Prologue

James tightened the grip on his axe's handle and watched an orb of light bounce up and down above the head of the hooded figure in front of him. A sheer black expanse spread overhead; the empyrean was far from dawning.

Dirk walked at James's side, hand on his own sword. "You trust him?"

"No," James replied. Of all the people in the world, why did their contact have to be *him*? "But the king does."

A small cut on his thigh, though sealed, still ached. Their guide either hadn't been able to or hadn't wanted to heal it completely. Beyond that memory of the recent fight, James's body ached in exhaustion from days of travel by foot through the wilderness. His heart ached for friends he would never see again. All to reach this place. He shifted the weight of the heavy pack on his back.

"This is as far as I go with you," the hooded figure said. He pointed down a valley between two hills. "It's about another quarter mile to the rift. A cement slab marks it. Eight men guard the site; half will be asleep in a nearby town. One is highlander, the others wildians. They're not Terian's finest."

"He's sure casual in guarding the key to this whole war," Dirk said.

James removed a small golden corkscrew from the pocket inside his shirt. "He doesn't know that we have this."

The hooded figure stared at the object. “That…”

“The king himself made it,” James said, slipping it back into his shirt.

“His highness?” the hooded figure said. “Then, will it work?”

“It had better.”

“We could use your help,” Dirk said. “We’ll make sure no one escapes to tell.”

“I’ve risked enough to come this far with you,” the hooded man said.

“At the orders of his highness,” James said.

The figure stopped and gave a dark chuckle, barely audible. “Yes, of course. I live and die at his pleasure. But he has more use for me in my current position than as your nanny.”

He turned to walk away.

James called after him, though he tried to keep his voice low. “I’m sorry about my careless words. You’re a greater hero than all of us, though no one realizes it.” He paused. “But if this is a trap, may the Light forsake you.”

“It wouldn’t be alone in doing so,” the figure said. His little light orb followed him into the darkness.

“Careless words?” Dirk asked.

“We used to be friends, you know. Sons of senators. When he joined Terian, I turned his parents against him, and they disowned him. I had no idea of his true allegiance.”

“Well, the plan?” Dirk asked.

James looked up at one of the nearby hills and squinted. The pale light of some kind of lantern rested on top. The faint sound of laughter rolled down to him.

“Climb the back side of the hill, but stay hidden. Don’t activate your armor. I’ll distract them by opening the rift; hit them from behind once I do.”

Dirk shrugged. “See you in the Shadowlands?”

“And remember, I’m still hurt,” James said.

“You make it sound like I need your help.”

James walked with a soft step through the dry grass, crawling on his belly the last quarter mile. The pack dug terribly into his back. In the thick darkness, his only sense of direction came from the light of the enemy’s position on the hill.

I hope I don’t get any ticks, he thought. *I wonder if the Shadowlands have ticks.*

He finally felt the edge of the slab. Good, because there would be no other way to spot the rift in the darkness. In the daylight, they said it appeared as a slight distortion in the air, as though peering through warped glass.

Axe still in hand, James set down his pack and crawled onto the slab. To his right, on top of the hill, four men sat in chairs around a little lamp. A highlander’s skin glowed pale in the light. The three wildians with him were brown skinned and much shorter, with rough stubble on their faces. They surrounded a wooden keg and wore casual—sloppy—shirts and pants. A little lean-to covered their heads. James reached into his pocket and removed the small, golden corkscrew.

He took a deep breath then whispered the activation words. “A bottle for new friends.”

The corkscrew shook in his hand. He released it, and it floated up and fixed itself midair. It burst into a steady, golden glow and let out a low hum. James’s eyes burned with the sudden light.

Up on the hill, four silver lights ignited: the guards, activating their soul armors. They jumped up from their chairs, and a voice shouted, “What just happened?”

James set his axe down, stood up, and faced the hill with empty hands. “I’m here from Terian to perform a new test on the rift.”

A moment of silence. One of them replied, “James? Is that you?”

At the sound of that voice, he knew his ruse was useless. It had been a long shot anyway. “Jed?”

“I never thought I’d have the chance to kill you with my own hands.”

Jed. Here, of all places.

A fifth silver light rushed up behind them. And that would be Dirk.

James concentrated on the metal band around his arm, the fire of Diotein. With a jolt, burning energy flowed into his limbs. The earlier weariness vanished. He scooped his axe off the ground and swung toward the hill; a fireball launched from the blade. Jed stood his ground and knocked it off course with his sword. The fireball collided with a young oak tree, which burst into flames, crackling and popping.

James leaped toward the fight and felt the rush of air through his hair. Up top, Dirk drove straight into his enemies, keeping them off balance, keeping them from rushing him together. He held his own.

James landed hard halfway up the hill, and ran up the second half. The light of both the fire and the king’s spell reflected from his blade. He charged Jed.

“Your sister rang me up the other day,” Jed panted between blows.

James gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the talk. He aimed a few blows at Jed to keep him on the defensive while dodging spear thrusts from one of the wildians. The fatigue of the last few days weighed on him; even with the strength of his armor, he felt slow, weak.

“She said she missed my caresses. I replied that I didn’t miss her smell.”

Fury boiled in James's ears; he lunged for this scum but missed and found himself off balance. Jed's wildian ally speared a gash in his stomach. Agony, burning agony, followed the exit of the weapon.

Jed laughed. "Always the temper."

James leaped back. Down at the rift, an enormous corkscrew of golden light twisted in the air, its hum now louder. In that bright display, a huge distortion in the air—the rift itself—became visible. Atop the hills, the fire had spread from the oak to the dry, surrounding grass.

James kept a few paces between himself and his two opponents, swinging his axe to keep them away. Dirk impaled one of his wildian opponents through the chest. Before he could pull the sword out, his other assailant aimed a large mace at him. Dirk released his sword and dodged; the mace hit a small rock and burst it into a thousand pieces. Twisting around, Dirk slid his sword out of the first wildian's warm body.

Jed's eyes darted to his ally's defeat. Immediately, he spun around and took a huge leap for the base of the hill. "Hold them!" he shouted from midair.

"He's going for the other guards," James said.

"I know," Dirk replied. He parried a thrust aimed for his head.

The two last wildians fought hard, but they were young. They knew how to fight, but they didn't know how to fight with soul armors. Even with the agony in his stomach, James held off the one across from him. But he couldn't find an opening to chase Jed.

Dirk landed his blade in his opponent's skull. The one fighting James threw down his weapon. "I surrender."

Dirk raised his sword.

“Stop,” James said. “He’s just a wildian. Who knows his real reasons for joining the rebellion?”

The short man fell prostrate. “Please, I have a wife and six children.”

Dirk spat on the ground. “You’re barely twenty.”

“One child,” the man corrected.

James held his axe to the man’s throat. “Surrender your armor.”

“They’ll kill me.”

Dirk wiped his sword in the dead grass. “Them or us. We’ll at least make it quick.”

The glow around the man went dark. He unclasped a silver band from his upper arm and handed it to James. His body quaked; tears formed in his eyes.

James turned the metal over in his hand a few times. It felt lifeless, a dead hunk of metal. “You killed it,” James said.

The man nodded.

That made it useless. James tossed the band onto the ground.

Dirk leaned down to pick up the band. “Disenchanted or not, those materials are priceless.”

Friend against friend, families at war within… this war was so bitter. And these, the wildians, so many innocent but for Terian’s influence, suffered most. “Leave it,” James said.

Dirk stared at him for a moment, then stood and sheathed his sword. They walked down the hill. Behind them, the soldier whimpered.

“Why?” Dirk asked. “They’ll just reforge it into a new armor.”

"Maybe just to prove that we're better than Terian. That for all his rhetoric, he's not 'Defender of the Wildians.'" James faced the churning, gleaming light at the base of the hill. "Besides, it's meaningless on our mission."

"And the other weapons?"

"Disenchanted, by now. All that matters is reaching the Shadowlands."

James kept his hand on the cut. Dirk glanced at him but didn't speak. They didn't need words: James was injured but could still walk. As they reached the base of the hill, the golden light coalesced into a rough circle.

"Is that… did it work?" Dirk asked.

James peered into the circle; a tunnel stretched into nothingness, the top just a bit shorter than him. The walls were cut in a spiraling, corkscrew shape. It extended for maybe a hundred yards; a faint glow came through from the other end.

"It's open," James said.

"What now?"

"We go through and start our resistance."

"No. They'll follow us. I'll guard it from this side."

"That's insane! It's you against the five of them."

"Listen, all I have to do is delay them for a few minutes. It'll close, and you'll be safe."

"And you'll die."

"Says the one who injured himself. What makes you think I can't take them?"

"Overconfident as always," James said. "If you can, avenge my sister's chastity on Jed."

"Gladly. Enjoy the Shadowlands." Dirk's voice wavered. "For my sake."

James slung his pack over his shoulder and turned off his armor. The pack's weight tugged him down and the pain in his side roared, but he needed to conserve the time he could use his armor. He took a deep breath then walked forward.

Warmth radiated from the walls of the tunnel, and his footsteps echoed. About halfway through, he could make out a field on the other side. Tiny points of light hung like jewels in the night sky. The beauty shocked him.

A young woman's voice came through. "Someone's coming."

1. Thai Food

"A double date?"

That's what he'd been so excited to tell her about? Vero snapped the padlock shut on her locker and stomped toward the parking lot.

"It's for a friend of mine, maybe my best friend." Pieter walked backward in front of her, his green eyes locked on hers. Pieter happened to call a lot of people his best friend. "Neil. You remember Neil, right?"

Yes, she did. A plump Asian friend of Pieter's with round glasses and round cheeks. She'd met him just a couple times. The name brought a vague unease. That's right, video games. The guy couldn't talk about anything else.

"How could I forget him?"

A small group of guys walking by waved to Pieter. He nodded back. Vero, who came up about to Pieter's shoulders, curved an arm around his waist and tugged him along. They walked together out into the gentle fall sunlight.

"Come on, he's not that bad," Pieter said. "Look, it's just one night. The guy's never had a girlfriend. Barely a date, even. I wanted to, you know, help him out."

Twenty-eight days together. Her happiest month in a long time. It seemed a bit soon for this kind of thing. They passed under the old oak, a tree that outdated South Obispo High by a couple centuries. Yellow, grassy hills rolled in the distance, and the rocky crag of Bishop's Peak towered just a couple miles away.

"We can hang out after, if it's a train wreck," Pieter said. "The worst dates always make the best stories anyways."

She laughed. "Yeah, sorry. Been a long week. Did you know Kristin broke up, again?"

Pieter sighed and shook his head, waving back and forth the little gelled spikes of his brown hair. "Didn't even know she was with someone."

"Yeah, it was a short one. Been texting her all week. You know how she gets."

"You're a good friend for her."

He tugged her arm, and they sat in the grass with their backs against the old oak. The grass scratched against her legs. She swiped her hair over the front of her body to keep the dirt out. The new brown highlights were a little too light against her natural black.

Pieter slipped his arm around her shoulder. His fingertips brushed her skin. "Let's just hang out, okay? And we have today, right?"

A couple girls came by and waved to Pieter; he waved back. Vero leaned a little closer. Sometimes the sheer number of people he knew got a bit overwhelming.

"So… do I have to find someone for him?"

He sounded offended. "You think I'd have any trouble with that?"

"Who's the lucky girl?"

"Gloria. Gloria Stone. You know her?"

"Name sounds familiar."

"She's lived here about as long as I have. Nicest girl I've ever met… but not dated, that is. She's had a really rough life. She needs someone, too."

Gloria sounded as desperate a case as Neil. "Can't really say no to that, can I?"

Vero leaned against a mailbox planted in the cement of the sidewalk. Overhead, the sky changed to dark blue as the sun painted a few last wispy clouds pink. Streetlights flipped on. Behind her, a happy family enjoyed the clean interior of one of San Luis Obispo's homes. She sighed.

SLO, about halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, was definitely an improvement over Bakersfield and the Central Valley. Here, grassy hills created a matchless scenery surrounding the small town. Parks and trails spread around the city, and the beach was about fifteen minutes down the highway. Everyone joked how Oprah had once named it the happiest town in America. With the flawless weather, friendly population, and safe neighborhoods, Vero missed nothing about her old hometown, except friends.

But last spring had been an awful time to move. Right now, she should be jumping into her senior year with friends she'd had since forever. Instead, she lost her boyfriend and came to a town where she knew no one beyond her family. Meeting Kristin and Carrie had helped. She'd also somehow managed to land the most connected guy in the school, a huge boost to her own status. Still, these white kids in idyllic SLO had grown up in a different world from the heat and dirt of the Central Valley.

A white two-door Toyota with a dent in the bumper and a scrape across the driver's side pulled around the corner. Pieter had gotten it for his eighteenth birthday. His dad, a physics professor at Cal Poly SLO, tended toward expensive presents. It seemed like his way of competing against Pieter's mom for his son's affection.

"Hola, chica," Pieter called from behind an open window. It was about the extent of his Spanish, despite two years. He smiled that smile that never left his lips.

"Hey."

"Hop on in the White Lady."

She opened the door and climbed inside.

"You know, you don't have to wait out there. Your mom's not *that* bad."

Vero shook her head. "No, it's fine. I wasn't waiting long."

He stared as though wanting to say more, as though he suspected something. Or maybe it was just the length of her skirt.

As they drove, he stayed quiet. Wind whipped through the windows, but Vero smelled a faint aroma of weed.

"You nervous or something?" Vero asked.

"Nah, tonight'll be great." His voice faltered. "It's just that Steve's in town."

"Steve…"

"My brother."

"Oh, right. *Steve*."

"He showed up today and tried staying with Mom. She turned him down, for once."

"And now?"

"He's somewhere around town."

His car idled at a red light. She put her hand on his on top of the gear shift and squeezed sympathetically.

"I just wish he'd get his life together," Pieter said. "Anyways, I'm glad to have plans for tonight. Feels good to get out."

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See you later!

-J.T.

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The Rift

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