

Induction

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The skies above Southcliff were dim and grey, and the air was heavy and cold. A steady, chilly rain fell in a continuous drizzle into its broad streets and the surrounding plains, but Richter refused to believe that the immense city's grandeur could be detracted from so easily. He had once been to the capital of Arvador, seen the imposing, white-gold towers for himself, but even they couldn't rival the country's beating heart in sheer magnitude. The huge, grey walls wrapped the thriving metropolis in layers of impregnable protection, each set of battlements more grand than the last.

From atop the hills to the north, as he approached, he could see cathedral-spires of churches, the heady heights of the towers of Castle Southcliff over the thick, brooding walls. Like the jewel in the crown, however, his true goal rose up to match them all, even exceeding the Duke's keep in splendor. Sitting high on its own hill amid the center of the great city was a gleaming, white structure that appeared, even at a great distance, to glow with light and life of its own accord, regardless of the dreary conditions. To see it, to finally see it after all the time he had spent in pursuit of it, filled his chest with elation intense enough to drive off the chill in the air.

There was little breeze in the air, but he held his thick, well-worn cloak closer to him, wishing beyond wishes that he could put the hood up to keep the water out of his face. However, his antlers continued to resist those efforts. At least he called them antlers. He was certain they were really horns in spite of their broad, branching shapes. They were made of dark, shiny bone, mounted to his skull, and added a foreignness to his otherwise equine features. He walked on thick, heavy hooves of a similar dark color. His ears were long and tapered, prone to swiveling towards unknown noises, and his face extended into a boxy, horselike muzzle that was combined with a rugged, angular handsomeness that he wouldn't deny possessing.

He had come a long way from the horse morph he had been, though. His hair he had kept cropped short, but it was no longer a lightless, glossy black, it was a fiery, unforgiving red that almost seemed to carry its own luster, and instead of ending at the nape of his neck, it simply trailed down his spine, between his shoulder blades and onto his tail in a line of burning crimson. But it wasn't the long, flowing tail of a horse, no. His tail was thick and muscular, reptilian, tapering to a point that likewise terminated his fire-tinted mane in a tuft of hair that, were it not currently soaked, would have looked much like the flame of a candle.

His life, and his body, had changed months ago, but he was uncertain if he would ever get used to it. He'd had to modify his gloves to accommodate for the thick, sharp claws that now capped his sturdy fingers. His antler-horns made it nearly impossible to put on a shirt that didn't possess buttons or laces. His tail required more than a simple hole in the back of his trousers, and it had taken some time to find someone with the necessary skills to give his current garment the sleeve that covered its first third.

What had taken the most getting used to, however, had been the sensation of being an intruder in his own body. In the mornings while dressing, or in the evenings while doing the opposite, he couldn't help but look down at himself and see the coat of scales that covered his front, his broad chest, his stomach, the underside of his tail. The scaly hide split the dark, murky red fur that covered the rest of him, and was itself a shade of brilliant, almost glittering ruby. He

had grown used to the color that made up his body, shades of blood and crimson and flame. He felt, after a time, that it suited him, red. It suited what he had done, what he had gone through. He was a half-forged blade pulled from the furnace, glowing with its own potential.

He shook his head as he started down the hill, following dutifully alongside a wagon that trundled along, plodding toward the city. He'd had uncounted miles to travel when he set out, and it had been almost a reflex to fall into doing what he was so used to doing, protecting, fighting. He'd walked most of the journey while guarding trade caravans hauling goods from the north, lumber, stone, and steel, to the city before them. He'd started out with nothing, but he really needed nothing. He was more than nine feet tall, easily the largest horse he'd ever known, and though he was now more than simply a horse that still held true. In fact, he was an oddity, a tall, broad-shouldered, and heavily, heavily muscled oddity, and it hadn't taken much selling to get caravan master to hire his services on intimidation factor alone. During the entire walk the wagons he'd helped guard had only been harassed once.

His temporary stint as an escorting mercenary had lined his empty pockets with a little more than dust, and he'd been able to afford a little more than the basic amenities. He'd gotten a real outfit, one that fit him, a sturdy leather pack to carry the gear he'd accumulated, and had even managed to purchase a knife to hang from his belt, a simple, utilitarian blade that, even so, could likely have been passed off as a sword by someone of a more normal stature. He carried all he owned, a sensation not unfamiliar to him, but the fact that he *did* own something was a comfort. It was almost enough to make him feel normal.

As he strode through the gaping maw of Southcliff's northern gates, he shrugged off the intense stares of the quartet of guards as they gave him a cautious, visual inspection. Richter didn't blame them. He stood head and shoulders taller than even the equine among them, and he looked like a rain-drenched bastardization of several different animals. They didn't stop him though, and they eventually turned their attention to the carts that passed by them, sharp eyes scanning for anything troublesome.

When he put the gatehouse behind him, he nevertheless heaved a sigh of relief. After so long, so many miles, he was finally there. The immense paving stones of Southcliff's main roadways clacked under his hooves. A hundred, hundred smells wafted by him, and the dull chorus of thousands of people made itself heard dimly over the sound of rain striking grey slate roofs. Keeping an eye out, trying to take it all in, he followed alongside his carts as they rolled smoothly down the thoroughfare.

It was a brief walk through the outer city before the caravan reached its final destination, a district that seemed to be devoted entirely to long, orderly rows of immense warehouses. The caravan master, a skinny, little weasel, approached him and the other guards to distribute final payments and thank them profusely for their service, and the congregated warriors slowly dispersed, likely to find the nearest tavern in which they could drink away their earnings. He peered down at the palmful of silver he'd been given, interspersed with a few thin, golden coins, and decided to just pocket it. It was a fair sum of money, and he truly didn't know if he'd need it in the near future.

As Richter returned to the main road, wading through crowds of people that hardly came up to his stomach, he decided to just walk uphill toward the center of the bustling city. Even toward the outskirts of the metropolis the buildings looked sturdy and well cared for, timber constructions built upon foundations of brick, mortar, and stone, some reaching several stories into the air. Some even had doors that he would only have had to stoop a little to fit through. The diversity that surrounded him was dizzying. There were people from across the country, the

continent even, judging by a few exotic dialects that caught his ear, and it seemed as though they were all there for the same reasons, to buy or sell something.

In spite of the gloom and rain, commerce wouldn't be stopped, even outside the marked market districts. There were stalls shielded by oilcloth tarps, and beneath them barked shrewd-eyed merchants that added to the din of trade. It was all watched over by groups of guards clad in Southcliff's black-and-silver livery, and to Richter the cacophony was almost nauseating. He wasn't accustomed to being around so many people, and although he could easily enough push his way through the throngs of rain-soaked passersby, the hundreds of stares his oddness garnered him made him nervous.

Freeing himself for a time from the crowds, he paused for a few moments at the apex of one of the broad, stone bridges that crossed the rain-swollen river that ran through Southcliff. Peering pensively down into the murky water, he watched as a barge heavily laden with crates and barrels drifted idly along with the current. He asked himself what was about to happen to him, and his anxiety peaked when he could find no satisfying answer. Torture, imprisonment, execution, those were the things that he likely deserved, but he still couldn't help but hope. He had to hope, and he swallowed the bitter taste of his own unsettled nerves as he finished crossing and forged onward.

Making his way through a second gated wall into the inner city, the buildings that he walked by became clearly more opulent, less wood and more stone, elegant statuary and lush gardens were dotted around homes that looked like small manors in their own right, complete with walls of their own. Foot traffic grew sparser, and there were more covered, horse-drawn carriages to clatter down narrower, brick-paved streets. Richter avoided what crowds there still were on the main streets, but tried to steer himself clear of areas where he was clearly not welcome. All the while, he kept an eye on the tremendous, circular building that rose up above him.

It was impossible to mistake for anything else, sitting imperiously on its own hill like a silvery-white crown, spires reaching proudly into the grey skies. Richter bit back his trepidation and started up the winding path, staring down at the clean, white pavers as he clomped his way along them. The closer he got to the structure proper, the more awed he grew. The walls were white, indeed, a pure, perfect white, but the silver he'd seen hadn't been a trick of the light. The stone was veined with streaks and flecks of flawless, metallic silver that glimmered even in the dim conditions, and he gawked upward at the walls that seemed to just continue rising into the air.

The entrance wasn't a door. It was too grand to be called such. It was a gate, with two massive, wooden monoliths wrapped in steel that was too polished to be natural. The metal, too, was almost white in its mirrored perfection, and he realized dully that it must have been argentum, dragonsilver, that braced the huge, sturdy beams. One half of the arch was shut, but that still left an open door that was wide enough for three of him to walk abreast through it. As he approached, he scanned the collection of buildings that were built up in a small courtyard next to the fortress's entrance. The largest one was clearly an enormous stable, with room for dozens of animals, and Richter spied a few figures moving around the space, some tending to a couple sturdy warhorses with long legs and sharp eyes.

Those eyes, along with the eyes of everyone in sight, some armored figures in polished silver, others in more simple, utilitarian garb, watched him as he finished his approach, and he hesitated at the immense portal as its two guards craned their necks to peer up at him. Their expressions were careful and guarded, but he sensed no hostility from them, only curiosity and

caution. "Business at the Sanctum Arcanum?" mused one, a proportionally tall, powerfully-built otter who, unlike his canine partner at the door, seemed to be enjoying the rain.

"I believe so, yes." he replied, holding up his empty hands in a placating gesture. The other Lancer at the gate was eyeing him suspiciously, hand resting firmly on the pommel of her sword.

"Any business in particular, or just... business?" queried the strapping otter while shifting his weight from paw to paw.

"I..." he began, hesitating as he considered his words, "I've come a long, long way, and I think I'd like to speak to someone in charge."

The otter looked at him hard for a moment before replying smoothly. "Well, there are a lot of people here who are in charge of a great many things. Did you want to speak to someone in charge of the Lance or someone in charge of the Sanctum?" Richter hadn't considered the possibility of those two things being separate, but before he could choke out a confused answer, the Lancer before him abruptly chuckled and shook his head. "I suppose it doesn't really matter. If it's someone in charge you're after, you'll end up seeing them all in time. Come. Enter. Get out of the rain."

Blinking in his puzzlement, he nonetheless followed the cheerful otter inside, stepping through the huge, open doorway and into a truly cavernous chamber, one that took his breath away. The enormous room boggled his mind with its dimensions. The ceiling rose up and up for what seemed like a hundred feet, and in spite of the lack of any visible lanterns or chandeliers, the whole space was filled with a clean, white light. The air was warm and comfortable, and he caught himself heaving a contented sigh before he could stifle it. His armored guide just grinned back at him as he was ushered over to one side of the room, one which was ornately furnished with a plethora of long, low tables, benches, and chairs.

He was bid sit down and rest from his travels and given the promise that someone in charge would be down to see him at their earliest opportunity. As the otter trotted away, down a hallway that looked to run the full circuit of the tremendous, circular building, he just stood awkwardly, unwilling to take a seat in even the chairs that looked to have been built with occupants of his stature in mind. He was soaked, and he wasn't about to cause his hosts any unnecessary annoyance. It was bad enough that he could hear the rainwater dripping from his saturated clothes to pool on the floor around his hooves.

Glancing down at his equine feet, the same elegant marble stared back up at him. It was as if the entire structure had been crafted out of a single, titanic piece of the beautiful stone, but it was neither that nor the water draining from his clothes that caused a chill to wash down his spine. As little droplets of moisture plipped softly to the floor, the puddle they made continuously shrank inward onto itself, simply disappearing as it was created. It was like there was an invisible force dedicated to keeping the place clean, and he shifted anxiously. Magic. Simple and harmless enough—at least he hoped—but magic nonetheless.

He stood there, awkwardly, for a while, maybe ten minutes, staring down at the ground in discomfited awe, until the sound of a pair of heavy, booted feet approached him. Looking up, he caught the last few steps of a heavily-armored equine in what appeared to be parade dress, silvery suit polished like a mirror and bright, blue cape hanging immaculately from her broad shoulders. His first thought was that she was beautiful, in a hard, statuesque way, a thought that didn't dim as he took in her youthful, feminine features and her lustrous, golden-brown hair that was drawn into a tight, simple braid. "I've been told that "the big one with the antlers" wanted to

speak to me. I presume that's you?" Her voice was deep and strong, a match for her prideful bearing.

He nodded, swallowing back his anxiety. It was all soon to come to a head. "Yes."

She smiled at him, and he wasn't sure if it was directed at his nervousness or something only she could sense, but it was warm, kind, and it put him more at ease. He was certainly the big one with the antlers, but she was nearly his equal, standing perhaps only a foot shorter than he. "Well," she mused, her grin taking on an increasingly bemused tint, "Here I am, pulled away from my duties to chat with the half-drowned whatever-you-are. What is it that you need of me?"

Richter winced. "I'm sorry. I should have waited, come at a better time. I-"

She interrupted him with a casual wave. "Relax, relax. There are no good times because I'm always busy with something, and if you'd interrupted me at night, I'd not be so cordial. I needed to take a break to preserve my sanity anyway." Casually, she eased herself into one of the chairs, motioning for him to do the same. "Besides, being the Lance's ambassador to the public is one of my duties." She fixed him with a genuinely concerned expression, lacing her gauntleted fingers together in front of her. "So tell me, what can I, or the Silver Lance, do for you?"

He knew such timidity didn't befit someone of his stature, but he couldn't help but fidget as he lowered himself into the proffered chair, chewing on his words. He wasn't certain if there was any appropriate way to approach the subject, so Richter just spat it out. "I... I'd like to join the Silver Lance, if I could."

Instead of dismissing him for a madman, her gaze only hardened as she cocked a single, pensive eyebrow at him. "Do you know why?" she asked bluntly.

Of all the potential questions he'd considered being asked, that one caught him unprepared, and he fumbled for words for a moment. "I... I've... I think-"

Cutting him off with an upraised hand, she just shook her head. "That's a yes or no question. I wouldn't imagine you'd be here if you didn't know who we are or what we do, so I have to ask, do you know why you'd like to join us?"

Richter tried to stifle his blatant confusion at the question. "Y-yes," he stammered, attempting to cease his puzzled blubbing before she wrote him off as a fool. "I-"

With another wave of her hand and a stern, "That's enough," she once more quieted him, and he took refuge in the opportunity to gather himself while she looked at him in what seemed to be a different light. "Everyone comes to the Lance for their own reasons, and they should stay just that, their own. You don't have to justify yourself to me, but I do have to tell you a few things. There are more to us than fancy armor and blue capes. Joining us is a dangerous, long-term commitment, maybe even a lifelong one. You have to be dedicated to a cause that is far, far larger than yourself. You have to be prepared to make hard, hard choices, life-or-death ones, and you have to be prepared to live with the consequences of those decisions. Do you understand that? Are your reasons strong enough to brace you against that responsibility?"

Finally. She seemed to be summing up his very being. He hardened his resolve and gave her a sharp, affirmative nod. "Absolutely."

Voicing a thoughtful "Mmh..." she slowly returned his nod. "We'll see. And what were you thinking you have to offer the Lance? Skills or experience?"

With a gesture at her armor and the weapon on her hip, he replied. "I've held a sword since I could walk, and worn a suit of plate for most of the time since. I've been a sellsword, a county guardsman, a militia drill instructor. I've been trained in both small and large unit tactics, and I'm familiar with most of the armaments in a typical Vandan armory. I also know my way

around a smith's forge, though it's been some time since I've made anything more complex than a horseshoe or nail."

She looked at him like she was ticking boxes on a checklist in her mind. "Impressive. All that and you still want to join..." He opened his mouth to explain himself, but she cut him off. "Again, your reasons are none of my business. And really, neither are your accomplishments. There are no trials of martial prowess standing between you and the Lance. You'll quickly find that the Lance doesn't really care for your abilities, only for your intentions. There is a place for everyone here, everyone with determination and dedication enough. Just know that, if you do make it in, your past glories have no place here, and any prestige you expect them to give you will be disregarded. You will be no more a Lancer than the scullions who scour pots in the kitchens, and they no less than you. We are all equal here, regardless of the breadth of our responsibilities and regardless of how well we *think* we can handle ourselves with a blade."

He digested that, and then found himself smiling. "I don't think that I would want to join if that weren't the case. I've seen far more than my fair share of injustice in my travels."

The grave-faced equine's expression twisted easily into a smile of its own, and she barked a short laugh. "Well, if you join you'll be seeing a whole lot more."

Richter nodded. "I'd hoped so. I just want to be able to do something about it this time."

"Don't we all..." she muttered as she casually rose back to her booted feet. "Come with me. We'll see if you've got what it takes."

He assented and stood up to follow her as she marched away down the endless corridor that ringed the immense building. She asked him his name, giving him her own in return. It was Valorie, a name that suited her. She carried herself with practiced ease. He saw that much. She walked with the idly stiff gait of someone who was always ready to whip her sword from its scabbard, and her cheerful, green eyes held within them a depth of experience that defied her otherwise youthful appearance. She intimidated him somewhat, and he wasn't afraid to admit that to himself.

The doors that ringed the tremendous hallway were more than capable of allowing him to step through them unbent, and Valorie led him through one after knocking respectfully on it. What waited for him on the other side of it surprised him. The room's lofty walls were lined with bookshelves, each of which was heavily laden with books upon books. That single room held more books and scrolls than many libraries he'd ever seen, and he hesitated at the doorway, gawking at the prospect of the knowledge the space held crammed within it.

When Richter finally managed to scrape his jaw from the floor, it nearly fell from its hinge when he took in the room's sole occupant. Sitting in a chair that was scaled up to hold the breadth of its impossible frame, a massive, shining creature was bent over a table and the stack of books that it carried. "Archmage." Valorie intoned, striding up to the table.

The dragon turned intense, sapphire eyes to them both, acknowledging them with a slow, respectful nod. "Captain." Leathery, scarlet wings shuffled idly against his back as he leaned back into the chair. A coat of metallic, golden scales covered him, partially hidden beneath a comically expansive black longcoat that rested on his broad frame. His tough hide turned to onyx over his front in a dark, glittering stripe that blended in with the dark fabric of his sole garment, and the color matched that of his lengthy, tapering horns, a thicket of which gave him a jagged crown to go with his regal appearance.

In spite of the enormity of his being, what Richter found most unsettling about him was the way the very air around him felt stiff against his skin, like the universe was bending around the figure that dominated the room. It felt like there was a storm being held in check, and his

mane bristled at the potential in the air. His heart was in his throat, and his stomach was in his hooves. He stared nervously into those impossibly deep eyes, remembering little more than fire and blood, and steeled himself as Valorie gestured at him and spoke. "Another potential managed to wander their way in, and this one was half-drowned to boot."

The Archmage's voice rumbled in his Richter's ears as he spoke. "And I presume you've already made the stakes clear to him?" Valorie nodded, and he hummed thoughtfully, closing the book in front of him. "Very well. I'll take a look." The armored equine nodded once more and spun to give them each a languid salute in turn, and then she turned and strolled from the room, shutting the door behind her and leaving him alone with the dragon.

Heaving an enduring sigh, the Archmage adjusted himself to better look at the mismatched, furred and scaled man that stood before him, holding the silence for a long moment while he considered Richter's presence in his sanctum. "I've got to admit, I've never seen anyone quite like you before. Professional curiosity is begging me to ask you how someone like yourself came to be here, but I suppose all that will be revealed in the fullness of time. Until then, please have a seat. Make yourself comfortable. Regardless of your purpose, you are still my guest. And allow me to see to your clothes."

Richter lifted an eyebrow as he carefully lowered himself into a plush chair. Being seated for the second time in what seemed an eternity was its own sort of bliss, but it wasn't enough to prevent his skin from prickling as the Archmage waved a huge, taloned hand at him and murmured a brief phrase. He felt a peculiar warmth wash over him, and with it came an alien sensation as the rainwater that saturated his clothing simply disappeared, wicking away into nothingness and leaving him comfortably dry. He shivered, but still managed to stammer a respectful, "Th-thank you, sir." It felt uncomfortable to speak upward at someone, especially this someone in particular.

"Daryn." rumbled the dragon in his tremendous voice. "Call me Daryn. We're far from some nobleman's estate, from any pomp and circumstance."

In spite of the Archmage's apparent friendliness, Richter's stomach was tied into tight knots in his gut, and he swallowed hard past the lump in his throat. "If it's all the same, sir, I'd rather not." He wanted to continue and say that he didn't deserve such cordiality, but he held his tongue.

His host simply shrugged. "Very well. Whatever makes you more comfortable." Then, leaning deeply forward, the dragon rested his elbows on the table and steepled clawed fingers between them. "You want to join the Lance?" Richter nodded. "I presume the Captain has already made clear what sort of commitment it is?" He nodded again, and the Archmage answered it with one of his own. "It takes a remarkable kind of person to devote oneself wholly to anything, let alone something so dangerous and life-encompassing. I don't mean to cast any doubt though. I just think that you deserve every chance to fully consider the implications of what you intend on doing. Is this really what you desire for yourself?"

He nodded a third time, pressing his lips into a thin, determined line. "It is, sir. This is all I have... It... I... I've done a great, great many things that, looking back, I have no reason to be proud of. I've hurt people, people I should have been protecting, people who didn't deserve what happened to them. I only wanted to act with honor, regardless of my position in life, and I let that... blind me. Sir, the Silver Lance is all I can hope for. I just want the chance to undo some of what I've done. I'm familiar with the weight of responsibility, but I don't care about difficulty. I don't care about hardship. I'll do whatever I have to. I'll prove myself however I must."

The Archmage accepted this with a wry smile that showed teeth like daggers. "Indeed, but it takes more than some physical trial to join the Lance. I don't doubt your determination, but the Lance doesn't have some proving ground for potentials. That falls to me. I founded the Lance what seems like an eternity ago, and the organization as a whole is my responsibility, but I don't run it, I don't direct its actions. All the Lance requires of me is a careful eye. I would normally chafe under the responsibility of being a judge of people's character, but I understand the importance of intentions, and I suppose I'm the most technically qualified. So here is what is going to happen. If you are sincere about your desires to join, I'm going to cast a spell on you, and together we are going to take a long, hard look at your motivations. I'm going to find out what makes you you, and then I will decide whether or not all that combines together to make someone who has what it takes to be a Lancer."

"What?" he choked, alarm crawling up his spine.

Taking a heavy breath, the dragon leaned more heavily into the table. "It's hard to explain without going in depth, but in essence I'm going to dig through your head like it's a haystack and I'm looking for a needle. I'm going to look at your memories, and I'm going to be looking for qualities that Lancers can't have, the no-no's, things like selfishness, cruelty, and greed. If you're selfless, compassionate, and courageous, then you might be Lancer material." He paused and took in the look of concern on Richter's face and then quickly added, "I know you said you might not have led the most noble of lives. Just know that it doesn't matter as long as you understand from where you come. If you strive for honor as you've said, then all should be well. It's not my duty to condemn people because of their past, only to judge their present worthiness." He hesitated again and fixed the man across from him with a meaningful gaze. "We all have done things we aren't proud of, and the older one gets the more that seems to stack up. Trust me. Sometimes it's all we can do to hope to be better than we were."

This was it, he knew. Richter had suspected some sort of sorcery would be involved, but he knew that it was either submit himself or leave, and the latter simply wasn't an option. He'd come too far and survived too much to turn back now. In answer, he balled his fingers into anxious fists and breathed a firm, "I understand, sir, but it doesn't change anything. I'll do whatever I have to. You should do the same."

The Archmage smiled and respectfully inclined his head. "There are times when that's all any of us can do." Then, rising to his taloned feet, the dragon stood up to tower over everything else in the room. Richter likewise rose, but the golden creature standing head, shoulders, and most of a chest taller than he made his stomach sink even further into his innards. "Alright then. Last real chance. If the Lance takes you, it takes all of you. There will be little time in the coming months to do more than write a letter to your family or friends. It will take every last fiber of your being. It will take more than you think you have to give. Are you sure that you are prepared for that sort of commitment?"

Gods, he just wanted it to be over, for better or for worse. "My family is gone, and what few friends I have left are... understanding."

The tension in his voice made it sound hoarse and constricted, but the Archmage took it in stride with a thoughtful hum. "Very well. Know that this isn't going to be some magic, right-or-wrong test. This is going to be hard on both of us, but it's necessary. I have to trust you wholly, and your thoughts and memories are going to have to prove to me that you are worthy of that trust before I tell the rest of the Lance that they can trust you the same. It won't hurt, but forcibly dredging up memories that have been suppressed or long forgotten is rarely a pleasant

experience, and it will take time, perhaps a lot of it. Are you ready?" Richter swallowed stiffly and nodded his affirmative. "Then sit back down, close your eyes, and hold still."

Shakily, he eased himself back into his chair, shifting nervously as the dragon knelt before him. Richter closed his eyes, swallowed around the lump in his throat, and made himself still as thick, scaly fingers lighted gently on the sides of his head. He wouldn't have expected a creature of the Archmage's stature to possess such digital finesse, but he could barely feel the behemoth's grip even as it held his skull in hands that could likely have flattened it between them.

"Relax." murmured the Archmage, voice rumbling despite how he made an effort to soften it. "Take a deep breath and relax. You're either going to join a new family or walk out of here as you came in, and either eventuality won't be served by you being stiff as a board."

Doing as he was told, he gripped the armrests of his chair and sucked in a huge breath, letting it out slowly through flaring nostrils. The dragon was right, and contrary to what he believed, his own powerlessness made him feel a little more at ease. He realized that he had done all that he could, and what would come would come. Richter repeated the soothing gesture several more times, and he tried desperately not to tense up again when the Archmage chanted a long, complicated phrase in a tongue he couldn't begin to comprehend. He felt its effects crawl along his skin and scales as a light, effervescent tingling that washed over and through him. It left his mane prickling, and his tail flicked anxiously. As prepared as he might have been, magic in such proximity made him uneasy, especially considering its source.

He couldn't help but stiffen when he then felt it in his mind, against his consciousness. Like a serpent squirming between his thoughts, something put the faintest of pressures on him in a way that baffled his understanding of his own body. It felt like it came from within, and the sensation slowly spread, enveloping the whole of his being in a layer of unsettling warmth. Their deed then done, the Archmage then removed the clawed fingers from him, their connection now something far, far deeper than merely physical.

"Remember to keep your eyes closed." the dragon whispered. "Additional images will only unsettle your mind. And remember to stay relaxed. Don't fight it. Struggling will only stress your consciousness even more."

Richter couldn't imagine how he would even begin to struggle against what had been done to him, so he was confident that the Archmage would have no trouble on that front. He felt exposed and, for one of the few times in his life, small and insignificant in spite of his stature. It was a sensation that only compounded as he felt a shift in the presence that was settled against and around his mind, and he forced out a shaky breath when, with an odd, pinching sensation, he felt it dig into him, pulling at something he couldn't imagine or visualize.

Images began to flicker through his mind, flashes of color and shape that slowly came into focus. Unfamiliar scents and sensations brushed against his senses as his memories were dredged up from the depths of his mind, and the Archmage dug through them, examining each one before returning it to its place in his psyche. He began to recognize some, brief spans of his childhood, his siblings, his parents. He felt his mother's arms around him, heard his father's voice again, but it was over all too quickly as those portions of his being were quickly replaced with others as the dragon advanced through his life from the beginning onward.

Through the spell encapsulating his mind, he relived his life in fast, flickering bursts. He felt all his childish jealousies. He was forced to re-experience his mistakes. His adolescence sped by as he became an adult. He felt the anguish, fresh and hot, as he lost his father again, but it was whisked away only to be replaced with another sliver of his life. Then another, and another. The

constant, pulsating pulling on his thoughts quickly became exhausting, and it became easier to focus on that rather than what it was sending through his mind.

Everything. Every doubt and regret and moment of pride. Every twinge of joy and mirth and every moment of intimacy was pulled back to the front of his mind, examined, and then carefully, tiresomely replaced with another, over and over again. He lost everything he had ever lost; he loved everyone he had ever loved. He remembered pain and fire and death. He remembered cold and terror and constant, gnawing remorse. He hurt too many people, and he tried, desperately, to protect all the people he'd failed. He yearned for peace, for justice, to live with a little honor, and he got to watch himself fail time and time again.

It was over in a heartbeat that felt like it had taken years to flow by. Like a bubble popping, the presence surrounding him disappeared, and he was abruptly alone with his thoughts once more. He shivered and gasped, gripping the arms of his chair with strength that made the sturdy wood creak in complaint. He blinked blearily, but he was blinded by tears, old and new. Some were dry and crusty on the fur of his cheeks, implying that more time had passed than he thought, and others flowed freely, almost making it to the line of his jaw before he lifted his hand to wipe them away, scrubbing at his eyes.

He felt raw and stiff, and it was a struggle to focus on any one thing. So much was fresh in his mind once again, and he struggled to shovel it all away, tamping down the earth that the Archmage had disturbed in his search through his being. His breath was shaky and uncertain, and he closed his eyes again for a moment, working to center himself and pull himself back into the moment. His head pounded, but that discomfort rapidly subsided to a vague afterthought, and when it did he blinked open his eyes just to cast them around the room again, seeking out a little grounding reality. He looked at the Archmage, who slowly rose back to his taloned feet and returned his gaze with one that was much more pensive than before.

"You... have lived quite the life for one so young." the dragon murmured as he returned to his seat. There was a long, pregnant pause as the Archmage took a few slow breaths of his own, some of them ending in wisps of thin, grey smoke that coiled up from his nostrils.

That he was still alive boded well for him, but he dipped his head, breaking eye contact anyway. "I'm sorry, sir. I've made a great many mistakes that-"

"Yes you have." admitted the Archmage, cutting him off with a lazy flick of his hand. "But like I said, who hasn't? You are quite the intriguing potential, Richter, and I have to admit that I've never had to do a Delving on anyone with quite such an interesting past. Normally I would go on at length about your potential duties, what would be expected of you, but I think that of the rest of the Lance, barring a few, you have a unique understanding of who we struggle against, and why."

"I've spent too long fighting for the wrong reasons, for the wrong people. Because I was an ignorant fool." he confessed. "I owe a few people everything, but fighting is all I've ever done. It's all I know how to do. I just want to do it for the right cause, for once."

Unexpectedly, the Archmage let out a low, thundering laugh. "Well, I'm not the right person to talk to about causes, but I know who I can direct you towards, a group of people far more dedicated than I, many of whom know first-hand what sort of atrocities can be perpetrated by a select few people. You might have more in common with them than you believe."

As if unwilling to believe that he was still alive, his hands only tentatively released their frantic grip on his chair. "Archmage, I... about what happened... I-"

"Don't." intoned the dragon, raising his hand for silence in case the iron in his tone wasn't enough. "Like I said. We've all made choices that brought us to places we'd otherwise have

rather avoided. The past will be what it is. For the time being, I suggest you leave it where it lay, because none of it will leave this room if I can help it. Instead, you should make your way to the courtyard. I'm sure the others would like to make your acquaintance before you start getting settled in."

At the Archmage's insistence, he rose from his chair, leaving him almost at eye level with the dragon. "Thank you, sir. I swear to you that I'll not waste this opportunity. And... about what I-"

The Archmage cut him off again, but this time with a warm chuckle. "*That*, you'll find, is very little of my business. It lies between you and her, and I believe she's already proven herself more than capable. It's not my place to interfere in something so benign, though there are others who are certainly of another opinion. For now, you've given me much to think about, more than you might know, so go. Say hello to your new family. They're all friendly, but some might take some getting used to."

After everything that had transpired over the prior months, he didn't know what else he could do or say, so after a quick, polite salute, he turned and, before his legs could fail him, made his way out of the immense library. He shivered as he shut the enormous door behind him, and he took a minute to lean heavily into the wall next to it. Richter had spent so long searching, and while he didn't yet know if he'd found what he looked for, he'd taken a long, long step in the right direction.

Whatever sorcery the Archmage had performed hadn't left him unscathed. His head ached dully, and he felt tired in what was far more than a physical way. But that discomfort ebbed quickly as he gathered himself and pushed off of the wall to wander back the way he had come. Though his future was still mostly a blurry haze, he felt more confident about it than he had in a long time, and it added a sureness to his steps as he picked up the pace of his hooves clacking on the smooth stone underfoot.

The immense, annular hallway appeared less busy than it had when he had first been led through it, though there were still a few dark-clothed lancers to give him friendly greetings as they made their way to and fro in the enormity of the building around them. Richter did his best to return their cheer, but he couldn't help but hesitate as he reached the lofty spaces of the entrance chamber that had first welcomed him. A more fitting crossroads he couldn't have imagined. The immense doors still stood half-open, an exit, but the doors on the opposite side of the room beckoned at him, urging him further into the grand complex, daring him to make a that decision.

The inner doors yielded to him flawlessly, gliding inward on smooth, silent hinges as he passed through them and out into the Sanctum's broad courtyard. The rain had let up somewhat, but a light drizzle still fell to patter over the expanse of fresh, green grass that blanketed the hill that gently rose up in front of him. The sweeping size of the open space gave an impression of how truly vast the titanic structure was. Built against the walls that enclosed the yard were accoutrements of training, sparring courts, obstacle courses, but as his eyes swept up the hill, he saw everything grow far more natural. There were stands of trees that shaded everything beneath them. There was a stony stream that bubbled audibly over the sound of rain, rolling down the hill in a serpentine line, and it began amongst the exposed roots of an absolutely enormous willow that dominated the crown of the hill, its drooping branches screening his view of the other side of the broad, open area.

What really got his attention, however, was the cluster of people that were standing around one edge of the circular park. The murmur of casual conversation made itself heard

across the distance, and he made his way over, his hooves squelching in the wet grass as rain began the process of slicking his fiery hair down against his scalp once more. As he approached, he caught their eye, and their soft words fell to silence as they parted a little to allow him entrance into their ranks. Valorie stood at their center, and beckoned him closer with a friendly wave.

"I had a feeling that I would be seeing you again, big guy." the statuesque equine said smugly as he plodded up to her. "I've gotten a pretty good eye for people over the years. Do you have any questions?"

He looked around at the faces that squinted up into the rain at him. Some figures were done up as Valorie was, with shining silver armor and the brilliantly-colored cape that went along with it, and others were dressed for battle more normally, with steel plate and chain, the difference between Lancers and other recruits, he presumed. With a deep, bracing breath he answered her. "Yes. Where do I begin?"

Valorie grinned and swept an arm around her at the soggy field around them and the people that stood within it. "Well, I like to say that there's no better time than the present. It will take a couple days to get you settled into a room and get suited up, but I suppose there's time for a quick lesson. You said you've some experience with a blade?"

He nodded confidently. "Yes."

With a low chuckle, she reached down to her waist, wrapped her fingers around the hilt of the sword at her hip, and pulled the length of polished steel from its scabbard in a single smooth motion. "Catch." she said as she tossed him the weapon, pommel first.

Unexpected surprise almost foiled him, but he managed to get his hand around the hilt before it smacked him in the chest. As the feel of the sword in his fingers, he let out an appreciative hum. It was long enough for even him to use, and was perfectly balanced. He admitted to himself that he may have misjudged it on its ornamental appearance. The tool that rested in his hand was of superb quality. He did, however, notice a faint tingling that washed up his arm as he gripped the hilt tightly, certainly. "Alright, what now?"

Valorie's smile deepened and she swept an arm around her again, this time more directly at the gathered congregation. "Well, you heard the newbie. Who wants to give him his first lesson?"

Silence answered her directly, but a host of arms lifted into the air, each belonging to one of the silver-clad Lancers in attendance. With a satisfied nod, the equine who had summoned them returned her gaze to Richter and gestured to the upraised arms. "Pick one."

He was sure about what was next to come, so he gave each of his potential foes a more thorough appraisal. Though most of the gathered throng appeared like children next to him, there were a few there who looked capable of facing him on almost equal footing. He made eye contact with one and pointed his finger, trying to do so with at least a modicum of respect. "Him."

Valorie actually laughed for a brief breath, but nodded her assent anyway. "Alright then. Come."

He followed the Lance's leader as she made her way over to one of the large, picketed sparring squares nearby. His challenger separated himself from the rest of his fellows and did the same, and they likewise attended the three of them, just a step behind. At Valorie's gesture, he stepped over the rope cordon and onto the training field, watching his opposite as he did the same. Despite the rain, the bare earth under his hooves felt solid and well tamped down, with only a thin layer of mud to pull at his feet. He wouldn't have to compensate much.

He eyed his challenger up and down. He was a horse, though he appeared shorter than most, even shorter than Valorie. His fur was universally black save for the blaze of white on the top of his muzzle and his forearms and fetlocks. His own, crisp, white hair was plastered to his scalp and he pushed it back as he returned the cautious gaze. Richter feared that having two feet on the smaller equine would give him too much of an advantage, but the way his opposite moved spoke of experience.

He bowed respectfully to his challenger. "Richter."

"Tobias" replied the horse. "Hold on a minute, though. This doesn't seem fair." He fiddled for a moment with the straps of his armor, and when his breastplate came off, he stepped over to the edge of the arena and handed it off to another Lancer. He continued until he was unarmored, in just his clothes and cape, with only the sword on his belt to mark him as the warrior he appeared to be.

Richter readied himself as the horse drew his own sword with a clean, metallic ring. "Let's give them a show, hmm?" Tobias said with a cheerful smile. "I can't say I've ever fought anyone like you, and I've done a lot of fighting."

"I'll see what I can do." Richter replied, lifting his borrowed sword up to mirror the motion of the equine that stood opposite him. Tobias laughed eagerly, but when it died off, they each stood in silence for a time, only the light splashes of rain adding to the puddles on the sparring square to mar the temporary peace. They waited opposite each other, and Richter felt the familiar twinge of adrenaline speed his heart as he gripped the hilt of the blade in his hand more tightly. When an indeterminable span of time passed, Tobias made the first move, sweeping his sword in a lazy circle and rushing forward with agility that startled his foe.

The horse dashed up to him, feinted to the left as he slid to a stop, and then proceeded to transfer his momentum to a quick, horizontal slash directed at his opponents midsection. Richter gritted his teeth as he slid back a step, giving himself just enough room to swing his sword around, catching his adversary's blade with his own and throwing it aside before moving forward again in a short, probing thrust. However, it was as if he hadn't even deflected Tobias's attack. The horse easily sidestepped and turned the momentum of his stymied slash into another, this one directed lower.

Gods' Blood, the Lancer was fast. He'd expected that, of course. Tobias was lean and far narrower of build than he was, but he was surprised as even his cautious, probing attacks were avoided like they were child's play. His opponent tested him in turn, watching him with a sly grin as they danced in a slow circle, swords clashing time and time again. He would have to be careful of overextending, even with his greater reach, because it was clear that even the slightest mistake would be hastily punished. Richter focused, determined to give a good accounting of himself, since he supposed that was the point of this entire exercise.

In a flash, he spied a tiny, tiny opening, a faint heartbeat of time when Tobias's weapon was too far to one side, and he leapt at the opportunity, stepping forward. His off hand slid around the hilt of his weapon and he brought the edge up in a vertical slash that would likely have bisected the lithe horse had his opponent not hissed and squirmed away faster than he could safely advance. "Alright!" the Lancer cheered. "You might be pretty good after all! Most people wouldn't have even seen that!"

Richter acknowledged the compliment with a grin, but he wasn't about to let up, and he strode forward again, returning his weapon to its proper grip as he met once more with his equine adversary. He was much taller than his opponent, not to mention significantly broader, and he sought to make use of his superior reach and strength, a habit that had rarely before failed him.

Shifting his stance, he gripped his sword in both hands, sacrificing a little martial flexibility for uncompromising power, and screened Tobias with a flurry of broad, sweeping strokes that would be hellishly difficult to simply turn aside. He made the Lancer give ground or be cut in half, something his assailant was all too happy to do, dancing nimbly around him and between his attacks.

He silently wished for a suit of armor, or even a shield. It was clear to him that, Tobias was all too happy to let him tire himself out with continuous, heavy strikes, and he was certain that if he wanted to actually make any progress against his foe, he needed to get closer, under the Lancer's artfully-crafted guard. But to do that would be to sacrifice his advantage. However, he could already feel himself tiring. He was big and well-made, but rather out of practice, and his arms were beginning to heat, showing sign of fatigue. He had little choice, and so he advanced, knowing that he would have to do more other than simply fend off his opponent.

Driving Tobias back a step, he followed an attack up with a long stride and another vicious swipe that sent his blade whistling through the rain. This one came closer to his adversary's dark fur, and he kept the horse preoccupied with not getting eviscerated while he closed the distance between them, minimizing the Lancer's ability to prance around his slower attacks. His opponent wasn't smiling so broadly anymore, teeth clenched and brow drawn down in a focused frown that pulled at his lips. Richter forced him back and in a wide circle that their hooves inscribed within the sparring square, and he didn't let up, knowing that hesitation would immediately be punished by the faster combatant, made easy by their proximity.

Finally, he was given his chance. With his blade, he harried the horse's flank, *made* him use his own to defend himself, and shifted forward once more, into the void that the motion left in the Lancer's guard. He caught his opponent's wrist on his forearm, and in the same instant he tucked his shoulder and bore forward with every pound of his great weight, shoving against Tobias's chest. A stiff wheeze signaled the breath mercilessly leaving the equine's lungs as he was simply thrown backward, and his arms pinwheeled for a moment as he tried and failed to regain his balance before he toppled into the mud.

In spite of his spill, the horse managed to maintain his grip on his sword, and even from his compromised position, he was able to turn aside several low swipes of Richter's weapon. He growled, carrying his assault forward as his adversary squirmed backward, stubbornly refusing to give in. So focused was he that it was only the faint sound of something whistling through the air that saved him from immediate defeat. He caught movement in the corner of his eye, something glinting threateningly, and he only just, by instinct, managed to twist around to catch the end of a long, stout staff on his sword rather than his skull.

The little shark-morph that had leapt into the arena hissed and whirled away, her initial attack stymied, and in the lightning-fast motion, she reversed her grip on her weapon and brandished the foot of steel that terminated it. Richter didn't even have time to object to the unwanted intrusion on his fight before this new threat darted back in and pushed him back onto the defensive. As he turned away jab after quick, repetitive jab, he quickly came to the understanding that while Tobias had been faster than he, his unexpected assailant was faster still, a problem which was exacerbated by her spear mitigating some of her deficiency in reach.

The wiry fish-woman danced like a dervish, twirling her spear around her quickly enough to leave it a dark, steel-tipped blur. Richter, taken aback, barely managed to mount a defense as his lips pulled back in a determined snarl. However, he managed it. He understood what she was doing, buying his original opponent the handful of seconds he needed to pull himself out of the mud, which was something he couldn't just allow to happen, outnumbered as he was. He strode

forward, forcing the shark to warily back away as he advanced under her whirling guard, but that was another benefit to having limbs almost twice as long as his opponents.

He narrowly managed to turn aside an attempt to skewer one of his legs, throwing the shark's spear far to the side, and through she recovered nearly instantly, it gave him the sliver of time he needed. Richter swung upward at his adversary, making the slight figure dart to the side to avoid the length of his blade, and he let the momentum of his attack wheel him around. He pivoted on the spot, turning away from the piscine woman in an unexpected gesture. Sweeping his tail outward, low, a length of the muscular appendage caught the shark right at the diaphragm.

It was as if the skinny Lancer weighed nothing, and in the same moment that the breath left her lungs in a sharp wheeze, Richter finished his spin, hurling her through the air and out of the arena, practically into the arms of the crowd that was watching with intense, silent attention. He'd barely been fast enough, however, because he only just managed to meet sword-to-sword with Tobias once more. The horse looked worse for wear, his clothes and fur matted with mud, but his grip on his weapon was sure, and he engaged with vigor that seemed to have been renewed by a little wet muck.

Richter was getting tired, so he took a risk. He stepped close, far closer than he should, and it paid off. Tobias uttered a coarse oath and tried to back away while blocking a low, clumsy swing, and while he did, it put his arm in a compromising position. Seeing what he hoped would be the last opening he needed, he reached over with his free hand, grabbing and holding tightly to the Lancer's wrist, squeezing with every ounce of strength he had. The horse grunted and managed to retain a grip on his weapon, but that didn't matter. Richter threw the arm to the side, accepting a painful strike to his ribcage in the process, but if there was one thing he knew he was capable of, it was taking a couple hits.

Tobias tried fiercely to disentangle them from one another, but he wasn't able to match Richter's greater strength and leverage in such close quarters. The Lancer had his footing robbed from him by a hoof against his ankle, but the larger combatant didn't let the horse fall. Instead, he threw a knee firmly into his opponent's stomach, driving the air from his lungs before doing it again for good measure and tucking an arm under his adversary as he tried to fold up on himself. Then he tensed, levering everything he had against the weight of the body against him, and he lifted his foe's hooves from the ground, spinning him up through the air before slamming him bodily, back first, down into the mud with a wet *thud*.

The equine Lancer squirmed and wheezed for a second, but the impact seemed to have pacified him rather decisively, and Richter lowered his sword, eyeing him cautiously but taking the chance to just stand there and heave huge, panting breaths. He didn't know which of his assailant's had managed it, but he was dripping a thin trickle of blood that the rain was washing away from a shallow cut on his forearm. Perhaps he let his guard down too early, but he was given disastrously little warning, only hearing something unexpected an instant before his world was turned upside down.

He had only begun to spin around when something crashed into his back with more than enough force to knock him cleanly off of his hooves. It felt like a giant had just reached down and knocked him aside with casual, world-ending strength. He was sent sprawling out over the arena, but the weight that had struck him stuck to his back, and before he could begin to reconcile what was happening, he felt hands like vices take him by his wrists and pull both his arms up behind his back, twisting them far past the point of discomfort.

He grunted, burbling as half his face was pushed into an inch of watery mud, and he felt the weight atop him shift upward, giving his arms a threatening twist in the process. "Yield." hissed a low, breathy voice into his ear.

Richter struggled, but his every effort was discouraged with painful violence and strain on his arms that felt as if they would be torn from their sockets. When he spied Tobias plodding toward him, sword in hand, to stand over him, he let out a tired breath and went limp. "I yield." he sighed.

Tobias smiled warmly, and he felt the weight on his back remove itself from him. He could have gotten up, but instead he just rolled over to stare up at the dim, grey skies. What greeted him instead, however, was a host of grinning faces, the foremost among them that of his unexpected defeat. Rain sluiced from fine, brazen scales, and intense, amethyst eyes scanned him up and down. The dragoness then stood, tugging her dark uniform straight on her shoulders before she extended a hand down to him. "Lesson number one, big guy: never fight alone." she said with a laugh, "At least not if you can help it."

Regardless of how many months it had been, he couldn't have forgotten the contours of the dragon's tapering features. Ice flooded his veins, and it was all he could do to avoid shaking as he reached up, accepting her hand. With that same steady strength, and despite that he was half again her height, she helped him get his hooves under him again.

As he stood there dumbstruck, Valorie approached, pausing to scoop her sword from the ground where it had fallen before closing the distance and clapping a hand down on his shoulder. "That was... impressive, certainly more impressive than I expected. I don't think I've ever seen Toby have to work so hard to lose convincingly. Good on you."

Everyone that had been watching his mock combat gradually formed a loose circle around him. "Wh-what?"

Valorie paused for a moment, staring down at the blade of her sword as she idly rubbed her thumb over the glittering orange gem set into its pommel. It almost appeared as though she was listening to something, and it took several seconds for her to acknowledge his bafflement with a squeeze of his shoulder. "What do you mean what? Toby's one of our best, although I'll admit that there might be some of us that wouldn't have had to throw the fight just to illustrate a point. If you're in the Lance, no matter what, there will be someone there to have your back. You don't ever have to fight alone again. You don't have to stand by yourself. We're a family, a weird, dysfunctional family, and if I've learned anything over the years I've spent here, it's that you should always be able to rely on your family."

He wiped mud off of his face, struggling with the overwhelming sensation of having so many sets of eyes on him at once. He was sore, and tired, and wet, and he had every reason to be miserable, but the warmth in Valorie's smile and the sincerity of her voice cut through all that. "Thank you. I think I'd like that."

"Then welcome." she added, sweeping a hand out to indicate the massive walls that surrounded them. "Welcome home. Now come on. Let's get you cleaned up and settled in. You're going to be very, very busy for the next few months, and you should be comfortable for at least a little bit of that."

He nodded, and Valorie ushered him away from the sparring field. Along the way, he received a host of murmured greetings from the gathered throng, all of which he at least tried to return, but they were quickly left behind him as he was led down the hill toward the immense doors. Tobias walked behind and to the left of him, and the equally muddy horse couldn't seem to rid his face of his enormous smile. "In your defense, I didn't have to try to lose all that hard. I

did *not* see that suplex coming there at the end. It's not often I fight people who can just toss me around like that. No, you're pretty good. It shouldn't take any time at all to get you sharpened up and in real fighting shape. I know the first day isn't really the easiest."

As Tobias gave him a good-natured clap on the back, he couldn't help but laugh. "You're not kidding. I look forward to our rematch, sometime when I'm not cold, tired, and out of practice."

With a loud, boisterous chuckle, Valorie shoved open the Sanctum's inner doors and ushered them both through. "That's the spirit! Now, Toby, would you please take your new friend to Ranna and get him—and yourself—fixed up?"

The lanky horse nodded. "Of course."

"Excellent. When you're done, could you get a hold of Virgil or Aurora and let them know we need another room?"

"I'm sure that they'll be excited to make introductions."

Valorie rolled her eyes. "Yeah, one more than the other. At any rate, Richter, welcome."

He thanked the imposing equine and watched her turn and stride back out into the rain, leaving him standing there in the doorway, dripping once again. "Alright then," Tobias said, extending a guiding hand down the hall, "If you'll follow me? You're going to be pretty busy pretty soon, but for now, take your time. We'll get you all cleaned up, and you'll have some time to introduce yourself and explore a little bit. This place is pretty easy to navigate, one hallway, three floors. Facilities are on the first floor, armory, mess hall, work rooms and the like. Quarters are on the second. The third floor's mostly larger rooms for guests and the Archmage's business. Are you ready for this?"

The Lancer must have noticed the thoughtfulness so plain on his face, and he straightened his back, following along with a sharp nod. "Yes, actually. I feel like I've been ready my whole life. It just took me... a little while to figure it out."

Tobias laughed. "You might be surprised how much you've got in common with some of the others, then. Come on, I'll show you around."