

Once you got past the foreboding outer perimeter wall that had long since fallen into decay, Sareth seemed like a modest coastal town at a distance. Hardly idyllic, barely distinct. But once you passed the iron gate of the inner wall, its true nature became depressingly clear. Ramshackle houses of clay and straw were crowded stiflingly close together, barely leaving any room for the mud roads. The townsfolk milled aimlessly about in their disheveled shawls and patchworks robes, making way for the slaves hauling in dragsilwood trees from the neighboring forest. The blood-red smokestacks of Domor Fai pawed at the heavens, sputtering black clouds into an orange evening sky, drifting seaward.

Well, this is cheery. Siris shrugged his cloak around his wide shoulders and kept his head low. He held the hem of his enormous sleeve to his mouth and made a strangled noise with his throat, trying to copy the unfortunates who

shuffled past him. The woman walking alongside him shrouded in an equally filthy robe gave him a quizzical look. “What?” he asked.

“That’s your cough?” she said, arching an eyebrow at him in disbelief. A tendril of red hair poked out from within the hood, the barest hint of her braid. “You sound like a cat being strangled.”

“Should I be concerned that you know what that sounds like?” he replied.

Isa smiled. “Not unless you have a fondness for tigers you haven’t told me about yet.”

It was hard not to smile back. Years now, he’d lived as a Deathless, unable to die...well, he *could* die. It was *staying* dead that he had trouble with. For a while, the idea of spending eternity alone had terrified him—he’d quashed the thought by focusing on his quest to save the Worker of Secrets from the Vault of Tears.

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But the Worker had betrayed him, escaping to conquer the world once more. The rebellion had tried to stop him. It failed. And Isa died.

Now she was like him, and there was no one else he would rather have by his side. She'd saved him thrice over—once from a fate worse than death. She was beautiful, occasionally adorable, and could slice him into ribbons if he called her either one of those things to her face.

Today though, she was his model for appearing frail and sick. He had been Deathless for...he wasn't even sure how long anymore. It was as if once he'd realized he was and always had been Deathless, a switch had been flipped in his body. The concept of ill just seemed to evaporate—like his body had summarily decided to stop getting sick.

Isa, however, had spent most of her life human. Feigning physical weakness still came relatively easy to her. He emulated her posture—hunched, shuffling. Like the

slaves who walked around as if they were about to snap in half—likely as a result from porting in all these dragsilwood trunks. “You think they’re buying it?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Isa said without looking back at him.

“Maybe we should ask?”

“Ha ha.” He doubted anyone would talk to the pair of them anyways. He’d hardly seen such a miserable group of people, especially so many in one place. Judging from the grime smeared on their faces, their gnarled hands and the fraying fabrics they wore, the entire town was collectively being forced to slave away in the forges of Domor Fai. Helping to create the very reason they had come.

The Infinity Hammer. Siris had hardly believed it when he’d heard it. He’d been to the vault in the Seccian Desert, brought all the keys to claims its ultimate prize: the original Infinity Blade, Raidriar’s blood crusted along its spine. It

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had taken the rest of the Infinity Weapons to claim the legendary sword, and none of them had included a hammer.

But then only last week, word had reached him from a certain trader that a Deathless had managed to rescue the Worker's blueprints from his fortress before its destruction: Karanoth the Sly, now Lord Master of Domor Fai. If it was true that there was a new Infinity Weapon being forged in the depths of the fortress, then he and Isa had to retrieve it before Karanoth could use it to subjugate other Deathless to his will. Or worse, start an all-out war amongst them, just as the Worker had intended.

That being said, sneaking around wasn't the way Siris would have chosen to go about their mission. It wasn't like he was impatient—conquering the Vault of Tears had taken years, after all. Releasing the seals, dying, then

making the perilous journey all the way back across the sea to Saranthia from his regeneration chamber, time and time again. No, what was bothering him was that what they were doing now seemed so...underhanded. "You know, this would go a lot faster if we just storm the place," he tried. "I mean, we've killed gods. I haven't seen a single Titan or Deathless since we arrived. Be a breeze."

"Keep your voice down," Isa warned him.

"Sorry," he whispered.

She sighed. "Not that low," she said in a tone halfway between a grumble and something like a sarcastic aside. "Like this. You don't want them to hear us, but you don't want to look like you're conspiring to stir trouble."

"I've never needed to conspire for that. Trouble always runs into me. Or steps on me. And eat me, every so often."

"Ah, fighting dragons," Isa said wistfully. "Fun times."

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“For you maybe, miss acrobat,” Siris said. He made a show of rubbing his back. “I’m starting to cramp.”

“You liar,” Isa snickered. “C’mon. Enjoy it. We’re conducting espionage. The highest of all the sneaking arts.”

“Espionage is...kinda boring,” Siris said.

Isa sighed. “You’re no fun at all.”

They arrived at their first waypoint towards completing their objective: the town square, where a massive iron statue of Raidriar stood atop what must have once been a resplendent fountain. It was bone-dry and covered with lichen, its marble surfaces cracked, majestic copper trenchwhales raising the God-King aloft by their tusks broken open, revealing their rebar innards.

Isa snorted at the sight. “Cute. Now all he needs is a rainbow.”

Siris stared up at depiction of his former foe. Raidriar

had been the cause of so much suffering in his life, killing him time and time again at Lantimor, then upping the brutality when they became trapped together in the depths of the Vault. Yet, in a way, Raidriar had also saved him—were it not for his treachery at Korothe, the planet might still be under the onyx thumb of Ausar the Vile, and Siris would still be a murderous tyrant, corrupted by hatred and an insatiable lust for power. It was ironic—he owed so very much to the man who’d spent decades killing him as, of all things, a hobby.

He tore his eyes away from the rusting God-King and nodded to across the way, where a shop had been erected. A boy sat forlornly out front beneath in an awning, weaving straw baskets that he unsuccessfully tried to peddle off to passerby. Above his head swayed a wooden sign that read *Cerin’s Gems* in crudely scrawled Lantimorian characters. “There it is,” he said.

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Isa nodded. “I shouldn’t be long. Let’s meet back here in twenty. And Siris?”

“Mm?”

“Be careful.” It wasn’t a plea—more like a parent’s warning to their child.

“*You* be careful,” he retorted.

She smiled knowingly at him. “No promises.” A quizzical look suddenly passed over her face. “Say, what’s that over there?” she asked, pointing over his shoulder.

“Where?” Siris asked, following the line of her finger. He didn’t see anything out of the ordinary. When he turned back, she was gone. Flushing hard as he realized he’d just fallen for the oldest trick in the book, he bowed his head and stalked towards *Cerin’s Gems*, muttering under his breath.

He stopped when the boy silently offered him a basket. The distant, hungry look in his dark brown eyes

brought Siris out of his irritation, and he searched his pockets for a bag of gold. Out from the back of his trousers, he pulled a small pouch that fit perfectly in the boy's cupped palm. As the child's eyes grew two entire sizes, Siris realized that this looked somewhat conspicuous, so he held a finger to his lips and shushed after taking a cursory glance around to make sure nobody was watching. After getting over his shock, the boy shushed him back. Smiling slightly, Siris pushed aside the cloth draped in the doorway and headed inside.

It was remarkably dark within, despite the table-sized open skylight in the center of the roof. Multicolored rocks were arrayed in wooden bins stretched across long tables, exorbitant prices marked on their containers in white paint. Siris picked one up and examined it. You didn't need to be an expert to tell that Cerin had taken a rock and painted it a bright red color—the fact that none of his

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wares shone in the light of the sun confirmed his suspicions. None of these pebbles had so much as a drop of magic in them.

“It’s a living.” An old man strode out from a backroom, wiping what looked an awful lot like blue paint from his hands onto his black apron. Like the other townsfolk, his skin was stained an unhealthy charcoal color from the fires of Karanoth’s seaside fortress, and his shirts and pants were in filthy tatters. “Can see you judging me in your face, outsider. Real gems are mortally difficult to come by nowadays, ‘sidering that anyone who has one is either immortal or dead. Now, you going to buy one or am I gonna have to give you the boot?”

Siris put the rock back. “I’m here about what’s being forged in Domor Fai.”

Cerin’s eyes widened. “My God-King,” he said. “It’s you? You’re Siris?”

“Last I checked.”

Cerin looked about wildly, then he ran over to the north-most wall, where an enormous oak board a head taller than him stood. He took it and effortlessly carried it all the way around the interior of his shop until he was in front of his door, where he slammed it in place to block off the doorway. “In here,” he ordered, ushering Siris into his backroom, a cramped workroom that reeked of the buckets of paint sitting under a table where over a dozen pebbles sat, half-painted. Like in his main showroom, a skylight provided them with light.

He pulled up a stool and offered it to Siris, who sat. Cerin settled into his own chair and spoke with a low, slow drawl. “You got here just in time. Karanoth’s been having us work nearly day in and day out to make the weapon. He’s a madman—flogs anyone who so much as breathes the wrong way inside the forge. You have to—”

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“So it does exist,” Siris breathed. “How’d he make it? I didn’t think it was possible.”

“That’s the thing,” Cerin said. “Wouldn’t be otherwise, but Karanoth found something that made it possible. It’s the whole reason he moved house to come here—he only got here a few months ago.”

“What is?” Siris asked.

“The Eye of Galath,” Cerin breathed.

Siris frowned. “The Eye of Galath?”

“Aye,” Cerin said, beaming with anticipation. “You know it?”

“Never heard of it.”

Cerin hadn’t expected that answer. “Ah,” he muttered. He rubbed his stubble-spotted chin sheepishly. “Well, er, truth be told I’m not sure what it is either m’self. I just know this: the power to put the Deathless down for good? Y’know, the Infinity Blade? Came from the Eye. Hidden

before, found now.”

Siris absorbed this information, digging through his memory...no, *Ausar's* memory, for anything that could possibly corroborate this man's claims. He preferred to keep everything about his former self under lock and key, for fear of that darkness resurfacing once more. Scratching the surface did him no good, so he went back further, clawing his way through the snaking black thorns that protected the secrets of the Vile one. The effort made Siris's heart sprint in his chest and his breath thin. It was like his heart was being strangled in nettles.

After a few horrible moments, he climbed his way back out, wiped his brow and took a breath. A faint voice whispered in the back of his mind.

“You wa'right there, boy?” Cerin asked.

“Fine,” Siris lied. *Damn. Nothing.* He didn't remember anything about the Blade's forging—Galath had not been

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keen to share his secrets with Ausar. Smart of him. “Have you seen the weapon?” he tried, writhing uncomfortably atop the stool.

Cerin shook his head. “All I do is help keep the furnaces going.”

“But you had to have seen the metals he’s been melting, then.”

“No. ‘Fraid not.”

“What about smiths? Has he hired any?”

“If he has, haven’t heard. Apologies.”

“Have you seen anything for the Hammer? A cast? Maybe even a finished component, like a handle?”

“My sincerest apologies, Lord Siris—”

“Stop apologizing,” Siris ordered him. “Why does Karanoth need dragsilwood, of all things?” The bark of those trees was legendarily difficult to saw through.

“No clue.”

For the love of... Siris was starting to lose his patience.

“Then what *do* you know, old man? Give me something to work with here. What about this Eye? Surely you’ve heard at least *something* about it? Other than how mysterious it is?”

Cerin took an agonizingly long time to pore through his own memory, humming and hurming all the while as he stroked the coarse white stubble on his pointed chin. “Well...nobody’s seen it, but I don’t think it’s an *actual* eye,” Cerin finally said. “He may be the only one who’s seen it—you may have figured, but he’s keen on keeping things from us. But word’s been going ‘round that without it, Karanoth can’t finish the Hammer.”

Siris started. “Wait. It’s not done yet?”

“Don’t think so. Will be soon, though.”

He felt a stab of triumph. *Yes! We’re not too late then.*

Siris leaned forward, anticipation welling. “What about a

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way into the forge? And what's security like? Karanoth has to have 'Titans guarding the entrances.'

"Aye. Big ones. But they shouldn't be a problem for the likes of the two of you, eh?"

"No, we can..." He paused. *The two of us? I never sent word that Isa was coming with me...*

With a start, he realized that everything had suddenly grown eerily quiet. The hustle and bustle of the outside that had been murmuring in the background of their conversation had gone stone-cold silent. His heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. *Something's wrong.* "No, probably not," Siris said, his mouth gone dry. *I need to find her.* Forcing a smile onto his face, trying not to let his anxiety show, Siris picked a square orange ruby out of his pocket and handed it to Cerin, who took it with a cautious hand. "The fire gem, like I said."

"Ah, well, thank you," Cerin said, looking confused. "I

mean, I didn't get to telling much about the way you can get into the forge, but much obliged anyways, I guess," Cerin said. "Ah well. Fewer questions means I can just get back to painting faster." He clutched his wrist and sighed. "Ah, the old aches kicking in again. Say, son, would you mind staying a spell and giving me a hand? I don't often have—"

He was stalling. "I'm sorry," Siris said, shooting to his feet. "But I need to be going."

"Oh," Cerin said, disappointment...no, *anxiety* plain on his face. "Well, if you really need to leave..." He leaned past Siris and shouted angrily, "Tamiel, you rat! How'd you slip in here?"

Siris was about to turn when the memory of Isa's prank flashed in his mind. *Fool me once.*

Cerin's face fell when Siris failed to turn around. So the shopkeeper's snatched up one of the buckets of paint

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sitting under his table and made to bash it against Siri's head, only to receive a backhanded blow to the temple for his trouble. As the old man crumpled in a heap, Siris left him there and scurried towards the barricaded door in the showroom. Peeking out into the square outside, he saw dozens of Sarethians training bows on the shop's exit.

A trap. *Thought so.* Siris retreated from the door, trying to make as little noise as possible. Why were there were no Titans out there, though? Granted, there were none that he could see, but surely Karanoth knew at least one Titan large and powerful enough to crush this shop into powder. So where—

A shadow moved across the wall.

Siris had just enough time to whirl around and shield his face with his arm when an arrow lazily bounced off the metal gauntlet he wore, the vibration traveling along the length of his arm into his fingers. "He's got armor

on!” someone shouted above atop the rim of the skylight, a pair of legs standing in silhouette against the red sun. They leapt away, and the world turned quiet once more. Siris took advantage of the lull to draw the sword and shield he’d been keeping concealed under his cloak, tossing it aside.

“Come on out, Ausar!” a grizzled voice shouted from the outside. “Or we will kill this boy.”

Damn! Siris shuffled up the crack in the wooden panel blockading the doorway again and peeked outside. The sight was the same as before—humans, more now, with swords and knives drawn. Even if he did go out there to face them, he couldn’t kill humans. Never mind it being an unfair match, even assuming if they violated dueling etiquette and rushed him en masse, killing *people* was something he’d swore he’d never do. Only Deathless and Titans would meet his blade.

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Still, if a child was in trouble...

“What do you want with me?” Siris shouted.

“No questions!” the voice replied. A boy’s pained scream followed.

Siris grit his teeth. He uttered a foul curse under his breath at this man for hurting a child just to lure him out. *But he’s doing it because he knows he can’t threaten me otherwise.* After all, he was Deathless—at its worst, death was merely a painful inconvenience. By harming this boy, they were trying to appeal to his sense of humanity. Ironical, since they apparently knew of Ausar.

A thought occurred to him then. “You think a mere human boy’s life means anything to me?” he asked, lowering his voice an octave or so, drawing upon the memory of his encounter with his soulless counterpart. “To Ausar, the ancient and mighty god? Kill the whelp, for I do not care. He is beneath—“

The boy's screams became louder. Shriller.

"All right, all right! I'm coming out!" Siris shouted, his heart twisting in his chest. "Just let the boy go!"

A few agonizing moments of silence passed. "You come out *now*, and he goes free. No tricks."

"No tricks," Siris agreed. Standing to his feet, he effortlessly took the enormous oak board and tossed it aside, letting it crash into Cerin's counterfeit wares and spray splinters and pebbles all over the place. As he emerged into the open, Siris made a show of dropping his sword and shield to the ground. There had to be over a hundred people waiting for him, bows trained on his head. They were all the same sort of people he'd seen upon his arrival with Isa—ordinary citizens, dirty and underfed. As he scanned them all, he didn't see a child. *Damn.*

Wait. Isa. Where was she? *Hopefully*, he thought, *you're having a much better time of this than I am—*

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He was yanked out of his thoughts as he suddenly plummeted to the ground, his head colliding with the rough dirt. As the world shifted and blood dripped into his eye, Siris realized they'd thrown a weighted net over him. Despite his efforts to rise again, he was well and truly pinned.

“We have caught the Vile one!” a woman shouted.

Through his pain, Siris managed to pick up his head and watch as over a hundred soot-stained Sarethians prostrated towards the fountain in the middle of the square. “Praise be! We have served your wishes, master!”

“Hail his greatness, the God-King Raidriar!”

“Raidriar!” they cried, their voices growing more fervent with every hail. “Raidriar! Raidriar! Raidriar!”

Siris blinked. *You've got to be kidding me.*