

Phoenix flame:
flame enkindled

Phoenix flame

First flame

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Author's Note

This story is more than just fantasy—it's a reflection of my struggles. I've lived with chronic pain since birth, alongside bullying and mental struggles that made the world difficult to understand. *Phoenix Flame: First Flame* is my way of giving shape to those experiences.

Alasthra Phoenixtra is, in many ways, a reflection of myself—someone who suffers, not because he deserves it, but because he carries burdens, so others don't have to. He has trusted friends, something I never had. He seeks love, something I have struggled with. In the end, he lives so that others' suffering may end.

This world is my way of making sense of things.
If you have ever felt alone, misunderstood, or burdened with pain—you are not alone.

Thank you for reading.

Content Warning:

This book contains depictions of war, emotional trauma, chronic grief, character death, and moments of existential despair.

1 Intro

And so it was, that when the gods withdrew to their celestial dominions, the kings and queens of Virma stood united beneath the quiet sky. Each ruler, once proud and separate, turned their gaze to the Flame King—for he had led them through fire and fury, and all knew him as the first among their number. In that solemn moment, he bade them swear an oath—a vow bound by blood and magic—that never again would betrayal or broken trust be permitted amongst them. Should any violate this sacred pact, their lineage would wither and fade from history.

They agreed, one and all. For after the cataclysmic battle against the forces of Chaos, each had glimpsed the ruin wrought by pride, and none wished to tread that path again. And so, they departed—each to their own realm—carrying their peoples to the corners of the world.

To the northwest rose the Lands of Light, home to a people who walked in harmony with the god of radiance. Each day, they sought divine favour with fervent devotion. Their cities were sculpted from marble and gilded with gold, and in certain places, the sun never set. Yet it was never too hot, nor too cold—for in that blessed realm, the climate was always as one desired. Verdant vegetation flourished, fed by gentle light. This land was a solemn continent, surrounded entirely by water—serene, gleaming, untouched.

Far to the west lay the South-Eastern Lands of Earth. Above ground, one would find only dry, cracked wasteland—lifeless and barren. But beneath the earth, deep within the mountains

and caverns, vast cities thrived. These were the children of stone—stout, strong, and hardy. Their peoples came in many heights and shades, but all lived by one creed: the strong endure. Their underground cities were marvels of craftsmanship, lit by crystal and molten light, built with care and fierce pride. It was a nation where strength was both law and legacy.

At the heart of the world were three great nations: Fire, Water, and Darkness. Each bordered the same vast sea, and each nation laid claim to its sacred shores, declaring them the cradle of their origins—that place where their first ancestors had awakened.

The Fire Nation was no desolate wasteland, as many might wrongly assume. Rather, it was a land of roaring volcanoes, steaming hot springs, lush greenery, and teeming life. Its people were fierce, but not cruel—guided by passion, honour, and an unquenchable will.

The Water Nation shared many similarities with its fiery neighbour, yet its soul was wholly different. Ancient, enchanted woods whispered through its lands, and its people embraced life as something to be celebrated, savoured, and understood. Their culture taught that every step should be walked with love and joy. This belief shaped even their warfare—they favoured quality over quantity, precision over might.

And then, there were the Darklands. For uncounted ages, their realm had been shrouded in endless night. Some say it was the eternal battleground of Light and Dark, where the gods

themselves clashed. Others whisper that the god of light cursed them for some forgotten crime. The truth is known only to the King of Darkness.

Their realm is grim—swamps, toxic forests, and shadows that breathe. Vampiric beings and the undead dwell there, yet honour binds them. A vow given by one of darkness is never broken, for to them, honour weighs more than life itself. Indeed, they see death not as an end, but a beginning. No king may rule there unless he has crossed from life to death—transformed, body and soul. Thus, the current king is only the fourth to wear the crown, even as other realms have seen more than a hundred generations of monarchs come and go.

And finally, there were the Floating Isles of Wind. It is said that the first High Priest of Air grew weary of the world below. He sought no throne upon soil, no chains of stone or earth. Instead, he looked to the skies and declared them home. His people followed, and upon drifting isles, they took to the heavens.

These were a people of peace—lovers of freedom in all its forms. Freedom of speech, of belief, of existence itself. Their economy ran not on coin but on service—each gave what they could, and took what they needed.

Content and joyous, they lived without concern for the turmoil below. And yet, their current High Priest—aged beyond reckoning—often gazed downward from his high sanctuary. For though his people soared above war and sorrow, his eyes saw still the suffering of kin, and he wondered: Why must blood still fall, when the true enemy lies beyond the horizon?

2 Remorse

Kiara burst through the doors, blades drawn, her voice sharp with urgency.

“What happened, Alasthra? Are we under attack?!”

But no enemy awaited her—only Volko, standing still, his expression a storm of concern and sorrow. Alasthra stood nearby, his head bowed, trembling with regret and fury.

“What is going on?” she asked, breathless, eyes flicking between them.

Alasthra could not meet her gaze. His voice was strained, barely above a whisper.

“Volko... tell her what you told me.”

Volko stepped forward, solemnly holding out a sheaf of aged documents.

“Alasthra Phoenixtra is our true king,” he said. “King Kront... he was the one who ordered the soldiers to attack Alasthra’s village. He has known the truth all along. This war—it is not justice. We have been fighting the wrong enemy.”

Kiara took the pages in trembling hands, her eyes scanning the inked truth. Her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the floor. “No!... NO, NO, NO!” she cried out, the weight of it breaking her voice. “All this blood... all these lives... for nothing?!”

Volko gave a quiet, heavy nod.

Her scream echoed through the room. Alasthra, barely containing the torrent of emotion within him, turned to Volko, his voice firm despite the quiver behind it.

“Bring me Frenyara,” he said. “But do not show her the truth—not yet. And see to it she is treated with dignity. No one must harm her.”

Volko bowed and departed without a word, leaving the two alone in silence.

“Kiara,” Alasthra said gently, approaching her, “I know what you’re feeling. I feel it too. But my commanders... they must all know what has happened. Gather them. Bring them to me.”

She stood slowly, her face stained with tears, eyes still red with disbelief. She gave a single nod, then turned and left—leaving Alasthra standing alone, in a room that should never have been his...

Volko found Frenyara tending to the wounded, her hands stained red as she carefully wrapped bandages around a soldier’s leg. For a moment, Volko hesitated. She looked nothing like a enemy that knows the truth—only another soul trying to save what little remained. He lingered behind her, then spoke in a hoarse, almost broken voice.

“Frenyara... Alasthra is looking for you.”

She looked up, startled for a moment, then softened with a smile.

“Volko... I’m so happy to see you again. How have you been?”

She moved to embrace him, but he took a step back. Her smile lingered, tinged with teasing.

“Still not good with people, I see.”

“Can you please just follow me to him,” he said, avoiding her gaze.

Frenyara sighed gently. “Fine. Lead the way, then.”

They walked in silence through bloodied streets, the aftermath of battle still heavy in the air. Volko said nothing the entire way, his face unreadable.

When they reached the palace, he guided her through the ruined corridors until they stood before a heavy wooden door. He knocked once.

“Come in,” came Alasthra’s voice from within—calm, but tired.

Volko opened the door and stepped aside, allowing Frenyara to enter first. As she stepped in, he closed the door behind her—and locked it.

Frenyara paused, eyes narrowing.

“Volko?” she asked, confused. But he said nothing.

She glanced around the room. Shards of glass glinted on the floor. Papers lay scattered like fallen leaves. The air was thick with something unspoken. Then she saw Alasthra.

He stood by the shattered window, his eyes heavy with something deeper than anger—something tangled between love and fury.

“What’s going on?” she asked, her voice cautious.

Alasthra turned to face her, his voice calm, but his whole body trembling with emotion.

“Promise me,” he said, “that your next answer will be the full truth.”

Frenyara blinked, her brow furrowing.

“Of course. I would never lie to you. What’s this about?”

He stepped closer, eyes burning.

“Have you always known who I truly am?”

She tilted her head slightly, confusion deepening.

“And what might you be, then?”

Alasthra’s control finally broke. His voice rose, raw and bitter.

“Did you know your father was the reason my village was destroyed? Did you know about the prophecy? Did you know—”

Frenyara took a step back, her face pale now.

“What are you talking about?”

Alasthra’s voice trembled—not from weakness, but from the weight of truth long buried.

“My village was razed to ash. My mother... my Father... everyone. Gone. And it wasn’t the Darklands, As I thought. It was the Old Guard. It was your father’s command! I have proof!”

She shook her head, lips parting as if to deny it, but no words came. He pressed on.

“And the prophecy,” he said, quieter now, yet each word cut like a blade. “The one that foretold of a child born in fire, destined to end a king’s legacy. Did you know that child was me?”

Frenyara’s mouth opened, then closed again. For a moment, silence consumed the room. Then, almost in a whisper:

“I... I knew there was a prophecy. But I didn’t know it was you. I swear it, Alasthra. I never knew.”

“So you knew there was a true king, then?” Alasthra asked, his voice cold and low.

Frenyara met his gaze, tears welling in her eyes. She nodded slowly.

“Long ago,” she whispered, “before I even knew you—before I knew anyone—I overheard the High Priest recite the prophecy to my father. I was just a child, Alasthra. I didn’t understand whether it was some ancient fairytale or political nonsense. I never imagined it was real.”

She stepped closer, her voice trembling with each word.

“I didn’t know he sent the Old Guard to slaughter innocent people. I didn’t know he was hunting children... mages... you. My role, in his eyes, was simple—to bear noble heirs, to keep my healing gifts hidden. That was all.”

Her fists clenched at her sides.

“But something changed after that ball. When we returned to the capital, for the first time in my life, he didn’t speak to me about which nobleman I should open my legs for. Instead, he spoke of soldiers. Of gathering certain people. I didn’t understand what he meant. I still don’t.”

She looked up, her voice growing firmer.

“But he said one thing very clearly: that I should go to you. That I would be of use to you.”

Alasthra flinched at the word *use*, but she pressed on.

“That field hospital... it was the first time I’d ever used my powers openly. The first time I disobeyed him and chose to

help. Do you have any idea what it's like?" Her voice cracked. "To be able to heal—truly heal—and yet stand helpless as people are tied to stakes and set alight? And I, the Crown Princess of Fire, could do nothing."

Her tears fell freely now, but she did not look away from him. "I never wanted a throne, or power, or legacy. I just wanted to stop the burning. I wanted to matter. And when I met you... for the first time, I did."

Alasthra stepped back, his breathing unsteady as he looked into her eyes. The fire behind his gaze dimmed, his anger slowly ebbing into sorrow.

Then Frenyara spoke—and with her words, every shard of doubt in him began to crumble.

"The Phoenix means a great deal to you, doesn't it?" she said softly. "Then hear this: I swear on the Phoenix... that it may take my life if I am lying to you now."

As the words left her lips, Alasthra felt it.

The Phoenix within him stirred—its consciousness brushed his own, warm and watchful. And in that moment, he knew. She was telling the truth.

Without a word, he dropped to one knee before her. Gently, he reached up and touched her ear—a gesture of trust, of connection, of apology.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I only just received the truth from Volko... and this revelation—it's shattered me. It's made this war feel... like it was all for nothing."

His voice trembled, hollow and raw.

"I led them into vengeance... but against the wrong enemy."

And now, nothing I do can bring them back. I needed to know—for certain. And I am sorry.”

She knelt with him, brushing away her tears, her face now calm—understanding.

“I can understand, Alasthra. I truly do. Had I been in your place... I think I would have reacted the same.”

The moment of tenderness between Alasthra and Frenyara had only just begun to mend the rift between them—but it did not last long.

A knock echoed at the door.

Alasthra’s voice rang out, weary but composed. “Who is it?”

“It’s Kiara,” came the reply. “I’ve brought them.”

Volko stepped forward and unlocked the door. One by one, they entered—Kiara, Helion, Varrock, Kranor, Fyestra, and Krovar.

Kranor was the first to speak. “You realise we have a great many things to handle, don’t you?”

Varrock let out a short laugh. “Kranor, you stubborn old ox, do you even know how much my dragons are doing? Last I saw you, you were sipping tea on top of the western wall!”

Kranor raised an eyebrow, his lips twitching into a smirk. “I’m a frail old man. How dare you speak to me with such disrespect?”

But before the banter could go any further, Kiara’s voice cut through the room like a blade. “Enough! Shut up and listen to him!”

Everyone turned to her, startled. Then, slowly, their eyes shifted to Alasthra.

He sighed, shoulders heavy with the truth he was about to share. Then he stepped forward.

“Our war against the Waterlands...” he began, “was a war that should never have happened.”

A pause. Silence fell like a curtain.

“Our true enemy... is not the Water Queen. It’s not her people. It’s King Kront.”

Murmurs stirred in the group, but Alasthra raised a hand. “He is the one who ordered the destruction of my village. He heard a prophecy—that a child would be born who would end his legacy. A child of the true king’s bloodline.”

He took a breath, meeting their gazes one by one. “That child... is me.”

Another pause. “I am the true heir to the Firelands.”

Silence fell across the room, heavy and unrelenting.

Then Kranor spoke, arms crossed, a faint grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Well,” he said, “I always had a hunch you were meant for something greater, boy. But this... this surpasses every expectation I ever had.”

Varrock, for once, didn’t make a jab at him. Instead, his voice was quiet. Hollow. “I’ve burned so many innocent soldiers...”

The others fell into the same thought, the weight of it pressing into their bones.

Then Helion spoke. His usual charisma was gone, replaced by a calm, uncertain edge. “What do we do now, then?”

Alasthra looked around the room, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword. “We cannot keep the Water Nation under our rule. We must seek forgiveness from the Water Queen... and retreat. Fully.” He took a breath, then continued. “After that... we go into open rebellion.”

Krovar scoffed. “Open rebellion? We’ve lost more than half our forces. If King Kront summons every noble under his banner, he’ll outnumber us three to one—maybe more. And don’t forget: he’s a crowned, recognised king. He can call for aid from the other nations. We can’t.”

Alasthra met his gaze without flinching. “I know who you serve, Krovar. A general hand-picked by King Kront himself. If you wish to leave us... I’ll understand.”

But Krovar grinned. “You’re all fools. Every last one of you.” He paused. “And that’s exactly why I like you lot.”

The others blinked in surprise. But he wasn’t done.

“Besides,” he said with a smirk, “I’m glad my soldiers and I killed our general.”

Their eyes widened in shock.

Krovar shrugged. “He was a drunken bastard who liked to touch little girls. Was I wrong to open his throat while he was taking a shit?”

Volko tilted his head slightly, then gave a faint nod. “I understand the feeling.”

3 Rebirth

A knock at the door.

Alasthra raised his voice. “Who is it?”

A voice replied from beyond the wooden frame. “It’s Normas. I’ve come to speak about the labour and the payments.”

Alasthra glanced around at his gathered commanders.

“Perhaps we begin with him,” he said. “To tell him the truth. Everything we’ve learned and what we intend to do.”

They nodded in silent agreement.

“Come in,” Alasthra called.

The door creaked open, and Normas stepped inside. His eyes were drawn first to Alasthra, who stood with the broken window behind him—jagged shards still clinging to the frame. Turning to his right, Normas saw the commanders lined along the wall, their faces grim, some stricken with grief.

“I can come back later, if it’s a bad time?” Normas asked quietly.

Alasthra shook his head. “Sit down.”

Still confused, Normas obeyed.

“What I’m about to tell you,” Alasthra began slowly, “will make you angry. It may even fill you with even more hatred toward us. But know this—we did not know. None of us here knew the full truth until now.”

Normas frowned. “What didn’t you know?”

Volko stepped forward, unfurling a set of documents and laying them before him.

As Normas scanned the pages, a sense of dread settled over him—even before Volko could speak.

“Lord Alasthra Phoenixtra is of royal blood,” Volko said solemnly. “Which means, by right, he is our true king. King Kront knew of this and attempted to have him killed as an infant—ordering a massacre out of fear for a prophecy. The truth is, all of us here are loyal first and foremost to Lord Alasthra. Which means...”

He hesitated, then said it plainly: “This war we waged was not against our enemy. This entire crusade was false—unjust from the start.”

Normas stared at the papers, his hands trembling. The war had consumed over a hundred thousand lives... for nothing.

He stood abruptly, his voice breaking into a roar. “How could none of you know? Thousands lie dead in our capital! How could none of you *know*?!”

Varrock, his face pale with lingering grief, snapped back. “We were following orders! We thought we were doing what was right! Do you have *any* idea what this means now? We’ll have to rise in open rebellion—fight our own brothers and sisters! Don’t you *dare* think we don’t know the cost!”

Before he could say more, Helion stepped forward and placed a hand on Varrock’s shoulder, silencing him with a look.

He turned to Alasthra. “Shall I begin preparations with Varrock for our departure? Shall I take that as your command?”

Alasthra gave a solemn nod. Without another word, Helion took Varrock with him, his face twisted in a storm of contempt and sorrow.

Krovar watched them go, then turned back. “I’ll gather the generals loyal to you, Alasthra. I know several—and with Kranor’s aid, it’ll happen quickly.”

Kranor, who had witnessed more in his life than most men could fathom, still looked shaken. “I always had a bad feeling about Kront... but this? This is a new low.” He straightened, resolve hardening in his voice. “I’ll begin sending out messages. Volko, we’ll need you as well. If we know the truth, then Kront likely knew it even before the ball. We must uncover what preparations he’s already made.”

Volko nodded, handed the documents back to Alasthra, and left silently with Krovar and Kranor.

Only Normas, Kiara, Fyestra, Frenyara, and Alasthra remained in the room.

Normas sat down heavily, then looked up at Alasthra with a bitter edge. “Tell me then, oh mighty King Alasthra Phoenixtra... what will you do now?”

Alasthra met his gaze, unamused. “I will speak with Queen Elathra. I’ll tell her that we will cease the occupation and order a full retreat from the Waterlands. We do not intend to remain here.”

Normas scoffed. “Why not? You’re our conqueror now, are you not? Do what any vile Fire King would do—crush us, force our hands, and drag us into more war.”

At those words, something in Alasthra snapped. His eyes flared with inner fire, and his voice trembled with long-buried pain.

“I am not King Kront. I am Alasthra Phoenixtra. I fought for my people—just as *you* would have done for yours. Do not stand there and accuse me, not when your rage should be directed at the man who orchestrated all this. I did what I had to do.”

He stepped forward, fists clenched. “Would you have done differently? Would you have rebelled against your own nation, your own king, with nothing but a whisper of truth?”

Normas saw the fury burning in Alasthra’s eyes, but behind it—deeper—was a grief that shook him. He exhaled slowly, softening.

“Then... what do you intend to do, truly?” he asked.

Alasthra lowered his gaze and walked to the edge of the desk, sitting on it like the weight of the world rested on his shoulders.

“I don’t know,” he said quietly. “I know that I must lead my soldiers out of these lands... but what do I tell them? What do I say to the mothers and fathers who will never see their sons or daughters again? That our king betrayed us? That *I* led them into rebellion? That their grief has been made heavier by my hand?”

He looked down at his hands, as if searching for answers in the lines of his palms.

“Then what? Attack the false king? March on our own capital? Slaughter our own cousins, our own kin? What’s worse... what I fear most... is that *unlike* me, Kront is recognised. The other kings and queens acknowledge him. If he calls, they will answer. I’ve lost more than half my men, and he can amass an army in the millions.”

He fell silent.

“I am lost,” he whispered. “Lost on the very path I once thought was destiny.”

Normas looked at him and spoke softly. “I cannot claim I feel no anger... but I see your sorrow. And your regret. I will stand beside you when you speak with Queen Elathra. But know this—she will never aid you. Nor forgive.”

Alasthra gave a faint, weary smile. “No one will.”

Together, they made their way to the throne room.

Alasthra had sent word ahead—Queen Elathra was to be treated with the utmost dignity, not as a prisoner, but as a queen. When she entered, the chamber fell silent.

She stood tall, dignified despite her weariness, her gaze sweeping across the room. Before her stood Alasthra and his companions—not with the faces of conquerors, but of those who had seen too much and carried too many regrets.

Without hesitation, Alasthra dropped to one knee.

“Queen Elathra,” he began, voice heavy with grief, “what I am about to say comes with the weight of truth—and the burden of regret.”

He raised his eyes to hers.

“When I was a child, I *saw* my village destroyed. I remember the banners, the armour, the symbols. I believed with all my heart that it was the Darklands who burned my home, who slaughtered my people. I fought and bled with that belief driving me. That memory was carved into me like fire into flesh.”

His voice faltered, then steadied.

“But I was wrong. Volko found the truth. Evidence buried, but not destroyed. It was not the Darklands who committed the atrocity I saw. It was the old guard. Sent by Kront.”

Elathra’s eyes darkened, but she remained silent.

“Out of fear of a prophecy,” Alasthra said, “he ordered the massacre of my village. A prophecy that foretold the rise of a child from the true royal line—one who would bring an end to his legacy. And so, to prevent it, he tried to erase that child from history.”

He reached inside his cloak and pulled forth the documents.

“I am that child. The last of the Fire King’s bloodline. These prove it.”

He offered them to her.

Elathra’s fingers trembled slightly as she accepted the pages. She scanned them in silence, her expression unreadable. When

she finally spoke, her voice held not fury, but something colder—sorrow wrapped in steel.

“So... this bloodshed was for nothing.” She stared at the page, then back at him. “These documents bear the mark of the Crown. I know them well—they are used to record and track every noble lineage, even my own. This is real.”

She closed the pages slowly, hands shaking just enough to betray her inner fury.

“It is hard not to feel anger toward you,” she said. “But I know what it is to be used by those above. I know what it means to follow commands with a loyal heart, only to find you were holding the blade of betrayal the entire time.”

Her eyes locked onto his.

“But I cannot forgive you. Not yet. So I ask you now—what will you do?”

Alasthra rose and bowed his head.

“I will withdraw. All our forces. The occupation ends here. I will not cling to the ashes of a false victory. This was never the war I thought it was. I believed I was seeking justice... but now I see it was all a scheme. A war to weaken me—and to destroy you.”

Frenyara then stepped forward, her voice soft yet clear.

“I know... as the daughter of King Kront, none of you—save Alasthra—feels anything but hatred for me and my father. But even so... we could use your aid.”

Queen Elathra scoffed, her tone like ice.

“Aid? Do you truly believe my soldiers would march beside the daughter of a murderer—and the wife of the butcher of innocents?”

Frenyara moved closer, standing at Alasthra’s side. She reached to take his arm for comfort, but as her fingers brushed against the Phoenix Blade, even for the briefest moment, everything changed.

In a single breath, the world was gone.

She was pulled into the same white void where Alasthra had once stood when he spoke with the Phoenix. She could not move. There was no sky, no floor—no sense of up or down. And then... it appeared.

The Phoenix.

Her heart filled with terror. It was beyond titanic, a being of fire and soul, vast and terrible to behold. Words could not contain its presence.

But as the Phoenix turned its gaze upon her, gentle ripples of energy radiated from its form. As they touched her skin, the fear softened. Her soul steadied.

A voice, not heard but felt, echoed within her.

“Why art thou here, young one?”

Frenyara responded, though her lips did not move.

“Are you the Phoenix Alasthra called upon in battle? The one he holds so dear?”

“I am,” came the reply, “Daughter of the false king.”

Her breath caught.

“You... you know who I am?”

The Phoenix’s voice was calm, ageless.

“I know all whom Alasthra Phoenixtra has seen and will see. I know his beginning and his end . And I know those who truly dwell within his heart. If they are worthy, they may feel my gaze. But know this: once they have, they will no longer need me.”

It paused.

“Now, answer me. Why art thou in my domain?”

Frenyara lowered her eyes. Beneath the Phoenix’s massive claws, there was nothing but emptiness.

“We’ve learned the truth. The truth of the war. And I fear Alasthra may no longer trust me. I tried to ask Queen Elathra for aid, but I knew it was folly. I am a princess... and all I truly know is how to heal.”

The Phoenix responded gently.

“Is that not enough?”

She gave a faint, bittersweet smile.

“The first night I healed the wounded—when the King of Water fell—I thought it was. But then I heard the stories. How they all fought... how *he* fought. And I felt so weak compared to them all.”

The Phoenix’s voice grew softer still.

“Your actions helped many see the morning light. What you have done is more than enough, young one.”

But she shook her head.

“Alasthra freed me from the chains of my past. Yet here and now, I cannot cast a single spell that would give Queen Elathra a reason to fight beside us. I am powerless... truly powerless.”

Silence.

The Phoenix did not speak for a long moment. Then, in a voice both distant and intimate, it asked:

“How far would you go for Alasthra?”

She raised her gaze, meeting its eyes without fear.

“I would give my soul and body to aid him.”

The Phoenix studied her. Then it spoke:

“I can grant thee the knowledge of a spell—one that will bring hope to many. But know this: your body will be weakened. My truth is not made for mortal flesh. You may not bear it without pain.”

Frenyara did not flinch.

“Will it bring hope to Alasthra?”

The Phoenix’s answer came like a sigh of fire and sorrow.

“It will. But it will bring him pain as well.”

From the outside, it seemed as if Frenyara had suddenly frozen. Alasthra turned to her, confused by the stillness in her posture, and asked gently, “Frenyara... are you alright?”

Then, without a word, her eyes lit up—first a soft white, then blooming into a faint but resplendent golden hue. A delicate, glowing light began to radiate from her body, wrapping her in a gentle aura. Her eyes no longer looked human; they had

become like hollow windows to something greater, something divine.

She turned her gaze towards Queen Elathra, her voice rising with unwavering clarity, echoing through the stone halls like a sacred bell. “I will show thee, daughter of the First Queen of Water, why thou shouldst follow the banner of the Phoenix—and the wielder of its flame.”

Without another word, Frenyara strode toward the great gates of the palace. With every step she took, the stone beneath her feet cracked and splintered, unable to withstand the sheer pressure of the magic now coursing through her.

Alasthra, Kiara, Fyestra, Normas, and even Queen Elathra followed behind, drawn forward by awe more than will.

And what they beheld beyond the gates was something that defied explanation—something far beyond miracle.

As they reached the entrance, two radiant magic circles ignited before Frenyara, spinning slowly in the air. Their hues shimmered and shifted, blending every element—fire, water, earth, air, light, and even shadow—into one perfect harmony. Then, high above in the sky, an immense third circle appeared, mirroring the colours of the two below.

The two circles before her began to pulse and shift, coalescing into the graceful form of a spectral stag—its body made of glimmering magic, its antlers like branches of living starlight.

Across the battlefield, soldiers and villagers watched as smaller circles emerged beneath the fallen. Even when bodies had been torn apart or were missing entirely, the magic knew

where to find them—appearing near the last place they had stood alive.

The sky crackled with lightning of every colour, like the heavens themselves were bearing witness. Then, slowly, shimmering orbs began to descend—soft as snowflakes—falling from the sky like fragments of grace.

Alasthra stared at Frenyara in awe and horror, for blood was streaming from her eyes, her nose beginning to bleed. Cracks of pure mana exhaustion were forming along her skin, glowing faintly. She was burning herself away.

Yet still, she persevered.

She clenched her fists, tears of blood falling freely, and cried out—not to the sky, but to the Phoenix itself. “Please... give me more! I must do this!”

The orbs descended into the circles, and before the eyes of the living, limbs were restored. Torn bodies reformed. Those crushed beneath rubble began to rise, lifted gently into the air as if carried by unseen hands. Broken statues reversed their ruin, stone smoothing and reshaping as though time itself bent to her will.

From every corner, all turned toward the palace gates, where a singular light blazed brighter than the noonday sun.

The spectral stag’s antlers twisted and curled, shaping into a nest of pure, living fire. And from that nest, rising with solemn grace, emerged the Phoenix—its wings vast and shimmering with shifting hues of red, gold, and silver. Its light reached

toward the heavens, etching its sacred form across the sky in fire that did not burn.

Then Queen Elathra gasped—for behind her, something warm stirred.

She turned sharply and ran, leaving the others behind, drawn not by thought but by instinct. Her feet carried her to the Pools of Rejuvenation.

There, before her eyes, a second light bloomed—cool and radiant. The sacred waters glowed with a vivid, ethereal blue, as if the soul of the First Water Queen had returned to the world for but a moment. The water surged and curled upwards, enveloping Princess Elara in a cocoon of luminous healing. Every wound, every strain left by her magic was kissed away by the ancient power of the waters.

It shone brighter and brighter still.

Back at the gates, Frenyara gazed skyward through the blood in her eyes, through the veil of her fading vision. Yet in her soul, she saw everything. The miracle. The lives returned. The healing of flesh, of spirit, of a broken world.

She felt the Phoenix beside her—not distant, not aloof, but within her, around her, carrying her through the storm.

And in that final moment, as her body trembled under the weight of all she had given, she heard the Phoenix speak—not with thunder, but with warmth and truth, a voice like a mother holding a child.

“You have done enough, child of flame. Rest now.”

4 Tears

As the people gazed upon the lifeless bodies strewn across the scorched ground, a soft gasp rippled through the air.

One by one, eyes fluttered open. Chests heaved. Breath returned to the fallen.

At first, there was only stunned silence—then a sudden eruption of joy. Children hurled themselves into the arms of their mothers and fathers. Cries of disbelief turned into sobs of happiness. Tears fell like rain as loved ones clutched one another, trembling, whispering names they thought they'd never speak again.

The smouldering ruins around them no longer seemed to matter—for out of the ashes of devastation, the dead had risen. The miracle was real. The miracle was Frenyara's.

And it was unlike any miracle ever witnessed.

Frenyara, cradled in Alasthra's arms, let her eyes drift closed. Her breathing slowed, her body trembling from exhaustion. Crimson trails of blood seeped from her nose and eyes, and glowing fissures of mana burn marked her skin like cracks in porcelain.

Alasthra looked down at her, his expression unreadable—torn between pride, sorrow, and reverence.

Behind him, Normas stepped forward and spoke softly, "We should bring her to the Pools, Alasthra. Someone like her... she deserves to soak in the waters of the First Queen."

Alasthra nodded, his voice quiet. "I thank you for this kindness."

They walked in silence, Frenyara held carefully against his chest, until they reached the chamber of the Pools of Rejuvenation. There, before the gently glowing waters, stood Princess Elara—awake, alive—and in her arms, Queen Elathra, weeping in silence as she held her daughter close.

Normas fell to one knee. "My princess," he said, voice thick with emotion, "I am beyond relieved to see you awakened."

Then, his gaze turned to Frenyara, and back to Elathra. "It is most likely Princess Frenyara who brought you back. Her condition is dire. To allow an outsider to enter the sacred pools would be considered heresy... but what she has done is beyond compare."

Queen Elathra held her daughter close a moment longer before lifting her eyes to Alasthra.

"Bring her here, King Alasthra."

He flinched at the title—it felt heavy, undeserved—but he obeyed without question, gently placing Frenyara into the Queen's arms.

With care, Elathra lowered her into the crystal-clear waters. The pool embraced her like a lullaby, the soft glow shimmering around her fragile form.

"She needs rest now," Elathra said, her voice quieter than before. "Her deeds have softened my anger toward you, Lord Alasthra. For now, I would be... grateful if you and your men remained here to aid with the first steps of repair. Beyond

that—" she paused "—we shall see what course our nation will take. But do not expect too much, Lord Alasthra."

Alasthra bowed deeply. Behind him, Kiara and Fyestra followed in silent respect.

"You have my word, Lord Alasthra, that she will be cared for with the utmost respect. Her deeds far surpass anything I could ever dream of achieving in this life. She shall be treated as a queen of this nation. But for now... would you grant me a moment, so I may hold my daughter in silence and love?"

Alasthra gave a solemn nod. "My men will assist however they can. I truly hope this marks the first steps towards a united and enduring nation."

He bowed once more before turning to leave, Kiara and Fyestra trailing behind him without a word.

Queen Elathra turned to Normas. "Stay with him. See to it that our people follow his guidance—for now."

Normas stood, bowed low, and replied, "Your order is my duty."

Then he too departed, leaving mother and daughter alone in the chamber.

Later, back in his office, Alasthra sat with his hands buried in his hair, staring at the floor.

"Well," Kiara said, breaking the silence, "that was something, wasn't it?"

Alasthra let out a long breath. "Something? She brought multiple people back to life. That wasn't just a miracle—it was

beyond anything I've ever witnessed. The spell she cast... I don't even recognise it. I believe the only ones who might would be King Aurelion Phoelix of Light, or Lord Noctyros Zhilix of the Darkness. I'm certain at least that it was an eleventh-tier spell."

Kiara sat across from him, arms folded. "May I ask... what's the difference between the tiers? I was never taught—magic was considered wicked when we were growing up."

Alasthra leaned back and nodded slowly. "Where to begin... Let's say this: everything below fifth tier is generally non-offensive. Tier one is mostly creation—things like conjuring flame, water, or stone. Tier two includes enhancements like heat, light, and minor manipulation.

"These lower tiers—up to the fourth—are accessible to most who can use magic. Fifth to seventh is where offensive spells begin. Tier eight spells are powerful—often wide-range and devastating. Tier nine, however, includes things like instant death spells—extremely taxing and dangerous.

"Now, you might wonder: if ninth-tier spells can kill instantly, what could the tenth and eleventh possibly do?"

Kiara raised a brow. "I was just thinking that."

Alasthra gave a faint smile. "The Drovar Duel is an example of tenth-tier magic. We cast ninth-tier spells against each other, and as those spells clash, the duel begins and sustains itself through tenth-tier binding. Maintaining that balance, that clash of wills—that's tenth-tier. Only kings and queens tend to know those spells... and even fewer can cast them.

"And then, there's eleventh-tier magic. One word describes it: miracles."

"Was that red lightning you struck Elara with a ninth-tier spell?" Kiara asked, eyes fixed on him.

He shook his head. "Nay. As you know, lightning doesn't truly belong to any one element. In theory, every nation can use lightning magic—even the Earth Nation, though they rarely do."

He paused, then continued, voice quiet but firm. "But red lightning, fell-blue lightning, or any variant that aligns with a nation's element—those can only be wielded by those of royal blood. It's not just lightning. It's elemental lightning, bound to one's lineage. So no, what I used wasn't ninth-tier. It was tenth."

Kiara tilted her head. "I thought you needed incantations and runes for spells that powerful."

"Normally, aye," he said. "Most magic needs words, writing, symbols. But I don't use them. Not properly, at least. That red lightning—like all my spells—is only half as strong as it should be."

"Why?" she asked softly.

He ran a hand through his hair. "Because I never learned the proper way. And in battle, I don't often have the time to fully cast spells. That's part of the problem. When I'm forced to fight... I can't lead. And our battles often decide the outcome of the entire war."

Kiara gazed through the shattered window overlooking the city. Smoke still curled in the distance, and the wind carried the scent of scorched stone.

"It does indeed," she murmured. "But what now?"

Alasthra exhaled slowly. "We need to retreat. Completely. Fortify Phoenix City in case of a siege. And... we may need to call upon allies. But who, I do not yet know."

At that moment, Normas stepped into the room, his voice steady and blunt. "Forget Earth and Light. Both are too arrogant to lift a finger. The Air Nation? Pacifists. They'd never descend from their floating cities, not even if the world burned."

Alasthra turned to him sharply. "Do not speak lightly of the Air People. Yes, they avoid war, but if they ever chose to fight, they could drown armies with a single breath. Their priests are not to be mocked. If you've never seen an Air Priest summon a storm so vast it drowns cities, then you've never truly known fear."

Normas bowed his head slightly. "You speak the truth. Still... I do not hold them in high regard. Their cities may float, but they are far from pure. When they pass overhead, the sun vanishes—and all too often, their waste rains down on those below."

He stepped closer, lowering his voice. "That aside, there are only two nations that might be willing to help us. The Waterlands—my people—may yet listen. Or the Darklands. They once swore an oath to the First Flame King: that when a

true heir arose, they would come to his aid. That vow has never been fulfilled."

Alasthra looked at him for a moment, then spoke quietly. "Hmph... To think—we're relying on the forces of Darkness. After hating them for so many years, it feels... strange. Hard to believe they'd ever stand beside us.

"But tell me, Normas... You've every reason to hate *us*. We destroyed Bastion City. Yes, we acted under orders... but the fire came from *our* hands.

"Would you still choose to fight alongside us?"

Normas turned his gaze to the broken window, the wind brushing past the jagged edges. He was silent for a time, then said,

"... Your words are true. I failed as a commander that day.

"If we'd spoken—if we'd tried to buy even a little more time—maybe more lives could've been saved.

"But in my pride, I saw Bastion as eternal. A city that had never fallen. A city that *couldn't* fall. And I was wrong.

"I think... I hate myself more than I hate you."

He drew a slow breath. "And now, looking back... you only fought three times. You didn't burn villages. You gave some cities a choice.

"No... the blame lies with your king, not with you.

"I can't promise the soldiers of the Waterlands will see things the same. Many won't. But I can say this—allying with you might be our only real path forward.

“In the end, though... that decision lies with our queen.”

Alasthra gave a quiet nod. “All we can do now is hope that Frenyara’s magic left a mark—something that softened her heart.”

Fyestra stepped forward then, flame flickering at the corners of his mouth as he spoke.

“My lord... this coming battle—between us and King Kront’s forces... will it not be harder than any before? Not because of strength, but because we’ll be asking our people to rise up and slay their own kin.

“I am not like all of you. But the thought of raising my hand against Fire-born... it chills me. It feels *wrong*.”

Alasthra lowered his gaze for a moment, then met Fyestra’s eyes.

“It *is* wrong. But it must be done.

“Change never comes without pain. And the people will understand that in time. We can no longer cling to the ways of old... We must move forward—be reborn—if we’re to survive what’s coming.

“Our duty is to give them the strength... the willpower to carry on.”

Fyestra and Kiara both nodded in solemn agreement.

Normas stepped closer, placing one hand over his heart.

“I will see to it that my soldiers obey thy command, Flame King.”

Alasthra winced slightly at the title—still not quite used to hearing it.

“Good. Then let us prepare... and ready ourselves for what lies ahead.”

5 Words

One night, beneath the dim glow of stars and the scent of ash still lingering in the breeze, Kiara sat beside a low fire pit on the edge of Wattaria. She absently stirred the embers with a stick, the faint glow casting gentle light across her tired face. Around her, a few broken houses stood hollow and quiet—wounded, but not fallen. The city had endured... but only just.

The silence was near absolute, broken only by the soft crackling of fire and the distant whisper of wind through shattered beams.

Footsteps crunched over stone and soot. Varrock and Helion emerged from the shadows—Helion with a tired smirk that didn't quite reach his eyes, Varrock carrying a small keg under one arm.

“All alone, my fair lady?” Helion said softly, but the jest fell flat, hollow in the stillness.

Varrock sat down beside her, setting the keg down with a quiet grunt. “Thought we might share a drink,” he murmured.

Kiara nodded. A faint smile flickered across her lips, then vanished just as quickly. The three of them sat together in silence, passing the flask between them. The ruined edge of Wattaria stretched behind them—burnt roofs, blackened doors, homes that had once been filled with laughter and now echoed only with memory.

The fire cracked sharply, as if to speak for them.

“This place feels like a grave,” came Kranor’s voice, low and rough. He stepped into the firelight with Krovar and Volko at his side, their expressions grim.

“Not enough ghosts,” Helion muttered, his voice thin. There was no laughter.

Kranor sighed through his nose. “Mind if we join you? I’ve been working since dawn, trying to forget the truth. But it never leaves. Not really.”

Kiara shifted to the side and nodded. “I think we’ve all tried to forget.”

So they sat—Kranor, Krovar, Volko, Helion, Varrock, Kiara—gathered around one fire, surrounded by the remnants of a city still trying to breathe. None of them spoke for a long while. The fire cracked again, and someone passed the flask. The silence was heavy, like a shroud.

Varrock finally broke it. His voice was low, almost hesitant. “How do you all feel? About... all of this?”

Volko’s gaze stayed locked on the flames. “I’ve known the truth the longest. When I saw the aftermath, I froze. I had to bring that truth to Alasthra, and I was too late. I thought I’d done so much for him, and still... I failed. And now we’re not just soldiers. We’re rebels. Enemies of our own homeland.” He swallowed, jaw clenched. “What does one feel in a moment like that? There are no words for it. Just... the ache.”

Helion ran a hand through his hair, exhaling slowly. “I was raised as a noble of the Firelands. Not high court, but sworn to the crown all the same. By tradition, I should kneel to King

Kront. But the first time I saw Alasthra—truly saw him—I knew I couldn't. He came into the stables one day, wild-eyed and burning with purpose, asking after my mount to chase down a dragon and save a princess." A distant smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, fading as quickly as it came. "We fought together that day. And after... I watched him rebuild a city. Lay the stones himself. Work the fields. Laugh with his people. Drink with them. Wake up hungover, then get back to work like nothing happened."

He looked down at his hands. "If I follow him now, I may end up fighting my own kin. I might face my cousins across the battlefield. I've tried to stay busy—to stop thinking. I haven't even spoken to the woman here in weeks. But the thoughts keep coming. Like a tide that never pulls back."

Krovar shifted slightly, his gaze moving from face to face before settling on the fire.

"I'm not like the rest of you," he said quietly. "I only met Alasthra during that first meeting. I didn't grow up with him. I didn't fight beside him in the early days. But in that single moment... I saw something different. A man who brings people together in a way no one else ever has."

He gestured slowly around the fire. "Look at us. All of us—different ranks, different pasts—sitting here like this. After everything. We've done things no one thought possible. And yet, here we are. Alive. Together."

His voice grew more firm, more resolute. "I've served under a general before. One who was cruel. One who broke men down

until they licked his boots and thanked him for the privilege. I *will not* go back to that. Those days of suffering are over.”

The firelight caught in his eyes, hard and bright. “I’ll follow Alasthra. Whatever path he walks. No matter the risk. He’s done more in ten years than kings and queens have managed in centuries. For the first time in my life, I have faith in our future. Real faith. And by the gods, I *will not* return to those days where I was nothing but a dog beneath another man’s heel.”

He looked to Kranor and gave a slow, knowing nod. “I’ve made my decision. And I think... you have too.”

Kranor’s mouth curled into a faint, weary smile. He didn’t look up at first. When he did, his eyes were distant—filled with memories, regrets, and a quiet, enduring pride.

“I raised that boy,” he said softly. “When he came to us, he was barely more than a ghost. Wounded, tormented, scarred in ways that no one should be. His body was broken, his mind even more so. But he refused to fall.”

He paused, eyes fixed on the flames. “I watched him grow—not into a man, but into a force. A weapon, honed by pain, sharpened by loss. And through all of it—every injury, every nightmare—he *never* stopped. I’ve seen dozens of wars. I’ve fought in more battles than I care to count. I’ve killed strangers and soldiers, bandits and monsters. But this...”

His voice faltered. Just a little.

“This war frightens me. Not because of the enemy. But because this time... we’re not fighting outsiders. We’re

fighting our own. Our brothers. Our kin. The people we once swore to protect.”

He exhaled slowly, the breath heavy with the weight of memory. “But it must be done. This war—this bloodshed—it has to happen. The world cannot go on as it is. The path we’ve walked is cracked and crumbling. And if we don’t break it ourselves, it’ll break all of us in the end.”

Kiara stared at the ground, fists clenched, jaw tight. Silence gripped her lips, but inside, a storm raged. Not hatred for others—no. Hatred for herself. For her failure. For her weakness. For ever doubting. How could she protect *him* when she couldn’t even command her own heart?

No more. She would not hesitate. She would not *think*. There was no room for thought where devotion lived.

“We are his knights,” she hissed, rising slowly, voice low and trembling. “We are his soldiers. And I—” her eyes blazed, “—I am *done* crawling in my own shame.”

She turned, gaze wild, as if seeing the world for the first time through firelit eyes.

“From this moment onward, I shall not leave his side—not in sleep, not in war, not even in death. Come dawn, I will stand with him—no, *beneath* him—body, soul, breath, and blood. He is our flame. He is our future. He is *everything*.”

Then it happened—something inside her *snapped*. Not a crack, not a tremor—a total fracture. The girl who once admired Alasthra was gone. What remained was something else. Something... *devoted beyond reason*.

She threw her arms wide, voice now a shriek of conviction, trembling with violent, holy certainty.

“Our duty is not a choice. It is *worship*. Our path is not honour. It is *submission*. We will carve his will into this world with fire and steel—tear down the mountains if they block his way—shatter the bones of gods if they defy him!”

She turned, eyes mad with purpose, a fanatical light gleaming within.

“He is not just our leader. Not just our lord. *He is salvation incarnate*. And I swear—by breath, by blade, by burning soul—I shall *make the world kneel* before him. Even if I must burn it all to ash to do so.”

They all looked to her—Kiara, blazing with madness and devotion. For a moment, silence lingered. Then, one by one, the others seemed to awaken, as if her fanaticism had lit a spark in their own hearts.

Varrock was the first to speak.

“All my life,” he began, voice low and shaking with fury, “I chased the myths. I abandoned my home, my name, everything I once was—just to find the caves where the last dragons slept.”

He stood slowly, eyes gleaming like molten steel. “And then *he* found me. Alasthra. He gave me not just a purpose—but a blessing. A bond greater than any fire, any oath, any blood. There is *nothing—nothing*—that compares to what he gave me.”

He drained a full tankard of fire-ale in one long pull and slammed it down, the wood splitting under his grip. Then he reached for his weapon—his old spear, now dull in his eyes.

“I must go to Gnobel,” he growled. “I need a *new* weapon. New armour. This... what I wore before I saw the truth—this was the gear of a man who dreamed. But I am done dreaming.”

His voice deepened, each word falling like thunder.

“I will become the terror of the skies. I will carve his vengeance into the bones of our enemies. No more shall the cries of the innocent haunt my sleep—because those cries...” he paused, eyes narrowing into slits of rage, “those cries *paved* his path. They screamed for justice. For fire.”

He turned away, pausing only to look back once—his eyes blackened with purpose.

“I am not a man anymore. I am his fury. His wings. His wrath. And I will bring fire to those who dare stand in his way.”

Volko smiled—and it was not the smile of a man, but something far colder. Something that had waited in the dark for far too long.

“No one shall be safe in the shadows,” he whispered, almost reverently. “Not anymore.”

His voice was quiet, measured, yet carried a venom that chilled the air.

“I failed to uncover the truth once. *Never again*. My daggers shall glisten beneath the moonlight, and any who dare threaten our lord shall feel them pierce flesh and soul alike.”

He stepped forward, eyes glinting like twin blades.

“I shall rise. I shall bring a crusade upon every vile creature that lurks in the dark, every rat that whispers doubt, every worm that conspires against him. I will build an empire—not of cities, but of silence. An army of spies and shadows that will tear kingdoms apart from within.”

His tone grew sharper, colder, cutting like the blades he kept hidden.

“My path is no longer hidden from me. It is *his* path—and I shall walk it with blood-soaked boots. His shadow will not merely fall over nations—it will *consume* them. And I...”

He lowered his hood, revealing the scarred, unforgiving face beneath.

“I shall be that shadow. I shall be his dagger. His cloak. His silence. His vengeance.”

He turned without another word—gone before anyone realised he had even moved.

Helion grinned, brushing a strand of hair from his brow with a flourish.

“Well,” he began, his voice smooth as silk and twice as sharp, “I am not like the rest of you. I wasn’t born of hardship or shadow. I am a noble. A man of grace. And the ladies—and the lords—adore me for it.”

He stepped forward, posture poised, every word deliberately crafted.

“I cannot be his vengeance, nor his blade, nor his cloak in the night. But I *can* be his *voice*. And the thunder of my cavalry's hooves shall be the sound of his will crashing through the halls of power.”

He flicked his hair back, eyes gleaming with purpose and pride.

“If betrayal of my family is required, then so be it. Let my name be scorned by blood, so long as it is praised by *history*.”

He spread his arms with theatrical flair, a smirk curling on his lips.

“Leave the nobles to me. The pretenders, the cowards, the hollow crowns—I shall see to it they bow before Alasthra. Not out of fear, no. Out of *desire*. Out of awe. For what is nobility, if not the ability to recognise true greatness?”

He turned, already lost in the fantasy he intended to make real.

“Hooves and spear shall carry his name to every court, every parlour, every ballroom from here to the ends of the world. Until all that is whispered is reverence, until every mouth sings of him in praise and longing.”

Then, with a knowing smile and a wink toward the firelight, he added:

“After all... who could resist the charm of *true* beauty?”

Krovar looked at them, eyes ablaze with conviction. “I know what I will do,” he said, his voice firm, almost defiant. “I will