

Interlude: Listen

The winds parted before Fynn as he raced ahead across an open field, splitting and rallying behind him as he pushed forward, step by step. Every leap flowed fluidly into the next, continuous now for several hours.

Fynn shifted his head to the side when something entered his senses and he stopped immediately, reigning in the trailing winds as they ruffled his hair and clothes.

He fought back the urge to keep going. To continue and be one with the gale. To heed the words of his ancestors, whispering to him from the ring on his right hand. Shaking his head violently, the impulse slowly faded.

The elders had always warned him not to fall to inexperience.

He peered into the forest that was to his left. There was a presence there. It felt exactly like what Miss Scarlett had described. Warm. Pungent. Sharp in his nose.

She seemed to know the strangest things.

He started moving again. Without relying on the winds this time. Soon he reached the forest, moving deeper amongst the trees. The smell grew stronger as the trees grew thicker, less of the sun's light reaching the forest floor here through the treetops. Although Fynn didn't mind the lack of light.

As the smell reached its height, the forest opened up into a clearing. Old stone buildings lay strewn about the area, having mostly been overtaken by nature. They reminded him of some of the structures he'd seen in Elystead.

Turning his head, he looked around. The wind carried traces of humans, but it wasn't from his immediate surroundings. Miss Scarlett had said the road wasn't far from here. He didn't like using it, though.

He started moving towards the center of the ruins, where there was a crumbling statue with only the lower half remaining. That's where the smell was at its strongest.

He didn't quite understand the reason behind this mission, but Miss Scarlett had explained that it was important. And that he was the only one that could do it. So he hadn't complained. She had given him the relic of his ancestors. Even though he still wasn't used to it, the ring had already shown him more than he could have imagined.

Miss Scarlett was also paying him. She had already given him 100 solars, which he had sent back to the others in Dimfrost as fast as he could. Then she had promised to pay him 300 more if he succeeded with this task, in addition to the 500 he would get monthly. With that, he wouldn't have to worry any longer.

To him, Miss Scarlett seemed like a trustworthy person. She was weird, though. He didn't understand all the things she knew, and while he didn't want to be rude, some of the things she

knew seemed almost impossible to have learned. There was also a hint of falseness in all her words. Sometimes more than others.

At first he had been suspicious because of this. He had only accepted her first offer because of the ring. And the money.

But after a while, he'd caught on that the falseness wasn't just lies. Instead, it was like Miss Scarlett was always pretending for some reason. The other weird woman was the same.

He didn't understand it.

As he neared the broken statue at the center of the ruins, Fynn scowled and scanned the area with his eyes. This close the smell was making it hard to get a good sense of things.

Stopping in front of the statue, he examined it closer. While the upper part was gone, the legs were covered by what was probably supposed to be a robe of some kind, and there were offerings on the ground in front of it, the kind humans around here set up for their sun god sometimes. It seemed this place wasn't completely abandoned.

Fynn reached to his shoulder to pull off the magical bag that Miss Scarlett had let him borrow. Glancing at the strange face on the bag's front for a second, he then opened the flap and pulled out an iron shovel. Walking up close to the statue, he pushed the offerings to the side with his foot. The grass here was fresh, despite things having been lying on top of it for a while. This was also where the smell was coming from.

He put the shovel to the ground and started digging. It took some time, but a heap of dirt steadily filled up next to him as the hole widened. Finally, a shiny object was exposed under all the dirt. Throwing the shovel aside to the ridge of the hole, he bent down on his knees and started digging out the dirt around the object with his hands. Soon, a gold chalice with bright red gems lining the rim was revealed.

He dug the rest of the chalice out as he picked it up, leaning it upside down and using his fingers to remove the remaining dirt that was stuck on the inside. Tilting his head to the side, he studied the object, brushing aside some of the dirt stuck to the rim as well.

What was this doing in a place like this? It looked expensive.

He knew most people in the empire loved shiny things, so if they had known it was here they would have already taken it. That's what Miss Scarlett was doing now, after all.

She had known about the mark of the gale too, and that was supposed to be a secret.

Fynn didn't know too much about the empire's nobles, but he felt that Miss Scarlett was probably special even among them.

He was curious about these things, but he didn't think it was likely that she would tell him much even if he asked.

He threw one last glance at the chalice before standing up and reaching for the magical bag again. Putting the chalice inside of it, he jumped out of the hole and dusted himself off.

He turned his head to take in his surroundings again. The smell was quickly starting to dissipate now, and with it, the odd presence that had been around this place. But Miss Scarlett warned him off this mission, so he shouldn't get too relaxed.

...But nothing was happening. Even after he had taken the chalice. Had Miss Scarlett been wrong?

The hairs on his neck rose and his eyes immediately pivoted to a spot in front of the statue. A new presence was forming there. Cold. Resentful. A swirling mass of grey smoke convalesced into the form of a large, floating person. Their body was covered in thick, translucent robes with complicated patterns on them. The figure's head was covered by a strange, square-looking mask similar to those he had seen some of the empire's priests wear.

But those priests never felt this angry.

The apparition let out a loud shriek, one that he felt all the way down to his bones. It raised an arm, and Fynn immediately leaped to the side as a bright beam of light burst out and slammed into the ground, sending dirt into the air on the spot where he'd been.

Baring his teeth, Fynn lowered his stance and dashed forward. Swiping his right hand at the figure, he was surprised to find that it just passed right through the apparition's body, leaving a tingling numb feeling in his fingers.

He jumped back just in time as another blast of light shot out towards him. The apparition raised both hands and he had to jump back even further to dodge two more attacks.

This was the first time he had fought something that he couldn't touch.

Miss Scarlett had told him that might be the case, though.

He glanced toward the magical bag as he dodged another bout of attacks.

She had even lent him one of the weapons they had found in the fairy forest, saying that it might help.

But he preferred his hands. They were more trustworthy.

His eyes widened as all of his senses suddenly screamed at him all at the same time. He hastily borrowed from the power of his ancestors to create a burst of wind to leap to the side, but it was a moment too late.

A burning sensation slammed into his side and he lost his footing as he tumbled to the ground. It didn't get through his defenses entirely, though. He rushed to stand as he readied for another attack, staring ahead.

Confusion filled him. The apparition had moved, yet it hadn't. There were a dozen of them now, surrounding him in a circle, all with their hands raised.

A blinding light spread across the ruins as they all fired at once.

It was impossible to dodge this time, but he felt just one burst of light strike his back. With a growl he spun around, trying to determine where the attack had come from.

He sniffed the air, violently shaking his head. It felt like they were *all* real. But Miss Scarlett had said it was a trick of the light. Illusions.

So why did they all have the same presence?

Another burst of attacks fired off. Once more he tried dodging, but he still felt pain strike his side. This time it had gone through his defense, singing his clothes.

Was his head affected? Was this dark magic? Dark magic along with light magic. He didn't know they could be mixed like this.

Another blinding set of attacks burst forth, and yet again he couldn't determine where the real attack was coming from as he was knocked to his knees. He grit his teeth and let out a roar as he pushed himself to his feet, running towards the closest of the figures. Its shape took on a hazy image of itself as his hand passed through it, but he immediately set off toward the next one, staggering through another bout of attacks. The next flickered like the previous one as he reached and slashed out at it.

He growled as his eyes moved to the other ones. They'd shifted so that they surrounded him again, and their numbers hadn't changed. As the apparitions prepared another set of attacks, he raised his right hand.

With a howl, he tapped deeper into the power of the ring on his finger and felt the instincts rush into him. The air around him swelled as blades of wind formed, gushing out from him in rough clusters.

When the blades struck the illusions they became hazy images like before, and Fynn's eyes instantly locked onto the only one that was different. Borrowing even more power, he shot out at the apparition and reached it in less than a breath. His first strike passed through it, but there was no haziness now, and the numbness was back.

The apparition fired another attack that hit the side of Fynn's face, singing his hair, but he ignored it and slashed out again. And again. And again.

His hands kept passing through it without any effect, but he continued, fighting through all its attacks. He felt how the winds surged up around them. How the whispers spoke to him.

And he listened. He listened and shaped power—*his* power—as the whispers said, enveloping it around his hands like claws that tore through the apparition's body. And where they did, the apparition *didn't immediately reform*.

It tried to launch another attack at him, but this time he slashed out towards its arm and sliced it off. The anger exuded from the apparition increased, but Fynn didn't care a bit about that as he tore into the being. Shreds of it disappeared with every blow, and within moments almost all traces of it were gone. He gathered even more power into his fist as he reached out for what remained of its lingering presence, claspng it tight and squeezing it into nothingness as a wailing scream echoed out across the ruins.

Then there was silence. Fynn stood there, completely motionless. Listening.

It was still early, the whispers told him. *Too early*, they said.

But soon, they muttered as he breathed out deeply, taking in his still surroundings.

Soon the gale would howl again