

Spirit of Vengeance

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He walked.

He walked because he had nowhere to go.

He walked because he had somewhere to be; he just didn't know where it would be until he could walk no more.

The unrelenting, desert sun beat down on him from its throne high in the sky. The hyena was young, strong and robust. He would be a long time dying. But he had already left a shifting trail in the dunes behind him for days. Two, three, four, he couldn't be sure. He had fallen when his legs refused to carry him, and when he awoke, he rose, shaking the sand from his fur to continue.

His body was built to withstand the unrelenting heat, and dehydration was going to kill him with agonizing slowness. He was a hunter; he had been proud once. He once had reason to be proud. His short, greyish-yellow fur was sleek, softer than many others of his kind, and the countless, black spots that covered his back, legs, and stomach were clear of any discolorations, showing that he was healthy, in his prime.

He was a hunter, and possessed a hunter's body. His long arms were thick with sinewy muscle, and the breadth of his shoulders, the depth of his chest accentuated his obvious strength. Like most others of his kind, he was top heavy, his legs were comparatively short, his hips and rear dense and compact, supporting the mass of his powerfully built torso. He had been proud of that, how his thick neck and short muzzle let him put his sturdy teeth to work, cracking bone with frightful ease.

But even knowing how... desirable he was, it meant nothing to him. Aside from glimmers of dull pride, he had never really cared about his body save for what he could use it to catch and eat. All that had mattered was her. She had been so much more than he. Compared to her, he was a squat, misshapen brute, clumsy and slow. But none of that had mattered to her. She had seen through their differences. The lioness had been beautiful. Tall, lean, her physique had been more proportioned, her soft, tawny fur covering her own athletic frame.

He had loved her, more than anything, and he had known his love had been returned. He had seen it in her eyes when she looked at him. She saw his own beauty through his thick frame. The confidence with which he always moved, he had known he was strong, well-made, but he had never thought of himself as attractive, not until she had told him.

It shouldn't have worked. He had known it was an impossibility. They should have been at each other's throats. He should have put his spear through her heart. She should have pounced on him, torn out his throat with her long, imposing fangs. She had been bigger than he, if not stronger, and she had gotten the jump on him when they had first met. Mirth glimmered dully in his hollow gut. She had teased him mercilessly about it.

Regardless of what they should have done, they hadn't done it. She had risen up from the grassy savanna, silent, but her eyes had been curious, longing, and had stayed his spear-arm. They had spoken, nervous, and then they had laughed. She had laughed harder, giggling at his distinctive cackle. A few minutes had left them rolling in the grass in a most taboo manner, but he hadn't cared. She had been soft in his big, strong hands, had urged him onward, nipping playfully at his sensitive, rounded ears.

At first it had been just fun; they would meet, by the light of the moon. She would smile, clap her hands at the gifts he had made her from the bones of his hunts, necklaces, trinkets, and charms. They would meet, hold each other. It had been bliss the likes of which he had never imagined. Eventually he had realized he had been in love, and had told her, more nervous than he had been before his coming-of-age hunt. She had just smiled, that same, soft smile, showing her fangs not in threat, but in promise, and had whispered to him that she felt the same way.

He had never been so happy, and his ecstasy only continued to grow. Weeks bled into months, each a giddy blur under the brutal sun and cooling moon, but they had taken that from him. They had taken everything from him. His tribe had found them, limbs twined together under the shade of the acacias after a long, sleepless, blissful night. They had screamed their rage at his betrayal, the lust for blood in their ignorant, wild eyes.

She had tried to run, to save him, he knew, but they had struck her, spears drawing her blood. He had cried out for them to stop, to listen, but they ignored him. The sight of crimson in her fur broke him, the thought that they would make a creature so majestic into prey made him rise up against them, for her. She had begged him not to, but he couldn't let them continue, and he had thrown himself at them, armed with nothing but his broad, gnashing teeth, the only weapons he needed.

His teeth had found them, closing around a neck, thick and sturdy like his own. He had known his name; he had tasted his blood. It didn't matter. His maw had crushed bone and throat alike. As the body had fallen, he had taken up his pack-mate's dropped spear and put it to use. It was hopeless though. He was strong, but they were many, and he had been subdued. His resistance was useless, had changed nothing, but he couldn't have stood there and let them take her.

His love had been taken anyway, bound and gagged like him, trussed up and brought before the matriarch for judgment. She had looked down on him from her grimy "throne," pronounced his punishment for fraternizing with the "enemy," for treason against the tribe, the punishment he knew was coming. They hadn't let him speak to defend himself. Like that, he had lost all the honor he had dragged himself through the muck to earn because he had lay alongside a lioness, killed one and injured several in her defense, in defense of a beast.

She had been dragged forward, their teeth bared, eyes hungry. In the tribe, nothing was let go to waste, and what better way to punish him than to make him watch? She was thrown to the ground a scant few paces from him, made lucid enough to comprehend what was going to happen to her. They pulled the gag from her mouth, expecting her to scream, but she hadn't; she hadn't even acknowledged them. She had died with his name, soft and quiet, on her lips, lips that had so often smiled so warmly at him.

He had screamed where she hadn't, shown weakness in face of her strength. His voice had been hoarse against his gag, and he had struggled against his bonds as his life was destroyed. He hadn't been allowed to look away, and only when his tribe was done with her was he rendered unconscious to serve what they thought would be his *true* punishment.

Banishment, he had awakened miles from his home, on the edge of the savanna, where the soil grew loose and shifting. His death was a certainty if he ever ventured back into the plains, not that he cared for his life. He just refused to give them the pleasure of seeing him broken and bloody at their feet, so he had turned south, into the dunes.

And so he walked.

The tough pads on his paws were torn and blistered from constant contact with the rough grit on which he walked. His lungs burned from the arid air that he breathed only by instinct. The

sand beneath his broad, digitigrade feet was speckled with crimson, blood that dripped weakly from his parched, cracked nose and lips. He felt none of it; he felt tired, numb and hollow more than anything else, but he didn't let himself stop. It was all he could do, and he would know he had reached his grave when he could no longer force his legs to carry him onward, further into the biting, unforgiving wind that blew constantly from the west.

As he crested one of the mountainous mounds of shifting sand, his exhausted legs found a loose spot and just as suddenly lost their footing. He fell limply, and his world spun around him as he tumbled down the dune, landing in a heap at the bottom. A torrent of gritty dirt followed him down, filling his mouth, ears, and eyes. With a raspy cough, he clawed his way out from the cascade of sand that had half-buried him, but try as he might, he couldn't get his legs under him.

Slumping back to the earth, he snarled defiantly and tried again and again to rise, each time his mutinous legs dropping him back to the sand. This was it, then; this was where he would lay until the wind and sun turned him into a dried husk. There were worse places to die. His mouth was full of dirt; he spat it out. It was dry. He had no more saliva. There was so little water remaining in his body; there was none left to lose. The sand was wetted only with his blood, little, weak droplets pushed from his desiccated lips by his feebly fluttering heart.

"Zyra..." he croaked, "I'm sorry..."

"I know, Kye"

He looked up at the source of the shadow that had fallen over him. The sun's light was still blinding him, silhouetting in darkness the figure that stood over him, but he knew that voice. He would know that powerfully feminine shape anywhere. The lioness that loomed over him dropped to her knees, coming into focus of his weary, sunburned eyes.

She was as beautiful as he remembered, and she looked on him with tender affection, a hand hovering over his shaggy, black hair, almost touching him. "You mustn't yet surrender, Kye. You're so close. You've come so far. Don't give up."

"Zyra..." rasped the voice that could hardly be recognized as his own, "They killed you. They tore you apart and ate you like a stupid warthog. They... they killed you, Zyra."

Heart-stopping anguish flickered over the lioness's lovely features. "I know, Kye; I know. I wish you hadn't had to see that, but I stayed strong for you. I didn't let them hear me cry. I tried. I tried, Kye. I didn't want you to remember me like that." Her claws whispered over his hair, barely perceptible over the constant, arid wind. "Don't give up now, Kye, please. You're almost there."

With a coarse grunt, he shoved his arms beneath him, digging claws through the sand as he pushed himself stubbornly to his feet, absolutely refusing to let gravity bear him down again. He wobbled in front of her, and she smiled down at him as she, too, rose to her own paws, her tail twitching happily behind her. "Come, Kye. Walk with me one last time."

She sashayed gracefully away, beckoning to him every few steps with a playful wave of her tail. He followed her as best as he could. Movements shaky, unsteady, he forced himself to keep up with her, and she helped him, slowing as he slowed, growing confident with him, but always staying tantalizingly out of reach. There were no words he could say, and she, too, remained silent, just urging him on with voiceless glances.

Time stretched on. He wasn't sure how long he spent walking, or where he was being taken, but her path didn't stray too much from his previous, southward wandering. He hadn't been searching for anything, but the way Zyra pushed him onward lent purpose to his numb steps. When he stumbled and fell, she would stop, rush back to him, beg him to rise with soft, gentle insistence until he managed to claw his way back upright.

He saw it eventually, down a shallow incline, in the distance, a patch of color that stood out from the sand that stretched on from horizon to horizon. It wasn't a mirage. Mirages were blue, the sky bouncing off the scorched earth. This was green, a tiny little patch of the lush color in the distance, and the lioness guided him toward it. It must have been far, because it approached them at a crawl.

The sand grew firm underpaw, rough and rocky, giving way to massive slabs of weathered stone that had been worn smooth by ages of sandblasting by the desert wind. Even with all that, they looked abnormal, too even to have been created by natural forces. He could see creases in the stone, grooves. The slabs had been placed there. He was walking on an artificial plateau, half buried in mounds of sand that were constantly sweeping the surroundings clean.

He passed the remains of a low wall that looked ancient beyond his imagining, and then there were more, taller, more sturdy-looking. They outlined the fossils of time-crumbled structures, growing larger and more impressive as Zyra led him onward. And then he saw the source of the green. There was a garden, centrally located in the mess of ruined structures, a vibrant splash of green in the middle of lifeless dust. The sound of trickling water forced his ears upright.

The lioness continued onward, excitedly, and he followed her until she had stepped under the shade of ancient, towering trees that had looked so tiny from so far away. A stream, fed by a fountain made to look like a natural waterfall, bubbled between smoothed stones, pure, crystalline water. Zyra seated herself on a long, low bench that sat placidly adjacent to a worn footpath. "Drink, Kye. Please."

If she hadn't told him to, he wouldn't have. He had nothing left for which to survive, but he staggered forward anyway, letting himself fall to his knees. He stuck his face into the water, gulping it down like a dying beast. It was mercifully cool, and it felt like the parched skin of his mouth and throat absorbed most of it before it could reach his stomach. Eventually, though, the heat that had been baking him for the past eternity subsided, replaced by the pleasant coolness of water and shade.

He nearly forgot to breathe, and when he was finished, he came up coughing and spluttering for air, sweet, delicious air that filled his lungs and pushed the fatigue from his bones. He licked his ruined lips, feeling them bleed anew, suddenly revitalized. With a huff he regained his shaky feet and stumbled away from the stream, deeper into the shade, to the lioness that watched him approach with the kind smile she always gave him.

He collapsed back to his knees a step from the bench, and his thick arms went around her waist. Her fur was soft, and she oozed the very warmth he had yearned for those lonely nights when they were apart. It was just as he remembered it. He pressed his muzzle into her stomach and screamed. He cried and wailed with a force that he hadn't known he possessed, shaking her in his hands. She had been lost to him, and with her, everything he had ever cared for. Why did he drink? Living meant more time alone, without her. Living meant the memory of her death burning at the fore of his mind, meant horrifying, bloody dreams. Why did he want to live anymore?

She put her hands to him, petting his hair, scratching the tips of his ears like she always had. "I don't know, Kye. The only one who can answer that question is you."

He looked up, burbling, "Z-Zyra... please... forgive me. I failed you. I couldn't keep you safe! I let you down, and now you're dead! I should have run away with you, left them to wallow in their own filth, but I was afraid! I was weak, and it got you killed. Please forgive me!"

The lioness sighed, pulling his head up so she could look down at him. "No..." she said in a low, tender purr, "You didn't get anyone killed. The blind ignorance of those dumb animals, too set in their ways to see reason, got people killed. You did nothing wrong. You gave me hope. You gave me love, Kye; you gave me joy. There is nothing to apologize for in those things. I'm only sorry it couldn't have lasted longer. Please, Kye, don't cry for me; don't mourn me. Please, just remember how much fun we had, how long our nights were, how short the days between our meetings were. Please, whatever happens, don't forget the way I was."

He went back to nuzzling her belly, pressing his nose to her velvety fur, gulping down her keen scent. "I won't." he said in a throaty murmur, "How could I forget you, Zyra? I can't. I won't. I promise."

That made her smile. "Come here, Kye. Kiss me one last time, please."

He rose up, pushing himself onto her, and the lioness's lissom arms wrapped around his broad shoulders, pulling him in. With a huff from her throat, his bloodied lips met hers. They held each other, the lioness letting herself be pulled to her paws, making him crane his neck to meet her. It was slow, longing, lasting, full of enough energy to make his fur stand on end. He cried in spite of her prior pleas, silent tears finally able to darken the fur beneath his eyes. There was so much in those tears, loss, pain, grief. They were tears of sorrow for her loss as much as his. They were selfish tears as much as selfless, shed with the knowledge he could never feel such passion again.

When he felt her crying too, he broke. He parted from her lips with an ashamed sob. "I love you, Zyra." he whimpered, "I love you."

She forced him back into her, pressing her body into his with decisive finality, as if trying to make an imprint of herself in his fur. "I know, Kye. Remember that."

He felt the first tear roll off of her silky cheek to strike his muzzle. He blinked, and he lost her again. A harsh, thunderous peal split the air, shuddering around him as a flash of brilliance stunning enough to knock him down lit his surroundings. His ears rang, and his eyes were blurry for a few seconds as he clambered up to throw his arms over the bench. More water struck him, plipped against the stone around him. It thickened, grew rougher, and he was forced to blink it from his eyes as he regained his bearings.

Zyra was gone, vanished with the coming of the thunder and rain. Of course she had. She hadn't ever been there. He had known; he had to have known. Had he known? Forcing himself to his feet, that familiar hollowness returned to his gut, sinking into him, dulling the sensation of the water soaking into his fur, making his ears and tail droop. Whether by the intervention of the spirits, or the death throes of a heat-stricken mind, he had been granted one last audience with the goddess he had devoted his life to worshiping.

As if the rain was easing the passage of his thoughts, it finally began to sink into him. She was gone. He was alone, terribly, horribly alone. His tribe had taken the light and warmth from his life, but that wasn't what made a dull ember of anger bloom in his gut, filling the hole left by her passing. He was tough; he could handle darkness and cold. They hadn't just taken her from him. They had taken *everything* from her.

His mind went to the endless list of things she had told him she wanted to do, things she would never get to experience. All of that was lost. He should have been the one to die. *He* should have fought harder for her. If he had been stronger things could have been different. He could have fought his way to her and escaped. They wouldn't have let that happen. They would have killed him if he had resisted too much.

He abruptly turned away from the rain-drenched garden and stalked back the way he had come, past the ruined construction of whatever tribe had lived there ages ago. The avenues between the buildings were becoming rivers, and the torrential rain, coupled with the night-incessant flashes of stark lightning were making it difficult for him to keep his bearings. He did his best, trying to remember his original passage through the stone.

It was as if he hadn't spent days trudging through the unforgiving heat of the desert. He felt energized, and his anger bloomed hotter in his chest. How dare they?! They hadn't even given him a chance to explain, plead his case! He had been a hunter, honored, and they had bound and gagged him like he had been a beast! With her help, he could have explained to them, but they hadn't even considered it!

He had gotten turned around. His surroundings were unfamiliar. The buildings were more intact; he must have wound up going further into the maze of shattered walls. It didn't matter, and he let his legs just carry him with newfound confidence. It would have been easy to swallow his anger if it had been his own loss he was angry about, but what those inbred animals had done to *her* infuriated him. They had been kin to him, friends and family, and they had turned on him for falling in love, and then they had punished *her* for it!

Panting now, he felt dire purpose crystallize within him. He would show them. He would make them listen to him, and then he would take everything from them, grind their bones to dust between his teeth or die trying. He knew, now, why he had slaked his thirst. He couldn't die without seeing them pay for their crimes. They would answer to her memory. He would give them a chance to explain their choices, but he wouldn't save them from the consequences of their decisions.

Rage, frantic and unknowable, boiled inside him, pouring through his veins, untouched by the icy rain that cut his vision to barely a dozen feet before him. Lightning, paling in comparison to the strength of his fury, split the sky, rumbling the earth beneath his paws. He no longer hurt. He no longer knew fatigue, or joy, or even sorrow. Sullen outrage, bordering on mindless violence, was all his mind could process, and it only fed on itself, growing hotter, a burning inferno that scoured away his inhibitions one layer at a time.

He didn't even flinch when a nearly blinding bolt of violet-white lightning, almost bright enough to mirror his temper, struck the earth barely a hundred feet in front of him. He saw the point of impact, shrouded by high, almost intact walls, in vicious silhouette through the rain. His feet didn't falter as they continued to carry him forward into the storm.

Only that same wall, rising up before him, was enough to stop him. A broad, arched doorway stood in his path, seemingly daring him to step through it, into the weathered structure. He did. The floor was of similar, smooth stone, and circular walls, uncapped by any roof, completely surrounded the space. Once more, the enormous, nearly-empty room gave him pause. The shadow of something sitting in the center of the rounded chamber gleamed metallically in the webs of lightning that carpeted the sky above.

He strode forward. The only entrance to the room stood behind him, and the tremendous, walled ring held nothing else but the object he approached. The space seemed sized to fit its still, silent occupant, and it came into view as he padded through the inch of water that had fallen and was flowing from the broad arena.

It was a squat pedestal, made squat only by its enormous diameter. Its smooth top came up to his chest, and the circumference of the sturdy monolith was engraved with faded, illegible script, some unreadable, pictographic language that was only briefly illuminated by the lightning

that shredded the clouds above. It almost looked like it had been made to hold a statue, some enormous construction, but it held no sculpture.

Instead, the hilt and blade of a sword rose up from the heavily-aged stone. He stared; it felt right. It was as enormous as the pedestal in which it resided. Its blade was straight for a length, but then gave birth to a long, sweeping curve like that of a wicked, outwardly-sharpened sickle whose tip was buried within a stony prison. It, unlike its surroundings, was not marred by time or the elements. Its bronze blade and wire-wrapped hilt glimmered in the flickering light, calling to him.

It was perfect, but it was not meant to be wielded by anyone of his stature. It was enormous; the sword's hilt alone was as long as he was tall, rising high into the air above him. Rain sluiced off of the blade's elegant curve. It didn't matter if he had no hope of lifting it, let alone swinging it. He knew he needed it, and he jumped up onto the plinth, taking the requisite couple steps to bring the flawless metal within arm's reach.

The instant his claws brushed against the immaculate bronze, a deafening clap of thunder signaled the arrival of a dazzling bolt of blue-white brilliance that struck the weapon's hilt. That power coursed through him in a split-second that felt like an eternity, and he could track it by the burning in his skin. With a cry forced from his lungs by a spasming diaphragm, he was struck by it, knocked backward off the pedestal, rolling to a halt in a tangle of arms and legs.

His face was in the water; he couldn't breathe, but neither could he make his body move. His muscle just twitched nervelessly under his fur as he struggled to force himself up. "Now is the time for choices, Kye!" called a voice that would have been mistaken for thunder if it hadn't been so furiously feminine, "I have done nothing to you! Will you surrender and die, or will you live and fight to make those who have wronged her pay?!"

Gasping, he got his hands beneath his chest, pushed himself to his knees. "Good!" cried the invisible giantess who shouted down at him from her phantom throne, "Will you fight, Kye?! Will you fight for her?!"

The ground rumbled beneath him as the voice repeated the question. He pushed a paw under his weight, forced himself up. "Yes..." he grunted.

The voice practically screamed at him, "Will you fight for her?!"

"Yes!" he screamed back, opening his mouth in a cry of frantic defiance.

Lightning struck him again, this time lancing through the air from the hilt of the sickle-sword. It impacted his chest, sliding him back across the slick stone, but not knocking him down. He screamed wordlessly as pain the likes of which he could have never imagined filled his body. It was harsh, raw and visceral, making every nerve demand his attention. He screamed and screamed as bolt after bolt of angry red lightning poured energy into his body, slamming him back against the smooth curve of the wall, pounding him into it.

It couldn't compare to the pain of his loss. It was nothing compared to the numb emptiness he felt, but that void in his soul was quickly filled with a fury that made his body throb in time with the streaks of energy that were continuing to arc into him. They had taken her from him, from this world, as much as they had taken the world from her. Those stupid, filthy creatures, the ones he had called kin, had no right! Mindless ignorance had fueled their pitiful hatred. He would show them hate! They knew nothing of pain!

With a roar of rebellion, he pushed himself off of the wall, bracing an arm against it as the sword's lightning tried again and again to slam him back against the stone. Flashed of red reflected off of the water that soaked everything, passed through the countless drops of rain. The red filled his vision, outlining the sword that was its source. He needed it, and, pushing off of the

wall, he took a step forward, ignoring the disastrous rage that shot ice through his heart. He cared not for their excuses! He would hear them as they had heard him!

The monolithic blade struck him relentlessly, but he refused to be pushed back. He dug his blunted claws into the stone beneath him, finding any purchase he could, and took another step forward, ignoring the agony with which the sword filled him, and welcoming it, even. It filled him with a piercing ache, a frigid, icy burn that settled in his frame. It made him shake, made it difficult to continue, and with another step, his body betrayed him, dropping him to hands and knees.

The lightning that connected him with the gigantic sickle-sword continued to batter him, but he caught his claws in a crack in the otherwise smooth floor. He would not allow himself to be forced back. He wouldn't let himself fall. His anger demanded recognition. His fury demanded an outlet, and the sword gave him that release. A guttural growl sprang unbidden low in his throat, and he forced himself upright again, sudden, determined strength pouring into him.

As he rose, his joints cracked and his bones groaned under the strain of forging onward through the sword's assault. He pushed himself forward, raging wordlessly as his body was wracked with frightful spasms. Curling his fingers into tight fists, he struggled to keep his footing as he shook, the energy being blasted into him making his body tremble traitorously. The rain soaked into his fur steamed off of him, his hair was slicked into his eyes. He couldn't see anything beyond his body and the violent, crimson power that crashed through him.

He could feel it though. It built within him, pushing outward against his skin, growing more clamant with each half-stumbling step he took. The scarlet power flashed in intensity to mirror the sense of overwhelming, dreadful power that welled up from his core. Tightening his chest, his stomach, it pressed at him, tore at him, demanding everything he had. It promised either destruction or salvation, and it was up to him to decide whether to embrace the terrifying agony or let it annihilate him.

His mind was already made up. He raised his arms over him, lifting his head to scream in brazen challenge, daring the universe to oppose him. When nothing but the fury of nature, feeble compared to his own, answered him, he cried out again, bending his spine and throwing his fists into the flooded, packed stone of the floor. With a calamitous crack that was audible over the thunder roaring around him, the slab of rock splintered under the impact, crumbling to rubble beneath his fists.

His voice rumbled between gnashing teeth, deep and rough with unbridled violence, and then he exploded. The flickering ruby glow that glared off of the ocean in which he stood rushed into him, pushing him outward. It started in his core. The tension in his body, trying desperately to contain his strength, proved not enough, and snapped, but instead of burning him to ash, that searing power mingled with his frigid rage and boiled up through him.

Claws grated against the remains of the floor as it began. He bent forward, his paws barely able to keep him in a semblance of standing as his bones ground against one another. With the crackling of shifting sinew and the crunch of twisting bone, his already broad chest surged under his fur. It pushed his shoulders apart and spilled fire into his arms. They thickened, stretching his fur taut over muscle he had always had, but now grew frighteningly huge, raking his blunted nails over the shattered stone beneath them.

The bones in his limbs pushed them longer, giving his expanding bulk more and more room to fill. His spine stretched, pulling him taller. A grinding in his skull pushed his head out, giving him the unsettling view of the flooded floor getting further away as his arms and legs held him higher. He kept his rough proportions, his humongous shoulders keeping up with his chest,

slabs of unyielding might that bordered his thickening neck. His whole frame throbbed wider, swelling with each bolt of lightning that rained down on his back, flash-steaming the water from the fur of his increasingly muscular form.

Turning bloodlust-hazed eyes to the monsoon sky, he staggered back to his paws, his legs bulging with the strength required to heft his weight over his feet. The lightning pounded inch after inch onto him, but he was already too large to worry about being forced to give ground. Demanding it from him, the painful pressure that surged with each streak of blazing brilliance made him flex his body, pushing his muscle against his skin, forcing it bigger, drinking in the strength that was forced into him.

He felt hard, unyielding; he felt dense and heavy, but as he took another dauntless step forward, it was with effortless power. His form grew, his spotted fur stretching over popping joints and a heaving physique. His thick, bone-crushing teeth snapped together time and time again between terse, barking gasps that deepened alongside his chest. He pulsed outward, and the cavernous room felt less and less oversized. His tough, padded feet made standing water jump as they shook the ground. The weight that dropped to the ancient stone slabs was enough to sunder them, crushing rock, turning the floor to a murky, rubble-filled slurry.

His tail brushed along the wall behind him. He was growing faster than he was making progress toward his goal. Feet shuddered onto his frame. He roared defiantly and forced himself forward, cracking stone as it surrendered to his rage. The sword was making him fit to wield it, and as his agonized body groaned and swelled, his titanic arms reached out toward it.

His fingers pushed past the lancing lightning, wrapped around the hilt, and his knees crashed to the ground as the beams of crimson luminance ceased. He had made contact, and the sword's power no longer needed to blaze through the air to pour into him. The violent pressure in his body redoubled, and he found himself screaming again as his bones crumpled. He surged larger with explosive force, even his kneeling, hunched position forcing his eyes upward, along the polished bronze blade. Still, he didn't let his hand leave the sword. He would take everything it could give him, demand it.

With a roll of his massive shoulders, he levered himself to his paws with the arms he had on the sword. It didn't budge, and as the endless lightning lashed the clouds above, he put his other hand to the bronze, wringing it in his fingers and pulling upward. The wire-wrapped hilt was soaked and slick, but he kept his grip, his muscle bunching under his fur as he put his back behind his struggle.

Throwing his head back, he bellowed into the torrential rain, commanding the sword to yield to him, but he wasn't done. His legs shook and shuddered larger. The muscle that coated his abdomen rolled and flexed as he bent his back, bulging like bricks in a massive wall. It wasn't muscle for show; it was hard, unforgiving, tough and sinewy. His upper body was enormous, thick plates of solid strength that bunched in time with his exertions, forcing his fur outward as each jerk on the sword pushed him larger.

The stone beneath him gave under his weight, but the loss in height was immediately countered by his gargantuan body's pulsing expansion. He was so close; he could almost do it. His mind focused entirely on that one furious demand. He threw his weight against the sword with an aggressive snarl, having to shift his hands as the hilt grew too small for both. The stone in which the sickle-sword was buried groaned louder than the barrage of thunder surrounding him, finally giving under his strength with a terrific crack.

He felt the sword finally give, allowing itself to be pulled free. Rock crumbled around the massive, sweeping curve, and he lifted it up before he slammed it back into the weathered slabs,

collapsing as numbing fatigue crashed into him. The fire, if not the anger, rushed from his tremendous body, and he was forced to lean heavily on the immaculate weapon or crumple to the rain-soaked ground. His lungs pumped like bellows, struggling to pull enough air into his vast chest to keep him conscious. The endless rain pounded down onto his expansive back, soaking his fur, making him shake. It was bitterly cold, and without the fire afforded to him by his newly-claimed weapon, he shivered in the chill.

"Rise, Kye." whispered the voice through the thunder, coming from within him, now gentle and intimate, "Stand and see yourself."

Gritting his teeth, he hauled himself to his feet, knowing that it was for the last time; he would never fall again. The sword's wicked tip rested against the shattered remains of the earth below, its monolithic size belied by the size of the hand in which it confidently rested. His palms were nearly as wide as he had been tall only a few moments ago, and he would have been able to wrap his fingers around himself.

He had done more than grow taller. His bulk, already strong and hard, had been magnified. His arms were thicker, his entire frame broader. His chest was deeper, covered in a dense layer of mountainous muscle that rose and fell under his heaving breaths. His legs, while still shorter in proportion to his longer, more powerful limbs, were still packed with steely, striated muscle that bulged beneath his spotted fur as he shifted easily, straightening his spine, thrusting his chest out and balling his unoccupied hand into a furious fist as he watched his arm flex with the movement. There was nothing he could not now make his body do.

With a gruff growl, he dragged the blade from the ground, watching as rainwater streamed along its cutting edge. It felt heavy, but rightly so, and he moved it like an extension of his arm, slicing the air with a dull roar that was just barely audible over the nigh-constant thunder that shuddered through the sky above. As he stood there, feeling his anger condense, fall inward on itself, sharpening into something the blade could be proud of, he felt his fatigue gradually drift away and be slowly replaced with a sense of ominous purpose.

The calm, feminine voice continued to murmur into his thoughts, somehow audible over the cacophony that filled his ears. "I am Vindicta." it... she told him, "Use me, Kye. Take me up and through me, become the instrument of her vengeance. With me, make them feel her loss. Return to them the courtesy they showed you both. Make them hurt the way she hurt, Kye. Make them scream where she was silent; let them hear what they so wanted to hear. I feel your rage, Kye. It is righteous, with purpose, and you have proven worthy. I will give you all I can, Kye. I just ask that you use me to those ends.

In answer, he spun the blade around with a feral cry and brought it down with both hands. The weapon's graceful curve bit into the sturdy stone wall and sunk tenaciously into it, powered by a body of unthinkable strength. The rock screamed its torture as he brought the sword all the way down to sink it into the ground, and the wall collapsed outward in a cascade of broken rubble.

Hefting the sword to rest comfortably on his shoulder, he stepped through the opening he had made, his paws shaking the ground as he moved. He had no sense of direction in the blinding storm that mirrored his outrage, but instinct turned him north, toward the savanna, and he padded onward with long strides, the thought of looking back not even flickering through his mind.