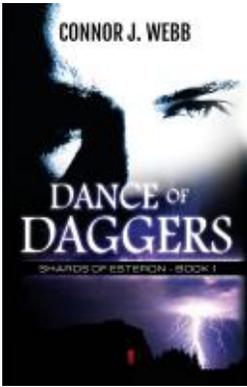
A high-contrast, black and white close-up of a man's face, mostly in shadow. His right eye is visible, looking towards the right. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of his nose and eye.

CONNOR J. WEBB

DANCE OF
DAGGERS

SHARDS OF ESTERON - BOOK 1





As a threat against his nation emerges, Prince Lysander Stormfury of Arodell moves to stop it. His patriotism is short-lived when his father and mentor are taken from him. Now king, Lysander wages a war against the man who changed his life. But is everything really so simple? The Planes clash, views and relationships change, and a horrible power awakens. Is Lysander strong enough to stop his world from falling apart?

Dance of Daggers: Shards of Esteron – Book 1

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Dance of Daggers

Shards of Esteron: Book 1

Connor Webb

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Chapter 1

Among infinite specks of bleak and white sand, one could find the center of the world - of *all* the worlds. It was there that the dark black tower pierced the sky.

There was no specific name for the plane where the Dark Vigil was found. There was no real need to call it anything but the Dark Vigil, considering the plane was only white sand and the unbelievably massive black building. Prince Lysander Stormfury found the name fitting. As far as the eye could see, the obsidian tower stood. The top rested somewhere far above the clouds. Yet surrounding the tower was an endless white wasteland. No matter how far you traveled, white sand was the only thing you would find. The landscape was even eerily flat. Even footprints seemed to fade.

But it wasn't that which mattered, it was the Dark Vigil. The nexus between all planes: Ravensya, Ulduun, Elstrad, Telys, and Lysander's home plane of Arodell. They who controlled the Vigil controlled all five planes, and their respective inhabitants.

Lysander flexed his right hand, ready to summon his weapon in a heartbeat. His father had been warned of an immediate attack on Arodell by Elstrad. A man had come to Axel Rhodes, the Arodellian spymaster, informing him of the impending assault. The Elstradii would move through the Dark Vigil instead of moving directly between the planes. That way, an over-exertion on the Elstradii Planeshifters wouldn't be required, as moving through the Vigil - due to its inherent power - was far easier.

Truth be told, it was a smart idea for the Elstradii. While a Planeshifter could move to any plane from any plane, Shiftgates were strongest in the Vigil. Even a skilled 'Shifter could only move a few soldiers at best simultaneously through a Shiftgate directly from one plane to the next. Yet even Lysander, who was not skilled in using Shiftgates, could summon a massive 'Gate here. He'd

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moved an army before, at the behest of his father. If he could do that, what did that mean a fully prepared army could do?

Luckily enough, every plane has its rules. For the Vigil in particular, Shiftgates only opened to one specific plane depending on where they were. A Elstradii Shiftgate would open into the Vigil in a particular area, and any 'Gate made from there would take them back to Elstrad. Kain Stormfury had accounted for this, and now a large Arodellian army stood ready to defend their homeland from the Elstradii incursion.

“When will they come, Father?” Lysander asked Kain.

The King of Arodell stood next to him in his ornate blue-and-gold plate armor. Intricate lightning bolt patterns weaved their way over him. Golden bolt-shaped pieces rose from the armor menacingly. Plate armor wasn't as popular now as it had used to be, but this ornate set had been passed down through the Stormfury line for centuries. Kain's startling white hair hung down around his neck, drawn back in a ponytail, his helm-less face smiling at his son.

“It won't be long, should Axel be correct. They planned to attack while the moon was on the other side of the Vigil.”

“A smart plan,” Lysander replied. “I take it they don't know of our pact with the Ravensy?”

“None do,” King Stormfury answered confidently.

Lysander looked to his father, seeing the way his deep blue eyes watched the sands with their self-assuredness. Still, Lysander knew him well enough to know that he was troubled. Although the king would not admit to it, the fact that the Elstradii were making a play against Arodell bothered him deeply. To an extent, Lysander could understand. This could mean war, a *true* war, not something like the commonplace skirmishes in the Vigil. War is something that the planes had not seen in a long time, since the war between Telys and Ravensya some hundred years ago.

Within the hour, the first shadow struck. One minute a group of soldiers stood together in tight formation, the next a man in all black stood before one with a dagger slipping between the soldier's ribs. Lysander focused on his spear, and it shimmered into

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existence in his hand. Next he focused on the Arodellian power of lightning, and the world seemed to slow to a halt around him. Lysander smiled, exulting in his speed. He was fast, even for an Arodellian. The Elstradii assassin removed his dagger slowly enough that the soldier's blood looked frozen in place, at least to Lysander's eyes. He had the lightning to thank for that. The blade hadn't even come out an inch by the time Lysander was upon the man, focusing on wind to add grace to his fighting techniques. The spear's tip - a dark blue lightning bolt that wove its way in a spiral down the shaft of his weapon - exploded from the Elstradii's chest and tore out just as quickly. Another Elstradii tried to teleport to him and attack him, but Lysander hadn't stopped envisioning the lightning. The man was simply suspended midair as Lysander walked over to him. To this man, he wouldn't even see that Lysander had moved until it was far too late; until Lysander was still once more. Lysander made his next move: a simple twitch of the wrist, and blood flew from the man's open throat before his boots even hit the ground as he dropped from the portal.

At first glance, the powers of Arodell and the powers of Elstrad were the same. However, they only seemed similar by looks. The Arodellians, while channeling the power of lightning, were fast - *impossibly* fast - while the Elstradii were able to teleport. Their teleportation techniques and limitations were strange, at least to Lysander. They could teleport freely at a heavy cost to their energy, or simply move to a shadow within their sight for no physical cost. Their power was almost closer to weak Shiftgates than Arodellian lightning. Unfortunately for them, that meant they could be sensed as their aura flared with the power for their teleporting. The Arodellians simply sped up, making use of an internalized power. They didn't have to worry about a telltale aura, as no power was being externally flaunted.

Once the primary force of the Elstradii seemed to have appeared, Lysander heard his father shout his name. The king held his golden sword in hand as he looked at his son. Kain caught Lysander's eyes pointedly and raised the sword skyward. Lysander

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caught the signal and mimicked the position with his spear, screaming, “Arodell!”

It was that very moment that the Elstradii lost.

The Arodellian host split in two as they backed up, the warriors in the front fending off the assailants as they made their play. Yet within minutes, the shadow warriors were boxed in on three sides by the Arodell. With no warning, the final wall struck. The men in red came from nowhere, their glowing molten armor giving light to the black and moonless night. As the Elstradii were distracted, the Ravensi firemancers came down, blowing fire into the attackers. None noticed until it was too late. Lysander watched as several of them turned, saw their doom, and attempted to escape it. Still the fire engulfed them. Then the second line of the army stepped forward. Walls of flame leapt into existence to protect the Arodellians from the consuming flame. Just like that, the night was day and the day was won. The fire stopped pouring from the firemancers, and only bone and ash remained. The protecting walls of fire sputtered and then died, leaving them in the dark once more.

It didn't matter. The Arodell and Ravensi had *won*.

Dante was right about Saera, Lysander thought. *She is a good tactician.*

Of course, the Ravensi also had the advantage of being the most magically-inclined out of all five races. And here was their Third Legion, comprised of their strongest firemancers. Lysander smiled ruefully. What a power to wield. Seeing them display their power made Lysander wish there was an Arodellian equivalent to the spraying fire. Sadly, the Goddess of Storms had not seen fit to give them the ability to cast lightning from themselves.

Without warning, the peculiar purple light of Elstradii energy exploded all around them. Suddenly, there was an aura exuding a force so strong it very nearly drove Lysander to his knees. It *did* force some to kneel. The combined might of Arodell and Ravensya righted itself with an impressive quickness, ready to defend themselves against this new threat.

From behind him, metal clashed against metal. Lysander spun around, raising his spear in the same motion. His father fought

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against a man dressed all in black. The Elstradii had two jet black daggers, casually using one to parry Kain's sword. The opponent's back was to the prince, but Lysander's eyes shot wide with recognition. It was someone that neither he nor his father had anticipated seeing on the battlefield. Lysander knew of only one person with a Coreforged black weapon such as those daggers. Lysander thought it was a sword that the man chose to wield, but perhaps he was mistaken... *Sorin is here? The Nightlord himself?* he thought to himself. That was an unsettling fact. Fighting in the Vigil was common and generally accepted. Until now, there had still been the chance that this was all a misunderstanding, and merely another skirmish, not a planned incursion into Arodell. Nightlord Sorin leading an attack into Arodell himself confirmed that it was an outright act of war. A leader didn't take part in skirmishes. Not even common lords did that, save the lowly ones who wished to make a bigger name for their house through glory.

Lysander focused on lightning and moved to the center of their army. Sorin was one of the strongest Planeshifters there were; this did not bode well. Everyone turned to him when he appeared. "Be careful!" he shouted at them. "Nightlord Sorin is here!"

Then he used lightning once more, disappearing and reappearing by his father and the Nightlord. He drove his spear forward with the grace of his wind, and it made its way toward Sorin. Kain saw and jumped backwards. Sorin turned to look at Lysander. Lysander saw his strange mask: a silver thing with only one eye socket and a black line in a reversed L shape; the jagged mark ran from his open eye, to where the other eye hole should have been, down to the side of the chin. Then the Nightlord disappeared. Cursing himself for a fool, Lysander focused on tracking the Nightlord's aura. *Behind me.* Calling wind again, he spun around and stabbed forward as his enemy reappeared. The thrust was misplaced however, only grazing the Nightlord's side. A red ribbon seemed to glow as it fell. It was just then that Lysander realized the Ravensi firemancers were calling light for them. *No,* Lysander realized, finally registering the clashes of steel resounding from behind him. *They too are fighting.*

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Sorin danced casually away from the blow. Lysander focused on lightning and the dodge slowed down almost completely. He spun around with his weapon and cursed his younger self for being so fascinated with spears. They complimented the lightning power rather well, but had he chosen nearly any other weapon to train with, he could have used thunder as well. It was a power that still was available with a spear... the conditions were just so specific to be useful it was rarely ever worth it.

But then, to Lysander's delight, Sorin gave the prince an opportunity to use it. He saw Lysander coming, and knew he couldn't twist his body around in time to parry or dance away. So he called up a shield of the strange black light around him. Just as the spearhead connected, Lysander focused on thunder. There was a loud, deafening thunderclap, and then Sorin was flying backwards as though he had been flung from the top of a cliff. Both Lysander and Kain simultaneously used lightning to chase after him, taking the fight away from the army. A fight between powerful Planeshifters was never good on anyone around them.

Lysander was fast, but Kain was faster still. He came down on Sorin as he landed, his sword held above his head in an overhead swing. He swung down in an arc, and as Sorin somehow managed to parry, he used thunder to send their target shooting down into the sand beneath them. The clap of thunder was even louder than Lysander's. The prince came to a stop beside his father, where the king stood looking down into the pit he had just created. Somewhere below lay Sorin. "Is he dead?" Lysander asked. "I don't sense an aura."

"Unlikely. The sand is too thick without being solid. I think he just flew down until the resistance eventually stopped him."

"Then he might have 'Shifted away.'"

The king nodded in return, his white hair strewn across his face. There was a singular shallow cut across his cheek where one of the black daggers must have gotten him. Sweat glistened, intermingling with dirt and the blood from the cut. It only made him look more powerful. Not that he needed it.

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Lysander saw something in the king's eyes, however, that troubled him. Kain's eyes danced with a mixture of disgust and something that looked quite like fear.

Wind blew the white hair of both father and son forward, and they simultaneously looked behind them. A large black Shiftgate sliced through the Vigil's sands. On the other side, a group of Elstradii soldiers stood in formation and ready for battle. A hundred steel swords were held at the ready. Lysander hadn't realized they already made it into the Elstradii entrance to the Vigil, but it mattered not. He looked at his father, who gave him a nod.

And then the soldiers died.

Lysander's world slowed to a stop as he sped up. One hundred Elstradii soldiers stood as still as statues. When he was on the first one, his spear buried its point deep into the man's belly. Lysander didn't bother with wind or thunder. These men weren't Planeshifters. They would still have the typical powers any Elstradii had, but far less potent than an Elstradii Planeshifter. *Planeshifting is a strange concept*, Lysander thought idly to himself as his spear slashed the throat of another soldier - the seventh man he had done in out of the hundred. He looked over as he ripped his spear out; Kain had done in many more than his son. Lysander trailed Kain's movements, swelling with pride, but redoubling his own efforts to try to match his father's. Eventually Lysander's son would be looking at Lysander this way, when Lysander was king and little Kaien was the prince in line.

Now there was a thought that swelled Lysander with pride.

After just a moment, they were done. Lysander let go of his lightning and the world sped back up, and almost at the same time one hundred bodies sprayed blood and fell to the ground. The Shiftgate had closed behind them, but Lysander had no interest in staying in the purplish wasteland that was Elstrad. He Planeshifted back to the Vigil.

Right away, a blow took him in the back of the head. He grunted and his world danced momentarily. It had dazed him enough that he couldn't even focus on his lightning. The spear fell from his grip. Black spots danced along his vision. The blow had

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been a solid one, and Lysander felt vaguely aware that he was lucky he hung onto consciousness. He barely registered the sudden aura as his father burst into existence behind him. He heard the screech of metal on metal but hardly recognized it. His head ached so badly. What had even hit him?

Slowly he managed to stand and turn. His father's golden sword clashed against twin night black daggers. *Sorin*. Lysander cursed the man and summoned his spear into existence again. When the blow hit him, it stunned him enough that his weapon faded away, its owner unable to hold it in existence. That was the biggest downside to how the weapons of the Arodell worked.

Lysander jumped forward, using thunder to boost his jump height and power, wind to gracefully control his trajectory. He crashed down on the Nightlord. Sorin managed to parry the outstretched spear to the side, but Lysander's weight still took him on the shoulders and chest, knocking him over. Kain fell back a moment, and Lysander heard him expel a breath he had been holding in. Kain had needed the reprieve.

The Stormfury prince brought his spear down at Nightlord Sorin as he lay stunned under him. But then the Nightlord flickered out of existence under him...

... and a black dagger swung at Lysander's exposed throat. Lysander yelped and nearly panicked - he barely had time to call lightning and roll out of the way. He stabbed at Sorin's rib cage. All his spear found was open air and purple light. Sorin was suddenly on Lysander's right side, jabbing at his kidney with the left-handed dagger. Lysander didn't let go of his lightning and the dagger moved slowly towards him. More than enough time to dodge. Lysander sidestepped the blow, then brought his spear down in a slashing motion, aiming to cut off Sorin's left hand. Just as the spear connected, Sorin disappeared, though not before a few small globes of blood appeared and seemed to hang suspended in the air. Black light appeared in front of him, on the inside of his extended right arm. Lysander's eyes went wide as a dagger nearly appeared lodged in his throat, stepping to the side just quick enough to

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reduce the injury to only a shallow cut on the side of his neck. He sucked in air in response to the scarlet pain that shot through him.

A few feet away, he stopped and let go of his lightning. Both he and Sorin stood facing one another, their breathing heavy. *This fight cannot be allowed to go on much longer*, Lysander thought to himself.

In the space of a few seconds, the entire world of Lysander Stormfury changed.

Sorin disappeared. There was no purple light. In fact, it appeared as though the man had just faded away into shadowy wisps. *He Planeshifted?* Lysander wondered desperately, readying himself for another attack, unsure of what else Sorin could have possibly just done. “Be careful!” Kain was shouting at him as he moved towards his son. “He could come from anywhere!” There was an unexplainable understanding in Kain’s mannerisms.

The Nightlord did reappear, even being so kind as to let King Kain Stormfury finish his shouted warning before opening his throat in a spray of red. Kain’s sapphire eyes went wide and then empty, the life draining out from him in a scarlet storm.

Fury engulfed Lysander, as did lightning, thunder, and wind all at once. So deeply did he drink from his powers that sparks and lightning bolts danced around him in a horrifying array. He was on Sorin before the Nightlord could even draw his dagger back from his father’s throat, swinging the spear down in an overhead arc so hard that Sorin dropped the dagger as he tried to parry and stumbled backwards. When the thunderclap sounded his eyes widened slowly as he was blasted away. By the look of him, he hadn’t realized that the prince could hold back the thunderclap for a second or two.

Lysander’s spear was in his left hand then, and he picked up his father’s golden sword from the ground as he walked towards where Sorin was headed. The world was dragging itself so slowly that Lysander made it to Sorin before he even hit the ground. The shaft of the spear flicked up, connecting with the Nightlord’s back as he was about to land. The thunderclap was earsplitting as Sorin was thrown upwards like a doll.

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The sand around Lysander started blowing around violently as more wind came into the prince. Then he jumped straight up into the air with as much strength as he could muster, aiming to go higher than Sorin for at least a moment. He succeeded. Then, with all the fury and power he had, he took his father's golden sword and flung it like a javelin at Sorin's body. Was he wearing black armor now?

Blue-and-gold lightning formed around the blade as it shot like an arrow from the heavens themselves. After mere seconds, the blade wasn't visible through all the energy surrounding it. When it connected with Sorin, the lightning flashed and then blasted through him. The golden sword remained, resting at an angle. The blade's tip poked out of Sorin's side, while the hilt nearly rested on the opposite side. As Nightlord and Storm Prince alike descended, Lysander released his powers. He landed, ripping the blade from Sorin's body. He stepped forward when a sudden gust of wind blew behind him. Lysander turned to see nothing. *He Planeshifted. He's still alive. Good. Let him tell his people about the mistake he's made this day.*

Lysander made his way to his father's body, placing the sword's handle in his grip and closing the mailed fist. Then he closed the late king's eyes and summoned all the lightning and wind he could muster to make it back to the part of the Vigil that would lead back home.

The funny part about the way the Vigil worked, was as long as you were in the corresponding area of a plane in the Vigil, you could open a Shiftgate to anywhere in that plane. Lysander envisioned his parents' palace as he opened a 'Gate just large enough for him and his father. He called his wind once more and carried his father through, laying him down on the other side and expelling the last of his powers with a heavy breath. Two guards looked at him, bewildered. "What are you doing?!" Lysander shouted angrily. "Get a damned medic. Get Axel. Get the Ranger-General!

"Get my mother."

Chapter 2

One Year Later

If I have to sit through one more war council, I will go mad, Lysander decided from where he sat on the end of the long mahogany table. His father had been considerably better at politics than Lysander. Even his wife Lilianne was better than he was. Still, as the prince, it was expected of him. It would not look good for him to miss the war councils of the war that he had personally started. Well, maybe not started. When Sorin killed Kain Stormfury, that had been a direct act of war. No one had opposed the declaration of war, save Sorin, who tried to play innocent. Even today, a year later, the Nightlord would still have the world believe him innocent. Without thinking, Lysander clenched his fist.

“...the rangers could strike directly through a Shiftgate while the Prince leads his strike through the Vigil, could they not?” asked Nathaniel Firebrand, the King of the Ravensi. Since their alliance, King Firebrand and his legate Dante - Lysander’s closest friend - attended all of the councils. The king himself had his crimson crown resting lazily on his brow, designed to look like a halo of flame. His square face was lined with matching red hair, slicked back, sliding down into sideburns and a mustache. Not a common style, at least not in Arodell, but it fit his blocky face.

“Of course,” Ranger-General Christopher Marlowe replied. He’d been the Ranger-General for as long as Lysander could remember, although he wasn’t very aged. Mid-forties at best, by Lysander’s guess. “The Rangers are trained to work with ‘Shifters. We’re meant to go forth to enemy soil. It would be foolish to send us through the Vigil or use us as defenders, Your Grace.”

King Firebrand nodded, thinking to himself for a moment. “True. As a matter of fact, my Grand Legion can manage defending both of our planes, should King Lysander prefer to use Arodellian attackers.”

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“Prince,” Lysander corrected quietly. He disliked being called king. “My mother still lives. However, my preference is simply to win. You all know by now that the planning part of warfare isn’t my strongest point. Though the Legion *are* strong defenders... it could work.”

To his right, Lilianne spoke up. “My love, could we not split the Ravensi Legion *three* ways? There are eight minor legions within the Grand Legion. We could have four remain in Ravensya, three defend Arodell while we strike, and have the remaining legion attack with the main Arodellian host.”

“True enough, my lady. The third legion is our strongest magical unit, and I know you like to make use of our firemancers. We could send them with your host,” King Nathaniel offered helpfully.

Lysander thought for a moment. It was a good plan. Out of all the races, the Elstradii were the least suited for fighting against magic-oriented warriors. Their skill set’s disadvantages were similar to the Ulduuni in that way - wonderful against any physical opponent, but near useless against magic. That was a weakness Lysander had played greatly upon since his father’s death, choosing to utilize the Ravensi firemancers as much as possible. Unfortunately, Arodellian powers were almost all physical - if not for their speed outdoing Elstradii teleporting, their powers would be easily trumped by their enemy. Lysander had begun to use both his spear and his father’s sword, so he could make more use of thunder, a great ability against Elstradii physical attacks. He smiled. “Do it.”

“Dante, you’ll lead the third legion in the attack, commanding with Prince Lysander. I will stay behind in Ravensya to command the first, second, fourth, and sixth legions in the defense of Ravensya. I will send for the remaining legions and Saera for the defense of Arodell. When do we strike, Szymaster?”

In all honesty, Lysander had nearly forgotten that the szymaster stood in the shadows behind the table. The man was too quiet. At the sound of his name, he looked up, dark hair hanging

casually over one eye. “Elstrad plans its attack on the Vigil two days from now.”

Lysander stood up, putting on his best royal visage. He felt it was an awkward display, but it seemed to work in the eyes of the others. “In two days, we will break Elstrad. We will make Nightlord Sorin regret ever slaying my father.”

If only he could see me now, Lysander thought proudly.

Storm Queen Aela was precisely where Lysander expected her to be: sitting in the room that Kain Stormfury had built onto the Stormspire specifically for her. Aela loved books, no matter what the subject; poetry, fact books, storybooks; anything that she could read, she did. Aela’s library was built as long and wide as two normal living rooms, making it the second-largest building in the Stormspire, rivaled only by the Grand Hall. However, the library was far more impressive. From top to bottom, wooden shelves lined the walls everywhere but the windows, each filled with books. Kain had spent the first decade that he was married taking every book he could, carefully making sure there were no copies at all within the room. Lysander still remembered how happy she had been when his father finally unveiled the room that had been hidden from everyone for the better part of two years. Lysander had been what, sixteen then? It seemed like a lifetime ago and a world away.

Yet even with all the books in this library, Queen Aela had a favorite. She had grown even more attached to it since Kain’s death. On the cover was a beautiful painting of the king and queen together, Kain holding Aela up to his chest; her resting her head and looking up at him. Lysander had read it once, following his father’s death. It was split into two parts: the first was a written record of the royal wedding by one of the many Arodellian scribes. The second half of the book - Lysander knew this would be the part she was reading now, without even looking - was a journal-like recount of the wedding in Kain’s own words. Lysander had struggled to finish that part. Yet even as Lysander had been unable, Aela seemed to require it just to hang on.

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She hardly looked up at first, and Lysander simply waited for her to finish. Nothing called for his attention at the moment, and he didn't mind just sitting there with his mother. She licked her thumb and turned the page before pulling the leather bookmark into place. She brushed a light blond bang out of her eyes and looked up. When she saw Lysander, she smiled. "Lysander, my dear! Why didn't you say it was you?"

Lysander smiled back. "I couldn't bring myself to interrupt."

The Queen stood up to hug him, slinging her slim arms over his shoulders. He nearly had to bend down to return the embrace. After a moment, they pulled away. Lysander flashed her a smile as she pushed a white bang from his face. "How went the war council?" his mother asked lightly.

"Well," Lysander replied. "Thankfully King Firebrand and Ranger-General Marlowe are better tacticians than I."

Aela laughed. Lysander had missed the sound. For months after Kain's death, she did not laugh. She could pretend to smile and be okay, but he never once heard her laugh, up until a few months ago. It had been Kaien that returned her laughter to her. Since then, the nine-year-old spent as much time with his grandmother as he could. Lysander was proud of him, and glad he had been blessed with a good son.

The two stood there for a moment before Lysander extended his arm. "The sun is beginning to set," he pointed out. "In two days I get to go prepare for war. How about we go eat?" Lysander generally made a habit of trying to keep things light.

"I would like that," Aela replied with a smile.

Together they left the Queen's Library and headed towards the descending staircase. "Would you prefer just us, or shall I grab Lillianne and Kaien?"

Aela immediately replied with, "A dinner with the entire family sounds like a grand idea."

When the two arrived at Lysander's family's chambers, the rooms were empty. Lysander called their names several times, giving up after the third or fourth attempt. He walked out, closing the door behind him, and said to Aela, "Kaien must have wanted to

train more.” Lysander shook his head. “The boy wants desperately to be a valorous warrior, especially since the wars for the Vigil have been escalating.”

“He takes after his father then,” Aela informed him. “I don’t know if you remember, but since the first time you were old enough to carry a weapon, you wanted your father to help you get better. Kerana’s thunder, some days it drove the man mad.” She laughed, and Lysander laughed with her. Lysander remembered that well enough.

Sure enough, the pair found Lilianne leaning against the castle wall, watching Kaien parry and return blades with Dante. Lysander couldn’t help but smile at the sight as he slipped his arm around Lilianne’s waist. “Hello, my lady,” he murmured with a grin. “Mother -”

Dante cut him off. “My prince!” he yelled mockingly. “Your son would like to challenge you for the rights to Arodell’s throne!”

“Oh does he?” Lysander called back. “And what makes you think you deserve that, at the age of nine - and with nearly no training?”

Kaien’s face flushed. “I have training! I’m close to calling lightning!”

That is impressive, Lysander thought to himself. He had been thirteen when he gained his first power, and that had been wind, the easiest to call. Still, he challenged, “You’ll have to prove that to me, boy.”

Dante laughed aloud and Lilianne smiled as Lysander grabbed a blunted sword from the training rack. He wondered idly if the Ranger-General had actually believed Kaien was close to lightning or if Kaien was trying to talk himself up. The young prince had his blade held ready, and Lysander had to admit he held its weight well for a nine year old. “Take my throne then, little prince,” Lysander smiled at him, and surely enough Kaien rushed forward.

The boy held his white-haired head too far forward as he charged. Lysander focused on wind and casually used the flat of his blade to hit Kaien in the chin. “You extend your head out when you charge. That is a sure way to lose it.”

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Kaien flushed, and visibly focused on holding his head back before he brandished his training blade again. The result was an amusing pose, his head tilted to far backwards with his hands extended out too far ahead. He swung wide and nearly lost his balance, while Lysander simply stepped to the side. “Balance your weight, or you’ll lose the blade.” He chose not to mention the position. Kaien would know what he was doing, he had spent much time learning the proper techniques of swordplay.

This time, Kaien charged him correctly and spun the blade. Its tip went from pointing towards the ground, to behind him, and then ultimately crashing down in an overhead arc. This one Lysander had to parry with his blade. *Did he just use wind?* Lysander thought incredulously. He was about to ask when Kaien cheered. “I made you block! I told you I’m good!”

Focusing on lightning, everything slowed down. Lysander moved behind his son and knelt down casually on the ground, pulling out a dagger and grabbing Kaien around the shoulders, pressing the dagger into him. He let go of lightning and he felt Kaien stiffen up. “You grew too arrogant,” Lysander breathed in his ear. “Arrogance gets men killed.”

“That...” Kaien, for a moment, looked as though he was about to cry. “That was so *fast!*” he exclaimed excitedly. “Was that lightning? Will I get to be fast too, daddy?”

Lysander smiled as he returned the knife to its sheath and picked the boy up, sitting Kaien on his shoulder. “Soon, little prince. Learn to use lightning and you’ll be the fastest out of all the boys.”

This gave Kaien a satisfied look. Lysander moved towards his wife and mother, who watched the display with smiles. From behind him, Dante called, “My prince, won’t you honor me with a duel? I so dutifully trained Kaien as I waited for you.”

“Soon, Dante. I promised my family a meal, but afterward I can probably come nearly kill you if you’d really like.”

Even without seeing his friend, he knew the scarlet-haired man smiled. “We’ll see about that, Stormfury.”

It didn't take very long for Kaien to start wolfing down his meal. According to him, he'd been training all day. Lilianne said it was more like two hours. Lysander laughed. Kaien blushed, but didn't bother replying anymore. He was too busy stuffing his face.

The food was incredible, though. Slabs of steak from a sabertooth - catlike creatures with two massive teeth on the top jaw, which made their homes in the plains far below Zephyras - had been boiled and smoked to perfection, along with onions and potatoes. Lysander was eating rather quickly, too; he didn't blame Kaien for focusing so hard on eating his. Lilianne and Aela picked casually at their smaller portions.

"So how is your training going, Kaien?" Aela asked, smiling.

Kaien got excited enough by the question to forget his meal. "It's going great! Did you see me make daddy block me earlier?"

Aela laughed, glancing at Lysander, who was smiling. Lilianne, too, wore a smile on her face. "I did!" Lysander's mother told Kaien. "It was pretty impressive."

The child beamed. "Thank you, Grandmother!"

"When you get the rest of your powers, you're going to give me quite the challenge, child." Lysander smiled at Kaien. "Then, you'll be able to take my place."

Kaien's face practically radiated with delight. Lilianne laughed and tousled his white hair - hair he kept in a style similar to Lysander's. It wasn't as long as Lysander's hair, but stylistically it was the same, with most of the hair combed back, the rest allowed to hang in front of the face. Lilianne had always found that adorable. And, to be fair, Lysander would be lying if he said it didn't make him proud. Lysander had always looked up to Kain. He wanted Kaien to look up to him in the same manner. He wanted to be a good father, like his father before him.

Lysander's thoughts drifted to his uncle, Kyura. He was Kain's younger brother by a year and a half. From what little Lysander had known him, it seemed Kyura was the only person in Arodel who hadn't loved the late king. Kyura was brooding, arrogant, and spiteful. Nothing like Kain at all. Yet even with a man like Kyura, Kain had tried his best to bring him back into the family. Kain had

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always thought that Kyura could get better. It made Lysander sad to think that his father had died without reconciling with his brother. Worse still, the conniving bastard had waited all of a week to come attempt to lay claim to the throne following Kain's death.

Lysander's thoughts were interrupted when Lilianne grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze. She smiled at him slightly. *Ah, she's right*, Lysander thought. *It won't do to have such thoughts. Today has been good. Tonight has been better. And soon we might be able to end the war.*

He smiled back at his beautiful wife. She didn't pull her hand away. Lysander leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. Then he turned to the others. "Well, it looks as though we're done eating." Lysander's deep blue eyes gleamed. "How about we go meet Dante for that sparring match."

Kaien cheered, then they all laughed. They headed back outside. Lysander kept his arm around Lilianne's shoulders. He lived for this.

As the sun was going down overhead, Dante watched Prince Lysander, Lady Lilianne, and their son Kaien walk back towards the training ground. He brushed a red bang from his eye and grinned. "Brought your entourage, I see? I'm shocked, I would have guessed you wanted to keep it a secret when I kicked your ass."

The gold sword was in Lysander's hands then, the one he had decided to name Kain's Fury. The late king had never named his blade, and Lysander had taken to using both the sword Kain's Fury and his spear, which he named Aela's Vengeance, simultaneously. The combo seemed a strange one, but Lysander used it effectively. Lysander summoning the sword alone was better than using both. Still, Dante mocked him. "Come, you fight me like a butcher. Just because I can heal doesn't mean you can shred me."

"Then don't let me shred you," Lysander said with a grin, a bow, and then he was gone.

Dante smiled and pulled both blades from his belt. His twins were both pure red, long with a blade only on one side, the tip

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curving slightly. Coreforged, of course, thus the red - made in the Coreforges of Ravensya, where all the best weapons were made, magically infused from the strange power of the Core. *Scimitars*, Dante had heard them called once. He didn't know if that was actually their name. Lysander's aura surged slightly from behind him, and Dante spun as quickly as possible. Fire flew from the one sword he managed to slash with, but Lysander was already gone. They had done this a lot; Dante was growing accustomed to fighting against the speed of the Arodellians. Kain's Fury connected to his shoulder on its broad side. *Not well enough*, he thought to himself, attempting to roll with the blow. As he stood up, Lysander appeared, swinging downward in an overhead arc with both hands. Dante barely managed to parry. Lysander leaned in and smiled. "I'll stop using lightning." Their blades clashed again, sparks flying as metal slammed into metal. The clashes continued far into the night, long after Lilianne and Kaien left the courtyard.

Chapter 3

Ravensi Legions Fifth, Seventh, and Eighth spread out in formation on the smoldering plane below a tall red wooden stand. Above the army, Grand Legate Saera looked down upon them all. These were her soldiers for the time being. Not that she minded, she was proud of all of the Ravensi legions. No plane had a finer army than Ravensya. Combined, their flame was worth something.

“Tonight we go to Arodell, to aid Prince Lysander’s defense while the Firestorm Alliance makes its move against Elstrad in two points. Arodellian Spymaster Axel has found out that the Elstradii plan to move on the Vigil tonight. Grand Legate Dante and Prince Stormfury himself will lead a host against the Elstradii in the Dark Vigil itself. Their Ranger-General would lead the Arodellian rangers directly into Elstrad itself, raiding their plane and putting an end to their insolence. Nightlord Sorin has remained in power far too long, and threatens to destroy everything the Firestorm has worked for. It is time he falls.”

As one, the soldiers raised their fists into the air, yelling the word “Firestorm.” It was an impressive sight to behold. *Let the bastards attack Arodell in retaliation. They will find themselves crushed beneath my heel.*

Saera giggled in anticipation.

The moon of the Dark Vigil rested directly above the massive tower, lending an eerie glow to the entire plane. Dante found himself staring up at it, uncomfortable. He and Lysander lay in the white sand, covered in it, waiting for the Elstradii army to arrive. They were just on the border of Elstrad’s section to the plane, within Lysander’s running distance to where one of the Arodellian ‘Shifters awaited the order to open a Shiftgate. Lysander had planned to come alone into the scouting point, but Dante wouldn’t hear it. Best friend or otherwise, Lysander was in all rights his

commanding officer, and it was Dante's duty to make sure nothing happened to him.

He looked to the prince, once more finding his visage impressive. He wore part of King Kain's armor: a dark blue armor with golden trim, made of some kind of metal from Arodell. Cloudsteel, if Dante remembered correctly. The metal covered his arms and legs. A small breastplate rested under his plated coat as well. It looked and reacted to hits as though it was plate armor, but it did not hinder movement or reaction whatsoever. The lightning spikes drove into the sand, making Lysander Stormfury's form look closer to a demon than a man. Matched with his speed and agility...

White sand blew all over as a Shiftgate opened in front of them, barely in view. *The Spymaster was right*, Dante thought. *Good. It's time the Elstradii were brought low.*

Lysander looked to him and nodded, then he was gone. That never failed to make Dante shiver. The speed was unnatural. Lysander had tried once to explain the feeling to him, telling him about how the entire world slowed down around him. How he could mix it with his power he called "thunder" and send an enemy flying away like a tossed doll, only to be where he landed before the flying body was even there. The Ravensi had their own set of powers - flame, smoke, ember - but none were quite so horrifying as the Arodellian lightning. Though maybe that was just his point of view as an outsider.

Just then Lysander returned to him, not bothering to try to conceal his presence. "Get up, legate," Lysander ordered formally. It annoyed Dante, sometimes, how Lysander took on the role of king in battle and cut everything else out, though he still understood. Dante obeyed. "The battle is begun."

The prince was gone once more. Judging by the Elstradii sentry exploding in blood as his torso split in two, Dante knew he was entering the battle. But then blood started flowing everywhere, and he knew the might of Arodell came down upon the Elstradii force like an executioner's axe. There was nearly no fighting to be seen.

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Dante's legion, Legion Third, waited behind him. He drew his twin swords, their red edges gleaming cruelly in the eerie moonlight. He was a good legate, he felt, though not nearly so good with words of inspiration like Lysander or even Saera. Dante was too gruff of a man, while not being as articulate with his words as most leaders or commanders. So he kept it simple. Turning to the third legion, he spoke loudly to them. "Let them feel enough fire they think the Vigil itself burns. Try to leave some for the Arodellians."

Cheering erupted then, and Dante knew that was enough.

The Ravensi joined in the bloodbath then, and all around Dante was the grotesque mixture of blood and fire. Every now and then, an unseen sword would strike down an enemy, though not as much as Ravensi fire or steel. The Arodellians weren't as strong when it came to magical abilities as the Ravensi; the Arodellian powers focused more on their physical capabilities while the Ravensi focused more on their elemental power.

Dante's red steel clashed against a plain steel greatsword. It took both blades to block against the force of the brutal blow. Dante focused on fire and let it expand from his body, the heat and fire sending the man stumbling backwards. That was all the opening that Dante needed to remove the head from the shoulders. He still channeled his fire, this time through a sword slash at another man, who seemed to charge him more out of fear than bravery. The simple chainmail he wore melted easily against the impossible heat of the fire and a scream escaped the man before the blade ate into his stomach hungrily. The fire was enough to sear the wound shut before blood even sprayed.

Somewhere off in the distance, the energy of both Lysander and Sorin clashed. The power was immense. *Sorin himself is here?* Dante thought, surprised. It didn't matter. Last time, Lysander had crushed him, by his account. Sorin never should have been allowed to escape.

Another Elstradii fighter launched himself at Dante, this one wielding a shortsword and a shield. The shield was poised to bash him, and Dante didn't bother moving. He focused on smoke and

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the shield passed through him harmlessly. Dante was careful not to allow his smoke to wear out while the man's arm was passing through him; to do so would mean instant death. Holding the smoke with an iron grasp, Dante spun a single blade and removed the man's arm at the elbow. Blood passed through him and the man stumbled backward, screaming. Years ago, before the deaths of his parents, Dante would have wanted to be sick. *But I'm growing used to it*, he thought sadly as he drove a sword through the man's heart, granting him a merciful death.

Among the Ravensi, quick and brave deaths were the most honorable way to go. Torture was something looked down upon, and the Ravensi treated it as a crime, even among the royal houses or Legion legati. On the battlefield, they did all they could to grant clean deaths. They believed in justice and honor above all.

A war cry sounded from behind him, and Dante focused on his smoke as he turned around to face his attacker. The sword passed through him and he plunged a sword into the man's eye. The limp body slid from his sword easily, landing on the ground with a *thump*. Dante kept moving, cutting down the enemies who dared strike at him. The Elstradii had been too unprepared. It was a bloodbath.

Surprisingly, part of Dante felt oddly...guilty. He pondered that for a moment, looking over the battlefield.

Axel was wrong, Dante thought. *This was not a battle. This was an unprepared, peaceful scouting party.*

And we just massacred them.

How had Lysander not realized that? Or, worse, did he even really care? Dante shuddered, loathing his best friend's desire for vengeance for the first time.

Ranger-General Christopher Marlowe held his arm. The charm, usually wrapped around his wrist, fell free, dangling in the purple-lit air. Marlowe focused his power on it, and his bow, made from pure sapphire lightning, leapt into existence. It was a gift his father had granted him, as his father's father had done before him. The Marlowe family was essentially a noble family, though their

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position was that of Ranger-General, not Prince of Arodell, nor of lords in the common sense. He drew back the string and an arrow formed in it, also made purely from dark blue lightning. The amulet took the power from his aura and supplied its own arrows. It was an amazing ability. "Hold," he commanded his rangers, from where they waited at the top of the strange purple mountain that overlooked the Elstradii capital, Darkstar. His rangers obeyed him almost mechanically, as they always did. They were the best of the best. "Fire," he ordered evenly, and arrow after arrow flew down upon the city.

Some of the archers had burning arrows. Where their arrows struck, as well as his own lightning arrow struck, the surrounding area burst into flame. That had been all he hoped for. "Tark!" he called to his lieutenant, who was by his side immediately. Tark was the best sword fighter that Christopher had under his command. On top of that, his brothers loved him, and he was a good commander. There was no better man to lead a charge into a city.

"Yes, Ranger-General?" he said, all business. Christopher liked that in a ranger.

"I need you leading the first attack into Darkstar. Take five hundred rangers and pave a way. As you clear the path, I'll have the archers take the rooftops. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Tark moved towards his battalion and barked an order. They all saluted and as one, they called lightning and disappeared.

"Archers!" Marlowe called out. They turned their attention towards him. "We storm Darkstar. I want Nightlord Sorin's head by dawn. We will bring it back to Prince Lysander to show that we have won the war, or we will not return at all. A portion of their army has gone into the Dark Vigil to die. Some will likely counterattack Arodell or Ravensya. Sorin will either be in his palace or commanding the army we face. Do not hesitate. Whichever of you puts the final arrow into him will get a promotion and a night of fun. Are we ready?"

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They all responded with a simultaneous “Yes, sir!” and at Marlowe’s motion, they used lightning to move to Darkstar’s gates, just behind Tark’s battalion.

His bow screamed as he drew back, lightning covering his black-gloved hand. He let loose and the arrow tore through a soldier running towards one of the rangers in the front. Smoke rose from the hole in his body even before the assailant’s corpse realized it was dead. Relentlessly Christopher drew back another arrow and let it fly, taking an archer on top of a tower through the throat. The body flew backwards and tumbled off the tower. As Tark led his men into the city proper, passing the gate, the gate crashed down to lock them in. Guards and soldiers alike poured from the barracks that must have been connected to the tower. As Marlowe drew back a new arrow, he called casually, “Archers!” and shot. Behind his crackling blue arrow, hundreds of other arrows followed. The guards and soldiers were cut down mercilessly, becoming mere pincushions to the Arodellian army. The archers never once stopped moving forward. Only a few of the guards survived, but some of that number were stupid enough to try to renew their attack. Or maybe that was smart, even honorable, Marlowe supposed. They likely knew death was upon them no matter what they did. Marlowe’s bow disappeared for a moment and a longsword appeared in his hand as it flashed upwards, causing a soldier’s torso to open up in a red gash as he fell. The man behind him attempted to run, but then Marlowe’s bow was in his hand once more; the sword gone away. It didn’t matter. Another ranger took the man in the back.

The gate wasn’t problematic, either; merely a setback by a few seconds. Marlowe channeled as much energy as he could control into a single arrow, and blew apart the top of the ramparts. The gate crashed inward with nothing more holding it up, and the archers resumed their assault. Tark’s men had made it a good way down the road, and Marlowe ordered his archers to take the ramparts and rooftops. He himself called wind and lightning at once to propel himself up towards the nearest rooftop, controlling the wind enough to land lightly upon it. Up ahead, he could see a soldier

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about to run towards one of the many barracks that Darkstar had littered throughout its streets. A quick, narrow lightning arrow put an end to that quickly enough.

Darkstar had been unprepared. Marlowe didn't plan on letting them prepare until the Arodellians were already long gone.

Continuing with the bloodbath, the Arodellian rangers cut through what enemies they had easily. The element of surprise had given them the powerful edge they needed. Men ran towards them or away from them, and either path ended in their demise. Even if they failed to kill Sorin, the Elstradii would be crippled, possibly beyond repair. After tonight, they would be a threat no more. Marlowe thought about this pridefully, even as he stepped through the bloody mess, through Tark's men, past Tark himself, and up to the gate of the Nightlord's palace. "Nightlord Sorin!" Ranger-General Christopher Marlowe called, amplifying his voice with thunder - a useful trick he had figured out a few years back. "Darkstar is lost. We are here only for you. Surrender yourself, and the people inside may live. Make us invade by force, and we will kill you all."

The door to the palace groaned as it opened.

Dante hissed in pain as a spear cut into his shoulder. He had not seen it coming. He cursed himself for that, even as he focused on ember, stabbing a sword into the ground. In his open hand appeared a glowing red orb, which he pressed to his shoulder. The injury was right on the shoulder blade, and would render the arm nearly useless. Ravensi had quick healing, but ember could make it even more rapid at the small cost of a bit of energy. The skin around the wound sizzled as the fire burned it, and the ember was hot enough to send pain even through a Ravensi. Dante shuddered, but it was worth it. The splitting pain was worth taking so he wasn't fighting without his full strength. That got men killed. Dante had no plans to die today.

All throughout the battle, he felt the energies of Lysander and Sorin clash repeatedly. They were fighting with everything they had, and that was unsettling. The two were two of the strongest

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fighters that Dante had ever seen. They were perhaps even more powerful than Saera, judging by the mercilessly clashing auras.

An arrow flew at him, and Dante focused on smoke to let it go through him. He looked around for the shooter, though it appeared it had simply been a stray arrow. As he looked around, he noticed that most of the fighting seemed to have stopped. It was over. He smiled, returning his swords to their sheaths. “Ravensi! Arodellians!” he shouted. “We’ve won.”

Yet, with his realization, that sounded hollow.

A grin exploded on Saera’s face at the same time the fire blasted outward from her longsword. The Elstradii soldier who had the audacity to strike at her erupted into flames, screaming. Saera’s grin remained. *They came, thank the flame. Now I get to incinerate these curs.*

She could practically burst out giggling with excitement.

As the next blade swung at her, she nearly did laugh, summoning fire in her free left hand, blasting the sword away and running her sword through the man’s heart. Saera couldn’t believe they had been so stupidly arrogant, to attack Arodell while they were under siege. Axel had thought they would. Yet how could one army split three ways, unsuspecting, ever hope to face the planned and combined might of Ravensya and Arodell? Her heart fluttered in her chest as she spun around gracefully, flames trailing behind her left hand, swinging her blade as though she was simply dancing. Blood sprayed from the open throat of a Elstradii, whose corpse she casually stepped over as she continued. Her mood was wonderful. If only Dante was here to see this. But no, he was fighting in the Vigil.

Not that it mattered, she supposed. Dante was afraid of her. He wasn’t relevant. Not right now, when she was so high from the smell of blood and flame.

She let an Elstradii stab her, just to call smoke. She felt the power surge through her, and laughed out loud at the look on her poor attacker’s face. She swung her longsword and cut open his throat, spinning around again to drive the blade deep into his heart.

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She spun around again, giggling madly, spraying fire from her left hand. Screams sounded all around her. The defending legions were fighting the Elstradii around her somewhere, but they were irrelevant, too. The soldiers knew not to cross her path when she was this far gone; they'd be as likely to die as the enemy. Not that she *meant* to kill them... she simply got lost in the fun.

She generally managed not to do that, though.

A blade swung at her face. She blew it back with her fire hand and cut open the man's belly, spilling its contents onto the ground. It almost seemed like the soldier looked down at his insides before he realized he was dead. Maybe he had, who knows? Death was a strange, beautiful thing. Moving forward again, she left her legion behind her, fighting the vanguard of the Elstradii attack force. Still more of them waited in the back like vultures. *How dishonorable*, she thought with contempt. With a new resolve, she headed for these men, who dared try to hide away. These were the cowards who wouldn't join the battle until the Legion's numbers had been milled down. They would be nothing for Saera, the Burning Grasp. In fact, she would kill them all simultaneously. She knew she could, though she'd never done it before. She focused very hard on her fire.

She moved toward one man in the middle of the sea of black. He held his sword ready but Saera allowed herself to stumble forward. Surprised, the man caught her, though he still pressed something sharp against her side. Before he could drive it home, she looked in his eyes. It was a shame purple eyes so beautiful as his wouldn't survive. They deserved a better fate than trash like this man. She knew what he was thinking, by the way his starry eyes danced in his eye sockets. He looked into her fire-red eyes and saw what most cowards claimed to see in her: insanity. He recoiled back, but it was too late. "Burn," she whispered, so close she was nearly in his ear.

And they all did.

Chapter 4

Sparks flew as Lysander parried a brutal blow from Nightlord Sorin. For a moment, he thought about how nice it would be if thunder worked in any way besides attacks, but then Sorin was striking again. Lysander didn't bother calling lightning; he was capable of defending himself against Sorin even without it, and conserving his energy while he could was a better idea. After last year, he had learned this; he had figured out a way to use his powers in strong, quick bursts as well. The second blow came in the form of a stab, the black longsword Sorin favored currently gleaming in the strange moonlight of the Vigil. Lysander pushed the blade away with his palm, using the smallest amount of wind he could call to prevent himself from injuring himself. He could have laughed. Was Sorin even trying? It sure didn't feel like it. This was nothing like the night they had fought a year ago. Lysander had actually been impressed by Sorin then.

Then it was his turn.

With only his right hand, Lysander spun Kain's Fury to the side and whipped it back, slashing at Sorin's exposed side. Sorin desperately jumped backward to avoid the blow. Still the blade found its mark and tore the shirt the Nightlord wore. Bits and pieces of purple and black fabric flitted to the ground. Lysander kept the momentum of his swing, letting go of the golden sword and letting it fly into his left hand. His fingers closed around the hilt as he dashed forward quickly with a small burst of lightning, stabbing forward at Sorin's chest. This time, Sorin had to teleport backwards to avoid the attack, though he didn't move very far away. Lysander pushed forward with his empty right hand and summoned his spear in one motion, letting Aela's Vengeance fly forward. It was a cheap trick he had figured out in one of his fights against Dante. The force of the spear shot forward before Lysander grabbed the end of its shaft, calling wind to make sure he didn't drop the weapon and expose himself. As he grabbed it, he spun

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around in a wide arc with Vengeance extended as far as he could. The shaft connected with Sorin's rib cage, and he grunted as he stumbled to the side.

Sorin lost his balance.

It was just the opening that Lysander needed.

Lightning filled him as the world slowed to a near stop. He moved toward Sorin as he fell, slashing downward with his blade to remove the Nightlord's head. Lysander did not let go of the lightning; on the contrary, he held on to so much that electrical energy was dancing down Fury's blade. Today was the day that the Nightlord fell.

Without any sort of warning, so much power radiated from Sorin that Lysander was driven to his knees, the lightning blasted out of him. Panic flooded over him. This was wrong. What was happening?

Sorin stood up then, black shadow energy flying from his face in waves. Through the void-like darkness, Lysander could see a silver mask that danced with energy. It had a black line going from the eye hole on the right, to where the left eye should have been, then down to the chin. It was solid, with the exception of the right eye slot that let Sorin see. It was the same one he had worn a year ago. Why did he gain so much power from it this time? Even his eye was different... What should have been white, with a purple iris and a black pupil was now reversed. The iris itself was black and everything else was amethyst purple. It was one of the most horrifying things that Lysander had ever seen. Sorin was truly a monster.

Lysander's surprise was just the opening that Nightlord Sorin needed.

He flew - *flew!* - at Lysander with impossible speed. Calling wind and lightning was the only thing that saved Lysander's life. He barely managed to bring Kain's Fury up to defend against the blow in time. How was it even possible, that Sorin should be fast enough to contend with Lysander's lightning? Lysander, who was considered one of the fastest Arodellians alive. The prince tried to push back the fear, focusing on maintaining his defense. The power

behind Sorin's strike was enough to drive Lysander backwards, causing such a blow to his sword that the vibrations almost made him drop it. Pain shot up his arm and into his shoulder. What *was* this?

There was no chance to wonder as Sorin was on him again. This time it was a stab at Lysander's heart. No amount of wind would allow Lysander to parry this blow as efficiently as the first time, and the prince knew it. Without any other ideas, he threw himself backwards, using all three Arodellian powers at once to launch himself backwards with such a blast that he slammed into the wall of the Vigil. Sand flew up everywhere in his wake. The pain of connecting to the wall made him cry out before he fell to the ground, his entire back seizing up in pain. His weapons fell uselessly at his sides. Even hitting the sand below as he fell was enough to make him want to scream. Still, it was better than death. Sorin could not kill him. Lysander would not allow it.

The entire world went dark as a massive blast of shadow energy shot out from somewhere in the distance, black tendrils dancing around furiously. Lightning wasn't even enough to save him, he realized, as the power of his lightning filled his veins.

Everything around him changed suddenly as he Planeshifted. The strange dark and light duality that Sorin's blast created faded away as trees seemed to sprout all around him. All sorts of the strange animals of Ulduun seemed to erupt in a cacophony of noise. *I blasted myself all the way to the Ulduuni territory...?* Lysander hadn't thought the fight had taken him that far into the Vigil.

Then Lysander realized something strange: after Sorin had put on his strange void mask, he made no noise. Not even the swords hitting each other had emitted sound.

There was no time to consider it. Before Lysander could stand, black void surrounded him once more, and something grabbed him by the back of his plated coat. Sorin lifted him easily into the air, as though he was a rag doll, as though he wasn't armored, and just as easily slammed him back into the ground. Lysander screamed as he felt a rib break from the ferocity of the blow. Blood dripped from his nose and probably his mouth, he realized, as Sorin lifted him

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back into the air. *He's using only a single hand*, Lysander thought weakly, unsure as to why that even mattered. He was dead. With the Nightlord's sword hand, he flicked his wrist and a Shiftgate appeared, tearing through the humid Ulduuni air. Lysander felt his eyes widen in surprise just as Nightlord Sorin threw him through the 'Gate.

Cold engulfed Lysander as he flew through the snow. After a moment, he skidded to a stop. Shakily he stood up, and he saw part of his coat had been torn off from the sheer force of the throw. He summoned Kain's Fury and Aela's Vengeance to him again, trying to prepare himself to defend against his next assault.

It didn't matter. Sorin was flying through the 'Gate then, his horrible mask making his eye look like that of a demon, the eye brimming with a cold, collected fury. Both hands were on the hilt of his black longsword, held out to his side, and as he reached Lysander he swung the dark sword in a wide, sweeping arc. With the help of lightning and wind combined, Lysander was able to block the blow. Even with the power of wind behind the defense, Lysander was flung to the side uselessly. He didn't even have time to register his body hitting the ground - if it even did - before Sorin was above him, grabbing his collar, and throwing him high into the air. Cold wind tore at him as he flew upward. Somewhere below, his weapons lay on the ground, but he didn't even have the strength to summon them anymore. He didn't even have the strength to be surprised anymore when Sorin appeared above him and punched him back to the cold ground, far below.

He didn't even have the strength anymore to stay awake once he hit the ground. He didn't feel himself connect. He only felt the cold.

Fire blasted from Dante's right-hand sword as soon as he saw Lysander hit the ground, and knew he was safe away from Sorin. Fury boiled inside him. The Ravensi legate resolved to tear the mask off Sorin's face and kill him with it. Lysander Stormfury was his best friend, and Dante had arrived too late. The Prince of Arodell could be dead because Dante didn't get there in time. No

matter what the case, he would make Sorin pay the ultimate price for his actions.

Dante could feel his fury. He would make sure today was the day when he drove his blade through Sorin's worthless fucking throat.

Sorin was next to him then, moving as fast - or maybe even faster - than Lysander himself. His disgusting black sword cut forward at Dante's throat. Anger surged within Dante as he parried the blow with the sword in his left hand and stabbed with the one in his right. Fire manifested and blasted forward out of the sword's blade, going entirely through Nightlord Sorin's left side. Dante had managed to score a hit. Ravensi power was enhanced or lowered by emotions, to a much greater extent than those of the rest of the races. Pure fury could keep Dante fighting even a monster like Nightlord Sorin for hours.

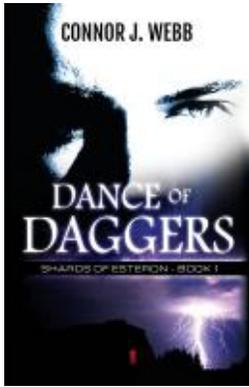
Dante cut upwards with the sword that was held towards the smoldering wound in Sorin's body, aiming to make a slash across the man's chest. Sorin simply disappeared and reappeared behind him. Flame erupted from Dante and pushed Sorin backwards. The Ravensi whirled on the Elstradii with both blades slashing furiously, red blades glinting in the Telysan sun. One cut into Sorin's chest. The Nightlord didn't even make a move to block it. That was when Dante noticed that there was no blood on Sorin. His wound, where Dante's fire had pierced through him, was already healed. Even now, the slash across his chest was healing. *No! That's a Ravensi power! What is this mask? Arodellian speed, Ravensi healing...*

His surprise was enough for Sorin. Pain shot through Dante's body and he looked down to see Sorin's dagger, a weapon that Dante hadn't even registered Sorin summoning, impaled in his chest. Dante looked up, trying to heal, and found he couldn't. Ember wouldn't come to him. His vision was glazing over slowly and he began to panic. Is this what death was like, then? Then Sorin brought his black longsword down on Dante's left shoulder and cut so far in that it nearly came out at his left hip. The last thing

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he saw was Nightlord Sorin moving his hand over his face, and his mask suddenly burst into pieces before disappearing.

Had Dante Garad not been bleeding out in the snow, he might have been angry at the sad look in Sorin's eyes.



As a threat against his nation emerges, Prince Lysander Stormfury of Arodell moves to stop it. His patriotism is short-lived when his father and mentor are taken from him. Now king, Lysander wages a war against the man who changed his life. But is everything really so simple? The Planes clash, views and relationships change, and a horrible power awakens. Is Lysander strong enough to stop his world from falling apart?

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