

began planning what statues he would create for the following year. Although dragons like his father's creations were still beyond his skill level, he believed attempting a life-size Moa statue would be within reach.

As the suns had fully set on the horizon, Eldi grew restless at the thought of climbing one of the houses in Viona and gazing at the night sky. "I still have an Alar left. I'll quickly go buy some candied apples for us tonight!" he exclaimed to his father, brimming with enthusiasm.

Weariness etched on his face; his father looked him in the eyes. "I'm sorry, my boy. I won't be joining you tonight. The journey here and the busy day have taken a toll on me. But I'll join you tomorrow, alright?" He sighed, stretching a bit before settling on one of the crates. "I'll make sure the cart is fully prepared for you to sleep in when you return. And if you happen to see any Sovnar," he added with a hopeful tone, "please convey my regards to them."

"Not a problem! I will, Dad!" Eldi replied, already halfway across the town's center and waving back at his father. Rushing to the local candy shop, Eldi spent half an Alar on candied apples and walked out with a wooden crate filled with a dozen or so.

On his way back to his father, Eldi made a point to pass by Master Reval and Miss Tali to give them each one of the apples. He did the same for Hasan and even the fish man he had unintentionally offended with his staring. The fish-man seemed to appreciate the unexpected gift the most.

Returning to his father's side, Eldi left two candied apples on the stall, not wanting to linger too long as the suns had already faded. The town was plunged into the nightly darkness but was lit up by candles in a plethora of colors, the sight was a delight.

Left with six more candied apples, Eldi made his way to the edge of town and climbed onto a roof where the light and sound wouldn't carry too far.

Lying flat on his back, he gazed at the tall mountain and the temple, waiting, and hoping to catch a glimpse of light.

After a few hours and having eaten four of the candied apples, Eldi spotted the group of Dakin at the edge of town. The elegant robes of Master Reval swayed in the wind. Eldi wondered where the Dakin woman who had spoken to the soldiers had gone. She still appeared moderately ragged, but happier than when he first saw her. She seemed to be holding something, although it was too far for Eldi to discern exactly what it was. Then it dawned on him—they were leaving Viona.

As if alerted by Eldi's gaze, Miss Tali pointed in his direction. Eldi froze in fear before realizing she was pointing at something behind him. He turned around and saw what he had come to witness—a shimmering golden light high up in the sky.

It sparkled and flickered as if trying to convey a message. The brightness and dimness became erratic, almost chaotic.

Mesmerized by its beauty, Eldi couldn't tear his eyes away from the night sky.

Suddenly, a deafening roar shattered the air. People looked around confused, unable to locate the source. It sounded like an animal's roar, but its intensity shook the very foundations of the houses.

Then, a blinding flash illuminated the streets of Viona for a fleeting moment. A wave of brilliant light so bright that those unfortunate enough to have looked directly at it were temporarily blinded.

And moments later, thunder followed, echoing the roar and lightning with a force that made people scream out. It felt as if the mountain itself was collapsing.

Eldi shot up, the floor of the house he had been lying on trembling from the thunderous roar. "MOA!" he screamed, gazing at Wryyard, before realizing the significance of Moa's roar.

Just beyond Wryyard, coming from the south, a wave of ash and dust was approaching Viona, accompanied by the sounds of echoing cries of horror.

Leaping from the house and landing on the cobblestone street, Eldi barely felt the pain in his knees from the impact. The sky gradually transformed into a dark, clay-like color as he ran as fast as he could. People around him screamed, and soldiers rushed toward the south of the town. Another roar shook the air, startling everyone except Eldi. Moa was warning them to flee. A flash of lightning briefly cut through the increasingly thick storm of ash, and the ensuing thunder was muffled by the chaos and red dust. The town center was just ahead, filled with screams and the sounds of the ongoing battle.

Sweat streamed down Eldi's forehead, and his heart pounded loudly as if Loftion drummers were announcing war.

Eldi sprinted toward the town center, the red mist enveloping most of it. Dead soldiers lay in the streets, families, merchants, and even children torn apart by the vicious claws of the creatures lurking within the mist. Elongated arms and legs stretched out from the darkness, grasping at anything that dared to approach. Faces as pale as skulls sought their next victims, darting forward with the swiftness of an arrow released from a great ballista.

Racing toward their stall, Eldi saw Hasan firing his bow into the mist, fear, and shock etched on his face. Three soldiers ran past, their green cloth now almost brown from the intensifying storm. They held off some creatures briefly before succumbing to their claws, their metal-plated chests torn open. Firing desperate shots into the mist, Hasan shouted, "Aeden went into the storm! His Charnan friend was in trouble!" Amidst the screams and adrenaline, Eldi could barely make out his words. Without hesitation, Eldi darted toward the storm. Hearing Hasan's voice behind him, Eldi ran, the sounds of swords clashing and people dying filling his ears.

Passing the bodies of dead soldiers, Eldi saw their armor, twisted bent and ripped off. Whatever had done this had enough force to rip through solid steel plating. One of the soldiers still stood, sword barely being held in his shaking hands. As soon as he saw the young boy, he raised one of his arms up and pointed to the city center.

"Run, boy!" he yelled. As he wanted to lower his arm again, a claw sprouted from the thick fog. Cutting it off and dropping it onto the stone floor. With a hollow scream, the Medolan soldier got dragged into the unknown corners of the town. Red blood covering the place where the man once stood. His screaming ending abruptly caused Eldi to quicken his dash away from the center in search of his father.

As he ventured deeper into the storm, all sounds of the battle began to fade. Feeling the effects of his earlier fall, Eldi came to a stop, his knee aching. He could barely discern the walls of houses around him due to the thick red fog. He heard screeching noises darting by in the direction of the battle. Eldi leaned against a wall, trying to find the entrance to a nearby house. He fumbled around until he found the doorknob, praying that it would be unlocked. Pushing the door open, however, caused it to fall off its hinges, having already been battered. Eldi's panicked push had proved too much for the damaged door, which fell to the floor with a muffled bang. Eldi hurried inside, the red mist having already penetrated the building. Searching for a place to hide and check his knee, he made his way upstairs and entered the master bedroom, locking the door behind him. Finally able to catch his breath and examine his knee, he realized that his boots were stained with blood—human blood. The revelation, combined with the rush of adrenaline coursing through his veins, overwhelmed Eldi. He collapsed where he stood, falling onto the hard wooden floor, with a faint roar echoing in the distance.