Part 3

I’m nervous… Why am I so nervous…? A fight like this is exciting, Lowain, Grampa, and the old man never made me feel like this. I’m watching the old man tell me something, but I just hear ringing and white noise, his lips read “Papa.” This familiarity, it’s what I’d yearned for… but not like this. I can’t ask you anything… I can only sit in wait until your aether is spent and then you’re just a puppet. You can’t tell me about Mama or Gabbie or why you only have one horn or why everyone only told me scary stories about you. —I see the scowl now… He’s saying something to the old man, but my ears are still ringing. I look to him for anything, and the old man has a nervous smirk on his face. The dull ringing in my ears is drowned out by a question: “You woman, what is your name?” My eyes shoot up to meet his, my nerves all firing off before cooling down as I open my mouth to answer: “Aola—, A-Armina… Versi” I choke on my answer and watch and wait for this man’s response. His frown softens, and his stance becomes lax… was that the right thing to say? I look over to the old man and he’s readying his bell to cast a spell. The man flips his weapon slamming the massive iron ball into the ground, lifting a large slab of earth from the ground before kicking it towards us… huh? He kicked it? The old man tugs me behind him and bangs his club against the bell, summoning a bolt of lightning that splits the rock in two before it reaches us. Before the dust even settles, I hear a loud bang against the bell, followed by the sound of metal bending and crumbling. The old man is sent flying aside, knocked unconscious from a single blow. I turn to look forward and a pair of golden eyes peer at me through the cloud of smoke and debris… I see a flash of gold move through the smoke and bring my weapon up to block. A massive fist adorned in jewelry crashes into my blade, carrying me off of my feet and knocking my weapon into the air. Before I even land, the man stomps forward for another strike, I redirect his punch towards the ground. “You fight like him…” the Auri man grumbles, “—I only hope your trickery is good enough.” All I can do is dodge and parry this man’s kicks and punches; I feel bruises form every time I try to block. I have to fight back… I scoop a handful of dirt into my fist and try for and uppercut, he casually leans back to dodge and I open my hand dumping the dirt in his eyes. He shoves me back on purely instinct, but I sprint back towards him to get my first punches in. I nearly smashed my fingers punching his dead skin, he didn’t respond to me at all and simply continued swinging back at me. Fatigue quickly set in as we barraged one another with punches, his fist slowly losing their weight. I let out a loud scream as I forged on for what seemed like an hour of hitting this wall of stony flesh, the man finally reeling back and falling to his knees laughing. He murmurs something. “What did you write?…” he struggles to get back to his feet, his limbs seeming to give out randomly, “you wrote something into your skin… that man did something akin to that, skipping the incantations for spells?” He slumps back into a sitting position. I lift my sleeves showing him the ancient runic writing on my wrist. Cleanse, dispel, around oneself, the words cut into my skin, the basic writings for esunaga. “I can’t lift the control over you… why?” The spell was supposed to cleanse his aether from the body if he was truly undead. The man stretches and relaxes his shoulders, his bones and joints crack and loosen as he stands back up with renewed vigor. “I’m not under control child,” he clenches his fist and wrings out his wrists, “I’m tempered, under the influence of another, you simply cleansed the layer of aether that suppressed the strength bestowed upon me.” The yellow rings around his eyes flicker whips of amber and orange, and the air around us gets warmer as he grabs his weapon. A low growl builds up in his chest as he

screams at me, the image of a cloak of fire resting upon his back. The gold and brass jewelry glowing white hot, his weapon turning a bright red as he laughs, and he begins twirling the iron ball on his weapon around. “APOLDYON!!!”

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