lightning strike, sapphire blue symbols appeared along the shaft. Between the cloth tied over the ends, four columns of letters or runes of some sort appeared, from a language both familiar and foreign to her addled mind.

"Even the Gods can't save you from me, Harbinger!" Luther yelled from nearby, wherever he'd stumbled to in his writhing. The wolf sprinted towards her, unwilling or unable to move at the blurring speed he'd seemed partial to.

That gave her a chance.

Without another thought, Sela grabbed the staff with her usable, non-shattered limb and pulled on it. It was buried at least two hands deep in muck, one of the cloth ends completely submerged, and the mud adamantly

refused to release it. But even touching it, she felt the strange power flow back into her veins, though not nearly as much of it as the first time. It was enough to sustain her, but not enough to resupply her broken body.

Luther drew within a heartbeat of her. To the Hells with sustaining her - the fox needed more than that, and she needed it *now*! Sela seized the power and tugged on it, directing it to her good arm, and heaved on the staff with everything she had. The loamy sludge gave in with a rumbling, squelching noise that reverberated in the distant trees and over the field, louder and louder until it reminded her of a pack of ravenous wolves, growling and snarling at her from all sides.

The very real wolf in front of her swung his claymore at her in a vicious, horizontal sweep, the composed and calculated gleam in his eyes replaced by a murderous, berserk fury that chilled her to the very core. In that moment, she thought she stared not at Luther, but at the cold, unblinking visage of death itself.

Sela's mind froze and her training took over. Planting the end of the staff into the ground, she launched herself high into the air, the terrible pain in her chest forgotten the moment the weapon entered her hand. Her feet barely cleared the stroke of steel before she sailed up and away from the wolf.

Towards the cliff.

The howl of the wolves had crescendoed in her head with each passing moment, rather than fading, echoing and distorting more with each pass. Sela noticed Luther's lips moving, but the feral noises completely drowned him out, allowing her to focus on his actions, not his empty words.

Crippled as he must be from the lightning, she knew the wolf would slaughter her if given even the briefest of opportunities. Realistically, her options were limited - it felt like she was choosing how she would die, rather than how she might live. Luther had killed so many already, she didn't want to give him the satisfaction of her life, too. The life of the

final Blade, by all rights, was hers to take.

She just had to do it.

The brine of the sea hit her full force as her back slid up to the edge, an icy chill slashing through her bones as wind raced up the face of the cliff.

"Selena!" Luther's voice pierced her resolve the moment Sela swept one of her feet over the cliff's edge. He dashed towards her, and for a moment the fox froze. The wolf's eyes had softened again, his features swathed in a mask she'd never seen him wear before.

Fear. That was all she needed. For a single moment, she was in control.

Sela flung herself from the the cliff.

A shadow surged over the cliff and grabbed fast onto her wrist, jolting her as her momentum came to a sudden halt. Luther's hand bit deeply into her flesh, squeezing so tight she felt blood trickle down her arm. Sela cried out sharply as she looked closer at his arm - it was the lightning-riddled one that gripped her. The fur and flesh was coated in a chalky, black substance, with large valleys of rent flesh as far up as the shoulder, still oozing bright blood.

His other arm pushed firmly against the cliff's edge as he lay prone, everything from the waist up hanging over the sea. "Selena, hold on!" He breathed, pain clearly evident in his face. It was all he could do to keep his eyes open, the rest of his features clenched tight.

"Selena is dead!" Sela screamed, tugging on her arm with all her strength. She didn't dare swing her staff at him and risk knocking it from her grasp. But she had a backup plan.

"You killed her!" She said. In a way, it wasn't a lie.

Luther's eyes went wide, and his hold slackened. Sela felt the air rush up to meet her again, his vermilion gaze caught her silver eyes one last time, and then he disappeared into darkness...