

## Discovery of a Fortress

“Not like that.”

Aiofe cringed as she looked up. She wasn't even the target of the brief, harsh words, but she still felt their impact.

Her rods dropped as she looked over, to where Caleb was standing with Abigail. The woman was positively *glaring* at Caleb as he stood next to her, pointing at the rods in her hand. He had been teaching them in the art that he claimed to have already mastered.

He wasn't a very good teacher, but she enjoyed learning from him. It was better than being at home, where she had to do... womanly things. Things she hardly enjoyed.

“Control,” he said, repeating the mantra that he had been telling them over and over again, “starts with concentration.”

“It's rather hard to concentrate here in the forest,” Abigail muttered as she looked around, “too many sounds, too much...”

“To investigate,” Caleb agreed, “I understand. And yet, we can't do this in the village.”

Aiofe swallowed. She figured that, if they practiced where others could easily spot them, they would be hunted and hung from the highest tree within a day.

“Landon,” Caleb said, turning his head so abruptly to Aiofe that his long, white hairs swung around violently, “you try it again. Do the hover.”

Aiofe gave Caleb a doe-eyed stare, but he seemed to be unaffected by it. She swallowed, before she shook her head.

“I...”

She clenched her fist. She didn't dare to.

She understood why she had to learn, but the last time she had to do that, she had overcompensated and her rods had burrowed themselves ten feet into the floor, barely missing her foot.

“Show it again,” she said, trying to keep from cringing at the sound of her own voice, “maybe if I see it once more...”

Caleb put his hands on the daggers that hung from his belt and sighed softly. Aiofe eyed the knives, even though Caleb hadn't removed them from their sheaths for as long as she knew the man. He simply carried them for the style, she figured.

Then he raised one hand and *snapped* his fingers.

Goosebumps ran over Aiofe's arms as a presence made itself known in the air. She heard Abigail gasp as she *felt* the presence more than saw it. There was a tremendous charge in the air, as if lightning was about to rain down around them. A charge of power that Abigail had never managed to equal and Aiofe had never dared to even *try* to challenge.

It was gone just as swiftly as it had appeared. Caleb didn't visibly react to what he had caused, though Aiofe knew what he was wielding.

He had stolen power. Power from something that was too strong for them to even think about.

With a single wave of his hand and a rushing sensation, two wooden rods equal to the ones in Aiofe's hand came flying out of Caleb's pockets. They twisted in the air, briefly hung still as if they had reached the apex of some kind of jump, and then dropped to his hand.

Aiofe wasn't watching the rods at that point. She was watching Caleb and saw how his face was twisted in concentration. He was looking at the rods, which were hovering just above his hand, obviously keeping them in his sight.

Then his eyes flicked to Aiofe. They briefly met, accidentally looking deeply in each other's eyes for just a second.

He blushed and quickly turned his look back down, but it was already too late. The rods that were hovering shot up, barely missing Aiofe's face as they went skywards and quickly disappeared from sight.

Caleb balled his fists briefly, embarrassed.

"Like that," he said clearly fighting to salvage something from the attempt, "but... don't lose concentration."

Aiofe wanted to nod, but her ears perked up when she heard something come crunching through the forest. Caleb turned around to face the sound, his hands by his sides again, but he relaxed the moment a face appeared. The blonde mop of Luca O'Finn made its way through some bushes, shortly followed by the easy grin of Zak Quinelly.

"Caleb Manning," Zak said, giving Caleb a friendly punch against his shoulder, "we figured we'd find you here."

Zak turned to Abigail and tipped his hat at her. A second later, he did the same to Aiofe.

"Ladies. I hope we're not interrupting. Has he been treating you well?"

"You're not interrupting," Caleb said, shaking his head, "I was just... giving an example."

He puffed himself up a little while Abigail was taking her chance to step away from Caleb and take a step closer to Zak. The sudden shift in dynamics was hard to miss as the two new arrivals grinned at Caleb.

"It was how we found you," Luca said, his voice quiet and careful, "it was like you ignited a beacon, really. We only had to follow..."

Luca stopped talking when he saw Caleb glower. Caleb raised a hand.

Aiofe braced herself. She didn't want to be caught off-guard by the sudden rush of energy and presence that came with every snap of the shorter man's fingers.

Surprisingly enough, the shorter man suddenly thought better of it. His fingers relaxed before they could snap out. Something changed in his posture, as if he had made a snap decision.

"I understand," he said, as Zak and Luca also visibly relaxed, "I have a great power. It is both a boon and a curse and it is up to me to wield it responsibly."

Aiofe narrowed her eyes at the sudden pompous tone. It wasn't the man she had been practicing with in the woods so far.

“So great and so responsible, even,” Caleb continued, his tone turning to an infuriating smugness, “that I have found a location much more interesting – and much more dangerous – than these woods could ever be.”

“What are you talking about?” Abigail asked from next to Zak, “these woods are pretty safe.”

She looked at Luca.

“Right?”

Luca cringed a little.

“There are wolves here, I believe,” he said slowly.

“Wolves!?” Abigail exclaimed.

“Though they’ll know to stay away from humans,” Luca quickly added, “we’re not worth it to attack us, I think. And besides... I think we’d be able to fend off a wolf or two.”

Aiofe swallowed.

“You, maybe,” she said, “you guys have been... well...”

She made an uncertain gesture with her hand. She was glad that she had managed to stall Caleb until something else could come by to distracting him from training her, but... well...

Well, the other two were better than her, too. They just didn’t think they could teach others like Caleb did.

Caleb was huffing as his mysterious words were being ignored. Aiofe saw how he was turning a little red as Zak and Luca were comforting Abigail. He took a step forward and raised his hand, pointing deeper into the forest.

“We are just at the precipice of these woods,” he declared, “these parts of the forest are still safe. Deeper is where the real mysteries are. There is where *others* are.”

That got Zak’s attention. He slowly tilted his head at Caleb’s words.

“Others?”

Caleb’s mouth turned into a victorious grin when he saw the interest on Zak’s face. Aiofe felt the same interest, though she could only hope that she hid it a little better than Zak did.

“Others,” Caleb repeated, “I have been exploring. Searching around, on my own. Testing myself.”

He clearly tried to put on a mysterious air. Abigail rolled with her eyes at the tone, as if she didn’t want to believe him.

As if what he had already given them, introducing them to the very thing that they tried to learn from him, didn’t warrant some belief.

“Right,” Abigail said, “if you’re not going to be straightforward about this, it probably isn’t true.”

Aiofe bit her lip. She couldn’t blame Abigail for saying what she said, but as she saw Caleb’s face turn a deeper shade of red and his mouth clamping shut, she realized that it wasn’t going to win them any favors.

“I’m willing to listen,” she said, “it’s the least we can do, right? As *friends*.”

She put some extra emphasis on the last word. Despite all of Caleb's harsh teachings, they couldn't forget why he had come to them with his power.

Why they had agreed that he taught them.

It seemed to work. Though Abigail rolled with her eyes again, it was in agreement. Caleb nodded to Aiofe and grinned a little wider at her last words.

She put her hair behind an ear and blushed as she noticed that all of the guys were looking at her in several forms of agreement.

"So... as you were saying," Zak said, the grin returning to his face as he turned to Caleb, "a place deeper in the forest? Others?"

"Why don't you show us, then?"

Though she had been a central part in the trek through the woods that followed, it didn't mean that Aiofe enjoyed the hike. She had dressed sensibly for the practice she had been anticipating with Caleb, but she had to admit that still didn't mean a lot. Most of the practice involved the manipulation of rods while standing still, so she had just taken what was comfortable.

The long skirts that had ultimately been chosen were definitely not supposed to be worn for hiking. They got snagged behind bushes and thorns and collected mud and sand as she kicked it up. If her mother found out what she had been doing with them and what had caused the numerous little scratches and damages, there would certainly be hell to pay.

But she still didn't want to disappoint Caleb and the rest of the group, so she grit her teeth and set out to distract herself from all the tiny repairs she would have to make, later.

"So what did you find, exactly, Caleb?" she asked, "some place with other people?"

Caleb carefully stepped over a fallen log and looked over his shoulder. He offered Aiofe a hand, which she gratefully accepted as she put a big step over the same fallen tree.

"I found a door," he said, though Aiofe couldn't find a hint of the superior tone he had been using before in his voice, now that they were taking him seriously, "a door that led to a different place. To a place of mystery, where we can practice all day without interruptions."

"Where we could practice without standing out like a sore thumb on a cold day?" Zak asked. Aiofe could hear the smirk in his voice as she put her feet down on the woodland floor and carefully brushed her red hair back.

"We'd be more like black powder cannons being shot at sea," Caleb said.

Silence reigned for a second as everybody looked at him.

"A lot of bloody noise and nobody around to hear it," Caleb clarified, "you guys *have* seen a cannon fired before, right?"

"Of course," Luca said, immediately, "terrible noise."

"Well, imagine that, and then with nobody around."

“And where is this door?” Abigail asked. She had been lagging behind, but her eyes were glinting in the shadows underneath the leaves, “are we close?”

“Actually...” Caleb said, punching with his hand.

The terrible power rose through the air. Aiofe swallowed as she physically recoiled from the man who had just helped her climb a tree to protect her dress.

Actual, tangible strength shot away from Caleb’s fist, as if he had punched the air so hard it had moved away from him. The force blew through low-hanging branches and swept aside bushes, giving Aiofe a quick peek through the undergrowth.

She saw black stone. A wall of rocks that were hewn and stacked on top of each other. It was definitely not a natural formation.

Which meant that someone had made it.

Then all the branches and shrubbery bent back to where it came from, hiding everything from sight again.

Quite the show for very little effect. Aiofe felt her teeth ache at the effect of the sudden gathering of strength that Caleb had shown.

“I ran into it as I was exploring,” Caleb said, walking on as if he hadn’t done anything, “I almost missed it, too, if I hadn’t been... experimenting.”

“What kind of experiments?” Aiofe asked.

“Density, mostly,” Caleb said, “you know leather is more likely to stop a blade than silk?”

Aiofe turned her head, together with Zak and Abigail. She passed Caleb as he held a branch out of her path and handed it over to Zak, so he could do the same for Abigail.

“Well, I figured that is because there is so much *more* of it,” Caleb continued, as if they had wholeheartedly agreed with him instead of quietly letting him go on, “there is more of it in a smaller area, so it can resist more. I tried to make the same happen with my clothes, but... they shrank. I couldn’t make fabric appear where there wasn’t any.”

He grimaced.

“It was uncomfortable. I wanted to practice on something that wasn’t my clothes, so... I tried the trees.”

He waved his arm at the leaves keeping the sun away from them.

“And as I did so, they retracted, and lo and behold...”

With another burst of power, the leaves got pushed aside again. The rough stones peeked out behind their cover again and stayed in sight as Caleb held the leaves at bay.

“There it was.”

As Aiofe walked into the clearing, she realized that the hewn stones were not just a random wall placed in the middle of the forest.

“Four walls,” she said, “or what’s left of it. Looks like this was a building?”

Caleb nodded. He started to walk around the construction, which was no more than ten paces on every side.

“Covered in dust and animal droppings, when I found it,” he said, “ancient. Who knows how long it has been since someone entered this building?”

He turned one of the corners and twirled in a little circle. Aiofe saw how a part of the wall had collapsed, forming a rough entrance.

“I don’t see any regular doorways,” Luca said, “in fact... it doesn’t look like it was intended to have any kind of entrance.”

“Or exit,” Zak added, “I’ve also never seen stone like this. Have you, Caleb?”

Caleb shook his head. He appeared to grow five inches as people apparently deferred to him and his knowledge.

“I don’t know where they’re from,” he admitted, “but I can say with certainty that these rocks are not from around here.”

“They feel wrong,” Abigail muttered, looking at the stones, “as if they’re... not from this world.”

“Well, let’s not get too dramatic,” Zak quipped, though Aiofe thought she could hear some tension in his voice, “these rocks are probably just *old*. Maybe they’ve been treated with something to make them look like this.”

“Or...” Caleb said, that mysterious air returning to his voice, “maybe Abigail is on to something.”

Aiofe swallowed. She followed as Caleb stepped through the destroyed wall, carefully keeping her hand against the rock as Caleb pointed out an indentation in the inside of the wall.

“See that?” he asked, his hand waving over the stone that appeared to be sanded smooth. Aiofe nodded, though she didn’t come closer as she realized that Caleb held his hand just an inch away from the wall.

He took a step back, offering Aiofe a hand. She hesitated for just a second before she made the conscious decision to trust the man and placed her hand in his.

“Watch this.”

Caleb snapped the fingers of his other hand. Aiofe barely had the chance to widen her eyes in shock as gravity started to turn around her body until it settled in a completely different direction.

In the direction of the smoothed wall.

She started falling, straight for the wall, with Caleb falling right next to her. He let out a little *whoop*, the only sound he managed to make before they hit the black rock...

And fell through.

Aiofe’s scream cut short when she realized that she hadn’t slammed face first into the black rock. Her heart pounded like a drummer against her chest and she had to fight for air as she found her feet on solid floor again and tugged her hand out of that of Caleb.

“What,” she managed to gasp out with her first proper breath, “was *that!*?”

“That was a very persuasive argument for the others to follow us,” Caleb said, his voice giving Aiofe something to focus on as her senses fought to regain their balance, “if there was any doubt in their hearts about joining me, now they will come for sure.”

Aiofe took another deep breath and smelled something musky. She felt the fine layer of dust that entered her nose before it reached her tongue and she could taste the dirt.

She coughed harshly, fighting against the urge to retch as her body wanted to expel the foreign material as quickly as possible.

As she managed to get herself under control, Aiofe realized that she recognized the room that they had ended up in.

Or, she recognized the make of the walls. They were made of a similar rock as the construction that Caleb had led them to, at the other side of the wall that Caleb had pulled her through.

“You could have asked,” she said, harsher than she intended. She didn’t want to be harsh, but Caleb had been very rude by not communicating his plans, “we were already invested.”

“Yes, thanks to you,” Caleb said, though his happiness appeared a little subdued, “but the unknown is a scary thing. Sometimes people need some *motivation*.”

“And I’m the motivation?” Aiofe asked, rubbing the unwanted tears that had formed in her eyes as she had been coughing off of her cheeks.

“Sort of,” Caleb nodded, “the rest will be through... any minute, now.”

Aiofe turned around. She saw that the wall that they had come through had a similar smooth section, as if people had been leaning against it for hours on end. Two torches were inserted in sconces that hung on either side of the wall, burning and providing the room with light.

“People have been here recently,” she observed, pointing at the torches, “or these would have burned out by now, for sure.”

Caleb rubbed his chin as he followed Aiofe’s look and cocked his head.

“Good point,” he muttered, “or there may be more to it! If the way in is far from natural, the way of light must be so, too!”

“You didn’t think about that, when you were here before, did you?” Aiofe asked dryly.

“There were too many wonders to wonder about,” Caleb said defensively, “I got distracted by the very existence of this room and what lies beyond.”

Aiofe had noticed the doorway that led out of the room. That was the only thing that this room and the construction on the other side didn’t have in common.

There was an intended way out.

It wasn’t what was keeping Aiofe’s attention, though. She anxiously eyed the smooth section of the wall.

“Shouldn’t they be coming through?”

“Yes,” Caleb said, rubbing his chin again, “hang on, I will check what is keeping them.”

Aiofe took a further step back. If somebody decided to use that moment to come through, she didn't want to be in their collision path when they did. Caleb, however, stepped forward without fear and casually reached out to the wall.

He touched it gingerly. He pushed against the wall.

Caleb frowned as nothing happened. The wall remained solid. He pushed a little harder, but nothing happened.

"Uh-oh," he muttered, "it didn't do *that* last time."

Aiofe blinked.

"What do you *mean*, it didn't do that last time?" she insistently, "are we stuck?"

"No," Caleb said, immediately, maybe too quickly, "no, we're not stuck. I can fix this. I can fix this."

He started pushing against the wall. Aiofe could feel him gathering and expending power as he pulled and pushed on the stones, doing it so quickly and repeatedly that Aiofe started to fear that they may get undue attention.

Attention from the creature that guarded the strength that Caleb was pulling from.

Aiofe felt her nerves unravel as he continued. She fidgeted as she watched, until she felt a headache that she couldn't explain starting to form.

It was too much. It had to stop somewhere and, if it was up to her, that point had been reached.

"That's enough," she said.

Caleb didn't appear to hear her, or he wasn't willing to listen. He continued with his attempts.

"Caleb, please," Aiofe continued, "it's not working."

The man hesitated for only a second before he continued.

"I've almost got it," he said, "I'm certain of it. Don't worry, it's just a little more..."

Aiofe saw him pull back his fist. She could feel how Caleb gathered more strength, bracing himself.

The pain behind her eyes became more insistent.

As Caleb clenched his fist, Aiofe lunged forward and grabbed his arm before he could throw it forward, unleashing more of the force at the wall.

"It's okay," she forced out, trying to keep the worry out of her voice, "we'll find a new way out. Can't be that we're stuck."

She swallowed and licked her lips, feeling that they had already dried out. The air in this room was drier than back home. Another sign that they had been removed from where they had come from.

"It can't be."

Caleb grimaced. He briefly looked at Aiofe and at the arm around his elbow, holding it against her. Their eyes met again.

Aiofe looked away.

"You're right," Caleb eventually muttered, "let's look around. It may be that it..."



He fell quiet. Aiofe tried not to look at him as he searched for words, before he looked at the door and raised his head.

“That’s our only course for direction, isn’t it?” he said, some confidence returning to his voice as he raised his finger and exclaimed, “time to explore!”

He put one big step forward, giving Aiofe just enough time to hurry after him as he marched into the hallway outside the room.

Caleb looked left and right and, with only a moment’s thought, turned to the right.

“I’ve been in here before,” he said, “and for longer than we’ve been, so far. Perhaps the entrance just needs to recharge, after someone went through. That would make sense! It can’t be easy to just move someone from one place to the other like it did!”

Aiofe let him talk to himself. She could hear that it was more for him to talk some courage into himself than that it was for her to not lose hope. She pulled her arms around her body as she tried to suppress a shiver.

It was cold in the hallway.

“How long did you explore in here?” she asked, mostly to forget about the temperature.

“About an hour,” Caleb said, “I made chalk marks, too. These hallways are rather similar to each other, so stay close. If we lose each other, who knows how long it will take to get back together?”

He got a piece of chalk out of one of his many pockets. Caleb grinned at Aiofe as he drew an arrow on the wall, pointing in the direction of their entrance.

“So…” Aiofe asked, “that would mean your previous marks are still there?”

“That would make sense,” Caleb nodded, “it’s been a couple of days, so yes!”

“Then, where are they?”

Caleb froze. He looked into the hallway, in the direction that they were walking. Torches dotted the space, hanging securely in their sconces, providing easy light. As Aiofe looked up, she could see that there were no signs of soot above the sconces.

These torches didn’t cause smoke marks. There was no telltale stream of smoke leading to the closest ventilation holes, keeping them from choking on the deadly smoke.

It made her uncomfortable. It was unnatural.

Just like the power.

“I was a little sparse with the marks when I started,” Caleb finally decided. It sounded like an excuse to Aiofe, no longer an explanation, “it took a bit before I realized just how easy it was to get lost.”

He grimaced.

“Stay close, okay?”

Aiofe nodded. She needed no further encouragement to do so.

As they walked, leaving a generous amount of marks on the walls, Caleb lacked his usual bravado. He seemed almost nervous as he walked forward, checked corners, and drew arrows pointing backwards towards the room they had left from.

The hallway seemed endless. Despite the regular torches, Aiofe couldn't see the wall at the far end as the walls disappeared into the distance. There were regular doors, each of which Caleb checked for similar marks on the walls as the one that they had come through. Though Caleb found them regularly, they left the room just as often in disappointment, having found out that there was no active way through there, either.

Caleb hadn't exaggerated when he had said that the area was very similar, constantly looking the same. Aiofe lost track of time as they trekked through the hallway. It felt like they had been going for hours when Caleb stopped at one of the many crossroads that they encountered.

Their path was intersected by another. Caleb had deliberately ignored these crossing hallways, always moving in the same direction as they walked.

"Why are we stopping?" Aiofe asked, looking into the crossing hallways. More doors, more pathways, more rooms. It dazed her to think of the size of this construction.

Instead of answering her, though, Caleb just pointed at the corner that they had just arrived at.

It showed an arrow, pointing in the direction that they were walking.

"Another mark," Aiofe realized, "another group?"

"It must be," Caleb said, "other people must have had the same idea as we did."

"The direction of the arrow is wrong, though," Aiofe observed, "we would have run into them, if they had come from that direction."

If Aiofe had to judge Caleb's eyes, he was desperately trying to ignore that fact.

"We could..." he started, but Aiofe didn't listen to him. She put her finger to her lips, which caused Caleb to immediately clam up. Aiofe felt a little bad about doing that to the man, but...

She heard footsteps. Footsteps paired with voices that sounded like they were arguing about something. Caleb's eyes shot over to the hallway as he tried to listen.

Aiofe felt goosebumps rise up her arms again. She held her breath, wishing that she could make out what was being said.

But there were echoes that made it impossible to understand. Instead, she focused on the sound of the voices itself.

They were rough, harsh voices. Nothing like those of Zak, Luca, or Abigail. Were they still outside, waiting for them to come out, or bashing their heads against the wall? She didn't think that kind, careful Luca, who always preferred to think before he acted rashly, would just jump after them into the unknown.

They couldn't have, would they?

"Let's take a step back," Caleb eventually decided, "see who that is, instead of..."

"Someone will have to help us," Aiofe said, "we can't just keep walking."

“We don’t know who that is,” Caleb argued, “what if they’re... I don’t know... evil? Demons, maybe?”

Aiofe was all ready to walk forward and introduce herself to the strangers. Ready to explain their plight and why they had been trespassing, and ask for help to leave. Then Caleb’s words came through and injected some doubt into her certainty.

She didn’t want to meet people like *that*. She had heard enough stories about demons clawing their way into homes and stealing children from their beds. She had been terrified of them when she had been little and now, at fifteen, she was still nervous about the threat that they symbolized, even though she had never seen anything that resembled a demon.

Then again, she had also never seen anything like the construction they had found themselves in.

“Okay, you may be right,” she said, even though it didn’t feel good to admit it, “let’s...”

That’s when the voices stopped. Aiofe looked in the direction that she had heard the voices coming from, the crossing hallway.

There were shapes in the shadows between two of the torches. She saw the glint of eyes reflecting the torchlight, around the heads of the shapes, looking at them. The shapes were silent, looking at them.

Teeth glinted in the light.

Then Aiofe felt the strength that Caleb summoned. It jumped forwards an instant later, grabbing hold of the shapes and turning the gravity around for them, throwing them backwards.

“Run!” Caleb hissed, turning into the path that they had ignored.

The path they had come from was filled with chalk arrows pointing where they would go. The hallway that they had been about to enter was already marked with an arrow that they were going to follow. Both paths contained convenient directions pointing where they would go.

So they took the third road, the crossing hallway that they hadn’t wanted to go into. Caleb abandoned care as he flung himself in that direction, no longer drawing marks or leaving anything that could show where they had gone to.

Aiofe felt a couple moments of absolute terror as they ran. Her heart beat in her chest, her eyes flew around bewildered, and her legs just kept going as she ran beside Caleb.

She had expected him to be faster than her. He was more experienced with anything physical, really. He had been allowed to roam and explore, to run and practice, without being stopped by family or friends. Aiofe, in the meantime, had been confined to home and made to sew, wash, and cook. She had to sneak out under the guise of meeting friends in order to just be able to practice.

And yet, Caleb was puffing next to her, keeping Aiofe close.

She could make out the shouts behind them. Though she couldn’t understand the words, which were still bouncing around the hallways unrecognizably, she could only imagine the cursing that was being sent after them.

Maybe these people would have been friendly to them at some point, but they no longer were.

They blindly ran through an archway that left the stuffy hallways. Aiofe only noticed they did when she realized that she could no longer see the ceiling that had been above them. She slowed down for just a brief second, just to look around, when she collided with what felt like a wall.

Aiofe bounced off and fell to the ground, landing hard. She felt the wind get knocked out of her lungs as she hit.

She heard someone else hit the ground, too. Aiofe blinked the tears out of her eyes as she forced herself to get back up. She forced herself to get ready to defend herself.

Her mind ventured out on its own. It followed a trail that had been laid out not too long ago, to a point in the universe that she was unaware of, except for the fact that she had made a connection to one of the creatures living there.

One of the guardians of an immense strength. A strength that was able to change the world in ways that were only limited to her imagination. The guardians contained that strength. They used it and they were both the protectors and storage of it.

They were unaware of Aiofe's intrusion. She was safe from them, having made a safe pathway under the guidance of Caleb, but as her mind quested out she still felt the worry of those eyes that could land on her and look at her, keep an eye on her, destroy her.

She sucked in the strength as she found it, as quickly as she could. Her mind retreated from the source before she could be noticed. She took the strength with her, giving her the power needed to defend herself.

Everything in the blink of an eye. She was already getting up from her fall when she realized that the other person was crying out at Aiofe.

"Abigail!" Caleb said, almost sounding relieved at the prospect of one more friend being in the maze of a construction.

Aiofe felt the strength in her chest. She felt the force pushing at her, wanting to get out and return to its storage.

She looked at Abigail with her hand raised. She had been ready to do something to her.

Or, at least, to try doing something to her.

"I'm so glad it's you two," the woman said as Aiofe quickly lowered her hand, acting like nothing had happened. She sounded out of breath, fighting to get air into her lungs, "where is everyone? I can't find Zak or Luca."

Her eyes turned harshly to Caleb.

"Where did you bring us?"

Caleb cringed, but Aiofe realized that they didn't have the time to just chat as the footsteps started sounding behind them again. People were coming closer.

The people that Caleb had pushed back.

"We need to go," she said, hurry sounding through in her voice as Caleb helped Abigail up, "there are people and I don't think that..."

The voices behind her suggested that they didn't have the time to properly explain everything. Instead, she just grabbed Abigail's hand and started pulling her into the direction that they had been running.

Abigail tripped and ran with Aiofe. She stumbled along, just barely staying upright, until she managed to turn around properly and keep up with Aiofe. She grit her teeth and kept up, even as Caleb looked over his shoulder.

“Wait!” Abigail urged, “I come from that direction, there’s...”

Aiofe didn’t listen. The wide room ran into a set of stairs that went up, spanning the whole width of the room. She just started climbing, trying to maintain the distance between them and the people that they had angered.

“Aiofe,” Abigail shouted, “we can’t, this is a...”

Aiofe came to a sudden halt when she ended up on a plateau, which was ringed with walls and windows. The windows were a beautiful stained glass, looking down at them as they reached the top of the stairs.

“... Dead end.” Abigail finished her sentence.

Aiofe looked around, but could only conclude that Abigail was correct. The plateau was completely walled off, with no doors in sight. Only the stained glass windows allowed them to look out... but they were filled with a fine metal mesh enclosing the colorful glass.

Caleb turned around, looking back at the stairs. As Aiofe followed his eyes, she could see the figures that they had angered already climbing up. They were taking their time, clearly content and aware of the fact that they had been trapped. They didn’t want to exhaust themselves like Aiofe had done.

Now she could see them, Aiofe realized that she hadn’t just seen their eyes reflect the light of the torches. There was a glimmer coming from them as they looked up at Aiofe. Their skin was red and their hands ended in claws, which were extended in a hostile pose.

They were actual demons. The stories her mother had told her, all to keep her on her best behavior, were actually true.

Aiofe felt a shiver run down her spine as she locked eyes with the closer of the two. They grinned at her and raised a hand.

Some gland opened up in their hand. It started filling with...

Something. Aiofe couldn’t make out what it was, but she could see that it quickly congealed and stuck together, almost forming a ball before their fingers closed around it and they threw it at Aiofe.

She saw just in time that the second one had been doing the same, two of the globs of liquid being lobbed at her. Aiofe jumped back and saw the projectiles land just where she had been standing, the liquid hissing and bubbling as it started reacting with the black stone that they were standing on.

Within moments, it had eaten a hole into the floor. Aiofe swallowed.

She didn’t want to be hit by that.

The creatures on the stairs kept climbing. They were already gathering more of the liquid in their hands, moving their fingers to shape it in their palms. The movements of the digits were almost hypnotic.

“We need a way out,” Caleb said urgently behind Aiofe, “Abigail, *stand back!*”

Aiofe could feel him gather strength, as she always could. She saw the creatures narrow their eyes, turning their heads to Caleb and twisting their hands. They changed their attention, away from Aiofe on top of the stairs and instead to the one that could gather as much power as Caleb could.

They were aware of it. They could sense Caleb gathering power and they considered him a target for it.

He didn't even notice it as he balled his fists and punched them out simultaneously with the creatures throwing their acid out in his direction.

Caleb got pushed back, the result of his force being turned back at him. The walls and the stained glass didn't react to the force, as if they had been made to withstand it all. If something happened to them, they didn't show it.

But Caleb stumbled and tripped from the recoil, falling backwards. The balls of liquid flew over his head as he dropped on his butt, barely missing him. The acid landed on the floor, eating yet another hole into the floor.

"Can we get past them?" Abigail asked.

"I don't think we could avoid them," Aiofe swallowed, looking one of the creatures in the eyes again and feeling them look straight into her soul, "Not if they have the high ground..."

"Well, we can keep them down," Caleb said, coming up from his fall and throwing another fist in the direction of the creatures. Aiofe could feel the force pass by her, barely brushing against the strength that she was desperately trying to keep contained.

Her own strength tried to come with the force of Caleb. Aiofe fought to keep it in, to keep the strength in as reserve, to comfort her that it was there and available.

She grimaced when the two held up their hands and stayed standing. They ignored the force thrown at them, the force that would have turned their gravity around. It was almost like they absorbed the strength.

Two extra big balls of liquid gathered in the hands of the creatures. They balled their fists and flung it in Aiofe's direction.

She saw them fly. They contained more of the acidic liquid than had been thrown at them so far.

In just a split second, she realized that she could make it work into a plan.

Though she didn't have a lot of time, Aiofe balled her fists and reached out to the blobs of liquid. She molded the strength that her body had gathered and was keeping as close to her mind as possible. She persuaded it to do something simple, the first thing that she had learned when Caleb had persuaded her to learn how to use the strength to escape from her life in the house.

She asked the power to pull the blobs in Aiofe's direction, directly at her, before she sent it out.

It better work.

The force flew away, leaving Aiofe feeling empty and vulnerable. The liquid was already out of the hands of the two on the stairs, they had no more control over it. Aiofe could barely control it, though she *felt* it when the force grabbed a hold of the acid and gave it a *pull*.

Aiofe saw her life flash before her eyes. The acidic material flew straight at her face, where it would undoubtedly eat through her skin and bones before she could even feel it.

At least it would be over quickly.

She didn't want it to be over, though. Aiofe ducked at the last moment, moving her head out of the way in the same instance she released the force that pulled at the acid and let it fly over her.

An intense, burning pain mastered her. She felt a hole get eaten into her cheek by a stray splatter that released itself from the congealed mass the moment she stopped exerting force on it. There was no time to scream as Aiofe rolled over the floor, her momentum carrying her on. She started beating at her cheek only a second later, trying to get the acid away before it could deal too much damage.

Her fingers started burning. Her nose was filled with the scent of burning hair. Even her clothing started to sizzle before Caleb stood over Aiofe and she felt a *peeling* force move over her body.

The pain didn't stop, but at least it didn't expand.

"What did you do!?" Caleb exclaimed.

"The wall," Abigail gasped, still blinking away tears of agony, "did it eat out the wall?"

Silence reigned for just a second before Caleb let out an excited noise.

"Get on your feet!" he shouted. Aiofe felt a hand jerk on her arm, helping her up and dragging her on while Aiofe still fought against the pain in her cheek, "fly!"

What? Fly?

Though Aiofe had barely been able to throw other things, she wasn't as adept at manipulating her own body and gravity. Though she recognized the action that Caleb tried to get her to do, she was still blinded by the time the floor disappeared from under her feet.

She fell forwards for just a second, before two hands took her and dragged her upwards. They pulled her up, towards a body. She swallowed as wind rushed by her face as she flew up, away from the direction her body was being pulled by gravity.

Aiofe blinked tears out of her eyes. Salty drops rolled over the wound in her face, causing untold agony as the salt made its home in the open wound.

It was enough to get her mind to pay attention. Enough to give her focus, to make her forget about the cause of the pain and to become aware of the current threats to her life.

They had only agreed to practice the power. She hadn't wanted to run for her life, to be hunted by acid-throwing creatures.

She forced her eyes to open and get focused on what was around them...

And gasped when they succeeded in doing so.

They were hanging high above a construction, which had obviously contained the many hallways and rooms that they had attempted to navigate. The building went on for as far as Aiofe's eyes could see, growing out into the distance. There were irregular towers, spires, and what appeared to be keeps built into the construction, providing high points, vantage points, and different forms of entrances at several places. A sun hung threateningly above them, larger than their own sun had ever been. The light was red and dangerous, but Aiofe felt no heat radiating off of it. There was no cloud in sight, nothing that suggested any form of weather under the angry red light.

Caleb hung above her, holding her under her arms. His arms were linked through hers, pushing her against his body as he kept them hanging above the construction. Abigail was right next to him, though her face was contorted in concentration. Aiofe could feel the forces pulling and pushing at her body, struggling to keep Abigail in one position.

Caleb, in the meanwhile, showed none of these issues. He was holding her still in the air, looking down at the construction with just as much awe as Aiofe had done.

A form rose from what appeared to be an open courtyard. Wings flapped and spears flashed in the red light as several other forms came up after the first one, flying upwards in quick, wide circles that became wider and wider, until they were at the same level as Aiofe was and they were clearly coming in their direction.

Caleb sighed.

“Now what?” he asked softly, “are we going to...”

He couldn't say more. Not before the group of winged forms, nine in all, got within hearing distance. There was no way to go. No way to flee without the flying forms knowing where they had gone. They had come so quickly that Aiofe doubted they could get away if they tried.

The middle of the nine stopped, their wings flapping as they just hung in the air. It turned out that they were built generally humanoid, too, with two arms, two legs, a torso, and a head.

But their wings definitely didn't belong to the general structure. Aiofe didn't understand how they worked, but it felt like they shouldn't have been able to support someone hanging in the sky.

The other eight didn't stop moving. They flew around them, holding blades on long sticks that they kept beside their body, sticking out behind them. Even though they were moving too quickly to make out much of their details, Aiofe could see the glint of the sun reflecting off of metal armor and helmets angled to keep an eye on them.

They were definitely not dealing with humans. Aiofe swallowed as she reached out with her mind, gathering her own strength, just in case it would be necessary.

“Lo,” the one hanging in front of them boomed, “you are trespassing. You will submit, or face the consequences.”

Aiofe blinked as she was greeted in her own language. She had been ready for a quiet assault, or a collection of sounds and movements that would together form a language she didn't understand.

But this. This, she did understand.

If only it hadn't been as aggressive and final.

“She's wounded,” Caleb suddenly said, taking the initiative, “we were attacked. We need help.”

The figure appeared to mull his words over. For too long, the only sounds Aiofe could hear were the wings flapping around them as the eight shapes around them kept flying in circles, never giving them a direction to flee to. Aiofe felt her cheeks burn, almost literally, as she felt the figure was looking at her.

“Very well,” they thundered, “you will follow me, or face the consequences.”

They turned around. Aiofe looked up at Caleb, but he shrugged as well as he could before he started to lower them, after the winged person, towards the open courtyard.



There were more of the winged, armored people standing around in the open space. They were performing drills, swinging and twisting with the weapons they carried. All of them wielded the same blades, long swords attached to poles that granted them a great reach to spear and slash at dummies and practice targets.

Aiofe felt her arms tingle as Caleb put her softly on the floor. Her circulation had been blocked, but resumed in full force as blood started pumping through her veins again. She couldn't feel her arms, which hurt in its own way, but she ignored it as she saw two men rush in their direction.

Zak and Luca.

While Luca came to a halt just in front of Abigail, Aiofe, and Caleb, Zak kept coming and put his arms around both Abigail and Aiofe, pulling them towards him. Aiofe struggled to stay on her feet as she was ripped off the floor and put back down just a second later in Zak's bear hug. Her shoulder, which was still tingling, protested against the sudden movement, but she tried to see the action with the good intentions that had to come with it.

"Where did you three come from?" Luca said, "when Abigail had stepped through, we thought we'd find you, but..."

"You weren't there," Zak said, "and the gate closed behind us."

Aiofe grimaced. She untangled herself from Zak and Abigail, though Abigail was doing her level best to keep a hold of Zak. Aiofe stumbled back a couple of steps until she managed to right herself. She shook her head and ignored the questions.

"How did you get tangled up with these people?" she asked.

"We ran into them almost immediately," Luca grimaced, "they... speak our language. We managed to explain what happened, but..."

The figure that had been speaking to them landed behind them with a massive crash of armor plates and flagstones.

"Well, I think he can probably best explain to you what is happening."

Aiofe, Abigail, and Caleb all turned around to the winged figure. When they removed their helmet, a mass of blonde curls erupted from underneath. A square jaw jutted out of the curls, until they settled and a regal set of piercing, golden eyes cleared their way from underneath them.

"You are the same trespassers," they said immediately, "those who claim to have no idea how you got here, though yet you are in our halls and in our skies."

Aiofe grimaced.

"We had no intention to trespass," she said, before Caleb could open his mouth to defend himself, "we were curious, investigative. We are stuck."

"We just want to go home."

"Going home is no option," the man spoke, causing a shiver to run its way through Aiofe's spine, "for your arrival shook the core of this fortress."

His eyes went from Aiofe, to Abigail, to Caleb, and then to Luca and Zak. He didn't appear to be pleased with what he saw.

“Your arrival has not gone unnoticed,” they said, “the fortress has locked up to protect itself. Nobody is going to leave. Meanwhile, we have others to deal with in here.”

He nodded at Aiofe.

“It seems you have met some of the more dangerous ones, already,” he said. Aiofe self-consciously probed the wound in her cheek with a finger and was rewarded with a stinging feeling and a pus-covered finger, “you are lucky to have escaped alive.”

“We are no pushovers,” Caleb said immediately, “no exit, you say? I will find a way to open it again!”

“You will do no such thing,” the man thundered, causing Caleb to take a step back, “your floundering through this fortress has done great damage. You are but *children* wielding the power like you are. You came in through the prison, who knows what you could have released!”

They glared at Caleb. Aiofe swallowed when she realized that the armored figures had stopped their drills. They had surrounded her little group, their wings flared and ready while they pointed their polearms at them.

“We have beastborn,” the man then continued, “they will instruct you before you will do *anything*. Perhaps, if you prove yourselves... you may look for a way to leave.”

Aiofe took a step back.

Not allowed to go back home? Not seeing her parents anymore?

No longer being forced to wash, clean, sew, and cook and, instead, learning how to control the strength of the beast?

Abigail looked aghast. Luca was nervously clenching his hands, visibly deciding what would be a good move. Zak was curious, rubbing his chin.

But she?

Her mother would notice her absence. Her family would worry after she had disappeared without a sign, but it looked like there was nothing that she could do to prevent that.

She could make this work.

“Let’s meet them, shall we?” she suggested.