

Portfolio Submission

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Writer's Statement

Short Story (Fantasy): "The Corollaries of War"

Short Story (Fantasy): "Dragon Wings"

Short Story (Fantasy): "Safe Grounds"

Writer's Statement

The written language is beautiful, powerful, magical – and that is what draws and captivates me. Each sentence holds profound emotion, an extraordinary way of perception and thought, and each passage offers a scene so vivid and brilliant that the story can be seen, felt, heard, smelled, and tasted as if it were reality. The words jump and leap off the page, twisting and morphing in front of my very eyes. Words become images, images transform into the imagination, and the imagination has no bounds. In elementary school, voracious reading was enough to sate my growing hunger for these mythical tales, but by the time I reached middle school, I began creating my own stories of wonders beyond this world. Since then, my passion has only intensified.

But while I write of lands seen only in the mind's eye, I draw my inspiration from everything around me – music, videogames, literature, art, film, and even real life situations. Anything and everything can fuel my imagination to journey to a place all its own. Writing is my way of sharing those enchanting stories with the rest of the world so that others, too, can become enveloped in all its magic.

I write where I can and when I can. First, I build the world with its many intricacies and create the characters with all their depth. Afterwards, I briefly outline the story and research concepts I plan to incorporate. And then, I can really begin. Once I put my fingers to the keyboard – or my pen to the paper – I become meticulous, carefully placing one word alongside the previous one to create the image I see. Music plays gently in the background, a playlist I personally create to fit the story I tell. Slowly, the pieces fall together, and the scene unfolds.

Everything after that is up to the imagination.

Fantasy, nearly nonexistent in boundaries, is my favored genre because of all the possibilities it allows. Therefore, the subjects and ideas I choose to target from story to story are diverse and complex, seeking to attempt that which is new and different compared to my prior works. Recently, my focus has drawn toward short stories to sharpen my weaker skills in writing, but composing novels is my true goal.

In this portfolio, I have included three short stories, organized in order from the most recently to the least recently completed. "The Corollaries of War," completed in January 2009, depicts the confrontation of two noble men years after a devastating war; "Dragon Wings," completed in March 2008, delves into the weighty mission of loyal Captain Marciel Torhild; and "Safe Grounds," completed in May 2007, walks along a single pathway with the reader nearly one-on-one. Powerful statements can be found in all three stories, the symbolism in some heavier than in others. Because my concentrations are varied, my themes and messages tend to be as well.

Nevertheless, they are there, waiting to be discovered. Just like my writing.

And just like me.

The Corollaries of War

The chamber was immaculate, without a single object out of place. Its sapphire walls held an ethereal glow, and even though they appeared transparent, nothing could be seen of the other side. Near the top, the magnificent, sturdy structures curved towards each other, making a spectacular dome at a daunting two hundred sixty-one feet from the floor. A navy blue cloud of magic obscured the ceiling, and soft wisps trailed downward, slowly dissipating into the air as they fell further from their source. It was as if the substances of the supernatural were too heavy to be maintained in the earthly realm.

The sound of slowly approaching footsteps emanated from outside the entrance, echoing loudly against the taciturn walls. To commemorate those in the Battle of Keadilan, the massive chamber doors were always open. From the darkness that shadowed the opening, a figure stepped forward. The long, dark green trench coat; tall, ebony combat boots; and wide, jet black fedora hid the man's form entirely from view.

He never faltered in his pace, striding deliberately and resolutely toward the raised altar at the chamber's opposite end. Next to each side of the broad dais stood a pillar of solid light, the only source of illumination in the enormous room. Protruding from the back wall was a colossal stone statue of Saint Aquene, the martyr of peace among nations. Fully covered in her traditional, plain robe, she had her hands clasped in tenacious prayer, her eyes closed and her head bowed down toward the altar below. Her gentle, loving face held a mix of faith and imploration.

Vigilantly, she welcomed the intruder as he advanced, subtly judging his worth in the consecrated edifice. Upon reaching the altar, past the small set of stairs, the man lowered his head and offered a silent prayer in turn. The atmosphere of caution and rigid formality lightened; Saint Aquene seemed satisfied.

When he finished his words of respect, he slipped his hands into his coat pockets and vacantly watched the magic materialize, interweave, vanish, and recycle itself in the pillars of light. Perhaps, he thought to himself with empty hope, he won't come tonight. His lips tightened into a strained smile. The lie could not have been further from the truth. Both of them would travel to the ends of the earth for this night.

Yet, despite the years of anticipation, there remained a sense of hesitation, of fear, of inescapable doom.

The chimes from the clock outside resonated loudly into the chamber. He found himself counting each set of harmonious patterns. One, two, three. The preordained time was closing in. Four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. The other had never made a point to be alacritous. Ten, eleven. But this was cutting it far too close, even for him. Twelve. The man raised his head to meet Saint Aquene's benevolent face. It was midnight, and the person he awaited still wasn't here. His small beacon of hope burned a little brighter. Could it be possible that he really wouldn't show up tonight, he thought silently to the saint that towered above him. Is this your doing?

Suddenly, a voice drifted across the chamber, its tone only mildly amused. "I didn't know we were to be so covertly dressed." He turned on his heels, torn between elation and despair. The image of a black-haired man, smirking in expression, greeted him.

So, he had come after all.

Dressed in an elaborate outfit of greens and blues, a belt of gadgets running slanted from his shoulder to his waist, the newcomer walked farther into the chamber, his broadsword at his hip. He paused in his stride when reaching the middle of the room, raising his head to observe the cloud of blue magic drifting downward from above. There was a transient silence. "Two hundred sixty-one feet," he muttered to himself, his voice soft and distant. "Two hundred sixty-one soldiers left alive." Slowly, his gaze returned to the bulkily-clad figure, a wry smile on his face. "So, this is what they've made of us." He paused, methodically assessing his options. "It is a pleasure to see you again, Serkan Erasto," he addressed finally, cordiality in his voice.

Serkan removed his fedora, revealing a shock of red hair, and slipped off his trench coat, the simple belt around his waist holding his long sword. The clothes he wore were decorated with hues of blue and purple. "And I must say to the same for you, Timir Coriiss," he responded gently, tossing the hat aside and leaving the coat at his feet. "I apologize for the ensemble. It was difficult to arrive here unnoticed."

Timir cracked a smile, his eyes glimmering. "Still as overly cautious as ever, aren't you, Serkan?" he teased.

The building they stood in rested on the very boundary line between Stolthet and Kitartas, meant to symbolize their peaceful union. The war between the two countries only years ago had been brutal. Now, the traumatic series of events was referred to as the War of Honor, but only those who had fought in it understood the irony in its name.

The reason the war had started, a contention which many had forgotten now, was inconsequential compared to what resulted because of it. In the final Battle of Keadilan, thousands of soldiers charged for Stolthet and a similar number of Kitartas' men met them at the boundary. Hours turned into days, and days turned into months, but neither country would relent, insistent on fighting, on winning, on their pride and honor.

At that final hour, two hundred sixty-one soldiers remained alive on a field littered with fallen bodies. Stolthet and Kitartas, at long last, conceded, signing a treaty to end the war. The enormous, towering building was created at their boundary to honor those who died in battle. Since then, the countries had been at peace and even, to a point, become allies.

Serkan and Timir gave each other a knowing glance.

Back when the war had just begun, when both men had been recruited and realized they would be battling against each other, they had promised a fight to the end on the battlefield, one having the honor to take down the other. Yet, as fate would have it, they only met at the Battle of Keadilan – and the countries had proclaimed the war's end before they had the chance to fulfill their promise. But, they were not men to renege on their word, so instead, they set another date, time, and place for their final confrontation.

And now, each man wore his country's colors.

Timir smirked and reached into a compartment on his diagonal belt, his eyes never straying from the man in front of him. Carefully, he pulled out a black gun, its translucent barrel swelling with green magic, and pointed it at Serkan. The red-head lifted his eyebrows in surprise, but the astonishment quickly disappeared from his face. "I see," he said slowly, kneeling down slightly and reaching into his abandoned coat pocket to pull out a similar gun, its barrel bulging with purple swirls. He aimed it at Timir. "I knew Stolthet had created these in secret. I didn't know that Kitartas was manufacturing them too."

Timir shook his head, almost despondently, his smile forced. "You think too innocently, Serkan," he replied gently. "Kitartas, after all, has spies."

Serkan's countenance softened, the corners of his mouth rising pitifully as a melancholic understanding dawned on him. "You weren't able to return to your old life either, huh?" he asked sympathetically.

Timir shrugged. "I'm a secret agent now." Serkan nodded.

"I'm leading some of Stolthet's most guarded weapons projects." The unspoken words of war lingered in the air.

"And that is why we are here," Timir responded abruptly before the other could say more. "But these guns didn't exist at the time of our agreement, so they cannot be part of our arrangement now." The atmosphere had turned drastically sober.

Slowly, both men lowered their guns at the same time before tossing them aside, ensuring that where they landed would not be intrusive to the oncoming battle.

Serkan took the lead, setting both hands on the long sword's hilt at his hip. "Shall we continue, then?" Timir took hold of the broadsword by his side.

"We shall." Metal rung in the air as the two drew from their sheaths, the blades iridescent in the unevenly illuminated chamber.

And then, a silence, a stillness, a period where time seemed irrelevant and devoid of meaning. The two men stared each other down, fingers tensed around their chosen sword but unmoving in their approach.

As if they were one mind, they began moving at the same time, building up momentum in their attack. Serkan leapt past the stairs impeding his way, though it became quite clear that Timir was the faster of the two. They clashed not far from the dais, the pieces of well-crafted metal struggling for domination.

Timir broke the standstill first, striking an open area before his opponent could move in with an attack. Serkan quickly deflected, forcing the broadsword completely away, but the solace didn't last long.

Timir's broadsword was quicker, lighter, and since Timir had attacked first, he clearly had Serkan on the defense. Before the red-head could make his own move, the opposing sword came back again, slashing repeatedly in attempts to find – or, rather, break into – an opening. Serkan had to keep moving, as did his sword, just to keep up.

Strike. Block. Strike. Block. Strike. Block. The fight already developed an intricate dance, the clashes of metal filling the air like a thunderous melody of screaming voices. The combatants' skills were more than impressive.

"You have improved," Serkan noted between blows, speaking over the deathly music. The black hair of his opponent came closer than he preferred, and he quickly added distance between them.

"Training," Timir answered, his attacks slowing marginally as he spoke. "Mandatory training." Serkan found his chance, landing a powerful assault against the broadsword and causing his opponent to stumble, but Timir quickly regained his composure, taking another blow from the long sword and holding his ground. Quickly, he managed to glance along the blade of Serkan's sword.

"Your craftsmanship is superb."

A meeting of the eyes and both men took a few steps back. A sudden respite between them, their blades lowered closer to the ground. Serkan felt the edge of the miniature stairway at his heels, but his focus never wavered from his opponent. "How do you know it's mine?" Serkan asked jestingly, his lips twisted into a smile. Timir laughed, soft but unrestrained.

"Back in the day, you used to show me all your projects. It's developed considerably, but I still recognize your design." That was before the war, but they knew things had changed. Their looks hardened again before nostalgia could step in, their swords rising to meet each other. A mutual silence. Then movement.

With long strides to cover the remaining distance, Timir vaulted onto the lowest stair and immediately began slashing and thrusting at his opponent, not just in weak spots but in any area that allowed the quickest access. Striking harder this time around, the technique forced Serkan to draw back in his defense, edging closer and closer to the chamber's lofty sapphire wall.

The familiar feeling of pure adrenaline kicked in, a rush of sudden awareness and strength. Yet the pounding in their ears could not drown out the call of death. Their swords danced valiantly in the light as the men met blow for blow.

But Serkan's time was dwindling, and both knew it. The distance between him and the wall narrowed at every second; he could not afford to wait.

In a bold attempt, Serkan quickly covered the remaining void before his opponent could catch up with him and climbed up the wall with only his feet before circling around and dashing back down, long sword held steadily with his enemy in line.

Timir appeared surprised, confusion momentarily crossing his face, but Serkan didn't give him the time. Aiming for the shoulder of Timir's wielding arm, he pushed off from the wall, adding force to his downward slice.

Timir was quick to react; swiftly adjusting his position, he blocked his enemy's assault with the basket hilt of his sword, a smirk crawling up his lips at his brief moment of victory. Fate now seemed set. The expanse of space between the two men was closer than ever, and Timir's broadsword reigned supreme under those conditions.

A thrust. A slice. An endless torrent of attacks. Serkan could barely maintain his ground, his longsword slowly failing as a proper defense, but the forte of his sword was nearer to its hilt than its tip – and that would be his saving grace. The moment Timir's blade struck that point, Serkan channeled power from his legs and torso, his feet firmly planted on the ground, to counter the attack and successfully pushed Timir back.

Advantages had been negated. The fight began anew.

But with one key difference – the onset of fatigue had become a factor. Heavy breath and weary body began battling the mind's will. This battle could not last much longer—and it wouldn't. The two men stared at each other resolutely. One chance. Winner-take-all.

Serkan moved first, swinging his blade to initiate a series of skillful, nearly inescapable attacks. The combination had gained him many of his victories. Yet, somehow, in the heat of combat, Timir found an opening – and he seized it with a speed he had not shown since the battle's commencement. In those deteriorating seconds, Serkan saw the blade rush toward him, radiant and wondrous in all its fatality, but his body could not react as quickly as his mind.

Excruciating pain hit him immediately, his weapon clattering to the floor. Blood spilled over his clothes, down his legs, onto the sapphire floor. A metallic taste filled his mouth, and he let the crimson liquid drip down his chin. Through the haze of agony, his hand reached forward, trembling, and stilled itself firmly on the broadsword that ran through him. He gazed at Timir, lips turning upward in a tense but genuine smile. Serkan mustered the strength to speak, his voice pained and labored. "It looks... like...you win."

A gentle hand fell over his. "No," Timir replied steadily, "you won." Serkan could feel his body failing him, his systems shutting down, but even through his blurred vision, he could see Timir's tender smile. The next words reached his ears quietly. "I'll see you on the other side. I promise."

Carefully, Timir withdrew his support as Serkan succumbed to death's call, letting the man crumble to the floor as he removed his sword from the body.

Silence. Timir took a slow breath and sheathed his broadsword. As many times as he had envisioned this outcome, it failed to be any less shattering.

Unhurriedly, he made his way to the gun he had abandoned at the far side of the room, picking it up and weighing it softly in his hand. Kitartas would be pleased to see one of Stolthet's most prominent weapon-makers eliminated. Timir scowled at the thought, turning around to walk to where Serkan had left his belongings. Retrieving that gun as well, he set them both at the foot of the altar in front of Saint Aquene, one barrel facing the other.

Softly, a chant grew in the chamber, the voices infinite in number. "Wipe the blood clean." Timir turned around. All around, the room repeated the sentence again and again, growing louder. Magical navy blue tendrils extended from the cloud that floated near the chamber's ceiling and drifted to the floor over Serkan's body, over his sword, over the blood, over the death.

"Wipe the blood clean!" A cacophony of voices screaming in horror. The magic wrapped itself around the body, soaking up the blood as it moved.

Timir laughed bitterly, raising his head to meet the chamber's high ceiling and walls. "Don't you understand?" he declared loudly, almost in anguish. "The blood can never be wiped clean." The voices continued their chant, undisturbed by the outburst. Timir's gaze returned to the cloud of magic on the floor to find it retreating, leaving nothing behind.

And then the voices stopped. The room was immaculate once again.

Evenly, Timir strode back to the entrance of the room, halting before he reached the end. He turned around, his dark eyes falling on the empty floor, the image of Serkan's body still imprinted in his mind. His lips parted to speak, the words emerging barely above a whisper. "Rest in peace...old friend."

A hint of displeasure graced his face as he resumed his walk. There was something he still needed to do. As he exited the room, he made a powerful swipe against the air in front of him, and the giant chamber doors closed with a loud thud.

The War of Honor was over. The dead deserved their peace of mind.

Dragon Wings

It was unnatural, bizarre, and virtually paradoxical. The island had been flooded in rain for nearly a month, and because of it, progress had been slow. The scouts searched sluggishly and inefficiently, often overlooking their duties in an attempt to get out of the miserable weather and muddy ground. The one thing Captain Marciel Torhild was lenient on was the condition of her soldiers. She understood that leaving them too long in the rain would lead to sick soldiers, and sick soldiers would lead to a complete cessation. If they returned no word to the mainland in the time allotted, they would be pulled back, and a new troop would be put in their place. For all the power and pride the company boasted, they could not allow a failed mission, especially when it meant harsh and strict punishment upon return.

The rain itself wasn't strange – it held nothing magical – but for a land that was continuously in sunshine, the downpour that made day seem like endless night came as a larger hindrance than expected. It began on the day of their arrival, relentlessly and dauntingly, and had not backed down since. The soldiers were not prepared for nor accustomed to the torrent that awaited them, and the oblique doom it foretold dampened their spirits and restricted their optimism. From the very start, the operation presaged failure, but Captain Torhild's stellar performance under pressure was legendary. It was specifically her unit that was dispatched time and time again for assignments which held little hope of success, and three-fourths of the time, they returned victorious. By now, their triumph was anticipated. Failure was no longer an option.

Although Marciel could not account for the awareness of the rest of her company, she recognized their predetermined completion of their task before they even set out, and Emperor Raedin Mithren himself and his right-hand man, Demyan Kirill, made sure she didn't forget.

She had considered it curious when the emperor invited her to his throne room the night before their departure, but it was not her place to question his wishes. The meeting was brief and stilted; polite tones masking his vicious threats.

Instinctively, she cradled her wrist in memory. Everyone knew of Demyan's enchantment; something about his beauty and the way he carried himself gave him an overwhelming power over others. When he wanted something, he would get it, and he served the emperor with the utmost devotion, though many believed his loyalty came as result of the practically unrestricted freedom he was allowed. His relationship with Emperor Mithren was a unique but steady one.

On that night, he was there with the emperor; she shouldn't have expected anything less. However, she did not anticipate for him to act on the emperor's behalf this time. Demyan had never appeared to pay much attention to her despite her famous reputation, and she did not think the emperor would find it necessary to use him to get across his message. Somehow, before that point, she had felt impervious to Demyan's ministrations. Her exceptional work for the empire and her allegiance and obedience to its emperor left them little reason to punish her.

She would not make that assumption again.

He spoke to her for the first time after the emperor finished with his words. Demyan had a smooth, enticing, overpowering voice, and it made her completely immobile as he came toward her. She had heard him speak before, but the effects were strengthened tenfold now that she was his target. It was the kind of voice that instilled as much fear as it did assurance.

She had let him get too close. Before she knew it, he had caught her by the waist, his breath warm against her skin, and she felt unable to breathe. The cruel words that left his lips melted away into nothingness. Delicately, he took her wrist and whispered those intimidations in her ear, soothingly and alluringly. Then, he broke it in one swift motion; she barely even had time to blink. He moved on to her forearm and did the same, a merciless grin on his beautiful face. At least three bones he had broken, and she did not react – she could not afford to show weakness in front of her superiors, even when the pain felt unbearable. Their message, she assured them, had been well received. She then graciously asked for her leave, and they had let her go, for which she was grateful. After passing through the grand doors, she immediately sought a healer from her company. She was glad that a few broken bones were all she had walked away with.

"Captain?" A meek voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Hm?" Marciel replied inattentively, only sparing a glance at the one addressing her. The long white robe made the person's status easily recognizable. She kept her eyes trained on the dark abyss in front of her, the ferocious needles of water continuously falling into the concoction of sludge it had created underneath. They stood under the wooden roof that extended past the building's edge. The structure's decrepit and outmoded state showed that it had been abandoned long ago; it served as a perfect place to house the troops. No one lived on the island any longer, and signs of civilization were rare.

It was afternoon, but the dark clouds expanding across the sky like heaven's shadow spoke differently. Marciel had been standing outside, waiting, since the troops left in the morning; it was what she did every day for every mission if she did not travel out with them. She would not allow herself any other duty until each soldier was accounted for; she felt she owed at least that much to those who served under her.

"Captain," the healer repeated with stronger conviction.

"Yes?" she asked, still not fully focused on the speaker. There was a brief hesitation. Perhaps he needed some prodding. "Do you request something?"

"No," he retorted quickly, clearly struggling with his next words. Regardless, they came out solidly. "When you had come to me that night before we left, you had a broken arm." Marciel eyed the healer warily, her hand unconsciously moving to rest on the hilt of her sword.

"What about it?" she asked curtly. The healer wavered again.

"You had told me you broke the bones in your wrist and forearm falling down the steps."

"I had been clumsy." Her voice had turned to ice. "Your point, healer?" The man lost his composure and shied away from her, cowering slightly. Curiously, his voice did not reflect his distress.

"The way your bones broke," he paused, "was not the way they would break from a fall." Marciel turned fully towards him, and he took a step back but continued on boldly. "The only way they could have ended up the way they were is..." His voice drifted off in thought and hesitation but returned with just as much resolution as before. "Someone would have had to have intentionally broken them." Marciel stepped forward, her plates of armor softly clanging as she moved, and the healer took an equal number of steps back.

"What are you implying?" she growled. The robe hid his eyes, but she knew he was panicking. Her grip steadied around her sword's hilt.

A wind picked up from the east. The man's white robe ruffled wildly around his slender figure while Marciel's blue hair flew out behind her, only held together by a single band.

"Captain," he replied firmly, adding a bit more distance between them. "I'm aware the emperor summoned you that night." A fury erupted in her chest, an anger at herself for not being good enough, not being strong enough, not being reliable enough for the emperor and his precious royal puppets. The inevitable events of that night had not left her with any peace of mind. Her blue eyes fell on the healer and noticed him trembling in terror. Following to where his eyes were stationed, she realized that, in her ire, her sword had become half-drawn. Quickly, she pushed it back in its sheath and released her hold. There was no reason to punish him for caring about the ones he watched over.

Silence ensued as Marciel allowed the healer time to recover from his fright. The rain loudly pattered on the wooden roof. Marciel turned back to the place she expected her soldiers to return, barely able to see past the grassland in front of them.

"Captain," the healer spoke again, raw fear in his voice now.

"Yes?"

"We cannot afford to fail this mission, can we?" Dread filled the air. He had said it; now there could be no denying what would come if they did not return successful. Out of the corner of her eye, Marciel saw the healer face the outside rain too. They were all waiting for the same thing.

Marciel inhaled slowly. "Roshan, where is your staff? How are the troops inside? Shouldn't you be with them?" Her breath began to form a faint fog before slowly dissipating into the air. It was getting colder.

"I left my staff in the stockpile. The soldiers are well. You made a wise choice to keep them inside today. A day longer and I don't know if their bodies could have taken it. They're as healthy as we can hope for." Marciel gave a short nod in affirmation. As soon as she realized the dreary weather would not cease, she immediately fell into a plan of rotation. She split her troops into five equal groups, and each group took to the task for a full two weeks before another group relieved them of it. It was a rigorous strategy, she knew, but it gave her soldiers a longer period of time to recover, which in turn brought a greater overall efficiency. They were on the third group now – the first group had performed as expected due to their newly energized spirits, but the second group had fallen short. It was foreseeable, despite her best hopes. As the days drew on, the soldiers became less and less able. She had created an excess of groups to counteract such an occurrence; she had never anticipated to actually last through the entire ten weeks the tactic demanded, and she still didn't. No one wanted to stay on the forsaken island for that long. No one wanted to stay longer than they had to.

Carefully, she ran a hand over the left side of her adorned breastplate, enjoying its cool texture. Underneath her armor, she always kept a scarf, a keepsake given to her by the man she loved and lost. It was a simple piece of cloth, covered with beautiful designs of dragon wings and phoenix feathers. She always kept it close to her heart.

The sound of heavy horse hooves reached them. Distant and muted by mud, they could barely be made out, but Marciel was sure of it. The pace was heavy and rapid; a rider with so much conviction and urgency could only mean one thing.

“Roshan,” she commanded suddenly, unable to suppress a small smile. The healer turned toward her. “Fetch my steed.”

It existed where things seemed nonexistent, where the fantastical breached the physical. There stood a cove of tremendous height, the entire mountain shrouded in a powerful shield of magic. Without a proper system to counteract it, the mountain would not have been able to be seen nor felt; it was wholly possible to walk straight through it without even knowing it was there, but that was clearly the intention in the first place. Bells jingled softly in the wind and rain, each attached to a separate hovering crystal orb. Together, they formed a great circle in the empty air, revealing the mountainous cavern mouth but no more. Within the ring of orbs was a transparent vortex, like a film of gyrating water, that blurred the shadowy crags inside. Only able to see what the orbs provided, it appeared as if the cave and the mountain it resided in were on a different plane altogether.

The sight of the swirling chasm only made Marciel ride faster, the messenger falling even further behind. They had really done it. Nearly a month it had taken them, but now their mission was almost complete. She could almost taste their success. When she came within a foot of the large cavity, she slowed, dismounted, and took her white horse by the reins. With a bit of coaxing, they traveled through the supernaturally created opening, easily passing through with only a minor pressure and a gust of wind.

The cove was dank and musty, even more than usual as a result of the month’s worth of unremitting rain. Small streams flowed down from crevices while other places simply dripped water from the cavern’s ceiling. The cave floor was completely submerged, and the humidity made it uncomfortable to remain in any one location for very long. Marciel took a look behind her in search of the soldier that had been sent as messenger. From inside, there was no translucent vortex, no blurring of the other side. The magical barrier they had attempted to neutralize did not affect the interior; it made sense that the outside could be seen unmarred from inside the cove. As soon as she sighted the envoy on his brown steed, she gave a curt nod as explanation and continued onward.

Her blue hair was drenched, and the band that held it back in her ponytail was beginning to sag due to the additional weight. The rain had run past her armor and soaked into her clothes, and the puddles she now stepped in engulfed her combat boots. Ahead was a corner with a sharp turn to the right; from it came a tall, well-built man, heavy armor covering most of his body. “Captain,” he greeted, proceeding excitedly toward her. Marciel gave a nod in turn.

“Lieutenant Harleigh, is this what I believe it is?”

“Yes, Captain,” he replied enthusiastically, falling in line with her steady steps. “This place was difficult to find, but we finally did it. I told you it couldn’t hide from us for very long. Alongside our mages, we managed to mostly negate the beast’s protective magic – the new technology the empire gave us to test worked wonderfully.”

“I saw, Lieutenant Harleigh,” Marciel returned with a smile. “It was hard to miss and a marvel to observe. Excellent work.” The man beamed.

“Captain, wait until you see how we tied the beast down.” They turned the corner, and the sight left Marciel breathless. The rugged passageway became a wide expanse of at least four hundred feet wide and equally as tall. No apparent gap gave light from outside, though the month’s dark days would have plunged the cave into shadows regardless and the heavy precipitation would have turned the cave into a pool if such an opening existed. To compensate for the lack of sunlight, torches – their torches – had been placed on the walls and enhanced with magic so that every important area of the large cave chamber could be seen.

In the center of it all was a colossal creature with a red so rich rulers would pay an infinite amount in order to obtain its color. Large, beautiful scales covered its skin, leaving only the underside of its body and its two wide, leathery wings exposed. Elongated talons extended from its five digits on each of its four main limbs, and spikes protruded in uniform increments from its powerful tail. It gave a snarl, opening its great mouth to reveal pointed, sharp teeth, and laid its relatively small ears flat in irritation. Moving forward only slightly, it leered at them with large, serpent-like eyes.

“A dragon,” Marciel exhaled, realizing she had been holding her breath. A flush had run to her cheeks in her stunned excitement. It advanced with a greater force, but magical wires stopped it in its tracks. From its arms, legs, wings, and tail were resilient, lustrous, mystical blue ropes. Each cord of magic came from an individual crystal orb, and on each orb was a bell that seemed to ring independently of outside forces – they were the same as the ones which had revealed the cave’s entrance. The empire’s advancements in magical technology were proving worthwhile; she would have to report the success of their prototypes as soon as they returned to the mainland.

Her soldiers were stationed at the edge of the chamber farthest from where she stood and had split into two sections. To the right, the mages scoured over their tomes and discussed amongst themselves the results of the magic orbs. To the left, the physical soldiers stood in admiration of the beast’s majesty and debated the necessity of building a provisional apparatus to move it back to the base. The couple of healers ran between the two groups, attending to those who had become wounded in the process of securing the creature as well as relaying any messages from one group to the other.

Together, there were about forty soldiers inside the cave – her company totaled to roughly two-hundred people – and each was as dedicated to the empire as Marciel herself, if not more. In doing so, they also esteemed the captain they served under; their loyalty, no doubt, could withstand any obstacle.

One of the mages noticed Marciel's arrival and quickly made his way toward her with a grin plastered on his face. His matted dark purple hair contrasted greatly against his pale skin. In the crook of his arm rested a black tome, green runes inscribed methodically on its cover. As he strode toward her with deliberate and confident steps, his dark green cape fluttered behind him, revealing the black garments he wore underneath. Light and unarmored, his clothing reflected the necessity for mages to be quick on their feet – or, at least, as quick as possible with their required tomes and items. It was well-known that they had no room for heavy protection.

Marciel stepped forward to greet him. "Captain Torhild," he called merrily, "I am pleased you could make it." Despite his obvious delight, his speech remained as decorous as ever. Marciel returned his enthusiasm with an amiable smile.

"Iyar, it is my pleasure to be here." He gave a small bow upon being addressed; Marciel gave little notice, her gaze moving subtly to the soldiers behind him. "How are my men?"

"That is always your first question," Iyar remarked offhandedly, shaking his head in humor. The entire company knew of Marciel's compassion for her troops. "Everyone is well enough. Even though taking the dragon by surprise, we were caught off-guard by its brute force. Regardless, we managed to bring it under our control. Casualties are minimal." Marciel didn't respond, but her relief was evident even through her equanimity. Iyar allowed a brief moment of silence before attempting to move onto the topic he had originally wanted to speak with her about. He was certain that Marciel would wish to hear his input on the orbs, especially since he was the chief mage within the company.

His words were drowned out by a deafening roar. The dragon lunged forward in its last attempt to break free but found the effort futile as the ropes continued to hold it back. The magic cords forced it onto the cavern floor with a loud crash, and the entire island seemed to shake under the beast's massive weight.

Reality held its breath. Time slowed. Sound muted. The dragon had gained everyone's individual attention, and many of the soldiers had grown pale in its display of power. Its two large eyes moved across the semicircle from the troops to the three that stood at the entrance to its hiding place. A low, ferocious growl escaped from its throat as it sneered, showing blatant fury and defiance against the army's leader. The ground trembled and the air shuddered and collapsed under its mighty breath. For a transient second, all was still. Then, suddenly, it reared its head and sat back on its haunches, taking a monstrous gulp of air.

Marciel didn't have time to understand its intentions. Immediately, a frantic incantation was uttered and the space around the dragon's head warped and twisted as if it had a spirit of its own. Quickly, it wound itself across the beast's snout, forming a strong tunnel of wind to latch its mouth shut. At first, the spell worked, effectively forcing the dragon's jaws to close, but the beast only had to put a small amount of resistance against it to weaken the human magic. A series of incantations followed at once. Spirals of light materialized out of nowhere; shadows stretched from the crevices; fire blazed from the torches; water gathered from the puddles; the ground beneath rumbled as a tower of rock, stone, and dirt was brought forth. They drew forward from their various locations to meet the beast's challenge, fusing themselves with the wind magic to strengthen the binding.

Flames erupted from its mouth but were unable to escape far past its now restricted opening, tendrils of fire licking high into the air through its teeth. The thick magical rope around the dragon's large jaws continuously changed colors from the combined magic, no part holding a certain color for very long before transitioning to another. It lowered its head once more, the flames diminishing in size. Its fire breath had extinguished, its energy expended. Again, it glared at Marciel, its gaze more malicious than ever before. Its feral growl gained intensity.

Despite its hostility, something about the beast was mesmerizing. Marciel couldn't determine whether it was its legendary magic or the look in its eyes, but the dragon held a sense of allure stronger than the attraction she had experienced earlier. She found herself wrapped in its passion, tangled in its beastly expression. For a moment, she even lost grip on her company's purpose and location, focusing only on the dragon's distinct breathing. All other noise felt greatly subdued.

"Captain Torhild, perhaps we should put some distance between us and that beast," the lieutenant suggested anxiously, edging backwards. Marciel heard him but couldn't register his meaning; she stepped forward instead. The chief mage took a few stumbling steps toward her and put a hand on her shoulder in concern.

"Captain," he muttered in hushed tones, "the dragon is dangerous right now. Please do not approach it any further." Marciel shook her head at him, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze before removing it from her shoulder. Her voice came out soft and distracted.

"Iyar, I'll be fine. Stay behind. I think it wishes for my attention." The mage gave a hesitating glance and then stepped back respectfully, his head bowed. Marciel continued forward, taking deliberate steps in approaching the

mighty beast. The dragon crouched so that its head hovered only inches above the ground, and its growl softened to a dull rumble. Its two large eyes followed her movements carefully, bearing down on her, but the creature took no other action. Marciel stopped when she could feel the gentle breeze created by its nostrils, determining that any farther would be too close to danger. The dragon exhaled, blowing a strong gust of wind in the captain's direction.

"Filthy human," it muttered disgracefully, its upper lip raised in a snarl to reveal its long, sharp teeth. "What materialistic foolishness do you hope to obtain from my capture?" Even through the binding, its deep voice resonated throughout the chamber, heightening its image of enormous power. Marciel remained calm, her blue eyes carefully examining the captured creature. She couldn't afford to outwardly show her excitement in attaining the rare opportunity to speak to a dragon.

"Emperor Mithren has his own agenda," she replied placidly. "It is not my place to question his intentions." The dragon reacted with a series of grunts that steadily increased in volume. It took a moment for Marciel realized that it was laughing. Mild confusion crossed her face.

"Your kind entertains me," it remarked after its laughter mostly subsided. "You are of a high rank in your country, yet they do not even inform you the reasons behind your missions, nor do you question them." Its golden eyes stared at her mockingly and its sneer quickly returned. "Tell me: where does your loyalty come from?"

"I hold my country above my own life," Marciel retorted crossly. She was cut off before she could say anything more.

"And still, you stand here, risking your life, for a mission that may not even benefit what you value so highly," it taunted, a cruel smile finding its way across its beastly lips. Against her better judgment, Marciel became defensive.

"Our emperor looks out for our country's best interest. His orders are in direct correlation of our country's needs and wants." The dragon burst into laughter again, louder this time.

"You assume that humans are not dishonest or self-serving. Power corrupts your people more easily than any other race I have ever encountered." Marciel refused to listen; she would not be fooled by this fiend's tongue.

"The emperor—" she began loudly, attempting to speak over its rumbling laughter. "—is a great man—" Irritated, she clenched her right hand into a fist and tightened her jaw. "—who intends to do great things for our country. Why would I—" The roaring laughter just wouldn't stop. "—doubt his objectives?" There was so much noise. She couldn't concentrate.

"Are all of you this stubbornly loyal, or is it just your people?" Slowly, it quieted itself to a low grumble, but its booming voice soon took over.

"Surely, Captain, you must understand what has happened by now. There was no explanation for why the mission must be done, no mention of your country's advantages for its achievement, and the emperor's council, most probably, was not even present during its assignment. It resulted as a direct order from your emperor, and you might even have been met with an incentive to ensure the mission's completion, an intimidation, perhaps, for your success." The dragon flashed its yellow teeth at her in a pretentious smirk. "Do you not see that you have been deceived?" Something inside of her quavered at the thought. She felt her resolution bending precariously.

"This mission has nothing to do with your country." The sickening crunch of her bones echoed in her head. The threat had been an obvious show of power. While she was not forced into the mission itself, she had been forced into guaranteeing its completion.

"Your emperor is now working for himself." A dead weight dropped in her stomach. She had been blind. Her loyalty to the mission had been based on a nonexistent purpose. Nothing benefited from the dragon's capture except for the emperor's own greed. Suddenly the air around her felt like lead on her shoulders.

Marciel stared at the creature, paralyzed. Her eyes traced its powerful frame and lingered for an extended period on its open wings that were bound to the cavern floor. Her heart beat faster and her breath shortened as she was distinctly reminded of her scarf. In her mind's eye, she could see the intricate stitches, the rich colors, and the beautiful patterning on the piece of cloth. Dragon wings and phoenix feathers was their symbol, meant to represent their goals and dreams, their beliefs and values, their freedom to strive toward their passions.

For the emperor, she could give up her time, her energy, and even her life, but the very symbol which held all her hopes and aspirations was something she could not let the emperor take away.

"Captain Torhild," Lieutenant Harleigh barked from behind her, clearly angered from the dragon's taunts. "That beast knows not what it speaks. We will bring it back to the empire on your orders. Please, instruct us."

"Wait," Marciel muttered frantically, her mind racing. Things were moving too quickly. She couldn't allow the emperor to get his hands on the dragon, but she couldn't release it when her troops had been so dedicated to her and their mission.

"Captain? What do you wish for us to do?" Iyar prompted. She looked around to her soldiers. Everyone was watching her, waiting for her command. The dragon stared at her haughtily, certain that it had already won. Marciel pursed her lips in indecision. Only a particular piece of the dragon she would not allow the emperor and his greed to

obtain.

"Its wings," she stated firmly, looking at the soldiers in charge of the orbs. "Break them." The soldiers hesitated.

"But Captain Torhild," Lieutenant Harleigh protested, "the emperor wants—"

"The emperor never explicitly stated the necessity for the dragon's condition. For all of his knowledge, we could have very well damaged the wings in battle," Marciel shot back curtly, her mouth hardened into a line. She stared forward at the two soldiers – their hands brought to their waistlines, pausing for her word. The lieutenant didn't respond; Marciel assumed everyone was in agreement, even if they disliked the idea.

"Break its wings," she commanded again. The two soldiers nodded and shaped an invisible ball in their hands. There was a temporary stillness before the ropes that were latched onto the dragon's wings pulled closer to the orb, forcing the magnificent structures downward. The dragon roared loudly in objection, struggling fervidly against all its restraints, but to no avail. The magical ropes held with a tenacious grip, and the one around its mouth tightened even further.

The orbs continued retracting the glowing blue rope, pulling the wings closer and closer to the ground. Marciel turned away, unable to watch. A series of loud cracks quickly ensued as the bones split and shattered inside the leathery frame – and the mighty roar that resulted covered the island like a blanket of raging fury.

Safe Grounds

The room is empty. Simple and meaningless, it remains a wide expanse with nothing in between. There is no color; there is no life. There is no danger. Time is ticking. Memories are fading. It's time to go. You need to hurry. But, please, be careful. You can't afford to get lost.

The scenery changes. No longer are you in a plain, white quarter. A morning breeze blows by as the tall ferns brush at your ankles. The meadow extends far past what your vision grants you. The sun is shining brightly; good weather is forecasted. Please, hurry!

A dirt path appears. Your journey starts simply. There's only one way to go. You slowly amble along; you want to enjoy the view. Butterflies flutter by. Grasshoppers sing to their content. There is no rush. The pathway leads you to a forest. The trees are sparse at first but more emerge as you progress. The birds chirp softly, fainter calls echoing back. The bees buzz their way along, soft hums coming and going. Everything is at peace. There is no need to worry.

The path makes a fork up ahead. Now there are two roads. But which to choose?

The bushes behind you shake. You turn around. A squirrel innocently makes its way from under the leaves, picking up an acorn before scurrying off to its home. The clock won't wait for you. You must decide. Your gaze travels to the sky. It's still sunny; the clouds are white and full. It's okay to choose. Both ways feel right. You decide to travel with the right trail – it has never led you wrong. The path twists and turns, making its way around trees and boulders without care.

Things are going well. You must have chosen correctly. Suddenly, the trees begin to tremble, and the branches rattle in a flurry of motion. You know it's just the wind, but a tinge of uncertainty taints your confidence. The breeze quickly passes, and everything returns to how it was. You remain untouched. The forest has protected you. You continue on without a second thought. Your doubt is banished.

The forest becomes denser; less light is able to filter through. The tree trunks are thick with age, though their leaves are as vibrant and lively as ever. The atmosphere turns slightly colder as you near the more protected regions of the woods. The moisture in the air clings to your skin. Further down the path, you encounter three grand oaks, their branches entwined to form a sturdy shelter for its residents. Between them lay three trails. The path has split again. Be wary.

You pay no heed to the caution. This forest is safe; you trust it. You only give a fleeting glance at the trails before choosing the middle one. Your logic is simple: the center course is straight and true. The wind lightly ruffles your hair. A soft boom comes from above. You look up to see a thick canopy of leaves and branches. The clouds can no longer be seen, but your ears can distinguish the thunder. Your doubts return, but you quickly dispel them. You cannot control the weather. You were not wrong for choosing this path. Danger approaches. Be very cautious.

Your course diverges again. Now there are six paths. Which one will you choose? Hesitation comes. Qualms nubile at the back of your mind. You cannot wait. Choose a path. The thunder booms loudly, and you can visualize the bright flash of lightning as it strikes the ground below. The bird songs are gone; the bees have stopped. Safety is but a few steps away. You turn around. You don't need to go any farther. You can continue later. There is no time. You cannot turn back. A heavy wind picks up, maneuvering itself through the trees. You put your hands up to protect your face and quickly turn your back to it. The forest could not shield you this time. You have to go. I will help you!

A small ball of light appears. Hovering in the air, it circles around you anxiously. Follow me. It dashes off in haste, and you follow. Decisions don't matter anymore. You have a guide; you don't have to see which pathway you're on. The thunder booms again – it's becoming more frequent. The light continues forward; you're trailing it as fast as you can. Water comes pouring down; the storm gave little warning. The wind picks up from ahead, and the rain falls sideways. You shield your eyes and keep going. Though harder to see, the light is still in front of you. You're still on the right course.

The scenery blurs. The light speeds up. You run faster. Branches scratch at your skin, your face, your clothes. The wind howls and the rain stings, but they can't stop you. You'll keep going. You're still on the right track. You squint in disbelief. The light is gone – it's traveled too far ahead. You couldn't catch up. You keep running. There is no time.

The forest melts at your feet. Leaves blend into branches; branches blend into dirt. You give no notice. Now is not the time to enjoy the view. Slowly, things dim. And then complete darkness envelops. The wind, the forest, and even the ground beneath you – everything is gone. You stop. Silence surrounds you. Your breath comes heavily. There is nothing. Only darkness and empty air remain. You put your hand in front of your face. Nothing can be seen.

A hollow switch resounds in the distance. For a second, nothing happens. You hold your breath. A path of light materializes under your feet and snakes its way through the darkness. You thank the feeling of familiarity and let out a sigh of relief. With nowhere else to go, you begin your trek again. But this time, you are cautious. The pathway is the only solid, visible object in view. If you step off, you'll be tossed into the endless abyss. Where are you going? The murky darkness seems to give a moan in answer.

You come upon a dead-end; the solid, glowing white path abruptly cuts off in front of you. You pause. It'd be pointless to go back, but there is no room to go forward. You feel a small breeze blow by. A soft hum reaches your ears as four new paths of light emerge and connect themselves to the one you stand on. Each one curves in its own direction. You falter; you understand the importance of your decision, but you know you can't take too long. Time is ticking. A small series of bells ring faintly behind you. You turn around and find the path slowly starting to disappear. You have to choose a route. You follow the left one this time, stepping on the solid platform. The old pathway falls at your feet. You can't turn back. You have to keep going. As you walk, you silently watch the other pathways vanish from your view one after another in their own direction. You did not make the wrong choice. You cannot afford to get lost.

The road makes another twist. You look ahead to see how much you have left to travel, but the light continues farther than you can see. Is it possible that this path never ends? Your breath shortens. There must be an end. You need to hurry. Your walk becomes faster, and the temperature seems to drop. The anxieties pull at your mind. If you can just get to the end, things will be okay. You hold onto this belief, vainly attempting to quell your fears. Your footsteps softly reverberate in the empty void. The solid stream of light appears to falter for a moment. You blink. Far in the distance, the light melts away. You look at the trail behind and, at the farthest point of your vision, it does the same. Slowly, the invisible force makes its way toward you. The now small strip of light grows even smaller. There is nowhere to run.

The path under you starts to tremble and shake, already beginning to soften. The gentle waves turn larger as your weight becomes too heavy for the path's support. You begin to fall, and even though you know the inevitable result, you still hold on to what little solid ground is left. It disappears from under your fingertips, and you plunge completely into the darkness. Your heart skips a beat; panic takes over your body. Things stop again. You open your eyes to find a blank room. Carefully, you pick yourself up from the ground and stare at the empty space. You're safe. Time is ticking. Memories are fading. It's time to go. You need to hurry. But, please, be careful. You can't afford to get lost. The landscape shifts in a flash of light. A soft breeze blows at your back; the grass tickles your ankles. You're in the meadow again. You had not chosen correctly. Please, hurry!

The dirt path reappears. You must find your way.