

Cause

Berion No name sat on the cold stone, his eyes turned down. His hand, like all minotaur hands, had only four digits. They were thick and often made him feel clumsy, or rather they used to, back when he was a young. When he had to work in the mines, before he was chosen and uplifted from one bondage to another.

Just thinking about the past made his hand shake, and quickly he grasped it with his other, to hide the shakes from anyone that might see. He raised his head to check, and saw that no one was looking at him, of course, he was not important. The attention of the courtyard was pointed at the center, at the elevated platform holding two people.

Berion turned his eyes away from them, the world was a cruel place. He learned that long ago, back when he had truly understood what being born a slave meant. He didn't know if he should weep or laugh at his earliest memories, at that child that he used to be. He hadn't even known that life was not supposed to be bondage. He hadn't known anything other than servitude. One of his clearest memories was the moment when he realized the truth. When a servant of his master told him what he was. He hadn't known that he was a slave back then, hadn't understood, he was a child.

He had been a well-cared for slave, true, but one nevertheless. Berion raised his head and looked at the two people on the platform, looked at the one standing, remembering the moment when Kael had saved him from that fate.

“Kill him!” The master yelled. Berion looked at him, unable to rouse any emotion. Other slaves and guards sat on the ground around them, their eyes gazing without truly seeing. Trapped in a trance. Even he was filled with tranquility and peace, though he could still think. A woman walked behind the stranger, her staff glowing as roots grew out of the ground and wrapped around all of them, keeping them in place.

“Kill him and save me, Berion!” The slave master yelled as the tall drake with feathered and colorful wings approached him. Berion could feel his collar burning around his neck at the order, forcing him to obey, but he didn’t move.

His master had never allowed Berion to learn how to fight, had never allowed him to learn how to hurt another. It was not something that he knew how to do. Perhaps, if his master had asked Berion to take them away from this place, to help him escape, perhaps then he could’ve roused himself from the trance that gripped him.

Instead, Berion watched as the tall stranger killed his master. He felt the command burn into his mind, telling him to kill himself and join his master. But the trance kept a grip on him, preventing him from acting it out. The collar sent agony into his body as the stranger walked over to Berion, dragging the corpse of his master behind him. He dipped his fingers into the blood of Berion’s master then raised his hand and touched the collar. He removed Berion’s collar then leaned down and looked him in the eye.

“You are free,” he had said.

Berion shook his head. What did freedom mean to someone who had never had it? It had taken Berion years to learn what freedom was, and to understand just exactly what had been stolen from him.

When Kael had killed his master and released Berion from his bondage, Berion had felt anger, hate even toward Kael. He had loved his master, or at least he had thought he had back then. He hadn't understood just how he had been twisted. It had taken a lot of time for Berion to see the truth. It had taken until Kael showed him the world, showed Ber the darkness that spread through the foundations of the factions that ruled the people.

He saw how people were oppressed everywhere, even those who did not wear collars. He had learned much, seen much, he knew that this rotten world was inevitable outcome for as long as people allowed authority over them. They were all supposed to be free, yet the systems put in place around them pulled them all into bondage. He looked around the courtyard, looking at the people gathered. He could feel them as imprints on the space around him. His power pulsed inside of him like a physical thing. It had been years since his encounter with the Warden, Zacharia Gardner. Years since he had glimpsed something great, a step beyond where he was. And Berion had been chasing that power ever since, had felt like it would finally allow him to break all chains of authority.

He looked around at all those who had joined them. All of them had felt the weight of coercive authority on their back, had felt like they had no choice. They had joined because they knew what oppression felt like, and believed wholeheartedly that death was preferable to a life lived in bondage. Among them stood out those who he knew closely, those whom he followed into battle. Fethum, Maya, Tellisa, Exiled Shell, a few others.

Their stories he knew intimately, and knew that they believed in the cause the same way Berion did. That they understood the weight of the blood that they were spilling, and that they hoped that something better could wait for them on the other side. Who better to understand that sacrifice and price, than them. Fethum who rejected the teachings of a nation that forced a place on everyone from birth. That put them all into boxes and allowed no deviation. Maya who was sold to a King, to satisfy

carnal desires of a perverted monster simply because he had the power to make it so. Tellisa, who dedicated her life to caring for a grove, only to see it all burned down for greed. Exiled Shell, whose only crime was refusing to die a pointless death for his Queen.

Kaeliss, born from the love of two different species, who was supposed to be something that brought them all together. And was instead used by those who were vile and without scruples to experiment and advance their own power.

Berion wished that he was powerful enough to force the world to be better without spilling blood. He wished that he could snap his fingers and make it be a beautiful paradise. But he had seen the rotten core in the mines, had felt it around his neck for years. He had grown in power, had grasped and glimpsed at the secrets behind the tapestry that it was all woven in. Yet still, he wasn't strong enough.

Everyone in the courtyard around him had been exploited in some way by the authority above them. Those whom the world tried to make them believe should be in charge, that they had the right, and that they would protect them. All those leaders had failed. Some just because they turned a blind eye to the horrors done by their neighbors, others because they believed that their power gave them the right to infringe on the freedom of others.

Ber felt the space around him, spreading in all directions, he could feel everything in the territory, beyond even if he focused. He could tell when something was happening to the tapestry of space. He was so close to something beyond, he knew it, had known it from the moment he had achieved the title of a Sage.

That short battle against the Warden had pushed him, had shown him the greater heights, and now, perhaps he could find another path. If only he could take that last step.

Berion's attention was pulled back to the platform as Kael started to speak to the woman chained in the center, who glared up at him from her knees.

“Behold, Polima Adir, the great Healer!” Kael spoke. “We are gathered here to pass judgment.”

No one from the audience spoke, instead, the woman was the one who broke the silence. Her voice filled with anger and loathing.

“What judgment can you pass, you fucking murderer,” she spat at Kael. “What right do you have to anything, your hands are soaked in the blood of countless innocents. All of you,” she looked around the courtyard, her eyes blazing with hate. “All of you are the same! All of you are guilty for following him! Monsters, all of you!”

Berion knew that she wasn't wrong. What she didn't understand was that they had all made peace with it, they had decided that their dream was worth more than their souls. Berion closed his eyes, feeling the weight of it all. He felt tempted to slip into his mind, to turn his attention to the space and not what was happening in it. The plane of Space was his great escape from everything. A place that was as infinite as the Infinite Realm, a place where all this death and suffering felt so small and insignificant.

Kael waited for her to finish. “I don't lead, they don't need to be here if they do not want to, that is the difference between us. We are all united by the same dream, and if the price of it is that our names and souls are blackened, then we shall pay it gladly, let the future generations curse us, at least they will be free.”

“You have no right to judge me,” the Healer glared back.

Kael nodded his head. “And so, I do not,” he agreed. “I am not the one passing judgment. I never am. All those I had killed, all those I had hunted, were on behalf of others. I am the Speaker for the Blind, Polima, I only act on their behalf.”

It was never simple, Ber thought to himself. They didn’t judge, but they always had someone who could. For a slave had the right to judge the one that put the collar around their neck. The one who was wronged had the right for their voice to be heard.

Kael gestured, and Ber saw a shuffle near the base of the platform, a moment later a woman climbed up. She was old, had wrinkled skin and gray hair. She walked with the help of a cane. It saddened him to see someone who had not achieved immortality. The knowledge that a life would end just because someone was denied the knowledge and proper guidance to become immortal always pained him. It shouldn’t be this way, not when they could all come together and make it different. If only greed and hubris didn’t interfere.

The woman approached and the Healer frowned. “I don’t know this hag,” she spat.

Kael nodded. “And so you do not, let me introduce you,” he said. “Polima Adir, meet Sana of Fir Village.”

“I’ve waited a long time for this moment,” the old woman’s voice was weak, barely audible, but Ber could feel the pain in it. He understood it, not as intimately as she did, of course, but he knew the rage and the hate behind it. The things that she held close deep inside.

“I don’t know who you are, I have never been to your village. Whatever slight you think I’ve caused you, you are wrong,” the Healer said.

The old woman shook her head, then spoke. “Forty years ago, you passed through the territory of the kingdom I lived in. You stayed for two days in the city near my village, resting on your trip to wherever it was that you were heading. Our village had been afflicted by a plague, and the rulers of the kingdom had isolated it. The plague was highly contagious, it caused people whose bodies were of very low tiers to waste and fail. It spread quickly outside of the village, though the fact that it didn’t afflict higher tiered individuals meant that other places could easily combat it. All they had to do was to level. The rich and influential people quickly did so, leaving it affecting only those who couldn’t afford to level, or those who had no way of leveling—children.”

The Healer frowned, but she didn’t speak.

“We learned of your presence,” the woman said. “And a rider was sent, we believed that our pleas for help had finally been answered, that help had finally arrived. Do you know what you did?”

The Healer didn’t answer.

The woman nodded. “You ignored us. You didn’t even hear our plea. It would’ve taken you nothing to help us. Knowing now all that you could do, you could’ve healed us all from across the territory, you didn’t even need to leave your chair. Instead, all the children in my village died, my son died. Because you couldn’t be bothered to help.”

The Healer’s looked around, she saw everyone looking at her, their faces accusing but there was no hatred there, these people had moved beyond that, only apathy remained. “That was not my fault!” The Healer said. “I didn’t make that sickness; I didn’t cause their deaths!”

“You could’ve prevented them,” Kael said. “You sell your services only to the wealthy, to those who can offer you something. How many people

had died in the core in the last two decades when you could've saved them?"

"You caused those deaths!" She yelled at him. "You opened the dome, don't put their deaths on me. You did all of it, and for what?"

"To create balance, a dream," Kael said slowly.

"Balance? All you created is chaos!"

"Precisely," Kael said. "The only real order of the world is disorder. Only real freedom is when everyone is able to stand on their own, when they don't need others to rely on. All these systems, all these kingdoms, nations, sects, all of these factions, all they cause is inequality and ignorance. The very idea of having them, of having leaders at all, is foolish. Just look at you, look at what you have become. You think that your power should allow you to choose who lives and who dies."

"You hypocrite, you are doing the same thing," the Healer threw back at him.

"Yes," Kael said. "But if I succeed, at least I'll take down all of the other hypocrites down with me. I have a dream about a world where everyone is strong enough to be free. And yes, for that world to come about, many must die. But I look around and I see nothing worth saving here. Look at what has happened, the Exalted Empire has spread, enforcing their zealotry on all who find themselves within their borders. They take away choice and assign roles. How many kingdoms have conquered others? Put their foes in bondage just because they have the power to do it? My only mistake was thinking that one Dome was going to be enough. The world needs a trial greater than that, something that will shatter all nations and all factions. Splinter people into individuals, something that will create legends out of all who survive."

“You are insane, all of you are,” the Healer said.

“You are right,” Kael told her.

Berion closed his eyes for a moment. There were people that were good in this world, he knew it. There were kingdoms and nations that tried to be equal, that protected their people. And yet, they had decided to erase everything, even them. Because what did those small pockets matter when the world was Infinite? When there was more evil than there was good, when those horrible ideas would spread. They had thought long and hard about their decision, decades ago before they started the Unchained even. There had been plans on just leaving, on heading somewhere far away and starting anew. Making something better. Yet... none of them could abandon their past. None of them could turn their eyes to someplace else and forget all those that they would leave behind, the future generations that would come. How many would be born into slavery as Berion was? How many already had, only to live and die without ever having the chance at freedom that Berion had? Too many, and he would not turn away. Better death than a collar.

He opened his eyes and looked back at the old woman as Kael pulled out a knife from his storage. Ber recognized it and felt its power from across the courtyard. He passed the woman the knife and then stepped back.

Kael spread his hands and spoke to the Healer as the old woman approached with the knife.

“Look upon us and see, we are the madness that you created.”

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“You left quickly,” Kael found Berion on a cliff outside of their fort. He came here often when he wanted to meditate.

“I do not enjoy seeing death,” Berion said.

“Neither do I,” Kael said. “What I enjoy is seeing justice.”

Berion looked down at his hand. He closed it in a fist, then slowly opened it up. “Justice...” he repeated.

Kael put a hand on his shoulder. “What is it Ber?”

Ber turned his head, seeing that he was just a tiny bit taller than Kael. His body was different than it used to be, his turquoise scales had been replaced by dark scales and molten lines streaking in between them with antlers adorning his head. He was changed, yet he was still the same. He could always see right through him.

“I am lamenting my weakness,” Berion said.

Kael sighed and turned his eyes to look at the mountains in the distance. “You are everything but weak, Berion.”

“If I was strong, I could reach out through space and free all those who are enslaved. I could touch all those who are guilty and send them to the bottom of the oceans or throw them straight into the void above the sky. Instead, we do this... we spill blood of innocents because we are not strong enough to do it any other way. It is sad Kael.”

“I know, but it is what we have decided on. Once we are done, I’ll gladly let the survivors judge me too. Let them punish me as they see fit, at least we will have broken the order that keeps this world wretched.”

Berion bowed his head, Kael was right, they had agreed.

He took a deep breath, feeling Space all around him. Something was there, just waiting for him to see it and embrace it. Sometimes, he felt as if he could hear whispers, as if he could feel thoughts that were not his own. All speaking about Space, of things that he knew and agreed with, others conflicting with the ideas he held. Sometimes, Space would feel like it was fighting him, and others it would feel as if it was fully under his control, as if it wasn't a law of the universe but an extension of his will. He didn't know what that was, but he could feel something building inside of him, and it was close to rupturing out.

He shook his head, trying to pull himself back when he felt it. Space trembled, just barely. If this happened before his encounter with the Warden, he wouldn't have felt it. But now, as a Sage of Space it stuck out to him like the sun blazing in the center of the sky. A fine control of Space twisted it, and something stepped out behind them.

Berion let his Image out immediately, he opened himself out to the Plane of Space. His Image manifested as a box, invisible to all senses but his own. It surrounded him and gave him complete control of Space within it. He locked down Space around them, he froze all Essence woven in the tapestry and pressed it on the intruder.

He felt a strange will push back, but his will over Space was greater, yet... he couldn't actually touch the intruder. It was as if his body and all that touched it was infused with a Will that was greater than even Berion's.

He turned, Qi moving through his body and ready a technique to throw the intruder across the territory, when he saw who it was and froze.

The intruder was familiar to him, a tall monster, a yeti. His fur was matted with sweat and covered in grime. His armor was torn in places

and blood dried in the fur beneath. His eyes held rings that stared at Berion with... surprise?

“Another one?” The yeti said. “It seems I don’t know nearly as much as I thought I did, curious.”

“Teacher?” Kael said before Berion could react.

He remembered what Kael had told them about the yeti, and he remembered seeing him eradicate a High Ranker with ease. Berion pulled his Image back and released the Space around the yeti, allowing him to move. He still kept the lock on the Space in place.

The yeti’s eyes narrowed at Berion for a moment, but then he turned to Kael and his entire demeanor changed. “Ah, Kael,” he said.

“Teacher,” Kael repeated. “What... why are you here?”

The yeti tilted his head. “I need... time, and a place to learn more. I was hoping that you might be interested in helping with a project of mine. I assure you, it will help your goals as well. So, how would you like to make another bargain?”

The yeti smiled, and Berion felt a chill pass through his veins.