

A Six. With slouched shoulders the young boy walked back through the long hallway of the Determinatrix. A lousy Six. Father was a proud man. The recent passing of his grandmother had made him into the head of an equally proud family. A Six was not going to cut it.

"For generations we have been members of the upper echelons of society. We are Threes. Fours. But never.." his father's voice blasted through the room. In the short pause between the history lesson and his condemnation, Boreas heard his mother weep softly.

The marking on his chest still burnt after a few days. His old friends laughed at him, calling him a peasant. His parents didn't say a word.

He was only nine, yet he knew what it meant to be a Six. If he worked hard enough he could become a Master Builder at best, but never an Architect.

"If not a strong leader, then a staunch follower. You will honor the family in your own limited way," his father spoke to him sternly, "A short life of dedicated service to the Matriarch is all one of your stature can hope to achieve."

Perhaps an able Wingsman, but never a Captain.

Lying in the infirmary, he overheard the healers speaking in hushed tones:

"... used a kitchen knife in an attempt to change his cypher, the little fool. Almost cut straight through his right lung, he did." He didn't want to hurt himself. He just wanted to be what they expected him to be.

His mother had birthed two Stunted before him and they were never spoken of anymore. Whenever he asked about where his brothers or sisters had gone, she used to answer how happy she was that he was born Affinite, her third and only child. Boreas saw her belly grow and feared the worst.

The teachers had started paying less and less attention to him, while the wrong kind of spotlight was shone upon him by his peers. Refuge was found in the dark and musty corners of the library. He taught himself many things in those lonely days, ranging from simple aura manipulation to controlling and redirecting his body heat. His primary lessons however had been in anger and spite.

Screams of pain and then exultation echoed through the halls on the day his baby sister Lorelai was born. He wasn't allowed into his mother's chamber. He managed to cloak himself from the sentry's vision and sneaked a peek at the little creature held in her arms. It was perfect and it was loved, unlike him. Yet he didn't loathe her. He knew it wasn't her fault; it was his own.

"This family can yet be redeemed, however I do believe we should invest in another child," his father spoke to his ailing mother, "you never know how she'll turn out, even if Affinite." The birth of a Stunted child only took a physical sacrifice. That of an Affinite took part of the mind as well.

Everything had a price and he would be paying for his failure soon enough. Boreas knew he was going to vanish, much like his siblings had. Wherever he was going had to be better than here. He just wished he could see sweet, little Lorelai again. A strange serenity washed over him whenever he stared into those beautiful, violet eyes.

"His taint will linger only a moment, darling." His father had said while wiping some saliva from his mother's cheek. The pregnancy had taken its toll. "You can rest easy knowing you have secured our future."

Boreas didn't cry when the guards came for him. He wanted to, badly, but he held back the tears until he was out of his father's sight. He didn't struggle, curse nor beg. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

He was to become a Soldier and never to be Royalty.

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So far off in the distance, the kennel and the house reminded her of two tiny lice on a green leaf. She knew she wasn't supposed to go this far from the house when she was by herself. Luckily I have Merlot with me, she thought smiling, with him by my side I'm never alone! She realized that was probably not what her parents had meant, however Meredith was quite adept at convincing herself of almost anything if it somehow gave her an opportunity for adventure. She was positive that she'd seen a sparkling light at the forest's edge. What else could it be besides treasure?

Pappa always told her she had far too vivid an imagination for a farmer's daughter. Momma mainly thought her creative energies could serve a better purpose if channeled towards solving their infestation problems and learning about the seasonal growth patterns of their crops. This morning Meredith had been pretending to do her mathematics, though actually she had been drawing her newest fantasy about a little girl that and her guar becoming outlaws. Her charade had been quite clever, right until the moment Merlot decided to steal her pencil and began running around the house with it firmly clenched between his teeth. In anger, Meredith had thrown her Compendium of Mathematics at the animal, in the process revealing several drawings hidden between its pages. "I'm only eleven, I'm supposed to do nothing all day!" she'd tell Momma in her defense, "The Mornis boys don't ever need to go to school.." In reaction, Momma had told her she was right and that if she was happy doing nothing, she should. Then she proceeded to lock away Meredith's papers and books, and told her to stay behind when she and Pappa left for the market. "Today we'll see how much you like doing nothing," Momma said irritably as she closed the door. Pappa just smiled and winked at the little girl, "See you in a few, honey." Meredith had been staring out of the window for almost an hour until she saw it. A tiny shimmer near the treeline. Treasure.

She patted Merlot on its scaly back and beckoned the lizard-like creature towards the stairs. "Adventure time, lazybones!" Pappa had found a cairn of guar nesting underneath the floorboards several years ago and chased them off. The tiniest, cutest guar you'd ever see

remained, as it had a defect that made it unable to walk properly. Instead of tossing it back into the forest to fend for itself, and most likely not survive the ordeal, he had given it to Meredith to take care of. "He is your responsibility now, Merry," he had spoken gravely, "and that means you must take care of it like it was your own flesh and blood." The idea had disturbed her a bit as she was slightly off-put by the slimy little creature, yet she had taken its care upon her and in time, she learned to love it almost as much as her parents. Also, Merlot was no longer slimy, which helped a lot. Now the guar's head came up to Meredith's chest, its leathery green scales hardening with each year. She imagined Merlot was going to end up as a statue in the garden some day.

Together they climbed the hardwood staircase, their footprints diminished to dull thuds because of the rawhide upholstery. Passing the second floor and arriving at the dark top of the staircase, she pushed open the hatch to the attic with all the strength she could muster. Nearly tripping over a box of wine bottles, she ran to the shutters, removed the bolt and opened them with a loud creaking noise. Their farmlands, covered in the orange-purple shadows cast by the setting suns, were a sight to behold. One could see quite far from here, the farm being as flat as it was, clearly all the way from the river to the forest's edge. Meredith however only had an eye for the fiercely yellow dot off in the distance. She squinted her eyes to spot any possible dragons guarding her treasure, when she noticed the smoke trailing from it. "Darn.." she whispered disappointedly as she realized it was merely a campfire.

Then again, she thought, fire means people: visitors, strangers even! She smiled broadly, proceeded to open the shutters and swung her feet outside of the window. She grabbed the tiny protrusions attached to the outside of the house and slowly climbed down, careful not to slip on its chitinous exterior. "Good morning, Brakan", she spoke to the house cheerfully as she jumped down into the ground and patted its smooth exterior gently. Meredith and her parents tenderly referred to their home as 'Brakan the Bug'; the remains of ancient insects housed most people of their village. When they first moved here, Meredith was afraid the giant exoskeleton was going to eat them alive. Poppa had assured her the creature was long gone and had left its shell for nice people like them to live in. Later she learned Brakan just had been dead for a while and was a bug, so he couldn't protest to them moving in. The greenish gray harshly reflected the dusk's last light, brightly illuminating Momma's herb garden. She walked over to the basil plants, tore off a leaf and put it in her mouth. She loved the taste of fresh basil. Meanwhile, Merlot had managed to get itself stuck on one of the protrusions and was hissing softly. Meredith reached up and untangled one of Merlot's limbs. In the process however she lost her balance and the guar and girl fell flat onto the grass. Laughing, she shook some dirt off of her dress and started walking towards the forest's edge, a tad roughed-up Merlot by her side.

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With a gasp, Boreas awoke from his deep, troubled sleep. His blanket was nowhere to be seen and he felt the familiar sensation of sweat trickling down his body. He cursed under his breath, felt around for the blanket and proceeded to dry his shivering skin with it. A faint glow illuminated the room, its source the shimmering eye on his right pectoral. He lifted his head slowly and looked at it. In answer, it turned its iris towards him, shining a warm, bright purple light into his face.

"Never engulfed by darkness," Boreas mumbled to the unblinking eye gravely, "always radiated by vigilance." Laughing to himself, he placed his hand on the eye in a mocking salute to no one in particular. The room was utterly black and silent. He took a deep breath and enjoyed the nothingness for a small moment. Another familiar feeling greeted him as his exhalation gave way to a bad cough. He raspily spat out a dark-red ichor, stared at it shortly and proceeded to lick it off of his palm. Grimacing, he swallowed the blood.

Back in the academy he was taught to never leave a trace of his presence, especially not if it meant giving the enemy a chance at discovering any sign of weakness. Old habits die hard, it seemed. Even without any enemies left to murder him in his sleep, or whatever went for sleep these days, Boreas meticulously cleaned every object he stained and each place that he visited. Especially bodily fluids were a liability. A Châteaux scouting party had once tracked their presence through the bloodied excrement or bandages left by an injured ally and had managed to ambush his troupe. It was a mistake he would not soon repeat; one of many. While Boreas did not count himself among the wise, he made an effort to at least not belong to the ranks of the dead or dying. He banished the thoughts of the ambush and its harsh aftermath from his mind, a skill he had become quite adept at. He had almost forgotten what he had dreamed about. Almost.

He sat up quickly and the consequences of his nightcap became apparent. Today's hangover made its introduction. He hadn't expected such a bad one, but then again he could barely remember raising even a single glass to his lips the night before. Or how he got to bed, for that matter. Squinting his eyes to steady his vision, he glanced through the small, circular room and saw all of his gear was accounted for. He didn't have to check the room for possible company; the gaze of the Watchful Eye would take care of that for him, even while he was out cold. He could feel the warmth of its constantly vigilant gaze penetrate his flesh. It always felt reassuring somehow, like a mute guardian watching over him. "Or watching through me," he chuckled.

He reached for his container and reflexively waited for the instant it took the Eye to scan its contents. It emitted a short pulse of heat, signalling the water was okay. He took a sip in an attempt to remove the rusty taste of the blood. While the water could hypothetically still be non-potable or even poisonous, at least he was now sure it hadn't

been contaminated by otherworldly energies. He acknowledged to himself he might still be unnecessarily paranoid.

No one was chasing him. No one was trying to kill him. No one had bothered to even imagine doing so in years. The Eye seemed a lot more grounded in reality than he was, even if it wasn't even actually sentient. It could at least distinguish between real and imaginary threats.

"Next time just drink the water, crazy old man," he promised himself for the umpteenth time, "maybe you'll get lucky for once and it'll actually do some damage."

The water was doing his head a ton of good: he could feel the vice on his head unwind ever so slightly. He rubbed his temple softly, took another swig from the container and pushed himself up from his hard bed. It slowly dawned on him where he had spent the night. Seeing as he was by himself it wasn't a brothel, or at least not a proper one. A cheap inn, perhaps? The circular construction of the tiny room reminded him of a cell.

He always got disoriented by the round shape of aura-built structures. Affinite builders manipulated a certain material, in this case wood, to form around them. For the often low-cyphered Affinite builders, the simplest shape was the circular aura projected by their limited influence on the world around them. He had performed similar feats long ago, while still in training as a cadet. Boreas judged from the ragged edges of the interior that this builder would've been an Eight at best. Instinctively he glanced over to the Eye, where his cypher used to be shown. He vaguely remembered the pride he felt when he rebranded all those years ago. He was quite sure his dream had something to do with the rebranding, amongst other, darker things.

He remembered the words his mother would speak whenever he'd run into her chambers scared. Best to leave the nightmares to the night.

He stood up and dropped his blanket on the floor, together with the lingering thoughts of his dreams. He waved the two remaining fingers of his right hand, calling forth the kinetic energy required and kindled the candles around him. The slight burning sensation that accompanied such minor alterations no longer registered. Blinking his eyes at the sudden eruption of light, he saw himself reflected in a nearby mirror.

With milky white skin stretched out too far over obvious bone, he had seen better days. Burn marks, scars and ominously dark patches of skin littered his flesh. The sharp angles of his body, combined with his tall stature, gave him a fragile appearance and if not for his broad shoulders he'd look like a twig ready to snap at even the slightest hint of a breeze. He looked old, far older than he actually was. His greying hair didn't do much to help. He still possessed a powerful jaw and his signature crooked, large nose. The nose of a conqueror, Meryn used to tell him. He smiled at the thought, revealing a set of perfectly straight teeth. One could see that he used to be handsome, muscular and vital. Matter of fact, it hadn't been that many years since he had possessed all of

those traits. Everything has its price, he thought while looking down at his damaged hands. The ring and little fingers of his right hand, together with the part of his palm attaching both to his arm, had been consumed completely, as had part of the middle finger on his left. He realized it was good that he had never gotten into wearing jewellery.

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As they crossed the cornfield and entered the tall grass, Meredith slowed her fast pace; maybe the campers were thieves, or pirates or bandits.. No they definitely weren't pirates, she reasoned, there is no sea for miles around and pirates always had ships. Thieves or bandits then. Or perhaps a party of adventurers back from slaying a dinosaur! "No, Merry," she whispered to herself with a stern voice not unlike that of her Momma, "don't be so childish. They're probably just some merchants or pilgrims." Still, she snuck towards the forest quietly, remembering what her Poppa told her: "Honey, strangers are called strangers for a reason: they're strange." She thought it meant she had to be careful, but she wasn't sure. Now that she thought about it, strange was often quite interesting, so she was definitely hoping for strange.

When she was younger, Meredith played hide and seek in the tall grass with Poppa. Around her eighth birthday, she finally outgrew what appeared to her a dense forest; she felt like a giant, looking down at the far reaching woodlands that were the grassy patch. She had hoped that Merlot would one day be tall enough as well, but Momma explained that some creatures stop growing at a certain point. Luckily Merlot never seemed to mind being the only one in the family unable to see more than sprigs, bugs and dirt.

Now, a mere three years later, she had to crouch and move on hands and knees to not be spotted by whomever she was hiding from. She had grown immensely in the last few years and was almost as tall as Momma now. Most children her age were in the midst of their growth spurt, though she preferred the term 'growth sprint', which implied Meredith was winning a race of some kind.

The faint sound of voices and general activity could be heard through her grassy cloak. The shimmering light of the fire was her compass in the near-dark, its large shadows signalling the movement of the camp's inhabitants. Meredith moved quietly, but she was afraid the travellers would overhear her loudly thumping heart. "Stay," she whispered to her little guar. As she edged closer to the camp, the voices became more distinct.

A high-pitched, feminine voice: "I say, it's unfit for those of our stature to be sleeping on the floor like common stunties. These iron slabs they refer to as 'bedding' are.. "

He or she was interrupted by another, whose cracking, raspy sound reminded Meredith of the creaking shutters of the house: "Calm yourself, no need for the animals and trees to grow bored of your incessant drivel as well."

"Well pardon me for voicing my opinion! All I'm trying to say is.."

Another, much younger and sharper voice intervened: "Yeah yeah, just can it will ya. It's not like we have any travel time like the stunties do. Last expedition I had to ride an actual

animal all the way from the Dome to the fucking warzone. My ass was bruised for days, worse than a mild backlash pain."

Raspy: "Ouch. Wait, they ride ANIMALS now?"

Feminine: "Yes, you ignoramus. Have you ever threaded anywhere outside of your tiny mental world before, Berrick the Brilliant?"

A grunt indicated Raspy's (or Berrick's) disapproval, the others laughed. Meredith sniggered; they were a silly bunch.

She discerned three souls at the camp, the usual faint auras of light she could see emanating from people giving away their presence. She couldn't really tell what was going on though and was more than curious to add faces to the voices, so she risked moving.

That's weird, she thought as she crept a bit closer, she couldn't hear the crackling of the fire anymore. Now that she thought about it, even the crickets had gone quiet. And the crickets were never quiet.

Her train of thought was interrupted by something grabbing her by the arm and pulling her out from under her grassy hideout. Confused and blinded by the harsh light shining into her eyes unfiltered by the sprigs of grass, she screamed and kicked against her invisible captor, only to find that she couldn't produce any noise whatsoever. The grip on her arm loosened and as her eyes acclimatized to the light, she calmed down and looked around. Towering over her was a slender man in a long leather coat, his perfectly shaped beard in flux due to his silent, moving lips. Annoyed, he looked over his shoulder towards the camp, pointed at his mouth and with a loud thump, the sounds of the night returned.

Realizing her cover had been blown quite disastrously, Meredith improvised. She scrambled onto her feet, licked her lips and stuck out her right hand: "I AM MEREDITH THIS IS MY FARM HELLO HOW ARE YOU." Her heart was pounding in her throat now, and she hoped yelling would mask her trembling voice. She even managed to conjure up a faint smile.

"Oh how quaint!" The feminine voice spoke from the hairy lips of the tall man. He gave her the widest, most insincere smile she had ever seen. As quick as it had appeared, the smile vanished from the tall man's face. "The little slave thinks it can speak without being spoken too!"

The smack to her face came as a complete surprise. Meredith cried out and fell down from the pain, tears streaming across her burning cheek. Poppa and Momma had hit her once or twice on her behind, but never like this. It stung, worse than any wasp ever could. Her lip had burst open from the force, and she tasted some blood in her mouth.

"Wuh-why would you do th-that" she stuttered confusedly, while wiping a few droplets of blood off with her dress. The red mixed well with the creamy white colour of the linen, producing a deep pink shade.

"Still haven't learned your lesson, little spy? I guess we'll have to teach it to mind its manners," the tall man sneered.

As he raised his left hand for another strike a young woman, perhaps still in her teens with incredibly long, braided hair and an intricate geometric tattoo design on her neck and arms, spoke up: "Cut it out, Slender. No need to torture the local fauna. You're just upset she managed to sneak past your flimsy-ass sentry." The tall man named Slender turned around to

respond, when small blue runes around the fire started glowing fiercely. "The sentry is still active, something is coming."

The other two strangers whom had been lazily watching from around the campfire, were instantaneously on their feet. Not only the blue drawing on the ground were lighting up; the tattoos on the young woman's body started shimmering, Slender's veins seemed to be lit on fire and the air around Raspy/Berrick started crackling with small lightning bolts.

Meredith stopped crying, everyone was silent. Only the crickets continued their chant. Then came a loud hiss from somewhere in the grassy field, a sound she was quite familiar with.

The grass rustled and Merlot jumped out of the bushes. It rushed towards its young master and hissed again fiercely, its fangs becoming visible through its chin-grooves. Merlot was usually such a gentle soul, so Meredith had never realized how someone could be afraid of guar, however now with its over extended jaw and protracted fangs, the small beast was an intimidating sight.

The young girl's expression changed from excited back to bored. "A guar? Is that it?" Berrick sat back down again.

"Take care of it, will ya Slender. I mean, your life is the one being threatened." She chuckled.

Meredith saw the veins in his arm tremble and the flame-like liquid coursing through them became more volatile.

"And cool it will ya, it's just a sodding guar. No need to alert more of them to our presence, we don't need the attention."

His veins returned to normal. "Well Sari, throw me a knife then if you are so adamant on more barbarous means." She tossed the blade at Slender and as it flew through the air, Merlot lunged at the now-distracted man. It snapped at Slender's knees successfully, penetrating his upper leg and shin with surprising force and depth. The man howled and fell backwards, the knife barely missing his head and landing with a dull thud somewhere in the grass. The guar managed to wrestle its head free from Slender's leg, its gurgling hiss covering the man in blood and saliva.

In the meantime, Sari started towards her fallen companion. Meredith stared paralyzed at the insane scene playing out in front of her for a split second; then decided to run.