

*A Colossal Dilemma*

Lightning snapped as it seared through the dark sky, splitting the overhead clouds in twain with its flash. The following thunder rumbled as it shook the very earth beneath its domain. Completing the sinister ensemble was a misty rain. Heavy enough to dampen anyone, but light enough to barely be a nuisance. In the distance, flickering in and out from the lightning, was a malevolent-looking castle. Standing a few feet from the lowered drawbridge was Serokus, his wife Terris, their daughter Shayla, and a white-coated wolf.

The red-haired Shayla looked to her parents; determination branded onto her face from beneath her black, hooded cloak. Shayla's mother returned her look with a smirk, as Terris tightened her grip on her massive battle-axe, and rolled her shoulders. Terris's silver hair, held together in a single braid behind her pointed ears, billowed in the slight breeze that accompanied the acute storm. Serokus, merely tugged at his dark, green hood, his gaze fixated on the castle's entrance.

Flashes of unpleasant memories swarmed his consciousness sporadically. The memories started with his home being razed and his origin being ripped from his very core. His first transformation into a monstrous, wolf creature before Terris, as well as that unquenchable feeling of bloodlust. The month he spent in prison, being tortured day in and day out. Then finally the truth his father shared, before being murdered by Serokus; the truth of Serokus's magical bond to the warlock, Aeberos.

"Let's go," he stated, drawing both of his swords from their scabbards strapped to his back as he marched to the castle's entrance.

"You're always so serious, Sero," Terris chuckled. She marched behind her much taller husband. "Don't go thinking you're going to have all of the fun y'know."

“I wouldn’t dream of it love,” Serokus jested. Shayla smiled from behind her parents and patted her thigh.

“Come Rulf!” Shayla jogged up to her parents as the white wolf obediently followed beside her. The enormous wooden doors, accented by an obsidian frame, barred their path. As the family approached, a glyph appeared before them. The symbol of the glyph was represented by a manticore with an enflamed crown surrounded by a series of chains. Serokus clenched a fist, concentrated for a few seconds, and placed a hand on the glyph. The glyph immediately erupted into blue flames, enveloping Serokus’s arm. Flaming, ethereal-like chains spewed out from the glyph, and entangled Serokus, wracking him with pain as he burned from the magical fire. Worried, Shayla rushed to her father but was held back by Terris.

“He must do this,” she stated calmly, even though tears fell from their ducts. “He is the only one who can...”

“But why him?” Shayla shouted at her mother, pressing against her mother. “Can’t you see that he’s in pain?”

“He has to because he is bound to the warlock, Aeberos, our foe.” The glyph finally dissipated, and Serokus took moments to recuperate before rising to his feet again. His sleeves and vambraces were completely incinerated, revealing the flaming scars of chains wrapped around his forearms. Terris leaned in behind her husband, whispering into his ear. “You are almost there. You are almost free. I...I’ve come to terms with your fate, finally.” Serokus reached behind and placed a charred hand on Terris’s wet cheek, then pressed into the entrance.

The grand atrium housed a two-tiered staircase, covered with crimson carpeting. The floors consisted of obsidian stone, and the wall-mounted sconces were filled with orange flames. Standing at the top of the staircase, clad in armored robes, and veiled in a black cloak, was the warlock, Aeberos.

With a simple wave of his gauntleted hand, the entrance door slammed shut behind the family that confronted him.

“I’ve grown weary of your incessant attempts to foil my plans,” Aeberos began, menacingly. “The futility of your resolve will only delay the inevitable. I have gathered enough Essence from this realm to wake Vorkunan from his slumber!”

Serokus shouted, “You know damn well that we are not going to let up!” He brandished one of his blades toward the man. “You of all people understand that you will perish when you wake that dragon!”

“Ah, but I’ve found a way to *fuse* with the Colossus! I have found a loophole within the ritual!”

“What are you getting at, Aeberos,” Shayla inquired. “What have you done?” With a curt grin, Aeberos levitated himself down to the ground floor, landing just a few feet from his foes.

“The Tethered are selected by the Colossi, and then magically bound in servitude to them. They gain magical prowess that far surpasses the capabilities of any mortal, and the Tethered are the only ones capable of siphoning Essence into their colossal masters.”

“We know how the ritual goes,” Serokus interrupted. “We want to know how you’ve found an alternative!”

“The Tethered becomes the heart and soul of the Colossus, allowing it to roam this plane briefly. When the Tethered finally dies, the Colossus returns to its resting home, waiting for the next time it wakes from a new chosen Tethered.” Terris’s grip tightened around her battle-axe as she glared at Aeberos. “I ask you this, fools: what if the Tethered never dies?”

“But that is impossible...” Shayla answered. Her determination melted into worry. “Not unless you’re...” At the pause, Aeberos pulled back his cloak, revealing a pale-skinned, gaunt, elven face with

white hair. However, his eyes glowed amber, and parts of his face were skeletal, with more pieces of his flesh peeling away. An evil grin spread between each of his cheeks, with one half still intact, and the other completely skeletal.

“A lich,” answered Terris, immediately lowering her battle-axe into a combat-ready stance. Lightning crackled around her forearms, and her eyes turned into a blue-electric color as sparks flew out of the sockets.

“Shayla, I hope you’re ready for this,” Serokus said. Aerebos raised his gauntleted hands into the air. Blue fire erupted into his palms that completely engulfed his forearms as he levitated into the air once more.

“There is no hope for you anymore,” Aerebos began. “You cannot defeat me, for my powers have grown to unfathomable levels! Vorkunan will destroy this realm, and there is nothing you can do to stop his wrath. Prepare to die, Valeon family!” With that, Terris roared in fury as she charged at Aerebos, lightning funneled into her axe’s head. She recklessly swung at Aerebos who nimbly evaded her attack. However, Terris utilized her momentum to continue her assault. Aerebos shifted to the defensive by forming magical shields on each of his arms with the same fire that engulfed them. With each blow, Aerebos deflected Terris’s axe swings with his flaming arms. Dragging the head of her battle-axe along the floor, Terris swung upwards with enough force to send Aerebos reeling.

Establishing his footing once more, Aerebos summoned rings of fire in several spots along the atrium’s floor. Emerging from these rings of blue fire were faceless, monstrous humanoids. The monsters’ flesh was charred by the same blue fire that summoned them. With blade-like claws and sharp fangs, the monsters advanced on the Valeon family. Terris’s attention was redirected from Aerebos to the monsters, and Shayla drew her golden lance, finally joining the fray. Shayla swung her lance in large sweeps and thrust the point into nearby monsters, igniting them with white, radiant

energy. Rulf bobbed and weaved through the horde, tearing away muscles from the monsters' calves and necks with his fangs. Serokus became a flurry of blades as he swung both swords at Aeberos.

"You fool!" bellowed Aeberos. "You cannot defeat me because I cannot die! Thanks to you, I have achieved immortality! And when I finally rid myself of your wretched family, then there will be nobody else to impede me!"

"All liches can be killed once their phylacteries have been destroyed," Serokus replied as he stood before his foe, seething with anger and hatred.

"So, you've figured out your role in my glory," taunted Aeberos.

"For over fifteen years, you have tormented me with the burden of your blasted curse," Serokus bellowed. "I have been your chained hound my entire life! I am through with you! It is time we settled this once and for all!"

"Your pathetic father hand-delivered you to me at my request. I didn't care who the subjects were, I just needed them for my experiments! *You* were the only one to survive. *You* were the only vessel for my soul. *You* are the reason I will live forever!" Aeberos formed the blue fire into a magical blade. "There is no settling this! You are forever indebted in servitude to me!" Aeberos swung his flaming blade violently at Serokus, which was parried in return. Rings of clashing blades echoed throughout the atrium, and wisps of blue fire spurted out from the magical weapon. There was a pause in the duel between Serokus and Aeberos as they were catching their breaths. Before Serokus could resume his onslaught, Aeberos conjured a lance of flame in his open hand, staring straight at Shayla as his target.

"No!" shouted Serokus as he bolted to his daughter, dropping his weapons to reduce his weight. At that moment, Aeberos hurled the flame lance at Shayla. However, Serokus managed to intercept the

magical attack in time...but with his own body. Both Terris and Shayla witnessed the act as they watched Serokus topple to the floor, unmoving. Tears welled up in Terris's eyes as she was tackled to the floor by the monsters she was fighting.

"Father!" screamed Shayla, rushing to Serokus's side as she slid to her knees before him. The magical branded chains that were wrapped around both of Serokus's arms illuminated in the same blue fire that Aerebos used. The chains burned bright before finally vanishing into thin air as if the chains were broken. Aerebos shrieked as he clutched his face, writhing in pain. The monsters followed suit before disintegrating into ash by the same fire that summoned them.

"No!" screamed Aerebos. "THIS CAN NOT BE! I CAN NOT FALL LIKE THIS! I WAS IMMORTAL, VORKUNAN WAS ALMOST AWAKE!" Aerebos clutched his torso, shuddering in pain, before unleashing a final scream of pain. Every orifice of his body erupted in blue fire before the elf finally exploded in blue fire. Not even ash remained from Aerebos, and everything that was summoned by him dissipated and vanished. Silence finally fell upon the atrium. Terris dropped her weapon and rushed to Serokus's side along with Rulf.

Shayla cried profusely as she clutched her father's hand. "This cannot be happening! Tell me you'll be alright!" she demanded. Serokus only smiled as he brushed away Shayla's red hair from her face with his free hand. Wiping away her tears, he shushed her.

"Everything will be okay," he reassured her. "This was how it needed to end. This was the only way to stop Aerebos."

"I don't believe you!" wailed Shayla. "Mother help me save him!" Terris knelt on the other side of Serokus as she brushed his unkempt, aged hair. She kissed his forehead, and her tears fell to his cheeks.

“You’re finally free my love,” Terris began, finding difficulty bearing a smile. “I just wish we could’ve found another way...”

“But it’s not fair!” Shayla wailed. “I need you still! Mother needs you still!”

“You don’t need me anymore Shayla. You’ve grown to be such a beautiful, powerful, and brave young woman. I am so very proud of you.” Serokus turned to his loyal beast companion. Rulf began to whimper and whine as Serokus scratched behind Rulf’s ear. “You have been a loyal companion and family member, Rulf. Keep watch over them, my friend.” Serokus then turned to his wife, whose tears flowed even faster than before. He clasped his hand over her cheek, then brushed her silvery hair behind her pointed ears. “I will always love you, Terris. Thank you for giving me such a wonderful life, and for being my greatest companion.”

“I will always love you too Sero...wherever the wind guides us-”

“-The journey will keep us together.” Serokus and Terris shared a sentimental kiss before his remaining strength left his hand. Growing heavy, his hand fell out of Terris’s, before landing on his chest. His eyes slid closed, and his head tilted to the side. Shayla embraced her father, and Rulf howled to the ceiling.