

LYCOPOLIS

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Ali Luke

Aliventures

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For Mum & Dad, with love and gratitude.

The Players and their Lycopolis Characters

Seth Harrington – Lord Cyrric and Remegius the Demonologist

Katherine “Kay” Blake – Sir Tristram, leader of the knights

Edwin Mitchell – Benedict, squire to Sir Tristram

Mark Webster – Roderic Revelry, a thief

Hannah Webster – Matilda, warrior-woman, leader of the Haven

Robert Stephens – Heidi of the Plains, an academic

Brandon Starchild – Sir Wilhelm, a knight

Chapter 1

Kay sipped uncertainly at her hot chocolate. Seth was taller than she'd imagined him. His blond hair hung perfectly, parted in the middle to fall to his chin, just like his profile picture on Messenger. She'd brushed her own hair into fierce plaits as usual, but the wind had whipped strands of it loose.

"So." He poured his coffee from a tall chrome cafetière. "How are you finding it?"

"It's all very ..." She trailed off.

"Give it a bit of time. You'll find your feet."

"I just feel so out of place here." By *here*, she meant the university – but she found herself glancing into the huge wall mirror to her left, taking in the crowded Grand Café. There were a few other students, most of them with parents, and a couple of guys in suits. She felt under-dressed in jeans and a polo-neck.

Seth tilted his head slightly, as though inviting her to continue.

"Everyone else is so confident. They seem like they should be here."

"And you feel like you shouldn't?"

"I know it's stupid, but I always thought Oxford was full of geniuses." Her cup clattered as she put it down on the saucer.

"Kay. Come on, look at me."

She lifted her head, and met his eyes. They were a greyish blue, like stonewashed denim, like the pebbles on the beach back home. For a long moment, he just gazed back. Her cheeks were hot. She was sure she was blushing.

"First, everyone feels like that. Second –" He leant forwards across the table, and lowered his voice, as though telling her a secret. "This is Oxford. They don't let people in by mistake."

That actually made her smile. "Did you feel the same way, though? When you were at Cambridge?"

"No. But I had a rather well-developed sense of entitlement."

She wasn't sure whether to laugh or not.

"Anyway." He picked up his shoulder bag. It was light brown leather – definitely in a different league from her battered rucksack. "You've been great – I've appreciated all your help with Lycopolis."

At the start of the summer, while she was waiting for A-level results, he'd declared her his assistant. She had a badge against her name on the forums, and a few administrative powers in the game. She'd been surprised, though no-one else had. He'd noticed her. He trusted her.

"Thanks," she said. "I enjoy it."

He passed her a wrapped box; she hesitated, then untied the ribbon. The shiny silver paper slid off easily. Chocolates. Rich, glossy chocolates, beautifully packaged.

“Oh! You didn’t have to ...”

“I wanted to,” he said, and smiled, easily.

This was awkward. She wasn’t going to be put off, though; she’d decided what she was going to say, and she wouldn’t talk herself out of it just because he’d given her a present. “It’s really kind of you, but look, what I told you, about this new storyline for the game –”

“Hey. We can talk about that later. I didn’t come up to Oxford to argue about Lycopolis.” Some of the warmth had left his voice, though. That *was* why he’d come – but she tried to make herself believe his next words. “I came to see you, Kay. To find out how you’re doing.”

“Thanks. I’m all right, really.” Her throat felt tight. She’d thought that Oxford would feel like a new home; had pictured friends, laughter, deep and meaningful conversations. She’d been promised dreaming spires – but she was surrounded by thick stone walls and daunting courtyards.

“You’re settling in? Making friends?”

“Yeah.” That wasn’t really true. She’d tried. But everyone else doing Archaeology and Anthropology was disarmingly clever, and all the girls on her corridor existed in a constant whirl of clothes and parties. She’d spent most of her evenings hiding in her room, losing herself in Lycopolis.

“You don’t sound too convinced,” he said.

“I suppose I thought it would be easier.”

To her surprise, he reached out and put his hand over hers. For a brief, silly, instance, she wanted to flinch away.

“Hey, you have me,” he said. “And everyone in Lycopolis. We’re there for you.”

“Thanks.” Her voice came out so small that she couldn’t even hear herself over a sudden laugh from the table next to them. She said it again. “Thanks.”

For a while, they talked about easy, inconsequential things: books, films, the dismal weather. Kay gazed out at the street. The sky was darkening.

“We’d better get moving,” Seth said. “Looks like rain.”

He was facing the back of the café; her confusion only lasted a moment before she remembered that there was another mirrored wall behind her. She slid the box of chocolates into her bag, and rummaged for her purse.

Seth shook his head, retrieving the bill from a waitress and putting a handful of coins down. “It’s on me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.” He was already standing, pulling his coat on.

They walked out onto the High Street. The wind was even stronger now, tugging at Kay’s coat and flattening strands of hair across her face.

“Let me walk you back,” he said.

“Oh. Thanks.”

Cyclists darted along the road, seeming oblivious to the traffic. She would never get up the nerve for that.

“So,” Seth said, as they crossed over in a gap between buses and cars and bikes. “You’ll join us tomorrow?”

He’d said it as there was no doubt, but – “I’m still not convinced it’s the right direction for Lycopolis.”

“I think I’ll be the judge of that.”

It was the same every time she disagreed with him: he’d point out that Lycopolis was, after all, his game. He paid for the servers, he had access to the databases, and he decided who to let in and who to kick out.

“What about the no magic rule?” she asked.

“That’s to stop newbies flying around on dragons – I can quite happily ignore it.”

“But why this? Why do we even need something on Hallowe’en? It’s not like we have anything for Christmas or Easter or –”

He stopped abruptly, turned and looked at her. His eyes were colder now, though his tone stayed pleasant. “You’re over-thinking things. It’s just a game.”

Three years ago, she’d promised herself she’d never believe that again. Not with something like this. “It’s not in-character for Tristram. Human sacrifice – summoning a demon – no.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment. “You’re shivering.”

“I’m okay.” Dusk was falling and it was cold, the coldest Oxford had been since the start of term, but that wasn’t what had sent a shudder through her.

“Here.” Before she’d quite realised what he was doing, he’d unwound his scarf and looped it around her neck. It was slate grey, and soft against her skin.

“Everyone else has agreed to be there, you know. Even Hannah.” He stopped, letting a group of teenagers go past. They were on the bridge now, the river Cherwell murky below them. Her halls were just a little further – but he’d reached out and taken hold of her arm. “Seeing as you’re my assistant, I’d rather hoped I could count on your support.”

“Does supporting you mean I always have to agree?”

He hesitated. “Well, no. Of course not. But I can’t very well have an assistant who’s refusing to go along with my storyline, can I?”

That felt like a threat. She pulled her arm away. “You mean, you’d sack me.”

He frowned, as if to say that she’d misunderstood him.

“Seth, I don’t want to spoil the game.” She loosened the scarf, which was pressing too hard against her throat. “You know, we’ve got something good there.”

“It won’t spoil it, I promise. This is what Lycopolis is *for*.”

The wind was blowing harder now: she hugged her arms around herself. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps she was overreacting, and it was all just harmless fun.

“Come on, Kay, be there tomorrow night. I’m asking it as a favour.” He smiled at her. “I really want you to be part of this.”

Now he was making her blush. And it seemed churlish to refuse. “Well, okay, then.”

“Thank you.” He reached out and touched her shoulder, lightly. “It was good to meet you at last.”

Her face felt hot, despite the cold sting of the air. “Thanks, you too.”

“I should go and catch my train. See you in Nottingham.”

“Yep. Looking forward to it.”

She fumbled at the scarf, but he put his hand over hers. “Keep it, you’ll get cold.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded, then turned and strode away, back across the bridge. For a minute, she just watched him; walking fast, his hands thrust in his pockets, the hem of his coat trailing over the top of his boots. She was suddenly angry – at herself, rather than at him. She’d been determined not to have any part in this, and now she’d just gone along meekly. But he was Seth. Lycopolis was his creation: a game of words, of rich, meaningful stories and people to share them with; a world where she belonged, where she had friends. She couldn’t throw that away.

The first drops of rain began to fall as she swiped her entry card and walked in through the gates to the Waynflete halls. Tomorrow, she’d be braver, and unswayed by chocolates and warm words and blue eyes. Tomorrow, she’d be Tristram.

* * *

“I have deep misgivings about this.” Sir Tristram strode over to where Lord Cyrric stood, in the doorway leading down to the Temple of Shadows.

“I don’t care.” Cyrric leant towards him, the city’s insignia glinting from the medal around his neck. “All I care about, Tristram, is your loyalty.”

There were footsteps on the road, slowing, then halting. A lantern pierced the gloom, illuminating a pale face and blonde hair. "Lord Cyrric. Sir Tristram."

Tristram frowned. "Miss Heidi. Are you sure you wish to be here?"

"Of course." She glanced at Lord Cyrric, and Tristram saw her wait for his nod before continuing. "I will not be participating, merely observing."

She should not see such things. No-one should.

There were louder footsteps now, accompanied by a jangling of metal, then a whooping battle-cry. Matilda. She came over, dragging a chained slave girl no older than Tristram's squire.

"Stay and join us," Cyrric said, to Matilda.

Tristram hoped she'd refuse. Matilda was a law unto herself – along with the sprawl of streets that she ruled over. She shrugged. "Why not?"

From behind him, another voice came: "You require my service, Lord Cyrric?"

Roderic. A slippery character, ringleader of a gang of thieves and muggers. Tristram turned, and was surprised – and angry – to see his squire there too. "Benedict, go back to the Keep at once."

"Oh, I think he can come with us too," Cyrric said.

"Ben," Tristram said, but the boy pretended not to hear.

Cyrric said, "Roderic, open the door. Without damaging it. I would prefer the priests not to know we were here."

As Roderic set to work, Tristram stepped over to Benedict. "Go home. That's an order."

"Got it," Roderic said, and the door creaked open.

"Tristram, if you're quite ready?" Cyrric said.

Benedict turned away, back to the road. Tristram took a long breath, and walked with the others down the stone steps into the crypt. They huddled on the two rough pews, and Tristram fought down mounting horror as Matilda chained the slave girl to the altar.

"Defenders and citizens of Lycopolis," Lord Cyrric said. "We do this for the greater good. For the glory of our city. For the safety of our citizens. We have gathered here at the Hour of Darkness, on the night when the realm of demons comes close to our world. We have gathered to call for aid, to summon the one spoken of in the ancient legends of our city. The one who can shape reality for us."

Cyrric lifted the knife. The girl didn't even flinch. Her face was turned towards them, and her eyes were blank.

Then he paused, and pointed towards the back of the Temple. "Stand up!"

Sick dread weighed down Tristram's heart. He stood, turned, knowing as he did so what he would see. "Benedict, leave! Get out of here."

"It's too late," Cyrric said. "Come forward, boy."

Benedict walked forwards and edged into the pew next to Roderic, well out of Tristram's reach.

"We call the Prince of Nightmares!" Cyrric thrust the knife down.

The girl's blood ran down the altar, spilling into the ancient channels carved into the floor, a red stain winding across the white stone. She shrieked as her body was engulfed in blue flames.

A mass of black smoke, coiling like something living, appeared behind the altar. Cyrric stumbled back, one arm up to ward it off. The flames died, and a pack of wolves snarled around the altar, eyes glinting yellow. They tore the slave girl's body to pieces, more blood running.

The smoke thickened.

The wolves turned.

Tristram vaulted over the pew, sword already in hand. He thrust it through the throat of the nearest wolf, almost severing its head. Behind him, Matilda shouted a warning. A second wolf came at him. He fought it off, yelling "Keep back!" to Benedict and Heidi.

When he turned, he saw Matilda clubbing one wolf while another snapped for her throat. He ran the sword into it. Both Cyrric and Roderic were cowering against the wall. He'd have cursed them if he'd had breath enough to spare.

The remaining wolves let out a howl. The smoke swirled around them for a moment, then they vanished.

Cyrric edged forwards to address the cloud of smoke – which, Tristram realised, *was* the demon prince. "You are bound within these ancient lines until our contract is agreed. We are representatives of Lycopolis. We have summoned you and request your aid against the forces which threaten our city."

There was a long silence. Then the room echoed with a laugh, deep and jarring. "*You will all kneel to me and serve me as your lord and master.*"

Tristram grabbed Benedict's arm and pulled him close.

Cyrric was already covered by the thin haze of black smoke at the edge of the cloud: slowly, he knelt. Roderic joined him. Heidi left her notebook. The black smoke drifted around them all. It whispered at the corners of Tristram's mind: *kneel, obey, it's easy ...*

He steeled himself against it and held Benedict more tightly. "No."

Matilda was still standing, but her gaze was fixed on the demon. "You'll give us strength? Victory in battle?"

"Yes."

Tristram had never seen her submit to any form of authority. But now, he watched her kneel.

The smoke wisped towards him. It smelt like soil and musk and blood. "*You will serve me too, Tristram, you and your squire.*"

He stayed silent. A long moment went by.

"*You have no choice.*" A tendril of smoke snaked out and Benedict was pulled out of Tristram's grip by some invisible force. The smoke curled around his throat.

Too late, Tristram reached for him. "Let him go!"

"*Knight.*" The voice was quiet, the words, somehow, intended just for him. "*Serve me.*"

Tristram swung his sword up and lunged. It crackled, as though lightning stormed through it. The blade crumbled to dust, and the hilt fell from his numbed hand.

"*You will kneel and serve me, as will your squire. The souls of all here belong to me.*"

The smoke seemed to tighten around Benedict's throat. The boy made a sound, almost a cry.

"Do not harm him!" Tristram shouted.

The Prince of Nightmares released Benedict's neck, the smoke curling into an almost solid form. Tristram reached for the boy, but a gust of wind, like a blow, forced him back.

A thin trail of smoke reached Benedict's forehead as he knelt. The boy gasped as though in pain. Tristram forced himself to watch as the smoke slithered through the air, touching each of them in turn – marking them.

“Stand,” the Prince said, and the smoke curled around Benedict’s arm and pulled him to his feet. *“Take your squire, Tristram. And do not doubt that we will meet again, and that you will do my bidding.”*

There was a rush of wind that rang in Tristram’s ears and shook them all. Benedict stumbled. Tristram reached for him. A crack tore through the crypt floor.

When the noise and the tremors stopped, the demon was gone.

Chapter 2

Seth watched the computer as a progress bar inched forwards.

Nothing. Just like before, nothing. No sign of any interference with his game. He jabbed a few keys and set a final test running, then flicked to Messenger, wanting a distraction.

Kay had logged off straight after the role-playing, but Edwin was still online. A few months ago, Seth hadn't wasted any time on him, leaving him to be Kay's little sidekick. Recently, though, Edwin had become more interesting. He had potential.

"Ed. Try this." It was a track by some obscure Norwegian death metal band: after listening to it once, he'd decided not to subject himself to it ever again.

"Okay, thanks!" As usual, Edwin was typing in an almost unreadable Gothic font. "Hey, thanks for letting Benedict be there. It was so cool tonight, properly creepy."

"Glad you enjoyed it."

"Yeah, I could really *see* it all ... the girl and the blood and the temple. And the wolves, wow."

Normally, Seth lurked invisibly in the game, watching; he'd get involved where necessary as Lord Cyrric, but without any particular attachment. Today, he'd found himself hunched over the keyboard, typing almost without thinking, his mind full of stone and shadow.

"So, what's the Prince of Nightmares gonna do next?" Edwin asked.

An unexpected shiver ran up Seth's arms. He shrugged it away, irritated at himself. "I'm not at liberty to reveal the Prince's plans."

"Heh, okay."

The test was still running. He pulled the conversation back onto safe ground. "Are you coming to the meet-up?"

"Yeah. Well, I'm trying to get Mum to agree. She's being so unreasonable."

Seth pre-empted the usual whinging with, "You'll talk her round, I'm sure."

"Yeah. I'll be there."

"Good good. Here, I've got another song for you." He sent it through Messenger. It looked like a perfectly innocuous file.

"It won't play."

Seth knew it had installed just fine. It would record everything – Google searches, Messenger chats, emails. "Let's try it again. Here."

A couple of minutes went by. "Cool, I really like it."

The interface was a little clunky, but the program worked perfectly, showing an echo of Edwin's words to him. Excellent. It'd be even better if he could get the

spyware onto Kay's computer too, but he never sent her anything other than text files, and she wasn't as blindly trusting as Edwin. In fact, she was getting more and more uncooperative. He should've gone ahead without Tristram there.

The test was still running. The progress bar ticked on. Restless, he went over to the window and looked out at the lights across the Thames, a sprinkling of reds and greens reflecting from the grey water. The Eye was stilled for the night. He drew the curtains and shut out the dark. He didn't feel like sleeping yet.

After making a coffee, he returned to the computer. The test routine was still trawling through the files. If there was anyone screwing around with his game, he'd find them.

In Messenger, Edwin was asking him, "Kay's going to be there, right?"

"In Nottingham? Yep. Looking forward to meeting her?" Seth sipped his coffee. It was a strong Javan blend, with a distinct kick to it. He appreciated that. It had been a long weekend.

There was a long pause before Edwin's reply popped up. "Yeah, I guess."

"You role-play with her all the time." He could've added, *And talk about her. Constantly.*

"Yeah. I know. But it'll be a bit weird to meet her in real life."

"You like her, don't you?" A month ago, he wouldn't have asked it so directly. But now, Edwin trusted him, brightened up every time Seth favoured him with a special item in the game.

"Well, I like everyone in Lycopolis."

"You fancy her." Seth checked the progress bar again. Another five minutes to go.

"Maybe a little bit."

"Just a little bit?"

"I don't even know her, really. Seth, you won't say anything, will you? Don't tell her, don't even hint or anything."

He smiled at the screen, and finished his coffee, before typing, "Of course I won't."

The computer beeped. The test was finished – and, once again, there was nothing.

No unusual activity in the game. No suspicious logins. No tampering, no hackers, no bots, nothing at all that shouldn't be there. Just him, with power over everything, Kay with a few administrative functions, and thirty-four bog-standard players.

Well, now he knew.

For so long, he'd wanted this. But he'd hadn't let himself dwell on it. He'd thought of the game and the storyline; he'd concentrated on winning everyone over, Kay especially. He'd been prepared for nothing to happen – a let-down for everyone, an anti-climax.

But the Prince of Nightmares had appeared.

He took a couple of deep breaths. Just for a moment, he wished there was someone he could talk to. It was a childish and pointless thing to want: in any case, there was no-one. The other players assumed that he'd been pushing the story along last night, that he'd been writing the Prince of Nightmare's lines. Edwin thought he'd brought the wolves snarling in. They all knew he could shape the game world like that. He often did.

Except this time, he hadn't.

Rain was beginning to fall outside, cold specks landing on his face. He didn't bother going back up the stairs to the flat for an umbrella. He strode towards the river, drinking in the cool night air, a breeze tugging at his coat.

He walked onto the South Bank. Most of the buildings along the Thames were still lit up, pouring squares of light towards the river. Tacky Hallowe'en decorations festooned the restaurants; zombies and ghouls and witches walked past, along with Londoners in suits and jeans and little black dresses.

He turned left, and paced past The Globe, then the Tate Modern, their fame made ordinary by long acquaintance. He should be excited – jubilant. What he'd seen all those years ago had been *real*. The Prince wasn't a lonely child's imaginary friend. The journal he'd started when he was seven wasn't a creative writing exercise.

And Lycopolis wasn't just a game.

He realised how fast he was walking, and deliberately slowed his pace to a saunter. Under the Southbank Centre, kids were skateboarding and spray-painting. It was a cold, ordinary Sunday night. He wasn't a child any more. He was twenty-four. He'd conquered his fears long ago, thrust them away, and learnt to turn the nightmares aside.

Yet tonight, every breath seemed to catch in his chest. Things were already slipping out of his hands: the ritual should have worked. Cyrric should have had control. The Prince should never have been able to stroll past those carved channels of blood.

And, of course, Cyrric should not have knelt. That hadn't been in the plan at all. But in the heat of the role-playing, it had seemed exactly right. Had it felt that way

to the other players, too? It was hardly in-character. Heidi had been there as an observer. Matilda never recognised any form of authority. And yet they'd knelt.

Only Tristram hadn't – only Kay hadn't.

Leaning on the wall, he looked into the Thames. Water pouring into water, rain streaming into river. His hair was wet now, and he kept having to blink his eyes clear. He turned, and began to walk back.

Half-a-dozen girls swayed towards him, heels clicking on the path, a bottle being passed between them as they pressed together under umbrellas. One of them – flimsy dress, witch's hat, too much lipstick – nudged her friend, and they looked at him, unabashedly eyeing him up.

Any other night, he'd have smiled, started a conversation, amused himself a little. Tonight, he just raised his eyebrows at the one who'd pointed at him and held her gaze, relentlessly, until she blushed, looked away and hurried on with her friends.

Back home, he unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk and took out his journal. The first few pages held the list, beginning with three names in careful cursive:

Michael Harrington (my father)

Victoria Harrington (my mother)

Richard Harrington (my big brother)

It went on: names from the playground, from boarding school, from university. Some of them had been struck through long ago. The first three names remained, along with a handful of others sprinkled throughout the list. Soon, though, he'd be able to cross off every single one.

In the bathroom, he washed the rain from his face and hair. The mirror had clouded up. He swept the towel across it, to see his reflection. His hair was darkened by the water, heavy around his face.

There was a mark on his forehead. It was so faint he could've walked away and convinced himself it had just been imagined, conjured up by tiredness and not-quite-conquered nerves.

He pulled the plug from the sink and watched the water spiral away. There was no backing out now. Not even if he'd wanted to. He'd known for years what he was playing with. When he'd created Lycopolis, writing the code line by line, building the world line by line, he'd known what he was doing. He wanted the Prince, and all its power.

Later, as he lay in bed, he reminded himself that he hadn't expected it to be easy – hadn't dared hope it would be easy.

He closed his eyes, and braced himself for sleep.

Chapter 3

Edwin slammed the front door, kicked his trainers at the wall, and was half-way up the stairs by the time Mum called, “How was school?”

He didn’t know why she bothered asking. What did she expect: that he’d stroll home, announce that he loved school, that his teachers were the most intelligent and sympathetic people he knew, and that Darren Miller was his new best friend?

He slammed his bedroom door so hard that a bit of paint flaked off the wall.

“Edwin!”

After bolting the door, he flung himself face-first onto the bed. It had been the worst Monday yet. Darren Miller had started getting the bus to school, and had chucked spit-balls at him the whole way there. Then, in Chemistry, Darren and a couple of his cronies had decided it’d be really fucking amusing to waft a Bunsen burner near his hair. Of course, it was Edwin who got yelled at for messing around.

At lunch, he’d thought he was safe, hanging out round the back of the art block in the grey November drizzle. But they’d found him.

He pulled off his blazer, then his shirt, examining his upper arm. There wasn’t a bruise, yet. He dropped the blazer and shirt on the floor and dug through his wardrobe for a black sweater. It was hard to feel properly Goth in school uniform, even now his hair was nearly down to his shoulders. He wanted to re-dye it – the roots were starting to show – but Mum had gone on and on about the streaks he’d left on the bathroom sink last time.

When he stared into the mirror on the back of his wardrobe door, he saw a reddish bruise on his forehead, right in the middle. He didn’t even remember getting that one.

He lay down on the bed, and pressed his face into his pillow. A whole four days till the weekend: that meant twenty lessons, eight bus journeys and four lunchtimes to somehow survive through. And it would be the same week after week, for almost seven whole weeks till the Christmas holidays.

If he told Mum he was too ill to go to school, she wouldn’t believe him. Even if he could convince her – by faking a temperature or pretending he’d been sick – she’d want to stay home with him. And then he’d have to lie in bed, rather than playing computer games.

His medallion was poking into his chest, and he pulled it out from under his shirt. After he’d started at the new school in September, he’d come up with a sort of routine. He’d put on the medallion every morning and clasp his hand all the way

around it, and concentrate really hard on not getting punched or kicked or beaten up. Until now, he'd almost managed to convince himself that it was working.

Standing in front of his bookshelf, he looked at the twelve wolf figurines. Apart from the medallion, they were the only things he had that'd once belonged to Dad. The only faint thread that linked them. At the end of the shelf, the empty space still waited for birthday cards, Christmas cards, postcards, any cards signed "Dad".

None ever came.

He switched the computer on and it chuntered into life. He opened Media Player, even though he didn't have any playlist heavy enough for a day like today. Messenger logged him in automatically, and he looked for Kay's name, but she wasn't online. He found himself gazing at her Messenger photo, wondering what it'd be like to actually see her for real.

A message popped up from Seth. "Hey Ed. Meant to say, great role-playing yesterday."

Edwin sat down and spun his chair all the way round – which was totally un-Goth, but there was no-one to see him. Seth saying "great role-playing" made the day a little less crap. Seth owned Lycopolis, Seth had written it all, from the crooked streets in the Thieves' Quarter to the mansions and gardens where the Nobility lived. And the demon-summoning had been so creepy and intense that, for a couple of hours, Edwin had forgotten about half-term being over.

"Thanks," he typed, but didn't add a smiley face. They weren't Goth, plus, Seth never used them.

"Didn't give you nightmares, did it?"

"No." His flicker of a good mood vanished. He wasn't a kid. He could cope with the violent, nasty stuff, it didn't bother him. He liked the darkness of Lycopolis. It made it real. Better than life, where people pretended everything was okay, even when they were cracking apart.

He pulled up Media Player, shoved the volume up and set the "Crap Day" playlist on shuffle. Avenged Sevenfold's *Nightmare* began.

"Good good. Check your game inbox, Benedict has a message."

Curious, Edwin loaded Lycopolis, typed "Benedict" and his password, "creepingdeath." Once he was into the game, he typed, "Hey all," to the Chatroom.

"Hey Edwin!"

"Welcome back!"

It was so different from school. People liked him here, even though he was younger than them all. They cared about him.

He opened the message.

Benedict,

You impressed me last night. You showed courage and spirit. It is clear to me that you are an intelligent young man – one who I would be glad to have in my employ.

I require your assistance on a matter of great importance to the city.

As I am sure you noticed last night, Sir Tristram and I do not always agree about the correct course of action. With our city under threat, I need to know that all of my subordinates are acting in accordance with my mandates.

This is what I task you with. Watch Sir Tristram closely. Note the places he goes to, the people he talks with, and the orders he gives. If you suspect he is planning any form of rebellion, any dissent, you will inform me immediately.

Lord Cyrric, Governor of His Majesty's City of Lycopolis

High Judge of the Lycopolis Court

Edwin read it through several times, wondering how Benedict was going to react. Lord Cyrric had never taken any interest in him before. And Ben was usually deeply loyal to Tristram. But this wasn't the sort of order you could disobey.

In Messenger, he asked Seth, "Cyrric wants Ben to betray Tristram? What if he won't?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination. And Ben's."

Edwin grinned.

"Anyway. I've just sent an email about the meet-up."

"Oh cool!" The weekend in Nottingham – so long as he could talk Mum into letting him go – was the one thing in his life that he could look forward to.

Hello all,

Saturday 13th approaches rapidly. So, some plans:

We'll meet at The Pit and the Pendulum (pub, centre of Nottingham, google it) at noon on Saturday. I owe you all a drink as a thanks for helping make Lycopolis what it is.

Seth.

"The Pit and the Pendulum?" he asked Seth. The name sounded familiar.

"You'll like it. It's named after one of Poe's short stories."

Edwin hadn't actually read any of Edgar Allan Poe's stuff yet, though he kept meaning to; if there was a reading list for Goths, Poe would be right at the top.

Messenger showed that Kay was online now.

“Did you get Seth’s email?” he asked her. “You’re coming, right?”

“Yep!” She added a smiley face. “I definitely need to escape from Oxford for a weekend. How’re things for you?”

“School’s really shit at the moment.”

“Oh ... I guess everyone feels like that a bit, at times.”

“No they don’t.” He found himself suddenly annoyed, typing fast, the letters jumbling in his desperation to make someone understand. “*Everyone* doesn’t get spat at or kicked in the corridors or have their homework ripped up. *Everyone* doesn’t get smacked in the eye by some stupid Neanderthal bastard thug. It’s just *me*. They all hate me.”

He hit *send*, before looking at the words and wondering if they even made sense.

A single word appeared in response: “*hugs*”

His throat tightened up, as though there was a hard lump of misery lodged in there. As he typed “*hugs*” back, he wondered if she’d actually hug him for real, or if she just meant it virtually. It didn’t matter: hugging wasn’t very Goth.

“I’m sorry, Ed. That does sound shit.”

“Yeah,” he typed, “It is. And it just gets worse all the time.”

“Have you told your mum?”

“Not really.” He didn’t want to worry Mum, not now that she seemed to be better.

“How about your form tutor?” Kay asked. “Head of year? They’ll know how to handle it.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” There was no way he could say anything to a teacher. He’d just get beaten up for being a grass. Plus he knew exactly what Mr Thompson would say. “*Perhaps if you got a hair-cut and didn’t wear jewellery ...*”

He was *not* going to compromise his Goth identity. But for about the millionth time since breakfast, he wished his dad was around. He’d be able to tell his dad anything. He could talk about the bullying, he could say he wanted to move schools. His dad could tell him about girls and stuff. His dad could teach him how to fight. If he could beat up Darren Miller, the rest of them would leave him alone.

“You around for a while?” Kay asked. “Sir T’s having a Knights’ meeting soon, and he wants Ben there.”

“Yeah, sure.”

But Mum was banging on his bedroom door. “Edwin. Can you hear me? Switch that music off, please.”

He turned the speakers down a bit. If she’d get him some decent headphones, like he kept asking, his music wouldn’t bother her.

“What?” he yelled.

“Dinner’s ready.”

“But Mum! I’m playing Lycopolis.”

“Well, just pause the game for a bit, and –”

“I can’t – I keep telling you, it’s an online game! There are *other people* playing it with me.”

“I’m sure they’ll wait while you have your dinner. It’s sausage and mash. I’m dishing up in a minute.”

He turned off the music, scowling, and told Kay, “Mum’s making me go and eat dinner.”

“No worries, we’ve not got everyone online yet anyway.”

He unbolted his bedroom door. He’d fixed the bolt on during the summer; all Mum had said was, “Well, you are a teenager, I understand you need some privacy.”

His new poster, on the back of the door, had come unstuck at the corner. He pressed it down. It was a Led Zeppelin album cover which he really liked – he wasn’t so keen on their actual music. He’d found it on eBay, and Kay’d bought it for him, because she had an eBay account and good feedback. When he’d posted her the money – *Katherine Blake, Magdalen College, Oxford* – he’d written her address on his arm with a Biro. It still hadn’t completely washed off.

He trudged downstairs. Mum still hadn’t got a carpet for the stairs, and the wooden steps were cold through his socks. He wandered through to the kitchen and sat down.

Mum put a plate in front of him. “How did your maths test go?”

“All right.”

“Well, how did you do?”

“Hundred percent.” He dug into the mash.

“You don’t sound very happy about it.” She filled a plate for herself, and sat down opposite him.

He gave his trademark gothic grunt. It was like the “unh” he’d been doing since he was twelve, but with a hint of a world-weary sigh, and a touch of death-metal growl.

Mum leant across the table to touch his forehead with the back of her hand. “You sound like you’re coming down with something.”

“I’m fine.” He picked up *Cult Times* and flicked to an article about a new vampire series.

“I’m sorry I had to work during half-term.”

It'd been great, he'd had the house all to himself. And without Mum nagging him to go outside and get some fresh air, he'd been able to spend the whole time on the computer.

"We could watch a film later," she said.

He ignored her, turning the pages of the magazine with his free hand.

"You can pick, if you like," she said, "As long as it's not too gory."

Anything *she'd* want to watch would be rubbish. She wouldn't even rent eighteens from the library for him to watch on his own. It didn't matter, though; Seth'd explained how to download films from The Pirate Bay.

"I've got maths homework," he said.

"Well, perhaps I could give you a hand with it?"

"I don't need any help, I'm not a retard." He trudged back upstairs before she could tell him to help with the washing up. Once he'd logged back into Lycopolis, he headed straight to the meeting room.

* * *

The clock out in the courtyard struck seven, and the three knight leaders entered, one by one. They were all big, stern men, with bright tunics in their Orders' colours.

Their greetings were brief. "Sir Tristram. Squire."

Standing, Sir Tristram said, "The danger we face is grave. I am sure you have heard the rumours – these are the facts. An evil, demonic creature, known as the Prince of Nightmares, seeks to control our city. I believe that Cyrric is acting under this creature's influence."

Sir Tristram paused. Benedict felt a slow shiver run up his spine. He'd tried not to think about that demon, or Lord Cyrric, or that girl's blood running across the temple floor.

"Cyrric has barricaded the Lionheart Gate and set guards on almost all the others. The only ways out of the city are the Old Gate towards the mountains, and the southern path through the forest. I believe Cyrric's actions mean that the demon wishes us isolated. We cannot allow our city to be cut off from the outside world and its aid – we must reopen a route to the capital."

Before continuing, Sir Tristram glanced around the room. "Matilda has promised the aid of the Haven. I would rather not have to rely upon it, but I believe we will need numbers on our side. I welcome your suggestions."

Sir Elliot said, "We should dismantle the blockade. Set fire to it, or dynamite it, if we have to."

"That was my thinking also," Sir Tristram said. "But Cyrric will not turn a blind eye whilst we do it."

They kept talking, discussing tactics. Benedict tried to concentrate, because he didn't want his thoughts to drift back to the Temple of Shadows, and the blood running on the floor, and that black smoke.

"Do we have enough men to take on Cyrric's?" Sir Farrion asked. "Even with Matilda's rabble, we're going to be hard-pressed."

Sir Julian said, "We should pull down the blockade, yes, but there is no bravery or wisdom in risking lives. We should take the gate under cover of night."

There were nods of assent.

"Are you all agreed to this?" Sir Tristram asked. "Let me have your voices on it."

"Aye," they said, together.

"Tomorrow, at midnight, then. We meet at the gates. On foot – we need to move quietly. I will send word to Matilda. Only give your men the details necessary. We need but one loose tongue for this to reach Cyrric's ears."

After a round of hand-shakes, they filed out. Benedict stood up to follow, but Sir Tristram caught his arm. "Benedict. You look tired. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, hastily. "Nothing. Just – it's late."

"Yes. Off you go, then, get a good night's sleep."

Benedict walked slowly out of the meeting room, across the courtyard, through the dim gloom that was barely broken by the lanterns shining through the windows of the Knights' Rest. He went to his room, and huddled under a blanket. He wasn't going to tell Cyrric anything. He wasn't going to betray Sir Tristram.

* * *

"So what's up with Ben?" Kay asked him, in Messenger.

Edwin almost told her, then hesitated and went back to Seth's window. "I can tell Kay about Cyrric and Ben, right?"

"No."

Normally, Edwin would've left it at that: you didn't go questioning Seth. But maybe out of curiosity, or because he'd had such a shit day at school, or because Seth had been much chattier recently, he asked, "And what if I do?"

"Well, I'm not always as merciful as Lord Cyrric."

Edwin grinned. A dangerous tingle ran along his arms. No-one crossed Seth, not if they wanted to stick around in Lycopolis. Newbies were always getting banned for pissing him off. But there was a sort of fun in being threatened. Jokingly threatened.

"Heh," he typed, for an amused-but-still-Goth laugh. "Okay."

"Good good."

He told Kay, "I can't really say what's going on with Ben."

"Oh. Right. Well, I'm sure Sir T will figure it out." Then, a moment later, "Ed, on Sunday night, did you think Seth seemed too eager about it all?"

"Don't know," he typed, then, reckoning he should agree a bit with Kay, "Maybe."

"Perhaps it's just me. Anyway, I have to finish reading this astonishingly boring article, so I'm going to call it a night."

Bored, he wandered downstairs to the kitchen. There was nothing interesting to eat: the biscuit box was empty and there was only wholemeal bread. He settled for a bowl of frosted flakes. However often he told Mum that proper Frosties really did taste better, she never listened.

He peered out the kitchen window. Back at their old house, he'd spent hours curled up in the shed, reading comics and playing on his Nintendo DS. Now, they barely had a garden at all, just a bit of scruffy grass and a knobbly tree. Mum had told him she was sorry they'd had to move to Milton Keynes, but that was where her new job was. There wasn't anything he could say to that: he was glad, really glad that she was well enough to work again. Even though it meant living in an ugly, concrete city full of chavs and shopping centres. He cupped his hands against his face and pressed closer to the window to watch the wind whip the tree's feeble branches. It had already lost all its leaves.

A murmur came from the living room. Mum had closed the door: he crept up close to it. She was on the phone, probably to Aunty Sue.

"Oh, the course is fine – though I'm going to have to go in on a few Saturdays. But I need *something* to boost my CV."

Silence for a moment.

"Well, it's Edwin I'm worried about. He just doesn't seem to have settled very well."

They were talking about him again. He stood in the hall, listening.

“Yes, of course I have. But he’s fourteen, he doesn’t talk. He just grunts.”

That was totally untrue. He’d had an entire conversation with her over dinner, when he’d been trying to read.

“No, he never wants to go anywhere, just spends hours on the computer.” Her voice went a bit shaky on the next words. “I wonder if, you know, he needs a father figure.”

Edwin didn’t stay to hear any more, just stormed off up the stairs and slammed his bedroom door.

He didn’t want some stupid *father figure*. He wanted his *dad*.

Chapter 4

Mark slammed off the alarm. Hannah was already up: no surprise there. He could hear Megan chattering in the kitchen below, Denny's feet on the stairs. The clock read seven-twenty, but he felt knackered, like he'd barely slept. Somehow, he pulled himself out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom. He took a shower, letting the water drown out the noise of the house; for a few snatched minutes, it was just him. No wife, no kids, no boss, no envelopes marked *final demand*.

"Shit!" The bills – the postman. He dressed hastily and hurried downstairs. There were no letters on the mat. Did that mean that nothing had arrived yet, or that Hannah had got there first?

He poked his head into the living room. "Has the post come?"

"No." Hannah said, from behind the ironing board. "Could you look for Megan's new jumper?"

"In a minute. I haven't even had breakfast."

He'd just put the bread into the toaster when the post-box rattled. He shot down the hall, grabbing the envelopes before Denny, hurtling downstairs, could reach them.

"I could've got the post, Dad!"

"There's nothing for you. All boring stuff for me and Mum."

He hurried through the kitchen to the den. It'd once been intended as a study – he'd built shelves and a desk – but for years it'd been overtaken by kids' toys, a couple of broken computers, and bits of furniture that wouldn't fit anywhere else.

He flicked through the envelopes, looking at them properly this time. *Final demand. Urgent. Open immediately.* One looked promising: he ripped it open. *Regret to inform ... High volume of applications ... We will keep your CV on file.* He crumpled it in his hand, and shoved the lot into the back of the junk drawer, underneath broken remotes and old instruction manuals.

Abandoning his toast, he headed for the door and called a hasty, "Bye!"

Mark was contemplating getting a second cup of awful coffee, just for something to do, when a Messenger window appeared from Seth. "Busy?"

"No, I'm at work, and bored out of my mind."

"Up for some role-playing?"

"Sure." With only a couple of weeks to go, it wasn't like it was going to matter if he got caught playing games on company time. He logged into Lycopolis, typing "Roderic" then his password, "fullmoon".

In the game, a message waited in his inbox, from Lord Cyrric. *“Roderic Revelry. Kindly meet me at the Court.”*

Mark wandered over there, found Cyrric, and had a guarded conversation in between checking emails. He’d hoped for a reply from some of the places he’d applied to, but he had nothing. It didn’t matter; there was plenty of time yet.

In the game, Cyrric was offering Roderic a deal, couched in wary terms: go and fetch me Benedict, here’s your pay, half now, half later. Mark didn’t need to give it any thought. Roderic was friendly with Ben, sure, but he wasn’t about to pass up on that sort of money.

“How’s the job hunt going?” Seth asked, in Messenger.

“Pretty well. I’ve got one in the bag, I think, just waiting for an email.”

“Good good.”

He checked his inbox again, out of habit rather than expecting anything. But there it was, a reply from the job he’d just about met the requirements for. A glance told him all he needed to know. *Unusually high number of applications ... Thank you for your interest.*

He slumped in his chair. There was still one more to get back to him, but he doubted they’d even bother replying. Seth was the one person he could confide in. “Actually, I’m getting a bit worried. I thought I’d have something definite lined up by now. Maybe I should’ve stuck it out here a bit longer.”

“No, you did the right thing. You deserve better.”

“It’s just,” he typed, “I’ve not said anything to Hannah yet.”

“About quitting?”

“Yeah. I thought I’d get something else sorted out and then tell her. I didn’t want to worry her, not with the kids and everything.” He loved Denny and Megan, of course he did, but whenever he thought of them, it was with surprise: how had his life ended up like this?

“You’re still coming to Nottingham?”

It seemed an odd thing to ask – but he knew how keen Seth was for them to all be there. Anyway, Mark was looking forward to the meet-up: a chance to get away from the usual Saturday routine of storybooks and god-awful cartoons. “Yeah. We’ve already arranged to leave the kids with Hannah’s parents. But after that, I really need to get some work.”

“Anything I can do?” Seth asked.

Mark was surprised – and oddly touched. “Not unless you happen to know anyone in Swindon who’s busy recruiting IT workers.”

“I might.”

Mark had meant it jokingly, but those two words brought an unexpected rush of hope. After all, Seth was the sort of guy who knew people. “Well, if you do have any leads, I’d really appreciate it.”

He wouldn’t have been able to say that face to face, not to Seth, the best part of a decade younger than him, and already so far ahead in life.

“Perhaps we can have a chat in Nottingham.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.”

Last month, he’d been so certain he’d have something by now. Seth had seemed pretty sure, too, encouraging him to make the jump, seize the day.

Another message appeared. “Can I ask you something a little personal, Mark? Have you had any nightmares recently?”

“That’s an odd question.”

“I know.”

“Well, I suppose I’ve had some weird dreams.” When he’d woken up earlier, his brain foggy, he’d not remembered them – but they were coming back to him now.

“Nightmares?”

“I suppose so. If you want to call them that.”

“What about?”

He felt stupid, typing it. “A tree – I was trying to pull myself up a muddy bank, holding a sapling, and it broke away.”

“Were you in a forest?”

An image drifted into his mind: a thicket of trees, each stretching up for the sky. “Maybe, I’m not sure. Why do you ask?”

Seth didn’t reply.

Chapter 5

Kay typed a message to the knights, telling them simply, “Meet at the gate. T.”

It was the first time she’d arranged a large-scale scene without consulting Seth. In fact, she’d gone further than that. She’d asked them all to keep it quiet. They’d talked on Messenger, instead of discussing it in the Chatroom or on the forums. In the game, the Prince of Nightmares had spoken to Tristram several times – and whenever she asked Seth about it, he wouldn’t offer any explanation. She was beginning to feel increasingly on-edge.

At least the game was a distraction from college life, though – she’d had yet another tutorial where she’d felt stupid and tongue-tied, and her current essay consisted of two paragraphs that she’d deleted and rewritten a dozen times. After four weeks, she was still missing Mum and Dad and Tom all the time; she’d rationed herself, strictly, to only phoning home every other night.

There was a knock at her door. She ignored it, but then it was repeated six times in quick succession.

“Come in, it’s unlocked,” she called.

Somehow, she wasn’t surprised to see Brandon, the one person on her corridor who fitted in even worse than she did – though he never seemed to care or even notice. Today, he was wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt, along with grey jeans patched at the knees, and sandals.

“Hey,” she said. “Um, I’m sort of busy.”

Brandon leant against the doorframe. “I don’t mind. I can stay anyway.”

“Well ... if you want.” Sometimes, he’d show up with a textbook and sit silently in her room while she was working on an essay. He usually wandered off wordlessly after half an hour or so. She didn’t mind: she was starting to enjoy the company.

Sitting on the end of her bed, he took a Hobnob from the packet on her bedside table. Crumbs fell onto her carpet as he broke it in half, then into quarters. He pointed at her screen. “What are you doing?”

Elliot, Julian and Farrion, plus a host of imagined foot-soldiers, were at the Keep now, along with Benedict. “It’s a sort of game,” she said. “All in text, no graphics.”

He didn’t ask anything else, just looked intently at the screen and said, “They’re waiting for you.”

Kay was impressed that he’d managed to pick up that much. When she’d tried to explain the game to her parents, they’d been bemused by the lines of text appearing in different places – the gossip and in-jokes in the Chatroom window, the main action in the big Game window, private messages in the Inbox. Tom had

wanted to play it with her but Seth said that, at 12, he was too young; Kay had been relieved that it wasn't down to her to disappoint him.

"You don't mind if I carry on?" she asked Brandon.

He was gazing at the screen, as though perfectly happy to sit there all evening and watch. Kay set her hands to the keyboard, and turned her attention to the game, to the footsteps and murmurs of the wary knights...

* * *

They walked through the streets, lanterns dimmed low. Tristram hated having to sneak around his own city in the dark, but it was the only sane choice they had. He led his men towards the alleyway that jinked down into Matilda's realm, the Haven.

"Knights." Matilda was waiting, with her ruffians: a dozen men and a few women, plus a handful of children. He'd have protested – but he'd brought his own squire.

He paused, and looked back at the men following him. "Where's Benedict?"

"Shirked it," Elliot said. "He was scared half-witted."

Tristram frowned. Although Benedict had seemed on edge, he'd given no indication he wanted to remain behind.

"Well?" Matilda asked, impatiently, "Can we get going? I'm freezing my tits off."

They crept onwards, under the cover of night. The moon was not even a crescent: only stars lit the sky. Tristram listened for any sound, watched for any movement in the shadows, any sign that they had been spotted.

Matilda fell into step beside him. "Tristram. You seen anything of Roderic recently?"

"No." The less he saw of Roderic, the better. "Why?"

"He's working for Cyrric."

Cyrric had dozens of informants in the city – but none with quite the same underground network of contacts as Roderic. "Thank you for telling me."

As they turned out of the alleyway onto the only road that led towards the Lionheart Gate, Tristram said "We do this as quickly and quietly as we can. No unnecessary bravado."

They strode up the street to the gate, to the blockade of brick and stone, and started to tear it down. Some of the men, with heavy hammers from the Keep's forge, began to break the biggest rocks into smaller chunks.

Tristram shoved stones aside, his hands protected by gauntlets. The sound was becoming deafening. They made slow progress, but eventually he could see a gap emerging at the corner of the gate, a glimpse into the darkness outside the city.

Over the clatter and rush of stones, the sound of hooves went unnoticed until too late.

"Tristram!" Matilda's elbow caught him in the ribs; he turned.

All he could do for a moment was stare. There was Cyrric, his courtiers, and at least a hundred soldiers.

"Get the bastards!" Matilda yelled.

"Hold back!" Tristram shouted. "Stay your weapons! We do not engage!"

But a battle horn sounded, and the soldiers charged forwards; Elliot and Farrion attacked at once, and Tristram drew his own blade.

It was over quickly. Matilda and her group were cornered by the soldiers; his own men retreated at his command. Cyrric had stayed well out of the fray. He sat on horseback, the light from his guards' lanterns glittering from the plates of armour on his steed.

"Sir Tristram," he called. "Might I ask what you think you are doing?"

Next to him, small and drab in the midst of the bright retinue, stood Benedict.

It took Tristram a long moment to take that in, before he found his voice. "We are here to rip apart this blockade. If we cannot do so tonight, we will attempt it again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, until the trade route is opened again."

"Aye!" yelled Elliot. The other knights – and Matilda's rabble – joined in the cry.

"That might be a little difficult, Sir Tristram, if I have you all thrown into prison."

"Fuck this!" yelled Matilda. The nearest soldiers backed away. "Let's get this bloody thing down now. A few more rocks and it'll tumble."

"Don't you dare!" Cyrric snapped. "Guards!"

There was a hiss of metal as blades were drawn.

“Stand down!” said Tristram. The odds were overwhelmingly against them. And how – why – had Cyrric got Benedict?

“Stop this instant, or I’ll have you all put to the sword!” Cyrric shouted – but his next words were lost in a roar. The stones crashed down like an avalanche.

The men nearest the gate, both Tristram’s and Cyrric’s, were suddenly scrambling backwards.

A wolf leapt through the gap, followed by another, and another, until a dozen of them snarled in front of the barricade. They pounced indiscriminately: Matilda and Tristram and Farrion were all fighting alongside Cyrric’s terrified soldiers.

“Drive them back!” Tristram yelled, “Drive them out of the city!”

It was only once the immediate heat of the battle was over, once the wolves, some wounded, some dying, limped away, that he saw the carnage. The grey light of morning made even the blood look colourless. A dozen or more of Cyrric’s men were dead. Three of his own. Several of Matilda’s, including one boy barely any older than Benedict.

Benedict. Tristram sought him anxiously. He was no longer at Cyrric’s side.

That voice from the Temple, and from his dreams, spoke through the dawn. “*Missing someone?*”

At the edge of the road, smoke pooled around Benedict.

“Let go of him! Lord Cyrric, tell your demon to release my squire.”

“This isn’t in my hands any longer. You went against the Prince’s wishes in trying to destroy the blockade.”

“*Good Sir Tristram.*” The Prince’s words carried above the groans of the injured and the dying. “*What nightmares do you have? Perhaps treachery and betrayal number amongst them?*”

Next to him, Matilda gazed with a disturbing intensity at the black smoke.

He strode forwards: the smoke curled threateningly around Benedict’s throat. He stopped. Cyrric, he saw, was urging his men away, gesturing them back towards the road.

“*Tell your men to go home,*” the Prince of Nightmares said.

Tristram turned to Elliot. “Take everyone back.” His voice sounded strained to his own ears. “See that the injured are tended to.”

“Aye, sir.”

They left, all his knights, all his men, and the Prince watched them as they walked away. Matilda said, "Scram," to her people; they went without a word, carrying their wounded.

What unspoken, unholy, agreement did he, Cyrric and Matilda have?

"Your little traitor was magnificent." The Prince spoke quietly now, his voice playing through the dawn like silk. Cyrric still kept his distance. Matilda watched, poised almost as though ready to spring.

"He wormed his way into your confidence. He pleaded to be allowed to come with you tonight. And then..." The voice turned hard. *"He told Lord Cyrric everything."*

Tristram felt a dark wave of anger. He'd loved Benedict like a son. He'd trusted the boy just as he trusted Elliot and Julian and Farrion. And now, a dozen of his men were badly injured, and three were dead.

"I believe that the Knightly Orders are hardly tolerant of traitors."

They couldn't afford to be. The Code, ancient yet living, demanded unswerving loyalty.

"Lord Cyrric." The demon's voice was suddenly directed away from Tristram. *"Would you like me to spare this child?"*

"Do whatever you please. I have no further purpose for him, unless you do."

"You bastard," Tristram said, and Matilda gave a low noise, something like a growl.

It was to her that the demon spoke next. *"You knelt to me, Matilda."*

"Yes." She was still tense, ready to fight – or, Tristram realised, to run.

"I promised you power. The expansion of those dark streets where nightmares can fester, which you call the Haven. You have your share of runaways there. Murderers. Slaves. Traitors. Children."

"No," Tristram said, sharply. "No!"

"Shut up, Tristram," Matilda said, and it wasn't the coldness in her voice that shook him so much as the greed in her eyes. To the Prince, she said, "I take anyone."

Benedict was trembling in the demon's grip, and Tristram wanted to stride forwards and snatch him back, but he did not dare, in case it could snap the boy's neck.

"No," he said again. "I don't care what's he's done. He pledged himself to the Knights, and I am not abandoning him."

But a trail of smoke rose and curled upwards, as if beckoning Matilda. She walked towards it.

“A gift. Use it well, it bears my mark.”

Benedict stumbled forwards as the smoke faded; Matilda took hold of him. A thunderclap tore the dawn sky, and clouds opened, rain pelting down.

* * *

It was only when Kay blinked her way back into the real world, dragging herself from a place of knights and demons and broken promises, that she realised that Brandon was gone.

So were her Hobnobs. Oh well.

A Messenger box popped up, from Seth. “Why did you refuse to kneel to the Prince on Sunday night?”

“Hello to you too,” she typed, and added a smiley face.

“I’m serious, Kay. Why didn’t you kneel?”

She was struck that he’d said *you*, not *Tristram*. Seth was normally rigid about the character versus player distinction, insisting that nothing in the game was ever to be taken as a personal attack. She suspected this was an excuse for Lord Cyrric to be more of a bastard than Seth could otherwise get away with.

“Tristram sees it as selling his soul. I’m just trying to role-play consistently.”

“Where consistently equals defiantly?”

That made her blink. “Who are you accusing of defiance, me or Tristram?”

“You.” The word hung there on the screen, like a challenge.

“It’s just a game, Seth, you said that yourself.” But he was taking it far too seriously; they’d barely spoken since Sunday, and when they had, he’d been unusually curt.

“I don’t want you screwing around with my plans.”

“Perhaps it’d be easier I knew what your plans actually are. Why did Cyrric close the gates? Why does Tristram keep hearing the Prince’s voice? Why did you give Benedict to Matilda?”

“The *Prince of Nightmares* gave Benedict to Matilda.”

He was behaving as though it had nothing to do with him. Her chest felt tight, her heart thumping fast. “You role-played it, though. Didn’t you?”

“This is my game. I do whatever I fucking like.”

The aggression didn’t distract her: he’d not answered her question. But now the window had greyed out. He’d gone offline or, more likely, blocked her.

Kay's room was cold at night, even with the radiator turned up high. She unfolded her old Guide blanket, badges still sewn along one edge. *Camper, Survival, Outdoor Cook, First Aid, Traditions.*

When she finally managed to sleep, she tumbled straight into dreams. There were black trees all around her, close together, branches grasping at one another. She backed away from them. The ground was slippery underfoot, sodden leaves sliding on mud.

She began to walk, lifting her feet carefully, setting them down slowly, the thud of her heartbeat echoing in her ears. The trunks rose like thin spines to tangled balls of branches and dying leaves. A leaf fluttered down into her hair: she grabbed it, and it crumbled to ash. There was a black stain across her hand.

"Kay."

She didn't know where the voice came from. It seemed to be part of the forest, pressing in like the trees.

"Kay."

There was something both compelling and terrible about it. She couldn't move. She tried to answer, but her mouth made no sound. The mud was oozing up around her ankles, gripping tight.

The trees were getting closer.

She watched them come towards her, moving in the corners of her vision.

"Kay."

She woke in the dark, one arm clutching her pillow. There was an odd scent in the room, like freshly turned soil. When she flicked on the bedside lamp, she was sure she saw a black smear in the air.

Once she'd blinked and rubbed her eyes, it was gone.

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