

Forged in Fire

For Ambreson Tellerian, the first Friday in February had started like any other day. The sun set, and he crawled out of his comfortable little vault to check his supplies. There had been no break-ins, no suspicious materials laid out among his vials of blood. He drank one like a shot of vodka and thought of what to do. He had no duties to attend in the city, he had no friends to see. So Ambre settled down on a hard wood chair, legs folded under him, and read from the Philosophers’ Book of Alchemy.

Two boring pages in, there was a soft rap on his door. Ambre put the heavy tome down and went to answer it. Outside of his house stood a short man holding a scroll. The man cleared his throat and looked up at Ambre.

“Are you Mister Ambreson Tellerian?” he asked, his voice high-pitched and nasal. To Ambre’s sensitive ears, it sounded like two swords scraping against each other in combat.

“Yes, I am,” he replied. There was a long silence between them. “What do you want?” Ambre wasn’t usually an irritable man; he just preferred his “mornings” to be uninterrupted.

“The Grand Council of the Land of Acadia has appointed you its Hero.” The messenger unrolled his scroll and cleared his throat once more. “The Land of Acadia is in dire need: the wizard Frostmaker has used one of his own to steal the Radon Lithius from our armory,” he read. “Thus, we require one Hero to ascend to the Lathinade Path and retrieve the Sword. A Hero needs to be strong enough to survive the harsh conditions of the Actinade Mountains, fortified enough to pass the emotional barriers of the Lathinade Pass, and virtuous enough to wield the Radon Lithius. Tyrant Raquell Navidium and his Council have elected Ambreson Tellerian to be this Hero.”

Ambre stared in shock and confusion at the short messenger. Me? he wondered. The Hero to retrieve the Sword from the clutches of the wicked Frostmaker?

"You must have the wrong guy," he said to the messenger. "I can't be the Hero-- I'm simply not fit for the--"

"Tyrant Navidium told me himself: Ambreson Tellerian, the outskirts of the Northeastern Sector, the only inhabited house in the area," the messenger declared. "He is to be told that he was appointed the Hero and must go to the Actinade Mountains as soon

as possible."

Ambre's jaw dropped. The messenger flinched at his fangs. "And the Council-- are they still in session?"

"No, they are not-- but the Tyrant might still be there--" Ambre glared at the small messenger. "And, sir, this is a matter of grave importance--"

"Shut up!"

Ambre ran out of his front door, nearly running over the messenger, and started down the path toward the heart of the city. Though the path was covered in weeds, torn-up stones, and other debris, Ambre had no trouble from them. It was his path, after all, and he knew it well. All the while, he could only think of the task that the Council had set out for him. Why me? he wondered. They could have picked any number of people, all more suited to the task than Ambre was. There was Delas Arsetius, the war hero-- there was Ventira Atrius, the witch-doctor-- there were a million other people they could have picked before Ambreson Tellerian. He should have been their last choice.

Who would put the fate of their land in the hands of a vampire?

Ambre slowed as he reached the tall, fortified stone walls of the Capitol. He drew nearer, his eyes catching the guards who lined the perimeter of the building. Looking up, he could see more and more of them-- even the hidden snipers on the roof. He hoped to the gods that they wouldn't take issue with him. Ambre was no threat, not really, and one would hope that he harbored no ill will against the Tyrant. He was the chosen Hero, after all.

Though, that one little fact made him resent the Council just a little bit.

Ambre climbed up the tall marble steps with ease, drawing the stares of the many guards. He could just barely hear the slight twang as archers readied an arrow; he made himself swallow down his fear. Even if they shot him, unless they pierced him right through the heart, it wouldn't really cause any damage. Sure, it would hurt like hell, but being terrified by the prospect was a little too much for Ambre.

Two guards-- large men, both wearing low fur hats and the same neat style of beard-- approached Ambre as he climbed up on to the last step. One of them tapped his cane twice while the other one put a hand on his sword. Vampires didn't exactly have the best reputation in Acadia-- mostly because of those like the one who'd turned Ambre.

But he was the Hero. The guards would have to let him in.

"What is your business?" the first asked, his voice perfectly matching the rest of him. "The Council is no longer in session and the Tyrant is not seeing people at the moment."

"I am Ambreson Tellerian and I am the Council's chosen Hero." He tried to make himself sound as firm and sure as possible. Both of the guards did a double take. "And I would like to request an audience with Tyrant Navidium."

"We require identification," the second guard pitched in.

"What? What could I possibly show--?"

The guards began to whisper to each other, just as puzzled as Ambre. The taller one-- Ambre vaguely thought that his name might have been Eaven-- took a step forward and inched his sword out of its sheath. The show of violence worried Ambre. He swore that he could hear a few of the guards pull back on their bows just a little-- others just stayed unmoving, watching him. If Ambre had a pulse, he knew that it would have gone up just then.

He was afraid of death, even if it was the least rational fear he could have.

"Listen," Ambre started, his voice shaking. "I don't mean anyone any harm-- I just want to talk to the Tyrant about the mission he's laid out for me."

Eaven looked at his shorter companion and nodded. "Fetch the portrait." The second guard nodded and ran toward the line that surrounded the Capitol, asking the first guard something. The question went down the line until a messenger ran out with a parchment scroll. The first guard retrieved it and brought it back to Eaven. The scroll was opened and hung out, the two guards comparing it to Ambre.

"Well," said Eaven. "You must be the Hero, then."

Finally, thought Ambre. It had taken them long enough to figure that out. "So I can enter the Capitol?"

"You need an escort."

"What?" Two guards stepped out of line, walking over to stand by either side of Ambre, both towering over him. Eaven turned around and resumed his place in line.

"We will accompany you to the Tyrant," said the guard to Ambre's left as they

started walking up the remainder of the stairs with him. At the door, the other guard pulled out a small, red amulet and pushed it into an indentation in the wall. The door slid open and the two guards rushed Ambre inside. “We will go as far as the door with you.”

Ambre sighed. “Thanks, but, um... why exactly are you doing this?” he asked. The long hall didn’t catch his attention-- he wasn’t a man interested in those precious things that were stored within the Capitol of Acadia. However, the door to the Armory did not go unnoticed. It was a tall, metal door with so many locks that even Ambre lost count. How could anyone-- let alone the Frostmaker-- get through that?

“Only a member of the Guard of Acadia can open the Capitol’s door,” the second guard said. His voice was a bit higher in pitch than the other guard’s. “Besides that, security’s a lot tighter here after the theft.”

“Ah.” Ambre nodded. “Do you know how he did it?”

“Yes. One of the Frostmaker’s agents was working here, right under our noses!” Ambre decided that he liked this man a whole lot more than the other guard. “And he was the man who stole the Sword.”

“What was his name?” Ambre asked.

“Michael Pedesonius,” said the guard.

“We’re here,” the first guard grunted, almost shoving Ambre face-first into the tall, wooden door. In its center, it was engraved with a painted version of the Land’s symbol. There was a smaller replica of it, right by his eye, and the kinder guard again raised his necklace to it. He turned it thrice, and there was a sound of something large and heavy sliding, then a click. The doors creaked open. “Go in, vampire. We can do no more for you.”

The other guard winked at Ambre as he walked inside. “Good luck.” Ambre just nodded at him. He wished he hadn’t downed that blood so fast; his stomach was churning and his head was spinning. He felt sick from nervousness, which was oddly foreign to him. He hadn’t been sick in a long, long time. Ambre started down the narrow, dark hall toward the main room. He could already hear two voices bouncing off of the stone, a conversation. The open room is coming up soon-- Ambre can tell by the way too-bright, flickering torch light streams into the mouth of the hallway. He rubs his eyes.

“And he will have an aide, if he requests one,” a male voice said. Ambre could

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recognize it almost immediately as Tyrant Navidium’s voice. “Lady Equia-- please, listen to me.”

“Yes, but the man is stubborn,” Lady Equia protested. “I know him. He will not take help unless it’s on his own terms--”

Navidium sighed. “Then let him have his own terms, Equia.”

“I would not advise that.” The older woman sounded bitter, though it was hard to tell because her back was toward Ambre. Not being able to see someone’s facial expressions always put a damper on his ability to read their tone. “He is fi--”

“Hello, Mr. Tellerian,” Tyrant Raquell Navidium stated, his eyes moving from Lady Equia to Ambre.

“I am here to seek your audience,” Ambre responded, bowing low as per courtesy.

“Your request is granted.” Navidium smiled. Lady Equia looked at Ambre closely before sitting down at her tall chair. “So, our Hero, what would you like to talk about?”

“Why am I your Hero?” Ambre asked, meeting Navidium’s warm amber eyes. Navidium looked back into the unfeeling greys and smiled once more.

“Because the Council and I feel that you are the ideal choice for the task we have presented to you.” Tyrant Navidium stood and started descending the long, stone staircase that lead from his throne-like seat. He held his arms outstretched, his long blue robe billowing behind him. “We trust that you will be able to do this, Mr. Tellerian. Otherwise, we would not have chosen you. Isn’t that right, Lady Equia?” He shot a glance back to the old, soft woman. She, in turn, looked at Ambre and nodded.

“You will be able to retrieve the Radon Lithius from the Frostmaker,” Equia said, the lines of her face turning harsh in the bright light of the torch beside her. “The fate of our land depends on that, Mr. Tellerian. And thus, there is no backing out.”

Ambre took a few steps forward, his bare feet making no sound on the hard stone floor. “I really don’t think I’m the right person for this job,” he argued. “Isn’t there Delas, Ventira? They’re both better choices for this--”

“Neither of them have all three of the qualities required for this task,” Equia replied, taking a few steps of her own.

“And those qualities are?”

“You will find out along your journey, Ambreson,” Tyrant Navidium said, taking the final few steps toward Ambre. “But, you must understand that this is a quest you must go on. There is no getting out of it. You must take this task and fulfill it. For the sake of all of us. Please, Ambreson Tellerian.” The Tyrant’s eyes were wide and pleading, but Ambre looked anywhere but at his leader. “And, if it is any consolation, we will not bother you at all after this. Not for vampire registration, not for news, not for anything. You will be allowed a very private life.”

Ambre paused, idly fumbling with the ring he wore around a chain. Alright, so the Capitol’s agents were a little pushy about everything involving state matters. It would be rather nice to live out the rest of his existence without their pestering. All Ambre really wanted was to be left alone-- but, then again, that was why he was so hesitant to go on this quest in the first place. But, he supposed, it really was a good thing he was going to do. And-- by the look in Lady Equia’s eyes-- he would be forced to do it if he declined. Ambre looked up at Tyrant Navidium and nodded.

“Fine. I’ll do it.”

Navidium smiled at him, then clapped him on the shoulder. “Good then. You may leave when you like, so long as it’s today. Now, prepare.”

And so Ambre prepared. Once he was back at his house, he slipped on a pair of shoes. He slung a small pack over his shoulder and filled it with his remaining vials of blood--who knew how long he’d be there. He slid his knife into his pocket and made sure that the chain he’d strung his ring on was secure around his neck. Ambre left, saying goodbye to nobody, and headed straight for the mountains under cover of night. He yawned as he reached the edge of the forest, the sun just peeking over the horizon. Ambre laid down in a shady cove and slept through the day.

When he awoke, he was no longer alone. Ambre could hear the sounds of two people arguing by the mountain. He stood and ran to the foot of the mountain’s path-- better to get his start, anyway--and he saw the two he’d heard arguing.

“The Council’s Hero isn’t here,” one of them said. A girl. She was average height, with short, ragged hair-- though it was hard to tell, due to the pack she was wearing. A simple sword was at her hip, and Ambre could see the small arsenal of daggers in their pouches around her waist.

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“And you should wait for this Hero to come,” the man said. He was tall and young, but with the soft hands and gentle manner of one of the Land’s elders. His hair was long and he tied it back in a ponytail. His robes swept the floor beneath him.

“Listen, alchemist,” the girl replied, taking a step toward him. The man stumbled back. “I’m gonna get the Radon Lithius, the Land needs it, and I figure that if their Hero’s not gonna--”

“No, I’m here,” Ambre said, approaching the two. They both looked at him; they both sized him up in their own ways. “I’m the Council’s Hero, and I’m here to retrieve the Radon Lithius from the Frostmaker.”

The girl’s eyes-- well, eye, as her right eye was covered with a simple black eye patch-- widened. “You’re Ambreson Tellerian, right?” she asked. “You’re a vampire but I heard that you don’t eat people.”

Ambre couldn’t help but laugh. He was a bit of a legend in the town for being the only vampire who accepted donations instead of just going around and killing people. Even though not many people had ever met him, they still spread the rumors. “Yeah, I am. But you can call me Ambre.” He smiled at the two. “And who are you?”

“I’m Nadine Callalium,” the girl announced, taking a step forward. She stuck out a hand for Ambre. “And I’m second in command of the Guild of Thieves in the city.” She grinned as Ambre shook her hand. “But I’m here to get the Sword to... mend things between us thieves and the Council.”

Ambre nodded at her. “And you?” he asked the man. He bowed low.

“My name is Fasithian Xythli, and I am the alchemist who has found the secret to elongating human life.” He offered a small, soft hand for Ambre. “It is a pleasure and an honor to meet you.”

The weight of being the Hero started to settle on Ambre’s shoulders when Fasithian said “honor”. “And why were you two arguing?”

“Well, like I said, I was here to get the Sword for the Council, but he--” Nadine jerked a thumb at Fasithian. “--he told me that I should wait for the real Hero to get the Sword--”

“And,” Fasithian cut in, “I thought it would be unwise to allow a thief to retrieve the Radon Lithius...”

“And anyway, that all doesn’t matter now.” Nadine turned her glare to Ambre. She folded her arms across her chest. “Because the real Hero is here, and you’re gonna go off and save the day.” Nadine made a small, indignant noise in the back of her throat. “Good luck getting through the Lathinade Pass all by yourself!” She started to walk away, Fasithian’s sorrowful eyes following her, but Ambre cleared his throat and she stopped.

“Listen, Nadine,” Ambre said, “did I ever say that I don’t need help?” She looked back at him, her fiery eyes showing interest. “The Council never said I couldn’t--” He couldn’t believe that he was saying this, but angering people was one of the things that irritated Ambre to no end. Besides, having help would get him through this journey faster-- and all he really wanted was to go back to his house, for his life to go back to normal. “--and so I guess I can.” He smiled and fiddled with his ring.

“I’d catch up to you, anyway,” Nadine grumbled, walking back toward Ambre. Fasithian fidgeted where he stood, looking at his feet.

“And you can come, too, if you want.” Ambre smiled at the alchemist, who looked up.

His eyes screamed “yes,” even though he mouthed “me?”

Nadine sighed. “Why him?”

Ambre shrugged. “He just seems lonely. And besides, I’m no good at alchemy-- who knows when it’ll come in handy, right?”

“I’ll go,” Fasithian whispered.

“Then it’s a deal.”

The trek up the path to get to the Lathinade was silent and uneventful. No bears jumped out of trees to eat them, no crazy shepherds tried to impale them, and the tension between the three was so thick that Nadine’s sword would have trouble slicing through it. It was still nighttime when they reached the icy stretch of the Lathinade Pass.

“It’s freezing,” Nadine muttered as the shrubbery got scarce.

“What were you expecting?” Ambre asked. “The Lathinade Pass is the land of the Frostmaker!”

“Yeah, yeah,” she replied, “shut up.”

“I can help.” Fasithian pulled a few crystal vials out of his pocket and muttered a

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few words. A small bubble floated up and around them, warming the air. Its seeming fragility intimidated Ambre and he made sure to stay far away from its edges.

“Thanks,” Nadine said, looking over at Fasithian.

“You’re welcome.”

As they started through the Pass, Ambre noticed how old Fasithian seemed. It was in his eyes-- how wisdom steeped within them, like a dark tea. The way he walk showed the years he carried on his back. Ambre figured that the alchemist was probably older than he was. It was a bit of a relief, even.

Nadine was distant. She stayed far away from the others, walking along the side of the path and carefully turning her daggers in her hands. Though Ambre got a few responses out of Fasithian, Nadine seemed to ignore what he said to her. Ambre found that curious, as he could feel her staring at him when she thought he wasn’t looking. Even so, he caught himself staring at her on more than one occasion.

But she didn’t even thank him when she tripped and he kept her off the ground. That bugged Ambre, if only a little.

Fasithian watched them with his wise, wide eyes and smiled at that. Ambre caught his eyes, raising a questioning eyebrow to that small reaction.

“It seems that interactions between people who are so disinterested in each other have not changed,” Fasithian said as he passed Ambre, smiling and hinting at something. The briefest idea of what he was talking about flashed through Ambre’s mind, but that was a simply preposterous idea.

Ambre’s eyes were heavy as the sun started to rise once more. He leaned against a rock. “We’ve got to stop,” he muttered, looking at his companions. “I hope you don’t mind sleeping in the sunlight for a few days.” Ambre managed a smile. “Cause you’re not going on without me.”

Nadine cast a glance at Fasithian, who shrugged. “Alright,” she said, rolling out a blanket from the pack that she’d strapped to her back and laying on top of it. Fasithian solidified the wall of heat around them and laid down, as well. Ambre found a small cove of rocks and curled up under there. He was the first to fall asleep.

The second night was much easier for them. Ambre awoke at dusk and downed one of his vials, then saw Fasithian and Nadine talking in the other corner. He caught

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murmurs of their conversation -- it seemed to be about the task ahead of them, how they were somehow going to help Ambre. He smiled as he walked over. “Am I interrupting anything?”

“Nah, not really,” Nadine said before Fasithian could even open his mouth. She’d already rolled up her supplies, her pack just as neat as before. Ambre noticed the remains of a few rabbits in the space where they were sitting. “Wanna head out?”

“The sooner the better,” Fasithian added, standing as well. He smiled and brushed off his robes.

“Alright, then,” Ambre said, and they started walking once more.

Even with Fasithian’s bubble of heat around them, the cold was starting to get to Nadine. Ambre wondered why she had worn a loose shirt and loose pants when she knew that the Lathinade Pass was so cold. At one point, he’d offered her his shirt, but she turned him down.

“Don’t want our Hero to die of frostbite.” She pushed on, despite his protests to the contrary. “I don’t even care, Ambre. I’m not gonna let it get to me. ‘Sides, why is the Council’s chosen Hero so insistent on making friends with a thief like me?” She winked at him and took a few long steps to get ahead of Ambre. He was too irritated to try and catch up with her.

Though they were more comfortable with each other this night, it seemed to stretch on for much longer. They pushed through the icy wasteland, making idle conversation and learning more about each other.

“This is my shark tooth necklace,” Nadine said, showing the string of long, white teeth to Fasithian. “I traded it for a band of turquoise. Got it from a Thieves’ Guild from the seaside city.” Fasithian held it carefully, examining each tooth.

“This will bring you good luck,” he replied softly. Fasithian passed it back to Nadine, who put the necklace back on. She smiled at him.

“See, he’s not so bad,” Ambre said to Nadine a few minutes later, making sure that Fasithian was out of earshot.

Nadine shrugged. “You know how long this pass is?”

“No, not really,” Ambre replied with a shrug. “Maybe a few days, at the most.”

“Are you gonna just forget me after that, Hero?” she asked.

Ambre shook his head. “No, I won’t.”

“What makes you so sure? I mean, I’m just a thief girl.” And Nadine was gone again, disappearing ahead of Ambre to hunt for skinny, weak rabbits. Ambre followed her this time, though, his soft shoes and light step making no noise against the hard-packed snow. “What d’you want, Tellerian?” she asked, not looking up from the tracks that she followed.

“How hard is it to be a thief?” Ambre asked her. Nadine stood and looked back at him, raising her left eyebrow.

“Pretty damn hard, sometimes,” she replied, going back to her work.

“How’d you lose your eye?”

Nadine froze. She raised a hand to her eye patch, covering it up. “Why do you want to know?” she wondered stiffly.

Ambre took a step back. “Um... I was just curious, I guess.”

“Some things are better left unasked, Hero.” Nadine went on with her tracking, absolutely ignoring Ambre.

A little while later, Ambre made his way back to talk to Fasithian. “Hey,” he started, smiling.

“Hello, Ambre,” Fasithian replied, smiling back. “Where did you get that ring?”

“Um, you mean this?” Ambre held up the ring that was on the chain around his neck. Fasithian nodded. “My mother gave it to me when I was a child. I’ve had it for most of my life...”

“Interesting...”

“How old are you?” Ambre blurted out before Fasithian could say anything else.

However, just as Fasithian was about to reply, a bear crawled across the path ahead of them. Nadine ran straight into it, eliciting a growl from the bear. Nadine stepped back, grabbing one of her daggers. The bear growled again, pacing closer to Nadine. She readied the dagger. Time seemed to slow around her as the bear swung at her leg. Nadine barely escaped its paw, though she ended up with ribbon-like strips of skin hanging where the creature’s claws had hit her. Blood poured out of the cuts, and Ambre couldn’t help but stare. She grit her teeth, managing to lodge one of her daggers in the bear’s shoulder. It cried out and swung at her again, though it missed this time. Thick blood

poured out of its wound and matted down its fur.

Even though Ambre was frozen to the spot by the sight (and smell) of blood, Fasithian wasn't. He grabbed a small stone and two different colored vials from his pouch, carefully putting them together and throwing the resulting mixture at the bear. The smell of that thing cut through the smell of blood, snapping Ambre out of his trance. The bear whimpered and backed away from the stone. However, Nadine seemed to be caught by the scent, frozen to the spot in her own way. Before the bear had a last chance to snap at Nadine, Ambre ran toward her and pushed her out of its way. The sudden movement in turn startled the bear, who ran back to its place in the waste.

“What-- thanks,” Nadine said, a hint of a blush hitting her cheeks. Though Ambre liked the warmth of her body next to his, the blood made him take a step back. She looked at the ground, at her sliced leg, and winced. “Oh.”

Ambre retreated to a corner while Fasithian patched up Nadine's leg. He grabbed one of his blood vials with shaking hands and drank about half of it before slipping it away. If he'd lost control there-- with Nadine, of all people-- he would never let that go. He was just too empathetic, he supposed. He'd gone soft, even. Or maybe he just liked these people he'd come to travel with.

Especially her.

After helping out Nadine, Fasithian walked over to Ambre. “She'll be fine,” he said in response to Ambre's questioning gaze. “But you need something to defend yourself with, or even to protect yourself with. That knife won't help. It didn't help.” Fasithian paused. “So I will teach you Alchemy.”

Fasithian stayed by Ambre as they kept walking, listening to Ambre talk about the theories he'd learned from the books he'd read. Every once in a while, he would pitch in with a word of advice about alchemy. “You know,” he said, “you're the only people who really listen to me anymore.”

“That's because we've been climbing up this icy mountain pass with you,” Fasithian replied, his eyes sparkling with wisdom. “And I suspect that we are all lonely, under the surface.”

The third night, Ambre could tell that they were almost there. Even with the help of Fasithian's medicines, Nadine was still limping, though she seemed okay. The moon

sparkled over the snow and cast watery reflections onto the mountain’s side. The group talked this time, making jokes to each other and laughing at Fasithian’s old-fashioned ones. Fasithian taught bits and pieces of his alchemic knowledge to Ambre, who took to practicing what he knew whenever possible. Nadine talked about a few of her objects and where she had gotten them. Her fiery eyes would light up when she told the stories of her conquests, the epic battles she’d fought against rival guilds and guards. Something about that made Ambre feel warm inside-- though he wasn’t exactly sure why.

“Because we are here to defeat the Frostmaker,” Fasithian said to Ambre, “I will first teach you how to create fire.” Ambre nodded as Fasithian bent over to pick up a rock. He tossed it in his hand. “You can do this with any rock-- even this one.” In the pale moonlight, Ambre could see bits of ice sparkling on its surface. “You just need this.” He pulled a small vial out of his pouch. It was unlabeled-- as were all of his other vials-- and it was filled with a translucent, reddish liquid. He uncorked the vial. “Its name is not important right now. You can learn that from the books.”

Fasithian dabbed a bit of the liquid on his finger and ran it along the surface of the rock. As he did so, he muttered a string of nonsensical words. Ambre took note of these words that he said, imprinting them in his mind with every repetition. Three times, and the stone lit on fire.

“And that is how you can make fire.”

The fire burnt out fairly quickly, however, and Ambre was almost sad to see it fizzle down. Nadine had watched with some degree of curiosity as well, even though she wasn’t at all interested in alchemy.

“Now you try,” Fasithian told Ambre, passing him a rock and the vial. Ambre’s hands shook as he pulled out the cork and covered his fingers with the liquid. It stung a little, a shocking sensation to Ambre-- who hadn’t really felt pain in years. He traced lines on the rock, carefully saying the incantation over and over. However, on his third repetition of those words, nothing happened. Ambre sighed. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Nadine frown.

“You mispronounced it,” Fasithian remarked. He repeated his saying, making Ambre say it after him. “Now try again,” he said when he was pleased with Ambre’s results.

Ambre tried once more-- but he was in the middle of his second time saying the incantation when the ground rumbled. He looked up, almost dropping his rock in surprise, and saw the approaching two creatures.

They were humanoid, but they were too tall and too bulky to be human. Their skin, rough and sharp on the edges, glittered in the moonlight. The light even seemed to go through parts of this exoskeleton, showing only small bubbles on the inside.

“They’re Ice Warriors.” Somehow, Fasithian managed to stay calm as he said that. He knelt and dug through the snow and ice, grabbing a few stones. “Don’t directly fight them-- Nadine.” He looked up to make meaningful eye contact with her, but she had already unsheathed her sword. She stood with her left side forward, sword up as a warning. “You might break that--”

Fasithian was cut off by the shaking of the ground as the Warriors drew nearer. He passed a couple of the rocks to Ambre and pulled out a second vial of the reddish liquid. Ambre ran over the words in his mind-- exactly what to say to set the stone on fire-- it was his only hope.

The Ice Warriors towered over the group, easily ten or twelve feet tall. Ambre’s eyes widened as he saw one up close-- it was made out of ice! It was a moving, fighting warrior that was entirely made out of ice!

Just then, Ambre felt a blow to his side and went tumbling into the snow. He held on to his materials, however. It had been truly foolish of him to have let that happen. He could even hear Fasithian’s voice, reprimanding him in his head. Ambre got to his feet and started rubbing one of the rocks with the liquid, muttering the incantation under his breath. Three times and it caught fire.

Fasithian was already launching the rocks at the Warriors, driving them back and melting holes through one. Ambre followed suit, throwing his first rock at the one that Nadine was whittling away. Though Fasithian had said that a sword would be useless, she was managing to get some damage in with hers. Ambre was thoroughly impressed-- and, had Fasithian seen it, Ambre was sure that he would be impressed as well.

The monster shrieked as the rock hit it. Ambre prepared another rock-- twice, this time, to get it to light-- and hurled it at the Ice Warrior’s leg, giving it a severe limp. Two more rocks to go and already both of those creatures were crippled. The one that

Fasithian was battling was horrible to see-- half-melted, with random, deep pits in its chest and legs. There were a couple of holes, too, and it was limping as well.

Ambre aimed his next rock at the Warrior’s head. It missed, however, hitting the thing in its shoulder. He prepared and threw his last rock, hitting the Warrior square in its other knee. It toppled to the ground, shattering on impact. Nadine had just barely missed the flying shards of ice, and she grinned at Ambre as she ran over to him. “That was awesome, Ambre!” she shouted, hugging him tightly.

Over her shoulder, Ambre saw Fasithian’s Ice Warrior scream a death cry and fall onto the ground. Though it didn’t quite have the fireworks that the other had, it still seemed pretty spectacular. Fasithian sat down immediately, slipping his vial into his pouch and resting for a moment.

Then, they started moving again.

In the middle of the night, Fasithian remarked that the path was getting narrower.

“What’s wrong with that, ‘Thian?” Nadine asked, leaning against the side of the mountain, accidentally shaking some snow loose over Ambre’s head. He just shook it off.

“I think we’re coming to his cave,” Fasithian replied in soft tones.

“Oh,” Ambre muttered, taking the lead. “Well, then. Are you prepared?”

Nadine and Fasithian looked at each other and then at Ambre, both nodding. There was a bit of blood smudged on Nadine’s fingers from her earlier meal of scrawny rabbit, and that reminded Ambre that he’d forgotten to eat that evening. He downed a bottle of blood then continued up the path. Soon, it became so steep and narrow that he had to climb up sideways, leaning his back against the mountain to stay on. The three travelers continued along in silence, their backs pressed against the rough and rocky side of the mountain. Ambre hit the flat top first, staring at the wide open cave in front of him. So this was it. The Frostmaker’s cave. Nadine and Fasithian quickly caught up, and Nadine stood next to Ambre. She grinned at the open mouth of danger.

“Come on then,” she said, walking toward the cave. “This has got to be it.”

Ambre and Fasithian followed her lead inside, eyes open wide for anything that might come out at them unexpectedly. Ambre envied Nadine’s courage, just strutting into the cave like she owned the place. How typical. Just then, a large chunk of ice flew at

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them, followed by a high-pitched shriek of laughter. Fasithian quickly erected a shield that seemed to be made out of fire. Nadine pulled out her sword and a short, sharp dagger. She turned back to Ambre.

“You go find the Sword,” she told him, slicing a large cube of the ice in half. “We’ll take care of ol’ Frosty here--”

“No!” Ambre protested, his hand hovering over his knife. “Nadine-- we’re supposed to be in this together, you know that? You said it.”

She just grinned at Ambre. “Yeah, but this is your quest, Hero. Go do your job. Get that Sword and meet us on your way out, alright?”

Ambre hesitated before catching sight of the hole in the cave wall, leading into darkness. “Well... alright. Stay safe. Make sure ‘Thian stays alive. Keep yourself alive, while you’re at it.”

“Got it, bloodsucker.” Nadine winked and nodded toward the hole. “Go for it.”

Ambre nodded at her, watching her charge into battle. Then he started for the small hole. He just barely made it, nearly slipping on the icy floor. The ceiling in there was low, and the darkness was artificial--even Ambre couldn’t see a thing. He attempted to make some light in there using a few of the methods that Fasithian had taught him, but to no avail. In the end, he felt very trapped as he inched along.

The world dropped out from under him, and Ambre nearly went along with it. He scrambled, swinging himself and trying to get back onto the land above him. Who even knew how long that underground passage he’d found himself in would go? He got up to his elbows, then his stomach, and then he was sliding penguin-style. Down, down, down the hallway. Ambre wondered if he could even call it a proper hallway.

The air shifted. He put out an uncertain hand, feeling the space in front of him. It opened up. Ambre walked forward again, noticing the slight change in temperature. He frowned and kept going, every step careful and measured. No more falling in deep, deep holes. Ambre followed the air current and went rightwards, to another open passage. At the end, there seemed to be a sort of glowing, golden light. Aha! That had to be the Radon Lithius!

Ambre broke into a run to get to it, but ended up falling on his back when he hit an invisible force field. He cursed and stood up, tapping the field. Ambre fired a few test

shots at it, both with his knife and by conjuring some fire with the rocks. Why wasn't Fasithian there? He was simply the best there was at alchemy. This stupid force field would have been no problem for him!

Ambre got to thinking. Well, if this was a force field, how was he to get past it? There was no way to get through it, and he quickly determined that it went from one wall to the other. He leaned against the wall to the left of the door he needed to go through, thinking as hard as he could. Ambre heaved a sigh and pressed his back fully to the wall.

Not so fully. His shoulder hit an open point.

A second passage!

Ambre got to his feet and approached the passage, knife out just in case. There were no threats. It just seemed that the passage wasn't even there. That's the point then, he figured, starting down the hallway. It was an awfully narrow hallway. An awfully dark hallway. He wished that he could have the tall, open, well-lit hallway that lead directly to the Sword--but this hallway still did that! He could see the golden light spilling at his feet, even though the hallway was getting more and more claustrophobic. The Radon Lithius was just in reach. If only he could...

Ambre was scooting down the hallway, on his side, the wall pressing against his back and his chest. It was becoming a dull pain to him, and that must have been a bad thing. He grit his teeth and continued down, down, down, having more and more trouble breathing. Eventually, he just gave that up. But the light got stronger, and stronger, and it seemed to pull Ambre more and more out of the tight hallway.

He collapsed in front of a tall stone pedestal. The source of the light was perched on top. Ambre picked himself up and shielded his eyes, looking at the Radon Lithius.

The Sword was something that very many people knew about, but that very few people had seen. It was long and sleek, its bright blade engraved with an intricate drawing of a dragon. The large, clear stone on its hilt was the source of the light, and the light flowed like a river down the carving. The light itself was soft and harsh, all at once.

And it was right there.

Ambre closed his eyes, reaching out and taking it. The Sword was surprisingly light in his hands, and it almost seemed to buzz with some unseen energy. Ambre ran a hand up and down its smooth metal, careful to avoid the sharp blade. Then, the Sword

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spoke in a voice within Ambre’s mind.

You are the one they sent to retrieve the Radon Lithius, the voice stated. Do you believe that you are fit to wield this Sword? The voice was soft and loud, booming and whispering in Ambre’s head. It was like a light rainstorm with heavy thunder. *Only one who is worthy can wield this Sword.*

“I don’t think I am,” Ambre replied, eyes screwed shut. The Sword pulsed with energy.

Humility, the voice spoke. It almost laughed. Why do you feel that you are unfit to wield this Sword?

Ambre could feel it searching his mind, his memories, his soul. He swallowed. “I’m just me. I’m just this vampire with no one in the world but myself.”

But that’s a lie now, isn’t it? the voice teased, flashing the images of Nadine and Fasithian in his head. *A hero must claim his reward.*

“You are my reward!” he shouted in frustration. “I need to-- to get you back to the city, to the Capitol’s Armory!”

And driven, too. The Sword’s voice chuckled. *Then you shall wield me until we return to the city. Once you are in the darkness... you must find the light.*

“What does that even mean?” Ambre started walking toward the passage again. *Observe.*

Ambre Tellerian was brought to his knees by the force of the memory that the Radon Lithius was inflicting upon him. He struggled to get to his feet, to drop the Sword and run-- but he couldn’t move, just descend into his own personal Hell.

A dark night sky floated above him. His heart felt empty, free. He was an adult now, and he could go where he wanted, when he wanted. He ran down the open city streets. Though he had been advised to stay in at that hour-- who were they to tell him what to do?! He could go where he wanted, when he wanted. He kept down the streets as darkness settled over the city. He looked up, at the Capitol. The wind fluttered down the street, warm and buttery. He loved summer.

Then, he was pinned against the wall. The only warmth he could feel was the blood pouring out of his neck. He lay crumpled on the ground as the bleeding stopped and the change started. He screamed to deaf ears.

“I have to get back to the Capitol,” he breathed raggedly, hand still wrapped around the Sword. Ambre realized that he had been whispering that one sentence over and over through the whole dream. “I have to get back to the Capitol.” Ambre got to his feet and leaned against the wall. The Sword was silent, but hummed in his hands. It felt pleased. The last tremors of phantom pain passed through his arms.

Ambre soon felt fortified again and he made a choice. He charged forward, the Sword shattering the force field. Ambre continued in a straight line. Back down the passage he’d come from, the Radon Lithius lighting his way. He broke out into the mouth of the cave, seeing it empty but for some blood. Ambre ignored it and charged down the center of the cave, thoughts set on the Frostmaker-- and his friends.

You could leave now, you know, the Sword cooed in Ambre’s mind. Ambre shook his head and pressed on through the cave. *Why not, Tellerian? Your quest is complete. You can just go back to the Capitol and they will reward you accordingly.*

“Because my friends are down there,” Ambre whispered. The Radon Lithius fell silent once more.

He heard the sounds of battle before he saw the crops of ice growing up, up, up, from the floor of the cave to its ceiling. Ambre charged forward, the Radon Lithius held ahead of him. The gem in its hilt still glowed, a fiery amber-red that matched Nadine’s eye. Part of him felt a little stupid, running through an icy mountain cave with a glowing Sword held in front of him-- but the rest of him thought that it was pretty awesome. Through a thick pane of ice, he saw Nadine. Her outline was watery, crystallized, and he could tell that Fasithian was leaning on her. In the distance, Ambre saw the silhouette of the Frostmaker. He was standing on top of something, towering over Ambre’s friends.

“I’ve got the sword!” Ambre cried, hitting the wall of ice with the Radon Lithius.

The ice cracked, a spider web of fractures arching over its surface, then it shattered. A million little pieces of ice came tumbling down onto Ambre-- but he didn’t really care. He couldn’t feel anything. The Frostmaker, standing atop his throne of ice, came into clear view. He stared, open-mouthed, at Ambre. The Radon Lithius was held high, its light reflecting around the cavern. The Frostmaker jumped, soaring over Nadine and Fasithian’s heads, and landed in front of Ambre. He grit his teeth.

“You...,” the Frostmaker seethed, holding his arms out to the sides. He bristled,

sparks of frost spinning around his hands. He swung at Ambre, who countered with the side of the Sword. Slowly, he hacked into the Frostmaker’s thin arms, through layers of thick ice. The Frostmaker pushed him back, and Ambre’s feet dug into the soft flakes of frost layering the floor.

“This is for Fasithian!” Nadine cried, suddenly behind the wizard.

The Frostmaker gasped and choked as Nadine’s sword slid through his chest. He coughed as she slit his throat with her dagger, digging deep into his flesh. The man tumbled forward, and Ambre stepped out of the way just in time as he fell on the ground. Nadine pulled her long sword out of his back before sliding it into its sheath. The simple steel glittered blood-red in the light of the Radon Lithius’ gem. The Frostmaker took in one last, shaky breath before deflating on the ground.

Ambre looked behind Nadine, seeing Fasithian laying on the ground, shaking. He kneeled down next to the alchemist, taking one of his hands and feeling for a pulse. It was barely there.

“Nadine!” Ambre called. She ran over, before bending down and picking Fasithian up. Ambre stood, too, and looked at the wall of broken ice in front of him. He started on his way out, still carrying the Sword, and making sure that he could hear Nadine following him.

Nadine was carrying Fasithian’s limp form in her arms when she caught up. “He told me to go outside to do this. You should come, too,” she whispered to Ambre. He nodded sadly, following Nadine as she walked back out of the cave. The Radon Lithius dragged behind him, like it was part of this sick funeral procession as well. They made it back to the flat, open land in front of the cave at the crack of dawn. Ambre didn’t feel so tired, though. Fasithian whispered something to Nadine, and she put him down on the ground. His dark blood seeped into the pale snow, tainting it.

“Fasithian,” Ambre said, kneeling next to him. “Please don’t die.”

“It is my time, Ambreson,” he whispered, his years showing on his face. “And it has been a very good time here, for me. Thank you.” Ambre nodded, and he wished he could cry. Fasithian reached out toward him. “May I see your ring?”

Ambre passed it to him without a word. Fasithian whispered something to it, and it was enveloped in a dark glow. He held it out to Ambre, who took it and held it tightly

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in his hand. The ring was warm. “It should work again, now,” he wheezed. “An anti-gravity ring. With it, you can fly. You might--” Fasithian’s words were dead whispers, and he stared up at the sky. He convulsed once, twice, three times-- then his chest fell and he was done.

The ground jolted beneath their feet, and Ambre looked at Nadine. “Let’s get the hell out of here,” she said. Ambre nodded, slipping his ring on. Maybe it could help...

He was overcome by a feeling of lightness. When he jumped, he stayed afloat. Ambre smiled at Nadine and held his hand out to her. She grabbed it, jumping, and floated next to him. The snow at the top of the mountain was still shaking, covering Fasithian’s body in its powder.

“I think that’s how he’d have wanted to be buried,” Ambre whispered when he caught a glance at Nadine’s glazed eyes. She just nodded. “Come on, Nadine. Let’s find some standing ground.” Together, they ascended a little, flying away from the mountain. Then, they let themselves drop slowly, the wind whistling in their ears. In the distance, silhouetted by the rising sun, the City unfolded for Ambre. The Radon Lithius still glowed warmly in Ambre’s hand, and (for once) the rising sun didn’t bother him.

The End.