

Tides of Change

Some time ago

The Empire of Vlaredia was in many ways an oxymoron. The nation and its people were simultaneously warlike and isolationist. When faced with what they perceived as existential threats, they riled up their citizens into an almost bloodlust-like furor. The people resisted outsiders almost religiously and thus saw *any* attempt at foreign control as existential. They lived by a very simple mantra: leave me alone, or I will burn down everything you hold dear.

Some could say that conflict between the Empire and the Sovereign Cities was inevitable. The Sovereign Cities played host to the Guilds at a level not seen in other regions of the continent, and the Guilds used that ubiquity to push their influence and agenda with little impunity. Such an infringement of Imperial culture and sense of self, ironically made the Empire seem more *sovereign* than the very cities they found themselves at odds with.

For the Sovereigns had long been manipulated and led to believe that the Guilds were an integral part of the independent mindset of the Cities. The Guilds surely ensured that those who had a craft were able to resist being trampled by those above them. Right?

It was this idea that lay at the foundation of why the Sovereigns seemed befuddled when the Empire pushed back on the Guilds' attempt of imposing their authority within the nation. For it seemed minor deviations of viewpoints were all that caused such a drastic and visceral reaction.

A viewpoint being discussed by the Imperial war council. The emperor had summoned his economic and interior ministers, his generals and their advisors, key commanders, and even the priests. They spoke of skirmishes, disposition of forces, economic impact, and potentialities. The empress, in her role as the head of the imperial intelligence ministry, discussed opportunities and the weaknesses her agents had found. The surprising weakness and corruption at the heart of their other longtime rivals could potentially cause those forces to either take advantage of hostilities or simply dismiss the Sovereigns outright. A risk the council was willing to take, but not without approving a mission for the diplomatic ministry to undergo. For just because one was filled with bloodlust, didn't mean they couldn't enact a failsafe and strategy.

They discussed all this for one reason. For the economic war that the Guilds waged in the shadows had gone too far. The Guild of Blades had struck at Imperial Free Merchants, and absconded with their goods as a *tax*. The council worked tirelessly into the night and discussed options. In the end, only one solution could be made. The Guilds had drawn their line in the sand, and the Empire would not acquiesce to the demands of foreigners willingly.

To any other nation, such a reaction would have provoked a different response, they would have seen the Guilds as the entity they were. They would not have associated the actions of one power-hungry Regional Head of the Guilds with an act of all of the Sovereign Cities. Perhaps that was a failing of the Empire, or maybe they simply saw a rot that they could not allow to come for them again. Whatever the reason, they had made their decision.

As the meeting concluded, small discussions broke out amongst various members, and others yawned, desiring sleep, the empress called upon Commander Ressa.

“Commander Ressa.”

The orkun woman stood up from where she sat, saluted, and bowed her head. “Your Majesty.”

“Walk with me”

Ressa followed her Empress as she was led out of the war room. She kept her head forward, walking behind the woman, taking note of the imperial guard that trailed behind them. The man moved past the two of them and opened a door. The guard bowed his head as the empress and Ressa walked inside.

What they entered was a small sitting room with a large set of windows that overlooked the private imperial gardens. She quietly sat next to the woman and waited to be addressed.

“These gardens were originally planted by my mother-in-law just before my husband was coronated. She did it out of spite because while she permitted our marriage, she never liked me. She felt like giving me this garden would require me to take my attention away from the duties I have given myself.”

Ressa didn't quite know how to respond, so she remained silent. The empress looked up as if contemplating and continued.

“The woman had very different thoughts on how an empress should act. When I became empress, I had the entire garden burned. I then had it replanted in the way that you see now, and have people maintain it for me. They know to keep it this way, and I let them do their duties. I have zero intention of micromanaging a *garden*. My purpose isn’t to be some socialite that keeps apprised of the pulse of the nobility. My husband does that duty well. In this way, we are different. I understand this. As does he. *We do not care.*”

She must have seen the confusion on Ressa’s face because she smiled softly. “The reason I tell you this is simple. I do not care about ‘the way things have always been’. I will burn the past to the ground and rebuild something greater. I will appoint those who fit any given situation best. The future is uncertain. Our very way of life has been threatened by the changes brought by the Flash and the appearance of these terrans—or humans as some call themselves.

“You belong to one of these situations. I require you to assemble a team. You will ascertain the extent of changes and research the Sovereigns have put into this new reality we find ourselves in. Your own changes have been followed with great interest, and I expect you to take note of how to counter others such as yourself.

“If the Sovereigns field any such individuals. You will track them down and eliminate them. I predict that we are only just skimming the top of the potential of what is to come. Underestimating those with abilities could spell the downfall of our armies.”

Ressa slowly nodded her head. “I will do as you command, Your Highness.”

Her eyes narrowed as her thoughts went to everything she would need to accomplish.

“Good. You will have access to whatever you require, and you report directly to me. If you encounter the need, you have the authority to redirect any assets along the front. Do not abuse this. Ensure you requisition couriers, as I expect monthly reports.”

“Understood, Your Highness.”

“The guard will give you your orders on the way out.”

She stood and bowed to her Empress. Thoughts already moving to how best prepare, her team would likely move into enemy territory. This would need to be accounted for.

Ressa smirked as she received the orders from the man outside. She felt her magic ripple within her chest as a feeling of resolve overcame her. She would not fail her empress.

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Far from the Imperial Palace of Vlaredia, on the other side of the Kingdom of Rosale from where a certain terran was working with the King, a team of scholars was working on their own project. A project that would one day change every aspect of society, down to how someone viewed the fundamental levels of reality.

The group was led by two intrepid elves. A sun elf man named Aredd Vhoor and a high elf woman named Aila Iliric. They had been working tirelessly ever since the two of them had discovered the changes to themselves. Their group had been trying to find as much information as they could about the phenomenon known as the Flash. Gathering as much word as they could in the form of rumors and sightings.

A break in the research had come in the form of items they had obtained from a small company in a small Westaren village near the city of Thirdghyll. Their contact in the Merchant Guild had brought them a small variety of objects. One, in particular, changed... everything for them. A ring. A simple diamond ring, which surprisingly the ring had set against the finger, forced a connection to what the company had called mana.

Aredd and Aila delved into their research, foregoing any outside distractions for almost two months as they and their team of twenty scholars performed a series of experiments. They quickly learned of the cores and the importance of the new organ in manipulating mana.

The first thing they discovered beyond that simple observation was that this mana interacted with individuals in one of two ways: mentally or physically. The majority, roughly seventy percent, of individuals they tested were only changed physically. About twenty to twenty-three percent of individuals had a combination of physical and mental changes. These test subjects were able to manipulate the mana to perform decidedly magical acts. However, the magic shown there was nowhere near the level of potency of the last group. That group which represented around six percent of their sample population was modified by mana only mentally.

Every single person had a specific *coloring* that went to their mana and this was represented in five different hues: red, green, blue, yellow, and black. A full team of six was dedicated solely to how magic was changed by those colors.

All of this was fantastic and brought more and more investment and influence to their group from the local nobles of Nornport. All of this research had brought them to this moment. The moment that would change... *everything*.

“Aila? Come here, look at this,” Aredd said from where he was testing mana cores they had obtained from beasts that had undergone a mutation, or beastials as their group called them—monsters if you heard the soldiers and hunters tell it.

Aila walked over to her colleague and looked down at the two green cores on the table. “What am I looking at, Aredd?”

“*Look* into them. These were gathered from two beastials of the same grouping. They *should* be nearly the exact same.”

She nodded and **Examined** the core in front of her, trying to see what was different between the two. The two looked similar, they had a similar connection to green mana. Both could be used to draw and utilize that mana in— *Wait*.

Aila peered closer, **Focusing**, there was a difference in the two cores. *Cores don't hold mana...* “How old are these?”

“They were removed not even twenty minutes ago. You see it, right? It's dissipating even now.”

“*What* is it?”

“I want you to check my core.”

Aila tilted her head. *What?*

“Aredd... That's dangerous.”

“The one terran that is working with the city says it is fine. We can bring him here.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

Aila nodded, and the two went to work. They sent one of their team members to give a brief overview of what they wanted and their request. It was a testament to the acclaim they had earned that the countess had sent the terran only a few hours later.

The man arrived, looking out of place as all terrans did, but he seemed to hold a surety to himself. Aredd explained what their group did, and what Aredd wanted the doctor to accomplish. The man just nodded. “I can assist with this. What do you hope to gain?”

Aredd took a deep breath. “I believe there is something else other than mana that works inside of us. In fact, I don’t think it is the *mana* that does most of the work.”

Aila gasped. He hadn’t told her that theory yet.

The doctor stood with his arms crossed, then raised a hand to his chin. “Okay. I can work with that. I brought everything I will need. I just need your full consent and understanding that this could go wrong as any surgery could.”

Aila and Aredd both took a deep breath, her colleague giving her a meaningful look before nodding. “Please do this.”

“Very well. Do you have somewhere we can set you up to perform the surgery?” The terran asked.

Aila gestured toward one of the doors. “This way.”

The preparation had been both quicker and more in-depth than Aila had suspected. The doctor had made sure to clean all of his tools and the surrounding area where Aredd lay. Then he made sure to clean the sun elf’s chest thoroughly.

After some more preparation that consisted of the doctor giving Aredd something to calm him down and using a strange needle contraption that held a liquid to inject into Aredd, they were ready.

The procedure itself was quick, and once the doctor had Aredd’s chest cavity open, he motioned Aila over. “Please do your examination.”

Aila held her breath and **Focused** as she **Examined** the core and the nerves that sprouted from it. Looking at the swirling green and blue orb with fascination. She could see the connection he held to both of his mana attunements. She saw how the green moved even then and gathered around the opening in the man's chest as it sought to keep him healthy. Following the nerves, she saw something she hadn't expected. *Something* was flowing through them and slowly moving from the nerves into the surrounding tissue into the man. *What is that?*

"Aredd are you doing alright?" the doctor asked the man that was still awake, just numb from the neck down.

"Yes. I just... I need to do something."

The doctor placed his hand on the man's shoulder and leaned down, looking into Aredd's eyes. "What? What is wrong?"

Aredd closed his eyes and Aila felt it. She reached out and placed her hand on the doctor's shoulder. "Wait. He's alright. Let him focus."

The doctor hesitated before straightening his back and watching Aredd with her.

She turned back toward Aredd's chest and looked at the man's exposed core, watching as the green swirled and glowed deeply. The blue was pushed to the edges as Aredd channeled green mana for some purpose. Suddenly a pulse of green flashed and spread over the man's body. Aila **Focused** and channeled her blue mana to her eyes, trying to see what was happening to the *mana* in the man, not just see the details of his organs.

She felt a click and she forced herself to **Examine Mana** just in time to see a rush of *something* other than mana flow into the man that then spread throughout his body. She saw the telltale signs of the same rush she had felt before, and that was when she knew. *The mana facilitates improving us, but it's just not the mana actually does it!*

Aila smiled down. "I got it. We're done here, doctor."

The terran nodded and got to work.

She held her friend's hand. "You were right."

Aredd smiled. "Good. I am going to rest now."

She squeezed her friend's hand as he fell asleep, then moved away to let the doctor work.

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Several hours later, Aila walked into the room where Aredd rested. The doctor quickly used some materials and his own magic to sew the man's chest back together. After promising to return that evening, he left.

Aredd was awake as she entered, yawning even as he tried to smile. "Aila. Come in, come in."

"How did you know?" she asked.

He tilted his head and smirked. "It was just a feeling."

She shook her head. "Well, you were right. I went back to the cores and they were already devoid of whatever it was. Only their connection to mana was remaining. However, one core is stronger than the other. I gave it to the team researching cores and their uses. They had suspected that some cores were different for some reason, they just hadn't been able to test two cores that came from similar sources at the same time. That alone is an important revelation."

"Good. What did you see?"

"You made a new magic spell, didn't you?"

He nodded, gesturing for her to continue.

"Well, I know that just making one new spell doesn't do it. We both have tested that, and I made a new spell right after you did. However, it does have to do with the rush. The feeling is because our cores are filling with this... *energy* substance, and it subsequently *rushing* through our bodies. It follows the core's nerves and spreads into the surrounding area from there."

"We will need to test how often and what is required to gain a rush," he said with another yawn.

“Yes. As we have known for a while, the rush is the source of improvements we and our test subjects have felt. It is essential to our growth with mana. Every rush brings a greater connection and both physical and mental improvements.

“We will need to test, and I believe I can now do it without having the doctor cut you open, but I suspect that your body now has a greater concentration of something other than mana, but is intrinsically linked to mana.”

He furrowed his brows in thought. “You believe it is essential?”

“Yes,” she confirmed.

Aredd gave her a lopsided smile. She suspected the medicine the doctor had given him was making him feel a little loopy.

“Then that is what it is.”

She tilted her head. “What?”

“*Essentia.*”

She groaned, but then tilted her head. *That... isn't inaccurate. Essentia flows through us, and improves us. With more of it, we are faster. Stronger. Better.*

Aila sighed. Now to make sure no one ever discovered the origin of the name.